



Motherhood and Reality in *Northanger Abbey*

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MOTHERHOOD IN JANE AUSTEN is never at the center of the action. The heroines of the novels are daughters, not mothers, and the novels focus on the stage of a woman's life when she is least likely to feel close to her mother. Falling in love and marrying involve reaching outside a person's original family for love, affection, and validation. Choosing a husband therefore implicitly requires the daughter's emotional movement away from the mother.¹

Even so, the mothers in Jane Austen's novels are important. From Mrs. Dashwood to Lady Russell, the mothers and substitute mothers in Austen's novels affect both the plot and the development of the heroine. If Mrs. Dashwood had not been so trusting and ready to be charmed by Willoughby as well as so "sensitive" to Marianne's need for privacy, *Sense and Sensibility* would have been a different novel. If *Pride and Prejudice's* Mrs. Bennet had not maneuvered to "get" Bingley for Jane, Elizabeth would probably have never caught Darcy's attention. If Mrs. Norris had not been such a busybody and her two sisters had not been so weak, Fanny Price would have never been raised at Mansfield Park. If Lady Russell had not advised prudence and urged young Anne to give up Captain Wentworth, the plot of *Persuasion* would have never happened. Even dead mothers, such as Mrs. Woodhouse and Lady Elliot, influence not only through their

absence—the heroine lacks the guidance and companionship of her mother—but in how they represent what the heroine might become. Though mothers and mother figures are generally background characters in the lives of the heroines, the image of the mother is a powerful one in Austen’s novels.²

The mothers and mother figures in *Northanger Abbey* are particularly interesting because at every stage in her story Catherine is linked to a different mother figure. At home in Fullerton, there is her mother, Mrs. Morland. In Bath, Mrs. Allen is officially in the position of surrogate mother. And finally, at Northanger Abbey, where there is no living older woman to turn to, Catherine is influenced by the imagined story of Mrs. Tilney, the missing mother whose absence is both an invitation to a flight of fancy and a reminder of the contrast between appearance and reality.

Catherine’s first mother image, her mother, Mrs. Morland, is presented to us as “a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper” (13) who gives her daughter prosaic, practical advice. “I beg, Catherine, you will always wrap yourself up very warm about the throat...and I wish you would try to keep some account of the money you spend,” she urges when Catherine is about to leave for Bath (18-19). Mrs. Morland looks after the needs of ten children and a clergyman husband. She is shown as loving, supportive of her children, but very busy: “her time was so much occupied in lying-in and teaching the little ones, that her elder daughters were inevitably left to shift for themselves” (15).

Though readers generally agree that Mrs. Morland is one of the better mothers in Jane Austen’s novels, some critics point out that she is far from perfect. In particular, her inability to supervise her daughters more carefully results in Catherine’s tendency to read novels and other light literature. Mrs. Morland, such critics argue, is a “flawed mother” because she neglects her daughter’s “moral education” (Benson 117).

However, is it really a failing in Catherine’s education that she does not have her mother’s constant and undivided attention? Would Catherine have been able to make her way alone from Northanger Abbey to her home when General Tilney sends her away if she had not already learned a little of how to “shift for” herself? In short, isn’t it possible that not having her mother’s perfect attention strengthens

and empowers Catherine?

Furthermore, Mrs. Morland clearly has had a strong influence on Catherine in her formative years. Though she has been pregnant or nursing babies through most of Catherine's life, we see her teaching Catherine and her sister to recite, and we hear that she gives her daughters French lessons. Mrs. Morland may not have a lot of time for each individual child, but the little we see of her shows that she respects each child's individuality. For example, when young Catherine wants to give up piano lessons, Mrs. Morland, "who did not insist on her daughters being accomplished in spite of incapacity or distaste, allowed her to leave off" (14). Mrs. Morland's flaws, in other words, are those that any parent may have: not enough time and energy to supervise every aspect of her children's lives. Even the best of mothers may not be available all the time and will make mistakes. Mrs. Morland is not so much a "flawed mother" as a realistic one.

That Catherine's mother has been effective in her daughter's moral education is suggested by Catherine's willingness to be guided by her second mother figure, Mrs. Allen. Over and over during their stay in Bath, Catherine consults Mrs. Allen about what is or isn't appropriate behavior. Unfortunately, Mrs. Allen leaves much to be desired as a surrogate parent. She is empty-headed and frivolous, more concerned about "the safety of her new gown than for the comfort of her protegee" (21).

