

from “Reading Jane Austen and Rewriting ‘Herstory’” [from *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670–1820*]

[In this selection from the concluding chapter of her book *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670–1820*, Devoney Looser examines Austen’s letters, her juvenilia (omitted here), and *Northanger Abbey* to give insight into Austen’s philosophy of history as well as its role in her work.]

Linking Jane Austen (1775–1817) and history was once unthinkable. Critics saw Austen’s writing as limited to a “little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory” and to the milieu of “3 or 4 families in a Country Village” (Austen, *Jane Austen’s Letters* 323, 275).¹ The view of her as a novelist of the trivial and local was firmly entrenched and frequently juxtaposed to the “Big Bow-wow strain” of Sir Walter Scott (Southam, *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage* 106).² Scott was believed to cover the weighty worldly matters and Austen the quaint quotidian ones. Biographical details were marshaled to argue that a country spinster could not have had knowledge of—or perhaps even interest in—events beyond her own small sphere. Austen was often denigrated in such accounts, though not purposefully. She and her writings were placed outside history because received wisdom deemed her a genius of the minute human universal, just not the political or the historical realm. “It is a truth universally acknowledged that Jane Austen chose to ignore the decisive historical events of her time,” as Raymond Williams facetiously put it (113).³

The critical heyday of Austen’s ahistoricism is now happily behind us, and myths of her extrahistoricity or subhistoricity appear to have been debunked (Kent, “Learning” 59). The so-called new historicism of the past decades brought attention to a wider range of texts

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- 1 Subsequent references to Le Faye’s edition of Austen’s letters are cited parenthetically in the text as *JAL*.
 - 2 Christopher Kent demonstrates that the comparisons to Scott in Austen studies “opened in the mid-Victorian period” when Richard Simpson “cast doubt upon the historicity of [Austen’s] novels” in 1870. See Kent, “Real Solemn History” 87.
 - 3 Williams describes the ways Austen’s writings are implicated in history. For a study of Austen’s writings in relation to Regency England that goes much further, see Sales.

as potential forces of cultural change. Austen and history emerged as a viable area of study.¹ Critics noted historical events and sociohistorical material in her novels: “There are passing allusions to a contemporary history that included the flogging of soldiers, the slave trade, the enclosure of commons, new seed drills, émigrés eking out livings in London, bloody political riots, major and minor battles on land and sea, including privateering, even the American War of 1812” (Tave 61). Revived interest in her historical references contributed to “the more pervasive trend toward historicizing [Austen’s] novels” (J. Thompson, “Jane” 23). Studies appeared on Austen’s relation to the French and American revolutions, the industrial revolution, the economics of the marriage market, and the literary marketplace (Roberts; Butler, *Jane*; R. Williams; Fergus, *Jane Austen: A Literary Life*; Kroeber).² The political implications of her writings—once seen either as nonexistent or as tacitly Tory, following her family—provoked new debates.³ Critics argued about her progressiveness or conservatism on such matters as gender, class, race, religion, imperialism, and sexuality.⁴ Austen as a writer concerned with history—political and social—has arrived.

Despite the emergence of scholarship on Austen and history, she remains, in Nancy Armstrong’s words, “a particularly hard nut

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- 1 For other early studies on Austen’s relation to history, debunking her supposed “limitations,” see Greene; Wiesenfarth, “Austen” 46–47, 59–63; Wiesenfarth, “History”; Southam, “Regulated Hatred”; and Hopkins.
 - 2 For an account of Austen by a historian who argues that she presents “access to the felt reality” of her times and is the first and finest “historian’s novelist,” see MacDonagh ix.
 - 3 For an engaging article that labels Austen a Tory but takes issue with the ways “Tory” has been defined by today’s critics, see Neill. Edward Neill refers to Austen as having been “Bastilled for life” by critics who view her as ahistorical or anti-Jacobin (207). He contends that Austen’s novels are politically “contradictory amalgams” (211). For an account of the history of Austen’s reputation as “political,” see Kelly 155–56. Unlike James Thompson, who locates a more recent critical change, Kelly believes that the turn in the tide toward seeing a political Austen began in the 1950s with the commentary of Rebecca West.
 - 4 For a summary of this criticism, see Monaghan, *Jane Austen in a Social Context* 1–8, and Johnson, *Jane* xxiv–xxv, 48. For arguments claiming a feminist Austen, see Kirkham; Sulloway; and L. Smith. For an account that distances Austen from feminism, see Butler, *Jane*. Marilyn Butler asserts that “Jane Austen’s novels belong decisively to one class of partisan novels, the conservative” (*Jane* 3). On Austen and imperialism/slavery, see Said, *Culture*, and Fraiman. Duckworth’s *Improvement of the Estate* (1994 [1971]) is often credited with transforming Austen studies through its infusion of careful historicizing.

for historical critics to crack” (“Nineteenth-Century Jane Austen” 227).¹ What compounds the problem is that some who have taken a crack at it limit their commentary to Austen’s sparse textual references about “great events.” Setting up her use of history as a critical curio, these interpretations of historical minutiae—though not without merit—rarely go far enough, as James Thompson has contended.² What is meant by history or historical context in Austen studies remains “as vague and various as ever” (24).³ History has too often been defined narrowly where Austen is concerned, even among historically attuned critics. Narrow definitions in Austen studies have been carried out in the name of critical accuracy: “By placing Jane Austen within her genre,” Marilyn Butler has argued, “we help define her meaning” (4). One way to see history more accurately in her writings, however, is to consider its meanings beyond her genre of the novel.⁴

In recovering the forces that informed Austen’s relationship to fiction and histories, my investigation helps explain why, for nearly 150 years, claims about her connection to historical matters were viewed as untenable. Her letters and a piece from her juvenilia, the *History of England*, help show how she positioned her texts in relation to historiographical trends and to historical novels. *Northanger Abbey*, arguably the most fruitful text for discovering Austen’s philosophy of history, has been perceived by many critics as a response and a corrective to the sentimental or gothic novels of the 1790s. Others have viewed it as Austen’s plea for the need to add women to histories. But

