

“Rare in Burlesque”: *Northanger Abbey*

RICHARD LANSDOWN

Dors, dors, mon enfant,
Jusqu'à l'âge de quinze ans,
A quinze ans faut te réveiller,
A quinze ans faut te marier.

It has been appreciated for many years that a special part of the appeal and literary-historical significance of *Northanger Abbey* lies in the way the novel dramatizes and articulates the relationship between the two fictional modes it deploys: novelistic realism on the one hand and a satiric version of Gothic fiction on the other (what Reginald Farrer called in 1917 “serious drama” and “parody”). “As for the reader,” Farrer concluded, “the closer his study of the dovetailing of the two motives, the profounder his pleasure.”¹ Reflection on the moral and aesthetic effects of this dovetailing has frequently been seen as central to what Jane Austen’s novel encourages and has to offer. For Walter Anderson *Northanger Abbey* presents a struggle between “fatuous imaginings” and “common, sensible pleasures in reading,” in which Austen “intends her work . . . to compete with and ultimately outstrip Gothic romances.”² For Marvin Mudrick, “The problem is to write simultaneously a Gothic novel and a realistic novel, and to gain and keep the reader’s acceptance of the latter while proving that the former is false and absurd.”³ In *Northanger Abbey*, according to Susan Morgan, “Austen mocks sentimental and gothic conventions because they are unnatural and therefore incredible.”⁴

But other readers have taken the situation to be more complex than comments like these might suggest. “[I]t would be a mistake,” A. Walton Litz argues, “to think that Jane Austen is manipulating a straightforward contrast between Gothic nonsense and ‘the common feelings of common life.’”⁵ According to Jan Fergus, Austen has the capacity “to delight in, and occasionally to exploit, the convention she exposes and parodies.”⁶ (So it has been pointed out on a number of occasions that just as the heroine and the reader have learned to recognize and dismiss Gothic

imaginings, General Tilney returns to the scene in a towering rage and throws Catherine Morland out of his house, Montoni-style—though Montoni himself is more given to locking women up than evicting them.) Mary Lascelles, too, may have described the burlesque element in the novel as possessing only “a pretty intricacy and variety,” but she could see that the pattern of that element “is by no means simple.”⁷⁷ Though Austen’s novel “subverts the falsities of such works as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*,” Alistair Duckworth decides, “it also retains enough of the extrarational probing of the Gothic novel to put into question any easy acceptance of a rationally grounded existence.”⁷⁸ And Tara Ghosal Wallace agrees that “Austen does more than invite her reader to join in a collaborative effort to debunk the conventions of sentimental novels, more even than to witness the emergence of a new kind of novel based on probabilities and psychological realism.”⁷⁹ But Wallace doesn’t make it absolutely plain what Austen went on to do in this regard, and neither does Andrew Wright. He is sure *Northanger Abbey* “exhibits two sets of values,” one satirized, one shown to be true:

But the book goes somewhat beyond these limits—it goes beyond to explore the limitations of good sense itself. And Jane Austen shows us that though we must reject the Gothic world as inadequate and false, we cannot altogether apprehend the real world by good sense alone. Good sense, ironically, is limited too.⁸⁰

Critics in recent years—largely but not exclusively working under the auspices of feminism—have significantly rerouted what Claudia Johnson calls the “Gothic or Anti-Gothic” question,¹¹ particularly by drawing attention to the narratorial instability and metafictional playfulness of *Northanger Abbey*. For Carole Gerster “Austen places herself in the midst of an ongoing dialogue” in this novel, “within and between novels about woman’s true nature and proper role in order to engage other novelists and novel readers in dialogue and debate.” It follows the book offers a Bakhtinian “mix of varied and opposing voices” instead of “hidden meanings.” This does not imply an intertextual hall of mirrors, however. The “true nature” of women is at stake for Austen and her readers, after all, and the novel is designed (in part) “to show how [Samuel] Richardson’s ideas about women are false to reality.”¹² “Jane Austen freed her readers from damaging stereotypes,” as Elspeth Knights points out,¹³ and she could do so only by ensuring that metafictional playfulness was accompanied very closely by instances of intellectual earnestness: serious considerations about the novel as a form of rational entertainment, for example, and serious considerations about the fascination of Gothic for adolescent minds, as I hope to make clear. Whether *Northanger Abbey* is, as Claudia Johnson suggests,¹⁴ Austen’s most brilliant novel I doubt—but

then it is hard to think of any other novel, in any language, as brilliant as *Pride and Prejudice*. The brilliance it undoubtedly possesses has a good deal to do with its "multifaceted" quality, allowing it not only to "be read and interpreted in various ways,"¹⁵ but itself to read and interpret the human activity it records. "Clearly," Claudia Johnson writes, "though she pokes a lot of fun, Austen is not simply disavowing gothic."

Instead, she juxtaposes the "alarms of romance" to the "anxieties of common life" in order to enable us to see their interdependence. Rather than merely asserting the reality of one and dismissing the non-reality of the other . . . we see them each anew, and we are struck first by their apparent distinctness and next by their apparent indistinguishability.¹⁶

That state of interdependence, I think, is where the novel might be said to take us in its "extrarational probing" and its voyage beyond the limitations of good sense; and that state is what I want to shed light on here.

An unexpected obstacle to seeing *Northanger Abbey* in more of its completeness and complexity is the fact that many of its readers have treated the genre that it parodies in monolithic terms. A. Walton Litz may have distinguished between the "psychological truths" to be found in *The Monk* and the "appeal to vicarious emotion" in Ann Radcliffe (the "basic sentimentality and fundamental unreality" of which Austen "was determined to expose"), but he nevertheless felt that "Jane Austen's target was the form in general, not any particular thriller."¹⁷ "One major difficulty lies," Jan Fergus remarks,

in isolating passages from Radcliffe's works which can be set fairly against Austen's imitation. All Radcliffe's effects suffer slightly when her scenes are separated from their contexts. Furthermore, no direct evidence exists for Austen's preferences, if any, among her scenes or her works; we do not even know at which "most interesting part" of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* Henry Tilney refused to interrupt his reading for five minutes.¹⁸

In fact Austen does state a preference, and does give us an important clue in this regard. Not only is *The Mysteries of Udolpho* the novel that Catherine reads; we know that she found one incident in particular "most interesting." In Chapter 6 we find her in conversation with her new friend at Bath, Isabella Thorpe:

"But, my dearest Catherine, what have you been doing with yourself all this morning?—Have you gone on with Udolpho?"

