

Ingvild Staven

Reading the Gothic in the everyday

An analysis of Catherine Morland's reading of the Gothic in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

Master's thesis in English

Supervisor: Eli Løfaldli

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¹ Austen, Jane: *Northanger Abbey* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 21

Abstract

This thesis explores how Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* works as a reading of the Gothic, by transposing the contents of the Gothic novel to the everyday, and thus exposes women's position in a patriarchal society at the end of the eighteenth century. The thesis is an analysis of how Catherine Morland in Austen's novel reads the Gothic, how she latches the Gothic tropes of Ann Radcliffe's Gothic novels onto the people and places she encounters in real life. I argue that her reading of people and structures through a Gothic lens exposes the truth of gender aspects of society and helps Catherine understand the motives of people who are less straightforward than herself. Thus, *Northanger Abbey* explores contemporary gender relations and women's position within society. Through the novel's treatment of Catherine as a female reader Austen illuminates how views on reading practices and views on the impact of reading were gendered. Women readers were often seen as too susceptible and likely to read in the wrong way. This was closely connected to views on correct female behaviour and showcases some of the limits for women's agency. I argue that although Catherine gets too carried away by her reading in some respects, the essential point is that her reading helps give her an avenue by which she can make sense of things, becoming more aware of gender inequalities and thus less naïve and innocent, consequently her novel reading is beneficial rather than detrimental to her.

Sammendrag

Denne oppgaven utforsker hvordan Jane Austens *Northanger Abbey* fungerer som en lesning av det gotiske gjennom å overføre innholdet i den gotiske romanen til dagliglivet, derigjennom klarlegges kvinners posisjon i 1700-tallets patriarkalske samfunn. Oppgaven er en analyse av hvordan Catherine Morland i Austens roman leser det gotiske, hvordan hun legger de gotiske tropene i Ann Radcliffes romaner oppå hennes tolkning av mennesker og steder hun møter i det virkelige liv. Min analyse viser at hennes lesning av mennesker og miljøer, gjennom en gotisk ramme, tydeliggjør kjønnsdelingen av samfunnet og hjelper Catherine med forstå motivene til folk hvis fremtoning er mindre åpen enn hennes egen. Slik fungerer *Northanger Abbey* som en utforskning av samtidens kjønnsroller og kvinners rolle i samfunnet. Gjennom romanens fremstilling av Catherine som kvinnelig leser setter Austen fokus på hvordan datidens syn på lese måter og lesningens påvirkning var knyttet til oppfatning om kjønnsroller. Kvinnelige lesere ble gjerne sett på som for lettpåvirkelige og med stor fare for å lese på feil måter. Dette var nært knyttet til oppfatninger om hva som var

korrekt oppførsel for kvinner, og det sier noe om grensene for kvinners handlingsrom. Jeg mener at selv om Catherine drar parallellene mellom lesning og det virkelige liv litt for langt i visse tilfeller, er det et viktigere poeng i romanen at hennes lesning faktisk gir henne en måte for å forstå mennesker og samfunnet rundt henne. Gjennom å se kjønnsdelingen av samfunnet blir hun mindre naiv og uskyldig, derfor er hennes lesning nyttig heller enn skadelig for henne.

Introduction

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*² (1818) is a parody of the Gothic novels of the 1790s. However, it is not just a pastiche on the popular Gothic novels, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland, is also someone who lets her reading of Gothic novels colour her way of seeing the world. As such it follows a line from Cervantes' *Don Quijote* (1605-1615) through to Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) of novels whose protagonist is too much influenced by their reading, to the extent that they interpret the world around them with reference to the literature they have read. Considering the sheer amount of Gothic novels published in the late eighteenth century, and the reading public's appetite for them, it is, perhaps, not surprising that someone should use these novels to explore how reading of them could mould an impressionable reader. I wish to explore how Austen's novel engages with views on novel reading, and what reading does to the reader. In addition, I aim to explore how Austen's use of Gothic elements, as they appear in the novels of Ann Radcliffe, and Catherine's way of reading these elements into what she sees around her, exposes the inequalities inherent in gender roles in the late eighteenth century.

The story of Catherine may, on the face of it, appear as one more of a typical story which essentially follows the same plot line. It is a story of a woman who enters the matrimonial market, gets to know a number of eligible bachelors, goes through a few ordeals, and eventually she ends up married to a suitable man. However, Austen plays with our expectations of a novel. Catherine is not the typical heroine of novels, not very remarkable and not a beauty who pursues hobbies that add gracefulness to her person. Instead, Catherine is presented to have been "fond of all boys' plays, and greatly preferred cricket not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush" (NA 2). In telling us that Catherine at first did not appear cut out to be a heroine in a novel, describing how she shirked lessons and preferred the more boisterous, active pursuits of her brothers to the feminine and domestic hobbies one might expect, Austen shows us both what our expectations as readers may be, and how these can be countered. It is a play with the expectations of a female protagonist in a novel.

Similarly, Austen plays with the conventions of the Gothic novel. The Abbey at Northanger, playing the part of the castle in a Gothic story, reveals itself to be a very modern structure, even though some parts of the building have an ancient history. The sinister lord

² Austen, Jane: *Northanger Abbey* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998 Henceforth referenced parenthetically in the main text.

and master of the castle, General Tilney, though not a very pleasant man, is not the foul murderer Catherine suspects. Catherine herself, as the heroine, though innocent and kind-hearted, is not quite the angelic, self-sacrificing and always morally superior heroine of a classic Gothic mould.

It is important to point out that although first published in 1818, *Northanger Abbey* was begun, and probably for the most part, written in the 1790s.³ The novel is a parody of Gothic in the form that was popular in that decade, and Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*⁴ (1794) in particular. In the following I will therefore treat Austen's novel as a product of the 1790s.

In the following will explore how Austen's novel uses some of the key aspects of the Gothic genre, point to how these are rooted in gender roles at that time in history, and how some of the play with the Gothic genre that Austen performs is not merely a matter of using Gothic aesthetics as a "send-up of Radcliffe,"⁵ but can also be read as an aesthetic with a particular function in a particular social and political climate. What this leads to is a need to examine "the interpretative categories or codes through which we read and receive"⁶ a text. What Fredric Jameson refers to here is interpretative categories and codes in a more general way, as an overall literary theory and approach to reading. My point is not equally broad in scope. What I wish to explore is how Austen uses certain categories and codes which the Gothic novel developed, and how these interpretative codes are imbued with meaning which helps us explore gender roles in the late eighteenth century.

My aim in the following is to explore some of the ways in which *Northanger Abbey* uses conventions of the Gothic genre in a manner which exposes gender relations at the time, and how Catherine's reading of Gothic novels relates to contemporary debates concerning the female reader, which also exposes ideas of what a woman ought and ought not be, the limits of and degree of room for manoeuvring for creating an identity as a woman. In the following chapters I will focus on some of the tropes of Gothic fiction, how these appear in Gothic novels, and how Austen uses them in her novel. I have chosen to focus on 'the castle', 'villainous father figures', and finally 'the damsel in distress' as some of the key tropes or features of the Gothic which Austen plays with. My reading of *Northanger Abbey* sees it in close connection with Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Radcliffe's book is read by Austen's protagonist and is the chief reference point for Catherine. Therefore, I investigate the

³ Castle, Terry "Introduction" to Austen, Jane: *Northanger Abbey* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. x

⁴ Radcliffe, Ann: *The Mysteries of Udolpho* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998 Henceforth referenced parenthetically in the main text.

⁵ Castle, Terry "Introduction" to Austen, Jane: *Northanger Abbey* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. xii

⁶ Jameson, Fredric: *The Political Unconscious* Routledge, London, 2002, p. ix

tropes of the Gothic as they appear in Radcliffe's novel, and then how they are transformed in Austen's novel. The imagery of the Gothic that I have chosen to focus on can easily be read as reflecting contemporary gender relations, and I will argue that Austen's way of transposing them to the everyday makes them even more potent as a portrayal of women's position within society. The point is not to make Austen out to be a proto-feminist, but to see her novel in light of contemporary debates concerning women's roles which may also say something about society beyond her (un)expressed views.

A key aspect of *Northanger Abbey* is reading. It is a book about someone who reads, the novel itself is a reading of another novel, there is discussion of reading practices, both in dialogue and from the narrator. Reading at the time was imbued with gendered prejudices, which is discussed within the pages of *Northanger Abbey*. The perceived gendered reading practices of the time is closely connected to ideas of what reading does to a person and how and to what extent reading transforms and affects the reader. A key question in *Northanger Abbey* is, therefore, how and to what extent Catherine is affected by her reading of the Gothic. I will explore this in the light of Catherine's grasp of patriarchal power relations and where she fits in within society, and the degree to which she attains some independent outlook or simply falls into accepted categories. In order to do so I will therefore explore how Catherine's reading of the tropes of Gothic fiction and her way of latching them onto her own experiences works as a way towards understanding the society around her. The question I pose is: how does Catherine's reading of the people and structures around her through the lens of Gothic tropes expose the limits and possibilities for women in a patriarchal society?

In the first chapter I will provide a background to the eighteenth century as a period with increased reading, an increase in reading material to peruse, and an increase in female readers. The increase in women readers brought a wealth of comment and literature on correct and misguided reading practices, where the latter were often connected to women novel readers. Austen's story of Catherine's sojourn into the delights of the Gothic is very much a commentary on this.

The second chapter lays out some of the aspects of the Gothic which *Northanger Abbey* uses and turns on its head. Austen's novel is a play with what has been termed 'The Feminine Gothic', of which Radcliffe was one of the key authors. 'The Feminine Gothic' can be read as a dramatic exposure of women's precarious position in society, where the castle acts as an image of the home wherein women are incarcerated, and the Gothic villain as the male power figure who holds his dependant female relatives in tow. This is the type of Gothic

Catherine reads and which influences her view of the people and places she encounters in real life.

In the third chapter I will look at how Catherine's reading of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and the castle motif influences her understanding of real-life structures. When she encounters Northanger Abbey she reads the building through expectations from Radcliffe's novel. Catherine is disappointed at the lack of Gothic features, but I argue that the very lack of Gothic castle aesthetics in the building brings to the fore the fact that the modern home can act as a castle incarcerating its female occupants in dependency and seclusion from the outside world. 'The Feminine Gothic' as perceived through Catherine's reading thus works to expose gender roles in her surroundings.