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- 1 Armstrong persuasively argues, “That we tend to see the Austen text as a limited one ultimately says more about the limits of our notion of history, then, than about the limits of her world” (“Nineteenth-Century Jane Austen” 237).
 - 2 For an insightful account of criticism on historical and ahistorical Austens, see Kent, “Real Solemn History” 86–93.
 - 3 Thompson concludes, “Despite its mass Austen studies still have a long way to go before we can begin to restore and uncover the repressed history embodied in the novels,” noting that what passes for history in Austen studies is often conventional background or annotation (30).
 - 4 Tara Ghoshal Wallace’s article on *Northanger Abbey*’s “collision of genres” focuses on fictional genres (parody, romance, and the realistic novel). Frank Kearful similarly states that “Austen is writing what is not simply a novel of satire, a burlesque or a parody, a comedy or a tragedy, a romance or an anti-romance. She is, rather, combining elements of all of these” (527). Even Edward Neill, in his correct claim that the label “novelist” has limited our range of comparisons for Austen’s work, restricts his call for further comparison to “radical male poets” (212). Most critics see *Northanger Abbey* and the juvenilia as combining literary subgenres, but few look to histories and other nonliterary genres as points of comparison.

there is more at stake than either of these accounts allows. Austen's writings were competing for readers at a time when novels were not yet considered a fully polite form and when histories were experiencing a decade of "revival" (Feather, "British Publishing" 43). She made light of histories and defended novels in *Northanger Abbey*, usurping certain elements from historical discourse while making romance probable. She was defining her text not just against other kinds of novels or novelists but against other kinds of writing, including histories. In effect, Austen combined genres that were said to be masculine or feminine into a new kind of text that retained elements of both. She did not avoid history. On the contrary, she engaged it directly, grappled with it, and refashioned it for her own purposes.

Austen uses the words "history" and "historian" a mere sixty-six times in her published writings (De Rose and McGuire 3: 516). In *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* we are offered a "history of ... acquaintance." Catherine Morland gives "her own history" to Eleanor Tilney three times. *Mansfield Park* presents the "history of [Mr. Yates's] disappointment" about not getting to play the character he wanted to in the private theatricals at Ecclesford. In *Lady Susan*, Manwaring tells his wife's history; recent visits are often said to be worthy of "histories," and accounts of "history and character" abound. Modest Fanny Price has a history, as does Jane Fairfax. Mr. Weston gives his audience a "history of engagements" in the neighborhood. In almost all these references, history is not political history (not an account of past events of national import) but something we might call novelized history or history as fiction—that is, history as an account of the local details of a character's life. Even in *Northanger Abbey*, where political history is commented on directly as a genre, there are few explicit references to macrohistorical events.

The meanings of history that Austen employs in her novels have largely dropped out of common usage. "Let me tell you my history" has become in today's parlance a "story." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, history once signified "a relation of incidents (in early uses, either true or imaginary; later only those professedly true); a narrative, tale or story." Other definitions of history, most now obsolete, implied "a story represented dramatically" (examples from 1596 to 1877) or "a pictorial representation" in addition to what we now consider history—a branch of knowledge recording past events, often in writing—for which *Northanger Abbey*'s "real solemn history" is itself used as an *OED* example. Some scholars have asserted that the novel's eighteenth-century "rise" provided the major textual vehicle for promoting a sense of history as a chronicle of human development and subjectivity. Helpful as these arguments are, they

contribute to misleading assumptions about the status of the novel in the eighteenth century in relation to other kinds of writing. To compare Austen's writings with what we might now, following the lead of Christopher Kent, call "schoolroom history," we must ask questions about how she envisioned herself as an author in a broader field of letters ("Learning").

Austen's Letters, Gender, and Genre

Various self-understandings of Austen's authorship appear in her collected *Letters*. She reveals an interest in her own tight-knit community but also demonstrates that she was well aware of the literary marketplace beyond, that she read the writings of her contemporaries, and that she puzzled over the best way to construct her own books so as to appeal to an audience. Her letters on these topics are frequently mentioned in critical studies, but it is useful to reevaluate them in the context of genre. In a famous letter of 1813, Jane Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra that she felt *Pride and Prejudice* was "too light & bright & sparkling;—it wants shade" (JAL 203). The way she contemplated achieving this shade illustrates the kinds of writing she believed readers wanted "mixed" with their fiction: "[*Pride and Prejudice*] wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter—of sense if it could be had, if not of solemn specious nonsense—about something unconnected with the story; an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte—anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile.—I doubt your quite agreeing with me here—I know your starched Notions" (203).¹ Austen's account of what her novel should be in order to please her anticipated audience focuses on history and literary criticism, which she implies range in value from "sense" to "solemn specious nonsense." She considers her proposed additions so as to add weight and historical depth to her prose and to highlight the pleasing jocularity and pithy phrases throughout. She may be characteristically ironic when she notes that these historical and critical digressions will, by contrast, remind readers how much amusement is found in other parts of the book. Regardless of her level of sincerity, Austen demonstrates an awareness that she is competing for readers with histories and historical novels, though she appears unwilling to modify her prose to resemble them. Subsequent letters intimate why.

A year later, in 1814, Austen expresses her anxiety that Sir Walter Scott's historical novels will challenge the success of her own. Writing

1 On Scott's career as it compares with Austen's, see Millgate.

to her niece Anna, she complains: “Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones.—It is not fair.—He has Fame & Profit enough as a Poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people’s mouths.—I do not like him, & do not mean to like Waverly if I can help it—but fear I must. ... I have made up my mind to like no Novels, really, but Miss Edgeworth’s, Yours [Anna’s], & my own” (*JAL* 277–78). Why does Austen worry about Scott’s novels but not Edgeworth’s? Edgeworth’s earnings from one book rivaled the amount that Austen made during her entire lifetime.¹ It cannot be simply a matter of profit. Perhaps what is at issue is her conception of Scott as a threat to the popularity of her fictional product. Scott’s *Waverly* differed in kind from Austen’s fiction and was therefore viewed as a rival form, whereas Edgeworth’s sentimental novels (which Austen may have seen as more like her own) were not.² The position that Scott might carve out for himself as a historical novelist could have forced out a comic, domestic novelist like Austen unless she followed his generic lead into a new subgenre of fiction.