"Yes, I have been reading it ever since I woke; and I am got to the black veil."

"Are you, indeed? How delightful! Oh! I would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are you not wild to know?"

"Oh! yes, quite; what can it be?—But do not tell me—I would not be told upon any account. I know it must be a skeleton, I am sure it is Laurentina's skeleton. Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life reading it. I assure

you, if it had not been to meet you, I would not have come away from it for all the world." (39-40)

Granted, the thrills withheld behind the black veil are typical Radcliffe and typical Gothic. But Austen is a remarkably careful novelist,¹⁹ and it is worth enquiring if she invoked that particular episode for reasons which have a bearing on the deeper preoccupations of her own novel.

The black veil episode begins in the fifth chapter of the second volume of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, when Signor Montoni transports the kidnapped heroine from Venice to his eponymous castle in the Appenines, where he intends to marry her to Count Morano. The sight of the castle alone is sufficient to fill Emily's mind with "melancholy awe":²⁰

Silent, lonely and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all, who dared to invade its solitary reign. As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity, and Emily continued to gaze, till its clustering towers were alone seen, rising over the tops of the woods, beneath whose thick shade the carriages soon after began to ascend. (227)

Etcetera, etcetera: "gothic greatness of its features," "mouldering walls of dark grey stone," "gloomy and sublime," a gateway of "gigantic size" and a "huge portcullis," "two round towers, crowned by hanging turrets, embattled, where, instead of banners, now waved long grass and wild plants, that had taken root among the moldering stones," towers whose "shattered outline . . . told of the ravages of war." In short, "vast, ancient and dreary" (226-27). Small wonder Emily felt "as if she was going into her prison," and that "her imagination, ever awake to circumstance, suggested even more terrors, than her reason could justify" (227-28). Dark, obscure, solitary, forbidding, precipitous, monumental, decaying, ancient: Radcliffe's description suggests that Udolpho is much more than a creepy castle. It is the embodiment of its owner, naturally, as are so many houses in fiction; but it is also the embodiment of what Ian Duncan calls "decayed ancestral power":²¹ age, violence, tradition, law, and patriarchy (even, surely, the phallus, clustered as the place is with round towers without and pillars within).

At least Emily is not alone in this barbarically masculine environment. Accompanying her is her French maid Annette, and the two young women quickly become lost going upstairs to their room. Emily chooses a door at random, which opens onto "a suite of spacious and ancient apartments" where the furniture "retained an appearance of grandeur, though covered with dust, and dropping to pieces with the damps, and with age." Annette is all trepidation ("O! If I see anything, I shall be frightened out of my wits!"), Emily all fascination ("Why do you hesi-

tate?"), and this set of reactions in the heroine and her attendant is the next element in the episode as a whole. To become lost in the corridors of this building—an embodiment of violent and primitive masculinity—evokes fear (understandably enough) but also insatiable *curiosity*. There is a secret, and Emily insists on finding it out:

"Oh! do not go in there, ma'amselle," said Annette, "you will only lose yourself further."

"Bring the light forward," said Emily, "we may possibly find our way through these rooms. (232)

Two objects in particular attract Emily's attention in the room feebly illuminated by Annette's unreliable lantern. Both are or appear to be pictures: one of a horseman ("the countenance . . . struck Emily as resembling Montoni") about to run a spear through his sprawling victim, the other "concealed by a veil of black silk," which Annette refuses to help Emily uncover:

"I don't know what is the reason, ma'amselle . . . nor any thing about the picture, only I have heard there is something very dreadful belonging to it—and that it has been covered up in black *ever since*—and that nobody has looked at it for a great many years—and it somehow has to do with the owner of this castle before Signor Montoni came to the possession of it—and—." (233)

Needless to say, Emily's "curiosity was entirely awakened," and when Annette leaves to find help she is tempted to uncover the picture herself, but the "melancholy silence" of the place (234) "conspired with a certain degree of awe, excited by the mystery attending this picture, to prevent her."²²

After supper Annette—who has picked up her information from her boyfriend on Montoni's staff—tells her mistress the story of Montoni's one-time love, Signora Laurentini, who owned Udolpho when Montoni was a young man. The castle, it transpires, was to become Montoni's in the event of Laurentini dying unmarried, but in the event Montoni fell in love with her and offered her his hand, which she rejected, having a lover elsewhere. Montoni left the area, while Laurentini took up the habit of melancholy night-time walks (with her maid), mooning over her romantic misfortunes. Until one night, as Annette tells us:

"Well, they saw her go down among the woods, but night came, and she did not return; ten o'clock, eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock came, and no lady! Well, the servants thought to be sure, some accident had befallen her, and they went out to seek her. They searched all night long, but could not find her, or any trace of her; and, from that day to this, ma'amselle, she has never been heard of." (237-8)

The implication is obvious: Montoni has murdered Laurentini to ensure that she will remain unmarried, or out of jealousy, or to silence

her after an act of rape. As herself the unwilling bride-to-be of Count Morano it is hardly surprising that Emily compares her fate with the castle's previous female occupant: "her thoughts," Radcliffe tells us, "recurred to the strange history of Signora Laurentini and then to her own strange situation" (240). Nor is it any surprise, given the story Annette tells the previous evening, that Emily wakes the next day to find (241) "The Count Morano was the first image, that occurred to her waking thoughts, and then came a train of anticipated evils, which she could neither conquer, or avoid."

