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JANE AUSTEN'S IRONIC REWORKING OF TRADITIONAL STEREOTYPES OF FEMININITY THROUGH CATHERINE MORLAND

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Abstract: This article examines how Jane Austen uses Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey to question traditional stereotypes of femininity. It considers her treatment of literary conventions that present women as physically frail, submissive, emotionally impressionable, and dependent on constant protection. Particular attention is paid to Catherine's childhood interests, her preference for cricket, and her unaffected behaviour. The analysis suggests that Austen's irony exposes the artificiality of the sentimental heroine and challenges the restrictive assumptions about women that sustain this literary ideal. Catherine's character offers a different understanding of female individuality, one that allows for spontaneity, physical vitality, and independence of character.

Keywords: Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey, Catherine Morland, female representation, stereotypes of femininity, gender norms.

Jane Austen draws on some of the familiar representations of women found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English literature, yet her leading heroines differ markedly from the conventional female characters of her predecessors and contemporaries. Gentleness, obedience, physical weakness, and emotional sensitivity do not, in themselves, define Austen's women. Her heroines think independently, assess the situations in which they find themselves, and make considered decisions about their own lives.

The women in Austen's novels cannot be reduced to the ideal of the "angel in the house" or to the role of a man's moral support. Their lives are not devoted exclusively to charity, nursing the sick, or selfless service to their families. Nor does Austen measure their moral worth solely by what they do for others. She gives them needs, interests, faults, and opinions of their own, allowing them to emerge as complex individuals.

Some of Austen's male characters, however, regard young women as fragile beings who need constant protection. This view assumes that women are physically weak, emotionally unstable, and easily influenced, making male care and guidance indispensable. A young woman is thus imagined as a "porcelain doll" or a "delicate plant" that requires careful tending. The following remark captures this paternalistic attitude: "Young ladies should take care of themselves. Young ladies are delicate plants. They should take care of their health and their complexion" [10, p. 267; 13, p. 210].

The remark implies that a woman's social value rests on maintaining her health, attractiveness, and refinement. The emphasis on her "complexion" is particularly revealing: it makes women's bodies subject to aesthetic scrutiny. From this perspective, physical exertion and freedom of movement may threaten both a woman's health and the qualities expected of a feminine appearance.

The belief that women were naturally weak and susceptible to illness also encouraged disapproval of their involvement in strenuous sports. Such activities were considered unsuitable for women because they conflicted with an assumed delicacy of body and

temperament. These expectations restricted women's movements and helped regulate their bodies. Girls were expected to walk demurely, move with care, and avoid activities that might spoil their appearance.

Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey is introduced through an ironic departure from these expectations. From the outset, Austen stresses how little Catherine resembles the conventional heroine of sentimental fiction. She has neither extraordinary beauty nor the physical frailty, delicate temperament, and heightened emotional sensitivity associated with that figure. Her appearance, habits, and childhood interests all sit awkwardly with established ideas of what a heroine ought to be.

Catherine's enjoyment of games usually associated with boys makes this difference especially clear. She prefers cricket not only to dolls but also to nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary, or watering a rosebush, pursuits presented as more appropriate for girls [8, p. 7; 15, pp. 1–2]:

"She was fond of all boys' plays, and greatly preferred cricket, not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush" [15, pp. 1–2].

Austen's irony here calls into question the rigid division of children's activities by gender. Catherine's preference for cricket conveys her energy, spontaneity, and independence of character. Dolls and the care of flowers, by contrast, can be read as ways of preparing girls for their anticipated roles as mothers, homemakers, and caregivers. Catherine's enthusiasm for active play suggests that her interests do not fit neatly within these expectations.

Austen does not present these traits as defects. Instead, she uses them to reveal how artificial the model of the sentimental heroine can be. Catherine's apparent unsuitability for a heroine's role does not make her less feminine; it makes her recognisably human. She is neither exceptionally beautiful nor physically frail, and she does not need perpetual protection. She is healthy, curious, active, and open in her emotional responses.

Austen thus reconsiders the assumption that emotional delicacy, physical weakness, and a refined appearance are women's defining virtues. Whereas Louisa Musgrove's character lends a comic dimension to acquired sentimentality and the imitation of literary conventions, Catherine Morland brings out the value of spontaneity, physical vitality, and independence. Austen's women belong to a world shaped by traditional gender norms, but their characterisation also reveals the limits of those norms. Through Catherine in particular, Austen makes room for a broader and more individual understanding of femininity.

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