The real or perceived battles among fictional genres change their color when the circulation of novels is clarified. In the eighteenth century, novels were primarily borrowed rather than bought. Late in the century the war with France contributed to a jump in the price of new books, and though libraries continued to purchase books, those with smaller collections were at risk (Hodge 75). Circulating libraries (which effectively rented books) helped build the market for novels but did little to establish them as books one would feel compelled to add to one’s personal library (Feather, *History* 97, 99). As John Feather concludes, “From the trade’s point of view, the significance of the novel lay not in its literary merit but in its essential triviality. It was seen as an ephemeral production to be read once and then forgotten. This meant that, once the demand had been created, a continuous supply of new novels was needed to fill it. Waves of fashion swept over the novel” (*History* 97). Austen’s concerns about Scott’s success might have arisen from more than a desire for sales or “bread.” She may have feared that Scott, as an author who was already established in the more respected genre of poetry, could carry his authorial respectability over to his historical novels rather

1 Jane Austen, during her lifetime, made £685 from her writing. On Austen and Edgeworth, see Hodge 84.

2 On Edgeworth and Austen, see M. Butler, esp. chap. 5. Edgeworth also wrote historical novels, “broad and much more masculine sketches of national life,” some of which were said to have influenced Scott, including *Ennui*, *The Absentee*, and *Ormond* (M. Butler 132). The Edgeworth novels that Austen values most appear, from other references, to have been her “philosophical novels,” including *Belinda* and *Tales from a Fashionable Life*.

than to all types of fiction. Historical novels, if they became the ruling fashion, might diminish the demand for novels like Austen's. Riding the coattails of well-regarded and popular histories, historical novels could become a more exalted and acceptable form than domestic novels, long denounced as feminine trash. Austen may have recognized this potential valuation, preferring that her own novels be seen as neither trivial nor ephemeral, though not as historical in either a factual or a romantic strain.

Austen's wariness of history far predates Scott's novel-writing days. How did her skeptical stance toward history arise?¹ Her letters show her contending with historical writing, especially in her often-cited correspondence with James Stanier Clarke, the librarian and chaplain of the prince regent (later George IV). Clarke was subsequently librarian of Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, husband of the prince regent's daughter Charlotte. Clarke and Austen exchanged letters about her willingness to dedicate a novel to the prince regent, which she did with *Emma* in 1816. Along the way, Clarke made free with suggestions for topics he believed she should pursue, insisting that she should write about a clergyman. Clarke went so far as to propose that material from his own life might be used to build a plot. Austen's negative responses to these suggestions, couched as modesty rather than outright defiance, need not be read straightforwardly. She tells Clarke that she cannot write about a clergyman because she is "the most unlearned, & uninformed Female who ever dared to be an Authoress"—probably a polite plea to be released from Clarke's unwelcome ideas (JAL 306).

Undaunted, Clarke's advice continued in subsequent letters. He asked Austen to consider dedicating her next work to Prince Leopold and said it might be "any Historical Romance illustrative of the History of the august house of Cobourg," which Clarke claimed would "just now be very interesting" (JAL 311). Her response was, again, a pointed refusal:

You are very, very kind in your hints as to the sort of Composition which might recommend me at present, & I am fully sensible that a Historical Romance, founded on the House of Saxe Cobourg might be much more to the purpose of Profit

1 John Dussinger has suggested three possible answers: "Austen's silence about such momentous historical happenings may be attributed to one or more of the following causes: 1) a provincial's indifference toward the public world in general; 2) a comic novelist's aesthetic distancing of her story from local history; and 3) a late eighteenth-century woman writer's reluctance, or inability, to enter into the discourse of patriarchal politics" ("Jane" 33). This chapter and future work on Austen should add more possibilities to Dussinger's list.

or Popularity, than such pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in—but I could no more write a Romance than an Epic Poem.—I could not sit seriously down to write a serious Romance under any other motive than to save my Life, & if it were indispensable for me to keep it up & never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first Chapter.—No—I must keep to my own style & go in my own Way; And though I may never succeed again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other. (312)

It is difficult to know how much of this letter to Clarke is deliberate posturing and how much true confession. I agree with Donald Greene, who detects “no sense of real limitation in [Austen’s] expression of inability” in this letter (152). However, Austen does not explain her distaste for writing historical fiction out of an ignorance of history per se, as she implied before. If this letter is to be believed, her refusal resulted from her wish *not* to be “serious.” Clarke’s proposal would have involved pleasing royalty with her characterizations—perchance at penalty of her life and livelihood. If she followed his suggestions to compose a historical romance, Austen would have had to paint Saxe-Coburgian characters, despite their shortcomings, in high heroic fashion. She must have believed that in her comic, ironic style she was better able to set down the general moral truths she wanted to tell.

Austen initially pleads her sex as the reason she should not tackle historical fiction, implying that “unlearned” female authors must not dare to attempt such work. She must have known this was fallacious. Austen knew the gothic historical fiction of Charlotte Smith and Harriet Lee. Her mother’s cousin, “Aunt Cooke,” had published anonymously a historical novel set in the interregnum, *Battleridge, an Historical Tale Founded on Facts*, which the family was “expected to read” (Tomalin 149). Even closer to home, her brother James’s periodical the *Loiterer* published an issue on history’s virtues.¹ Austen was by no means uninformed when it came to history or historical fiction. We need to turn to her earlier writings to make sense of the ways she opposed her novels to histories, because, as Clifford Siskin has maintained, she “poses not just an individual enigma but a disciplinary one” (52). Austen’s relationship to history arose from more than a predilection for comic forms. Though her surviving letters

1 David Nokes discusses history and the *Loiterer* in relation to Austen’s writings, finding hers a feminist answer to her brother’s positions (123–24).

may imply otherwise, she clearly gave a lot of thought to historical discourse. ...

