

from “Shut Up in Prose: Gender and Genre in
Austen’s Juvenilia” [from *The Madwoman
in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the
Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*]

[*The Madwoman in the Attic*, by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, has been a landmark book of feminist literary criticism since its 1979 publication. In the selection reprinted here, Gilbert and Gubar interpret Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* as more than just a parody of gothic tropes. Instead they see the novel itself as a “gothic story” that explores what happens “when a woman is made to disregard her personal sense of danger” and to “accept as real what contradicts her perception of her own situation.”]

... With its insistent evocation of two generic frameworks, the *Bildungsroman* and the burlesque, *Northanger Abbey* (1818)¹ supplies one reason for Austen’s fascination with coding, concealing, or just plain not saying what she means, because this apparently amusing and inoffensive novel finally expresses an indictment of patriarchy that could hardly be considered proper or even permissible in Austen’s day. Indeed, when this early work was published posthumously—because its author could not find a publisher who would print it during her lifetime—it was the harsh portrayal of the patriarch that most disturbed reviewers.² Since we have already seen that Austen tends to enact her own ambivalent relationship to her literary predecessors as she describes her heroines’ vulnerability in masculine society, it is hardly surprising to find that she describes Catherine Morland’s initiation into the fashionable life of Bath, balls, and marriage settlements by trying to come to terms with the complex and ambiguous relationship between women and the novel.

1 Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* in *The Works of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1943). Subsequent references to volume and chapter will appear parenthetically in the text. Chapman’s edition divides the novel into two volumes, the first ending with chapter 15. [Footnotes have been modified to include full references to the material reprinted here.]

2 See the objections to the villainy of the General voiced by Maria Edgeworth and by the *British Critic*, in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B.C. Southam (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), p. 17.

Northanger Abbey begins with a sentence that resonates as the novel progresses: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine." And certainly what we see of the young Catherine is her unromantic physical exuberance and health. We are told, moreover, that she was "fond of all boys' plays, and greatly preferred cricket not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush" (I, chap. 1). Inattentive to books, uninterested in music or drawing, she was "noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house" (I, chap. 1). But at fifteen Catherine began to curl her hair and read, and "from fifteen to seventeen she was in training for a heroine" (I, chap. 1). Indeed her actual "training for a heroine" is documented in the rest of the novel, although, as we shall see, it is hard to imagine a more uncongenial or unnatural course of instruction for her or for any other spirited girl.

Puzzled, confused, anxious to please, and above else innocent and curious, Catherine wonders as she wanders up and down the two traditional settings for female initiation, the dance hall at Bath and the passageways of a gothic abbey. But Austen keeps on reminding us that Catherine is typical because she is *not* born to be a heroine: burdened with parents who were "not in the least addicted to locking up ... daughters," Catherine could "not write sonnets" and had "no notion of drawing" (I, chap. 1). There is "not one lord" in her neighborhood—"not even a baronet" (I, chap. 2)—and on her journey to Bath, "neither robbers nor tempests befriend" her (I, chap. 2). When she enters the Upper Rooms in Bath, "not one" gentleman starts with wonder on beholding her, "no whisper of eager inquiry ran round the room, nor was she once called a divinity by anybody" (I, chap. 2). Her room at the Abbey is "by no means unreasonably large, and contained neither tapestry nor velvets" (II, chap. 6). Austen dramatizes all the ways in which Catherine is unable to live up to the rather unbelievable accomplishments of Charlotte Smith's and Mrs. Radcliffe's popular paragons. Heroines, it seems, are not born like people, but manufactured like monsters, and also like monsters they seem fated to self-destruct. Thus *Northanger Abbey* describes exactly how a girl in search of her life story finds herself entrapped in a series of monstrous fictions which deprive her of primacy.

To begin with, we see this fictionalizing process most clearly in the first section at Bath. Sitting in the crowded, noisy Upper Rooms, awaiting a partner, Catherine is uncomfortably situated between Mrs. Thorpe, who talks only of her children, and Mrs. Allen, who

is a monomaniac on the subject of gowns, hats, muslins, and ribbons. Fit representatives not only of fashionable life but also of the state of female maturity in an aristocratic and patriarchal society, they are a constant source of irritation to Catherine, who is happy to be liberated from their ridiculous refrains by Isabella and John Thorpe. Yet if Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Thorpe are grotesque, the young Thorpes are equally absurd, for in them we see what it means to be a fashionable young lady or gentleman. Isabella is a heroine with a vengeance: flirting and feigning, she is a sister of the earlier Sophia and Laura who runs after men with a single-minded determination not even barely disguised by her protestations of sisterly affection for Catherine. Contorted “with smiles of most exquisite misery, and the laughing eye of utter despondency” (I, chap. 9), Isabella is continually acting out a script that makes her ridiculous. At the same time, her brother, as trapped in the stereotypes of masculinity as she is in femininity, continually contradicts himself, even while he constantly boasts about his skill as a hunter, his great gig, his incomparable drinking capacity, and the boldness of his riding. Not only, then, do the Thorpes represent a nightmarish version of what it means to see oneself as a hero or heroine, they also make Catherine’s life miserable by preying on her gullibility and vulnerability.

