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Eleanor Tilney as Cultural Historian

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IN HER NOVEL *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen presents Eleanor Tilney's observations on past feminine presence as a gentle corrective to her heroine Catherine Morland's initial rejection of history as militant and masculinist. As she walks and converses with Catherine, Eleanor highlights the roles architectural, familial, and even ecological spaces play in constructing cultural history. Focusing primarily on the micro-history of Northanger Abbey rather than on the macro-history of international war or trade, Eleanor acts as cultural guide, unveiling multiple layers of associative memory and historical meaning for Catherine. Metonymically, Eleanor Tilney represents women's intellectual, textual, and aesthetic engagement with history in the late eighteenth century. In response to Catherine's complaint that history is wearisome and dull, Eleanor cites her own pleasure in consuming the vibrant and incisive writing of historians David Hume and William Robertson. Arising out of the Scottish Enlightenment, with its growing attention to the role of human subjectivity in perception, historical studies written by Hume and Robertson contained affective and imaginative elements that supplemented and amplified the historical truths they conveyed. Hume, for example, sympathetically imagines the communities of women religious disbanded by Henry VIII's dissolution of the abbeys in the early sixteenth century. Robertson fascinatingly presents the history of European colonial tyranny abroad in the sixteenth century as a cautionary tale for monarchs in the eighteenth century. Jane Austen's Eleanor Tilney reads the work of these two historians, who both present ethical

critiques of overreaching leadership, and praises their literary merit. Then, when Catherine arrives at Eleanor's home of Northanger Abbey, Eleanor functions as a sensitive cultural historian, drawing attention to the abbey's interior rooms, natural landscape, and curated art.

Despite her key role as Catherine Morland's cultural guide and educator, Eleanor Tilney's intellectual and spiritual strength have remained somewhat underappreciated. In her 2002 introduction to the Broadview Press edition of *Northanger Abbey*, Claire Grogan initially notes that "[b]oth Henry and Eleanor Tilney are competent, attentive readers who enjoy fiction and non-fiction" (22). Grogan then argues, however, that "Eleanor reads in accordance with accepted educational treatises since she exhibits little independent thought or action and is well aware of her dependent position. She is very much a puppet in the patriarchal system" (22). But Grogan's presentation of Eleanor's perceived passivity and victimhood does not acknowledge the radical nature of her reading choices. Eleanor's choice to read the experimental historiography of the controversial, cosmopolitan, and critical Scottish philosopher David Hume, for example, situates her as an independent thinker. Her public display of her intelligence, wit, and erudition during the walk to Beechen Cliff also resists the common eighteenth-century dictum that women should hide their intelligence in order to be less threatening and more attractive to men.

Eleanor's ability to appreciate objectively David Hume's at times quite skeptical prose casts her as a philosopher open to the rational arguments of the Scottish Enlightenment. Hume was known for his denial of miracles, for example, which set him at odds with the religious establishment of the time, and in terms of aesthetics, he emphasized how our perceptions of physical reality shift with our bodily or emotional states. This second aspect of Hume's thought allows for variations in perceptions of a landscape, for example, acknowledging how one may see a natural setting one way as a child and another way as an adult, according to physiological changes related to aging and associations accrued through experience. As we will see, Eleanor praises and then exemplifies this Humean openness to human subjectivity, as she believes it enhances both the creativity of writing and the reception of beauty in local environments. Throughout Austen's narrative, the sensitive Eleanor's constructive and caring education of Catherine presents a positive alternative to the coniving and corrosive false mentorship coming from Isabella Thorpe. Terry F. Robinson rightly argues that "Catherine immerses herself in an associative relationship to history that allows memories of the dead (fictional and otherwise) to mingle with the landscape of her life" (224), but Robinson does not

examine Eleanor Tilney's role as the encourager and facilitator of Catherine's openness to such associations.

