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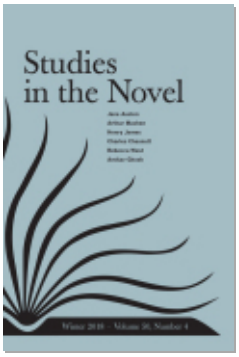

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SEXUAL SELECTION AND FEMALE CHOICE IN AUSTEN'S *NORTHANGER ABBEY*

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I

Catherine Morland, the protagonist of *Northanger Abbey*, is often regarded as Austen's least appealing heroine, considered not just naïve but unintelligent and uninteresting. Marvin Mudrick calls Catherine "impeccably ignorant," refers to her "lightweight...mind," and claims that "she is too simple and too slight" to engage readers' sympathies (44, 40, 53). Laura Mooneyham similarly characterizes Catherine as "not clever" and "of average—or below average—intelligence" (5, 21; see also 25). Recently, cognitive-evolutionary literary critics have explored Catherine's deficiencies in Theory of Mind, or the ability to infer the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others, and in metarepresentation, which involves evaluating the validity of sources for one's knowledge of other people and the world (see MacMahon; Nelles; and Lau). Although Catherine clearly demonstrates cognitive errors, as when she trusts insincere, manipulative Isabella Thorpe and suspects General Tilney of murdering or imprisoning his wife, the idea that she is socially inept and mentally obtuse is challenged by the fact that she ends up marrying the most eligible man in the novel, a match which, as her parents recognize, was "under every pecuniary view...beyond [her] claims" (*Northanger* 259). Blakey Vermeule notes about Miss Bates in *Emma* that Austen must surely expect us to consider how a character who has so few apparent advantages manages to survive so successfully, as Miss Bates does by securing the good-will of everyone in her village, all of whom reward her with invitations, gifts, and offers of assistance (179). Similarly, we can assume that Austen invites us to consider how Catherine Morland triumphs in spite of her disadvantages. Catherine is not an impoverished, middle-aged spinster like Miss Bates, but without a large fortune, striking good looks, or impressive accomplishments Catherine has little to attract a man of superior wealth and status. How does she manage to end up married to clever, well-connected Henry Tilney?

The field of evolutionary psychology provides answers to this question. Evolutionary psychologists believe the human mind evolved via natural selection to solve problems our ancestors faced in order to ensure our survival and pass on our genes to subsequent generations. Evolutionary psychology is especially concerned with mechanisms of mind common to all people, in the same way that all possess one heart, two lungs, and other components of physical anatomy (see Campbell 8-11; Wright 25-26). The field has encountered resistance from some humanities and social science researchers who adhere to a belief that human psychology is wholly shaped by culture and who assume that belief in common human traits means that we are determined by our genes. As many evolutionary psychologists explain, however, their theories incorporate the view that environment is crucial to human development. Evolution has designed humans to be extremely flexible in the range of strategies they employ for survival and reproductive success in response to different environments. This does not mean that human nature is infinitely malleable; there are species-typical constraints on the behavioral options people may choose. Nonetheless, cognitive-evolutionary psychologists embrace the view that genes and environment interact to shape individuals, and many literary critics who draw on their findings employ terms such as "biocultural," "cognitive cultural," and "cognitive literary historicism" to designate their approach.[1]

II

A major focus of evolutionary psychology has been male and female mating strategies as shaped by sexual selection. Although Charles Darwin mentions sexual selection in *Origin of Species*, he first developed the theory at length in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. According to Darwin, sexual selection involves two components: male competition with other males for access to females and female preference for certain characteristics, which males develop in order to please females even if these traits are disadvantageous for survival (the standard example is the peacock's elaborate tail feathers, which attract females even though they make the male more conspicuous to predators and hamper his mobility). For a long time, male scientists refused to accept Darwin's principle of female choice and preferred to characterize females as passive recipients of males who bested their rivals. That view began to change in the 1970s, largely as a result of more women entering the field and addressing women's concerns and perspectives (see Buss 3; Hrdy; Campbell 60-61, 309; Boyd, "Jane, Meet Charles" 16-17). Although questions and controversies remain about how female choice operates, there is now widespread agreement that, in the words of Wilbur and Campbell, "females are far from passive pawns in the mating chess game—they are powerful queens that exert significant control on the reproductive process" (332; see also Easterlin, "From Reproductive Resource" 391-94; Wright 86; Frederick, Reynolds, and Fisher).