What both the Thorpes do is lie *to* her and *about* her until she is entrapped in a series of coercive fictions of their making. Catherine becomes the pawn in Isabella’s plot, specifically the self-consciously dramatic romance with James Morland in which Catherine is supposed to play the role of sisterly intimate to a swooning, blushing Isabella: Isabella continually gives Catherine clues that she ought to be soliciting her friend’s confessions of love or eliciting her anxieties about separating from her lover, clues which Catherine never follows because she never quite catches their meaning. Similarly, John Thorpe constructs a series of fictions in which Catherine is first the object of his own amorous designs and then a wealthy heiress whom General Tilney can further fictionalize. Catherine becomes extremely uncomfortable as he manipulates all these stories about her, and only her ignorance serves to save her from the humiliating realization that her invitation to Northanger depends on General Tilney’s illusive image of her.

When Henry Tilney points out to Catherine that “man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal” (I, chap. 10), he echoes a truth articulated (in a far more tragic circumstance) by Clarissa, who would give up choice if she could but preserve “the liberty of *refusal*, which belongs to my Sex.”¹ But in Austen’s parodic

1 Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa* (New York: Everyman, 1962), 1:226–27.

text, Henry makes a point that is as much about fiction as it is about marriage and dancing, his purported subjects: Catherine is as confined by the clichéd stories of the other characters as Austen is by her need to reject inherited stories of what it means to be a heroine. Unlike her author, however, Catherine “cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible” (II, chap. I), so she lapses into silence when the Thorpes’ version of reality contradicts her own, for instance when Isabella seats herself near a door that commands a good view of everybody entering because “it is so out of the way” (II, chap. 3), or when, in spite of John Thorpe’s warnings about the violence of his horses, his carriage proceeds at a safe speed. Repeatedly, she does not understand “how to reconcile two such very different accounts of the same thing” (I, chap. 9). Enmeshed in the Thorpes’ misinterpretations, Catherine can only feebly deflect Isabella’s assertion that her rejection of John Thorpe represents the cooling of her first feelings: “You are describing what never happened” (II, chap. 3). While Catherine only sporadically and confusedly glimpses the discrepancies between Isabella’s stated hatred of men and her continual coquetry, or John Thorpe’s assertion that he saw the Tilneys driving up the Lansdown Road and her own discovery of them walking down the street, Austen is clearly quite conscious of the lies which John and his sister use to falsify Catherine’s sense of reality, just as she is aware of the source of these lies in the popular fiction of her day.

Yet, despite her distaste for the falsity of fictional conventions, Austen insists quite early in the novel that she will not reject the practitioners of her own art: “I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel-writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding” (I, chap. 5). In an extraordinary attack on critics of the novel, Austen makes it quite clear that she realizes male anthologists of Goldsmith, Milton, Pope, Prior, Addison, Steele, and Sterne are customarily praised ahead of the female creators of works like *Cecelia*, *Camilla*, or *Belinda*, although the work of such men is neither original nor literary. Indeed, as if to substantiate her feeling that prejudice against the novel is widespread, she shows how even an addicted reader of romances (who has been forced, like so many girls, to substitute novel reading for a formal education) needs to express disdain for the genre. In the important expedition to Beechen Cliff, we find Catherine claiming to despise the form. Novels, she says, are “not clever enough” for Henry Tilney because “gentlemen read better books” (I, chap. 14). But her censure is really, of course, a form of self-deprecation.

The novel is a status-deprived genre, Austen implies, because it is closely associated with a status-deprived gender. Catherine considers novels an inferior kind of literature precisely because they had already become the province of women writers and of a rapidly expanding female audience. Again and again we see the kind of mis-education novels confer on Catherine, teaching her to talk in inflated and stilted clichés, training her to expect impossibly villainous or virtuous behavior from people whose motives are more complex than she suspects, blinding her to the mundane selfishness of her contemporaries. Yet Austen declares that novel writers have been an “injured body,” and she explicitly sets out to defend this species of composition that has been so unfairly decried out of “pride, ignorance, or fashion” (I, chap. 5).

