

“From Involuntary Object to Voluntary Spy: Female Agency, Novels, and the Marketplace in *Northanger Abbey*”

[Susan Zlotnick argues in this essay that the “two major preoccupations” of *Northanger Abbey* are reading and shopping. She explores the ways in which the economic and the literary shape this novel, particularly the development of the female characters as agents in the marriage market. Arguing that the Gothic—particularly as it is embodied in the novels of Ann Radcliffe—developed at least some agency for its female characters, Zlotnick then makes the case that in *Northanger Abbey* Austen, too, is particularly concerned with her female characters’ agency. Catherine Morland, with her immersion in novels, achieves a degree of agency that the two other female protagonists, Isabella Thorpe and Eleanor Tilney, do not.]

When Catherine Morland, the naive heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, discovers a washing-bill buried inside the black cabinet at Northanger Abbey, the incident is generally read as a moment of comic deflation, in which the heroine’s gothic expectations are undone by the sheer weight of the banality of daily life at the Abbey. However, while Austen parodies the gothic in *Northanger Abbey*, she also employs its narrative strategies, so that this moment of banality is also one of sublimity. The washing-bill is both a joke and a genuine uncanny artifact, indexing what Catherine continually represses: the economic motivations that haunt her courtship plot. In this way, *Northanger Abbey* participates in what Edward Copeland identifies as the imperative of 1790s gothic novels, texts that are “inevitably economic” and that feature heroines who are “victim[s] of an unforgiving economy” (*Women* 7). The pleasures and pains of living in a market economy consume the characters in Austen’s novel, and Catherine Morland is hardly immune to the appeal of shopping.

Indeed, Catherine arrives at the private humiliation of the washing-bill incident through her own participation in the literary marketplace, as a reader of gothic bestsellers. Catherine’s reading practices as much as her spending habits align *Northanger Abbey* with other novels produced during the period, for as Jacqueline Pearson notes, by the 1790s a novel-reading heroine had become a literary cliché:

between 1752, when Charlotte Lennox wrote *the Female Quixote*, and 1824 when Sarah Green wrote *Scotch Novel Reading*, a number of novels, tales, poems and educational works centre on full-scale critical analyses of female reading practices, becoming especially common from the 1790s. ... It seems there was hardly any crime, sin or personal catastrophe that injudicious reading was not held to cause directly or indirectly. (8)

Austen's habitual realism transforms the dangers ensuing from "injudicious reading" into amusing embarrassment, and this transformation usefully reminds us that Austen aims at multiple targets in *Northanger Abbey*: the novel's parody of the gothic is, as Natalie Neill notes, part and parcel of its "parody of the female Quixote plot" (165). Of course, in both cases the novel's tactics are recuperative, and as numerous critics have convincingly argued, *Northanger Abbey* ultimately defends female reading from accusations that it inevitably led to "murder, suicide, rape ... prostitution, adultery, and divorce" (Pearson 8) by offering an alternative vision, in which wise and judicious female reading emerges as a possible antidote to female victimization.¹

Austen's simultaneous revision of the economic gothic and the female Quixote plot point to the fact that shopping and reading are the novel's two major preoccupations. There have been many excellent and useful studies of the relationship between the eighteenth-century novel and the rise to dominance of the capitalist marketplace, and this essay draws on these works to address how the intimate connection between the literary and the economic plays out in *Northanger Abbey*, an intimacy signaled by the washing-bill itself, which efficiently connects the two.² The "collection of washing-bills" (186), as Austen's narrative finally denominates the various scraps of paper Catherine finds hidden in the black cabinet, captures the essence of human interactions in the novel: the financial dealings recorded in the washing-bills between the gentleman visitor to the Abbey (Eleanor's future husband) and a laundress not only call attention to the cash-nexus at the heart of the novel's romantic entanglements but also to the asymmetrical relations of power between men and women in the economy. The privileged women in the novel do not literally serve or service men like General Tilney but they figuratively serve to

1 See Jerenic 185, Johnson 40, Pearson 212, and Waldron 40.

2 In addition to Edward Copeland's book on the economic subtext of the Gothic novel, see those by Bellamy, Kaufmann, Lynch, and Thompson.

further the men's economic interests.¹ Indeed, one might be inclined to read the bills as a distillation of the novel itself. They connect the novelistic and the economic as two discursive modes that represent a social world dominated by financial transactions and they link the heroine's novel reading to her discovery of the economic plots that surround her.