In the last few years, Austen's readers have begun to speak more admiringly of Eleanor Tilney's wisdom and tenacity. In a 2018 collaboratively written piece simply titled "Eleanor and Isabella," members of the Jane Austen Society of Pakistan extol Eleanor's virtues and strength. Saniyya Gauhar sees Eleanor as "balanced, wise and composed" (par. 3). Mahlia S. Lone compellingly argues that the "mature" Eleanor has "nothing to prove to anyone" (par. 6). And, Laaleen Sukhera views Eleanor as a "sensible and respectable" woman who "defies her ferocious father General Tilney with a quiet determination when her proposed match earns his disapproval" (par. 8). As we will see, the historical works by David Hume and William Robertson which Eleanor enjoys reading contain critiques of overweening pride and tyranny that resonate with Austen's reference to General Tilney's "parental tyranny" at the end of *Northanger Abbey* (261). In *Jane Austen's Women*, Kathleen Anderson most promisingly presents Eleanor Tilney as Henry's "equally intellectually gifted sister." Anderson classes Eleanor among those she terms "Austen's exemplary women" who "contribute to the common good" (96); she groups her together with Fanny Price, Elinor Dashwood, and Anne Elliot as the "sagacious guides" (120) of Austen's novels.

Jane Austen presents the motherless and vulnerable yet witty and elegant Eleanor Tilney to her readers through the eyes of the admiring Catherine Morland. Through free indirect discourse, the narrator conveys the strong visual and emotional impression Eleanor makes on Catherine as she sits down beside her.

Miss Tilney had a good figure, a pretty face, and a very agreeable countenance; and her air, though it had not all the decided pretension, the resolute stilishness of Miss Thorpe's, had more real elegance. Her manners showed good sense and good breeding; they were neither shy, nor affectedly open; and she seemed capable of being young, attractive, and at a ball, without wanting to fix the attention of every man near her. (51)

The sheer attraction of the humble and self-contained yet confident and poised Eleanor begins to dislodge Catherine from the grasp of Isabella Thorpe. The narrator observes how Catherine is "empowered to disengage herself from her friend, by the avowed necessity of speaking to Miss Tilney" (69). Eleanor Tilney empowers Catherine and encourages her to act with greater moral strength and determination. She helps Catherine realize that Catherine is a

free agent who can make decisions according to her own discernment and will. The narrator tells us that Eleanor and Catherine's conversation is full of "simplicity and truth, and without personal conceit" (69). Catherine soon learns that Eleanor shares her love of walking outdoors. Austen, throughout her novels, connects young women's walking with independent agency and thought. Eleanor's walking in nature signals her unconventionality and free will as well as her powers of observation.

Foreshadowing her role as cultural historian at Northanger Abbey, Eleanor acts as a geographical as well as literary and intellectual guide to Catherine Morland during their walk to Beechen Cliff. The cliff's sublimity is subtly conveyed when the narrator describes it as a "noble" and "striking" sight (107), paralleling Immanuel Kant's idea of the "noble sublime."¹ By placing Eleanor as Catherine's guide to the sublime and by describing her teaching Catherine via dialogue as they walk together in a group, Austen's narrator invites readers to view Eleanor as participating in eighteenth-century German and classical Greek philosophy. She models the peripatetic tradition of the classical philosopher Aristotle, whose pedagogy involved leading discussions with students as they walked together. Aristotle believed walking would increase blood flow to the brain and hence improve his pupils' mental capacities. By leading Catherine to a visually striking natural object, Eleanor combines Aristotelian pedagogy with Kantian aesthetics. As Catherine walks to Beechen Cliff and admires the landscape, however, she thinks not of classical or German philosophy but instead compares the scenery to the imaginative depictions of landscape in the gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe. Her comment prompts the Tilneys to begin a discussion of Radcliffe's prose and women's novels more generally. Though Catherine is in the position of a pupil, her reference to Radcliffe also directs the conversation towards a new focus: women's writing.

It becomes clear that Eleanor Tilney has functioned as a mentor for her brother Henry in this area of women's writing. He confesses to Catherine that the copy of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which he finished reading in two days, was actually his sister's, admitting how he ran "away with the volume, which, you are to observe, was her own, particularly her own" (108). Austen constructs an interesting and innovative reversal of the idea that eighteenth-century women, barred from formal education, gleaned reading materials from their fathers' or brothers' libraries. Reading between the lines, we can discern that Henry's "knowledge of Julias and Louisas" (108)—i.e., women's novels—has partly arisen out of borrowings from his sister's private library. Women's

novels would not have been included in the formal Oxford education for an eighteenth-century clergyman, which consisted mainly of classical texts, theology, philosophy, and church history. Eleanor, in recalling this episode wherein Henry essentially stole her copy of *Udolpho*, recalls how he then “took the volume into the Hermitage-walk” (108). Here Austen lightly satirizes the idea of an eighteenth-century man carrying a modern novel set in an imagined gothic past into an artificially constructed ruined hermitage in order to indulge in solitary reading. Eleanor directs her own sharp wit at her brother in her brisk description of his readerly retreat.