Her passionate defense of the novel is not as out of place as it might first seem, for if *Northanger Abbey* is a parody of novelistic clichés, it also resembles the rest of the juvenilia in its tendency to rely on these very conventions for its own shape. Austen is writing a romance as conventional in its ways as those she criticizes: Catherine Morland’s most endearing quality is her inexperience, and her adventures result from the Allens’ gratuitous decision to take her as a companion on their trip to Bath, where she is actually introduced to Henry Tilney by the Master of Ceremonies, and where a lucky mistake causes his father to invite her to visit, appropriately enough, his gothic mansion. Like so many of Pamela’s daughters, Catherine marries the man of her dreams and is thereby elevated to his rank. In other words, she succeeds in doing what Isabella is so mercilessly punished for wanting to do, making a good match. Finally, in true heroine style, Catherine rejects the false suitor for the true one¹ and is rescued for felicity by an ending no less aggressively engineered than that of most sentimental novels.

As if justifying both her spirited defense of sister novelists and the romantic shape of her heroine’s story, Austen has Catherine admit a fierce animosity for the sober pages of history. Catherine tells Henry Tilney and his sister that history “tells [her] nothing that does not either vex or weary [her]. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; *the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all*—it is very tiresome” [italics ours] (I, chap. 14). She is severely criticized for this view; but she is, after all, correct, for the knowledge conferred by historians does seem irrelevant to the private

1 Darrel Mansell, *The Novels of Jane Austen* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973) discusses the false suitor in all of Austen’s novels, and Jean Kennard discusses the two-suitor convention in nineteenth-century fiction in *Victims of Convention* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978).

lives of most women. Furthermore, Austen had already explored this fact in her only attempt at history, a parody of Goldsmith's *History of England*, written in her youth and signed as the work of "a partial, prejudiced, and ignorant Historian."¹ What is conveyed in this early joke is precisely Catherine's sense of the irrationality, cruelty, and irrelevance of history, as well as the partisan spleen of most so-called objective historians. Until she can place herself, and two friends, in the company of Mary Queen of Scots, historical events seem as absurdly distant from Austen's common concerns as they do to Charlotte Brontë in *Shirley*, George Eliot in *Middlemarch*, or Virginia Woolf in *The Years*, writers who self-consciously display the ways in which history and historical narration only indirectly affect women because they deal with public events never experienced at first hand in the privatized lives of women.

Even quite late in Austen's career, when she was approached to write a history of the august House of Cobourg, she refused to take historical "reality" seriously, declaring that she could no more write a historical romance than an epic poem, "and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter."² While in this letter she could defend her "pictures of domestic life in country villages" with a sure sense of her own province as a writer, Austen's sympathy and identification with Catherine Morland's ignorance is evident elsewhere in her protestation that certain topics are entirely unknown to her. She cannot portray a clergyman sketched by a correspondent because

Such a man's conversation must at times be on subjects of science and philosophy, of which I know nothing; or at least be occasionally abundant in quotations and allusions which a woman who, like me, knows only her own mother tongue, and has read very little in that, would be totally without the power of giving. A classical education, or at any rate a very extensive acquaintance with English literature, ancient and modern, appears to me quite indispensable for the person who would do justice to your clergyman; and I think I may boast myself to be,

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- 1 "The History of England," *Minor Works, The Works of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), vol. VI, pp. 139–50. Subsequent quotations of the minor works are taken from this volume.
 - 2 To James Stanier Clarke, 1 April 1816, *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sisters Cassandra and Others*, ed. R.W. Chapman (2d ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 452–53.

with all possible vanity, the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress.¹

Like Fanny Burney, who refused Dr. Johnson's offer of Latin lessons because she could not "devote so much time to acquire something I shall always dread to have known,"² Austen seems to have felt the need to maintain a degree of ladylike ignorance.

Yet not only does Austen write about women's miseducation, not only does she feel herself to be a victim of it; in *Northanger Abbey* she angrily attacks their culturally conditioned ignorance, for she is clearly infuriated that "A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can" (I, chap. 14). Though "imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms," Austen sarcastically admits that some men are "too reasonable and too well informed themselves to desire any thing more in woman than ignorance" (I, chap. 14). When at Beechen Cliff Henry Tilney moves from the subject of the natural landscape to a discussion of politics, the narrator, like Catherine, keeps still. Etiquette, it seems, would forbid such discussions (for character and author alike), even if ignorance did not make them impossible. At the same time, however, both Catherine and Austen realize that history and politics, which have been completely beyond the reach of women's experience, are far from sanctified by such a divorce. "What in the midst of that mighty drama [of history] are girls and their blind visions?" Austen might have asked, as George Eliot would in *Daniel Deronda*. And she might have answered similarly that in these "delicate vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasures of human affection."³ Ignoring the political and economic activity of men throughout history, Austen implies that history may very well be a uniform drama of masculine posturing that is no less a fiction (and a potentially pernicious one) than gothic romance. She suggests, too, that this fiction of history is finally a matter of indifference to women, who never participate in it and who are almost completely absent from its pages. Austen thus anticipates a question Virginia Woolf would angrily pose in *Three Guineas*: "what does 'patriotism' mean to [the educated man's sister]? Has she the same reasons for being

