Henry Tilney: Austen's Feminized Hero?

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In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen praises the novel form as she satirizes elements of the gothic novel, particularly the female gothic: medieval edifices; an atmosphere of mystery and suspense; inexplicable events; discovered fragmented narratives; the powerful, tyrannical male; the woman in distress. Jane Spencer and others have noted an additional element: the feminized hero. These critics claim that, in the eighteenth-century female gothic novel, and especially in the novels of Ann Radcliffe, the heroine triumphs over male authoritarianism by marriage to a "feminized hero," achieving a union "where womanly virtue and patriarchal authority are no longer in conflict" (Spencer 207). The companionate model of marriage, therefore, replaces the authoritarian, patriarchal model.

That Austen recognized this additional characteristic of the female gothic is not surprising. Even in her youth, Austen was a perceptive reader. Her *Juvenilia*, with its satire of excessive sensibility and its clever twists of literary motifs, is ample proof. Additionally, Austen's writings confirm that she is a socially conscious author, broaching important topics such as class, inheritance practices, imperialism, the role of clergy, and gender relations. But Austen's internalization of the national angst embodied in the emerging novel form finds deeper expression than mere lighthearted satire of the gothic. General Tilney plays Austen's version of the villain, an evil patriarchal figure, and Henry can be viewed as her clever acknowledgement of the feminization of the hero, characteristic of the female gothic. However, even though Austen's

comic wit shines in her acknowledgement of the feminized hero, Henry is much more than another opportunity for Austen to parody the female gothic. He is a complex character, a hero who demonstrates that a heroine can achieve a companionate union through marriage to a strong man, if his strength is coupled with integrity.

Michael McKeon, in *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, argues that the new novel form documents Britain's growing "discord of internals and externals, of virtue, status, wealth, and power" (150). In other words, while earlier literary forms assume a connection between aristocracy and virtue, the new novel form does not; in fact, the novel challenges that assumption and locates virtue and honor in the character of the individual rather than in his patrilineage or rank. The innocent Catherine's early impressions of Henry's father illustrate the traditional assumption. In Bath she finds herself "earnestly regarded by a *gentleman* who stood among the lookers-on, . . . a very handsome man, of a *commanding* aspect, past the bloom, but not past the vigour of life," and from Henry she learns that this man is the General, his father (*NA* 80, emphasis mine). Later, however, when she is subjected to the oppressive atmosphere surrounding General Tilney at Milsom-street, she is "puzzled" and cannot "account for" the collective unease: "It could not be General Tilney's fault. That he was perfectly agreeable and good-natured, and altogether a very charming man, did not admit of a doubt, for he was tall and handsome, and Henry's father" (129). That he is handsome and Henry's father certainly contribute to her desire to think well of him, but she is also swayed by the fact that he is a gentleman and in a respected position of authority.

Because of these long-established symbols of honor and virtue, she believes that General Tilney should be a good man. Instead, he is not a particularly virtuous person, and his motives are much the same as other patriarchs in gothic novels: he wants the heroine's money, and he plans to get it through subterfuge ending in Catherine's marriage to his son. He has "designed her for his daughter in law" (244). Later, when Henry's father discovers that Catherine is not a rich heiress and brusquely sends her on her way, she finds it "incomprehensible" that "so well-bred" a man could do something "so grossly uncivil" (226). General Tilney's villainy may not equal that of Radcliffe's Montoni, but upon discovering the General's motivation for banishing her, Catherine believes that "in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (247). Thus Austen sets him up as a corrupt authoritarian male, one whose schemes must be routed, whose power must be crushed.

At first glance, Henry does not seem to be the kind of hero who routs schemes and crushes power. He is, in fact, Austen's "feminized hero." However, he is feminized by Austen's wit, not in essential character. The actual feminized heroes of the female gothic novel are men of sentiment. They act spontaneously, display excessive emotion, are often vulnerable, and sometimes even become victimized themselves. These behaviors are associated with the cult of sensibility, a movement that many Britons believed had "feminized the nation, given women undue prominence, and emasculated men" (Todd 133). As Claudia Johnson points out, this "crisis of sentiment" is also a "crisis of gender" (3). Austen, in some of her novels, points out traces of effeminacy in male characters such as Frank Churchill and Robert Ferrars, always with disapproval.

