



From Puppet to Person:
The Development of
Catherine's Character
in the Bath Chapters
of *Northanger Abbey*

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GILBERT RYLE, THE OXFORD PHILOSOPHER, has noted the view that “when Jane Austen began to write [*Northanger Abbey*], it had been her sole intention to burlesque such novels as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by depicting a nice but gullible teenager looking at the actual world through, so as to speak, the celluloid film of Gothic romances” (176). Were this to be taken as the template description of Catherine's role, it would follow that she need not be a particularly interesting character. Gothic heroines, even those in parody, are bound to be somewhat cardboard in quality and boringly predictable in action. But fortunately, Austen's primary purpose was never simply to satirize the likes of *Udolpho*. *Northanger Abbey* is a novel of young love. It is a novel about the initiation and education of a young woman on the threshold of a complex adult world, where high standards of moral and social conduct are the benchmarks of personal worth. If, then, Catherine has more substance than the stock romantic heroine, how is she best understood?

Some commentators are cautious in their praise of Catherine. She is seen as desperately naive, dangerously unsophisticated, and frequently slow to comprehend. For example, Marvin Mudrick takes the position that “she is too simple and too slight, too narrowly a symbol of her author's rejection of romantic nonsense, to assert claims of per-

sonal feeling and value" (53). W. D. Howells writes of her: "Catherine Morland is a goose, but a very engaging goose and a goose you must respect for her sincerity" (55). But such negative views of Catherine's attributes are surely unmerited. Although one might view Catherine as a puppet of others' wishes in some of her social interactions, there is persuasive evidence that in the Bath episodes, Austen lays a careful foundation for a flesh and blood character, a Catherine who is the precursor of the more reflective and increasingly independent "person" of volume 2.

Personhood is a complex concept. Here it has to do with the capacity to be autonomous in thought and action, and to have a sense of identity and self worth. Fully developed adult persons are defined in part by their proven ability in making, reviewing, and revising judgments about the characters of others. This capability is crucial because an individual who accurately gets the measure of another's worth is exercising a survival skill, which is necessary to her own well-being and capacity to thrive. How is this so?

If an individual is to act autonomously and in her own best interest, she will need to have true beliefs about the worth of others who are important to her life. For example, in certain situations she may need to know whom to trust and why such persons merit her trust. In still other cases, it may be important to identify those whose behavior exhibits virtues such as courage, constancy, amiability, honesty, and integrity, for they are the individuals who are worth valuing. Similarly, another occasion may require the identification of those who are deceitful, treacherous, and villainous so that they may be avoided.

Has Catherine what she will need? Has she a clear grasp of fundamental moral concepts of character and basic reasoning skills, such that she can undertake the challenge of judging others? I shall argue first that Austen creates a Catherine who has initial competence in both these areas, and second, that in the course of the Bath episodes (vol. 1, ch. 2-15; vol. 2, ch. 1-4) Austen shows how Catherine manages to become a more astute, more comprehensive judge of others. In so doing, Austen reveals how these accomplishments serve to characterize the specific individual that Catherine is progressively becoming.

Concrete Reasoning Skills: A Prerequisite for Judging Others

It has been neither customary nor even popular to attribute to

Catherine any particular skills in reasoning. For example, the descriptive tag “engaging goose” hardly conjures up the image of a rigorous thinker. “Goosiness” is more naturally associated with silliness or simplemindedness. However, this level of condemnation is unfair and unwarranted, particularly because Austen does show Catherine periodically engaged in reasoned deliberation where she knowingly identifies true premises and makes good inferences based on them. What do such passages tell us?

In a key but rarely quoted passage in chapter 9, Austen describes Catherine’s analysis of whether John Thorpe’s alarmist remarks about the safety of James’s gig is a cause for worried concern. She writes:

It appeared to her that he did not excel in giving those clearer insights, in making those things plain which he had before made ambiguous; and, joining to this, the consideration, that he would not really suffer his sister and his friend to be exposed to a danger from which he might easily preserve them, she concluded at last, that he must know the carriage to be in fact perfectly safe, and therefore would alarm herself no longer. (66)

Here Austen uses meta-argumentative language to convey what claims are being linked together. Catherine is seen to “join” one true premise to another; on this basis she “concluded at last” that he must know the carriage is safe, and from this she further infers the final conclusion that she has no good grounds for alarm. This way of describing Catherine’s reasoning process is impressive, for it shows her marshalling relevant and sufficient evidence, thinking about the import of these claims, and then concluding what follows from them.

Then in chapter 8 there is further evidence that Catherine can reason capably about her immediate concerns. Her speculations about Henry Tilney’s marital state are guided by “what is simple [obvious] and probable” (53), both reasonable criteria for assessing the weight of evidence and the strength of an inference.