1 To James Stanier Clarke, 11 Dec. 1815, *Austen's Letters*, p. 443.

2 Quoted in an extremely useful essay by Irene Tayler and Gina Luria, "Gender and Genre: Women in British Romantic Literature," in *What Manner of Woman: Essays on English and American Life and Literature*, ed. Marlene Springer (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 102.

3 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1967), p. 160.

proud of England, for loving England, for defending England?"¹ For, like Woolf, Austen asserts that women see male-dominated history from the disillusioned and affected perspective of the outsider.

At the same time, the issue of women's reasons for "being proud of England, for loving England, for defending England" is crucial to the revision of gothic fiction we find in *Northanger Abbey*. Rather than rejecting the gothic conventions she burlesques, Austen is very clearly criticizing female gothic in order to reinvest it with authority. As A. Walton Litz has demonstrated, Austen disapproves of Mrs. Radcliffe's exotic locales because such settings imply a discrepancy between the heroine's danger and the reader's security.² Austen's heroine is defined as a reader, and in her narrative she blunders on more significant, if less melodramatic, truths, as potentially destructive as any in Mrs. Radcliffe's fiction. Catherine discovers in the old-fashioned black cabinet something just as awful as a lost manuscript detailing a nun's story. Could Austen be pointing at the real threat to women's happiness when she describes her heroine finding a *laundry list*? Moreover, while Catherine reveals her own naive delusions when she expects to find Mrs. Tilney shut up and receiving from her husband's pitiless hands "a nightly supply of coarse food" (II, chap. 8), she does discover that "in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (II, chap. 15).

Using the conventions of gothic even as she transforms them into a subversive critique of patriarchy, Austen shows her heroine penetrating to the secret of the Abbey, the hidden truth of the ancestral mansion, to learn the complete and arbitrary power of the owner of the house, the father, the General. In a book not unfittingly pronounced *North/Anger*, Austen rewrites the gothic not because she disagrees with her sister novelists about the confinement of women, but because she believes women have been imprisoned more effectively by miseducation than by walls and more by financial dependency, which is the authentic ancestral curse, than by any verbal oath or warning. Austen's gothic novel is set in England because—even while it ridicules and repudiates patriarchal politics (or perhaps *because* it does so)—it is, as Robert Hopkins has shown, the most political of Jane Austen's novels. Hopkins's analysis of the political allusions in *Northanger Abbey* reveals not only the mercenary General's "callous lack of concern for the commonweal," but also his

1 Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1966), p. 9.

2 A. Walton Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 64.

role “as an inquisitor surveying possibly seditious pamphlets.” This means that Henry Tilney’s eulogy of an England where gothic atrocities can presumably never occur because “every man is surrounded by a neighborhood of voluntary spies” (II, chap. 9) refers ironically to the political paranoia and repression of the General, whose role as a modern inquisitor reflects Austen’s sense of “the nightmarish political world of the 1790s and very early 1800s.”¹ The writers of romance, Austen implies, were not so much wrong as simplistic in their descriptions of female vulnerability. In spite of her professed or actual ignorance, then, Austen brilliantly relocates the villain of the exotic, faraway gothic locale here, now, in England.

It is significant, then, that General Tilney drives Catherine from his house without sufficient funds, without an escort for the seventy-mile journey, because she has no fortune of her own. Ellen Moers may exaggerate in her claim that “money and its making were characteristically female rather than male subjects in English fiction,”² but Austen does characteristically explore the specific ways in which patriarchal control of women depends on women being denied the right to earn or even inherit their own money. From *Sense and Sensibility*, where a male heir deprives his sisters of their home, to *Pride and Prejudice*, where the male entail threatens the Bennet girls with marriages of convenience, from *Emma*, where Jane Fairfax must become a governess if she cannot engage herself to a wealthy husband, to *Persuasion*, where the widowed Mrs. Smith struggles ineffectually against poverty, Austen reminds her readers that the laws and customs of England may, as Henry Tilney glowingly announces, insure against wife-murder (II, chap. 10), but they do not offer much more than this minimal security for a wife not beloved, or a woman not a wife: as Austen explains in a letter to her favorite niece, “single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor.”³ Thus, in all her novels Austen examines the female powerlessness that underlies monetary pressure to marry, the injustice of inheritance laws, the ignorance of women denied formal education, the psychological

1 Robert Hopkins, “General Tilney and the Affairs of State: The Political Gothic of *Northanger Abbey*,” *Philological Quarterly*, forthcoming. Alistair M. Duckworth also explains how Henry Tilney’s ironic reconstruction of his sister’s irrational fears of a riot is actually a description of the Gordon Riots of 1780; thus the passage ironically illustrates how well founded Elinor’s fears are. See *The Improvement of the Estate* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 96.