Though "in one respect she was admirably fitted to introduce a young lady into public, being as fond of going everywhere and seeing every thing herself as any young lady could be" (20), she is not much use as a guardian or guide. When Catherine looks "at Mrs. Allen for her opinion" about the proposed drive to Claverton Down, her "silent appeal... was entirely thrown away, for Mrs. Allen, not being at all in the habit of conveying any expression herself by a look, was not aware of its being intended by anybody else" (61). On two occasions, even a straightforward request for advice or permission results in an indifferent, "just as you please, my dear" (61, 86). Instead of looking after Catherine's interests, Mrs. Allen allows herself to be pressured into supporting the Thorpes' plan to go driving, even though Catherine is hesitant because of her prior engagement with Miss Tilney: "Well my dear," said she, 'suppose you go'" (86).

Yet as Catherine later discovers, "young men and women riding

about the country in open carriages” are, in the words of Mr. Allen, “not at all the thing” (104). That Catherine has, by this point in the novel, lost any reliance on Mrs. Allen’s advice is suggested by her having come to Mr. Allen, rather than Mrs. Allen, for “the opinion of an unprejudiced person” about her refusal to go with the Thorpes after she had made a prior engagement with the Tilneys. Even so, when Mrs. Allen agrees with her husband that “it has an odd appearance, if young ladies are frequently driven about in [open carriages] by young men to whom they are not even related,” Catherine can’t help being surprised and asking, “Dear madam... then why did you not tell me so before?... I always hoped you would tell me, if you thought I was doing wrong” (104). One of the lessons that Catherine learns during her trip to Bath is that she cannot count on Mrs. Allen’s guidance.

Mrs. Allen is connected to her friend Mrs. Thorpe, who is “a good-humoured, well-meaning woman, and a very indulgent mother” (34). Mrs. Thorpe’s indulgence toward her children takes the form of not having any influence or control over them. In a similar way, Mrs. Allen abdicates her responsibility for guiding Catherine with the excuse that, “Young people do not like to be always thwarted” (105). The effect is that Catherine is left to shift for herself in her relationships with the Thorpes and the Tilneys.

Just as Mrs. Morland’s busy life has taught Catherine to shift for herself in some practical matters, Mrs. Allen’s inadequacy as a guide and guardian forces Catherine to think for herself and to act according to her own principles. Though the novel begins by emphasizing Catherine’s inadequate knowledge and the silly ideas that she has picked up from the sentimental novels that she likes to read, the novel also shows that, except when she lets her imagination run away with her, Catherine has very good sense. She sees far more clearly than Mrs. Allen or her own brother, and she learns from her experiences. Though she is tricked once by John Thorpe into breaking an engagement with the Tilneys, she doesn’t make the same mistake again. Because she is able to stand up for her principles and won’t let herself be bullied into breaking another engagement with the Tilneys, Catherine is able to keep the valuable friendship of Eleanor and Henry.

Yet although the Bath scenes show that Catherine is able to act competently on her own, it could be argued that she misses the guidance of her mother. Her frequent appeals to Mrs. Allen for advice, and

in particular her heartfelt, “But this was something of real consequence,” when she discovers that Mrs. Allen should have prevented her from going out riding with the Thorpes in the first place (105), emphasize Catherine’s wish for guidance and her expectations that Mrs. Allen will do the job of mother substitute.

Much of *Northanger Abbey* deals with the discrepancy between what Catherine expects or assumes and what turns out to be reality. Though the central example of this contrast between reality and fiction is Catherine’s naive confusion between the world of the Gothic novel and her own more prosaic existence, *Northanger Abbey* comments on the distinction between reality and fantasy on many different levels. Just as Catherine has to learn that the view of the world that novels give her is not an accurate one, she must also learn that the society in which she moves has its own fictions. Throughout most of the novel, Catherine trusts that people will behave according to the roles they define for themselves. She believes that Isabella is a true friend because Isabella keeps telling her that she is a true friend. She trusts that Mrs. Allen will counsel her as her mother would because Mrs. Allen is officially in the role of surrogate mother to her. Gradually, she finds that she has been mistaken.

The final mother image in Catherine’s story is that of the dead Mrs. Tilney. We never learn much about what the real Mrs. Tilney might have been like, but Catherine’s thoughts about her make the imagined Mrs. Tilney a strong presence at Northanger Abbey. While on the surface Catherine’s fantasies about Mrs. Tilney simply reflect the dangers of confusing the world of novels with reality, the fact that Catherine happens to fantasize about the absent Mrs. Tilney suggests the importance that Catherine attaches to this absence. On some level, Catherine senses that Northanger Abbey lacks a mother’s presence, and she supplies that presence for herself in the only way she knows: by imagining a fate for the missing mother.

While her fantasies about Mrs. Tilney are preposterous, there is a level on which they reflect Catherine’s justified discomfort with General Tilney. Although he is kind and courteous to her, Catherine senses that something is not right about Henry and Eleanor’s father. When she imagines that he might have imprisoned or killed his wife, she is trying to understand ordinary experience in terms that are familiar to her. The General doesn’t fit into the pattern of common,

everyday experience as she understands it, so she links him to the only other pattern she knows: that of the plot devices of Gothic and sentimental fiction.