***Northanger Abbey*: Novel Approaches to History**

Because her name has long been synonymous with restraint, Austen is rarely thought of as combative; but in *Northanger Abbey*, even more than in the *History of England*, we glimpse her as she engages in written warfare. The stakes were high—success or failure as a writer. Her place in the literary market, and ultimately in the history of letters, was being determined. We can read back from the outcome as she could not.¹ *Northanger Abbey* has gained a reputation as the definitive commentary on the history of late eighteenth-century fiction, as A. Walton Litz maintains (19). Austen's comments go beyond the realm of fiction writing, however. Her first completed novel (and her last published) shows most directly how she understood her fiction's relation to history writing and how she differentiated her work from historical texts.² Viewing Austen's struggle in the context of late eighteenth-century genres other than fiction allows us to speculate about why she may have sought distance from them.³

1 Language as melodramatic as my own is used by Katrin Burlin: "Jane Austen's motive is to fight for her craft, to prove that it is the responsible novelist who protects us by teaching us through his art to recognize and discriminate among the fictions of life and art alike" (89–90).

2 On the dates of composition of *Northanger Abbey* (which are not easy to fix), see Chard 133–36; Emden; Mansell 40–41; and Southam, "*Sanditon*"

4. On the questionable claim that the Bath section and the Abbey section were written at different times, see Moler 31. Cassandra Austen, who was responsible for naming the novel *Northanger Abbey*, dates it from 1798. Austen had titled the novel *Susan* when she sold it to Crosby in 1803. Crosby did not publish it, and Austen eventually bought it back from him in 1816 for the price he had paid: £10. Austen referred to it at this time as *Miss Catherine*. Internal evidence proves revisions must have been made after 1798, though how much the novel was revised is subject to debate. The work was published posthumously, with *Persuasion*, in 1818. Meenakshi Mukherjee speculates that Austen's "playful subversion of some of the conventions of the popular novel in *Northanger Abbey* resulted in the non-publication of the manuscript in her lifetime, even though a publisher had paid for it," but the reasons it was not published have not been substantiated (31). B.C. Southam suggests that Crosby may have "thought that the Gothic market was overcrowded" (Southam, "*Sanditon*" 4).

3 In my article "(Re)Making Fiction and Philosophy: Austen's *Northanger Abbey*" I consider *Northanger Abbey* in comparison with philosophical as well as historical discourse.

The question whether schoolroom history helped to mold sensible and qualified females—implicit in the *History of England*—is taken up directly in *Northanger Abbey*. Though the novel has received more attention as a result of renewed critical interest in gothic and sentimental novels, its place in Austen's oeuvre remains somewhat unstable.¹ In relation to the gothic tradition, *Northanger Abbey* has been extricated from it as parody (M. Williams) and implicated in it as imitator (Wilt).² It has been called the “most political of Jane Austen's novels” (Hopkins) as well as the “shortest and lightest” (Anderson) and the “most trivially entertaining” (G. Levine). On the level of character, Catherine Morland has been defined as a self-actualized heroine (Reddy; Morgan) and as a colonized protagonist (Cottom 21), and Henry in turn has been considered a benevolent mentor and a bully. Though these critical debates may tell us more about today's literary criticism than about Austen, there are parallels to be noted between her day and our own. Austen too was involved in labeling and classifying her work as a particular kind of writing—a task that involved differentiating novels like hers from other genres, notably history.

Although *Northanger Abbey* is “structured like a Chinese box of fiction within fictions within fictions,” as Laura Mooneyham has described it, the plot is relatively uncomplicated (1). An unremarkable young woman (Catherine Morland) is taken by her chaperones to Bath, where—unknown to her and to the reader—she is mistakenly thought to be an heiress. Her initial circle of acquaintance forms a crucial subplot. The sycophantic Thorpes hinder rather than advance the novel's most significant romance. Catherine meets a rich and eligible man (Henry Tilney) whose father (General Tilney) promotes the match and invites her to stay at their home, Northanger Abbey. When the general finds out that Catherine is of much more modest means than he was led to believe, he rudely sends her away, much to the horror of his son and his amiable daughter (Eleanor Tilney). Eventually all is forgiven, Catherine is deemed morally exemplary,

- 1 In 1976 B.C. Southam wrote, “While each of the other novels has attracted a substantial body of critical writing and possesses its own individual critical tradition, *Northanger Abbey* has inspired rather little, the unstated implication being that [it is] ... the least in need of commentary” (*Jane Austen: “Northanger”* 20). This can no longer be argued, though *Northanger Abbey* has never received the unequivocal critical praise given the other novels. Typical is Joan Aiken's assessment that the novel is an “exuberant, faulty masterpiece” (54).
- 2 Amy Elizabeth Smith maintains that readings of *Northanger Abbey* to date have been “somewhat lopsided” in their consideration of gothic novels and lack of focus on the reverberations with the sentimental genre (40).

and she and Henry are wed, having secured the blessings of both families. What makes this novel far more entertaining than this sketch might suggest is Catherine's unworthiness as a heroine and her misguided penchant for seeing the world as a gothic novel. As a quixotic woman, Catherine is quaintly lovable like Arabella in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), though she has neither Arabella's panache nor her fortune.¹ The eerie gothic novel that Austen uses as Catherine's false reality is in some ways a more vivid foil than Arabella's chivalric French romances. At issue in both books is what constitutes dangerous reading for young women—and what does not—though Lennox and Austen encountered different contexts for the reception of their fiction.

By the late eighteenth century, the caveat against women's reading fiction—prevalent in earlier decades—had softened. In 1798 Austen did not face the same struggle for legitimacy as did the previous generation of fiction writers, but novels like hers did not yet benefit from high status or stable ground. What a novel should include, how it was to be defined, and how it should be weighed against other kinds of writing were still being negotiated. Austen attempted to convince readers that fiction could be authoritative and educational rather than just trivial, entertaining, or morally dangerous. In *Northanger Abbey* the narrator several times justifies her undertaking—defining the elements of good and bad reading and writing. Austen reveals through this defense that novels were not established to the degree she would have liked. In the end her novels helped change the definition of valuable and educational, as well as “literary” and “historical,” writing.

