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# *Northanger Abbey*

JANE AUSTEN



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

# NORTHANGER ABBEY

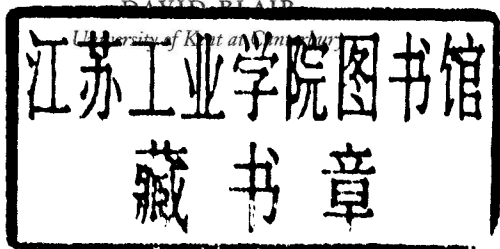
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Jane Austen

Introduction and Notes by

DAVID BLAIR

*University of Kent at Canterbury*



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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write broad-ranging, jargon-free Introductions and to provide Notes that would assist the understanding of our readers, rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

KEITH CARABINE  
*General Adviser*

## INTRODUCTION

*Northanger Abbey* is in some respects the Cinderella among Jane Austen's novels. The first of her mature works to be completed, it often has had to share chapter-space with her juvenilia in book-length studies of Austen. In its own time, however, it did not appear in print until 1818, the year after its author's death, when it appeared along with her last novel, *Persuasion*, each of them occupying two volumes of a four-volume package.

Even by 1816, when Austen wrote her short 'Advertisement by the Authoress' in anticipation of its publication, the novel had fallen prey to the passing of time and the accompanying changes to 'places, manners, books and opinions'. Of all her novels it is the one which is most closely and busily engaged with the language, styles and reading habits of the moment at which it is set and yet at the time of its appearance the world was preoccupied with different fashions and different books. By 1818 Walter Scott had followed the literary

sensation occasioned by his *Waverley* (1814) with a rapid succession of other novels set amid the colourful history and landscapes of Scotland, all eagerly seized on and dissected. In 1818 Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein*. The scene of young women in the fashions of a previous generation (the novel is also very engaged with the details of female dress) discussing the 'horrid novels' of the 1790s as the latest thing must have seemed slightly *passé* towards the end of the second decade of the new century.

From that point on, it has been the novel's fate to be read by successive generations who have not read the books to which its author and its characters make reference. Although the most prominent of these, Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, has been more read and commented on in the last two decades of the twentieth century than at any time since the start of the nineteenth, its renewed prominence has been largely due to the academic revaluation of Gothic fiction and women's writing. On university courses it is more likely, as a result, that *Northanger Abbey* may be studied alongside *Udolpho*, whereas even thirty years ago this was exceedingly unlikely. Austen's currency, however, extends well beyond the academy and the great majority of *Northanger Abbey*'s readers, inside and outside universities, including the majority of users of this edition, must still glimpse the dense literary culture on which the novel is predicated through the dark glass of Austen's irony without knowing it at first hand.

Here part of the responsibilities of the provider of a commentary and notes lies. In the Notes to this edition I have tried to go further than other providers in elaborating the overt references to other writers and texts in *Northanger Abbey*. I have also gone further in illuminating the covert allusions to novels by Radcliffe other than *Udolpho*, which are considerable in the later part of the novel. The nature of Austen's irony, however, means that the force of such allusions, and indeed the collective force of the novel's engagement with other literature is not by any means straightforward. Even well-informed readers, therefore, are likely to struggle to identify what the relationship between Austen's novel and these other texts is. To this issue I shall return later in this Introduction.

## 2

The compositional history of *Northanger Abbey* is unclear. Austen refers to it as having been completed for publication in 1803, but her sister Cassandra indicated that it was written in 1797–8. Of other novels mentioned in the course of *Northanger Abbey*, the latest, *Belinda*

by Burney (see p. 20 and note), was published in 1801. This must indicate at least that details were being revised and updated until then. The novel was not at this stage called *Northanger Abbey*, but *Susan* Crosby & Co., the prospective publishers, had bought the manuscript for ten pounds, announced its forthcoming publication under this title, but for reasons unknown did not go ahead. Austen did not pursue the matter until April 1809 when she wrote a terse letter to Crosby offering to provide him with another manuscript if by chance he had lost the original. It was not until 1816, however, that the manuscript and copyright were finally recovered. How far Austen then revised the novel for its later publication cannot be ascertained. She needed to change the heroine's and the novel's name because there had appeared in 1809 another novel entitled *Susan*; but the only other sign of late revision appears to be one identifiable instance of her updating the local topography of Bath (see Note 38).