In the fourth chapter I explore how Catherine's reading of General Tilney as a Gothic villain exposes him as patriarchal figure who holds great power of his surroundings. Even if he is not guilty of murdering his wife, Catherine's reading of him is in fact not entirely wrong. Although Catherine's reading pushes her notions of him too far, I argue that her reading does in fact help her make sense of people whose motives are not as straightforward and kind as her own perhaps are.

In the fifth chapter I look at Catherine herself and whether she acts as the damsel in distress, the innocent heroine of a Gothic story. I will also explore whether Catherine's reading helps her become a rational woman with a certain degree of independent outlook on the world and in charge of herself. This is tied into eighteenth century ideas regarding the impact of reading, women as readers, and the degree to which reading is educational or a dangerous way to fill idle time.

Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is highly entertaining as a play with the Gothic features of novels of the 1790s. However, I argue that Austen's novel is not just a parody of Radcliffe's brand of Gothic, Austen in fact makes the Gothic more relevant as a way of understanding the unequal position of men and women in late eighteenth-century society. Through looking at Catherine as a female reader of the Gothic Austen exposes prejudices against women readers at the time and illuminates how reading was very closely linked to moulding women into a proper version of their sex.

1. *Northanger Abbey* and attitudes to reading in the Eighteenth century

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is "first and foremost a novel about reading,"⁷ as Carol Margaret Davison states. The novel attempts instruction on both how to read books, and how to read people. As we shall see in the following, the public domain throughout the eighteenth century abounded with texts showing what reading did to the reader. Authors, reviewers, and commentators were preoccupied with what was suitable reading, how reading influenced the public, and the correct way to direct people's reading. The period was one with an increase in literacy levels⁸ and an increase in the amount of, as well as the variety of, reading material available for the public to peruse.⁹ This brought forth discussions of appropriate reading material, and how it influences the reader, as well as questions regarding what the aim of reading should be.¹⁰ Reading could be entertainment and it could be a means of instruction, and many aimed at both. Samuel Johnson was one of the authors known for his wit, style and carefully crafted sentences, giving pleasure to the reader, who also promoted a moral lesson of "applying reason to experience"¹¹ through his writings. As James Boswell wrote of Johnson's rambler essays; "in no writing whatever can be found more bark and steel for the mind".¹² The eighteenth century is an age of conduct books, specifically meant for instruction, but also a period with increased novel writing and novel reading, the novel being a genre often viewed as purely for entertainment.¹³ Novels were, however, a genre within which the author might aim at both entertainment and instruction.

On the face of it, it may appear that *Northanger Abbey* is a tale of how impressionable women who read too many novels are at risk of attaining warped ideas about the real world. Ideas have differed, as will be discussed later in this thesis, on how Austen lets Catherine Morland's initiation into the Gothic bear on real life. On the one hand one might argue that the tenor of the book is that the Gothic novels she reads are only suited for reading for

⁷ Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 161

⁸ Watt, Ian: *The Rise of the Novel, studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* Pimlico, London, 2000

⁹ Benedict, Barbara M. "Readers, writers, reviewers, and the professionalization of literature" in Ed. Keymer, Thomas & Mee, Jon: *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740-1830* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004

¹⁰ Pearson, Jacqueline: *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008

¹¹ Introduction on Samuel Johnson in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century* Volume C W. W. Norton & Company, New York & London, 2012, p. 2842

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ritter, Richard: *Imagining Women Readers, 1789-1820: Well-Regulated Minds* Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2015

pleasure, given that Catherine latches some of the ideas from her reading to literally onto the real life around her. On the other hand, one could argue that Austen points to there being something Gothic in the everyday, and that consequently its reading has relevance, albeit in mediated form, thus it could be instructive as well. In this chapter I will look at attitudes to reading in the eighteenth century, with particular focus on women as readers of novels. I will present some examples of how *Northanger Abbey* relate to these attitudes regarding women and novel reading more generally, before I delve into the specifics of the Gothic novel in the following chapters.

1.1. An increasing reading public

Ian Watt writes that many observers in the eighteenth century saw their own age as “one of remarkable and increasing popular interest in reading”.¹⁴ Barbara M. Benedict similarly writes that:

By the middle of the eighteenth century, readers of all classes and kinds were plentiful, and were growing in both wealth and influence. Men and women, gentry and professionals, merchants and urban servants read all kinds of printed works, from scientific treatises and travelogues to jest books, sentimental plays, advertisements, collections of poetry, periodical journals and, in increasing numbers, novels.¹⁵

Watt argues that the image of almost everyone reading needs to be moderated and points out that it is reasonable to assume that the reading public may have been large compared to previous periods, but probably “very far from the mass reading public of today”.¹⁶ For one thing there was no proper school system in place, schooling for the poor was short and irregular, and consequently the level of literacy would not have been very high in the population seen as a whole.¹⁷ Many did not see literacy amongst the poor as desirable either, since they were expected to work hard and remain in their given station all their lives it was seen as better to set them to work immediately, rather than give them a glimpse of something else.¹⁸ Jacqueline Pearson shows further difficulties in attempting to arrive at any correct literacy rates. She argues there were different degrees of literacy, and the classic way of determining literacy, being able to write one’s own name, is not necessarily adequate since

¹⁴ Watt, Ian: *The Rise of the Novel, studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* Pimlico, London, 2000, p. 35

¹⁵ Benedict, Barbara M. “Readers, writers, reviewers, and the professionalization of literature” in Ed. Keymer, Thomas & Mee, Jon: *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740-1830* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 3

¹⁶ Watt, Ian: *The Rise of the Novel, studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* Pimlico, London, 2000, p. 35

¹⁷ Ibid p. 38

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 39

writing and reading were taught separately.¹⁹ "Literacy is notoriously difficult to measure or even define"²⁰ according to James Van Horn Melton, "part of the problem is that literacy is not one skill but a hierarchy of discrete ones".²¹ That is, one might be able to read without being able to write, or one might be capable of writing one's own name but not be able to read a fairly simple text. Another factor Pearson points out is the tradition for reading aloud, hence quite a number of people would in fact digest literature without doing the actual act of reading themselves, thus increasing the reach of texts further.²² However, it follows from this that pinpointing the degree of such a reach is difficult.

Another factor which, according to Watt, restricted the numbers of the reading public had to do with money and the economic powers of potential readers. The price of books was too high for the majority of the population to be able to afford them, the poor lived on or near subsistence level and would not have the money to spare, nor the leisure to spend, on reading material. The majority of the expanding reading public would, according to Watt, have been found within an increasing middleclass:

There was a marked rise in the numbers and wealth of shopkeepers, independent tradesmen and administrative and clerical employees throughout the eighteenth century. Their increasing affluence probably brought them within the orbit of the middle-class culture, previously the reserve of a smaller number of well-to-do merchants, shopkeepers and important tradesmen. It is probably from them that the most substantial additions to the book-buying public were drawn, rather than from the impoverished majority of the population.²³

Pearson agrees with Watt that the expense incurred in the purchase of books probably hindered the reach of them. If we are to believe Pearson the level of literacy would have meant there were more potential readers than those who were actually in a position to procure a book.²⁴ It would seem fair to suggest, however, that literacy rates were rising throughout the eighteenth century.

The expansion of circulating libraries is seen as a contributor to the rising literacy rates throughout the eighteenth century. Circulating libraries, sometimes also known as subscription libraries, were commercial libraries wherein subscribers would pay an annual

¹⁹ Pearson, Jacqueline: *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 11

²⁰ Van Horn Melton, James: *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 81

²¹ Ibid

²² Pearson, Jacqueline: *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 11

²³ Watt, Ian: *The Rise of the Novel, studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* Pimlico, London, 2000, p. 41

²⁴ Pearson, Jacqueline: *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 11-12

sum in order to borrow books. The annual subscription fee would range between 10s. 6d. and one guinea, non-subscribers could also borrow with a set price for each volume borrowed.²⁵ The circulating library is a phenomena which first appeared at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Many of the early ventures failed, however, by the end of the century, circulating libraries had become an important element of the book industry as well as an important source of reading material for the public.²⁶ According to many these libraries expanded readership since they gave access to reading materials to many who could not afford the high prices of books.²⁷ The circulating library thus probably contributed a great deal to the expansion of the reading public, especially as regards novel readers.²⁸

Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* refers to the circulating library in somewhat mocking terms. When Catherine says that something “very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London”, (NA 87) Eleanor Tilney assumes she refers to a riot and political upheaval. Henry explains that what Catherine means is “a new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duodecimo volumes, two hundred and seventy-six pages in each, with a frontispiece to the first, of two tombstones and a lantern”, and any “rational creature” would conceive that “expected horrors in London” relate “only to a circulating library” (NA 88). His depiction of the book to be published is a generic description of a piece of Gothic fiction, which he readily puts in connection with a circulating library as the purveyor of the material.

The gendered nature of the usage of circulating libraries and reading practices in the minds of contemporary opinion is clear. In one of the reviews of the mid-eighteenth century, it is interesting to note that not only is the ideal reader, gendered as male, ‘serious and solid’, and the opposite ‘fair customers’, that is women, but they are ‘fair customers of the circulating library’.²⁹ The circulating libraries were often seen as a female domain, and put in connection with poor reading practices, and the wrong type of literature.³⁰ Many of the circulating libraries also published books, and “pointedly recruited manuscripts from

²⁵ Ed. McCalman, Iain: *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, British Culture 1776-1832*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, entry on ‘Circulating Libraries’, p. 454

²⁶ Jacobs, Edward: “Eighteenth-Century British Circulating Libraries and Cultural Book History” in *Book History*, Vol 6, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2003, p. 2

²⁷ Ed. McCalman, Iain: *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, British Culture 1776-1832*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, entry on ‘Circulating Libraries’, p. 454

²⁸ Watt, Ian: *The Rise of the Novel, studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* Pimlico, London, 2000, p. 43

²⁹ Review by Owen Ruffhead in Williams, Ioan Ed.: *Novel and Romance 1700-1800: a Documentary Record* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1970, p. 208-209

³⁰ Ed. McCalman, Iain: *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, British Culture 1776-1832*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, entry on ‘Circulating Libraries’, p. 454

women”,³¹ but were also accused of “crass pandering to fashionable taste and for poor workmanship”.³² “The conventional wisdom about circulating libraries represents them as repositories of fictional pap, served up to women of leisure who had little to do but surfeit themselves with romantic nonsense”.³³ However, women were in fact not the main customers of the circulating libraries, even if they appeared more prominently here than in other institutions of book-lending: “Even at Marshall’s circulating library in Bath, whose clientele notoriously comprised young ladies of leisure, women subscribers were in a minority: 35 per cent of readers in 1793 and only 22 per cent in 1798”,³⁴ and even here they had the opportunity to peruse a variety of books ranging well beyond only fiction.³⁵

1.2. An increasing female readership

In addition to an increase in the middleclass reading public, another facet to eighteenth century readership is the rise in female readers.³⁶ Women in the aristocracy and the middleclass had increased leisure, which according to Watt “was often occupied by omnivorous reading”.³⁷ Increasing amounts of goods were manufactured and available for purchase, and it was therefore not necessary for women to spend the same amount of time sewing, weaving, and producing items in the home as before. This freed up time, and, contrary to men, women would seldom spend their leisure on politics, going to public houses, or engage in other pursuits outside the home or in the public domain.³⁸ Their leisure would be spent within the confines of the home, and reading would thus be a suitable pastime.