In this essay, I argue that *Northanger Abbey's* dual concern with shopping and reading arises from the text's interest in the marketplace and the novel as two modern sites that construct individuals as free agents. That Austen connects late eighteenth-century novels and the marketplace should not be surprising, since the realist novel's representation of characters as largely free agents is itself linked to what Catherine Gallagher defines as the "liberal economists' model of freedom (the ability to contract one's labor—or other commodities—to the highest bidder on an open market)" (7).² To be sure, the most important novels Catherine Morland reads are gothic thrillers by Ann Radcliffe, but as Donna Heiland points out, it is Radcliffe's "capacity to endow her female characters ... with agency in the public sphere that renders Radcliffe's novels so successfully feminist" (60); and the heroine of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the novel Austen both parodies and reclaims in *Northanger Abbey*, possesses "more in the way of manly spirit than men do in the volume" (*Equivocal Beings* 109), according to Claudia Johnson. In other words, the market as imagined by eighteenth-century political economists as well as the literary idiom that Austen speaks (and that later came to be known as realism) and the literary idiom she lovingly spoofs and drolly honors (the Radcliffian Gothic) share an assumption about human nature: that individuals possess a degree of free will and thus can exert some (although not absolute) control over their own fates.³ *Northanger Abbey* shows a particular interest in women's agency, or

1 Heydt-Stevenson reads the washing-bills more stringently, contending that "these financial reckonings" are the "symbolic currency of marital prostitution" (131).

2 See, for instance Gallagher 34. Suggesting that Austen's novel engages with ideas about the marketplace does not assume that Austen was reading the work of the late eighteenth-century political economists like Adam Smith. However, Michie links Austen to Smith through a shared concern over the relationship between wealth and virtue and suggests that even if she did not read Smith, she may have been familiar with the ideas of eighteenth-century political economy that circulated in the periodical press.

3 Thompson's general observation about the eighteenth-century novel can also be usefully invoked here. By offering readers "models of choice" (Thompson 12), these novels model a human subjectivity that is increasingly understood to be self-determining.

female volition, as the repetition of “voluntary” in the novel’s final chapters indicates: England is full of “voluntary spies” (145); Catherine is the victim of “a voluntary self-created delusion” (146); Isabella has “voluntarily” (151) entered into her relationship with James Morland; General Tilney’s departure from the Abbey makes “every employment voluntary” (162) for those left behind; Catherine’s sudden, unexpected return to Fullerton leaves her feeling restless, “as if nothing but motion was voluntary” (177); and in the novel’s penultimate chapter, Catherine discovers herself to have been the “involuntary, unconscious object” (181) of General Tilney and John Thorpe’s greedy speculations. The novel’s return, both linguistic and thematic, to the notion of “voluntary” female action arises from Austen’s challenge to eighteenth-century notions of female propriety, in which, according to Johnson, women “are not initiators of their own choices, but rather are receivers of men’s” (*Jane Austen* 36). Johnson makes a compelling argument for reading *Northanger Abbey* as an illustration of how the already circumscribed female power of choice, what Henry Tilney labels the “power of refusal” (54), is repeatedly threatened in the novel. However, Johnson underestimates *Northanger Abbey*’s ambitions for its female characters. *Northanger Abbey* simultaneously explores the marketplace and the novel as two discursive spaces that hold out the possibility of enhanced choice for women by seeming to model more assertive forms of agency than the mere right of refusal.

In an almost schematic way, Austen’s three female protagonists (Catherine, Isabella and Eleanor) represent different understandings of women’s relationship to the marketplace and to reading. Isabella Thorpe, whose sentimental rhetoric (derived from novels) is a mere cover for her rational and self-interested participation in the marketplace, has the greatest faith in commerce’s liberating possibilities for women, and Austen responds to her by making her the novel’s biggest loser and sending her back to London, alone and unengaged. Eleanor possesses a clear-sighted understanding of woman’s status as a commodity in the marriage market, although this insight into women’s commodification does not set her free but merely depresses and immobilizes her. So does her reading: her commitment to the “non-fictional” narratives of male historians offers her no models of women as historical actors, and thus Eleanor suffers from not having any saving illusions about her own efficacy. Roughly educated and ignorant of economics, Catherine Morland stands in contrast to Isabella, with her shameless self-promotion, as well as to Eleanor, who seems defeated by the economic realities and historical “truths” she apprehends so well. What sets Catherine apart is her novel reading.