A number of literary critics have found the principles of sexual selection particularly relevant to Austen's novels, with their attention to the complex dynamics of courtship, especially from the woman's point of view. Boyd claims that "Austen focuses overwhelmingly on female choice" ("Jane, Meet Charles" 16), and David Barash and Nanelle Barash anoint Austen "the poet laureate of female choice....the motive force behind sexual selection" (41).[2] Various historical factors may help to account for the congruence between Austen's and Darwin's insights into mating strategies. Peter Graham argues that both Austen and Darwin were rooted in a British empirical tradition focused on particulars and individuals rather than types and conventions; both "were keen observers of the world before them...who excelled both in noticing microcosmic particulars and...discerning the cosmic significance of those small details" (2). In addition, the legal and cultural circumstances of marriage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may have influenced Austen's and Darwin's perspectives. On the one hand, women had few options to support themselves outside of marriage and were therefore highly dependent on acquiring a good husband for their prosperity, social status, and reproductive success. On the other hand, social developments such as the growth of individualism, feminism, and belief in companionate marriage raised women's expectations for what marriage ought to provide and granted more legitimacy to their interests and desires than in the past. Darwin himself contrasted sexual selection in "savage" and "civilized" societies, noting that women's wishes were largely ignored in the former, whereas in the latter women enjoy "free or almost free choice" (2: 356). Social conditions influence female and male sexual strategies and can favor or restrict either gender's mating preferences (see Smuts; Geary 188-91; Frederick, Reynolds, and Fisher 315-16). The time period and culture Jane Austen inhabited, in which men benefited from women's dependence on marriage for security but women benefited from having a fair amount of discretion in accepting or rejecting husbands, may have sharpened her focus and insight on the issues of sexual selection and female choice.[3]

Darwin observed that males in most species are more eager and indiscriminate and females more coy and selective in their choice of mates, but it was not until Robert Trivers advanced his theory of parental investment in the 1970s that a compelling reason was offered for these gender differences. As Trivers and subsequent evolutionary psychologists argue, females in most species, including our own, bear more responsibility for reproduction than males in that the latter need supply only sperm, whereas females provide a womb and nine months of gestation for the fetus, followed by birth, lactation, and usually the preponderance of childcare. Human children are among the most helpless in the animal kingdom and require a lengthy period of support before they are capable of surviving and reproducing on their own. Evolutionary psychologists generally agree that it is therefore important for a woman to wisely choose a mate who is likely to provide not just good genetic

material but resources and protection that will allow her and her children to thrive and pass on their genes.

Men's parental investment is high compared to males in most other species. Their genes will not be passed on if their children do not survive to reproductive age themselves, and throughout history and across cultures, children without fathers fare worse than those who do have fathers in their lives. It is consequently in a man's interest to bond with a woman and contribute to raising their children. Men nonetheless may still benefit from fathering many children on the chance that some of these will live and reproduce, and they therefore tend to practice two major sexual strategies: the pursuit of long-term mates with whom they will raise children, and short-term sexual partners they will abandon. Although under certain circumstances women may also pursue short-term affairs, they benefit the most from and generally prefer a mate who will make a long-term commitment to them and their children.[4]

As evolutionary psychologists point out, another difference between men and women is that, whereas men can potentially father hundreds of offspring if they have sex with multiple partners throughout their lifetimes, the number of children a woman can produce is much more limited, both because she ceases to be fertile after menopause and because she can only give birth to one child a year, no matter how many times she has sex (and the longer she nurses each child the more spaced out each birth will be) (see especially Frederick, Reynolds, and Fisher 308; Wright 35-36). Women in consequence tend to devote more attention to each child than men do; they care more about the quality than the quantity of their offspring (see especially Campbell Ch. 2). These differences in the reproductive potential and parental investment of men and women make mate selection more crucial for the latter than the former, and as a result, as Jane Austen knew, women are generally less eager than men to engage in casual sex, they prefer to spend more time in courtship getting to know a potential partner well, and they carefully analyze their suitors' personalities and prospects, often in conversation with other women (see especially Buss 149, 155).

It should be noted that the term "sexual strategies" does not imply conscious calculation on the part of the women and men who employ them. Our deepest drives and evolved behaviors to ensure survival and reproductive success generally operate below the level of consciousness. We are aware of what we desire, and we do scheme and purposefully act to achieve our goals, but we don't always know why we desire the things we do (except through the aid of psychological research). As Wright says, what we regard as common sense often involves impulses shaped by evolution: behaviors that simply "seem 'obvious,' and 'right' and 'desirable' [or] 'wrong' and 'abhorrent'" (175; see also 9-10, 36-37; Campbell 23; Buss 5-6).

Extensive cross-cultural studies conducted by David M. Buss and others have revealed widespread consensus on the major qualities women and

men look for in a mate. Chief among the traits women value in men is the possession of resources to support the woman and her children. Women tend to prefer men who are several years older than themselves (the average is three and a half years), for older men have had time to acquire resources and also are more mature and stable than young men (Buss 28). High social status is only slightly less valuable than resources for most women because the former usually correlates with possession of the latter. Women also prize men who are well educated and intelligent, indicated by traits such as problem-solving ability and good judgment. An important component of intelligence is social skills, which are crucial to "all relationships of power and status" in our highly social species (Easterlin, *Biocultural Approach* 261). Such skills include verbal facility, awareness of other people's thoughts and feelings, and the ability to communicate effectively (Buss 34-35). Another trait that women tend to value more highly than men in a partner is humor, which as Christopher Wilbur and Lorne Campbell explain is a "fitness indicator" reflecting intelligence, warmth, and "social adroitness" as well as skill in coping with adverse life events (337, 340). Because women in the past and present are at risk of harm from aggressive men, they appreciate mates who can protect them from other men, and one of the chief indications of male dominance is tallness. Women also seek men who are healthy, which may be indicated by good looks and grooming habits as well as "[a] lively mood, high energy level, and sprightly gait" (Buss 41). It is not enough, however, for women to identify potential mates who have resources and other desired traits. The man also must be willing to commit to the woman and reliably share his resources with her and her children. Behaviors that signal a man's willingness to commit to a woman include giving up relationships with other women and being kind, dependable, "available in times of trouble and listening to the partner's problems" (Buss 43; see also Campbell 179).[5]