It is important to note, however, that although Henry is "feminized," he is definitely not effeminate. He is well aware of accepted female behaviors—"'this delightful habit of journalizing,'" for instance—and is eloquently able to describe the contents of the perfect feminine journal entry: How, he asks Catherine, will you relate "'the civilities and compliments of every day[?] . . . How are your various dresses to be remembered, and the particular state of your complexion, and curl of your hair to be described in all their diversities, without having constant recourse to a journal?'" (27). Henry assures Mrs. Allen that he "'understand[s] muslins . . . [p]articularly well,'" recognizes a "'true Indian muslin,'" and has often been entrusted with the choice of his sister's gowns, even though, as Catherine's guardian notes with amazement, "'Men commonly take so little notice of those things'" (28). Although Catherine assumes that novels are for women and that "'gentlemen read better books,'" Henry is an avid reader of novels, notably all of Mrs. Radcliffe's works (106). Austen definitely draws attention to these feminine pursuits. However, as E. J. Clery asserts in "Austen and Masculinity," all of Austen's works operate within a "gendered moral framework, which might be termed a 'masculine ethic'" (335). In this satire of the female gothic novel, Austen constructs a deceptive façade for our hero, just as she does with his family home, Northanger Abbey.

Although Austen's description of Henry is admittedly brief, it contains no hint of effeminacy. Even his rival John Thorpe concedes that Henry is a "'good figure of a man; well put together'" (76). Henry, it is interesting to note, stands apart in the lineup of Austen's heroes. Although she goes on to create other attractive heroes—notably Darcy, Mr. Knightley, and Frederick Wentworth—Henry is Austen's only witty hero, and it is telling that his manner contains the complimentary characteristics of "archness" and "pleasantry"

(25). In fact, Henry seems much like his creator. Both are perceptive readers of literature *and* of society and its mores, and both become keen critics.

Henry quickly realizes that Catherine is an appropriate recipient of his wit. Her friendly disposition and naiveté combine to make her the perfect "straight man" for his comic routine. Actually, she serves as both partner and audience for his first performance of the novel, a scripted conversation based on the prescribed procedure for first meetings between hero and heroine, suitor and lady (26). Henry's humor serves him well. His ironic wit is surprising and entertaining to Catherine, keeping her off-balance yet continually bringing her back for more. As encore to his initial scripted repartee, Henry demonstrates his quickness in sizing up people and tailoring his wit to the situation, as he does at their first meeting with Mrs. Allen and the muslin, again causing Catherine to laugh. On their drive to the family home, Henry realizes that Catherine has imagined the Abbey as a romantic edifice from a gothic novel, and he begins to weave a story: "'And are you prepared to encounter all the horrors that a building such as 'what one reads about' may produce?—Have you a stout heart?—Nerves fit for sliding pannels and tapestry?'" In fact, Henry continues his narrative for almost three full pages—throwing in an ancient housekeeper, gloomy passages, a distant bedchamber, a dagger, and a storm—before "he could no longer command solemnity either of subject or voice" and discontinues his story. Catherine has become so immersed in his gothic tale that, when he stops, she must "recollect[ ] . . . herself" (157-60).

Additionally, Henry employs his wit to educate Catherine. The heroine's education by the hero is a recurring motif in Austen's novels, and most of this education occurs through confrontation, as with Mr. Knightley and Emma for instance, or by direct instruction, as with Edmund and Fanny. Henry ably lectures Catherine on the picturesque (111), defends the writing of historians, and argues for the instruction of young children (109). But he also uses his ironic wit to "educate" her on social niceties while actually encouraging honesty and independent thought. Henry falls back into scripted conversation during their dance at the Pump Room, asking, "'Do you find Bath as agreeable as when I had the honour of making the inquiry before?'" At Catherine's quick, honest reply of "'Yes, quite—more so, indeed,'" he wryly warns her, "'More so!—Take care, or you will forget to be tired of it at the proper time.—You ought to be tired at the end of six weeks,'" and he continues his lesson, alluding to the hypocrisy of those who claim boredom while repeatedly extending their stay and leaving only when their money runs out (78).