Novels in *Northanger Abbey* emerge as enabling fictions that offer women a vision of agency akin to that embedded in the ideology of the marketplace but with a greater likelihood to enable voluntary female action.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that even if Austen chooses the novel over the marketplace, she nonetheless remains keenly aware that the novel itself is a commodity. Indeed, her famous defense of the novel in chapter five places it within the literary marketplace as a commodity whose worth is underrated:

Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected 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. And while the abilities of the nine-hundredth abridger of the history of England, or of 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, are eulogized by a thousand pens—there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and *undervaluing the labour of the novelist*, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them. (23, italics added)

Austen cannily deploys the language of economics, the relationship between value and labor being a key concern for political economists like Adam Smith. In this way she figures the female novelist—the passage subsequently mentions titles by Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth—as a laborer whose work is financially undervalued because it is aesthetically undervalued. Austen wants novels to be appreciated for their literary value but she concomitantly wants the value of novels to appreciate. Austen herself was determined “to make the most of her talent in the literary marketplace,” Jan Fergus notes, but her lifetime earnings did not exceed seven-hundred pounds, a substantial sum but not enough to support her (50); and in this regard, she resembled most of the female novelists of her generation, who also “could not live solely on their earnings” (Fergus 44). Women who produce commodities like novels, or who commodify themselves (like Isabella Thorpe) are distinctly disadvantaged in the marketplace, where value is determined by men, whether they be reviewers or prospective husbands. Because commodity culture can augment women’s choices and offer them an “avenue of social and self-expression” (Benedict 147), Austen does not ultimately reject commerce in

Northanger Abbey. Instead, she draws a distinction between buying and selling, between Catherine's inspiring consumption of novels and Isabella's dazzling but nonetheless ill-fated venture into capitalist self-marketing.¹

Of all the women characters, Isabella exhibits the greatest trust in the potential of the capitalist market as a space for female self-assertion. After her engagement to James Morland, Isabella declares to Catherine: "had I the command of millions, were I mistress of the whole world, your brother would be my only choice" (87). Isabella's overwrought language aside, the declaration reveals not only Isabella's hypocrisy but also her conviction that wealth is a sure passport to freedom, the means through which genuine choice can be guaranteed. A sentence that begins with "had I the command of millions" can only end—in Isabella's mind—with "choice" because for Isabella choice is the logical consequence of commanding millions. In truth, Isabella has command of little but her own person, and James Morland turns out to be her "only choice" at the moment because he is the only man to have chosen her. Nevertheless, Isabella remains one of the novel's most avid shoppers, with a strong confidence in her own ability to bargain for a husband in Bath's marriage market, which Ann Bermingham usefully reminds us was "a *real* market—that is an economic space for the exchange of goods and services, regulated by specific rules of decorum [It] was characterized by bargaining, negotiations, and contractual agreements" (97). Even while violating its rules of decorum, Isabella understands the marriage market to be a "*real* market"; she collapses husbands and hats into the same category, in a fashion reminiscent of the narrator's own comic conflation of "pastry, millinery [and] ... young men" (28). So despite her empty purse and with nothing more to recommend her than a pretty face and dogged ambition, Isabella struggles to position herself in the marketplace as a seller (with the freedom to contract to the highest bidder) and not solely as a commodity. Commendably, Isabella resists being figured as the "involuntary, unconscious object" (181) of the male traffic in women and labors to transform herself from a to-be-looked-at object into a more active, looking agent.²

1 Copeland also contends that Austen viewed consumption in a favorable light, at least while she was writing *Northanger Abbey*, a novel in which "consumer luxuries carry with them no intrinsic associations of either social unrest or moral failings" ("Jane Austen" 83).

2 In her work on late eighteenth-century shopping, Kowaleski-Wallace notes that shopping was imagined as a gendered activity between passive female shoppers and assertive male sellers but that women were also represented as "capable of interrupting the orderly flow of commerce" by [continued]

Shopping in Bath was primarily a visual pleasure, but whereas enjoying window displays was open to both sexes, the marriage market was a “scopic regime ... where in the public spaces of cities and spa towns unmarried women were paraded before the male gaze at balls and assemblies, operas and concerts” (Bermingham 97). So while only men were ordinarily privileged to gaze in the manner of John Thorpe, who offers “a short decisive sentence of praise or condemnation on the face of every woman” that passes him by (32), Isabella tries to claim the gaze as a female right as well. Perhaps the most remarkable example of specular shopping occurs when Isabella goes “in pursuit” of the “two odious young men” staring at her in the Pump Room (27–28). Under the guise of taking Catherine off to see a new hat, Isabella actively pursues her pursuers; she even notes that one is “very good-looking” (28), a punning reminder that Isabella transgressively returns the male consumer gaze, whereas the modest Catherine wishes to avert her eyes altogether and recommends to Isabella that “if we only wait a few minutes, there will be no danger of our seeing them at all” (28). A young woman with no fortune and with only a tenuous grasp on gentility, Isabella knows she must sell herself, so she earnestly labors to exert some control over her life as a commodity by imagining herself as both merchant and merchandise. As a result, she inhabits a paradoxical location in the novel because she is an object struggling for subjectivity and self-assertion, a pair of “bright eyes ... incessantly challenging [her suitor’s] notice” (44).