So much for the intertextual clues left by what the narrator tells us concerning Catherine's reading. But those clues are not only intertextual and literary ones. The episode of the black veil is a unique but representative example of a driving force in Gothic fiction: the "train of anticipated evils" incumbent on marriage and/or sexual contact. Signora Laurentini is sought in marriage by an unwanted partner; she comes to a sticky end in unknown circumstances. Signora Laurentini is what Mademoiselle Emily will become unless she is rescued by her passive and androgynous lover; she has left the unmarried sisterhood and passed over to the other shore, to a fate as lurid as it is mysterious, worthy to be hidden behind a veil. This primal scene can be witnessed from the masculine point of view in books like *The Monk*, or from the feminine one in books like Radcliffe's own, but a significant part of the appeal of Gothic fiction to young readers in the mid-1790s and beyond surely lies in the fact that it dramatizes that particular rite of passage—common to young men and young women alike, of course, in all times and places, but for culturally determined reasons presenting itself with a different order of intensity for women of Catherine Morland's era.

That era had not yet passed when the Russian political thinker Alexander Herzen published a short meditation on female education in 1866. "A sober view of human relationships is far harder for women than for us," he wrote:

From childhood the girl is frightened by the sexual relationship as by some *fearful unclean secret* of which she is warned and scared off as though it were a sin that had some magical power; and afterwards this same monstrous thing, this same *magnum ignotum* which leaves an ineffaceable stain, the remotest hint at which is shameful and sets her blushing, is made the object of her life. As soon as a boy can walk, he is given a tin sword to train him to murder, and an hussar's uniform and epaulettes are predicted for him; the girl is lulled to sleep with the hope of a rich and handsome bridegroom, and she dreams of epaulettes not on her own shoulders but on the shoulders of her future husband.

Herzen then quoted the French song that forms my epigraph, and went on:

Christian teaching inspires terror of the "flesh" before the organism is conscious of its sex; it awakens a dangerous question in the child, instils alarm into the adolescent soul, and when the time to answer it is come—another doctrine exalts, as we have said, for the girl her sexual assignment into a sought-for ideal: the schoolgirl becomes the bride, and the same mystery, the same sin, but purified, becomes the crown of her upbringing, the desire of all her relations, the goal of all her efforts, almost a social duty. Arts and sciences, education, intelligence, beauty, wealth, grace, all these are directed to the same object, all are the roses strewn on the path to her *sanctioned* fall . . . to the very same sin, the thought of which was looked on as a crime but which has now changed its substance by a miracle like that by which a Pope, when anhungered on a journey, blessed a *meat dish into a Lenten one*.²³

Jane Austen would not have seen this matter in the same way as Herzen did or used the language in which he expresses himself. (He was essentially a radical, she essentially a conservative.) But his emphasis on the suddenness and completeness of the change of social attitude *to* girls at puberty, and of personal attitude demanded *of* them, is something she would have understood, I am sure—on the basis of *Northanger Abbey* in general, and the intertextual clue she has left concerning the episode of the black veil from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in particular.²⁴ So, too, his stress on ignorance converted at bewildering speed into "social duty." "Fearful and unclean secrets" hardly form part of the atmosphere of the Wiltshire vicarage in which Catherine Morland was raised; the better word is one also used by Herzen, by Radcliffe, and by Austen herself: "mystery." In Austen's novel as in Radcliffe's the mystery of life with men unlike the desexualized figures of father or brother, and the mystery of those women who have committed themselves to such a life, provokes fear and curiosity in equal measure, just as *Udolpho* did.

Moreover the social convention Herzen described is that the mystery must remain utterly intact until it is completely solved: there is no hint or clue or means of access to the way of life on the other side of Montoni's portcullis or the black veil. "Puberty," Lord Kames declared in 1781, "when new appetites and desires spring up, is the most critical time for education. Let the animal appetite be retarded as long as possible in both sexes."²⁵ If during this period of limbo Catherine Morland had gone for advice to a typical publication of her time like Hester Chapone's *Letter to a New-Married Lady* she would have found a great deal of pious discussion of marriage as companionship and sanctified tie—discussion as far from sexual education as one could either wish or imagine. But she would also have found the author paraphrasing male writers to the effect that "the passion of love in men is infallibly destroyed by possession,

and can subsist but a short time after marriage,” and concluding in her own right that “The tumult and anxiety of desire must of course be at an end when the object is secure.”²⁶ Nothing is done by writings of this kind to unravel the paradox Chapone’s readers face. On the contrary, the paradox is spelled out: marriage is a God-ordained and rational affair, yet it is achieved after a passage through tumult, anxiety, and climactic possession—after which the “passion of love” disappears as mysteriously as it came. In another of her books, Chapone admits that for advice on the subject of marriage to be of any use “it must be before passion has got possession of the heart, and silenced both reason and principle.”²⁷ Love and possession are no less frightening, or less fascinating, for being rendered in euphemistic terms like these.

Under these circumstances a mode of fiction which dramatizes the state of affairs Herzen describes—even if (*especially* if) it dramatizes that state of affairs in terms that are lurid and exaggerated—is likely to have an irresistible appeal for seventeen year-olds like Catherine Morland. Scary fascination is the moral experience they are undergoing and the aesthetic sensation they seek as a consequence, and if it is unavailable in Fanny Burney they will seek it elsewhere. Experientially implausible and morally exaggerated Gothic fiction may be, but seen in the context of Herzen’s remarks its appeal is the reverse of unnatural.²⁸ So Jane Austen’s attitude to Gothic in *Northanger Abbey* is far removed from competing with and outstripping it, or proving it false and absurd, or mocking its incredibility (as some of the critics I quoted earlier saw the case); her notion of the common feelings of common life recognizes that adolescent agitation—in which Gothic has its roots and for which it provides dramatic ventilation—is one of those feelings, whether we like it or not. “The youthful female reader, carried away in fantasy, was a familiar literary character in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” Heather Glen remarks:

From Charlotte Lennox’s “female Quixote” to Jane Austen’s Catherine Morland . . . she was seen almost invariably from the perspective of a more knowing, more disillusioned realism, as one whose book-induced day-dreams are destined to be corrected, ironically or tragically, by experience of the world.²⁹

If that is so then *Northanger Abbey* is the exception that tests the rule. Austen’s realism was distinguished here by *not* being of that “more knowing, more disillusioned” variety that sees her heroine’s state of mind in terms of “book-induced day-dreams” as opposed to “experience of the world.” Those day-dreams—as I think Austen clearly understands—are part of the heroine’s experience and part of her search for sense in it.