The famous justification of the novel in *Northanger Abbey*'s chapter 5 has been a favorite with critics, and most recognize that “in writing her first novel, Jane Austen was ... concerned to stake out her literary territory” (Monaghan, *Jane Austen: Structure* 16). Austen's narrator maintains that when any narrator or heroine disparages novels, the authors who express these opinions (and the readers who embrace them) necessarily become ludicrous:

Yes, novels;—for 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

1 George Whalley believes that “At best *Northanger Abbey* is a sort of *Donna Quixote*” (127). See also Kauvar. Rachel Brownstein notes that Catherine cannot truly be a Quixote figure because she is “too modest to presume herself a heroine of romance” and because “it would be hard for any girl to do so in a world like hers, where people read novels and discuss them together” (40).

which they are themselves adding—joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas, if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it. Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans. Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body. Although our productions have afforded more ... pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. From pride, ignorance, or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers. (*Northanger Abbey* [1966] 37)¹

The amusing passage defending novels also alludes to serious matters, as most readers agree.² By calling on her audience to join her in healing the injured and unfashionable body of her text—to take pride in the purveyed intelligence and pleasing form she implies that her novel offers—Austen argues that her book offers readers the same benefits formerly believed to be the provenance of other genres.

When interpreting this passage, some critics have been quick to see the injured body she invokes as an injured female body. They point to a subsequent statement—“Oh! it is only a novel!”—after which the narrator proclaims: “It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda”; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language” (NA 38). With its references to the writings of Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth, this statement has been used by some to argue that Austen invokes a women’s literary tradition, creating a bond with her sister authors. As I have proposed elsewhere, it is also possible that she is using Burney and Edgeworth for her own purposes.³ Austen’s

1 Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text as NA.

2 Everett Zimmerman writes, “In her juvenilia Jane Austen burlesqued these failings of popular fiction; in *Northanger Abbey* she attempts to resuscitate the fiction and certain values on which it is based” (“Function” 62).

3 See my introduction to *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism*, esp. 8–9. Without engaging issues of feminist criticism, Frank Bradbrook remarks on this reference to Edgeworth as a possible reproach (113), and he points to an even earlier source for this reading: C. Thomson (45–46).

literary “sisters” did not label their productions novels. Edgeworth called *Belinda* (1801) “a moral tale” because she considered novels immoral.¹ Burney insisted that *Camilla* (1796) was a “work” and not a novel. Rather than embracing these female authors as comrades, Austen co-opted them to advance her own classificatory cause. She may not have meant Edgeworth or Burney any harm, but she preferred to forge a literary relation to these authors on her own terms rather than on theirs.

In delineating what reviewers should applaud in novels, Austen’s narrator mocks the “abilities of the nine-hundredth abridger of the *History of England*” and “the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior with a paper from the *Spectator* and a chapter from Sterne” (NA 37). She sees these miscellanies and abridgments as garnering too much praise and attention. But is this a feminist critique? Margaret Kirkham answers yes, claiming that each of the authors chastised is sexist: “Jane Austen’s skepticism about ‘History’ is a feminist skepticism in which she anticipates a later age. ... The ‘man’ of whom she speaks contemptuously is a miscellanist and incurs scorn because he lacks the original creative gifts of the novelist, but his choice of authors also has a feminist point. Milton, Prior, and Pope had all written works to which a feminist might take exception” (69). Kirkham’s is a possible reading. Equally convincing to me is the idea that Austen views putting together “elegant extracts” as a worthless, unoriginal act that does not deserve commendation.

After holding the novel above history and poetry (and above collections of excerpts of “great works”), the narrator describes a mock female reader who would not be afraid to show people that she was reading something like the *Spectator*. The narrator concludes that this reader is foolish because the *Spectator* does not show good taste. If we take the narrator’s word, the “greatest powers of the mind” and “thorough knowledge of human nature” are no longer to be found in past accounts, like the abridger’s or the *Spectator*’s: “the substance of [the *Spectator*’s] papers so often consisting in the statement of improbable circumstances, unnatural characters, and topics of conversation, which no longer concern any one living; and their language, too, frequently so coarse as to give no very favorable idea of the age that could endure it” (NA 38). By devaluing the writings and opinions of the past, Austen’s narrator claims for the emerging novel the primary connection to current events and opinions—things

1 Edgeworth too wanted to change the way novels were labeled, wishing that a name could be devised to distinguish “philosophical novels” from “trifling, silly productions” (M. Butler 131).

that concern those “now living.” The *Spectator* is faulted because its subject and its diction, its old-fashioned qualities and improprieties, will reflect poorly on the current age. Instead of concentrating on past history, or even on Whig histories illustrating how the present is shaped by lessons learned from the past, *Northanger Abbey* implies that reading present-tense “histories” (in the form of the novel of manners) offers readers the best option.

Northanger Abbey must be viewed within the generic context in which it was written, a task that has proved difficult for critics when dealing with Catherine Morland and her comments on history.¹ The well-meaning Catherine devalues history, but she is shown to be a naive reader. She thinks the world operates in the same manner as her favorite gothic novels, rife with haunted abbeys, suspected murderers, kidnappings and other dark deeds. In addition to being a devotee of gothic novels, Catherine says she hates reading history. She disparages historical writings for their lack of entertainment value, not primarily for their lack of probability or contemporary relevance, though these issues too arise. In chapter 14, when Catherine is on a walk at Beechen Cliff with her soon-to-be-hero Henry Tilney and his sister Eleanor, the conversation turns to the premier gothic novelist, Ann Radcliffe, and her *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which each of them has read and enjoyed. Catherine tells Eleanor that she does “not much like any other” reading than novels, except perhaps poetry, plays, and travels. “History,” she says, “real solemn history, I cannot be interested in” (108). “Real solemn history” signifies schoolroom history for Catherine Morland, but Eleanor counters that she enjoys reading history. Catherine launches into an often-quoted critique of that genre: “I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does

1 “In *Northanger Abbey*,” Jocelyn Harris has convincingly declared, “Jane Austen transforms philosophy into fiction, but what she attacks in that fiction is history. Her defense of the novel, like other famous defenses of the imagination, claims superiority to them both” (26). Harris makes the provocative case that in chapter 5 Austen implies that “historical writing soon looks out-of-date” (27) and that it is “in effect the essay that she said she omitted from *Pride and Prejudice*” (30). Harris further argues, “The upstart novelist challenges the philosopher and the historian, standing (as Sidney said of the poet) between the precepts of one and the examples of the other. . . . she stakes the bold claim that fiction usurps poetry as well” (32–33). Harris’s argument has been important in formulating my own. It opens up questions similar to those I have been discussing by comparing and contrasting *Northanger Abbey*, John Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, and Sir Philip Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry*. In making these important comparisons, Harris necessarily brackets off the question of how Austen’s novel might be gauged in a larger field of writings.

not either vex or weary me. 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; and yet I think it very odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention ... [which] is what delights me in other books” (108).