As with the levels of literacy it is important to keep in mind that the amount of female leisure would probably have been somewhat exaggerated by contemporary observers. The lower social orders would not have had much leisure for reading. And, as Watt points out, manufactured goods would not have been equally available throughout the country, the freed-up time for reading would probably have been a phenomena mostly confined to London, the home counties and larger cities.³⁹ Richard Ritter also points out that recent research “have demonstrated, contrary to the assertions of previous literary historians, [that] women of the

³¹ Jacobs, Edward: “Eighteenth-Century British Circulating Libraries and Cultural Book History” in *Book History*, Vol 6, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2003, p. 9

³² Ibid

³³ Brewer, John & McCalman, Iain: “Publishing” in Ed. McCalman, Iain: *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, British Culture 1776-1832*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, p.204-205

³⁴ Ibid p. 205

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Watt, Ian: *The Rise of the Novel, studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* Pimlico, London, 2000 p. 43

³⁷ Ibid p. 44

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹Ibid p. 45

middle ranks were by no means the dominant consumers of literature within this period”.⁴⁰ Jan Fergus have argued that the notion that women dominated the public for fiction reading at the time is the result of reviewers and moralists in the eighteenth century propagating this image, rather than a fact based on empirical evidence.⁴¹ Even with these caveats in place, the eighteenth century would seem to be a time of increased reading, increased reading for pleasure, and an increased female reading audience.

It would seem to be very difficult, if not impossible, then to establish any precise numbers for literacy rates in general, or for female readers in particular, at the end of the eighteenth century. The exact number is, however, not particularly important for my purposes. What is important for the present study is the perception that literacy rates were on the rise, and that women made up a sizeable portion of the reading public.

1.3. Women as readers

That women were participants in literature, both as writers and readers were, according to Pearson, often viewed with a great degree of ambiguity.⁴² On the one hand women were told that reading was not compatible with doing one’s duty as wife and mother, and at the same time they were told that they had more need of reading than men, since they were less rational creatures at the outset and were confined to a private sphere without experience to draw on.⁴³ But, according to Pearson, the chief concern at the time was not with women who did not read, but with those who “read the wrong books, in the wrong ways and the wrong places”.⁴⁴ Pearson lists a number of texts from the 1750s and onwards showing the problems raised by female readers, in a variety of genres from education manuals and conduct books to novels. The worst readers would, according to ‘Hints on Reading’ in the *Lady’s Magazine* of 1789, seem to be those who read simply to pass the time:

The most extraordinary of all readers are those who read to *kill time*. To such it makes no difference what they read, for they remember *nothing*. Ask them what they have been reading – they can’t tell. – Ask them what the subject was – they don’t know.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ritter, Richard: *Imagining Women Readers, 1789–1820 : Well-Regulated Minds* Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2015, p. 3

⁴¹ Jan Fergus: *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 12

⁴² Pearson, Jacqueline: *Women’s Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 15

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Anon.: ‘Hints on Reading’ in *Lady’s Magazine* Vol. 20, 1789, p. 178

However, of equally great concern appears to have been women who read books which gave them too many fanciful ideas, or those who read too literally, mistaking fiction for real life. Many during the last decades of the eighteenth century “had argued that the novel over-stimulated the imagination, set readers imitating fiction in their own lives and usurped the place of useful and edifying reading”.⁴⁶ Both Claudia Johnson and Marilyn Butler point out that the 1790s brought forth an array of novels which point out the dangers of women reading novels that give them the idea that their own opinions matters more than what is prescribed by society and parental dictates.⁴⁷ Reading too literally was also perceived as dangerous. Charlotte Lennox’ *The Female Quixote* (1752) is a story of a woman who reads romances “in the belief that they are canonical, and thus true ‘histories’”.⁴⁸ The title is a reference to Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605-1615), a story of fusing literature and life to detrimental effects. The term quixotism is sometimes also used to refer to reading too literally. On the face of it, *Northanger Abbey* would appear to follow an eighteenth century tradition of portraying the dangers of a female reader reading too literally. However, as I will argue throughout this thesis, Austen’s work is, on closer inspection, not a clear-cut denunciation of wrongful reading.

Pearson writes that “Obviously both men and women, boys and girls, read in this period, but the issue in fiction, reviews, and educational works is dominated by *women’s* reading”.⁴⁹ Even if many texts would begin by making general statements about ‘readers’ they would quickly narrow their focus upon women readers, which, according to Pearson, “marks the special anxieties surrounding the growth of women’s literacy”.⁵⁰ Pearson also points out that poor reading practices were often gendered as female, good practices as male.⁵¹ One should bear in mind that readers and reading practices were more varied than moralists in the eighteenth century might portray, as Richard Ritter points out.⁵² However, “prescriptive accounts can tell us much about the anxieties generated by the conjunction of reading and

⁴⁶ Kelly, Gary: “‘This Pestiferous Reading’: The Social Basis of Reaction Against the Novel in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Britain”, *Man and Nature*, Vol. 4, 1985, p. 186

<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1011845ar> accessed 10.05.2023

⁴⁷ Johnson, Claudia L.: *Jane Austen, Women, Politics and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988 & Butler, Marilyn: *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988

⁴⁸ Doody, Margaret Anne in the Introduction to Lennox, Charlotte: *The Female Quixote* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. xxi

⁴⁹ Pearson, Jacqueline: *Women’s Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 18

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Ritter, Richard: *Imagining Women Readers, 1789–1820: Well-Regulated Minds* Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2015, p. 2

femininity within this period”.⁵³

1.4. An increase in reading material

The eighteenth century was a period of expansion, not just in the numbers of readers, but also in the number of titles available to read, and in the variety of literature to be read. Austen wrote at a time when “the volume of book production surged”.⁵⁴ Benedict writes of the increasingly professionalised book trade during the eighteenth century that there was a move from books being luxury items and high culture for the few, towards literature being a commodity in a competitive market.⁵⁵

According to Benedict “New genres, new writers, and new readers (...) opened up new topics. The burst of new literary forms resulted partly from new ways of selling old material, but it also reflected the new freedom in the marketplace of print”.⁵⁶ There was an increase in the number of people who could read and write, as well as more people being able to print and sell material. This was partly due to less regulation of print and a release from the censorship of the Puritan regime following the Restoration of 1660. Although there was restriction on reporting from parliament, and some degree of censorship on certain topics, there was a higher degree of freedom in print than what had ever been seen previously. This opened up the field for new possible topics in print. The Printing Act, which had previously limited the number of printers and the number of printed books, was not renewed when it lapsed in 1695 thus giving opportunities for more people to be engaged in printing ventures. All of this led to a freedom which according to Benedict “propelled a surge of new genres throughout the eighteenth century”.⁵⁷

1.5. The novel and the female reader

The expanding reading public focused much of their attention on a form of literary writing which developed throughout the age: the novel.⁵⁸ If we are to believe contemporary observers,

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Raven, James: “Book production” in Todd, Janet (Ed.): *Jane Austen in Context* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 194

⁵⁵ Benedict, Barbara M. “Readers, writers, reviewers, and the professionalization of literature” in Ed. Keymer, Thomas & Mee, Jon: *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740-1830* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 13

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Watt, Ian: *The Rise of the Novel, studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* Pimlico, London, 2000

the reading public, and women in particular, seems to have devoured novels.⁵⁹ It has often been the case that genres and fields associated with women have been viewed as of lesser value. Consequently, the novels being read by a largely female audience was, by some, viewed as lesser writing than elevated poetry with classical ideals, or political writings, categories of writing more closely associated with men.⁶⁰ This is perhaps particularly true of a popular genre within the novel, the Gothic. According to Davison “the Gothic’s gender associations have long functioned as a key but veiled issue in its denunciation”.⁶¹

The novel genre was, and still is, a literary genre in which some of the output is simply meant to be diverting, it is meant as entertainment. Being purely entertainment could be viewed with suspicion however since “pleasure has frequently been devalued as a result of its association with immediate gratification ... (and) the pleasure produced by the reading of fiction has ... typically been treated with mistrust”.⁶² The view that novels were only entertainment was according to Gary Kelly a key factor in discourse against novels.⁶³ Some novels would, however, be meant as instructive, and quite a few titles probably aim at both instruction and entertainment to a higher or lesser degree. During the eighteenth century much of what was written within the novel genre was viewed as pure escapism by some observers, to the extent that writers who wished to convey a serious message and instruction through the means of an entertaining tale would, quite often, make qualifications regarding their choice of genre, and point out the differences between their story and the general output from novelists.⁶⁴

The eighteenth century was, as we have seen, a period with great interest in female reading, and quite often the dangers of misdirected reading. This focused particularly on the novel. The assumed reader of a novel was a woman, usually a young, impressionable, and ignorant female who would waste idle hours being easily seduced by the fictitious world she immersed herself in.⁶⁵ As Pearson writes: “novel-reading [was] one of the most contested

⁵⁹ Pearson, Jacqueline: *Women’s Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008

⁶⁰ Ibid p. 196

⁶¹ Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 3

⁶² Ritter, Richard: *Imagining Women Readers, 1789–1820 : Well-Regulated Minds* Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2015, p. 168

⁶³ Kelly, Gary: “This Pestiferous Reading”: The Social Basis of Reaction Against the Novel in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *Man and Nature*, Vol. 4, 1985, p. 187

<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1011845ar> accessed 10.05.2023

⁶⁴ Pearson, Jacqueline: *Women’s Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 197

⁶⁵ Ibid p. 196

areas in cultural debate,”⁶⁶ this to the extent that novelists themselves appeared somewhat ambivalent about their genre, some naming their endeavours ‘a tale’ rather than ‘a novel’.⁶⁷ The narrator of *Northanger Abbey* is very well aware of this tendency amongst novelists themselves to be wary of the category of writing they add to, saying that their custom is one of “degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding” (NA 21). Some have suggested, as E. J. Clery does, that the discussion concerning women and novel reading may not have been arguments related to novels per se, but were, really, about larger issues which were projected onto a smaller canvas. She argues that the discussions were really about the crumbling of established hierarchies, and about social and economic factors within society as a whole, but novels were used as a convenient medium through which to discuss them. Discussing novels then acts to redirect anxieties about society, at that particular time in history, onto a supposedly timeless issue about the nature of women.⁶⁸ I believe there may be a lot of truth in this, however, we should not see arguments about novel reading as entirely detached from the novel itself either, issues relating to reading are closely tied to issues of society at large, as seems to be Pearson’s position.