Eleanor Tilney becomes more serious, however, when she and Catherine turn from their discussion of gothic fiction to historical scholarship, which she adamantly defends. Catherine famously protests that “real solemn history, I cannot be interested in” (109), since, among other failings, it contains “hardly any women at all” (110). Catherine also complains that a great deal of historical detail must be invention. Eleanor pushes back in defense of the discipline, explaining that she is “very well contented to take the false with the true. . . . If a speech be well drawn up, I read it with pleasure, by whomsoever it may be made—and probably with much greater, if the production of Mr. Hume or Mr. Robertson, than if the genuine words of Caractacus, Agricola, or Alfred the Great” (110). Eleanor expresses a philosophical and flexible acceptance of the always partially subjective nature of historical accounts written by fallible and finite human beings, no matter how careful those writers are with their sources. She acknowledges the role of historians’ imaginations as well as their reason, implying that there is an art as well as a science to writing history, and that such writers are strongest when they let their sensibility complement their sense in order to enhance their narrative accounts of past personalities, relationships, conflicts, and events. This defense of Hume is especially apt. E. M. Dadlez refers to Hume’s attention to what she terms human “susceptibilities,” and she argues that Eleanor Tilney too “acknowledges a variation of sentiments according to distance and contiguity” (93). Dadlez sees Eleanor’s reflections on the inescapable subjective touches within historical writing as profoundly Humean.

Austen’s reflections on the readerly pleasure to be found in history, via her character Eleanor, anticipate the late twentieth-century approach of American historian Hadyn White. White is best known for bringing together literary theory with analysis of historiography in a “poetics of history.” In “Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination” (1975), White discusses how all historians, whether consciously or not, use figures of speech

and literary techniques in their writing, such as metaphors, synecdoches, and ironic statements. He argues:

If the tropes of language are limited, if the types of figuration are finite, then it is possible to imagine how our representations of the historical world aggregate into a comprehensive total vision of that world, and how progress in our understanding of it is possible. Each new representative of the past represents a further testing and refinement of our capacities to figure the world in language, so that each new generation is heir, not only of more information about the past, but also of more adequate knowledge of our capacities to comprehend it. (66)

For White there is a progression towards both greater comprehension and epistemological humility, via historians' limited but imaginative and vital use of figurative language. The historical truth is not the possession of one historian to objectively and definitively master, but there is an incremental or aggregate collaborative movement forwards, through the process of historical writing from multiple, diverse, and finite human perspectives. In all her novels, Austen too acknowledges human fallibility; her heroines are not perfect; they make errors in judgment and often, especially in Catherine Morland's case, they act on mistaken perceptions of past realities. The graciousness Austen extends towards such fallibility in her characters is also evident in Eleanor Tilney's approach to historians like Hume and Robertson, in their attempts to sketch historical figures and imagine their voices and viewpoints. Eleanor's willingness to accept the imaginative embellishments of historians, to "take the false with the true" as she puts it, evidences a gracious sensitivity to the spirit over the letter of the law in history writing.

No doubt Eleanor is partly motivated by a desire to continue discussing landscape, literature, and history with Catherine Morland when she invites her for a stay in her family's home at Northanger Abbey. It is at this point that Catherine discovers the home of the Tilneys is an abbey, and the name of the building matches her wildest gothic imaginings. The narrator ambiguously and ironically draws us into Catherine's mind through another instance of free indirect discourse: "Many were the inquiries she was eager to make of Miss Tilney; but so active were her thoughts, that when these inquiries were answered, she was hardly more assured than before, of Northanger Abbey having been a richly-endowed convent at the time of the Reformation" (144). In the tumult of Catherine's still developing mind, the reader gleans images from her imagination tumbling together with facts about the abbey's history

no doubt provided by Eleanor in her role as cultural historian. Eleanor Tilney would be familiar with the history behind the suppression and dissolution of abbeys in England during the reign of Henry VIII, both due to the fact that Eleanor's family lives within a former abbey and as a result of her reading of David Hume's *History of England*. The fourth volume of Hume's eight-volume *History* (an expanded version published in 1772) recounts Henry VIII's attacks on the abbeys with a balance of historical accuracy, Enlightenment skepticism, and sympathetic sentiment. The latter is particularly pronounced when Hume narrates the impact of Henry's policies on communities of women religious or nuns.