Yet Isabella’s attempt to sell herself advantageously fails. After the aborted trip to Clifton, the Thorpes and the Morlands gather in the evening, when Isabella plays a “pool of commerce” (64) with her friends, which is the narrative’s clever way of highlighting the fact that she plays real-life “commerce” in the novel: when the marriage settlement from James Morland’s father proves too low, Isabella aims for a better catch by trying to swap the card in her hand (James Morland) for a better card (Frederick Tilney) available on the table. Of course, Isabella loses her pool of commerce just as she crashes in the commercial marriage market of Bath, and the novel sends her back to London empty-handed. Like the unnamed laundress who washes the future Viscount’s linen, Isabella is stuck within a power dynamic formed by class and gender; to extend Austen’s metaphor, the cards are stacked against her, and she ends up serving the needs

refusing that passive stance and becoming “subversive shoppers” (78). Of course, the marriage market—unlike the commodity market—complicates Kowaleski-Wallace’s gender binary because potential brides are buyers, sellers, and commodities all at the same time, and this collapse undoubtedly encourages the kind of behavior Isabella displays.

of Frederick Tilney's vanity. With no capital and nothing to sell but herself, Isabella cannot elude her fate as the object of male choice: her power is revealed to be, as Johnson argues, the mere right of refusal.

The limitations of the marriage market to offer women greater autonomy through rational and "voluntary" exchange become apparent when one considers in greater depth Isabella's loss at commerce. She does not succeed in exchanging James Morland for Frederick Tilney because of Frederick's superior powers of discrimination: he is proven not to be "defunct in understanding" (151) but rather maintains, as his brother Henry acknowledges, strict standards for feminine behavior. Isabella, who asserts herself through self-marketing, cannot meet those standards because, as *Northanger Abbey* makes clear, the genteel marriage market does not value women who embrace the values of the marketplace. By overtly shopping for a wealthy husband, Isabella violates what James Thompson identifies as the conjoined work of political economy and the novel, in which "finance and romance become dialectically related, so the presence of one calls on the palpable absence of the other. Exchange in civil society is supposed to be rational, free from all emotional encumbrance, just as the exchange of vows in courtship is supposed to be free from the taint of monetary coercion" (3). In other words, the ideology of genteel femininity impossibly demands that women's romantic lives play out in a space free of financial considerations, which leaves Isabella's future in the hands of the men she pursues and their degree of discrimination—whether or not they can accurately judge her "value."

To fully appreciate Austen's complicated exploration of women's "value" in the marriage market requires a brief detour into the history of the commodity. Theorists of consumer objects argue that around the turn of the nineteenth century commodities became "valuable not only for their use value or even their exchange value, but also for their capacity to signify particularized selves"; they began to acquire "individuality," in that "the kind of particularity that was coming to be valued in persons was also becoming an important quality in consumer goods" (Henderson 4–5). Early in the novel, Austen registers the transformation of the commodity from an object valued for use or exchange purposes to something closer to a personal totem, with the capacity to signify the exceptionality of the possessor. During her initial conversation with Henry Tilney, Mrs. Allen confesses that "this is a favourite gown, though it cost but nine shillings a yard" (16), and thereby opens up the gap between the monetary value of the muslin out of which her gown was fashioned and her emotional,

personal preference for its particularities. One can only speculate on the reasons for Mrs. Allen's preference (the fabric is especially soft, the color or pattern suits her complexion, the style of the gown is flattering), but in this regard her nine-shilling gown is no different from Catherine Morland, at least in her relationship to Henry Tilney, who also must confront the distance between Catherine's monetary value (her £3,000) and her unique worth to him as an individual. One can only assume that, like Mrs. Allen's favorite gown, Catherine is soft, she suits Tilney's mental complexion, and her evident adoration of him is flattering. So like Isabella's conflation of millinery and young men, Henry's courtship of Catherine depends on a parallel drawn between Catherine and other commodities in the marketplace.

Analogous to Mrs. Allen's regard for her gown, Henry's initial partiality for Catherine is portrayed as idiosyncratic, although it is later "rationalized" by Henry who prides himself on his superior shopping skills. Displaying what Deirdre Lynch identifies as a form of romantic-era cultural capital—by "plumbing ... [the] hidden depths" (10) of character as well as consumer goods—the Tilney siblings embrace Catherine for possessing exceptional inner qualities (in contrast to Isabella's superficial charms of beauty and style) that increase her value and thus signal their own exquisite taste.¹ Indeed, they delight in Catherine as the antithesis of Isabella, as a young woman who is "open, candid, artless, guileless, with affections strong but simple, forming no pretensions, and knowing no disguise" (152), and they value what we might call Catherine's authenticity (her lack of pretension, disguise, and artfulness) as well as her utter sincerity in her emotional attachment to the Tilneys, evidenced by an absence of mercenary motivations. This absence is what allows them to determine Catherine to be the genuine article, a woman whose feelings are "to the credit of human nature" (152) and thus a shrewd purchase, akin to the "true Indian muslin" (16) Henry has recently bought cheaply in the market.