2 Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 67.

3 In this letter to Fanny Knight, Austen goes on to admit the obvious, that this “is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony,” 13 March 1817, *Austen’s Letters*, p. 483.

vulnerability of the heiress or widow, the exploited dependency of the spinster, the boredom of the lady provided with no vocation. And the powerlessness implicit in all these situations is also a part of the secret behind the graceful and even elegant surfaces of English society that Catherine manages to penetrate. Like Austen's other heroines, she comes to realize that most women resemble her friend Eleanor Tilney, who is only "a nominal mistress of [the house]"; her "real power is nothing" (II, chap. 13).

Catherine's realization that the family, as represented by the Tilneys, is a bankrupt and coercive institution matches the discoveries of many of Austen's other heroines. Specifically, her realization that General Tilney controls the household despite his lack of honor and feeling matches Elizabeth Bennet's recognition that her father's withdrawal into his library is destructive and selfish, or Emma Woodhouse's recognition that her valetudinarian father has strengthened her egotism out of *his* selfish need for her undivided attention. More than the discoveries of the others, though, Catherine's realization of General Tilney's greed and coercion resembles Fanny Price's recognition that the head of the Bertram family is not only fallible and inflexible in his judgment but mercenary in his motives. In a sense, then, all of Austen's later heroines resemble Catherine Morland in their discovery of the failure of the father, the emptiness of the patriarchal hierarchy, and, as Mary Burgan has shown, the inadequacy of the family as the basic psychological and economic unit of society.¹

Significantly, all these fathers who control the finances of the house are in their various ways incapable of sustaining their children. Mr. Woodhouse quite literally tries to starve his family and guests, while Sir Walter Elliot is too cheap to provide dinners for his daughters, and Sir Thomas Bertram is so concerned with the elegance of his repast that his children only seek to escape his well-stocked table. As an exacting gourmet, General Tilney looks upon a "tolerably large eating-room as one of the necessities of life" (II, chap. 6), but his own appetite is not a little alarming, and the meals over which he presides are invariably a testimony to his children's and his guest's deprivation. Continually oppressed at the General's table with his incessant attentions, "perverse as it seemed, [Catherine] doubted whether she might not have felt less, had she been less attended to" (II, chap. 5). What continues to mystify her about the General is "why he should say one thing so positively, and mean another all the while" (II, chap. 11). In fact, Austen redefines the gothic in yet another way in *Northanger Abbey* by showing that Catherine Morland is trapped, not

1 Mary Burgan, "Mr. Bennet and the Failures of Fatherhood in Jane Austen's Novels," *Journal of English and German Philology* (Fall 1975): 536-52.

inside the General's Abbey, but inside his fiction, a tale in which she figures as an heiress and thus a suitable bride for his second son. Moreover, though it may be less obvious, Catherine is also trapped by the interpretations of the General's children.

Even before Beechen Cliff Elinor Tilney is "not at home" to Catherine, who then sees her leaving the house with her father (I, chap. 12). And on Beechen Cliff, Catherine finds that her own language is not understood. While all the critics seem to side with Henry Tilney's "corrections" of her "mistakes," it is clear from Catherine's defense of herself that her language quite accurately reflects her own perspective. She uses the word *torment*, for example, in place of *instruct* because she knows what Henry Tilney has never experienced:

"You think me foolish to call instruction a torment, but if you had been as much used as myself to hear poor little children first learning their letters and then learning to spell, if you had ever seen how stupid they can be for a whole morning together, and how tired my poor mother is at the end of it, as I am in the habit of seeing almost every day of my life at home, you would allow that to *torment* and to *instruct* might sometimes be used as synonymous words." (I, chap. 14)

Immediately following this linguistic debate, Catherine watches the Tilneys' "viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing," and hears them talking "in phrases which conveyed scarcely any idea to her" (I, chap. 14). She is convinced moreover that "the little which she could understand ... appeared to contradict the very few notions she had entertained on the matter before." Surely instruction which causes her to doubt the evidence of her own eyes and understanding *is* a kind of torment. And she is further victimized by the process of depersonalization begun in Bath when she wholeheartedly adopts Henry's view and even entertains the belief "that Henry Tilney could never be wrong" (I, chap. 14).