Men differ from women in the traits they value most highly in a mate. Men seek women of reproductive age (the peak years are 15-25) younger than themselves and possessing attractive features that indicate good health, especially regarding the ability to bear and raise children. One of the major problems for men, especially before the advent of DNA tests, is that, unlike women, they can never be certain of children's paternity. The obsession with female chastity before marriage and faithfulness afterward that is pervasive in most cultures stems from men's need to ensure that children their wives present them with are their own. Otherwise, they risk investing their time and resources on the transmitter of someone else's genes. For long-term mates, studies indicate, men, like women, value kindness, intelligence, and status.

Men's standards in choosing a woman for casual sex, however, are lower than those for a wife; they may settle for a woman older, less attractive, and with fewer social advantages than they require for a long-term partner. Moreover, instead of seeking a woman who is likely to prove faithful to one man they look for signs of sexual promiscuity, such as seductive clothing and behavior and

a history of relationships with other men (Buss 78-79, 83-84, 117-21; Wright 72-74). As a strategy for seducing women into casual sex, men may deceive women into thinking that they do have long-term interests by displaying acts of kindness and devotion, and women therefore must be skilled at detecting such men's insincerity (Buss 105, 154-55; Campbell 179-80; Wright 61-63). Evolution favors women who are adept at seeing through male deception, for they are likely to end up with loyal mates who can be relied upon to support them and their offspring.

Under certain circumstances, women may opt for short-term affairs. If eligible men are scarce, women may be willing to accept the temporary resources and protection they acquire from short-term mates. In addition, because men have lower standards for casual sexual partners than for wives, women can get more handsome and charming, wealthier, higher-status men for these relationships than they can for husbands. The ideal for women is a mate with good genes who will be a reliable provider, and one way to achieve this ideal if it can't be attained in one man is to marry a devoted "Dad" and have an affair with a "Cad" who will pass on good genes to children that her husband will help raise. Since even committed men are jealous of rivals and do not want to invest in another man's children, however, this is a scenario in which few women can succeed, and most must accept certain trade-offs, usually involving sacrificing the best genes in favor of a good-enough man who will invest long-term in the woman and her children. Men too adjust their mating strategies according to their personal, material, and social circumstances. The most attractive, high-status men may enjoy multiple sexual partners, but men with fewer assets can compensate by cultivating kindness, loyalty, and generosity in order to attract a mate (Campbell 44, 181-88, 247; Buss 234-40; Barash and Barash 64-65; Geary 181-89, 198; Frederick, Reynolds, and Fisher 317; Wilbur and Campbell 333-34; Wright 67-70, 80-85).

III

Austen's *Northanger Abbey* demonstrates these various impulses playing out in the courtships of two female characters, Catherine and her friend Isabella, the first of whom is successful and the second unsuccessful in the sexual strategies she employs. Catherine resembles Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, about whom Boyd declares that "[d]espite all her initial disadvantages of situation, she lands the best man around, the staunchest partner, through her superior ability to read the minds of others—to see Henry [Crawford]'s weaknesses, [and] to see that no one else comes close to matching Edmund's strengths" ("Jane, Meet Charles" 21-22).

Although Catherine, like Fanny, overcomes disadvantages to win the man she desires, she differs from the heroine of *Mansfield Park* in that she appears to have poor mindreading skills. She is confused by the duplicitous Thorpe siblings, whose disregard for the truth is frequently conveyed by inconsistency

both in what they say and in the contrast between their words and their behavior. For example, she can't understand why John Thorpe warns her that his horse is spirited and unruly when it then sets off "in the quietest manner imaginable, without a plunge or caper, or any thing like one" (59), nor can she make sense of the fact that Isabella follows "in pursuit" of two young men whose stares she claimed were annoying her in the Pump-room (37). She is unable to discern any meaning beyond the literal in others' statements and doesn't seem even to have a notion that people may have ulterior motives for what they say.

Catherine is not confused solely by the dishonest Thorpes. She also has trouble comprehending Henry Tilney, who has "an archness and pleasantry in his manner which interested, though it was hardly understood" by her (17). What she doesn't understand is the double meaning involved in his use of irony. Another technique Henry employs to convey complex meaning is metaphor, as when he compares dancing to marriage. Catherine, however, cannot discern the underlying similarities between these two experiences despite their surface differences and can only respond, "But they are such different things!" (74). Passages such as these may appear to support critics' claims that this heroine is not too bright.