Austen has, therefore, shown that from an early point in the novel, Catherine has basic reasoning skills. And it is crucial that this is so because an analysis of Catherine’s character development will only be possible if she can be seen to make reasoned judgments grounded on facts.

However, it is not good enough to simply have the general capacity to reason adequately. Specifically, in the case of moral reasoning about judgments of character, a reasoner needs to employ fundamental standards on the basis of which virtues and vices may be attributed to another. Then, taking into consideration the specific context, a reasoner can infer from a particular individual's behavior whether it is consistent with the standard in question. Such a process requires not only a sensitivity to the complexities of moral standards themselves but also careful attention to the significance of another's behavior in the setting and circumstances where it occurs.

In regard to standards of morally sound behavior, Austen shows that Catherine is in some state of preparedness. As Gilbert Ryle aptly observes, Catherine is "quite ungullible about what is right and wrong;...her standards of conduct...are those of a candid, scrupulous and well-brought up girl" (176). Truth telling is mandatory in her eyes, so is promise keeping. For example, when Catherine is pressured to cancel the Tilneys' engagement in order to go out with the Thorpes, she refuses to "[retract] a promise voluntarily made only five minutes before, and on a false pretence too" (101). And she is aware of the connection between how we behave and how others see our character. For example, Catherine knows that in determining to keep her promise to the Tilneys, she has "attended to what was due to others and to her own character" (101). Presumably Austen means that by being truthful Catherine knowingly acts in a way that is consistent with a virtuous form of behavior that is valuable in itself.

Yet, as critical thinking specialists have noted (Crooks 313), having the ability to infer on the basis of evidence and to make evaluative judgments grounded on an appeal to acknowledged standards does not entail that one always exercises these skills. So it is another question whether in the longer run Catherine exhibits symptoms of an enduring and stable disposition to judge others wisely and well. In order to decide this, I propose to analyze five key episodes where Catherine needs to judge the character of some other person who occupies a significant role in her life at the time. These are contextually rich passages and chosen primarily to show what advances Catherine is making.

This is not to ignore other passages where she judges faultily or not at all. For example, Catherine's opinions of Isabella are often ill-

founded, as in chapter 8 where Isabella is described as a friend of “fidelity and worth” (81). Additionally, she sometimes shows a general disinclination to offer any opinion, with the result that she passes no judgment at all. For example, in chapter 7 her lack of confidence keeps her silent in the face of John Thorpe’s egocentric boastings, and on occasions in volume 2, chapter 4, instead of determining her own point of view, she opts instead for the opinions of Henry Tilney who “must know best” (153).

However, the primary focus at this point is to look carefully and chronologically at some occasions where Catherine is beginning to grasp the dynamics of judging others. Then it is possible to explore what it is about her character development that can be inferred from these measures of success.

Judging too Timidly: Catherine’s Early Encounter with John Thorpe (60-69)

Thorpe is a new but not insignificant acquaintance given that he is Isabella’s brother and James’s good friend. Yet Catherine can’t enthusiastically endorse him, and Austen uses highly qualified language to capture this hesitancy. For example, on the occasion of their outing Catherine “could not entirely repress a doubt...of his being altogether completely agreeable” (66); furthermore “the extreme weariness of his company...induced her, in some small degree,...to distrust his powers of giving universal pleasure” (67). It is only when she is removed from Isabella and James’s influence that Catherine judges more crisply. Austen writes: “it was clear to [Catherine] that the drive had by no means been very pleasant and that John Thorpe himself was quite disagreeable” (69).

This is an important passage because it shows a vulnerable Catherine. She is “little...in the habit of judging for herself” (66), let alone speaking ill of someone, for this is an activity that her clerical family would have discouraged. And a lack of self-confidence causes Catherine to understate her perceptions of Thorpe’s overt, self-centered boorishness. As a result, she is somewhat slow to admit how odious he is. Moreover, she is too greatly influenced by the opinions of John’s enthusiastic fans, Isabella and James. It is evident to the reader that as long as Catherine uncritically accepts the “high authority” (67) of others, it is less probable that her judgments will be based on careful person-

al observation. She emerges from this episode looking as if she could be easily manipulated by those with stronger personalities and views. This is an occasion when Catherine seems more like a puppet than an independent actor.

Judging Tentatively: Catherine Begins to Note Isabella's Imperfections (90-91)

In the passage at issue here, Isabella profusely criticizes the Tilneys' failure to meet Catherine for a prearranged walk. Isabella's condemnation is characteristically embedded in a catalogue of her own superior virtues and loyalty. But in this self-centered babble she has taken no account of Catherine's grief and disappointment. Though Catherine says nothing directly to her friend, Austen reveals that Catherine "could almost have accused Isabella of being wanting in tenderness towards herself and her sorrows; so very little did they appear to dwell on her mind, and so very inadequate was the comfort she offered" (90).