Throughout Austen’s novel we encounter attitudes to novels and reading. Through the narrator’s defence of Catherine and Miss Thorpe’s novel reading, we see some of the contemporary derogatory opinions on novels. The narrator appears firm and assertive in stating that they read novels, saying that the two friends “shut themselves up, to read novels together. Yes, novels...” (NA 21). What is implied is that the reader may be surprised that novel reading is an activity the story allows and condones. But yes, this narrator allows her heroine to read novels without scolding her for it. What follows is a passage wherein the narrator describes other authors’ way of belittling heroines who read novels, or portraying characters who shun novels in favour of supposedly more exalted reading material. The tenor of this description allows us to see the way in which some critics are perhaps a bit too eager to decry novels, that the general opinion is against novels to the extent that one is fearful of being associated with them. Even to the extent that novelists were weary of letting the heroines of their own novels read their own genre. The narrator of *Northanger Abbey* will not “adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers...(of)...joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid p. 197

⁶⁸ Clery, E. J.: *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995

ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine” (NA 21). The irony of this is put to the fore. The tone of narration in the book is witty and bemused, and we may well laugh at Catherine and her obsession with *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, but the joke is equally on those who degrade novels. This passage also uses the opportunity to defend novels, not just laugh at those who denounce them. The narrator says that “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” (NA 22). It is also pointed out that “our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world” (NA 21).

Northanger Abbey then, is not just a novel which parodies a literary genre, it is also a novel which discusses writing and reading practises within its pages. The novel explores female and male writing and reading practises, and the expectations to these. As the dialogues between Catherine and Henry Tilney about journal writing and novel reading reveal, women’s writing was often perceived as concerned “with the most trivial concerns of dress and social success”.⁶⁹ Henry states that he knows what Catherine will put in her journal: “Friday, went to the Lower Rooms; wore my sprigged muslin robe with blue trimmings – plain black shoes – appeared to much advantage; but was strangely harassed by a queer, half-witted man, who would make me dance with him” (NA 12) Henry Tilney’s mocking picture of women’s journal writing reveals, as Joanne Cordón states, the prevalence of such ideas of women’s literary abilities. Cordón says that “though contemporary critics dismissively associate women with trivial literary effusiveness, the feminine tradition of the novel” is by Austen’s narrator claimed as something which transcends the rhetorical script for women. *Northanger Abbey* famously contains a powerful defence of novels, wherein the narrator presents novels as a medium through which we can explore the world around us with the help of the finest language. The narrator describes novels as “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 22)

During Austen’s lifetime there was a surge in book production, and many new bookshops and circulating libraries opened. It was a time at which “print penetrated ever more

⁶⁹ Cordón, Joanne: “Speaking Up for Catherine Morland: Cixous and the Feminist Heroine” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, University of Nebraska Press, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2011), pp. 41-63, p. 50
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A277271357/LitRC?u=ntnuu&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=12b33118> accessed 10.06.2019

deeply into British society – to both the delight and horror of contemporaries”.⁷⁰ During Austen’s writing career the novel appears to have divided into two types, one which was, as Walter Scott says in his review of Austen’s *Emma*: “the ephemeral productions which supply the regular demand of watering-places and circulating libraries” and the other which were works “exalted and decorated by the higher exertions of genius”.⁷¹

It was not just Scott who saw novels of lesser quality as the domain of spa towns and circulating libraries. In the view of many contemporary observers the circulating libraries contributed to filling the minds of large swathes of the population with fanciful ideas and idling away time in escapism.⁷² Brewer and McCalman have point which I find interesting, they write that it may well have been the case that a rise in the price of novels led more readers to borrow them from circulating libraries in order to spend their money on purchasing material considered as “more durable sorts of literature”.⁷³ It might well be that many amongst the reading public were in fact able to distinguish between various qualities of literature, and which to put emphasis on. It is clear that some, at least, were well aware that not everything they read was the best within literary output, and yet, they chose to read it regardless. Lady Mary Wortley Montague, for instance, writes in a letter to her daughter to send books according to a list she has compiled, noting that “I doubt not that at least the greater part of these are trash, lumber, etc. However, they will serve to pass away the idle time...”.⁷⁴ Similarly Austen distinguished between the books one reads once and those that are good enough to reread⁷⁵. Different books have different uses. Ana Voicu says that Austen:

had the opportunity of being acquainted with the great writers of her time and of reading both literature which was considered good, formative, and literature which was viewed as unsuitable for the sensitive female sex. Interestingly, she made a goal of neither copying the great authors, nor of devaluing those more negatively regarded, but of appreciating both sides by finding her own literary voice and thus contributing to their mission, whether primary or secondary, of establishing the novel as a respectable genre.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Raven, James: “Book production” in Todd, Janet (Ed.): *Jane Austen in Context* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 194

⁷¹ Cited in Cronin, Richard: “Literary Scene” in Todd, Janet (Ed.): *Jane Austen in Context* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 295

⁷² Jacobs, Edward: “Eighteenth-Century British Circulating Libraries and Cultural Book History” in *Book History*, Vol 6, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2003

⁷³ Ed. McCalman, Iain: *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, British Culture 1776-1832*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, entry on ‘Circulating Libraries’, p. 454

⁷⁴ Cited in Watt, Ian: *The Rise of the Novel, studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* Pimlico, London, 2000, p. 44

⁷⁵ Tomalin, Claire: *Jane Austen, A Life* Penguin Books, London, 2000

⁷⁶ Voicu, Ana: "READING HABITS IN JANE AUSTEN’S NORTHANGER ABBEY". *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai - Philologia* vol. 2: 175-190, p. 176 <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=959325> accessed 12.04.2023

Both the highs and the lows of the literary hierarchy have their uses and can be appreciated. Consequently, according to Voicu, Austen's parody of the Gothic romance is negative only on a superficial level.⁷⁷

If novels in general were a source of contentious debate Gothic novels were decidedly so.⁷⁸ During the 1790s the sheer amount of Gothic fiction which flooded the market led commentators to discuss the relative value of various types of fiction, as well as their usefulness as regards giving the reader the right kind of impetus.⁷⁹ Ann Radcliffe's novels of the 1780s and 1790s were amongst Gothic novels which became immensely popular and set a standard which was followed by many others throughout the 1790s.⁸⁰ Davison is amongst those who point out that the Gothic may have been seen as a suspect and lesser literary form because it was seen as feminised, and because the majority, of both writers and consumers of the genre, were women.⁸¹ Radcliffe however managed to gain both respect and a broad audience.⁸² Such was not always the case with those who followed in Radcliffe's footsteps, "between 1790 and 1810 critics were almost univocal in their condemnation of what was seen as an unending torrent of popular trashy novels".⁸³ Chapter two will expand on the Gothic, and women readers and authors of the Gothic.

1.6. The age of conduct books

Amongst texts specifically meant for instruction were conduct books. The end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century saw a great number of these conduct books, also called 'advice books' or 'courtesy books', being published.⁸⁴ These were books aimed at instilling moral character and directing the proper behaviour of ladies to girls and young women.⁸⁵ They were usually written from a devoutly religious and conservative point of view, promoting women's subordination to the family, first to their parents then to a husband. Often the aim of these books would be to prepare a young woman for the marriage

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Miles, Robert: "The 1790s: the effulgence of Gothic" in Hogle, Jerrold E. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Botting, Fred: *Gothic* Routledge, London and New York, 2001, p. 63

⁸¹ Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 84

⁸² Botting, Fred: *Gothic* Routledge, London and New York, 2001 p. 21

⁸³ Ibid p. 21-22

⁸⁴ Ed. McCalman, Iain: *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, British Culture 1776-1832*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, entry on 'Conduct Books', p. 464

⁸⁵ Poovey, Mary: *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, p. 15

market, through moulding its reader into a suitably submissive and unassuming lady, whilst preferably not having an entirely vacant mind. The goal was modesty, both in dress, behaviour, and in general appearance. A lady should avoid vanity and showing off in any way.⁸⁶ Another important subject matter in conduct books, and crucial for the present study, was the dangers of unsupervised reading, particularly of novels. Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* from 1773, for instance, teaches the dangers of reading novels.⁸⁷ Dr. James Fordyce wrote in agreement that "There are very few novels that can be read with safety" and continues, rather drastically I might add, to say that the woman who reads novels that are unsuitable "must in her soul be a prostitute".⁸⁸

Fordyce is of particular relevance to a discussion of Austen's work. The Reverend James Fordyce (1720-1796) wrote *Sermons to Young Women*, a collection of advice for the correct behaviour of women, first published in 1766.⁸⁹ The sermons preached submissiveness, modesty, duty, and sensitivity. For a time, the book was immensely popular, reaching several editions already in the first year of publication. By the end of century, however, at which time Austen began writing, the sermons' popularity had waned somewhat, becoming a source of comedy in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). When Mr. Collins announces his intention of reading from Fordyce's sermons to his cousins on the first evening of his visit in the Bennet household this can be taken as an indication of the character of Mr. Collins as one who sticks to propriety and social order, but who is also a bit tedious and sets too much store by social strictures. He "protested that he never read novels",⁹⁰ and chose rather to read the sermons "with very monotonous solemnity".⁹¹ Fordyce's sermons were by this time so well-known that the piece of writing could be used to give the reader a pointer to what kind of character he is who chooses this as preferred reading. The sermons are in fact equally well placed to add to the character of Lydia, who yawns at the proposal and quickly interrupts the reading.⁹² Her reaction says something about her priorities and inclinations as well.