Eleanor responds that she finds history to be good reading and that she believes it is as true or as false as anything that one does not observe oneself. Eleanor likes in history what Catherine does not find there: imaginative speeches, whether they are produced by Hume and Robertson or by Caractacus, Agricola, or Alfred the Great (109). In effect, Eleanor (who has been characterized as better educated and wiser than Catherine) reads history to be entertained by human nature—the things for which novels, and specifically Austen’s, would become valued. Even while perusing schoolroom history, Eleanor envisions herself as a reader of what we might call history as fiction, whereas Catherine understands schoolroom history to be the furthest thing from the gothic novels she enjoys reading. I agree with Christopher Kent that Eleanor, rather than Catherine, is the character whose views the novel endorses.¹ Eleanor does not criticize histories or historians. Instead she uses their words on her own terms. She seeks neither dates nor events but insights into the history and character of important personalities. Eleanor reads histories as if they were novels.

The conversation of Catherine, Eleanor, and Henry turns to the role history has traditionally played in educating young people. Catherine responds that she knows only men who read history by choice. She says that she will take Eleanor’s example of enjoying history and no longer feel sorry for the writers of it: “If people like to read [histories], it is all very well, but to be at so much trouble in filling great volumes, which, as I used to think, nobody would ever willingly look into ... always struck me as a hard fate, and though I know it is all very right and necessary, I have often wondered at the person’s courage that could sit down on purpose to do it” (109). Catherine does not

1 As Kent writes, “There is every reason to believe that Eleanor Tilney, who was ‘fond of history,’ better represented Jane Austen’s own mature views than did Catherine Morland” (“Learning” 68). On Eleanor, Catherine, and imagination in the Beechen Cliff episode, see Morgan, “Guessing” 117–18. In Frans De Bruyn’s interesting article “Edmund Burke’s Gothic Romance” these insights are given to Catherine. De Bruyn claims that Catherine Morland “acknowledges a close generic kinship between histories and novels and pertinently questions the consistency of her own taste, given her avowed love of fiction” (415). Some of De Bruyn’s arguments, including that “the stated aims of historians and novelists often converged remarkably in the period” and that Austen belongs to a tradition of “‘historical’ novel-writing,” overlap with my own (415).

merely question the historian's "courage," she criticizes the messenger and the message. History is a necessary cultural evil, she implies, but it is so boring that its practitioners deserve pity as much as praise. Henry believes the historian has a higher aim than Catherine assigns him—to instruct and not to torment himself or his readers. At issue is what kind of reading is frivolous and what edifying, as well as what kind is best used to educate the young. Catherine's point is not fully articulated, however, and the conversation moves to matters of taste about which Catherine "had nothing to say" (110). Henry has the upper hand and persuades both women to come around to his point of view (110–11).

After this discussion and another on the picturesque, the conversation devolves once again from a comment that Catherine makes. Catherine has heard that "something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London" (112), referring to a gothic novel. Eleanor mistakes her meaning, believing that she describes a "dreadful riot" in the making (112). Henry serves as the all-knowing buffer, clearing up the misunderstanding between the two with his characteristically pompous explanation:

My dear Eleanor, the riot is only in your own brain. ... Miss Morland has been talking of nothing more dreadful than a new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duodecimo volumes. ... And you, Miss Morland, my stupid sister has mistaken all your clearest expressions. You talked of expected horrors in London—and instead of instantly conceiving, as any rational creature would have done, that such words could relate only to a circulating library, she immediately pictured to herself a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George's Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood. ... Forgive her stupidity. (113)

This passage has become a favorite with critics of *Northanger Abbey* and history, who have tried to determine which riot Austen alluded to. The anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780, in which there was widespread destruction and three hundred people were killed, have been raised as a possibility, as have subsequent riots in the 1790s in which St. George's Fields was a central location.¹ The conclusion I

1 On the "something shocking" passage as a historical reference, see Litz 64; Southam, "Regulated Hatred" 124–26; Hopkins 216–17; Rothstein, "Lessons" 29; Paulson, *Representations* 216; and Loveridge 4. Rothstein notes that "St. George's Fields were the common gathering ground of any riotous mob from the early seventeenth century on" (29).

draw from this section resembles Nancy Armstrong's: this conversation among Catherine and the Tilneys "takes place against a landscape where fiction displaces history" ("Nineteenth-Century Jane Austen" 235). Armstrong sees *Northanger Abbey*'s displacement as a "narrowing down" of history in Austen's writings as a whole, allowing for the achievement of particular political effects (236–37). Her displacement of history also allows for novelistic effects. Beginning with a discussion of novels and moving on to history and the picturesque (landscape), *Northanger Abbey*'s chapter 14 displaces history twice—once in the form of "real solemn history" and once in the form of "riots"—only to return us on each occasion to the topic of fiction, as well as to the fiction we continue to read, the second half of *Northanger Abbey*.¹

Austen and "Herstory"

Northanger Abbey makes light of more than gothic conventions. At the least, it makes light of histories too, perhaps going so far as to oppose itself to them.² Many have viewed the "novel as opposed to history" maneuver as Austen's attempt to change the status of women in standard historical accounts. Some have cited Catherine's words as meaning that Austen was making a prescient call for "herstory," for historical accounts that—as a corrective—centered on women rather than on men. In such arguments Catherine's pronouncements are taken to be Austen's own. Austen is then congratulated for realizing before her time that women were excluded from histories. To accept such a formulation is to miss a more complex relationship between women and history at work in this novel. Histories by, about, and for women were not unheard of in the decades before Austen wrote these lines, though they by no means dominated the field. Histories of women's history have been neglected, in part as a result of the power of writers like Austen. By the late twentieth century, women's relationship to history in the early modern

1 In Eric Rothstein's view, the Beechen Cliff conversation is not about the triumph of fiction over history but about the components of gothic fiction: "One can see that the subjects discussed are really an analysis of the Gothic novel into components: words, pleasure for readers, history, didacticism, picturesque scenery, and the violence of life which it professes to imitate" ("Lessons" 18–19).