Although Henry's wit can be distracting, his humor actually reveals

more than it conceals. Marvin Mudrick claims that Henry is "detached" and that "whenever he speaks, he speaks from the outside, to amuse, to parry, to lead on, to instruct, to humble; never plainly and straightforwardly, or unwarily, to reveal or engage himself" (49). On the contrary, I would argue that, although Henry's wit does seem to give him distance, he repeatedly reveals himself through his witty exchanges, however unconsciously. Henry's discourse on the correct usage of the word *nice* coupled with Eleanor's warning that they would soon "'be overpowered with Johnson and Blair'" (108) and his mini-lecture on the incongruity of the term "'faithful promise'" (196) certainly display Henry's acuity with words. However, these exchanges also reveal that he is particular and a bit of a show-off. Henry enjoys displaying his intelligence. Additionally, the knowledge that Henry treats Catherine in the same familiar manner that he does Eleanor—"'He is for ever finding fault with me, for some incorrectness of language, and now he is taking the same liberty with you'" (107-08)—reveals the intimacy he is beginning to feel with Catherine. Austen's ironic narrator draws attention to this budding relationship a few pages later when she explains that "Catherine did not know her own advantages—did not know that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man, unless circumstances are particularly untoward" (111).

Henry's cleverness with words extends even to elaborate figures of speech. He develops his declaration "'I consider a country-dance as an emblem of marriage'" to great lengths. This extended simile again gives Henry an opportunity to demonstrate his intelligence and wit. However, this comparison also allows him to educate Catherine on his views of marriage. Marriage partners should exhibit fidelity, complaisance, and amiability; the union should be exclusive and mutually beneficial. This witty display also allows Henry to question, in a roundabout way, Catherine's views on holy matrimony, and fidelity in particular: "'[M]ay I not thence infer, that your notions of the duties of the dancing state are not so strict as your partner might wish? Have I not reason to fear, that if the gentleman who spoke to you just now were to return, or if any other gentleman were to address you, there would be nothing to restrain you from conversing with him as long as you chose?'" His wit is of benefit to Henry because it allows him distance. He reveals deeply held personal convictions and questions Catherine about hers without actually committing himself. Henry also receives another benefit from this doublespeak. Because the surface conversation is about dancing, Catherine relaxes and reveals more than she might have intended about her own feelings. Her reply,

"'[B]esides, I do not *want* to talk to any body,'" gives Henry "'a security worth having,'" and he relaxes, leaving the subjects of dancing and marriage behind (76-78).

Henry's cleverness does not always end with such positive results. When he discovers a flustered Catherine at the top of the stairs near his mother's apartment and realizes that she has been harboring terrible suspicions about his father, his "rebuke" shames and demoralizes Catherine. However, her distrust of General Tilney has not been "all a voluntary, self-created delusion" (199). Henry's own contributions to this outcome are impossible to ignore. He, too, is culpable in Catherine's taking the gothic narrative too far. From the beginning of their acquaintance, Henry takes pains to set himself up as an authority figure in Catherine's eyes. His "'Do not imagine that you can cope with me in a knowledge of Julias and Louisas'" (107) establishes him as an expert in the gothic genre. He encourages her interest in the novels, describing his own visceral reading experience. On the ride up to the Abbey, he stokes her curiosity, fuels her fear, validates her interest. Then, when she acts out the story on her own, he flays her with his words, and this confrontation concludes a most interesting scene. Upon apprehending Catherine's intent in viewing the apartment, Henry relates the details of his mother's demise, filling in the missing information that has caused Catherine's suspicions to be raised. Only after Henry establishes the facts surrounding his mother's death does his tone turn accusatory. But is he rebuking Catherine, as she believes? Or is this another example of Henry's ironic wit? Henry's "rebuke" is over-the-top, even hyperbolic: "'Remember that we are English, that we are Christians'"? "'a neighbourhood of voluntary spies'"? and "'Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?'" (197-98). Actually, many of the ideas that she has been admitting have come straight from him.