*Susan*, so-titled, was more overtly aligned with the 'Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda' genre of novel defended by Austen on pp. 19-20, although the homeliness of the name perhaps made its own announcement of difference: it is striking that Isabella Thorpe has a four-syllable name ending in 'a' and is therefore perhaps qualified by her name as well as her (false) sentiments to give Catherine 'a remembrance of all the heroines of her acquaintance' (p. 77). Austen's decision not to retitle the novel after its renamed heroine, however, is interesting. In the Gothic novel titles more frequently allude to locations rather than to characters, and so the relationship with the Gothic novel, is more headlined in *Northanger Abbey* than it would have been in *Susan* or *Catherine*.

The core of the novel, however titled, and whatever its allusions to Gothic, is the story of 'a young woman's entrance into the world', to borrow the subtitle of another of Burney's novels, *Evelina* (1778); or, in Austen's phrase, her 'entrée into life' (p. 8). This was the essential subject of almost all the women's novels of the period, even in their way the Gothic ones, although novelists might differ on how they defined 'the world' – and, for that matter, on their models of young womanhood. Austen's model is endowed with fewer accomplishments and fewer pretensions than most, as she makes clear from the first sentence. The novelist's interest in her, however, ends where the career of a heroine characteristically ends, in marriage, and with it her placement at a new point of stasis in 'the world'. Catherine's 'entrée' takes her from parental home to marital home, from daughter to wife: the rest is silence. In Catherine's case she marries the first man she dances with, which is pretty good going for a heroine whose ordinariness might arguably disqualify her from being one at all; and, as Austen points out

in her final paragraph, this is accomplished in less than a year.

This spares Catherine countless agonies of uncertainty about her own feelings and those of multiple choice – she does not even notice when John Thorpe, the only other candidate, announces his candidacy with sublime ineptitude in Chapter 15. It also spares the reader a third or fourth volume: Burney's *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782 – see p. 20) and *Camilla, or A Picture of Youth* (1796 – see p. 20 and p. 28) both ran to five. In the absence of prolonged courtships, labyrinthine uncertainties and multiple setbacks, then, *Northanger Abbey* has a clarity of narrative line and an economy of design. At the climax of the novel occur two reverses: the exposure to Henry of Catherine's suspicions about his father, and – more calamitous – the moment when 'the world' which Catherine has entered suddenly turns nasty and for no apparent reason she is unceremoniously expelled from Northanger Abbey and sent back to the vicarage in Fullerton whence she had set out. This is a spectacularly unheroic débâcle, as Austen points out (p. 152). It is also a spectacular and painful reminder that the world is a more complex, devious and dangerous place than Catherine's brief exposure to it has equipped her to anticipate. It shows that, for all her natural modesty and generosity of feeling, as 'a young woman' at large in 'the world' she plays a more problematic role than her own feelings and predispositions can determine.

'Mystery' is an element in this novel as well as in Radcliffe's, and the strand of plotting which culminates in Catherine's ignominious expulsion from Northanger is extremely carefully laid by Austen in a way that only a second or subsequent reading will disclose. Before Catherine has even entered the arena, John Thorpe's invitation to James Morland to spend part of the Christmas vacation from university with his family, which we learn of when their mothers and sisters meet at Bath (p. 16), has been the first step in the cultivation of the Morlands by the Thorpes in the mistaken belief that the Morlands are wealthier than they are. There at Putney, we are later able to infer, Isabella, drawn on by her brother's boastful accounts of his university friend's wealth and status, has got her hooks into James. We learn to decode her arch remarks to Catherine about James before Catherine does (see, for example, p. 23), but we are not allowed as quickly to decode the acquisitive agenda which is being pursued through her 'romantic' attachment to Catherine's brother. Indeed, our knowledge of the relatively modest resources of the Morlands precludes at this stage any such supposition.