Ever attuned to the demands of the marketplace, Isabella understands that in the absence of personal wealth, she needs to advertise herself as an open and affectionate young woman like Catherine rather than as a desperate fortune hunter. Moreover, in a market that increasingly values the "uniqueness" of the individual as well as the individual commodity, Catherine Morland's *sui generis* naiveté is going to be more appealing than Isabella's worldliness, arising as it

1 See Lynch 126. Through the plumbing of characterological depth, the sensitive novel reader—like the good shopper—acquires the cultural capital he or she needs for "restaging the stratification of society" (128–29) in the new commercial world awash with commodities.

does out of her mimicry of fashionable society. So Isabella tries to exert agency over herself as a commodity in the marketplace through the narrative she tells about herself, or what we might anachronistically call false advertising. If, as M.J. Dauntton notes, “the operation of a market depends upon the quality and quantity of information which is available to participants” (318), the unregulated marriage market of Bath is ripe for manipulation by clever marketers like the Thorpe siblings, whose misinformation distorts the market. Through puffery, Isabella tries to inflate the value of her character; and in this way her actions mirror those of her brother, who exaggerates Catherine’s financial worth to order to impress General Tilney. To drive up her value, Isabella presents herself as a sentimental heroine: in fact, she tries to sell herself as the possessor of the very qualities the Tilneys attribute to Catherine. She deploys an overheated rhetoric, which endlessly stresses her strong affections and guileless nature to conceal the economic rationalism behind it. “My attachments are always excessively strong,” she declares to Catherine (25), even though the only thing excessive in her attachments is her declaration of them, and in an unguarded moment, Isabella confesses that “after all that romancers may say, there is no doing without money” (105). While her self-marketing as a sentimental heroine may not convince sophisticates like the Tilneys, it does take in the provincial Morlands, and Catherine admires Isabella the most when she reminds her “of all the heroines of her acquaintance” (87–88). Of course, repeated exposure to Isabella’s hypocrisy devalues her in the eyes of the reader and the other characters, although Catherine wrongly dismisses her as a “vain coquette” (161) near the novel’s close. Isabella may be coquette, but her coquetry has upward mobility rather than vanity as its motivations. Nevertheless, through Isabella, Austen explores and exposes the paradox of women turning to the marketplace as a site of freedom and agency: Isabella’s act of economic self-assertion becomes one of defeating self-alienation because to sell herself to the highest bidder she must turn herself into something she is not (a sentimental heroine), which only serves to devalue her further in the genteel marriage market. By performing sentimentality as a cover for her economic motivations, Isabella confirms her status as shoddy goods, a cheap imitation lacking in the authenticity sought by discriminating consumers like the Tilneys, who prefer “true Indian muslin” and genuinely warm-hearted girls.

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While Isabella struggles unsuccessfully to achieve some measure of self-determination through shopping, Eleanor Tilney, the model young lady in the novel, full of “good sense and good breeding” (38), labors to disengage herself from the market (she often trusts her brother “in the choice of a gown” [16]) and from self-marketing (she is “capable of being young, attractive, and at a ball, without wanting to fix the attention of every man near her” [38]). If Austen routinely divides the gentry into two groups, the landed elite and the urban mercantilist, which enact the conflict between old and new money, old and new forms of power, old and new values, Eleanor and Isabella seemingly fall on opposite sides of this divide. Nonetheless, while Eleanor takes refuge in the traditional pursuits of a gentlewoman (reading, drawing, walking), as the daughter of General Tilney, she is as new-fashioned as Isabella. Her ancestral home, with its foundation in British soil for centuries, should be the countervailing force of tradition to Bath, but with its rooms full of Wedgwood china and Rumford stoves and a shopaholic patriarch overseeing all, the “improved” Abbey presents what Johnson calls a “disconcerting double image” to Bath (*Jane Austen* 34). Exchanging knowing looks with her brother when Catherine naively declares that the General told her “he only valued money as it allowed him to promote the happiness of his children” (151), Eleanor understands that her family has adopted the values of the modern commercial world, even as she tries to hold herself aloof from them.