In his speech to Catherine, Henry seems to be promoting a rational view of life, one based on personal observation, education, and common sense, but this championing of the rational is problematic in a novel satirizing the gothic. As Alistair M. Duckworth observes, *Northanger Abbey* "subverts the falsities of such works as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, but it also retains enough of the extra-rational probing of the Gothic novel to put into question any easy acceptance of a rationally grounded existence" (85). Austen repeatedly reveals that Henry values rationality. In addition to his rational explications and lectures, he uses the word itself twice. The first usage occurs during his initial meeting with Catherine, at the completion of their socially scripted repartee: "'Now I must give one smirk, and then we may be rational again,'" he concludes (26),

effectively classifying most social exchanges as irrational. He next uses the word after the misunderstanding between Catherine and Eleanor, when Catherine alludes to "'expected horrors in London,'" and Eleanor assumes that Catherine is referring to a "'dreadful riot'" instead of a new publication. Henry chides Eleanor, arguing that "'any rational creature'" would immediately have known that Catherine was referring to a book, not to an out-of-control mob of insurgents. But Eleanor's confusion is understandable. Henry had just completed a discourse on politics when, after a short pause, Catherine "uttered these words, 'I have heard that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London'" (112-13). Eleanor actually *does* make a logical leap. Henry's use of the word "rational" is ironic both times. He tries to amuse his audience, even if it is at their own expense. In fact, both Catherine and Eleanor recognize this propensity as Henry's weakness. Although Catherine thinks well of Henry and often enjoys his wit, she "fear[s] . . . that he indulged himself a little too much with the foibles of others" (29). Eleanor accuses Henry of being "'impertinent'" and of taking "'libert[ies]'" with Catherine (108), and she warns him that Catherine will misunderstand his wit, not being "'used to [his] odd ways'" (113).

Henry may go a little too far with his attempts at humor, but, for those who know him well, his admirable qualities outweigh whatever impression he makes with his witty displays. Henry's attempt to untangle the confusion between Catherine and Eleanor takes a humorous but misogynistic turn: "'I have no patience with such of my sex as disdain to let themselves sometimes down to the comprehension of yours. Perhaps the abilities of women are neither sound nor acute—neither vigorous nor keen. Perhaps they may want observation, discernment, judgment, fire, genius, and wit,'" Henry declares. He asks Catherine to forgive his sister's "'stupidity,'" and adds that "'the fears of the sister have added to the weakness of the woman.'" When Eleanor demands that he recant and reassure Catherine that he is not "'a great brute in [his] opinion of women,'" he replies, "'Miss Morland, no one can think more highly of the understanding of women than I do. In my opinion, nature has given them so much, that they never find it necessary to use more than half.'" Eleanor, defeated, assures her friend that Henry "'must be entirely misunderstood, if he can ever appear to say an unjust thing of any woman at all, or an unkind one of me'" (113-14), and, in fact, his own words and actions prove this to be true.

Just as he has made fun of social niceties and hypocrisies in his earlier conversation about Bath with Catherine, so he mocks negative stereotypical

gender roles in this exchange with Eleanor and Catherine. When he is serious, however, Henry is never misogynistic—in fact, he takes pains to "ungender" things. At the couple's first meeting, during Henry's playful discourse on journal writing, he claims that "'Every body allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female'" (27), but when the conversation turns sober he reveals, "'I should no more lay it down as a general rule that women write better letters than men, than that they sing better duets, or draw better landscapes. In every power, of which taste is the foundation, excellence is pretty fairly divided between the sexes'" (28). And later when Catherine asserts that novels "'are not clever enough for'" him, he replies, "'The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid'" (106). Henry's only use for misogyny is comic. Additionally, even though Eleanor is a target of his drollness, Austen makes it clear how much Henry actually values his sister. On their way to the Abbey, Henry thanks Catherine for agreeing to visit Eleanor, for her companionship and her friendship. He regrets that his sister is often lonely and reveals that he is "'always sorry to leave Eleanor'" (157). Later, when the two women are alone, Eleanor reveals to Catherine how hard Henry tries to stave off her loneliness: "'I have no sister, you know—and though Henry—though my brothers are very affectionate, and Henry is a great deal here, which I am most thankful for, it is impossible for me not to be often solitary'" (180). Henry has his own home, and the atmosphere around the General is hardly congenial, so it is doubtful that Henry would choose to spend as much time at the Abbey as he does if it were not for his love of Eleanor.