Catherine is introduced to us aged ten as the fourth of ten children, with "a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features" (13); as a tomboy who prefers cricket to dolls; and as a girl with no talent in fields of feminine endeavour like music and drawing. At fourteen her favourite employments were still "cricket, base ball, riding on horseback, and running about the country," but one year more produced an immense change: "her complexion improved, her features were softened by plumpness and colour, her eyes gained more animation, and her figure more consequence." In short, "Her love of dirt gave way to an inclination for finery" (15). This process takes place under the supervision of a mother much occupied with other domestic duties, and whose "elder daughters" as a consequence "were inevitably left to shift for themselves" (15).³⁰ ("It is difficult," Mary Waldron suggests, "to imagine any of her children consulting her about anything more complicated than clean underwear.")³¹ Two years later, "her mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is" (18) and without any experience whatsoever in the world of courtship ("without having excited even any admiration but what was very moderate and very transient" [16]), Catherine is handed over to a middle-aged childless couple and taken to Bath, the central marriage market of Georgian England.

Mrs. Morland has perforce been somewhat inattentive. Not having raised children themselves, the Allens leave Catherine practically in a state of surrogate orphanhood at the juncture in her life when adult guidance is most needed: a time when she is paraded for masculine inspection in the Pump Room on a daily basis.³² Only after her unchaperoned carriage ride with John Thorpe do the Allens wake up to the impropriety of her actions, and even then Mrs. Allen's moral grip is woefully loose: "as I told Mrs. Morland at parting," she says (104), "I would always do the best for you in my power. But one must not be over particular. Young people *will* be young people, as your good mother says herself." (The expression Austen uses elsewhere to describe Mrs. Allen's parental attitude is "placid indifference" [61].) In such circumstances of unsupervised anxiety and social excitement, Catherine makes recourse to Gothic fiction, but also to the encouragement and guidance of her confidante, the older and more worldly Isabella, whose self-assurance in dealing with men is manifest.

Needless to say, this state of anxiety and excitement becomes more intense when Catherine finds a young man to whom she is attracted. At first Henry Tilney seems an indifferent personage: "gentlemanlike,"

“about four or five and twenty,” “rather tall,” “pleasing countenance,” “not quite handsome” (25). But his manner of address—not to mention his knowledge of dress materials—is unusual enough for the plainspoken Catherine to make a key remark, to which luckily no one pays attention:

“‘How can you,’ said Catherine, laughing, ‘be so—’ she had almost said, strange” (28). Matters take their course. In finding Tilney irresistible, as Austen puts it, Catherine begins to become so herself (131); John Thorpe and his sister contrive to postpone but cannot prevent the heroine’s ongoing intimacy with Henry and his sister, Eleanor;³³ and Catherine is soon invited to stay *en famille* at Northanger Abbey.

For many readers this is where the novel reveals faults in the “dovetailing” mentioned at the beginning of this discussion. The novel’s two motives, two halves, or two sets of values—the realism in Bath, the satire in Northanger—seem to peel apart as the heroine arrives at her boyfriend’s home. “Between her character at Bath and Northanger no clear dividing line may be drawn and no consistent development traced.”³⁴ “Neither her reading of Gothic fiction nor Henry’s extemporaneous recipe for horrors on the ride to Northanger can adequately explain the psychological shift” Catherine appears to undergo “from antiheroic ingenue to an unabashed Gothic heroine.”³⁵ I would argue the novel lays down a pattern which seeks to explain exactly these things: a pattern continuous with that of Gothic desire, dramatized in *Udolpho* and summarized by Eleanor Ty, under the terms of which Gothic heroines must “unconsciously or consciously, search for that which they cannot or are not permitted to have.”³⁶

In Chapter 12 Catherine goes to the theatre where General Tilney—whom she has not met—inspects her carefully from a distance. At the end of the evening John Thorpe reveals that the General “thinks you the finest girl in Bath.” Needless to say, this testimony comes as a great encouragement: “That General Tilney, instead of disliking, should admire her, was very delightful; and she joyfully thought, that there was not one of the family whom she need now fear to meet” (96). But Catherine’s later experience is puzzlingly different. She spends a disappointing day with the family of whom she has such great expectations: “Instead of finding herself improved in acquaintance with Miss Tilney . . . she seemed hardly so intimate with her as before; instead of seeing Henry Tilney to greater advantage than ever . . . he had never said so little, nor been so little agreeable;

and, in spite of their father's great civilities to her . . . it had been a release to get away from him" (129). On the morning of her departure for Northanger the atmosphere is even less propitious: "so great was her agitation in finding herself as one of the family, and so fearful was she of not doing exactly what was right, and of not being able to preserve their good opinion, that, in the embarrassment of the first five minutes, she could almost have wished to return with him [Mr Allen] to Pulteney-street" (154).

It is General Tilney, of course, who is the source of this unpleasantness—he is the villain of the piece as manifestly as Montoni himself. But in a sense that is by the by. He is fearsome in himself, as he later proves; but at this stage in the novel he is above all fearsome in his roles as head of a family Catherine wishes to enter and father of the young man she loves. Her brother's engagement to Isabella "had taught her what *could* be done" and "she had got so far as to indulge in a secret 'perhaps': no more (138). The closer Catherine comes to joining the family, to becoming Henry's fiancée rather than Eleanor's friend, and to getting what she wants but is not yet permitted to have, the more anxious she becomes about the secret "perhaps" that occupies her mind. Her ignorance and lack of parental support serve to intensify this (quite natural) anxiety, which builds to a crescendo as she comes to visit the family in their own home. Those Gothic fancies to which she has already started to turn become almost addictive in their intensity, and the mere mention of Northanger is enough to have her speculating about "awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun" (141)—another of these Gothically ill-treated women to be placed alongside Signora Laurentini. Mary Waldron is right to suggest that only as Catherine comes up against "the internal dynamics" of the Tilney family ("of which she has received no sort of model in her own life") do "Gothic fantasy and real life mesh" for her.³⁷ Those family dynamics are particularly dysfunctional, as we shall learn; but the heroine knows nothing of that as she passes under the Northanger portcullis. At that stage her anxieties are—*mutatis mutandis*—those of Ann Radcliffe's Emily: "the imagined sexual apotheosis accompanying marriage."