⁸⁶ Dahmer, Cornelia: "Still, however, it is certain that young ladies should be more apt to hear than to speak": Silence in Eighteenth Century Conduct Books for Young Women" *Revue de la Société d'études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* 17 - 18, 2017, Vol.73 (73), p.123-145 <https://doi.org/10.4000/1718.748> accessed 10.05.2023

⁸⁷ Ed. McCalman, Iain: *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, British Culture 1776-1832*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, entry on 'Conduct Books', p. 464

⁸⁸ Fordyce quoted in Ed. McCalman, Iain: *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, British Culture 1776-1832*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, entry on 'Conduct Books', p. 464

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Austen, Jane: *Pride and Prejudice* Penguin Books, London, 2006, p. 76

⁹¹ Ibid p. 76-77

⁹² Ibid p. 77

1.7. Literature's ability to mould the reader

Even if the eighteenth century was a period of literature increasingly becoming something you could make a profit from, and therefore also of writing intended to cater for the market and not necessarily aimed at being fine art, it was also a period when reading denoted refinement as well as social and moral merit.⁹³ As Benedict writes, the readers of the age:

read for information, for entertainment and for profit, but as the period wore on they were increasingly reading for a further reason: moral improvement. Reading had become a route for the development of the individual into a fully formed member of society. Thus, what people read, as well as how and where they read it, could be seen to indicate much about them.⁹⁴

This points to great importance being given to literature's ability to affect people, and it is also why conduct books were so popular. 'Literacy offer[s] the most efficient means for shaping individuals' and it was therefore 'the *raison d'être* of conduct books'.⁹⁵ The notion that reading had a great impact on the reader is evident in the great number of writings from the time, both of fiction and non-fiction, concerned with what and how to read. However, reading was not necessarily always seen as moral improvement, whether it was depended both on what was read and the way in which it was read.⁹⁶ What is important to note is the idea that reading contributes to shaping the reader, and, which I find interesting, that reading shapes the individual's relationship to society.

Both Pearson and Benedict point to the idea in the eighteenth century that through reading and writing people were engaged in a public debate, a public endeavour. In many ways reading may appear to be a solitary, individualistic occupation. But it is, at the same time, a way of attaining knowledge of the world around you, and a way of being part of a development of ideas and debate, even if a passive one.

⁹³ Benedict, Barbara M. "Readers, writers, reviewers, and the professionalization of literature" in Ed. Keymer, Thomas & Mee, Jon: *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740-1830* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 3

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ Armstrong; Nancy and Tennenhouse, Leonard: "The Literature of conduct, the conduct of literature, and the politics of desire" in Armstrong; Nancy and Tennenhouse, Leonard (Ed.): *The Ideology of Conduct* Routledge, London, 1987, p. 2

⁹⁶ Pearson, Jacqueline: *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008

There is no doubt that Austen was an avid reader and that she was keenly aware of the events and discussions of her time.⁹⁷ It is also evident that these inform and infuse her work.⁹⁸

Austen enjoyed a varied repertoire of literature, amongst it the more trivial output of what one might term ‘hack’ writers, as well as literature of the more serious and elevated variety. She divided literature between the type that you read once and which amuses, and that which is good enough to reread.⁹⁹ Much of the popular Gothic novels of the late eighteenth century would probably fall into the category you read once, but Austen would quite likely have read a number of them, for amusement, whether they were seen as having literary merit or not. As we shall see in the following chapters Austen, through her work, engaged in contemporary debates concerning women and literature and the ways in which the reader interacts with and is affected by literature.

⁹⁷ Cronin, Richard: “Literary Scene” in Todd, Janet (Ed.): *Jane Austen in Context* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005

⁹⁸ Stabler, Jane: “Literary Influences” in Todd, Janet (Ed.): *Jane Austen in Context* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005 and Knox-Shaw, Peter: *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009

⁹⁹ Cronin, Richard: “Literary Scene” in Todd, Janet (Ed.): *Jane Austen in Context* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005

2. *Northanger Abbey* and the Feminine Gothic

Northanger Abbey is a novel which plays with the conventions of the Gothic as they were in the 1790s. Amongst the more popular, and more enduring of the late eighteenth-century Gothic novels are the stories of Ann Radcliffe. In its basic skeletal plot, as Carol Margaret Davison states, *Northanger Abbey* is “a novel in the tradition of the Radcliffean Female Gothic”.¹⁰⁰ Radcliffe’s novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is being read by Catherine Morland and her friend Isabella Thorpe, reading of Radcliffe is one of their chief concerns and the novel informs Catherine’s way of seeing the world around her, both people and places. Consequently, it is important to look at some of the key features of the literature Catherine is reading before I analyse how she reads this into the people and places she encounters in the following chapters. In this chapter I will present some key aspects of the Feminine, or Female, Gothic tradition, which Radcliffe is the foremost representative of, and how they can be read in terms of gender roles, thus being an evocation of the patriarchal structures of society at that time.

2.1. The ‘feminine Gothic’

According to Robert Miles in ‘The 1790s: the effulgence of Gothic’,¹⁰¹ there was truth in reviewers’ claims that the market was flooded with the Gothic in the 1790s, albeit one should be aware of the variety within what has been termed Gothic. Within Gothic literature which followed after Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) many critics divide novels into ‘feminine’ or ‘female’ Gothic and ‘masculine’ Gothic, the first often exemplified with Radcliffe, the other with M. G. Lewis. Kate Ferguson Ellis describes the two thus:

Both focus on the home, represented by the (often-usurped) Gothic castle. In the feminine Gothic the heroine exposes the villain’s usurpation and thus reclaims an enclosed space that should have been a refuge from evil but has become the very opposite, a prison. The masculine Gothic gives the perspective of an exile from the refuge of home, now the special province of women.¹⁰²

It is the ‘feminine Gothic’ which is of particular interest for the present study. Many of these Gothic stories conveyed a tale of a powerful, cruel, devious man who controls the fate of the

¹⁰⁰ Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 160

¹⁰¹ Miles, Robert: “The 1790s: the effulgence of Gothic” in Hogle, Jerrold E. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012

¹⁰² Ellis, Kate Ferguson: *The Contested Castle, Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1989, p. xii-xiii

heroine through both psychological and physical means. He could be a stern uncle, a guardian, or a monk. He was an authority figure who kept the beautiful and chaste heroine physically confined under lock and key, or under psychological control, away from the heroic lover who would eventually rescue the heroine. Critics have “codified the female Gothic plot as an orphaned heroine in search of an absent mother, pursued by a feudal (patriarchal) father or his substitute, with the whole affair monitored by an impeccable but ineffectual suitor”.¹⁰³ Some of these the key features of the ‘feminine Gothic’ were developed in the novels of Radcliffe and became so popular that they were copied by other authors, such as Regina Maria Roche, who figures on Catherine and Isabella’s reading list of Gothic horrors (NA 23-24).

It is not surprising that such tales of powerful father figures controlling women can be read as a problematisation of the period’s gender roles. At a time when women’s possibilities were limited and most would be reliant on either a father, a brother or a husband to provide the material comforts of life, and a male relative would be responsible for them in legal terms,¹⁰⁴ it is easy to see the Gothic novels as presenting the perverse and dramatic image of gender relations as they were in real life. It is, perhaps, very easy from a feminist point of view today to see the Gothic in such political terms, but even in the 1790s the Gothic was seen as political.¹⁰⁵ Gothic imagery was in fact used deliberately by some authors, such as Mary Wollstonecraft in *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798) to convey a progressive political message on women’s position. As Claudia Johnson states, by the time Austen began writing *Northanger Abbey* in the mid-1790s “the Gothic novel had already been thoroughly imbued with political implications”.¹⁰⁶ “By the time *The Mysteries of Udolpho* appeared, the castle, prison, tyrant, and sensitive young girl could no longer be presented naively; they had all been familiarized and sophisticated by the events in France”.¹⁰⁷ The events in France was, of course, the French Revolution which began in 1789 and ignited political debate across the channel in England as well.

¹⁰³ Miles, Robert: “Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis” in Punter, David (Ed.): *A Companion to the Gothic* Blackwell, Oxford & Malden, 2000, p. 43

¹⁰⁴ Davidoff, Leonore and Hall, Catherine: *Family Fortunes, Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* Routledge, London and New York, 2002

¹⁰⁵ Miles, Robert: “Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis” in Punter, David (Ed.): *A Companion to the Gothic* Blackwell, Oxford & Malden, 2000, p. 42

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, Claudia: *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, p. 32

¹⁰⁷ Paulson, Ronald: *Representations of Revolution, 1789-1820* Yale University Press, New Haven, 1983, p. 221

2.2. The Gothic, the French Revolution and women's rights

The French Revolution was an event which according to both Johnson and Marilyn Butler had great impact on the literary culture which Austen was a part of.¹⁰⁸ What was happening in France was giving impetus to fierce debate in England, either inspired by ideas from the revolutionaries of creating a more progressive society and greater equality, or staunch conservatism seeking to preserve an old world order and defending against dangerous ideas that might dissolve the fabric of society. This debate also entered the pages of fiction literature,¹⁰⁹ and the Gothic novel can be read as a portrayal of political issues in a dramatic fashion.