Henry also cares about Catherine's feelings. He "greatly ease[s]" Catherine's mind when he takes pains to assure her that his sister is not angry after the Thorpes' machinations cause Catherine to miss their scheduled walk (94). Following their confrontation about her suspicions of his father, Catherine is mortified. She is "grievously . . . humbled"; she is "sunk"; "her folly . . . was all exposed"; she "hated herself"; her heart is broken. She dreads seeing him again, but when the "formidable Henry soon followed her into the room, . . . the only difference in his behaviour to her, was that he paid her rather more attention than usual. Catherine had never wanted comfort more, and he looked as if he was aware of it" (199). Henry, Catherine believes, shows "astonishing generosity and nobleness of conduct, in never alluding in the slightest way to what had passed" (201). He is full of sympathy when Catherine receives a letter informing her of her brother's broken engagement (202). In this instance, he even uses his wit to comfort her: "'You feel, I suppose, that, in losing Isabella,

you lose half yourself: you feel a void in your heart which nothing else can occupy. Society is becoming irksome. . . . You would not, for instance, now go to a ball for the world. You feel that you have no longer any friend to whom you can speak with unreserve. . . . You feel all this?'" (207). The exaggerated sensibility of Henry's response causes Catherine to evaluate her feelings, to recognize that, although she is grieved, she is quite able to handle both the situation and her feelings, and this realization is surprising and gratifying to her.

In fact, a growing appreciation of Catherine's character has been forming in Henry. He has become almost jaded, and Catherine's honesty and instinctive integrity refresh him. She may often reveal too much information—"'I begged Mr. Thorpe so earnestly to stop; I called out to him as soon as ever I saw you; . . . and, if Mr. Thorpe would only have stopped, I would have jumped out and run after you'" (94)—but Catherine's unsophisticated truth-telling moves Henry. Her response is natural and unscripted. When she cannot understand Isabella's actions, Henry, with his characteristic irony, explains that Catherine's "'mind is warped by an innate principle of general integrity, and therefore not accessible to the cool reasonings of family partiality, or a desire of revenge'" (219). He realizes that Catherine always feels "'what is most to the credit of human nature'" (207). In addition to her integrity, Catherine has an innate self-confidence. Although she allows Henry to instruct her in matters of which she knows little, she is not afraid to have an opinion. When he launches his *nice* diatribe, Catherine admits she may have used the word wrongly but asserts, "'[I]t *is* a nice book, and why should not I call it so?'" (108). Henry may be amused by her naiveté, but he admires her strength of character, and his feelings are revealed in another instance of his doublespeak. His mocking description of Isabella masks his literal description of Catherine: "'Prepare for your sister-in-law, Eleanor, and such a sister-in-law as you must delight in!—Open, candid, artless, guileless, with affections strong but simple, forming no pretensions, and knowing no disguise'" (206).

Henry cannot be described as artless, simple, or unpretentious, but he is definitely a man of personal integrity, and although his wit is sometimes overpowering, he puts all comedy aside when circumstances demand it. Although Henry is practically defined by witty exchanges throughout most of the novel, as soon as his father sends Catherine away, all humor disappears. When he and Catherine are reunited, their meeting is not laced with wit. Instead, his "first purpose was to explain himself" (243). He soberly reveals that the confrontation with his father had been a solemn and hostile one: "Henry's indignation . . . had been open and bold"; he is not "intimidate[d]"; he is "sustained in his

purpose by a conviction of its justice"; Henry informs his father that he is bound to Catherine by both "honour" and "affection"; he possesses "fidelity" and "resolution" (247). He "steadily refused to accompany his father" and "as steadily declared his intention" to marry Catherine (248). Although Henry's wit may have made him seem capricious earlier in the novel, Austen's word choices in this most important scene—*open*, *bold*, *steady*, *sustained*, *conviction*, *honour*, *fidelity*, *resolutions*, and the close repetition of the word *steadily*—all underscore the integrity of Henry's essential character.

Austen, in her customary fashion, veils the proposal scene, but she assures the reader that Henry "was now sincerely attached to [Catherine]," that "he felt and delighted in all the excellencies of her character and truly loved her society" (243). Although *Northanger Abbey* is a satire of the gothic novel, it is also much more than that—a love story, a novel of manners, a female bildungsroman. And, as in Austen's other novels, the heroine triumphs. Catherine seems destined for a companionate marriage, the marriage model desired by the female gothic heroine. Yet she does not achieve this reward, as the traditional heroine of the female gothic does, by marriage to a weak, even effeminate hero. Instead, she "triumphs over male authoritarianism" and achieves a union "where womanly virtue and patriarchal authority are no longer in conflict" by marriage to a true hero, one who is both manly and virtuous. Henry is strong, and, in proper hero fashion, he courageously confronts evil and thwarts the schemes of the villain. He just has a little fun before he does it.

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