The appearance of John himself takes us closer to understanding the Thorpes. When he begins to 'rattle', what we hear is an astonishing

farrago of bragging about horses, carriages and drinking: but this boastful, self-aggrandising energy in Thorpe is in part bluster to disguise insecurities about his own wealth and status. This is, in fact, to be the key to Catherine's later misfortune and to her brother's, whose fate sadly foreshadows her own, courted by Isabella, as she by General Tilney, on the basis of Thorpe's exaggeration of the Morlands' wealth and expectations, and rejected when the truth emerges. This thread in Thorpe's agenda appears enigmatically in his sudden question to Catherine about Mr Allen's wealth and heirs and her relation to him (p. 38), and it is what lies behind his caustic remarks about James not being given enough of an allowance to keep a horse and gig (pp. 55-6), comments 'which Catherine [does] not even endeavour to understand'. The observed conversation between Thorpe and General Tilney at the theatre (p. 60) we later understand to have been a key episode in shaping the latter's misconceptions of Catherine's prospects, and this retrospectively places in a different light the General's solicitous politeness' to Catherine when she rushes into the Tilneys' lodgings (p. 65). It also explains the General's later marked allusions to Mr Allen's property as he shows her round Northanger - Thorpe has clearly passed on his supposition that Catherine is due to inherit the childless couple's fortune.

The consequences of this for Catherine will not be disclosed to her or to the reader until later, but that reversal is foreshadowed in the brilliant scene at the end of Chapter 16 in which Isabella and Mrs Thorpe are confronted with James's real material expectations and have to negotiate their mutual shock and disappointment in front of Catherine. Just before this Austen has given us a privileged glimpse into Isabella's fantasies of social and material advancement (p. 79). It is a rare moment in the novel in which Austen penetrates beyond what is disclosed in the content and inflections of Isabella's conversation to arrive at the deep-rooted needs and desires that drive her social and sexual career:

... by what means their income was to be formed, whether landed property were to be resigned, or funded money made over, was a matter in which her disinterested spirit took no concern. She knew enough to feel secure of an honourable and speedy establishment, and her imagination took a rapid flight over its attendant felicities. She saw herself at the end of a few weeks, the gaze and admiration of every new acquaintance at Fullerton, the envy of every valued old friend at Putney, with a carriage at her command, a new name on her tickets, and a brilliant exhibition of hoop rings on her finger.



'Disinterested' is finely weighted. Isabella is very apt to proclaim the lofty disinterestedness of her love for James, but here Austen's placement of the word both captures that moment of inward self-congratulation (notice the meretricious force of the word 'spirit') while ironically exposing its hollowness: the scope of Isabella's 'disinterest' is contextually confined to an indifference about the source of her anticipated affluence – 'landed properly . . . resigned, or funded money made over'. Even before her disinterestedness is asserted we hear a greedy, almost triumphant pleasure in 'resigned' and 'made over'.

We also see Isabella's desperation here, not just her materialism. The desperation is in part evident in her impatience, her need for 'speed' in gaining her enhanced status. For all her chipper self-assurance, she is trapped and, even at the age of twenty-two, running out of time. If an 'honourable' establishment is unattainable, what kind of 'dishonourable' alternative might she be driven to? In what set of values are her notions of 'honour' in such matters lodged? Desperation also underpins her need to exercise her status through fantasised acts of display, through the need to excite 'admiration' in acquaintances and (even more important) 'envy' in 'valued friends'. The irony of 'valued' points us to a profound, depressing truth: that for Isabella and young women like her friendship functions as an arena for enhanced competitiveness, and the excitement of envy is its highest reward: society is a theatre of war.

While unequivocally portraying Isabella as a snake, Austen allows us to see that she is a product of her society. It is not she who makes it a theatre of war; and her attempts to negotiate the minefields of class, property and gender, while they debase love, friendship and language itself, are a logical, if spiritually derelict, response to her situation. Isabellas and John Thorpes are inevitable, and entry into the world can only properly be accomplished by learning to recognise them. Catherine learns through pain as well as through practice. When she reads Isabella's letter at Northanger in Chapter 27 it is through her brother's pain that she has learned. Although Isabella's 'impudent' attempt to patch up her engagement with James might seem inconsistent – since it is clear that her intended lifestyle cannot be sustained by James's material prospects – there may be a hidden agenda. Frederick Tilney's dumping of her has left her back in her trap, and very possibly even worse situated than before: we may be supposed to infer that Isabella has gone too far in exercising her sexual allure in endeavouring to snare him. Catherine's puzzled, naïve questions to Henry about his brother's conduct in the matter and Henry's guarded replies (pp. 142–3) protectively allowing Catherine to understand it in her own limited terms, may point further towards the unspoken possibility of an opportunistic

adventure on Frederick's part and a bad sexual miscalculation on Isabella's. A rapprochement with the gullible James, the smallness of his expectations notwithstanding, may now be her last hope of an 'honourable establishment'.