The Marquis de Sade wrote that the Gothic genre was “the indispensable fruit of the revolutionary upheavals whose effects were felt all over Europe”.¹¹⁰ As Miles argues, the craze for the Gothic during the 1790s was already at the time viewed as connected with the French revolution, the perception being that writers strove to compete with the horror of reality in creating new extremes in print.¹¹¹ Although Miles is careful to point out that the Gothic romance predates the revolution in France, the Gothic in the 1790s seems to be bound up with the revolutionary times. In the first part of the decade these novels are “ideologically inflected” as Miles argues.¹¹² That is, they are pervaded by an Enlightenment sense of freeing society from feudal structures, the horror is being sent back to the Medieval. In the latter half of the decade the Gothic becomes infused by the more modern threat of chaos and unrest, and the Gothic thus becomes “a way of speaking the unspeakable”.¹¹³ Gothic literature can be seen as channelling fears of revolt and upheaval, external as well as internal, and the threat of change to established structures of society. Portrayals of a brutal and chaotic society across the channel would reverberate with the fears of the revolution spreading to Britain. Some Gothic texts could also be viewed as a depiction of the horrors of keeping the established world order rather than attempting to create a more equal society. *Northanger Abbey*, in Miles' view is a reflection of and comment upon the unspeakable revolutionary anxiety conveyed in other Gothic texts of the period.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸ Johnson, Claudia: *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990 & Butler, Marilyn: *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988

¹⁰⁹ Clemit, Pamela; 'Preface' to Clemit, Pamela (Ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011

¹¹⁰ De Sade cited in Löwy, Michael and Sayre, Robert: *Romanticism against the tide of Modernity* Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2001, p. 217

¹¹¹ Miles, Robert: “The 1790s: the effulgence of Gothic” in Hogle, Jerrold E. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 43

¹¹² Ibid, p. 54

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 55

¹¹⁴ Ibid

The politization of literature in the wake of the French Revolution, which Gina Luria Walker and others have explored,¹¹⁵ means that Gothic literature was open for interpretation in view of recent political events, both regarding gender issues and wider political concerns, even if its setting would often not be contemporary England. Whether the intention of the author was to make a political argument is not necessarily the point, the political climate could easily promote such readings according to both Butler and Johnson.¹¹⁶ Even if often set in medieval times or the 15th or 16th century and geographically in Italy or France, as Radcliffe's novels are, Fred Botting points out that, "Eighteenth-century values were never far from the surface in these tales of other times".¹¹⁷

A way in which the Gothic can be seen as commenting upon the present is in terms of gender. Literature in the 1790s may have been shaped by and influenced by the French Revolution. That is not to say that everything which was written in that decade springs directly from the events in France, but rather that they provoked a clearer politization of the literary debate, which also penetrates into the literature of authors, such as Austen, who did not have a staunch political agenda.¹¹⁸ Pamela Clemit argues that "the French Revolution ignited the biggest debate on politics and society since the Civil War 150 years earlier".¹¹⁹ Further she states that it changed the language of politics and forms of communicating it, and drew in new parts of society as readers, and "poets, novelists and dramatists sought to influence the course of events".¹²⁰ This engages women as authors in a new way. Gina Luria Walker explains that following the fall of the Bastille in July of 1789, "British women took their pens"¹²¹ not just as writers of novels and conduct books, which were the genres they had historically been relegated to. Women engaged in new genres, and "urgent political concerns surfaced in their domestic tales".¹²² Against a backdrop of revolution in France a "'women's war' took shape in print"¹²³ in the 1790s wherein women were debating the roles and nature of women in a climate of political upheaval, with impending reforms in education and reforms

¹¹⁵ Walker, Gina Luria: 'Women's voices' in Clemit, Pamela (Ed.): *British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011

¹¹⁶ Johnson, Claudia: *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990 & Butler, Marilyn: *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988

¹¹⁷ Botting, Fred: *Gothic* Routledge, London and New York, 2001, p. 63

¹¹⁸ See for instance Tomalin, Claire: *Jane Austen, A Life* Penguin Books, London, 2000, p. 139-142

¹¹⁹ Clemit, Pamela; 'Preface' to Clemit, Pamela (Ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. xv

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ Walker, Gina Luria: 'Women's voices' in Clemit, Pamela (Ed.): *British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 145

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ Ibid

of laws concerning women on the agenda. I would not suggest that Austen should be taken to account for the views of what one may term the proto-feminist works of Wollstonecraft for instance. However, as Claire Tomalin says: “Nobody could live through the 1790s without being aware of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which... caused a furore”,¹²⁴ and I believe the issues taken up by Wollstonecraft surfaces in mediated form in literature by ‘unpolitical’ authors as well. I would suggest that there is reason to see Austen’s work in light of the contemporary debates about the nature and roles of women, and that *Northanger Abbey* and its reading of the Gothic says something about gender roles at the time, which I will explore more closely in the following chapters.

2.3. The Gothic tradition and representations of gender in Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*

E. J. Clery states that the beginnings of the Gothic with Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* aimed at presenting something that was new, something that broke with the prevalent mode of writing where realism and verisimilitude was the highest aim.¹²⁵ According to Clery, during much of the eighteenth century a classical ideal prevailed in writing, giving stringent rules as to coherence and structure.¹²⁶ Novels, a fairly new form of literature, aimed at presenting events as they might occur in real life.¹²⁷ What Walpole set out to do is create something new which presents a fantastical story but adheres to rules of coherence and gives us realistic reactions to the fantastical.¹²⁸ *The Castle of Otranto* is set in medieval times, and the story harks back to medieval romances, but uses the novel form, a medium which was new at the time of writing. Thus, Walpole’s novella may be seen as a kind of hybrid between the old and the new. According to Clery the 1780s saw an emergence of writing which used the romance similarly to Walpole, influenced both by medieval romances and the French romances of the 1600s, such as those of Scudéry.¹²⁹ These works of writing were often termed romances at the time, but they are also the beginnings of the Gothic which developed into a massive phenomenon in the following decade.

Already with *The Castle of Otranto*,¹³⁰ usually seen as the first Gothic story, we find an exploration of gender roles. The novella explores the nature of paternal authority, and the

¹²⁴ Tomalin, Claire: *Jane Austen, A Life* Penguin Books, London, 2000, p. 140

¹²⁵ Clery, E. J.: “The genesis of ‘Gothic’ fiction” in Hogle, Jerrold E. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012

¹²⁶ Ibid

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Ibid p. 24

¹²⁹ Ibid p. 33-35

¹³⁰ Walpole, Horace: *The Castle of Otranto* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998

extent and limits of filial obedience. The novella centres around Manfred, the authority figure of the story. Manfred attempts to secure marriage to his son's fiancée, after the son has been brutally killed by a large helmet falling upon him and crushing him to death. Isabella, the fiancée of the son, resists the pursuit of what would have been her father-in-law, on both religious and social grounds. Frederic, Isabella's father, urges the union. Isabella questions the moral stature of both her biological father and what Davison terms "her surrogate father Manfred".¹³¹ Thus, according to Davison, an "exploration of the nature and limits of good and bad paternal authority constitutes one of *Otranto's* foremost enterprises"¹³². The "violation of Isabella is a particularly repulsive form of incest"¹³³ Davison states, since the daughter is the figure with whose mobility the whole kinship structure is determined. Hippolita, who would have been Isabella's mother-in-law, however, says that it is woman's duty to submit to male authority. Davison points out that it is notable that "authority in *Otranto* is always rendered in paternalistic terms".¹³⁴ The subsequent question to paternal authority is that of filial duty and obedience, whether there are grounds for a child to disobey the dictates of a parent. Manfred's daughter Matilda, who, on the whole, is a dutiful daughter, defies parental dictates in helping the escape of Theodore, a peasant, and giving way to her love for him, rather than following the route of marriage based on economic terms and consolidating property. A great number of fictional works from this period relate stories of exploring good and bad paternalism, this was a result of the traditional aristocratic values and new middleclass values increasingly clashing.¹³⁵ It was a time when the basis for marriage was in the process of changing. A marriage based, not necessarily on love, but on some kind of companionship, rather than purely on economic grounds was the new middleclass ideal.¹³⁶ Thus Matilda "assumes the role of a female moral revolutionary"¹³⁷ according to Davison.

¹³¹ Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 74

¹³² Ibid

¹³³ Ibid

¹³⁴ Ibid

¹³⁵ Ibid p. 75

¹³⁶ Davidoff, Leonore and Hall, Catherine: *Family Fortunes, Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* Routledge, London and New York, 2002, p. 323

¹³⁷ Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 75

2.4. The Radcliffean Gothic and gender

With the emergence of the ‘feminine Gothic’ in the 1790s the focus shifts from the villain on to the persecuted and incarcerated women.¹³⁸ Characters such as Walpole’s Isabella become the main focus of stories, rather than the villainous authority figures such as Manfred. The foremost proponent of this brand of Gothic was Radcliffe. It is primarily this type of Gothic fiction which is treated in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*. It is their reading of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* which chiefly occupies the minds of Catherine and Isabella, and it is her reading of this particular novel which informs Catherine’s exploration of Northanger. In the Gothic of the 1790s women authors used the Gothic as a medium in which to address women’s concerns and anxieties regarding their position in society and in the family. “Women writers early on redirected the Gothic’s lens to the figure of the persecuted heroine, who risks incarceration in the domestic sphere” which “testifies to their canny abilities to seize an opportunity to register their concerns, both gender-based and otherwise”.¹³⁹ This brand of Gothic attempted to give voice to the terrors of characters such as Walpole’s Isabella. Articulating such terrors was not only suited to the Gothic form, Davison explains, it was one of the main objectives of the genre.¹⁴⁰

In Radcliffe’s works some key motifs or tropes of the ‘feminine Gothic’ is developed. One is the castle wherein the heroine is shut up, both physically and mentally, from the world outside. This may be read as an image of women’s position as sequestered within the home, without much contact with the wider world and confined to limited spheres of life. Another key trope is the villainous father figure who keeps the heroine within tight confines. This is usually done with gains of economical nature or heightened social status as the goal. This can easily be viewed as a mirror of the role women often had in marital transactions, as a purveyor money or status, and it is often marital arrangements which the devious authority figures concocts schemes for. A third key trope in Radcliffe is the innocent heroine, who is graceful and gifted in various ways, and is chiefly mentally and to some degree in a literal sense sent through torment during the story.

Fredric Jameson writes that: “genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact”.¹⁴¹ The Gothic genre in the late eighteenth century became such a

¹³⁸ Ellis, Kate Ferguson: *The Contested Castle, Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1989

¹³⁹ Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 84-85

¹⁴⁰ Ibid p. 84

¹⁴¹ Jameson, Fredric: *The Political Unconscious* Routledge, London, 2002, p. 92

literary institution. As we have seen the Gothic tradition, of Radcliffe and others, developed tropes and plot structures that became recognisable elements of a genre. Thus, the reading public developed certain expectations as to how the key elements of the genre should be read.