2 As Ronald Paulson has maintained, however, the gothic and history should not be strictly opposed: "We notice the difference between gothic fiction and history, but also the similarity. ... The gothic did in fact serve as a metaphor with which some contemporaries in England tried to understand what was happening across the channel in the 1790s" (*Representations* 217).

era was believed to resemble Catherine Morland's picture of it, however ironically Austen may have meant to render it when she wrote *Northanger Abbey*.

Contemporary feminist critics have used Catherine's conclusions about history, fiction, and women toward a variety of ends. Cataloging the uses of Catherine's pronouncements provides a glimpse into how critics in recent decades have appropriated Austen on the subject of history and gender. Educator Lyn Reese begins her *Women in the World Curriculum Resources* workshops for teachers by citing Catherine as an authority on both history and women. In *The Women's History of the World*, Rosalind Miles uses Austen as an authority to ground her own authorial undertaking, putting Catherine Morland's words directly into Austen's mouth. Miles writes, "As Jane Austen demurely remarked, 'I often think it odd that history should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention'" (xii). In a chapter titled "Woman's Work," Miles takes Catherine's "real solemn history" speech as its epigraph (117). David Nokes, in his recent biography of Austen, writes of Catherine Morland's comments on history, "These were Jane's thoughts, too" (124).

Even writers who address a scholarly audience have similarly mischaracterized *Northanger Abbey*. In their far-ranging and useful multivolume study *A History of Women in the West*, Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot sum up their introduction with Catherine Morland's words, professing a hope that Jane Austen would find their own efforts less tiresome (ix–xxiii). Duby and Perrot introduce their study with assumptions similar to Catherine's: that history and women were, and had long been, categories that did not overlap. Susan Groag Bell and Karen Offen's collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historical writings, *Women, the Family and Freedom: The Debate in Documents*, on the other hand, takes this section of *Northanger Abbey* for its epigraph, partially to argue against it:

The omission of women from the histories discussed by Jane Austen's characters is misleading. The debate about women was unmistakably present in the dialogues of popes and kings, and in the consideration of wars and natural disasters, even though the chroniclers did not refer to it. Indeed, the "woman's question" may be the most central, yet overlooked, "quarrel" in the political and intellectual history of Western nations. It became an issue precisely because it challenged long-standing ideas of male dominance, which had remained implicit in Western political and social thought—published by men—until the seventeenth century. (1)

Bell and Offen rightly conclude that Catherine's claims about the omission of women from history are misleading because the woman question has received a good deal of unacknowledged historical attention. At the end of this section, however, they claim of their own anthology, "Here, in contrast to the books read by Jane Austen and her contemporaries, women are on every page" (1).¹ Bell and Offen present a contradictory tension: Austen misleads us by suggesting that the woman question was not present in the chronicles of history, but in the case of "the books read by Austen and her contemporaries," women were indeed often absent. This statement takes Catherine Morland at her word once again, mistaking her for an authority on books.

The most extreme—and certainly the most influential—example of Austen as a proponent of "herstory" can be found in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), a one-time Goliath in feminist literary criticism that has been both appreciatively cited and widely criticized in the two decades since its publication. Though Gilbert and Gubar rightly conclude that "Austen attempted through self-imposed novelistic limitations to define a secure place," they make the suspect claim that her writings "imply a criticism, even a rejection, of the world at large" (108). Gilbert and Gubar equate Austen with Catherine, asserting that "both Catherine and Austen realize that history and politics ... have been completely beyond the reach of women's experience" (134). They believe that Austen shows "sympathy and identification with Catherine Morland's ignorance" (133). Although they recognize that Catherine's views are raised only to be criticized within the novel, Gilbert and Gubar determine that Catherine "is, after all, correct, for the knowledge conferred by historians does seem irrelevant to the private lives of most women" (32). I might add, using this standard, that history is irrelevant to the lives of most men as well.

Gilbert and Gubar make a final, incredible argument about Austen and history that sums up their views: "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 are almost completely absent from its pages" (134). They attribute Austen's supposed motives to feminist anger, commenting that her novel is "not unfittingly pronounced North/Anger" (135). Austen's anger

1 For another account that understands Catherine's complaint as anticipating today's feminist criticism, see Tanner 44.

(if it can be so described) may well have been an authorial anger, a generic anger—the anger of a writer who was competing for readers with historical texts—both “real solemn” histories and historical gothic novels. To say that in Austen history is a “matter of indifference to women” is patently untrue.¹ History was of paramount importance to Austen.

Recent feminist scholarship has theorized British women’s writings to better effect for at least two reasons. First, an abundance of previously little known and unknown texts have now come to light, and second, theories of women’s writing have begun to address historical and cultural differences. In a discussion of women’s historical writings, for example, Isobel Grundy alludes to Catherine Morland’s characterization of history. Grundy recognizes that Austen’s Catherine is not a precocious expert on women and history:

Women’s history before the nineteenth century—history written about, or by, or for women—is generally assumed to be non-existent, a classic absence or silence. Examination, however, shows that the presumed absence is merely an absence of what we have mistakenly expected to find. Fully-fledged female writers of mainstream, national political history emerged late: Catherine Macaulay in Britain, 1763, and Mercy Otis Warren in the USA, 1805. The differences of these women from their male peers (though they exist and merit attention) are less immediately striking than their likenesses. Their great works fall under the stricture of Jane Austen’s Catherine Morland about history writing. (“Women’s History?” 126)

Grundy’s reading shows that Catherine is correct in her assumptions not only about histories written by men but about those written by women as well. That Macaulay and Warren produced histories similar to those of their male contemporaries is an accurate but, in some circles, potentially unpopular feminist critical claim. If we agree with Grundy, Catherine not only is disparaging male writers of history, she must necessarily be seen as criticizing women writers too. The fact of women’s sometime adherence to the mainstream of historical