Eleanor is the best-educated woman in the novel, with the clearest grasp on the real position of women in English society, for as she admits to Catherine on the eve of Catherine’s departure from the Abbey, “I trust you will acquit me, for you must have been long enough in this house to see that I am but a nominal mistress of it, that my real power is nothing” (166). This insight into the status of women in her culture—that her “real power is nothing”—is not liberating but merely enervating. Remaining largely passive in her father’s overweening presence, doing his bidding and permitting him to speak for her, she is as much a product of his forcing-houses (i.e. succession houses, or hot houses) as the pineapples he boasts of to Catherine.¹ Without any discourse (novelistic or economic) that might allow her to imagine some agency for herself, she remains the knowing victim of a domestic tyrant, “uncomfortably circumstanced” (114) and seemingly doomed to “habitual suffering” (185).

1 The classic moment of his speaking for her occurs in chapter 22, when the general asks Eleanor to describe Woodston, the site of Henry’s parsonage, but continues to attest to its excellencies himself, leaving the narrator to remark upon “the silence of the lady”(129).

So while Eleanor may possess the female virtues generally valued by Austen's culture, those virtues are of little value to her. She remains imprisoned and immobilized, a spiritless version of the Radcliffian heroine, one without the spunk or spark to exert herself. If the plot of the female Gothic initiates the innocent heroine into the buried secrets of the patriarchy, Eleanor has gone through this initiation only to conclude that women cannot enact their own escape from the patriarchal mansion.

Eleanor's favorite reading matter—history rather than novels—underscores the degree to which she remains trapped within the traditional plot of a gentlewoman's life. Antoinette Burton observes that in Austen's juvenile parody of Oliver Goldsmith's *History of England*, Austen exposes conventional historians' biases but also exploits history's malleability by placing the wronged Mary Queen of Scots at the center of English history, thereby highlighting "the power of history to allow women to reinvent the past and so too perhaps to imagine differently their own futures" (46). However, Eleanor's engagement with history is decidedly more traditional. Reading only male historians (she mentions Hume and Robertson), Eleanor seems unable to make creative use of her history lessons, so that instead of drawing on history to imagine her own future differently, Eleanor's reading confirms her acquiescence to authority, as she claims that historical accounts "may be as much depended on ... as anything that does not actually pass under one's own observation" (79). In the context of Eleanor's uncritical acceptance of a male-authored past, Catherine's much-discussed critique of historical writings—that "the men [are] all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all" (79)—takes on added resonance. Traditional historical accounts of the kind Eleanor reads largely erase women from history and therefore cannot offer women readers models of female agency, nor useful insights into patriarchal social arrangements. In fact, it is likely that Catherine's prescient critique of women's absence from history arises from her reading of Radcliffe, since the mystery of the missing mother (who has been locked away in a dungeon, or a convent) is one of the standard plots in the female Gothic tradition (see Miles 43).

Devoney Looser suggests that "perhaps Austen's voice is lurking in this section of the novel as commentary on the literary marketplace, rather than on the gender bias of history" ("Dealing in Notions and Facts" 224), but I would argue that the novel comments on both.¹

1 There is disagreement about the degree to which Austen is speaking through Catherine in this scene. See Knox-Shaw 128, for instance, versus Looser *British Women Writers and the Writing of History*, 202. Austen may not be altogether rejecting history as a discipline in *Northanger Abbey*, but [continued]

The vital connection Looser makes is between this scene and Austen's earlier defense of the novel, where Austen establishes historians and novelists as competitors in a literary marketplace that overvalues histories and underrates novels. However, it is important to keep in mind that novels and histories were rivals in the world of women's education as well: "throughout the eighteenth century," Daniel Woolf notes, "continued efforts were made to impress upon women the superiority of history to the French romance and its native successor, the novel" (220). Catherine's claim that she reads history as a "duty" (79) and novels for pleasure intimates *Northanger Abbey's* recognition of history as a privileged discourse within the field of female education. In this scene, Austen challenges the privileged position history occupies within the marketplace and the schoolroom by highlighting the pedagogical value of the novel. After all, reading Gothic novels is what inspires Catherine to try to uncover the buried history of Eleanor and Henry's mother, so that Catherine's devotion to Radcliffe—in contrast to Eleanor's preference for Hume and Robertson—leads to a revision of the (male-authored) historical past, like the one Austen herself penned in her own *History of England*, and thereby leaves open the possibility of a different future.¹

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While we almost unthinkingly associate money with power and influence, both Catherine and Eleanor's narratives suggest that a different logic is at work in Austen's novel. Even though Isabella believes that had she command of millions, choice would be hers, Catherine and Eleanor's stories indicate otherwise, that fortunes are likely to be a negative asset for women, in part because they never really have command over them. Eighteenth-century gentlewomen's fortunes

Catherine's untutored insight into women's erasure from historical writings, like so many of her remarks, reverberates throughout the novel, particularly in light of the female Gothic tradition of thinking back through the maternal line.