Catherine's greatest and most distressing confusion arises from the contradictory behavior of Isabella and Captain Tilney, who openly flirt with each other despite the fact that Isabella is engaged to James Morland. Isabella has declared to Catherine that she will not dance while James is away, so when Captain Tilney appears at the rooms and asks Henry to inquire of Isabella's friend if the lady would "have any objection to dancing," Catherine "without hesitation, replied, that she was very sure Miss Thorpe did not mean to dance at all" (134). When shortly after this conversation Catherine sees Isabella dancing with Captain Tilney, she is "astonish[ed]" that the lady would dance after saying she wouldn't and that the gentleman would ask her after being told she did not wish to (136). Over the next several days Catherine is further distressed as she witnesses Isabella "in public admitting Captain Tilney's attentions as readily as they were offered, and allowing him almost an equal share with James in her notice and smiles," an example of "unsteady conduct" that "was beyond [Catherine's] comprehension" (152).

Whatever her difficulties inferring the mental states of others, however, especially when these involve dishonesty and deception, Catherine displays unerring good sense in her evaluation of potential mates. She is attracted to Henry upon their first meeting, when he is described as "a very gentlemanlike young man" of about "four or five and twenty" who "was rather tall, had a pleasing countenance, a very intelligent and lively eye, and, if not quite handsome, was very near it. His address was good," and "[h]e talked with fluency and spirit" (17). This account, which reflects Catherine's perception of Henry, identifies him as belonging to a respectable social class with good manners and social skills ("gentlemanlike"), several years older than herself

(more so than the typical desired age gap evolutionary psychologists have documented, but allowing Henry more time to have acquired a living and income independent of his father), tall and acceptably good-looking, animated (indicating good health), and intelligent, with especially good verbal facility. Even his ironic style of discourse (the "archness and pleasantry" of his manner), which Catherine does not fully understand, "interested" her as an indication of his intelligence and sophistication with language. It also signals that he has a good sense of humor. Although Catherine is concerned "that he indulged himself a little too much with the foibles of others" (21), suggesting that he may be critical of those he considers inferior, his interest in and kindness to women is conveyed by his knowledge of dress fabrics and declaration that "my sister has often trusted me in the choice of a gown," causing Mrs. Allen to remark, "You must be a great comfort to your sister, sir" (20). Henry's devotion to his sister is later reinforced when Catherine meets Eleanor Tilney and learns how much she cares for her brother and considers him a valuable companion.

The more Catherine knows of Henry, the more she learns of his positive traits. When she finds out that Mrs. Allen has heard "a great deal about the family" from Eleanor Tilney's companion Mrs. Hughes, Catherine pumps her guardian for information, asking such questions as "what part of Gloucestershire they come from" and whether "Mr. Tilney, my [dance] partner, [is] the only son," a significant issue as it would determine whether or not Henry will inherit the family estate (65). Although Mrs. Allen has not retained much information, Catherine does eventually learn that the Tilneys are a wealthy family, superior to her own in social class, and when she first sees General Tilney she is struck by how "handsome" they all are (78). Henry continues to impress Catherine with his intelligence as he discourses on aesthetic principles and politics during their walk on Beechen Cliff, and he displays a lively imagination and playful sense of humor when he invents a clever, parodic Gothic narrative on their trip to Northanger Abbey. Henry's adeptness at reading the minds of others is further evidence of his social skills, for he pays close attention to what others communicate by their words and nonverbal signs and responds appropriately, as when he deduces that the letter Catherine receives from her brother announces his break-up with Isabella, a perception that prompts Catherine to exclaim, "How quick you are!" (210).

Moreover, despite his satirical bent, Henry proves to be kind and devoted to Catherine. When he exposes her misguided conjecture that General Tilney murdered his wife, after the manner of a Gothic villain, Catherine is mortified and fears the loss of Henry's regard. Instead, she is met with "astonishing generosity and nobleness of conduct" on his part, as he never afterward alludes to the incident and instead treats her with "soothing politeness" and "rather more attention than usual," so that "her spirits [soon] became absolutely comfortable" (206, 204). Instead of taking advantage of his insight into Catherine's blunder to tease and humiliate her, he reassures her of his

continuing affection and concern for her happiness. Most significantly, when General Tilney forbids Henry to marry Catherine after he learns she will not inherit Mr. Allen's fortune, Henry boldly defies his father, for "[h]e felt himself bound as much in honour as in affection to Miss Morland," and no insistence on his father's part "could shake his fidelity" (257). He demonstrates that he will remain faithful to Catherine even in times of adversity, when doing so does not serve his self-interest.

This is not to say that Henry has no faults. Catherine learns from her Gothic misadventure that all people are a mix of positive and negative traits, an insight which includes the realization that even Henry Tilney's character may contain "some slight imperfection[s]" (206). He can be rather smug and condescending toward those he considers intellectually inferior, and his awareness of human foibles has fostered a tendency toward ironic detachment that reminds some readers of Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*.[6] Nevertheless, in both the necessities of wealth and status and the luxuries of loyalty and kindness (to use Geary's distinctions [see n.5]), Henry is a highly desirable potential husband.