In terms of historical accuracy, as a Scottish empiricist, Hume provides exact numbers and financial figures related to two waves of monastic suppression enacted by Henry VIII: that of the lesser monasteries and the greater monasteries. He first explains how in 1535 an act was passed in the British parliament through which 376 lesser monasteries were "suppressed," and how the king gained £32,000 a year in revenues and £100,000 in goods confiscated from these monasteries. Hume then sums up the dissolution of all English monasteries by the end of 1536: "On the whole, the king, at different times, suppressed six hundred and forty-five monasteries. . . . Ninety colleges were demolished in several counties; two thousand three hundred and seventy-four chantries and free chapels: a hundred and ten hospitals" (204). Hume's empirical numbers bear witness to the great social, as well as religious, loss brought about by Henry VIII's actions, which robbed the British people of educational institutions, places of public gathering and worship, and healthcare previously provided by monks and nuns. Buildings that before had been used to support the welfare of entire parishes through teaching, hospitality, and medical aid were placed in the hands of select individuals who now used them for their private homes, like Jane Austen's relative the Rev. Thomas Leigh, who inherited Stoneleigh Abbey, which had originally been built as a Cistercian monastery in 1154. In Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, General Tilney has likewise inherited a building originally built for monastic purposes, but the narrator suggests that it was formerly a convent, specifically, housing a community of women led by an abbess. This history heightens the painful irony, and tragedy, that Northanger Abbey is now governed by the iron will of a high-ranking Protestant man.

In his *History of England*, David Hume is critical of Henry VIII in terms that resonate with Jane Austen's critique of General Tilney's "parental tyranny" (261). Hume refers to the king's attacks on the monasteries as "lawless

tyranny” (155), and he notes that after Henry VIII’s actions became more and more violent, satirical lampoons of the English king were published “by the wits and orators of Italy, comparing him to Caligula, Nero, . . . and all the most unrelenting tyrants of antiquity” (157). Hume then identifies Henry VIII’s primary motivation as a desire “to put himself in possession of [the monasteries’] ample revenues” (164). According to Hume, the king encouraged monks and nuns to spy on one another, and he sent inspectors into the monasteries. The king then opened the doors of the monasteries and convents and encouraged monks and nuns to leave with the reward of a small pension on which to live. This sounds reasonable and humane, but Hume notes:

as all these expedients did not fully answer the king’s purpose, he had recourse to his usual instrument of power, the parliament; and in order to prepare men for the innovations projected, the report of the visitors [inspectors] was published, and *a general horror* was endeavoured to be excited in the nation against institutions, which, to their ancestors, had been the objects of most profound veneration. (167, emphasis added)

So, the horror attributed to events inside monastic buildings found within the fictional works of Ann Radcliffe could partly be traced to Henry VIII’s intentionally instilling horror against abbey communities within the British populace in order to justify his consumption of monastic wealth. And, in Jane Austen’s novel, when Catherine becomes “motionless with horror” (174) inside Northanger Abbey, after Henry Tilney has asked her if she were “prepared to encounter all the horrors” of such a building (161), we can see her as echoing the politically motivated fear of abbeys originally, according to Hume, generated by Henry VIII. Hume was no defender of traditional Catholicism. In his *History of England* he satirizes male monastic communities as what he terms “colonies of superstition and folly” (164). Hume is also, however, no fan of Henry VIII, and he traces a centuries-old cultural pattern of what we might term anti-Catholic “abbey-phobia” back to rumours spread by the king in defense of his own greed.