By now the reader may be somewhat irritated that Catherine cannot muster a specific negative judgment. Too often in the past Catherine's excessive credulity and desire to think well of her friend have blinded her to Isabella's faults. However, in this passage Austen registers a significant change in Catherine's perceptions. The "almost" in the phrase "she could almost have accused Isabella" suggests that Catherine is beginning to seriously doubt Isabella's capacity to empathize with a friend in need of sympathy and understanding. And though Catherine is still much too naive about Isabella and consequently not yet able to judge her, she is at least very precise in her description of Isabella's failings. However, she hesitates to take the next step, which requires that she see this behavior as evidential of the sort of person Isabella really is.

Judging with Greater Deliberation: Catherine's Response to the Tilneys' Apparent Snub (91-92)

On this occasion, Catherine has rushed to the Tilneys' house with the express intent of apologizing to Eleanor and Henry. There she has been unkindly ignored. Austen writes that Catherine "could almost be angry herself at such angry incivility" (92). Although this passage might be taken as evidence that Catherine is once again self-effacing when the behavior of others more articulate and powerful than herself

is at issue, such an interpretation would be misleading. Instead, it is arguable that Austen deliberately uses the word “almost” not only to describe Catherine’s emotional response to the snub but also to signpost the complexities of Catherine’s attempts to make sense of the Tilneys’ behavior. How does Catherine’s deliberation proceed?

Her first reaction is to “[check] the resentful sensation; [and remember] her own ignorance” (92). Presumably if she has unwittingly broken some accepted rule of polite behavior, the error is hers. It would follow, then, that the Tilneys’ “angry incivility” is probably reasonable in the circumstances. For in the context in question, they, not she, may be the injured party. Thus, it would be unfair to think badly of them.

This is certainly more sophisticated mental work on Catherine’s part. Her response to the Tilneys’ apparent snub is deliberate and thoughtful. She has considered what, to her mind at least, might be plausible in the case. Moreover, she seems to recognize that judgments about character traits are not contextless. Personal feelings, such as a “sensation of resentment,” can affect what assessment is made. And in this situation, she not only acknowledges the presence of this negative emotion but additionally rules it out of order.

On balance, this is a more reflective Catherine who, on her own initiative, is exploring what she might reasonably make of the Tilneys’ actions. Certainly her deliberations about whether they are guilty of insulting behavior are more subtle than her earlier questionings about John Thorpe’s weaknesses of character.

Judging and Acting: Catherine Resists the Thorpes’ Pressure Tactics and Keeps her Promise to the Tilneys (97-102)

In chapter 13, Catherine finally identifies several flaws in Isabella’s character. Her negative judgment is prompted by Isabella’s refusal to acknowledge Catherine’s prior obligation to meet with the Tilneys. Tired of Isabella’s simpering insistence that the Tilney’s social engagement can be readily canceled, Austen reports that “Isabella appeared to [Catherine] ungenerous and selfish, regardless of every thing but her own gratification” (98). This “appears” is not the tentative “appears” or “seems” that is used in conjecture. Rather, on this occasion it is used to pick out how Catherine specifically sees Isabella.

It is important to note that on this occasion Catherine not only judges well, but she also is catalyzed to act. She will keep her promise to the Tilneys. She will not be duped or tricked to the contrary. She is setting aside Isabella's directives and attending instead to her own principles and preferences. These are steps ahead for Catherine. She is making an important choice that she is fully prepared to act on even though it will separate her from her constant companions. Moreover, for the moment she enjoys the "conviction of being right" (101).

According to philosopher James Christian, an autonomous person is one who acts. She "determines [her] own behavior and makes decisions consonant with what [she] really is, in contrast to the norms set by others that may be discordant with [her] own needs" (120). Catherine is moving in this direction. She sees herself as a truth-telling individual who keeps her word, and she will not compromise this authentic image of herself. Her actions will have to be consistent with the standards with which she has been brought up. In consequence, she consciously rejects the hedonistic norms set by Isabella, who is prepared to consider another's promise-keeping expendable if it should threaten her own plans for pleasurable activities. In speaking her mind to her friend, Catherine is, for the first time, refusing to tag along with Isabella. She is beginning to realize that the Bath social whirl will pale if she must act contrary to her principles and in association with those, like Isabella, who require behavior contrary to her own values.

How to Judge Another's Worth:

Catherine Responds to Henry's Teachings (131-34;149-53)

During the final days in Bath, Catherine is worried that Frederick Tilney's presence there could threaten the happiness of James and Isabella. Consequently, she is compelled to question Henry about his brother's character in order to better understand Frederick's behavior. Henry Tilney's role in these exchanges is reminiscent of the mentor who encourages his pupil to explore relevant issues.

A conversation with Catherine in the Upper Rooms, at a point where Frederick had recently joined their party, has already become a vehicle for Henry's insights about some contextual features of judging others. Austen writes:

Henry smiled, and said, "How very little trouble it can give you

to understand the motives of other people's actions."