The Thorpes, then, are the source of hidden dangers for Catherine as she negotiates the world beyond Fullerton. Less immediately obvious, but more potent, is the threat posed by General Tilney. The logic of his behaviour in the novel, as with Isabella's, is that of self-interest conceived in terms of material wealth and status. In responding to John Thorpe's accounts of Catherine's prospects as he does – that is by whisking Catherine away with the intention of effecting a marriage between her and his younger son – the General is, as Claudia Johnson points out, stealing her away from Thorpe whose intention is to marry her himself (see Select Bibliography – p. 45). His account of her to the General was presumably driven in part by a desire to boast about his own prospective advantages in marrying her. Catherine has been identified as an asset, a commodity. The General's conduct towards Catherine subsequently, as I have already suggested, mirrors Isabella's towards James – solicitous courtship up to the point where the myth of the Morland prospects is exposed, immediately followed by heartless rejection.

Decoding the General is not made easy by Austen at first, in part because, as with Isabella, we are not privy to his adoption of Thorpe's fallacy, and in part because of the instability of Catherine's own perceptions of him and her own susceptibility to error. At Northanger, Catherine, the innocent subject of his fiction, makes him the subject of her own. He is not, however, so innocent; and in projecting on to the General the Radcliffean paradigms of the Gothic villain, Catherine is extrapolating from her own authentic responses to him and to the dark undercurrents of the Northanger milieu over which he presides. Her half-acknowledged anxieties about him have in fact begun considerably earlier than the journey to Northanger and have formed another strand in the narrative of Catherine's struggle to decode the complex personal and social semiotics of the world beyond Fullerton. In Chapter 16, when the eagerly-awaited dinner at the Tilneys' Milsom Street house falls flat, Catherine characteristically suppresses the conscious attachment of blame to the General:

. . . 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 – in spite of his thanks, invitations, and compliments – it had been a release to get away

from him. It puzzled her to account for all this. It could not be General Tilney's fault. That he was perfectly agreeable and good-natured, and altogether a very charming man, did not admit of a doubt, for he was tall and handsome, and Henry's father. *He* could not be accountable for his children's want of spirits, or for her want of enjoyment in his company. The former she hoped at last might have been accidental and the latter she could only attribute to her own stupidity. [p. 82]

Here we see Catherine's characteristic mistrust of her own intuitions and her struggle with language and logic. Her reported thought processes are reinforced with the language and logic of conventional social judgements ('perfectly agreeable. . . altogether a very charming man, for he was tall and handsome') which is being made to block the troublesome current of her own misgivings. This tendency to self-censorship in Catherine runs deep. It inhibits her conscious recognition of Isabella's character, for all the daily evidence of her shallowness and inconsistency, and here it inhibits her willingness to acknowledge her feelings about the General. She has to accommodate these feelings to an idea of what she *ought* to feel.

The reader may – certainly on a second reading – see more than Catherine does of the nature of the General's conduct during the remainder of the Bath half of the novel and on the journey to Northanger. Eleanor's 'embarrassed manner' as she broaches with Catherine the possibility of her going to Northanger with them (pp. 88–9) discloses that, whatever her own feelings of friendship to Catherine may be, she is being forced to act as her father's stooge in this instance, struggling in the circumstances to bring an air of candour and authenticity to her solicitation to Catherine. His intrusion before she has even managed to play her part and his pre-emptive rehearsal of the invitation while attributing the 'bold wish' to Eleanor leave the latter to the exercise of 'secondary civilities'. The General's speech here is, besides, larded with name-dropping ('some of my very old friends') and odious false diffidence ('we can tempt you neither by amusement nor splendour, for our mode of living . . . is plain and unpretending'). On the journey into Gloucestershire, Catherine herself is conscious of his over-solicitousness and peremptory manner while still, as at the Milsom Street dinner, inhibited by her rehearsal of a prefabricated social assessment of him couched in an off-the-peg idiom ('so charming a man' [p. 99]).