Catherine's obsession with the locked chests, cupboards, and doors of Northanger is often explained in terms of similar manifestations in Gothic fiction, and therefore as straightforward satire; but that begs the question why they feature so strongly in the form Austen was satirizing. Tony Tanner speculates that the "cavity of importance" which Catherine unlocks in her bedroom cupboard is nothing other than "a thinly veiled

image of virginity,"⁸⁸ and Edward Neill also argues that "her Gothic curiosity encodes a pronounced sexual curiosity, or 'sublimated' libido."⁸⁹ But Catherine's urge to explore every nook and cranny can also be seen in terms complementary to psychosexual ones about fear and curiosity. More than anything else—as we have seen—she wants to be part of the family, and the building, the rooms, and the furniture offer a priceless opportunity to learn what she craves to know: to become an insider, as it were. ("You are a very close questioner," Henry observes on one occasion [151].) Thus the "large high chest" she finds in her bedroom ("in a deep recess on one side of the fire-place") seems older than the rest of the furniture: "If not originally their's, by what strange events could it have fallen into the Tilney family?" (163-64). How hard will falling into this family be if they, like their house, contain "many chambers secreted"? (183). The library, the "real" drawing-room, and the kitchens hold no interest to her, and Henry's "dark little room . . . strewed with his litter of books, guns and great coats" (183) is only passed through. It is the room belonging to the late Mrs. Tilney—at the end of "a narrower passage, more numerous openings, and symptoms of a winding stair-case" (185)—that becomes the object of her quest. She wishes to become the new Mrs. Tilney, after all, and who could fascinate her more than the previous incumbent? Yet the temerity of Catherine's marital ambition, unfounded as it is thus far and hedged about with prohibition and novelty, makes Mrs. Tilney—the Northanger equivalent of Signora Laurenti, also given to her favourite walks—an object of anxiety as well as fascination, and her tale seems to tell the fate of all married women just as Laurentini's does.

Catherine wants to enter the family and know its domestic arrangements, but her very eagerness might be a cause for rejection. In courtship, as Henry himself made clear at Bath, "man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal" (77): a stress on female passivity with which Austen humorously concurs when she notes "no young lady can be justified in falling in love before the gentleman's love is declared" (29-30). Young women should not actively seek to accommodate themselves in the "dynamics" of families other than their own, even by snooping around the house. It is appropriate, then, that Catherine's climactic moment of shame and disabusal should fall out as it does. On her way back from inspecting Mrs. Tilney's utterly unmysterious room, who should come bounding up the spiral staircase but Henry. "Good God!" she blurts out, "how came you here?—how came you up that staircase?" "How came I up that

staircase!' he replied, greatly surprised." "Because it is my nearest way from the stable-yard to my own chamber; and why should I not come up it?" (194). Poor Catherine has been caught red-handed, presumptuously invading the privacy of her chosen one's family. It takes only a second for Henry to ask how *she* came to be where she was, and from that question to an elucidation of Catherine's entire set of suspicions about his mother's death and his father's role in it.

So it is that Catherine nearly loses what she so badly wants, as her eagerness prompts her to actions that are invasive and unwelcome. No wonder she runs off to cry in her room. "The visions of romance were over" in both senses of the word (199): no more Gothic fancies, and no love affairs either.⁴⁰ But here we must turn to a complementary aspect of the novel, one in fact with implications for a good deal of the rest of her fiction: Henry Tilney's role in what Avrom Fleishman calls "the socialization of Catherine Morland."⁴¹ Many readers exaggerate his tutelary function in this respect, or overlook the fact—as they frequently do when considering Mr Knightley's role in the socialization of Emma Woodhouse—that when and if Austen's leading men do "educate" the women they come to marry, they are also demonstrably in need of learning something themselves (to come off their high horse, in Mr Knightley's case, or to see the state of their heart, in Captain Wentworth's). Lionel Trilling once suggested that Austen entertained "the idea of love based in pedagogy,"⁴² which seems to me a highly dubious supposition. But for Walter Anderson Catherine's mind "will continue improving under his [Henry's] guidance";⁴³ for Katrin Ristok Burlin "he is an eager teacher, she an ardent pupil";⁴⁴ for Jan Fergus Henry is in no need "of any enlightenment or reformation parallel to the heroine's" (as Mr Darcy may be said to be);⁴⁵ and for Susan Morgan "Austen's constant subject, the relations between ourselves and other people, appears here as teaching and learning, as a novel of education."⁴⁶

In fact, surely, Henry Tilney has a great deal to learn, however simple that lesson may be. He must learn that he is in love with Catherine, and to lower the barriers of defensiveness that keep them apart. In short, as Edward Neill puts it, he has an "urgent need to learn *not* to teach her."⁴⁷ Henry is too decent a human being to be an intellectual bully, and too complacent about his intellectual superiority over Catherine to seek to ridicule her. But it is apparent that he uses his education effectively to stifle any emotional interchange with women from the moment of being introduced to them. At the ball in Chapter 3 he ribs Catherine about the conventions of Bath conversation and female writing habits before demonstrating a knowledge about fabrics unprecedented in individuals

of his gender. More seriously, in the much-delayed country walk that occupies Chapter 14 his jesting attitude and quizzical opinions consistently keep Catherine at bay. He has read at least as many novels as she has, he insists, and probably more: "Consider how many years I have had the start of you. I had entered on my studies at Oxford, while you were a good little girl working your sampler at home!" (107). Catherine's reply—"Not very good I am afraid"—reminds us just how wrong Henry is about Catherine's childhood. ("I know you never mind dirt" is Mrs. Allen's most perceptive line in the book—linked to her ruling obsession though it is [82].) But it also reveals how he defends himself against women by conventionalizing their lives ("I shall make but a poor figure in your journal to-morrow" [26]) and patronizing them. A taste for flowers, he later remarks, Lord Kames-style, "is always desirable in your sex, as a means of getting you out of doors." Again Catherine has to disabuse him: "But I do not want any such pursuit to get me out of doors Mamma says, I am never within." (174). It is Eleanor who sees where Henry's habit in this regard is tending: "Miss Morland," she says (107): "he is treating you exactly as he does his sister."⁴⁸