If Catherine is adept at identifying a suitor who is likely to prove a valuable long-term mate, she is equally perceptive at recognizing less eligible men. She quickly concludes that she dislikes the company of John Thorpe, who comes from a family of precarious status, with few resources. Thorpe also has many personality traits unlikely to appeal to discriminating women. He has poor manners and social skills. He bores Catherine by talking on subjects of no interest to her and boasting of his own abilities and accomplishments. His dishonesty as well as lack of intelligence are conveyed by the blatant exaggerations and contradictions in his statements, causing even the naïve Catherine to suspect that he cannot be telling the truth. More seriously, Thorpe reveals his brutality when he refuses to stop the carriage after Catherine sees Eleanor and Henry and instead "only laughed, smacked his whip, encouraged his horse...and drove on" (86), an action that Jeffrey Herrle interprets as abduction and "figurative rape" (240). Thorpe's selfishness, duplicity, and aggression are further displayed when he goes behind Catherine's back to tell Eleanor that Catherine cannot keep her engagement to walk with her and her brother the next day and then grabs Catherine's hand and physically restrains her from pursuing Miss Tilney. In addition, the fact that he insults his mother and sisters, telling the former she looks like "an old witch" and the latter that they "both looked very ugly" (44), indicates his ill-treatment of women with whom he is intimate.

John Thorpe is perhaps easy to identify as a poor choice for a husband—he lacks resources, status, intelligence, social skills, and kindness to women—but Catherine also proves adept at noting the shortcomings of a more impressive man, Henry's brother Captain Tilney. When she sees him for the first time, she evaluates him as "a very fashionable-looking, handsome young man." She

> even supposed it possible, that some people might think him handsomer than his brother, though, in her eyes, his air was more assuming, and his countenance less prepossessing. His taste and manners were beyond a doubt decidedly inferior; for, within her hearing, he not only protested against every thought of dancing himself, but even laughed openly at Henry for finding it possible. (133)

Catherine accurately perceives that although Captain Tilney is better looking than his brother and as the eldest son will be more wealthy, he is haughty and aloof, and his Darcy-like refusal to dance in the Bath ballroom reflects his belief that the women there are beneath his notice, as a result of their inferior class status. Catherine, as mentioned previously, is deeply disturbed by Captain Tilney's flirtation with Isabella, whom he knows is engaged to James Morland, and when she finally realizes that he never even loved Isabella or intended to marry her himself, she declares, "I do not like him at all" (225). Catherine recognizes that the younger Tilney son, who has probably compensated for his lesser physical attractiveness, status, and wealth by cultivating both his mental abilities and devotion to women, is a better prospect for marriage than his brother.

Isabella, supposedly more experienced and savvy in her dealings with the opposite sex (she "could discover a flirtation between any gentleman and lady who only smiled on each other; and point out a quiz through the thickness of a crowd" [26]), is much less effective than Catherine at distinguishing between men who are good candidates for husbands from those who are only seeking short-term relationships. Isabella throws off devoted, dependable James Morland for the more dashing and socially eligible Captain Tilney, who initially follows her like "[her] shadow" and declares he wishes her "heart were independent," presumably so that she would bestow it on him (223, 149). Isabella does not realize that Captain Tilney is only pretending to love her as a strategy for seducing her into a short-term affair. Isabella can secure the wealthy, handsome Captain Tilney for this type of relationship, but, as Eleanor and Henry tell Catherine, their brother is not likely to marry a woman without "connections and fortune." Her lack of status and wealth are not Isabella's only liabilities, however. Eleanor astutely notes that it would be strange for her brother to propose marriage to Isabella, "[a] girl who, before his eyes, is violating an engagement voluntarily entered into with another man!...Frederick too, who always wore his heart so proudly! who found no woman good enough to be loved!" (211). The discriminating Captain Tilney is not likely to choose for a long-term mate a woman who is openly demonstrating her lack of fidelity, but the ease with which she transfers her attentions from one man to another, along with her seductive behavior, makes her an appropriate target for a short-term liaison.

In Isabella's defense, the novel suggests her family background may have influenced her poor choices. Isabella's father is dead and has left his

wife and children in reduced material circumstances. Studies indicate that girls who grow up without fathers are more likely to be sexually promiscuous than those in homes with two parents. Because they do not have a model of a consistently providing and protecting husband, these girls may assume that men are unreliable and that they are better off acquiring immediate benefits from multiple short-term partners rather than pursuing a long-term mate (Buss 93; Campbell 187-88, 194). Isabella may also be angling for the ideal female sexual strategy—retain James Morland as a steady provider but produce a child with Frederick Tilney's good genes (see Geary 198). If this is her goal, however, she does not have the wherewithal to pull it off, and by over-reaching she ends up with neither man and a damaged reputation that will compromise future marriage prospects. Moreover, Isabella appears to underestimate the importance of character traits that signal a man's willingness to commit to a woman. She loses interest in James Morland when she discovers that his family is not as wealthy as she supposed and quickly transfers her attentions to the more affluent Captain Tilney. When the latter abandons her, she complains in a letter to Catherine that "it is very difficult to know whom to trust" (223). Catherine, however, does know which man to trust because she has been alert to signs that indicate loyalty and a willingness to share resources rather than merely the possession of resources and good genes.