While the Tilneys are certainly neither as hypocritical nor as coercive as the Thorpes, they do contribute to Catherine's confused anxiety over the validity of her own interpretations. Whenever Henry talks with her, he mockingly treats her like a "heroine," thereby surrounding her with clichéd language and clichéd plots. When they meet at a dance in Bath, he claims to worry about the poor figure he will make in her journal, and while his ridicule is no doubt meant for the sentimental novels in which every girl covers reams of paper with the most mundane details of her less than heroic life, such ridicule gratuitously misinterprets (and confuses) Catherine. At Northanger,

when she confides to Henry that his sister has taught her how to love a hyacinth, he responds with approbation: "a taste for flowers is always desirable in your sex, as a means of getting you out of doors, and tempting you to more frequent exercise than you would otherwise take!" This, although we know that Catherine has always been happy outdoors; she is left quietly to protest that "Mamma says I am never within" (II, chap. 7). Furthermore, as Katrin Ristkok Burlin has noticed, it is Henry who provides Catherine with the plot that really threatens to overwhelm her in the Abbey.¹ While General Tilney resembles the fathers of Austen's mature fiction in his attempts to watch and control his children as an author would "his" characters—witness the narcissistic Sir Walter and the witty Mr. Bennet—it is Henry Tilney who teaches Catherine at Beechen Cliff to view nature aesthetically, and it is he, as his father's son, who authors the gothic story that entraps Catherine in the sliding panels, ancient tapestries, gloomy passageways, funereal beds, and haunted halls of Northanger.

Of course, though Austen's portrait of the artist as a young man stresses the dangers of literary manipulation, Henry's miniature gothic *is* clearly a burlesque, and no one except the gullible Catherine would ever be taken in for a minute. Indeed, many critics are uncomfortable with this aspect of the novel, finding that it splits here into two parts. But the two sections are not differentiated so much by the realism of the Bath section and the burlesque of the Abbey scenes as by a crucial shift in Catherine, who seems at the Abbey finally to fall into literacy, to be confined in prose. The girl who originally preferred cricket, baseball, and horseback riding to books becomes fascinated with Henry Tilney's plot because it is the culminating step in her training to become a heroine, which has progressed from her early perusal of Gray and Pope to her shutting herself up in Bath with Isabella to read novels and her purchasing a new writing desk which she takes with her in the chaise to Northanger. Indeed, what seems to attract Catherine to Henry Tilney is his lively literariness, for he is very closely associated with books. He has read "hundreds and hundreds" of novels (I, chap. 14), all of which furnish him with misogynistic stereotypes for her. This man whose room at Northanger is littered with books, guns, and greatcoats is a specialist in "young ladies' ways."

"Everybody allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female," Henry explains, and that female style is faultless

1 Katrin Ristkok Burlin, "'The Pen of the Contriver': The Four Fictions of *Northanger Abbey*," in *Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. John Halperin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 89–111.

except for “a general deficiency in subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar” (I, chap. 3). Proving himself a man, he says, “no less by the generosity of my soul, than the clearness of my head” (I, chap. 14), Henry has “no patience with such of my sex as disdain to let themselves sometimes down to the comprehension of yours.” He feels, moreover, that “perhaps the abilities of women are neither sound nor acute—neither vigorous nor keen. Perhaps they want observation, discernment, judgment, fire, genius and wit” (I, chap. 14). For all his charming vivacity, then, Henry Tilney’s misogyny is closely identified with his literary authority so that, when his tale of *Northanger* sounds “just like a book” to Catherine (II, chap. 5), she is bound to be shut up inside this “horrid” novel by finally acquiescing to her status as a character.

Yet Catherine is one of the first examples we have of a character who gets away from her author, since her imagination runs away with the plot and role Henry has supplied her. Significantly, the story that Catherine enacts involves her in a series of terrifying, gothic adventures. Shaking and sweating through a succession of sleepless nights, she becomes obsessed with broken handles on chests that suggest “premature violence” to her, and “strange ciphers” that promise to disclose “hidden secrets” (II, chap. 6). Searching for clues to some impending evil or doom, she finds herself terrified when a cabinet will not open, only to discover in the morning that she had locked it herself; and, worse, she becomes convinced of Mrs. Tilney’s confinement and finds herself weeping before the monument to the dead woman’s memory. The monument notwithstanding, however, she is unconvinced of Mrs. Tilney’s decease because she knows that a waxen figure might have been introduced and substituted in the family vault. Indeed, when she does not find a lost manuscript to document the General’s iniquity, Catherine is only further assured that this villain has too much wit to leave clues that would lead to his detection.