Northanger Abbey presents many mysteries to this young woman "on the threshold of a complex adult world":⁴⁹ mysteries she only intermittently senses and has as yet too little social experience to solve. Salient among them, of course, are the attitudes of those around her—notably James Thorpe and General Tilney—to herself. Then there is the mystery of Isabella's mercenary shift from Catherine's brother to Henry's; or the sadder tale that passes Catherine by entirely, of Eleanor's extreme loneliness and lack of female companionship at Northanger. ("I have no sister, you know—and though Henry—though my brothers are very affectionate, and Henry is a great deal here . . . it is impossible for me not to be often solitary." To which Catherine insensitively replies: "To be sure you must miss him very much" [180].) But the mystery of attraction, and the barrier presented to it by Henry's "odd ways" and surprising manner (113-14), are things that Catherine is aware of and seeks to fathom with all her strength. Being a demonstrative person, she sometimes seeks answers too eagerly; and sometimes the social conspiracy described by Alexander Herzen places the solution to such mysteries out of reach, or provides clues that are themselves ambiguous. Henry's knowledge of muslins, for example, is so unusual as to be positively off-putting in a man:

"What are you thinking of so earnestly?" said he, as they walked back to the ball-room;—"not of your partner, I hope, for by that shake of the head, your meditations are not satisfactory."

Catherine coloured, and said, "I was not thinking of any thing."

"That is artful and deep, to be sure; but I had rather be told at once that you will not tell me." (29)

Thus Catherine reveals herself by a blush and a shake of her head. Later, Henry reveals himself in a formal bow offered across a crowded theatre after his sister's offer of a walk had apparently been rejected by Catherine in favor of a ride with James Thorpe. Stiff bow or not, he still comes around to Catherine's box, where all is explained to him ("if Mr. Thorpe would only have stopped, I would have jumped out and run after you" [94]), and where he is able to report that Eleanor harbored no suspicions of Catherine's good will:

"But, Mr. Tilney, why were *you* less generous than your sister? If she felt such confidence in my good intentions, and could suppose it to be only a mistake, why should *you* be so ready to take offence?"

"Me!—I take offence!"

"Nay, I am sure by your look, when you came into the box, you were angry."

"I angry! I could have no right."

"Well, nobody would have thought you had no right who saw your face." He replied by asking her to make room for him, and talking of the play. (95)

The *contretemps* at the top of the stairs at Northanger Abbey brings this mystery to a climax and a solution, despite Catherine's fears that her dreams of romance are over. Their urgent discussion, after all, is about a *marriage*, albeit not their own: the subject has been broached. Far from Catherine's bizarre suspicions evicting her from Henry's regard, her abjectness and vulnerability finally shatter the carapace of defensiveness and fraternal familiarity he had built around himself: "the only difference in his behaviour to her, was that he paid her rather more attention than usual. Catherine had never wanted comfort more, and he looked as if he were aware of it" (199).⁵⁰ The revelation of Isabella Thorpe and Frederick Tilney's maneuvers illuminates both Catherine's innate superiority and the imperfections among the Tilneys, and an unstated but mutual understanding allows her to forgo standing on ceremony and to show Henry a letter from her jilted brother which closes with a warning to herself "how you give your heart" (202). Very soon, and in the General's absence, Catherine's welcome in the family is all the more palpable for going unexpressed:

The happiness with which their time now passed, every employment voluntary, every laugh indulged, every meal a scene of ease and good-humour, walking where they liked and when they liked, their hours, pleasures and fatigues at their own command, made her thoroughly sensible of the restraint which the General's presence had imposed, and most thankfully feel their present release from it. Such ease and such delights made her love the place and the people more and more every day . . . (220)

So it is she feels father, son, and sister “loved and even wished her to belong to them” (221)—which by the end of the novel she does.

For Jan Fergus, Catherine Morland is too young to live in “the complicated world of moral perception and moral choice” other Austen heroines inhabit.⁵¹ No doubt this is true. But she is not a “childish heroine,” and her “confusion of art and life” is not “childish” either.⁵² Rather, she is “prey to all the anxieties, agitations, embarrassments, disappointments—and hopes and happinesses—which would ‘naturally’ beset a young lady entering the world” of her time.⁵³ Austen’s is a novel not about childishness but about adolescence and “young love”:⁵⁴ it demonstrates, as Roger Gard remarks, a “mastery of teenage thought and sentiment,”⁵⁵ and it “displays the powers of human understanding,”⁵⁶ curtailed as those powers may be by emotional and social confusion. Gothic fiction, Austen concludes, is an inadequate guide through those confusions, but her realism is tolerant and inquisitive enough to ensure that no blame attaches to young people who, lacking sufficient guidance from other sources, resort to such publications.⁵⁷ Indeed the narrator is honest enough to admit “there are some situations of the human mind in which good sense has very little power” (239). Fanny Burney may be a more reliable prophet of the married condition than Ann Radcliffe, but there are times in life when the tigers of wrath strike a more urgent note than the horses of instruction.