Catherine's willingness to suppose the General charming does not survive long once she is at Northanger. Here Austen unleashes the General among his material possessions and signifiers of status to

devastating effect. It starts with the breakfast china – ‘an old set purchased two years ago’ (p. 113) – and his set-piece on native English versus German or French teacups, and proceeds through the General’s guided tour of the exterior of his house and grounds, accompanied by his false professions of modesty and his tireless litany of self-satisfaction. The modernity and fashionability of the interior fittings and furnishings, detailed in the General’s running commentary, may displease Catherine by being ‘not-Gothic’; but Austen is subtly directing the reader’s attention to the shallow, busy, ostentatious materialism of the General. In this display, and perhaps most damningly in his reminders of its ‘costliness’, we see that the lavish trappings of grand living are in the General unaccompanied by that deeper signifier of English gentility the unassuming, unselfconscious ease with which those domestic and material endowments are treated. Northanger Abbey may have been in the Tilney family since the reign of Henry VIII but the General has the manner of a *nouveau-riche* – of a Thorpe who has won the Lottery. In Tony Tanner’s unsparing formulation, he is ‘a most unheroic, monomaniacal, greedy, ruthless, dehumanised consumer-acquisitor’ (Tanner, p. 65). What in John Thorpe appears as youthful, brash, jaunty boastfulness has, in General Tilney, hardened into an intense, smug, essentially vulgar and tyrannical self-importance. It also has that competitive edge which is one of the Thorpe children’s characteristics: when told by Catherine that Mr Allen has ‘only one small hot-house’, his insincere response – ‘“He is a happy man!”’ – is accompanied by ‘a look of very happy contempt’ (p. 115).

We see also the domineering nature of the General’s relationships with his children and his guest. The timing of the morning walk, the dispute with Eleanor over the preferred route to the new tea-house and the subsequent arrangements for the visit to Henry’s house at Woodston all alert us further to the General’s patriarchal control and to his means of imposing it – bullying others by hypocritically appearing to consult them only to pre-empt the result of the pseudo-consultative process. He is also hostile to female space and female priorities: this is shown in the matter of the walk and also in his dragging Catherine through the most oppressively male spaces in the house – the billiard room, his own private apartment, and the dark little room, owning Henry’s authority, and strewn with his litter of books, guns, and greatcoats’ (p. 118) – while denying the ‘female’ spaces that Catherine is drawn to. Eleanor is right to be embarrassed by her father (p. 114): even if Catherine still cannot entirely decode the situation she none the less experiences the intuitive unease of a guest caught in a family situation fraught with unspoken tensions.

Her first morning's experience of the General on his home turf, narrated in Chapter 22, is sufficient to bring Catherine to a point where she 'attempt[s] no longer to hide from herself the nature of the feelings which . . . he had previously excited' (p. 117). 'Terror and dislike' have hardened into 'absolute aversion', and at the same time she begins to construct her suppositions about the fate of the late Mrs Tilney. Her reading of Gothic novels has not created her perceptions of General Tilney. Rather, it has begun to provide a vocabulary and narrative syntax through which to accommodate and develop those perceptions, just as an annoyance at the betrayal of Gothicity was her own way of registering her adverse reaction to the ostentatious fashionability of Northanger and its trappings. What her suppressed narrative of the General's 'Gothic' career as a wife-murderer and/or wife-incarcerator results from, then, is in part the collapse of those modes of self-censorship which have previously blurred her view of him. To understand the significance of the Gothic novel as the model for this extrapolated narrative we need to go back to consider the novel's broader engagement with other forms of literary narrative.

## 3

The first texts we see in *Northanger Abbey* (p. 5) are fragments, a few lines transcribed or mistranscribed from Pope, Gray, Thomson and Shakespeare, snippets without a context. The line from Pope comes from a poem about the suicide of a woman disowned by her family because of her love for an 'unsuitable' man. Gray's poem meditates on death and on the dignified futility of the unrecorded lives of the rural poor. Thomson's celebrates minutely the full cycle of the natural year and runs to more than 5,400 lines. The quotations from Shakespeare are from a tragedy about married jealousy ending in murder and suicide; a play about power, sexuality and corruption; and a comedy dealing with love, sexual identity, class-tensions and madness. A heroine's memory is run on 'serviceable' crumbs falling from great but discarded narratives. The novel from the start is taking a sceptical, ironic look at ways of reading – at what readers read *for*, at what they take away and at what they leave behind. The assembling of a portfolio of quotations looks a pitiful and disabling activity if you think outwards to the books from which they have come. The way of reading they represent encourages scrutiny of the trees rather than the wood – or perhaps of the twigs and branches rather than the trees, and abridgers and compilers of extracts later draw Austen's open deprecation (p. 20).