Catherine also proves more effective than her friend in convincing her suitor that she will make a good wife. By expressing extreme distress over Isabella's disloyalty to her brother and the pain she is causing him (she perceives that Isabella's conduct makes James "grave and uneasy" [152]), she conveys to Henry that she highly values female fidelity. Indeed, Catherine's inability to comprehend what Isabella's and Captain Tilney's feelings and motives are, and assertions such as "A woman in love with one man cannot flirt with another" (103) make clear to Henry that infidelity is not even a concept she can grasp. In this case, Catherine's obtuseness about other people's mental states and inability to detect dishonesty or selfishness actually aid her sexual strategy, for her habits of mind underscore to her suitor the likelihood that she will never engage in such behavior herself.

In other respects, Catherine's deficient Theory of Mind may actually be an asset in her courtship with Henry Tilney. In a passage in which Henry directly comments on Catherine's inability to infer the intentions and attitudes of people different from herself, he goes on to compliment her for this trait. "Your attributing my brother's wish of dancing with Miss Thorpe to good-nature alone," Henry states, "convinced me of your being superior in good-nature yourself to all the rest of the world" (135). Instead of regarding them as liabilities, Henry praises Catherine's blindness to others' negative traits and tendency to think well of everyone, which convey to him her kindness and inclination to trust others—qualities he would value in a wife. Henry also finds Catherine's ignorance on many subjects appealing, as we learn when he lectures

her on the picturesque, politics, and history during their walk on Beechen Cliff, and the narrator tells us that "clever young m[e]n" generally are attracted to "a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind" (112).

If Jane Austen is slyly satirizing men's egotistical preference for women to whom they can feel intellectually superior (as Juliet McMaster says, Henry and not Catherine is the object of the narrator's satire in this passage [154]), one can note specific reasons why Catherine's deficiencies in both education and social maneuvering might especially appeal to Henry in a way that aids the supposedly ignorant young lady. Catherine is surrounded at Bath by duplicitous individuals trying to cheat her, but she is also engaged in a kind of cheating herself. As Denise Dellarosa Cummins explains, cheating involves "*violating implicit social norms*" (232, Cummins's emphasis), and in species that live in hierarchical societies, such as humans and other primates, violating norms often involves lower-ranking individuals trying to improve their status and gain access to resources reserved for dominant members of their group. Cummins and others believe that cheater-detection is one of many cognitive functions that humans are "biologically predisposed to develop," since the ability to spot rule-breaking is pervasive in human cultures and emerges early in life (Cummins 240; see also Boyd, "Jane, Meet Charles" 7-9). Based on experiments she conducted, Cummins concludes that people from higher ranks are "*more likely to detect violations of social rules on the part of lower-ranking individuals than vice versa*," since the former have a vested interest in maintaining their superior status and privileges (233, Cummins's emphasis). It is dangerous for those in the lower ranks to violate social rules and risk punishment from those above them, but if they succeed in breaking those rules without getting caught they benefit by enhancing their standing within the group, their access to resources, and their reproductive success.

Isabella Thorpe clearly wishes to improve her status and access to resources by marrying a man superior to her in rank and fortune, a practice known in the social sciences as hypergamy (Barash and Barash 45). Henry Tilney identifies Isabella as a social climber when he states that she would be faithful to Captain Tilney only until "a baronet should come in her way," which as Catherine realizes means that Isabella seeks to marry chiefly "for ambition" (212). Catherine also realizes, however, that she and Isabella are alike in that both are socially "insignificant" young women without large fortunes who are hoping to marry into the prosperous Tilney family (214). Catherine, like Isabella, is thus guilty of "cheating" by attempting to secure a mate above her expectations, someone to whom she is not entitled according to the rules of her hierarchical society, and she risks punishment from social superiors who wish to maintain the status quo and prevent those beneath them from gaining access to their privileges.

This is exactly what happens when General Tilney discovers that Catherine is not an heiress as he supposed and, highly incensed at the deception that has

been practiced on him, banishes her from his house.[7] We eventually learn that John Thorpe told General Tilney that the Morlands were a wealthy family and that Catherine would also inherit Mr. Allen's fortune, and in numerous scenes both Thorpe and General Tilney make comments that reflect these beliefs. During their first carriage ride, Thorpe asks Catherine, "Old Allen is as rich as a Jew—is not he?", and he goes on to ask if the Allens have children and if Mr. Allen is Catherine's godfather (59). In a spirit of competition with the man he assumes is Catherine's benefactor, General Tilney frequently asks his young guest if Mr. Allen's possessions are as impressive as his own (e.g., 170, 183). Catherine's response to all such hints of what Thorpe and the General are thinking is complete incomprehension. Similarly, when General Tilney alludes to his expectation that she and Henry will marry, as when he tells her that he may soon be buying a new tea set for someone other than himself, she "was probably the only one of the party who did not understand him" (179).