The novel is positive, too, about Catherine’s powers of understanding, though they have not benefited from tutelage at an Oxford college. Back at home, and walking with her mother to visit the Allens, Catherine reflects on the changes a season has brought about:

It was not three months ago since, wild with joyful expectation, she had there run backwards and forwards some ten times a-day, with an heart light, gay, and independent; looking forward to pleasures untasted and unalloyed, and free from the apprehension of evil as from the knowledge of it. Three months ago had seen her all this; and now, how altered a being did she return! (237)

This is understanding, of a rational and reflective kind—and it is true. But she found out something by other means, and so changed not only her life but her future husband’s, too. Henry’s self-assurance deceived him: marriage is not necessarily a matter of male choice and female refusal, for she chose him and he refused her at first, as the narrator records:

I must confess that his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude, or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought. It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of an heroine’s dignity; but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own. (243)

"What breadth, what beauty and power of human nature and development there must be in a woman," Alexander Herzen concluded,⁵⁸ "to get over all the palisades, all the fences, within which she is held captive!"

James Cook University

NOTES

- 1 *Jane Austen: Northanger Abbey and Persuasion: A Casebook*, ed. B. C. Southam (London: Macmillan, 1976), 60.
- 2 See Walter E. Anderson, "From Northanger to Woodston: Catherine's Education to Common Life," *PQ* 63 (1984): 494, 498.
- 3 Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (U. of California Press, 1968), 39.
- 4 Susan Morgan, *In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction* (U. of Chicago Press, 1980), 59.
- 5 A. Walton Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), 59; "the common feelings of common life" is from *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 5 vols., 3rd ed. (Oxford U. Press, 1933), *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, 19 (cited below by page references in parenthesis).
- 6 Jan Fergus, *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel: Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 11, italics added.
- 7 Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (Oxford U. Press, 1939), 64, 59. (My title comes from a remark made on p. 62: "The pleasure of surprise is rare in burlesque.")
- 8 Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1971), 84-85.
- 9 Tara Ghosal Wallace, "Northanger Abbey and the Limits of Parody," *Studies in the Novel* 20 (1988): 262.
- 10 Andrew Wright, *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1953), 102.
- 11 Claudia Johnson, "Introduction," in Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon*, ed. James Kinsley and John Davie (Oxford U. Press, 2003), ix.

- 12 Carole Gerster, "Rereading Jane Austen: Dialogic Feminism in *Northanger Abbey*," in *A Companion to Jane Austen Studies*, eds. Laura Conner Lambdin and Robert Thomas Lambdin (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 115, 116, 117.
- 13 Elspeth Knights, "'The Library, of Course, Afforded Everything': Jane Austen's Representation of Women Readers," *English* 50 (2001): 35.
- 14 Johnson, "Introduction," vii.
- 15 Nick Pici, "A Heroine's Visions Undermined: Expectation, Disillusionment, and Initiation in *Northanger Abbey*," *Persuasions* 20 (1998): 38.
- 16 Johnson, "Introduction," xiv-xv.
- 17 Litz, 62, 61.
- 18 Fergus, 31. (Fergus alludes to Henry Tilney's breaking a promise to read the novel to his sister: see Chapter 14.)
- 19 It has been noticed before, I think, that the apparently trite apothegms from Pope, Gray, Thompson, and the rest, trotted out in Chapter 1 as constituting the basis of Catherine's moral education, are all relevant to the narrative as a whole. The allusions can be decoded as follows: the Pope is applicable to Isabella; the Gray and *Othello* to Catherine; the Thompson to Henry; the *Twelfth Night* to Eleanor (who waits so long to be married); and the *Measure for Measure* to the novel in its entirety.
- 20 Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford U. Press, 1980), 226 (cited below by page references in parenthesis). Pace Jan Fergus, significant features of the novel suggest that Austen had this chapter in mind in working on *Northanger Abbey*. In it the heroine has trouble with recalcitrant furniture much as Catherine does at Northanger, and Emily becomes fascinated by a portrait which she resolves to visit alone on a more convenient occasion. If that is not enough, the chapter opens: "Emily was recalled from a kind of slumber, into which she had, at length, sunk, by a quick knocking at her chamber door." Her maid tells her: "'Here is a fine bustle below stairs. . . .'" These are the circumstances in which Eleanor Tilney reports her father's decision to evict Catherine at the climax of Austen's novel.
- 21 Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens* (Cambridge U. Press, 1992), 23.
- 22 Eventually Emily lifts the veil to uncover what appears to be the corpse of Signora Laurentini but is in fact—we are informed at the conclusion of the novel—only a nondescript waxen effigy, placed in the wall for religious meditation and penance.
- 23 Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, trans. Constance Garnett, rev. Henry Higgs, 4 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), 2:830-31.
- 24 Herzen is not expressing a uniquely Russian or radical point of view. Indeed his comments are relevant precisely because they indicate the pervasiveness and ubiq-

uity of such behaviour to girls in European culture. "For the Victorians," according to Helena Michie, the sexual act was "often perceived as a crisis in the integrity of the body": a "climactic transformation in which men, and especially women, were thought to become different people after the imagined sexual apotheosis accompanying marriage." See "Under Victorian Skins: The Bodies Beneath" in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999), 420. "The world of sex was to become, in the eighteenth century, a world of terror for children," writes J. H. Plumb (in somewhat overstated terms, to be sure), "and one which was to create appalling guilt and anxiety." For this citation see J. H. Plumb, "The New World of Children in Eighteenth-Century England," *Past and Present* 67 (1975): 92.