Ways of reading are determined by culture, by class and by gender. Novels, Gothic and otherwise, themselves make their entrance into a world in which these determinants have produced deep-lying competition among different readerships, and in which reviewers patrol the frontiers. Reading, like speech, is one of the means by which individual positions and allegiances in that world are disclosed. The fictional young lady at the end of Chapter 5 (p. 20) would proudly admit to be reading *The Spectator* but experiences 'momentary shame' at being found reading a novel. The General retires to pore over political pamphlets (p. 121); Mrs Morland reads and rereads *Sir Charles Grandison* (p. 22 and note) and hoards old copies of *The Mirror* (p. 158 and note); John Thorpe finds readable only novels written by male authors (pp. 27-8 and notes); Mrs Allen appears to read nothing at all. Part of Henry Tilney's 'cleverness' and authority derives from the fact that his reading cuts across categories. He has read *The Mysteries of Udolpho* '[his] hair standing on end the whole time' (p. 68) and Radcliffe's other work; he has read Gilpin's work on landscape and painting (p. 71 and note); he has read the work of (conservative) writers on language and rhetoric (p. 69 and note); and he has read history.

About aesthetic and linguistic theory Catherine is utterly ignorant. About history she is unenthusiastic:

'I read it . . . as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. The speeches that are put into the heroes' mouths, their thoughts and designs – the chief of all this must be invention, and invention is what delights me in other books.' [p. 69]

It is a remark, like some of Catherine's others in the novel (e.g. 'I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible' , p. 84), which serves more purposes than Catherine intends. Looked at in one way her complaint is that of someone of no great intellect or analytic ability who is unable or unwilling to interest herself much in whatever does not bear upon her immediate situation as a young girl of her time and tastes; of someone who confuses 'instruction' with 'torment' and declines to reconfigure stories' (pestilences, the wars of popes) into 'History'. Catherine is ill equipped to be a romantic heroine and is even worse equipped to be a bluestocking heroine.

On another level this expresses not just Catherine's own callowness but reflects on the whole tendency of her society to create precisely the

kind of young woman she is – ill-informed, anti-intellectual, trivial and entrapped within a limited and devalued agenda of femininity. Those may seem strong terms to apply to Austen's representation of women, but would be acknowledged by Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* had been published in 1792. To read Wollstonecraft's denunciation of the education of women and the constructs of gender on which it is predicated can be instructive because what she is describing is substantially the same world as Austen lived in and represents in her novels, and recognisably so, albeit the polemical voice in Wollstonecraft sounds very different from Austen's more sidelong, ironic mode:

... the instruction which women have hitherto received has only tended, with the constitution of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire – mere propagators of fools! ... in aiming to accomplish them, without cultivating their understandings, they are taken out of the sphere of duties, and made ridiculous and useless when their short-lived bloom of beauty is over. . .<sup>1</sup>

Wollstonecraft herself makes Austen's point about the reading of history –

... confined to trivial employments, they [women] naturally imbibe opinions which the only kind of reading calculated to interest an innocent frivolous mind inspires. Unable to grasp anything great, is it surprising that they find the reading of history a very dry task, and disquisitions addressed to the understanding intolerably tedious, and almost unintelligible? Thus they are necessarily dependent on the novel for amusement.<sup>2</sup>

If the presence of Eleanor in *Northanger Abbey* signifies that this is not an inevitable result, then the presence in the novel of the Thorpe sisters from her own generation and Mrs Allen from her parents' show what the miseducation of women can produce when allied to the economic structures and imperatives of 'civil society'. Eleanor and Isabella are thus competing role-models, calling to Catherine with different kinds of female voice and energy, while Mrs Allen represents a 'numerous class of females' who, their youth past and long settled in their relocation as respectable wives, now have 'neither beauty, genius, accomplishments, nor manner' (p. 8).

