

Beyond Gothic Freedom and Limitation: Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* as an Expansion of Female Independence

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Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney parody the one-dimensional characterization found in Gothic novel convention. Despite constantly mocking the Gothic tradition the narrative voice in *Northanger Abbey* (1817) directly defends the Gothic novel. Considering the social context from which she was writing, Jane Austen may have perceived the Gothic vehicle as both an opportunity to create freedom for women and something that restricted the growing independence of women. Austen both defends and defies the typical Gothic narrative in *Northanger Abbey*, breaking gender stereotypes and challenging the accepted view of romance in her era. By both espousing and ridiculing the genre, Austen accesses the freedoms allowed by the Gothic tradition while advancing her own definition of romance.

Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey* is a terrible failure at being the Gothic-style heroine, and Austen emphasizes Catherine's deviation from the Gothic tradition from the first chapter. While "the traditional female Gothic heroines are physically weak women typically being terrorized by a ghostly figure within the home" (Guillard 16), Catherine's character contradicts what the reader expects: she is a tomboy who prefers "cricket ... to dolls" (Austen 37). Critics have "codified the female Gothic plot as an orphaned heroine in search of an absent mother, pursued by a feudal (patriarchal) father" (Miles 43), but Catherine's parental figures also contradict the Gothic stereotype. Her father is respectable and her mother is not only even-tempered, but has also survived the hazards of giving birth to ten children.

In addition to lacking the dramatic family life essential to a

typical Gothic heroine, Catherine lacks talent. She cannot write sonnets, play the pianoforte, nor draw well enough to “sketch her lover’s profile” (Austen 41). Likewise, Catherine’s love interest, Henry Tilney, does little to satisfy the characteristics of the “brooding or scowling but always devilishly handsome” male lead (Guillard 3). Instead, Tilney is good-natured and almost silly. In their first meeting, Catherine is hardly able to take Tilney seriously, particularly when he breaks from her expectations of a gentleman in order to banter with Mrs. Allen about fashion (Austen 51).

Catherine and Henry do more than deviate from the Gothic tradition, however, as they also bend the gender stereotypes that restricted social behavior in the Regency era. This is perhaps displayed most obviously in the character of Tilney, who unabashedly displays a familiarity with muslin upon his first meeting with Catherine (51). While Catherine was similarly able to break these gender expectations as a child, she eventually concedes to them as an adult; at fifteen she begins to pay more attention to her appearance and “her love of dirt gave way to an inclination for finery” (Austen 39). Catherine has to equip herself with the “superficial literary education and techniques of personal grooming that constitute gender identity ... and provide passport to the social interactions of the marriage market” (Clery 159). By rejecting her own “masculine” tendencies, Catherine displays the rigid expectations by which women were expected to abide in order to maintain their “femininity.”

While prominent moral voices, like James Fordyce in his book *Sermons to Young Women*, espoused the virtues of “meekness,” “sobriety,” and “modesty” as essentially feminine (Grogan vii–x), in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen emphasizes instead the importance of establishing reason and morality in both sexes. This is visible in the changes in Catherine’s disposition that lead to her “coming of age.” She is able to make moral judgments on the actions of men despite

external influences pressuring her to come to alternate conclusions: first she turns down Mr. Thorpe's proposal despite the protests of her closest friend, Isabella (150), then she openly condemns the behaviour of Captain Tilney to his brother despite Henry's defense of his actions (211). After all she has experienced since leaving her family home, Catherine matures enough to calmly and independently navigate her journey home from Northanger when expelled from the Abbey in the middle of the night. Passing up the opportunity to emphasize General Tilney as a Gothic villain, Austen instead uses the situation to reveal Catherine's growing maturity; Mrs. Morland rationally points out that it is "always good for young people to be put upon exerting themselves" and the journey must have "forced [Catherine] to have [her] wits about [her]" (226).

In a feminist context, Evans explains that Austen "gives to women a capacity for individual, adult, moral choice and perception, she values the part that women play in family and domestic life ... and she portrays women as acting ... independently of men and patriarchal interests" (314). While the Gothic novel may have created some freedom of action for female authors and main characters, Austen moves beyond action by valuing the role of women in society and their capability as individuals. In *Northanger Abbey*, this means focusing on Catherine's maturation into a rational, competent being, rather than on specific moments of victimization and romance.