As a writer in the age of sensibility who valued sentiment and affection, David Hume evokes pathos in his historical narrative of the abbeys’ dissolution, especially in regard to the suppression of female communities. He paints a portrait of Henry VIII as lusting after the abbeys, noting that early on “[h]e suppressed three monasteries, . . . and finding that little clamour was excited by this act of power, he was the more encouraged to lay his rapacious hands on the rest” (154). As Tonya Moutray observes, William Gilpin also used the

“trope of physical violation by a male hand” when he decried the improvements made to abbeys by eighteenth-century renovators. The language of Henry VIII itching to “lay his rapacious hands” on all remaining religious buildings in the early sixteenth century makes Hume’s description of the public sympathy for disbanded nuns even more poignant: “In several places, particularly in the county of Oxford, great interest was made to preserve some convents of women, who, as they lived in the most irreproachable manner, justly merited, it was thought, that their houses should be saved from the general destruction. . . . But the king was determined to abolish monasteries of every denomination” (201). Perhaps Hume’s implicit respect for the women he presents as the irreproachable and meritorious nuns of Oxford was yet another aspect of his *History* that appealed to Austen.

In his original one-volume *History*, published in 1754, Hume portrayed the Stuart monarch Charles I sympathetically, for which he was critiqued by his early English readers. In a short autobiographical essay titled “My Own Life” (1776), Hume notes that the reviewers, both Whig and Tory, were “united in their rage against the man, who had presumed to shed a generous tear for Charles I” (5). This sympathy for Charles I was shared by the young Jane Austen, as evidenced by her handwritten annotations in the Austen family copy of Oliver Goldsmith’s *History of England*. She referred to Charles I as an “amiable Monarch . . . born to have suffered Misfortunes” in her 1791 *History of England from the reign of Henry the 4th to the death of Charles 1st* (*Juvenilia* 187). David Hume’s compassionate portrayal of Charles I in his own history may have motivated Jane Austen’s depiction of Eleanor Tilney’s attraction to Hume’s work. Eleanor’s praise of Hume acts as Jane Austen’s effective rebuttal to the anti-Stuart “rage” expressed by the early condemners of Hume’s *History*.

The other eighteenth-century historian mentioned by Eleanor Tilney, William Robertson, was Scottish, like Hume, but was more definitively Whig. Robertson was a minister in the Church of Scotland, or Presbyterian Church, which functioned in a decidedly democratic manner. His *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V with a View of the Progress of Society in Europe* (1769) and his *History of America* (1777) function together as a critique of political tyranny. In a dedication to George III, Robertson presents his *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* as a sort of cautionary tale to the British king:

History claims it as her prerogative to offer instruction to Kings, as well as to their people. What reflections the Reign of the Emperor Charles V, may suggest to your Majesty, it becomes me not to conjecture. But your Subjects cannot observe the calamities,

which that Monarch's ambition to be distinguished as a Conqueror, brought upon his dominions, without recollecting the felicity of their own times. ("Dedication" v-vi)

It was the emperor Charles V who initiated the sixteenth-century colonial conquests in South America. Robertson's *History of America* includes a chronicle of the inhumane actions in this series of conquests. When Austen's fictional character Eleanor Tilney references the histories generated by David Hume and William Robertson, she is citing works that contain pointed critiques of tyranny at home and abroad.

From their initial meetings in Bath onwards, Eleanor Tilney has an empowering effect on Catherine Morland, and at times she functions as a sort of spiritual director. Roger E. Moore argues that due to the flood of refugee French monks and nuns into England from the early 1790s forward, Austen would have had the history of Catholicism and the dissolution of British abbeys on her mind while writing her major novels. Moore locates Austen's writing in what he terms "a tradition of nostalgia for the monasteries" (6). Though Moore presents this nostalgia as counter to David Hume's critique of superstition, I believe Jane Austen would have welcomed Hume's positive and respectful portrayal of women religious. Austen preserves the figure of the woman religious in several aspects of Eleanor Tilney's quietly contemplative character. In the 1790s, when she was first drafting *Northanger Abbey* under the title *Susan*, the influx of refugee *nuns* into England, in particular, would also have presented a model of female ministry and spiritual leadership to Austen, opening up new possibilities in her imagination. Kathleen Anderson includes a section on female spiritual directors in her book *Jane Austen's Women*, but within it she focuses on Fanny Price's quietly benevolent guidance of her sister Susan and Miss Bates's influence on Emma Woodhouse. She does not include Eleanor Tilney in her analysis of Austenian female spiritual directors. In *Northanger Abbey's* Eleanor Tilney we do see a poised and well-read spiritual director whose attempt to guide her mentee, Catherine, by recommending historical reading contains parallels with Anne Elliot's guidance of Captain Benwick in *Persuasion*, the novel with which *Northanger Abbey* was sold when it was first released in 1817. Like Eleanor Tilney, Anne Elliot adopts a practice of simultaneous walking and teaching through dialogic interaction. There are strong parallels between Anne's guidance of Benwick towards historically based non-fiction, as they walk by the sea, and Eleanor's defence of historical reading in her discussion with Catherine at Beechen Cliff.