Catherine's obtuseness, however, is an effective sexual strategy under the circumstances. General Tilney's erroneous belief that she has access to considerable wealth clearly works to her advantage, as it results in his encouragement of her association with his son and his invitation to her to visit Northanger Abbey. Catherine is aware that proximity to Henry is necessary for their relationship to result in marriage, for when she fears the Allens will leave Bath early "[h]er whole happiness seemed at stake" (94), and when General Tilney turns her out of the house her grief stems from her reflection that "[e]very hope, every expectation from [Henry was] suspended...and who could say...when they might meet again?" (234). She is also depressed by her mother's suggestion that she might run into Eleanor and Henry again "in the course of a few years," for Catherine realizes that Henry might by then have "forg[otten] her" and become attached or even married to someone else (245). Marriage to Henry is dependent on Catherine spending a sufficient amount of time in his company, but she must not appear to be consciously angling for him or misleading him and his father about her prospects. By not comprehending the hints she receives that others believe her to be wealthier than she is, she succeeds in getting the crucial invitation to visit the family but is exonerated from any suspicion that she herself is responsible for deceiving the General.

The resemblance of Catherine's behavior to a clever strategy is apparent when one compares it to a similar scheme undertaken by the eponymous heroine of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. In one episode, Moll's financial resources have been reduced, and she finds that men in her community will not marry a woman unless she has a fortune. With the help of a friend, Moll causes a rumor to be spread that she is a wealthy widow, and she soon has a number of suitors. Moll realizes that she "had a subtile Game to play," for "cheating a Man into Marrying...on pretence of a Fortune" is "one of the most dangerous Steps a Woman can take, and in which she runs the most hazard of being ill us'd afterwards" (78, 84). Moll therefore selects a good-

natured man who insists he passionately loves her, and in a key scene she tells him that she is poor, though she realizes he assumes she is not telling the truth. He protests that he desires her for herself alone, so that when they do marry and he learns she is not as wealthy as he was led to believe, "tho' he might say afterwards he was cheated, yet he could never say that I had cheated him" (80). Moll helps to soften her husband's disappointment by first leading him to assume she has nothing and then gradually presenting him with installments of the money she does possess, so he ends up being relieved that she is not completely destitute.

Catherine's experience with the Tilneys is parallel to Moll's, even in the way that General Tilney first learns from John Thorpe that Catherine is going to inherit a substantial fortune and then that her family is absolutely "necessitous" (256), so that he is somewhat mollified when he finds out her father is not poor and that "Catherine would have three thousand pounds" upon her marriage (261). The difference, of course, is that Moll consciously schemes to deceive and manipulate her husband-to-be, whereas Catherine achieves the same outcome as Moll but retains her innocence of any duplicity or responsibility for spreading false rumors about her net worth.

The practical advantages of her supposedly gullible and imperceptive nature are also illuminated by comparing Catherine to *Emma*'s Miss Bates, whom the narrator describes as having "no intellectual superiority to...frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect," and about whom Emma similarly remarks, "nobody is afraid of her: that is a great charm" (20, 91). According to Vermeule, Miss Bates's apparent lack of intelligence and her inclination to be "quick-sighted to every body's merits" (Austen, *Emma* 20) but not to their flaws are part of a "winning social strategy" that disarms others and prompts them to patronize her (both in the sense of feeling superior and of dispensing benefits to her) (179). In the same way, Catherine's guilelessness and inability to detect other people's ulterior motives can be considered an effective social and (in her case) sexual strategy, for these traits make her appear harmless, especially to social superiors who might otherwise suspect her of attempting to encroach on their domain. In fact, Henry's displeasure when he learns that Catherine has suspected his father of criminal behavior may stem in part from his alarm at her presumption in judging her "betters." When she realizes that she risks losing Henry's regard, Catherine quickly reverts to her previous blind trust in his father's literal statements and good intentions, as when she assumes he won't mind that she is not wealthy because he has expressed "some most generous and disinterested sentiments on the subject of money," and she even suspects that "his disposition in such matters [must be] misunderstood by his children" who have described him as mercenary in his views of marriage (214).

This does not mean that Catherine is consciously adjusting her behavior to achieve her goal of marrying Henry. As Buss notes, not only do the sexual

strategies in which all people engage not involve "conscious planning or awareness," but they actually succeed better when they are "carried out without the awareness of the actor" (6). Wright even cites research that indicates self-deception may aid survival and reproductive success, as it allows us to pursue our self-interest without the conflict that would result from a deliberate ruse—we genuinely believe we are as innocent of calculation as we present ourselves to others. In Wright's words, "we deceive ourselves in order to deceive others better" (264; see also 9-10, 36-37).