Most simply, of course, this section of *Northanger Abbey* testifies to the delusions created when girls internalize the ridiculous expectations and standards of gothic fiction. But the anxiety Catherine experiences just at the point when she has truly come like a heroine to the home of the man of her dreams seems also to express feelings of confusion that are more than understandable if we remember how constantly she has been beset with alien visions of herself and with incomprehensible and contradictory standards for behavior. Since heroines are not born but made, the making of a heroine seems to imply an unnatural acquiescence in all these incomprehensible fictions: indeed, Austen seems to be implying that the girl who becomes

a heroine will become ill, if not mad. Here is the natural consequence of a young lady's sentimental education in preening, reading, shopping, and dreaming. Already, in Bath, caught between the contradictory claims of friends and relatives, Catherine meditates "by turns, on broken promises and broken arches, phaetons and false hangings, Tilneys and trap-doors" (I, chap. 11), as if she inhabits Pope's mad Cave of Spleen. Later, however, wandering through the Abbey at night, Catherine could be said to be searching finally for her own true story, seeking to unearth the past fate of a lost female who will somehow unlock the secret of her own future. Aspiring to become the next Mrs. Tilney, Catherine is understandably obsessed with the figure of the last Mrs. Tilney, and if we take her fantasy seriously, in spite of the heavy parodic tone here, we can see why, for Mrs. Tilney is an image of herself. Feeling confined and constrained in the General's house, but not understanding why, Catherine projects her own feelings of victimization into her imaginings of the General's wife, whose mild countenance is fitted to a frame in death, as presumably in life, and whose painting finds no more favor in the Abbey than her person did. Like Mary Elizabeth Coleridge in "The Other Side of a Mirror," Catherine confronts the image of this imprisoned, silenced woman only to realize "I am she!" Significantly, this story of the female prisoner is Catherine's *only* independent fiction, and it is a story that she must immediately renounce as a "voluntary, self-created delusion" (II, chap. 10) which can earn only her self-hatred.

If General Tilney is a monster of manipulation, then, Catherine Morland, as George Levine has shown, is also "an incipient monster," not very different from the monsters that haunt Austen's contemporary, Mary Shelley.¹ But Catherine's monstrosity is not just, as Levine claims, the result of social climbing at odds with the limits imposed by the social and moral order; it is also the result of her search for a story of her own. Imaginative and sensitive, Catherine genuinely believes that she can become the heroine of her own life story, that she can author herself, and thereby define and control reality. But, like Mary Shelley's monster, she must finally come to terms with herself as a creature of someone else's making, a character trapped inside an uncongenial plot. In fact, like Mary Shelley's monster, Catherine cannot make sense of the signs of her culture, and her frustration is at least partially reflected in her fiction of the starving, suffering Mrs. Tilney. That she sees herself liberating this

1 George Levine, "Translating the Monstrous: *Northanger Abbey*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (December 1975): 335-50; also see Donald Greene, "Jane Austen's Monsters," in *Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. John Halperin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 262-78.

female prisoner is thus only part of her delusion, because Catherine is destined to fall not just from what Ellen Moers calls “heroinism” but even from authorship and authority: she is fated to be taught the indelicacy of her own attempt at fiction-making. Searching to understand the literary problems that persistently tease her, seeking to find the hidden origin of her own discomfort, we shall see that Catherine is motivated by a curiosity that links her not only to Mary Shelley’s monster, but also to such rebellious, dissatisfied inquirers as Catherine Earnshaw, Jane Eyre, and Dorothea Brooke.

Mystified first by the Thorpes, then by the Tilneys, Catherine Morland is understandably filled with a sense of her own otherness, and the story of the imprisoned wife fully reveals both her anger and her self-pity. But her gravest loss of power comes when she is fully “awakened” and “the visions of romance were over” (II, chap. 10). Forced to renounce her story-telling, Catherine matures when “the anxieties of common life began soon to succeed to the alarms of romance” (II, chap. 10). First, her double, Isabella, who has been “all for ambition” (II, chap. 10), must be completely punished and revealed in all her monstrous aspiration. Henry Tilney is joking when he exclaims that Catherine must feel “that in losing Isabella, you lose half yourself” (II, chap. 10); but he is at least partially correct, since Isabella represents the distillation of Catherine’s ambition to author herself as a heroine. For this reason, the conversations about Isabella’s want of fortune and the difficulty this places in the way of her marrying Captain Tilney raise Catherine’s alarms about herself because, as Catherine admits, “she was as insignificant, and perhaps as portionless, as Isabella” (II, chap. 11).