Once they are at Northanger Abbey, Eleanor directs Catherine towards

a fuller apprehension of the building's actual feminine history, thus countering the construction of history as containing hardly any women. Over the course of Catherine's time at the abbey, Eleanor emphasizes a former feminine presence within its buildings and grounds through reference to landscape and art. She tours Catherine through a grove of Scotch firs formerly beloved by her mother and takes Catherine to see the late Mrs. Tilney's portrait in her bedchamber. Eleanor thus acts as an effective cultural guide to the abbey's recent feminine past, a past characterized by forms of shared contemplation between women reminiscent of its pre-Reformation existence as a convent. As noted earlier, in Austen's own life, the abbey converted to a country house with which she was most familiar, Stoneleigh Abbey, had originally been established as a Cistercian monastery. To this day the Cistercian order of monks and nuns is especially devoted to simplicity, study, and silence, values shared and modelled by Eleanor Tilney. According to Constance Hoffman Berman, for centuries women in the Cistercian order have been referred to as "white nuns" due to the white colours of their habits. In Austen's novel, Mrs. Allen points out that "Miss Tilney always wears white" (90), perhaps an intentional associative link to monastic culture. The image of contemplative Cistercian nuns robed in white continued to appeal to the British imagination during the literary and artistic medieval revival of the Regency period and into the pre-Raphaelite movement of the mid-nineteenth century. Through her humility, studiousness, truthfulness, and contemplative disposition, as well as her consistently white garb, Eleanor bears powerful associations with the Cistercian nuns of England's pre-Reformation past.

During their weeks together at Northanger Abbey, Eleanor Tilney and Catherine Morland's feminine companionship in contemplation of the abbey's gardens and landscape, apart from any masculine presence, does carry connotations of the women's community to be found in a convent setting. We first learn that Catherine and Eleanor have been spending time outdoors together when Catherine shares her newfound love of flowers with Henry. Catherine bursts out: "What beautiful hyacinths!—I have just learnt to love a hyacinth." Henry replies, teasingly, "And how might you learn?—By accident or argument?"; and Catherine responds with some seriousness, "Your sister taught me; I cannot tell how" (178). Henry then implies Catherine is on her way to the regular enjoyment of flowers, an assumption of stereotypically feminine taste she firmly counters by declaring, "But I do not want any such pursuit to get me out of doors. The pleasure of walking and breathing fresh air is enough for me, and in fine weather I am out more than half my time.—Mamma says I am

never within” (178). There is a comic aspect to the quick responses between Henry and Catherine, but Catherine’s defense of her free wandering outdoors is also in earnest. The reader has a sense that Henry does not fully understand Catherine’s solitary rambles in natural landscapes, a delight she now shares with Eleanor in companionable walking apart from Henry. Her time spent with Eleanor outdoors reflects Jane Austen’s own practice of daily walking for hours at a time with her sister, Cassandra, in the environs of Chawton.