1 Christopher Kent has asserted that “Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have recently attempted to ‘dehistoricize’ Austen in the name of feminist literary criticism. They choose to identify her with Catherine Morland and maintain that she ‘refused to take historical “reality” seriously.’ ... This feminist version of history is the mirror image of the conventional chauvinistic view of history as a men’s club. Happily, this gender stereotyping of history as a subject (one which, if it existed in Austen’s time, was if anything reversed) is currently dissolving” (“Learning” 69).

discourse should give pause to those who posit Austen the herstorian. Perhaps the point is not that Austen's *Northanger Abbey* presents us with a male versus female issue in its comments on history but that it is a matter of stereotypically masculine versus feminine discourses in Austen's time. History was never completely identified as "male" in its production or content, just as novels were not wholly "female." Each, however, had aspects of conventionally perceived femininity and masculinity grafted on to it. In her writing, Austen did not replicate these assumed gender divisions, nor did she seek to overturn them. Instead she attempted to integrate them. She took the "masculine" benefits that were said to accrue to female readers of experiential, true genres (like history) and joined them to the "feminine" novel to create something that was, at least at the moment of its combination, not easily classified in terms of gender.¹

The strongest argument against viewing *Northanger Abbey* as a call for "herstory" involves a return to the novel's plot. Until the end of the book, when she is lectured by Henry and cured of her gothic predilections, Catherine cannot be mistaken for a trustworthy authority on anything. Chapter 14 also shows that *Northanger Abbey* is not a text that empowers women to make their voices heard. At the end of her critique of history, Catherine is silenced by Henry, and the narrator ironically suggests that the woman unfortunate enough to know anything should "conceal it as well as she can" (111). This sentence puzzles critics, who either take the sentiment at face value and see Austen's conservatism or believe her statement is sarcastic evidence of feminist anger. Whether the narrator's aside is meant to instruct the naive Catherine, the more accomplished Eleanor, or Austen's readers remains unclear. Whether it is meant as a critique of society, of Henry, or of assertive, intelligent women or as another of Austen's trademark ironic asides cannot easily be determined. The novel encourages us to laugh at the characters, at society, and at ourselves. In Austen's fictional world, novels (as opposed to "shaded," dry histories) make us laugh. In addition, novels teach what history cannot—how to function in the present. For Austen, novels offer edifying pleasure without haughty, didactic pain.

Walter Anderson is surely right when he opines that in *Northanger Abbey* "Austen intends her work, through its superiority in reality

1 Ina Ferris has made a similar but opposite claim—that Sir Walter Scott incorporated the masculine world of political or public history into the form of the novel, a largely female domain, thus changing the ground on which the novel was classified. That Scott's novels have been subsumed by Austen's in the canon tells us more about the twentieth century than about previous judgments.

and substance, to compete with and ultimately to outstrip Gothic Romances,” but there were additional competitors to face (495).¹ Austen matched her novel to history as well, when the boundaries of what both genres might be (or become) were shifting. *Northanger Abbey* proposes leaving behind the pedantry of schoolroom history while keeping its supposedly good qualities of probable events and natural behavior. Probability and naturalness were factors considered missing from history as fiction (especially gothic historical fiction), which was put down for its fancifulness. Austen gives her history as fiction a more substantive turn. In taking certain elements from schoolroom history and historical fiction and in making romance probable, she offers a reconciliation in her own writings. *Northanger Abbey* is hardly the only vehicle through which history exits and literature enters as more edifying reading material. Enlisting history as its “secret partner” and thereby “enacting a sophisticated reclassification of itself,” as Joseph Litvak puts it, *Northanger Abbey* improves its status (“Charming Men” 255).² Austen’s novel is an important artifact in valuing novels over histories, complicitous in change that we might now be tempted to see as inevitable.

Austen lived and wrote on the threshold of a new era of and for history. For her, novels and histories were presented as competitors more often than as coconspirators. If we attempt to move beyond Catherine Morland’s easy distinction of “male equals history, female equals fancy (or fiction),” we find ourselves in less charted waters. The name “Morland” has offered critics material for interpreting *Northanger Abbey*’s economic meanings, and it offers similar possibilities for understanding generic implications. Morland as a proper noun might signify Catherine as a site through which “more land” will be accrued in the joining of property through marriage, as Maaja Stewart has suggested (16).³ We might also imagine Austen’s era as

1 As Mark Loveridge has noted, *Northanger Abbey* “has recently come to be recognized as a transitional work in a much wider sense: as a work highly suggestive of changes in novelistic technique that were taking place between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (2). I think, however, that Loveridge’s “wider sense” could be wider still.

2 Litvak and I agree on the role that historical discourse plays in *Northanger Abbey*, but he finds Catherine Morland’s thoughts on “real, solemn history” to be Austen’s “rather sophisticated feminist critique”—a conclusion I disagree with. Litvak’s essay goes on to argue for *Northanger Abbey* as a preparation for the “homophobic aversion therapy” found in the nineteenth-century novel (“Charming Men”). Litvak’s work on *Northanger Abbey* also appears in his *Strange Gourmets*.

3 Stewart writes, “Catherine Morland’s name reflects her fate: she gains more land through marriage” (16).

interested in the lay of the land of newly forming written genres. Austen's building up of novels at the expense of history may be an attempt to acquire "more land" for the burgeoning field of literature.

Austen has a legitimate place in the pantheon of British feminist writers, but she should no longer simplistically prop up arguments about the absence of women in mainstream national histories during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Catherine's views of history must not be assigned to Austen, and Austen's views of history (as illustrated in *Northanger Abbey's* chapter 5, in the *History of England*, and in her *Letters*) must continue to be examined in broader generic contexts. Unlike many of her predecessors and contemporaries, male and female, Austen positioned her writings in a way that gave them extraordinary posthumous staying power in literary history. To attribute this fact to the universality of her subject matter or to her literary genius is to ignore her professional savvy and ultimate generic good fortune, as well as to imply that other forgotten writers have deserved the attention they did not (or do not) receive. It is even possible that, rather than standing before us as a founder of herstory, Austen and her writings worked against the larger cultural recognition of the contributions of women to historiography. Austen's nineteenth-century literary success and twentieth-century lionization may have inadvertently propelled forces that prevented women's history and history by women from emerging as a widespread scholarly concern for more than a century and a half after her death. More to her credit, Austen is responsible for attracting many of us to a life of historically focused feminist literary study.

(2003)

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