2.5. *Northanger Abbey* as a parody of the Radcliffean Gothic

Northanger Abbey is, to an extent, a parody of Radcliffe, and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in particular. Parody can be defined as “imitation with a comic or satirical intention, intended to mock its original, sometimes affectionately, but frequently with malice”.¹⁴² Austen’s novel has often been viewed as mockery with, if not malice precisely, a certain edge towards Radcliffe. According to Terry Castle, in the introduction to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Northanger Abbey*, Austen through her novel saying ‘no’ to “a certain type of contemporary popular fiction”,¹⁴³ that is the Gothic novel. Others have assumed that *Northanger Abbey* parodies literature of a kind Austen herself was enjoying reading.¹⁴⁴ I believe *Northanger Abbey* is not a ‘no’ to Radcliffe, or an “anti-Radcliffean parody”¹⁴⁵, but rather a parody of the affectionate kind. I would suggest the parody is benign in the sense that it sees shortcomings and the comical, and yet sees the value of reading it all the same. Austen’s brother Henry says of his sister that she was familiar with all the best authors, research into the Austen household suggest Austen was acquainted not just with the best authors, if that refers to what was seen as elevated literature, but that she read books of a great variety.¹⁴⁶ Tomalin in her biography of Austen paints a picture of someone who read a varied repertoire of literature.¹⁴⁷

“Parody typically attempts to copy aspects of its target very closely”,¹⁴⁸ sometimes to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish the parody from the object that is parodied. That is not necessarily the case with *Northanger Abbey*, we are made aware of how it differs from the object of parody already on the first page. In *Northanger Abbey* Austen continuously teases our expectations of a text, based on previous knowledge of a genre; novels in general and Gothic novels in particular. What Austen does is to turn many these assumptions on the part

¹⁴² Goring, Paul, Hawthorn, Jeremy and Mitchell, Domhnall: *Studying Literature* Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2010, p. 404

¹⁴³ Castle, Terry “Introduction” to Austen, Jane: *Northanger Abbey* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. x

¹⁴⁴ Stabler, Jane: “Literary Influences” in Todd, Janet (Ed.): *Jane Austen in Context* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 41

¹⁴⁵ Castle, Terry “Introduction” to Austen, Jane: *Northanger Abbey* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. xii

¹⁴⁶ Collins, Irene: *Jane Austen and the Clergy* Hambledon Continuum, London, 2001 xix, p. 19

¹⁴⁷ Tomalin, Claire: *Jane Austen, A Life* Penguin Books, London, 2000

¹⁴⁸ Goring, Paul, Hawthorn, Jeremy and Mitchell, Domhnall: *Studying Literature* Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2010, p. 404

of the reader on its head. We can see this already on the first page, when we are presented with the heroine of the story and with a number of circumstances which are not what they 'ought to be'. That is, not what we as readers would expect from a heroine about to embark on an adventure. The heroine, Catherine Morland, is presented as fairly average, from a normal, commonplace family. The whole novels tease the reader and her expectations, through a play with the conventions of the Gothic novel. What happens as the reader begins to approach *Northanger Abbey* is that Austen shows us that we begin to fill in gaps, as Wolfgang Iser suggests in his theory of how readers use cues in the text to generate meaning and make assumptions about the characters and where the story is heading,¹⁴⁹ already from the moment we open the book. The fact that we are about to read a novel, and a novel at that with a title which brings Gothic stories to mind, predisposes the reader to expect something remarkable in disposition, talents, and perhaps also appearance of the main character. But the first sentence of the story says that "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have ever supposed her born to be an heroine". (NA 1) Immediately we, as readers, are left to ponder the way we fill in gaps. Austen continues thus: "Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her". (NA 1) Her father is a clergyman "without being neglected, or poor, and a very respectable man... he had never been handsome". (NA 1) The mother is "a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. (NA 1) The mothers of Gothic heroines would rather be expected to be frail and die, leaving the heroine an orphan. Catherine and her family is average, she is not a heroine of particular sensibility or talents, and her parents have not inflicted cruelty on her or died young leaving her at the mercy of scheming villains who bring about the adventures of the book. Jameson writes that "we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself... they come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or – if the text is brand-new – through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretative traditions."¹⁵⁰ This is precisely what we as readers are made aware of already at the beginning of Austen's novel, that we as readers bring certain expectations to our reading of a book.

In the following chapters I will show that Catherine as a reader uses this approach of filling in cues based on the key motifs of the Gothic genre to read the real world around her.

¹⁴⁹ Iser, Wolfgang: *The Implied Reader: patterns of communication in prose fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* John Hopkins University Press, London, 1974

¹⁵⁰ Jameson, Fredric: *The Political Unconscious* Routledge, London, 2002, p. ix-x

As a naïve and inexperienced woman, Catherine takes hold of Gothic novels as a basis of experience where actual experience is lacking. Catherine therefore latches the Gothic plot structure, motifs and descriptions on to what she encounters in real life. When Catherine walks with the Tilney siblings around Beechen Cliff, near Bath, Catherine compares the scenery to what she has read in Radcliffe, since she has little experience of travel and seeing different parts of the world.

‘I never look at it’, said Catherine, as they walked along the side of the river, ‘without thinking of the south of France’.

‘You have been abroad then?’ said Henry, a little surprized.

‘Oh! No, I only mean what I have read about. It always puts me in mind of the country that Emily and her father travelled through, in the “Mysteries of Udolpho”’. (NA 82)

Since *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is amongst the things foremost in her mind, that is where she looks for comparison. Catherine reads the natural scenery around Bath through Radcliffe’s depiction of Southern France, a depiction which incidentally also was based on other literature since Radcliffe herself had not been there either and used guide books to create her fictional landscape.¹⁵¹ Similarly, Catherine reads the structure of *Northanger* and the people that are its inhabitants through Radcliffe, as will be discussed in the following two chapters.

Northanger Abbey is a novel which plays with the conventions of Radcliffe and the ‘feminine Gothic’, seemingly setting itself up as another Gothic story, only to twist and appear a depiction of the mundane and everyday. From the beginnings of the Gothic, with Walpole, this genre of the novel can be read as a depiction of gender roles and patriarchal structures in society. Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, one of the key novels within the ‘feminine Gothic’, can be read as a dramatic way of portraying women’s position at the end of the eighteenth century as dependant on male relatives and with little room to fashion their own lives. This is the novel Catherine uses as a template to understand the world around her, and in the following I will explore the implications of Catherine’s reading her surroundings through the ‘feminine Gothic’ and point to the connection between the fantastical of the Gothic and the everyday of Catherine’s surroundings.

¹⁵¹ Castle, Terry “Introduction” to Austen, Jane: *Northanger Abbey* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. xiii

3. The castle and the home

In the following chapter I will look at the castle of Gothic stories as both a place where power is centred and a space of domesticity, and that power in the greater world outside may often entail power over the domestic space as well. I will explore how Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* enters Northanger expecting a ruinous old pile of Gothic splendour, only to be disappointed that the abbey is full of modern comforts. However, as we shall see, the modernity and comforts does not take away from the fact that the domestic space of home can act as a castle locking in its inhabitants, and thus be intimidating both for its usual inhabitants and the visitor, Catherine.

3.1. The castle as a place of power and a domestic space

Already with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* the castle in Gothic literature represents both a structure of power and a domestic space. The novella's setting in the Crusader era was a time at which the castle is both a part in warfare, but also living quarters. The castle has an ambivalence, it is both martial and domestic, as Carol Margaret Davison explores, and is crucial as an upholder of secular power both in the domestic arena and the public world beyond.¹⁵² Davison cites an essay from 1790 in which Archibald Allison argued that that the Gothic castle is even more sublime than other forms of architecture since it had withstood both the desolation of time and, it would seem, the assaults of war.¹⁵³ Consequently Otranto, as a contested castle is, not just "an extremely well chosen backdrop against which to stage Manfred's figurative internal civil war",¹⁵⁴ but also to stage battles with other characters in the story.

In Walpole's story the castle functions as a manifestation of, and a physical reminder of, the forbears of its ruler. As Ian Watt writes the castle "is essentially the material survivor of a powerful lineage, a symbol of the continuing life of its founder".¹⁵⁵ Montague Summers suggests that "the castle functions as the main protagonist as the undead past holds great sway over the living present".¹⁵⁶ As a form of lasting legacy of a family, and its ancestors, the castle functions as a basis for power, and also as a determining factor for the life of its present

¹⁵² Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 72

¹⁵³ Ibid

¹⁵⁴ Ibid

¹⁵⁵ Watt, Ian: "Time and family in the Gothic novel: The Castle of Otranto" in *Eighteenth Century Life*, 10, 1986, p. 168

¹⁵⁶ Summers, Montague: Introduction to Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, cited in Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 70

inhabitants, in which it may serve as a physical manifestation of constraints put upon those who live in it. The castle is firmly tied to material realities, “the foremost of which is the family”,¹⁵⁷ the castle is thus not simply a shield from forces without, but also a way of containing those within.

“The Gothic novel of the eighteenth century foregrounded the home as fortress, while at the same time exposing its contradictions”.¹⁵⁸ In Austen’s novel the fact that the ‘castle’ of the story, or indeed Abbey, has been considerably modernised to cater for comfortable living quarters emphasises the site as one where the power figure wields considerable power over the domestic sphere, not just the affairs of importance for the public world. The point of Northanger being a converted abbey suggests perhaps that we have arrived at a point in history where secular power has usurped some of the power religion formerly had, thus possibly being even more all-encompassing.

3.2. The home as a feminine domain

Austen’s novels centre on a handful of families, with intrigues played out in elegant parlours. Seen as the domain of feminine interests the home has often been seen as trivial in comparison to the more masculine concerns of the world ‘outside’. As Virginia Woolf wrote of the devaluing of feminine interests in favour of masculine ones:

This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with the war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battle-field is more important than a scene in a shop – everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists¹⁵⁹.

However, I would claim that in much the same way as the feminist slogan of the 1970s said that the personal was the political, the inner life of a handful of country families and their, on the face of it, domestic concerns have much wider, and political, implications. What happens in the home and in the family is intimately connected to the affairs of the country. Politics begins at home.