While Austen often uses the typical Gothic heroine as a humorous foil to her own narrative, she does not aim to dismiss the genre as a whole. While describing the role of novels in the development of Catherine and Isabella's friendship, Austen allows her narrator to intrude with a defense of the novel: "Alas! If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard?... Let us not desert one an-

other; we are an injured body” (59). As a female author during the Regency era, Austen would likely have understood just how quickly a female writer became the subject of criticism. In her era, being an authoress was a perilous undertaking: “women were attacked for having the temerity to write without having the necessary learning and taste,” and writing for financial need was only condoned to “support aged parents, a sick husband, or destitute children” (Fergus 3). While endeavouring to navigate her restricted social climate in order to use writing as a source of income, Austen must have been aware of how some Gothic authors—particularly Ann Radcliffe, author of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*—had contributed to legitimizing the trade. Through a conversation between Isabella and Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* (62), Austen provides a list of Gothic novels beyond *Udolpho* that use romance as a guise to address problems of victimization caused by “marital conflict” (Wright 73). It can be concluded from her reference to this specific collection that Austen was aware of how Gothic novels were used to metaphorically reveal relevant forms of “persecution and entrapment” that still existed in polite society, though they existed in disguise (Keymer 29).

Mrs. Radcliffe, for example, often used travel as a device to place her heroines in an alternative environment and make them into victims who were “forced to do what is not allowed in their cultural context” (Ellis 259). By relocating the plot to a remote setting, where “enlightened modern constraints on plot and action—manners and morals, customs and laws—were conveniently in abeyance,” novelists were able to free their characters to engage in behaviours that would have been impossible in the current temporal and physical setting (Keymer 24). In addition, by setting the plot in “gloomy ... monasteries and ruined castles” the environments created in the Gothic novel were “heavily laden with enthralling psychosexual connotations” (24). Catherine herself is forced into

Gothic-style victimization when General Tilney discovers she is less rich than he had supposed her to be and expels her from Northanger Abbey (Austen 217). Her experience, though not as extreme as the forms of persecution exemplified by the Gothic, was a more realistic form of persecution for an unprotected woman in that era. Through her reading of Gothic novels, Catherine had been prepared for the event, becoming a more intuitive judge of General Tilney's true character than even Henry was willing to admit; "while the law may not tolerate murder it does permit General Tilney to turn a young unprotected female out of his house without money in the middle of the night once he has discovered that Catherine has no fortune" (Wright 69). While Gothic novels may exaggerate the physical form of danger that females experience in a patriarchal society, Austen demonstrates how a lack of equality and legal protection can be equally threatening.

It seems that Austen recognized a use for the Gothic tradition that first allowed women greater freedom as heroines through victimization. For the love story between Catherine and Henry, however, the Gothic venue was insufficient. While her victimization by Henry's father, General Tilney, provided a dramatic Gothic-style scene, the majority of interactions between Catherine and Tilney are humorous rather than dramatic, as they constantly joke about novels (Austen 120–28). In contrast to the comic interactions of Catherine and Tilney, the Gothic novel seems to be "locked in the encapsulating social systems that engender repeated trauma" (Ellis 259). Some critics emphasize that women remain imprisoned in the Gothic, both as heroines and readers, because that is where they have been taught to find love (Ellis 259). Yet Austen, perhaps by viewing marriage more as a social contract than a romantic entanglement, is able to deviate from the Gothic concept and propose a love story between equals. Indeed, her heroine chooses her love interest and is drawn

to him by “gratitude” (233). In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen presents a criticism of the romantic plot and an alternative view of marriage: she “distances herself from escapist romance ... insisting that the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants” (Fergus 21). She ridicules those that (attempt to) marry on impulse: Isabella is left in disgrace after being won over by the flirtation of Captain Tilney (211). Those who marry for money forfeit happiness, as General Tilney is viewed as having done through the eyes of his more righteous children (234). According to Clery, “Austen is careful to commit no illusions about the apparatus of marriage ... but the utopian potential of civilized conversation between the sexes is something she can subscribe to” (173). Austen’s marriage ideal, rather than being one of romance, seems to be of an intellectual union of equals.

Northanger Abbey is, in many ways, more a coming-of-age story for Catherine Morland than a romance. Though she was able to bend some gender rules in the unfolding of Catherine and Henry Tilney’s relationship, Austen was forced to follow one very important rule in her novels: her heroine must marry. Seemingly in protest of this one restriction, Austen denies her readers a satisfyingly detailed ending. Austen offers no description and no dialogue; she simply states, “Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang, and everybody smiled” (240). Even her more rounded characters like Eleanor Tilney are married off in order to tie up all loose ends (239). Throughout *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen both defends and mocks the Gothic romance. As a female author, and perhaps a proto-feminist, it seems obvious that Austen would build on the Gothic tradition of female authors writing about oppression in order to allow their female characters greater freedom. While heroines in Gothic tales are forced to struggle against obvious physical persecution to gain some liberty in their acts of bravery, Austen’s heroine

seeks to be viewed as a competent member of society worthy of independence. Jane Austen critiques the same patriarchal system that Gothic novels placed under scrutiny, but she challenges women to ask for more. After all, if they must be married, they ought to be able to do it with some self-respect.

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