As their friendship grows in mutual trust, Eleanor opens up to Catherine and shares memories of her late mother, thus directing Catherine’s attention to the recent feminine history of the abbey. She does so while touring Catherine through an ecologically rich space formerly frequented by Mrs. Tilney, a grove of mature Scotch firs on the grounds of Northanger Abbey. The reader senses that Eleanor, by walking meditatively through this grove, has both processed her grief over the sudden and unexpected loss of her mother and nurtured her memories of her. And, now, like a cultural historian, Eleanor invites Catherine to imagine her mother’s pensive and loving presence as she walked with her daughter through this specific outdoor space. Eleanor’s halting, poignant, and nostalgic statements during this walk are full of daughterly affection, emphasized through Austen’s narrator’s use of the words “fond,” “loved,” and “endears” (184). Catherine responds with wonder and expresses interest in learning more about the real Mrs. Tilney. Here, there is a moment of hope for Catherine, as she pauses with sincere curiosity to learn more about the abbey’s feminine history. But her potential to carefully attend to Eleanor’s account is thwarted by Catherine’s addiction to gothic fantasy, which prompts her to quickly assume that the General has murdered or at least imprisoned his wife.

Nevertheless, Eleanor, like a patient teacher, continues to present Catherine with the concrete realities of the abbey’s recent cultural and material feminine history. She next tells Catherine about a portrait of her mother, explaining, “it was intended for the drawing-room; but my father was dissatisfied with the painting, and for some time it had no place. Soon after her death I obtained it for my own, and hung it in my bed-chamber—where I shall be happy to shew it to you;—it is very like” (185). Like an art historian, Eleanor gives an account of the portrait’s provenance. Like an art conservationist, she preserves the cultural and feminine history of Northanger Abbey by preserving the portrait and keeping it safely in her room. Her phrase “I obtained it for my own” echoes her brother Henry’s statement about her copy of Radcliffe’s novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*: “the volume was her own, particularly her own.” When we consider Eleanor Tilney’s actions and choices carefully, she

emerges as a sort of guardian of culture; like a rare book librarian or a museum curator, she collects books and art, as cultural artifacts, not only for her own delight, but also to share with others.

When Eleanor takes Catherine to actually see the painting of her mother, the narrator once again conveys Catherine's perceptions, this time with a mixture of sense and sensibility:

It represented a very lovely woman, with a mild and pensive countenance, justifying, so far, the expectations of its new observer; but they were not in every respect answered, for Catherine had depended on meeting with features, air, complexion that should be the very counterpart, the very image, if not of Henry's, of Eleanor's. . . . But here she was obliged to look and consider and study for a likeness. She contemplated it, however, in spite of this drawback, with much emotion. (196)

Gone are the exclamation marks that often accompany Catherine's responses to new information or sights up to this point in the narrative. Her response is now measured and thoughtful as well as warm. The "mild and pensive" expression of the woman depicted in the portrait matches the image of a peaceful, contemplative walker constructed by Eleanor's words. And, Catherine mirrors this visual portrayal of feminine contemplation by contemplating it in turn, not with detached aesthetic objectivity, but with strong emotion, which suggests she is sympathizing with her friend's loss of a kind and intelligent mother. Catherine's compassionate sensibility is balanced, however, by her sensible objective observation that Mrs. Tilney looks like neither her daughter nor her son. This realization disappoints Catherine, but she is learning to allow for realities that do not meet her expectations rather than attempting to force the evidences of reality into the hypotheses of her active imagination. She respects the portrait's autonomous ability to testify to historical reality.

Towards the end of *Northanger Abbey*, via the mentorship of the wise Eleanor Tilney, Catherine has gained a capacity to apprehend and contemplate the testimony of historical evidence carefully, with both reason as well as emotion, rather than rushing to assumptions that block her full perception of past and present realities. Eleanor Tilney has taught her this approach. Eleanor understands the need to balance attention to concrete aspects of cultural history with openness to creative embellishment. Perhaps this habit of mind is something she has learned during conversations with her mother while walking through the grove of Scotch firs, a form of peripatetic pedagogy she then passes on in her walks with Catherine. The increasingly reflective and

contemplative tone of Eleanor and Catherine's interactions at Northanger Abbey certainly carries connotations of the contemplative order of Cistercian nuns whom we can imagine populating the abbey in its pre-Reformation past. Finally, the portrait of a pensive woman raised to a place of honor in her daughter's room carries connotations not only of a mother but also of a mother superior, or abbess, and it is heartening to see Catherine contemplate this feminine image from the past with quiet veneration.

NOTE

1. See Duquette for a more in-depth analysis of connections between Austen's text and Immanuel Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1763).

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