- 25 Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Loose Hints upon Education, Chiefly Concerning the Culture of the Heart* (Edinburgh, 1781), 221. The mysteries surrounding the "new appetites and desires" Kames speaks of are not solely to do with the sexual act as such. Boys and girls brought up in late eighteenth-century Wiltshire led sheltered lives, no doubt; but they could hardly avoid seeing things happen between animals in farmyards, fields, and country lanes. It is the social and personal context surrounding such things that creates "guilt and anxiety."
- 26 Mrs [Hester] Chapone, *Letter to a New-Married Lady* (London, 1777), 12-13.
- 27 Mrs [Hester] Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind: Addressed to a Young Lady* (Dublin, 1773), 114-15.
- 28 See Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford U. Press, 1995), 125: *Udolpho* "owed its vast popularity across Europe to its encompassing emotional power—its paradigmatic role in what one writer has called 'the fabrication of romantic sensitivity.'"
- 29 Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (Oxford U. Press, 2002), 118.
- 30 See Clara Reeve, *Plans of Education: With Remarks on the Systems of Other Writers* (London, 1792), 197, where the fictional Mrs Darnford advises Lady A. on raising daughters: "As the child approaches womanhood, it is of the utmost consequence, that the parent should obtain her friendship and confidence, that she should pour out the most secret thoughts of her heart into the bosom of her parent: When this charming friendship is established, the maiden will seek for no other confidant [sic]; and thus a number of dangers incident to this critical period of life, will be avoided." (Mrs Darnford also warns of the dangers when such girls are introduced to "books above their years and understandings" (ibid. 195).
- 31 Mary Waldron, *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time* (Cambridge U. Press, 1999), 28.
- 32 Catherine's first public ball is an unpleasant and unfamiliar ritual—"she was tired of being continually pressed against by people, the generality of whose faces possessed nothing to interest, and with all of whom she was so wholly unacquainted, that she could not relieve the irksomeness of imprisonment by the exchange of a syllable with any of her fellow captives" (21-22)—yet she is flattered when "in her own hearing, two gentlemen pronounced her to be a pretty girl" (24).

- 33 Eleanor and Isabella are mighty opposites in the novel's solar system and are named accordingly: the first after the English king Henry II's heroic wife Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204), the second after the first queen of unified Spain, Isabella of Castile (1451-1504).
- 34 Fergus, 12.
- 35 Duckworth, 92.
- 36 Eleanor Ty, "Catherine's Real and Imagined Fears: What Happens to Female Bodies in Gothic Castles," *Persuasions* 20 (1998): 256.
- 37 Waldron, 30-1.
- 38 Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 49: "if that sounds far-fetched and perverse just let me suggest that there were more mysteries and possible problems and terrors in the transition from virginity to marriage. . . for a young girl such as Jane Austen was writing about than in *Udolpho* or any other novel, 'Gothic' or not, which Catherine may have read."
- 39 Edward Neill, "The Secret of *Northanger Abbey*," *Essays in Criticism* 47: 1 (1997): 26. "Gothic fantasy, which is mocked and (as it were) extirpated from 'respectable' consciousness, encodes both the sexuality which is the one theme of the novel, as well as the underlying truth for Catherine on what we come to see as her entry into experience."
- 40 This simple ambiguity is one Austen used again to similar effect in Chapter 7 of *Persuasion*. "It is over! it is over!" the heroine says to herself having met her old lover Wentworth for the first time after eight years' intermission: by "it" meaning both the present embarrassing encounter and the past love-affair, and pointing to both relief and sadness.
- 41 Avrom Fleishman, "The Socialization of Catherine Morland," *ELH* 41 (1974): 649-67.
- 42 Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Harvard U. Press, 1972), 82.
- 43 Anderson, 498.
- 44 Katrin Ristok Burlin, "'The Pen of the Contriver': The Four Fictions of *Northanger Abbey*," in *Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. John Halperin (Cambridge U. Press, 1975), 91.
- 45 Fergus, 14.
- 46 Morgan, 52-53. "There is a sense," writes Juliet McMaster "in which Catherine plays Galatea to Tilney's Pygmalion." ("Clothing the Thought in Word: The Speakers of *Northanger Abbey*," *Persuasions* 20 [1998]: 215.)
- 47 Neill, 16 (*italics added*).

- 48 A crucial moment in *Emma* (Volume 3, Chapter 2) is one where the heroine asks Knightley to ask her to dance: "you know," she says, "we are not really so much brother and sister as to make it at all improper." To which he replies: "Brother and sister! no, indeed." So much for men having the advantage of choice and women having only the power of refusal.
- 49 Sheila J. Kindred, "From Puppet to Person: The Development of Catherine's Character in the Bath Chapters of *Northanger Abbey*," *Persuasions* 20 (1998): 196.
- 50 See George Justice, "*Northanger Abbey* as Anti-Courtship Novel," *Persuasions* 20 (1998): 185-95. "Austen turns the tables on patterns of courtship through her presentation of Catherine's ironic winning of Henry's sincere admiration" (187); "Henry requires education as much as Catherine does" (191); "Catherine is not the only person brought to a new level of understanding at this [climactic] point in the novel" (192). And see Knights, 26: "In *Northanger Abbey*, as in all Jane Austen's novels, the male mentor can be fallible and the pedagogic process, it is subtly implied, is mutual."
- 51 Fergus, 16. For her it follows that *Northanger Abbey* "is simply comic and lacks most of the moral concerns and discriminations of the other Austen novels"; consequently, the novel is "not central to Jane Austen's concerns or achievements" (14, 38).
- 52 See Jocelyn Harris, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* (Cambridge U. Press, 1989), 25, and Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1983), 90.
- 53 Tanner, 58.
- 54 Kindred, 196.
- 55 Roger Gard, *Jane Austen's Novels: The Art of Clarity* (Yale U. Press, 1992), 56-57.
- 56 Harris, 24.
- 57 Evidence of Austen's tolerant, even enthusiastic, attitude to the vitality of young people is provided in abundance by her correspondence of 1814-17 with her niece, Fanny Knight (born 1793). "You are the Paragon," she wrote on 20 Feb. 1817, "of all that is Silly & Sensible, common-place and eccentric, Sad & Lively, Provoking and Interesting. — Who can keep pace with the fluctuations of your Fancy, the Capprizios of your Taste, the Contradictions of your Feelings? You are so odd! — & all the time, so perfectly natural — so peculiar in yourself, & yet so like everybody else! — It is very, very gratifying to me to know you so intimately." "I shall hate you," she concludes, "when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal & maternal affections." For this citation see *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd ed. (Oxford U. Press, 1995), 328-29.
- 58 Herzen, 832.