- 1 Admittedly, Eleanor's own future at the end of the novel is rosy, as Austen rewards her with "the home of her choice and the man of her choice" (185). Yet by repeating the word "choice" when announcing Eleanor's engagement, the narrative only ironically underscores the anemic force of Eleanor's choice and the fact that Eleanor's happy ending is accidental, a mere matter of chance, as it is the Viscount's "unexpected accession to title and fortune" (186) that removes her from "the evils of such a home as Northanger" (185). Eleanor may have chosen the future Viscount in her heart but she must passively await his social elevation to propel their mutual affection into a marriage proposal.

came in the form of inheritances intended to ally families with others of equal or greater wealth and status, and this made young women mere vehicles for the transference of large sums, unable to wield control over their finances and vulnerable to fortune hunters. Thus, Thompson's keen observation, which arises from a consideration of the works of Fanny Burney, that "in eighteenth-century English novels inheritance is enabling or authorizing for male protagonists and disabling for female protagonists" (20), can be usefully invoked for Austen as well. Eleanor's wealth and position impede her marriage to the Viscount, who withholds his declaration of love due to his "inferiority of situation" (186), and Catherine's troubles in the novel begin when she gains a fortune, in her case an imaginary one, because it earns her the self-serving and pernicious attentions of John Thorpe and General Tilney. Given Catherine's actual status as a non-heiress, her mother can hardly be faulted for sending her off to Bath without worrying that she will be injured by the "machinations" of "lords and baronets" (9). Like Mr. Bennet, who believes that his daughter Lydia will be "too poor to be an object of prey to any body" in Brighton (*Pride and Prejudice* 177), Mrs. Morland assumes that (relative) female poverty assures a kind of safety for daughters.

The novel's trajectory makes clear that money does not necessarily endow women with greater autonomy, so Austen turns her back on the marketplace and signals that departure by making her heroine an economic ingénue. If Eleanor is rendered inert by her superior insights into her own powerlessness, Austen empowers Catherine through her cluelessness, not an altogether surprising move in a novel that claims "imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms" (81). Austen's irony aside, she explores through Catherine Morland the benefits of ignorance, specifically economic ignorance. Introducing Catherine to the reader as possessing an "unaccountable character" (6), Austen amplifies Catherine's unaccountability throughout the novel, both in the text's refusal to give a financial account of Catherine and in Catherine's inability to account for herself. While Austen tells us the precise amounts of money her other heroines can expect to inherit—from Emma's princely £30,000 to Lizzie Bennett's paltry £1,000—she offers us no reckoning of Catherine until the last page of the novel, when the narrator finally fixes Catherine's "worth" at £3,000. Moreover, possessing "unfixed ideas of her father's income" (98), Catherine lacks even the basic self-knowledge of how much she is worth and speculates late in the novel that she might be "as insignificant, and perhaps as portionless as Isabella" (153). That her entry into Bath thrusts her into a space where she is both consumer and commodity also

eludes Catherine, who remains largely oblivious to the commercial realities of her world, so much so that she can take at face value the General's exclamations of economic disinterestedness and barely register what perplexes everyone else in the novel: why is the General paying her so much attention? When she does register perplexity, it arises from her sense of herself as positioned within a traditional status hierarchy, not a marketplace. Breakfasting at the Tilneys, Catherine is uncomfortable with the solicitous behavior of the General, feeling "utterly unworthy of such respect" and not knowing "how to reply to it" (112). As the daughter of a prosperous but not rich clergyman, Catherine does not expect to be singled out for notice by someone so above her in rank and fortune, but she cannot translate her discomfort into an analysis of her commodification as a potential wife for Henry Tilney. Instead, she accepts at face value General Tilney's "generous and disinterested sentiments on the subject of money" (153), which are as ludicrous as (and parallel to) Isabella's lofty declarations.

While Catherine remains blithely unaware of the economic realities to which Isabella and Eleanor are alert, Austen suggests that Catherine's novel reading endows her with a genuine sense of agency, one that offers a better prospect for increasing her self-determination than Isabella's turn to the market. Critics who address Austen's defense of novel reading highlight the crucial role the Gothic novel plays in Catherine's female education: reading transforms her into a heroine, one attuned to irony and able to question linguistic authority, whether it be the General's or Isabella's, both of whom share the proclivity to "say one thing so positively, and mean another all the while" (156), as Catherine ultimately recognizes. However, in addition to developing Catherine's proto-feminist and critical capacities, reading produces more tangible results: it spurs Catherine to action. Through Catherine, Austen makes a case for the effectivity of novels, for their ability to, in the words of James Thompson, "affect how people live ... and the choices they make" (12).