"Why—What do you mean?"

"With you, it is not, How is such a one likely to be influenced? What is the inducement most likely to act upon such a person's feelings, age, situation, and probable habits of life considered?—but how should I be influenced, what would my inducement be in acting so and so?" (132)

In this passage, Henry notes Catherine's practice of attributing to another the same motivation that would be true of herself in a similar situation. But he introduces an alternative approach. For example, one should look to information about the individual's age, situation, and probable habits that would explain his rationale for acting. And if one applies this *modus operandi* to Frederick's case, it is very doubtful that Frederick's wish of dancing with Isabella should be attributed to his good nature alone. And why is this so? As Henry later implies, Catherine's simplistic analysis of Frederick's motivation falls short because it ignores what are the most probable motivating factors in Frederick's case.

In a subsequent exchange he suggests that they look at the facts and ask what follows. Henry says: "The premises are before you. My brother is a lively, and perhaps sometimes a thoughtless young man" (152). He has known Isabella for about a week and has known of her engagement for almost as long. Given this context and this cluster of traits, Henry seemingly invites her to infer that any attentions to Isabella are most likely due to Frederick's desire to be entertained during his tenure in Bath.

In these conversations with Catherine, Henry has explored contextuality as a means of reaching a final judgment. In effect, he teaches by example, as he leads Catherine through the steps of his deliberation. A pattern of asking questions, of listening and learning is being established, and this pedagogical chemistry between Catherine and Henry will be important for her ongoing personal development in volume 2.

And what does Catherine's participation in Henry's dialectic analysis of character tell about her? As a result of this and subsequent probing exchanges with Henry, she begins to realize that judging well matters, that she needs to perfect her skills, and that Henry will be an admirable teacher.

Catherine's Progress to Personhood

A precondition of autonomous personhood that is being explored is the ability to judge people and their actions wisely and well. In conclusion, it is necessary to evaluate how well Catherine does this by the time she leaves Bath for Northanger Abbey. Certainly some of the underbrush has been cleared. Catherine is less impressionable, less afraid to speak her mind. On balance, she has acquired some self-confidence, she has honed her reasoning skills, and has an increased self-awareness about what judgments of character entail. Essentially, she is on track and en route. She has been initiated into the intricacies of judging others, and in volume 2 further tests of her judgment skills will prove her mettle. There Catherine revisits and revises her originally flawed judgments of General Tilney and Isabella. On these occasions she acquits herself rather well, and in consequence provides evidence of her improved capacity to judge wisely, and so act consistently with being her own person.

Why is Catherine able to think and act autonomously? Conceivably it is because her "training" with Henry is beginning to pay off. She has become better motivated to judge with insight and confident enough to report the results of her deliberations. And even though Henry's questions and comments continue to assist her analysis throughout volume 2, Catherine demonstrates an improved ability to use evidential grounds to separate fiction from fact. The Gothic fantasies that she actively cultivated and eagerly allowed the Northanger Abbey atmosphere to nurture are dismissed as ludicrous. And once these imaginings are put paid, she can no longer attribute the characteristics of Montoni, the sinister villain of *Udolpho*, to General Tilney.

Additionally, later in volume 2, she reacts strongly and justifiably to Isabella's shallow, pleading, misrepresenting letter. Catherine sees its "inconsistencies, contradictions and falsehoods" (218) as evidence of Isabella's inconstancy and fickleness. Isabella is merely a vain coquette whose self-centered ploys have failed. And in admitting that she "[wishes she] had never known [Isabella]" (218), Austen shows that Catherine is registering an emotion that quite naturally accompanies the justified condemnation of another.

Recall that in order to retain individual moral and intellectual autonomy, an individual must have a reliable way of getting true beliefs about the caliber of others. And "if we can't think for ourselves

[in order to acquire these true beliefs] then we cannot be our true selves" (Grennan 4). The analysis of Catherine's assessment of the worth of others has revealed that certain traits are true of her, and their possession enhances her capacity to acquire true beliefs. For example, she displays some curiosity and independent spirit of inquiry as well as an ability to increasingly make more precise behavioral observations. These traits will facilitate future instances of evidence gathering on her part. Moreover, she brings to her assessment of others the desideratum that one should be fair. And although Catherine's reactions to others are often emotionally charged, she seems to see that a claim to know the character of another should not be slanted by one's personal feelings about that individual. This observation shows some wisdom on her part.

In consequence of this fuller picture of Catherine's capabilities, the reader is engaged by a more complex, more intriguing Catherine than the earlier model, who, though affectionate and cheerful, was more passively pleasant than actively interesting. She is growing convincingly and progressively into an individual of some substance. The young girl who is "in training for a heroine" (15) earns respectable grades in her report card on her schooling in Bath.

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