

JANE AUSTEN'S HEROINES often begin their fictional lives in a state of at least partial ignorance and, through education, progress to self-knowledge and maturity, in some cases with the assistance of the hero *cum* teacher. Fanny Price learns her earliest lessons from Edmund Bertram. Even the accomplished Emma Woodhouse must be taught by Mr. Knightley how to behave. Among Austen's heroines, seventeen-year-old Catherine Morland is by far the most "ignorant and uninformed." At the same age Marianne Dashwood is an avid reader and a proficient on the piano. Austen's tongue-in-cheek disparagement of Catherine at the start of *Northanger Abbey* sets the stage for a novel about the education of the heroine. It is no accident that one of the lessons Catherine learns in her meager reading adapts lines from James Thompson's "Spring": "It is a delightful task/To teach the young idea how to shoot."

Henry Tilney's role as teacher is established on his first evening in Catherine's company. He delivers lectures extempore on keeping a journal, writing letters, and selecting muslin. Though the archness and pleasantry of his manner interests Catherine, it is "hardly understood by her." This intellectual imbalance between hero and heroine is so striking that many readers feel Catherine is simply not good enough for Henry. But she is the perfect heroine for Jane Austen's satiric novel about gothic bestsellers and the Bath marriage market. Austen uses Catherine's ignorance to establish Henry as more than a teacher; he is Pygmalion to Catherine's Galatea. In Catherine he finds a pretty girl whom he can mold, and he falls in love with his creation.

Henry begins almost immediately to shape Catherine's mind. He instructs her in the art of the picturesque, the importance of learning, and even the meaning of the word "nice." When he attempts to expose the motive of his brother's flirtation with Isabella Thorpe and Isabella's susceptibility, Catherine says she does not understand him. He replies, "Then we are on very unequal terms, for I understand you perfectly well." Henry relishes his intellectual superiority. At one point he even tells Catherine, "a teachableness of disposition in a young lady is a great blessing." He uses his power over Catherine in an unkind way when, on the drive to Northanger, he teases her about a mysterious ebony cabinet, knowing full well that such a cabinet will be in her bedroom.

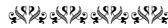
In the novel's most quoted passage, Austen explains Catherine's attractiveness: "To come with a well-informed mind, is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others. . . . A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing any thing, should conceal it as well as she can." While many men find *imbecility* an enhancement to a woman's charms, the more reasonable

desire only *ignorance*. Consequently, “a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man.”

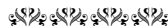
Henry understands that Catherine possesses the virtues of an excellent partner. She is, he says, “superior in good-nature . . . to all the rest of the world” and is shaped by “an innate principle of general integrity.” Even so, Catherine’s initial attraction lies in the way she unwittingly flatters Henry’s vanity. She listens with sparkling eyes to everything he says, and, “in finding him irresistible, becom[es] so herself.” Austen goes further, saying that a persuasion of Catherine’s partiality for Henry had been “the only cause of giving her a serious thought.”

In *Northanger Abbey* Austen satirizes not only the education of the heroine but the romance between hero and heroine. We are never allowed to take Catherine and Henry seriously as we do Elizabeth and Darcy or Anne and Wentworth. Austen’s sustained playful tone is reminiscent of the juvenilia, but the sophisticated development of plot and character places *Northanger Abbey* among her mature masterpieces.

The 2010 AGM in Portland celebrated the genius of *Northanger Abbey*. Many AGM papers and presentations are collected in this volume of *Persuasions* and on JASNA’s website in *Persuasions On-Line*, Vol. 31, No. 1. As I mark the end of my term as JASNA President, I want to thank Editor Susan Allen Ford and the Editorial Board for another year of outstanding publications, which bring the world of Jane Austen scholarship to members and online readers.



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