Catherine's reading surely teaches her how to navigate her social world, but it also prompts her to act in ways that suggests an enhanced sense of autonomy. Her reading leads her to unexpected but welcomed exertions and self-assertions, so that the girl who preferred "running about the country at the age of fourteen" (7) until her love of sports gave way to femininity at fifteen, recaptures through novel reading some of her youthful vitality. In that sense, reading prompts her to shed some of the stultifying accretions of femininity and return to a younger self. Most importantly, however, reading Radcliffe turns Catherine herself into the very thing Henry Tilney declares to be one

of the hallmarks of modern, enlightened England, a product of its “social and literary intercourse”: a voluntary spy. When Henry Tilney famously chastises Catherine by claiming that atrocities could not be “perpetrated without being known, in a country like this ... where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies” (145), he does not guess that Catherine has already become a spy in the house of Tilney, one of the earliest girl detectives in the literary canon, an eighteenth-century Nancy Drew snooping into drawers and ferreting out criminal behavior. Unlike Isabella Thorpe, whose reading practices lead her to ventriloquize the sentimental heroine, and in contradistinction to Eleanor, whose excursions into history seem to reinforce her status as an inert Gothic heroine trapped by the past, Catherine becomes a figure of detection and exposure.

Until her famous reprimand by Henry Tilney, Catherine Morland exhibits a range of extraordinary behaviors for a young lady in an Austen novel. Having been prepared by her Gothic readings to uncover terrible family secrets buried within the Abbey, she searches, surmises, hypothesizes, desires, and acts on her desires. When a chest in her Abbey chamber first attracts her notice, Catherine formulates a series of questions (“What can it hold?—Why should it be placed here?” [119]) and then undertakes a closer examination:

One moment might surely be spared; and, so desperate should be the exertion of her strength, that, unless secured by supernatural means, the lid in one moment should be thrown back. With this spirit she sprang forward, and her confidence did not deceive her. Her resolute effort threw back the lid, and gave to her astonished eyes the view of a white cotton counterpane, properly folded, reposing at one end of the chest in undisputed possession! (120)¹

1 While one could read Catherine’s discovery of the white cotton counterpane—instead of evidence of a long-buried crime—as another moment of Austen’s comic deflation, I think there may be more to it. For one thing, even when presented with a blank page, a pure white bedspread that seems to tell no story, Catherine persists in her snooping and continues her investigation until she uncovers the washing-bills the next night. Taken together, the white counterpane and the washing-bills suggest the possibility of a whitewash: that evidence of the true crimes of the Tilneys (whatever they are) has been cleaned up. This reading becomes all the more compelling when one remembers that Bath was a spa, where the eighteenth-century English went to “wash” or purge their insides through the supposedly medicinal effect of the pump room waters. For more on Bath’s waters, see Cottom.

Here Catherine physically exerts herself. Acting with “resolute effort,” she throws open the heavy lid of the chest, a feat that requires “confidence” in her own “strength” to accomplish the task. In less physical ways as well, one can see Catherine making use of her personal resources. By examining the chest and questioning its placement in the room, she refuses to accept domestic arrangements as a given, in contrast to Eleanor, who exhibits a striking lack of curiosity as well as a defeated sense of the inflexibility of family circumstances. When questioned about the chest, Eleanor merely states: “It is impossible to say how many generations it has been here. How it came to be first put in this room I know not, but I have not had it moved, because I thought it might sometimes be of use in holding hats and bonnets. The worst of it is that its weight makes it difficult to open” (120). As foolish as Catherine’s searching for a hidden manuscript may be, it challenges the domestic status quo and calls upon the heroine to act heroically: to demonstrate strength, bravery and self-determination.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen explores both novel reading and the marketplace as sites of female agency, and her explorations lead her to question the degree to which commerce enhances female autonomy. Isabella’s dedication to the values of the capitalist market transform her into an unmarketable woman, too much at odds with the strictures of feminine propriety as well as emergent commodity culture to make her worth very much. Catherine fares better in the novel for her novel reading because unlike the histories preferred by Eleanor, novels offer Catherine a model of female agency; moreover, it is one that does not entail the kind of self-alienation demanded by Isabella’s merchandising. If anything, novel reading returns Catherine to a truer self, before the fall into femininity. To be sure, the novel closes with a different kind of alienation as Catherine becomes the second Mrs. Tilney, with all the threat of Gothic repetition that entails, but Austen allows us to hope that once married to Henry, Catherine will continue reading novels and resume her role as a “voluntary spy” into the domestic arrangements of Henry Tilney’s establishment.

(2009)

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