Isabella’s last verbal attempt to revise reality is extremely unsuccessful; its inconsistencies and artificialities strike even Catherine as false. “Ashamed of Isabella, and ashamed of having ever loved her” (II, chap. 12), Catherine therefore begins to awaken to the anxieties of common life, and her own fall follows close upon Isabella’s. Driven from the General’s house, she now experiences agitations “mournfully superior in reality and substance” to her earlier imaginings (II, chap. 13). Catherine had been convinced by Henry of the “absurdity of her curiosity and her fears,” but now she discovers that he erred not only in his sense of Isabella’s story (“you little thought of its ending so” [II, chap. 10]), but also in his sense of hers. Not the least of Catherine’s agitations must involve the realization that she has submitted to Henry’s estimate that her fears of the General were “only” imaginary, when all along she had been right.

This is why *Northanger Abbey* is, finally, a gothic story as frightening as any told by Mrs. Radcliffe, for the evil it describes is the horror

described by writers as dissimilar as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Phyllis Chesler, and Sylvia Plath, the terror and self-loathing that results when a woman is made to disregard her personal sense of danger, to accept as real what contradicts her perception of her own situation. More dramatic, if not more debilitating, examples can be cited to illustrate Catherine's confusion when she realizes she has replaced her own interiority or authenticity with Henry's inadequate judgments. For the process of being brainwashed that almost fatally confuses Catherine has always painfully humiliated women subjected to a maddening process that Florence Rush, in an allusion to the famous Ingrid Bergman movie about a woman so driven insane, has recently called "gaslighting."¹

While "a heroine returning, at the close of her career, to her native village, in all the triumph of recovered reputation" would be "a delight" for writer and reader alike, Austen admits, "I bring my heroine to her home in solitude and disgrace" (II, chap. 14). Catherine has nothing else to do but "to be silent and alone" (II, chap. 14). Having relinquished her attempt to gain a story or even a point of view, she composes a letter to Elinor that will not pain her if Henry should chance to read it. Like so many heroines, from Snow White to Kate Brown, who stands waiting for the kettle to boil at the beginning of *Summer Before the Dark*, Catherine is left with nothing to do but wait:

She could neither sit still, nor employ herself for ten minutes together, walking round the garden and orchard again and again, as if nothing but motion was voluntary; and it seemed as if she could even walk about the house rather than remain fixed for any time in the parlour. [II, chap. 15]

Her mother gives her a book of moral essays entitled *The Mirror*, which is what must now supplant the romances, for it tells stories appropriate to her "silence and sadness" (II, chap. 15). From this glass coffin she is rescued by the prince whose "affection originated in nothing better than gratitude" for her partiality toward him (II, chap. 15).

In spite of Henry's faults and the inevitable coercion of his authority over her, his parsonage will of course be a more pleasant dwelling than either the General's Abbey or the parental cot. Within its

1 Florence Rush, "The Freudian Cover-Up: The Sexual Abuse of Children," *Chrysalis* 1 (1977): 31–45. Rush describes how young girls are made to feel responsible for parental abuse, much as rape victims have been made to feel guilty for the crimes perpetrated against them.

well-proportioned rooms, the girl who so enjoyed rolling down green slopes can at least gain a glimpse through the windows of luxuriant green meadows; in other words, Catherine's future home holds out the promise that women can find comfortable spaces to inhabit in their society. Austen even removes Elinor Tilney from "the evils of such a home as *Northanger*" (II, chap. 16), if only by marrying her to the gentleman whose servant left behind the laundry list. Yet the happy ending is the result of neither woman's education since, Austen implies, each continues to find the secret of the Abbey perplexing. We shall see that in this respect Catherine's fate foreshadows that of the later heroines, most of whom are also "saved" when they relinquish their subjectivity through the manipulations of a narrator who calls attention to her own exertions and thereby makes us wonder whether the lives of women not so benevolently protected would have turned out quite so well.

At the same time, even if the marriage of the past Mrs. Tilney makes us wonder about the future Mrs. Tilney's prospects for happiness, Austen has successfully balanced her own artistic commitment to an inherited literary structure that idealizes feminine submission against her rebellious imaginative sympathies. With a heavy reliance on characters who are readers, all of Austen's early parodies point us, then, to the important subject of female imagination in her mature novels. But it is in *Northanger Abbey* that this novelist most forcefully indicates her consciousness of what Harold Bloom might call her "belatedness," a belatedness inextricably related to her definition of herself as female and therefore secondary. Just as Catherine Morland remains a reader, Austen presents herself as a "mere" interpreter and critic of prior fictions, and thereby quite modestly demonstrates her willingness to inhabit a house of fiction not of her own making.

(1979)