

Catherine Morland: An Honest Heroine

By Amy Cushing

In 1863, British poet Coventry Patmore published a poem titled “Angel in the House,” detailing the courtship and marriage of his first wife, Honoria. To him, she was the vision of the perfect wife, a woman completely devoted to her husband and family (Gilbert 22).

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself...

...She loves with love that cannot tire;
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
Through passionate duty love springs higher,
As grass grows taller round a stone. (Book I, Canto IX)

Patmore’s poem gained popularity in the nineteenth-century and was a prime example of the ideal Victorian woman. She was submissive, docile, unfailingly pleasant, nurturing, and concerned solely with domestic duties (Gilbert 20-23). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe the “angel in the house” as the “most pernicious image male authors have ever imposed upon literary women” (20). Markman Ellis suggests in his book, The History of Gothic Fiction, “the gothic novel became the site of a heartfelt and, at times, bitter debate about the nature and politics of femininity” (48). Critics, like Carole Gerster, agree with this observation. She states, “With Northanger Abbey, Austen places herself in the midst of an ongoing dialogue within and between novels about women’s true nature and proper role...” (115). This debate is evident in Austen’s Northanger Abbey. While the character of Catherine Morland fits the mold of the “angel in the house” stereotype often found in the nineteenth-century literature, Austen’s intention was to create a realistic model of a naive teenager on the cusp of womanhood.

With Catherine, Austen did not follow the typical heroine standards set by many of her male counterparts. Instead, her female characters deviate from the “angel in the house” archetype. In her essay, “Jane Austen and the Culture of Circulating Libraries: The Construction of Female Literacy,” Barbara Benedict acknowledges that Austen’s “scrutiny of the struggle between duty and desire anatomizes the social oppression of women” (145). She goes on to say that “her heroines desire personal fulfillment, and Austen shows that this goal can be achieved through relationships that permit the flowering of character...or the power of choosing on just principles” (147). Gerster agrees with Benedict’s assessment, stating that Catherine, “comes to self-knowledge and knowledge of the society she enters through experience and the exercise of her own judgment” (119).

Throughout Northanger Abbey, Catherine’s naiveté lands her in precarious situations. Critic Barbara Seeber views Catherine as “the quixotic heroine, who stumbles onto many a parodic disappointment” (118). Her foolish, but polite, behavior could be seen as an “angel in the house” who is non-confrontational and concerned about her image, but Catherine is a realistic

character, whose silly notions are more a product of her lack of education than a persona she is trying to portray. The narrator aptly points out in Chapter 14 of Northanger Abbey 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...” (75). In his article, “Catherine Morland’s Gothic Delusions: A Defense of Northanger Abbey,” Waldo Glock states, “the purpose of Jane Austen’s satire [is] to point out that a real heroine of common life must display an honesty which scorns unnatural affections” (40). Catherine is the daughter of a clergyman from a family of ten children who was raised in a loving, middle-class home, but without much formal education (Austen 1-3). Catherine stumbles through the story, guided only by her naïve, but honest, intentions. As Edward Neill appropriately states, “her essential integrity is finally of more import than her lack of sophistication” (21). It is not her attempts to be the perfect image of a Victorian woman, the desired “angel in the house,” that leads to her success, but her well-intentioned, truthful nature that makes her an appealing character, and, ultimately, an appealing wife for Henry Tilney (Austen 179).

Unlike the typical Victorian heroine based on the “angel in the house,” Catherine’s lack of education is an embarrassment to her, and not an aspect of her image she attempts to amplify. In Chapter 14 of Northanger Abbey, as Catherine is attending the long-awaited afternoon with Eleanor and Henry Tilney, she finds herself embarrassed for not understanding the intricacies of art. “She was heartily ashamed of her ignorance. A misplaced shame” (Austen 74). A young woman determined to portray herself as the “angel in the house” would not be ashamed of knowing less than her prospective husband. However, Catherine is humiliated. She wants to participate in the discussion and talk intelligently about cultural subjects. Affecting her personality to win a young man’s heart is clearly not on her agenda—or Jane Austen’s for that matter. According to Betty Rizzo in her essay “Renegotiating the Gothic,” “female gothic at its best...provided an allegorical road map showing women their dilemma and the way out—through education” (62). Catherine’s journey in Northanger Abbey does just that. Through her experiences at Bath and at the abbey, Catherine learns some painful, but helpful, life lessons, what Glock calls “Catherine’s growth into maturity and wisdom” (35) where “Catherine...learn[s] a different kind of heroism. She represents the modern world of plain fact, a world in which common sense and sincere intention, not sentimental gestures and exaggerated artifice, must be allowed to define the essential quality of modern life” (37).

It is with this desire to learn and to improve her circumstances through means other than marriage, as Isabella Thorpe so miserably fails to achieve, that Catherine turns her back on the “angel in the house.” She chooses to let her merits speak for themselves, however flawed they may be. Catherine’s actions are reminiscent of the profound writer, Virginia Woolf, who years later infamously killed the “angel in the house” in her essay “Professions for Women.” In her essay, Woolf states, “And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room.” She continues, “whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her.... It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality” (Woolf 1-2). Through Catherine, Austen creates a realistic portrait of a young woman coming of age during the Victorian era. Catherine’s naiveté is authentic, a natural charm that critic Mary Waldron observes, acts as “her best guide ... revealed to be nearer the actuality than anything indicated by those who might be supposed to be capable of advising her” (28). Austen mocks her

counterparts and steps away from the conventional nineteenth-century heroine with Catherine, creating a genuine young woman who is more than simply an angelic prospective wife meant to be tucked away in the house.

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