In addition to reflecting Catherine's longing for a mother figure who will explain what is wrong at the Abbey, Catherine's fantasies about Mrs. Tilney may also represent her search for a mother figure who is less prosaic and ordinary than Mrs. Morland. Where Mrs. Morland is the flesh-and-blood, realistic mother and Mrs. Allen is a comically inadequate mother substitute, Catherine's Mrs. Tilney—a woman imprisoned or killed by her own husband—is a figure of romance. Unconsciously, Catherine may be dreaming of a mother-in-law who will be completely different from her own mother, not because she rejects or dislikes her own mother, but because part of the pattern of falling in love and marrying involves leaving one's mother and linking with a new family (Phillips 75-76).

However, in terms of the plot, Catherine's mistake about Mrs. Tilney marks the final time that Catherine tries to impose the clichés of sentimental and Gothic fiction upon reality. Catherine's recognition that she has erred, that her imagination has carried her in inappropriate and indiscreet directions, marks a turning point in her approach to experience. After her embarrassing confrontation with Henry Tilney, "the visions of romance were over" (199). From this point on, Catherine accepts the events that come her way in a realistic and sensible way.

Abruptly expelled from Northanger Abbey by General Tilney, Catherine handles the experience practically and competently, without agonizing about the possibility of roadside bandits, kidnappings, or other crises that one would associate with the adventures of a sentimental heroine: "The journey itself had no terrors for her; and she began it without either dreading its length or feeling its solitariness" (230). On her return to Fullerton, in other words, she is linked to her mother, who, at the beginning of the novel, never thought of warning her against "such noblemen and baronets as delight in forcing young ladies away to some remote farm-house" (18), and whose response when Catherine tells her tale is a cheerful "'perhaps there is no great harm done. It is always good for young people to be put upon exerting themselves'" (234).

The three mother images in *Northanger Abbey* are thus connected

with the different stages of Catherine's development. In the beginning of the novel, Catherine is shown in relation to a mother whose more pressing practical cares have left Catherine free to indulge her fancy. Furthermore, because they are so honest and straightforward themselves, the Morlands have not taught Catherine to question appearances, to distinguish between fiction and truth, between social myths and reality: "She had not been brought up to understand the propensities of a rattle, nor to know to how many idle assertions and impudent falsehoods the excess of vanity will lead" (65).

In Bath, under the care of a mother substitute who is incompetent to give useful advice or support, Catherine experiences for the first time the need to judge and act according to her own judgment. This judgment is surprisingly good. Catherine may want to like John Thorpe because he is Isabella's brother and her brother's friend, but after the first open-carriage ride with him, honest reflection forces her to admit that "the drive had by no means been very pleasant and... John Thorpe himself was quite disagreeable" (69). As she gradually recognizes that she can rely on neither her brother's judgment nor Mrs. Allen's advice, Catherine discovers that she can make the right decisions on her own.

At Northanger Abbey, Catherine is initially overwhelmed. The house is huge and not at all what she expected. It does not conform to the familiar, everyday world of Fullerton, but neither does it resemble the abbeys of her novels. After her mistake in trying to "explain" her unease about General Tilney through a story about the missing Mrs. Tilney, Catherine is forced to recognize another pattern, one that she had begun to know in Bath when she admitted to herself her dislike of John Thorpe and stopped turning to Mrs. Allen for advice.

What Catherine learns at Northanger Abbey is that in the "heart and habits" of most of the people in her world, "there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad" (200). It is at Northanger that she first gets the news that Isabella has betrayed James, and it is at Northanger that she becomes the victim of the General's angry egotism. Her fantasy about Mrs. Tilney turns out to be both absurd and perceptive. Mrs. Tilney, Henry admits, was not particularly happy with the General (197). Later, when she discovers what was behind the General's initial friendliness and sudden hostility toward herself, Catherine reflects that "in suspecting General Tilney of either mur-

dering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (247).

Northanger Abbey is many different things. Besides being a burlesque on sentimental and Gothic novels, it is a coming-of-age novel, a love comedy, and a commentary on "polite society." All of the above, however, demand the reader's recognition of the contrast between appearance and reality, between what we know and what we only imagine. The three mother images in *Northanger Abbey* reflect different aspects of this contrast as it is experienced by Catherine Morland.

NOTES

1. The way in which attachment to the mother and attachment to a husband compete against each other is presented especially well (in relation to Alcott's *Little Women*) by Juhasz, 160-81. See also Phillips, 69-76, for discussion of mother-daughter tensions and their connection with sexuality and autonomy.
2. On Austen's use of the "flawed or absent mother" as a literary convention, see Phillips, 290. For a discussion of the different types of mothers in Austen, see Benson, See Hirsch, 46-50, for a broader discussion of absent and flawed mothers in literature.

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