On the other hand, Catherine is not completely passive or without design either but does actively and purposefully attempt to shape circumstances in her favor. Just as Isabella befriends Catherine as a way of ingratiating herself with James Morland, so Catherine cultivates a friendship with Eleanor Tilney as a way of forwarding her relationship with Henry. The day after she meets Eleanor, "[t]he first wish of her heart was to improve her acquaintance with Miss Tilney" (56), and though she is deterred that day when she goes on a carriage ride with her brother and the Thorpes, the following day her "resolution of endeavouring to meet Miss Tilney again continued in full force" (68). When she spies Eleanor in the Pump-room she disengages herself from Isabella and James, walks over to the young woman with whom she desires to become better acquainted, and initiates a conversation. After the disastrous trip to see Blaize Castle, when John Thorpe's lie causes Catherine to renege on her engagement to go walking with Henry and Eleanor, Catherine is determined to explain her error to the siblings and restore their good opinion of her. She gets their Bath address at the Pump-room and calls on Miss Tilney but is not admitted. Although she fears Eleanor is offended and has refused to see her, she is not deterred that night at the theatre from looking at Henry until she catches his eye and then effusively apologizing when he comes into her box to see her. The next day, when John Thorpe tries to cancel her second engagement to go walking with the Tilneys by telling Eleanor that Catherine wishes to postpone their excursion for another day, she "broke away" from John and Isabella, who attempt to physically restrain her, and "almost ran" to the Tilneys' residence to retract John's lie and reinstate their plans (101-02).

Such passages make clear that, if Catherine is not fully conscious of how her behavior aids her courtship with Henry, there is no question that she desires his attentions and actively pursues a connection with him. Indeed, the narrator acknowledges her superior agency when she notes that Henry's attachment to Catherine began with "gratitude, or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought" (252-53). Early in their acquaintance Henry states that in marriage "man has the advantage of choice, women only the power of refusal" (74), but Austen depicts Catherine as more influential than he in determining the outcome of their relationship. In *Northanger Abbey*, female choice plays a greater role than male choice in the hero and heroine's courtship.

The impression of Catherine as naïve, inept, and even unintelligent is challenged by the realization that she engages in the most successful sexual strategy of any character in the novel. Not only is she, unlike Isabella, effective in identifying a man who is a good prospect for a husband and in convincing him that she will make a good wife, but her very obtuseness and seeming inability to read the minds of others may be considered assets in her goal of improving her circumstances through hypergamy, for these cognitive lapses allow her to break the rules without provoking the suspicion of social superiors, who regard her as harmless and incapable of calculation. In fact, the very traits with which critics have most found fault in Catherine's character may be those that chiefly contribute to her success in the hierarchical society and competitive marriage market depicted in *Northanger Abbey*. Austen's interest in female choice and her insight into the dynamics of what Darwin would term sexual selection are clearly on display in her earliest completed novel.

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NOTES

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[1] See Zunshine; Boyd, *On the Origin* 25; Easterlin, *Biocultural Approach*; Richardson 19-23; Stasio and Duncan 135-37. Good introductions to evolutionary psychology that outline its history, explain its premises, and respond to its critics are available in Wright; Campbell; Buss; Boyd, *On the Origin*; and Easterlin, *Biocultural Approach*, especially chapters 1 and 5. For arguments for and against different aspects and practitioners of evolutionary literary criticism, see also Kramnick; six responses to Kramnick (by Paul Bloom, Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, Vanessa Ryan, G. Gabrielle Starr, and Blakey Vermeule) in *Critical Inquiry* 38.2 (2012); and Flesch, especially Introduction.

[2] Boyd analyzes female choice in *Mansfield Park*. Barash and Barash treat *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*. Stasio and Duncan as well as Joseph Carroll analyze *Pride and Prejudice* from an evolutionary perspective.

[3] Others who discuss historical circumstances that may help to account for Austen's treatment of courtship and marriage in terms that anticipate Darwin and align with the findings of evolutionary psychology are Stasio and Duncan (133, 137) and Easterlin, "From Reproductive Resource" (394). See also n.5.

[4] On women's prevailing preference for long-term over short-term relationships, see Buss 88 and Campbell 188, 207. Certain aspects of Trivers's theory, especially as oversimplified by others, have been challenged or qualified, such as the idea that males always benefit more from multiple matings than females do (see Tang-Martinez and Ryder; Mulder). The core principles of parental investment theory summarized in this and subsequent paragraphs, however, remain central to studies of gender differences in mating strategies and are common to all the works I consulted.

[5] Geary distinguishes between "necessities" and "luxuries" in female (and male) preferences. He identifies "cultural success" (however defined in each community) as the primary necessity women seek in a man, and other traits "that make a long-term relationship satisfying" such as kindness, intelligence, and dependability, as luxuries (189). According to Geary, societies that contain a sufficient number of men who make adequate incomes allow women to indulge their mate-preference luxuries. Such societies include the middle and upper classes in modern Western countries, a category into which we can situate the world of Jane Austen's novels (see Geary 183-91).

[6] Both Mooneyham (17-25) and McMaster (154-55) compare Henry to Mr. Bennet, though McMaster believes that Catherine, with her "fresh responses and quickly engaged feelings," will prevent him from deteriorating into a "glib satirist" like Mr. Bennet (155).
[7] Hypergamy was not universally regarded as violating social norms in Jane Austen's day, but Austen clearly depicts characters such as General Tilney and Lady Catherine De Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* who view it in this way. Even Henry Tilney's cheater-detection mechanism is aroused by socially inferior women like Isabella who are too openly striving to marry up.

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