1 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Miriam Kramnick, Harmondsworth 1975, p. 83

2 Ibid., p. 306

However, Austen makes it clear that Catherine's lack of any intellectual pretensions and sophistication is one of the factors that make her attractive to Henry. In practical terms – to Wollstonecraft's indignation – female stupidity enjoys social and sexual currency whatever that may say about men in general and Henry in particular. Catherine is not going to be used by her author to tilt futilely at the status quo – she is not destined to be a feminist heroine either: that way martyrdom lies, as it does for Maria Venables, the heroine of Wollstonecraft's own unfinished novel *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798). A young woman like Catherine makes a young man like Henry feel an effortless superiority which is inseparable from the fondness with which he appears genuinely to regard her. It assures him of her acknowledgement of his greater power along with his greater knowledge. Austen directs us to Burney's *Camilla* again for further testimony to the advantages of female 'imbecility' and 'ignorance' (p. 71 and note), with some ironic comments gesturing precisely towards what this may say about men.

On another level still, Austen allows Catherine's comment on history to be unintentionally penetrating. Her lack of interest in it is not just because of her own lack of intellectual stamina or that of under-educated women in general, but because history is an entrenched, and for her repellently, male form of narrative. It is the history of men written by men: Caractacus, Agricola and Alfred, as rendered by Mr Hume and Mr Robertson (see p. 70 and notes). Women readers at the end of the twentieth century are still making this point about certain kinds of history, and the construction and validation of 'women's history' as an area of research and writing has been a significant, if still only partial, victory for intellectual feminism. In 1800 there is no women's history. What history narrates – war, politics, religious conflict – are fields in which women have always been marginalised. The fields in which they have not been marginalised are not considered the materials of history: it has taken most of the intervening two hundred years for these suppressed histories to begin to be written.

Novels for readers like Catherine are compelling because they represent a female-centred form of narrative. If history is by men and about men – and contains its own elements of 'invention' – then novels, on the contrary – although not the kind read by John Thorpe – can be by and about women, and whether responsibly or meretriciously, they are histories of women's aspirations and fears. We can see the former in the alignment between Isabella's fantasies of returning to Putney with her new cards and rings (p. 79) and Austen's remarks on how Catherine might have made a conventionally heroic return home (p. 152): the novel of the triumphant return can function for Isabella as



a fantasised history of her own aspirations. The latter is apparent from the way in which Catherine reconfigures her real insecurities and discomforts at Northanger into Gothic narratives.

With regard to the first part of this, which occurs on Catherine's first night at Northanger and centres on the chest in her bedroom, Roger Gard is one of a number of commentators who dislike this episode: it is, he complains, 'too stupid' (Gard, p. 58). It is stupid, although Claudia Johnson is inclined to lay much of the blame at Henry's door for misusing his authority over Catherine's mind in his mischievous Gothic pastiche as they approach the Abbey (Johnson, p. 39). It stems, however, from a need to understand where she is, to decode unfamiliar surroundings and to take some kind of imaginative possession of the space she occupies. Her first night as a guest in the family home of the man on whom her heart is set is an occasion of destabilisation and natural anxiety. She seeks privileged access to unofficial information and ironically she finds precisely this but is unable to read it because it is part of a different narrative from the one she is trained to recognise. The papers in the chest, itemising articles of male attire and male accessories, are the legacy of a visit by Eleanor's admirer and soon-to-be husband (p. 165), whom she never at any stage mentions to Catherine; here is an undisclosed history of a different kind from the one Catherine anticipates. Unaware of the difference between an abbey in a Radcliffe novel set in sixteenth-century France and a residential abbey in central England in 1800, she is unaware also of the different kinds of suppressed narrative they might contain. She does not yet see what this Abbey is and why it is as it is. History might have got her started if she could be bothered to read and absorb it: but alas she would have to have read about the quarrel between a king (Henry VIII) and a pope (Clement VII). Unable to locate Northanger in a validating historical narrative, she falls back on the Gothic narratives that she does possess, filtered through Henry's reinforcement of them. These narratives also offer to empower her; and her actions, helped by Austen's authorial voice in conducting the episode, temporarily blur the boundaries between the actual Catherine and a Catherine reinvented by a Gothic authoress to be the heroine of something other than just her own life.

It is a different application of Gothic narrative which underpins her misconceptions about the General, and a different novel by Radcliffe which is invoked (see Note 95). It is not driven by the imaginative reinvention of herself as Gothic heroine, as was the episode of the chest. Initiated, as I have already suggested, by her (quite justified) fear of the General and her experience of him as a boor, a chauvinist and a bully, it gets much closer to the truth. The Gothic villain with whom Catherine