The 1700-hundreds were a period where the idea of the home was developed, as Amanda Vickery shows in *Behind Closed Doors*.¹⁶⁰ The notion of the home as a private

¹⁵⁷ Ibid p. 71

¹⁵⁸ Ellis, Kate Ferguson: *The Contested Castle, Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1989, p. xi

¹⁵⁹ Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One’s Own* Penguin Books, London, 2000, p. 67

¹⁶⁰ Vickery, Amanda: *Behind Closed Doors, At Home in Georgian England* Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2009

space, ensconced away from the public sphere takes shape. But that the home and the family is reigned in behind closed doors, is not to say that what goes on behind these doors is not connected to public matters.¹⁶¹

3.3. Northanger as a castle, Catherine's expectations and the reality

Catherine's expectations of Northanger, prior to arrival, are for the most part made up by an imagination channelling imagery from medieval ruins and castles from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and the like. But rather than filling her with fear she is excited; "Northanger Abbey! – These were thrilling words, and wound up Catherine's feelings to the highest point of extasy". (NA 109) The name of the place, in itself, is enough for Catherine's thoughts to wander along a path created by her reading; "in addition to all the rest, this roof was to be the roof of an abbey! – Her passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney – and castles and abbies made usually the charm of those reveries which his image did not fill". (NA 110)

Catherine longs to explore Northanger's "long, damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel" and she hopes there are some stories related to the place to revel in, "she could not entirely subdue the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun". (NA 110) To some extent Henry Tilney understands the way Catherine's thoughts run, he teases her imagination as they travel towards Northanger. He asks whether she is "prepared to encounter all the horrors...Have you a stout heart? – Nerves fit for sliding panels and tapestry?". (NA 124)

What Catherine encounters is, in parts, remnants of an old abbey, it had been "a richly-endowed convent at the time of the Reformation... (had) fallen into the hands of an ancestor of the Tilneys on its dissolution", (NA 111) but it is now modernised with contemporary domestic comforts. As the travelling party draw near the abbey Catherine expects every bend in the road "with solemn awe to afford a glimpse of its massy walls of grey stone, rising amidst a grove of ancient oaks, with the last beams of the sun playing in beautiful splendour on its high Gothic windows." (NA 127) What actually happens is that, the building standing so low in the landscape, they pass through the gates of the lodge and into the grounds "without having discerned even an antique chimney". (NA 127) Once inside the abbey Catherine's image of the place continues to be challenged. When shown into the drawing room everything is modern, comfortable and handsome, with hardly any of the old fashioned,

¹⁶¹ Ibid

quaint and derelict elements of Catherine's fancy. "The furniture was in all the profusion and elegance of modern taste". (NA 128) Even the fireplace is a Rumford, the epitome of modernity at the time. Ornaments "of the prettiest English china" (NA 128) adds a feeling of cosiness, of home comforts, as well as modernity. There is little medieval about the scene at all, as Catherine reflects; even if she was now inside an abbey "she doubted, as she looked round the room, whether any thing within her observation, would have given her the consciousness". (NA 128) The only thing in the room with the semblance of an old Gothic abbey is the windows; they have the typical pointed arch of Gothic windows. They have, however, large, clear, and light modern windowpanes. In short it bears little visual resemblance to what Catherine had expected.

3.4. The castle with terrors within

The castle may ostensibly be built to keep enemies at bay and shield its inhabitants from the dangers without. But for the female protagonist of a Gothic novel the horrors are often within the castle walls. Emily St. Aubert of *Udolpho* looks out from "her casement... upon the wild grandeur of the scene" (TMoU 241) outside, and one might imagine her, within the fortifications of the castle, safe from the wild world outside. It is, however, within the castle walls we find that which causes apprehension in the mind of the young woman; the sinister uncle who now controls her life and the creaking doors and gloomy staircases inside the castle. Emily is locked in under the control of a man who within a few months "had already exercised an usurped authority over her, and whose character she now regarded, with a degree of terror, apparently justified by the fears of others". (TMoU 240) Signor Montoni, who, through marriage to her aunt, now has legal control over her, whisks her away to an unknown country, keeping her within a castle which in physical terms underscores the powers he has through legal and familial bonds. Radcliffe's novel displaces the action to a different time and a different country, but the castle resonates with the confined domestic sphere of 1790s England.¹⁶² It is precisely because the metaphor of the castle resonates so clearly with the actual contemporary situation that Gothic novels were such a popular genre, both for women authors and readers, according to Kate Ferguson Ellis.¹⁶³

It is worth noting that much of Emily's torments in Radcliffe's novel is of a psychological nature. A lot of it is based on what she fears Montoni might do. The castle in

¹⁶² Ellis, Kate Ferguson: *The Contested Castle, Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1989

¹⁶³ *Ibid* .x

this case may function as an “emblem of the unconscious”¹⁶⁴ relaying fears in the unconscious, a symbol of anxiety and dread in the face of uncertainty and powerlessness. That the scene in Austen’s novel is contemporary and rather more comfortable than a ruined stone abbey with the wind howling through the walls does not take away from the fact that General Tilney wields the same kind of paternal control as Signor Montoni does, creating the same level of anxiety and terror in the people who are under his care, as we shall look more closely at in the next chapter. Catherine’s reading of *Northanger Abbey* as a Radcliffean castle is thus in a figurative sense true. Once at Northanger, life there revolves around the strictures laid down by the General. Even if Catherine wishes to go to Northanger, once there she is very much within the control of the General. As his guest Catherine is, in a manner of speaking, locked up within his castle. Catherine experiences some of the feeling of being limited at Northanger, although she is able to leave.

3.5. Division of female and male spheres

The castle of Gothic novels can easily be interpreted as a dramatic mirror image of the home of domestic bliss. “Always historicize!”¹⁶⁵ thus Fredric Jameson begins the preface to *The Political Unconscious*, and it is important to keep in mind some of the historical context in which the ‘Feminine Gothic’ appears. Throughout the eighteenth century we see an increasing idealisation of the home and a sharper division of spheres, the outside world as the realm of men and the home as the province of women. With an emerging middle class came a clearer division between the world of work and attaining money, which occurred outside the home, and that of domestic comforts. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall traces the development of the middleclass throughout the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century and writes that within this group a new way of organising of life occurred wherein “the distinction between the public world and the private arena was central”¹⁶⁶ and further that “the shifting ambit of public and private was as much a territory of the mind as physical space”.¹⁶⁷ Many authors contributed to creating this territory of the mind. Amongst the more influential ones were Hannah More who “believed that men and women occupied separate spheres by nature

¹⁶⁴ Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 71

¹⁶⁵ Jameson, Fredric: *The Political Unconscious* Routledge, London, 2002 ,p. ix

¹⁶⁶ Davidoff, Leonore and Hall, Catherine: *Family Fortunes, Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* Routledge, London and New York, 2002, p. 319

¹⁶⁷ Ibid

as well as custom and propriety”.¹⁶⁸ The home increasingly became the site for women being ensconced away from the potential dangers of the world outside. There are those who have questioned the sharp division between male and female spheres “Public and private spheres undoubtedly did exist, but it is impossible to argue that the two were hermetically sealed, or that one was unequivocally masculine or feminine”.¹⁶⁹ I would argue that even though they may not have been strictly sealed off from each other, there was a division wherein women to a greater extent lived within the private sphere. Ellis states; the middle class home “distanced in ideology and increasingly in fact from the place where money was made, became a ‘separate sphere’ from the ‘fallen’ world of work”¹⁷⁰. The implication here is that the home was the site in which, with reference to the Bible, the innocence and bliss of paradise, before the fall of Adam and Eve, could be restored. What the early Gothic novels do, however, is to explore that the home is not necessarily the safe haven it was purported to be. Ellis argues convincingly that early Gothic novels subvert the image of the blissful home, using ruinous castles to portray a home wherein women are locked up inside it and men locked out of it.¹⁷¹

The eighteenth century saw the beginning of industrialisation and an increase in the urban population. As more people flocked to the cities in search of work, leaving what could be the relatively safe environment of a rural town, where everybody knew everybody else, for the urban sprawl where the individual could feel subsumed in a great mass of the unknown, the notion of the home as a haven develops.¹⁷² Fencing off the perils and unknowns of the public sphere outside it, literally through means of brick and mortar, and in the mind through an ideology of separate spheres, the home became a bulwark against the many dangers of city life.¹⁷³

Particularly as regards women the world outside was seen as full of dangers. Ferguson Ellis writes that:

...there is plenty of evidence to support a picture of eighteenth-century social life, both in the countryside and in the growing urban centers, that is filled with uncertainty and violence. The emergence of a waged labor force, which drew working women increasingly out of the home, made those women particularly vulnerable to assault and rape. At the other end of the social scale, in 1753 Parliament was so concerned with the rape of rich

¹⁶⁸ Ibid p. 169

¹⁶⁹ Sweet, Rosemary: review of Shoemaker, Bob: *Gender in English Society, 1670-1850. The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* In [The English Historical Review](https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&u=ntnuu&id=GALE|A55249947&v=2.1&it=r) (Vol. 114, Issue 457), Oxford University Press, 1999 <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&u=ntnuu&id=GALE|A55249947&v=2.1&it=r> accessed 14.05.2023

¹⁷⁰ Ellis, Kate Ferguson: *The Contested Castle, Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1989, p. ix

¹⁷¹ Ibid Introduction

¹⁷² Hobsbawm, Eric: *The Age of Revolution 1789-1849* Vintage Books, New York, 1996

¹⁷³ Davidoff, Leonore and Hall, Catherine: *Family Fortunes, Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* Routledge, London and New York, 2002

heiresses as a way of forcing them into marriage (and thus gaining control over their fortunes and family connections) that it debated and finally passed a law, the Hardwicke Act 'for the better preventing of clandestine marriages'.¹⁷⁴

In all walks of life women faced dangers in the public sphere. Theoretically, at least, the home would be a protection against these evils of male anger.

3.6. Dangers in the domestic sphere

The domestic scene is, however, in no way devoid of male control, the difference is rather that familial and legal bonds sanctions it, and the increasing focus on privacy means transgressions are unchecked by the interference of society or any of its busy-bodies.

Whether the woman's fortune was the object of her assailant, or whether he was simply confirming a bottom line of male power in a culture where new class lines were being drawn, she was still a possible outlet for male frustration from which 'the home' could not adequately protect her.¹⁷⁵

The world outside the home may well be full of perils, but violence may also occur within the home, within the confines of the supposedly safe haven. Domestic violence is a feature of the home. A woman may be subject to continued abuse without the knowledge or interference of any outside party, given that it occurs in a private sphere. Physical or psychological abuse renders the home less of a peaceful place, the comparison with being locked up in a castle at the mercy of a great villain, as in Gothic fiction, is perhaps not farfetched. Even when not subject to abuse, women at the time were in a precarious position, through legal and cultural means subject to control in ways which might well be portrayed through the image of the castle.

Fuelled by her reading of *Udolpho* Catherine imagines Northanger as castle wherein the late Mrs. Tilney had been locked up and subjected to evils, and perhaps even murder by her husband. This proves not to be the case. When Catherine hears that the Tilneys' mother died, with Henry absent at the time, Catherine begins to speculate whether something untoward happened. She suspects that the General may have had a hand in her death. Or perhaps that he is holding her imprisoned somewhere within Northanger Abbey. When Catherine hears that General Tilney is going to stay awake, after the ladies have retired for the night, her fancy tells her it is to keep an eye on his imprisoned wife. The General says that he

¹⁷⁴ Ellis, Kate Ferguson: *The Contested Castle, Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1989, p. xi

¹⁷⁵ Ibid

has pamphlets to write and that he will be “poring over the affairs of the nation”. (NA 150) Catherine however cannot think it very likely, to be kept up by pamphlets.

When Henry learns what kind of ideas Catherine has entertained, he rebukes her in a fashion which makes Catherine thoroughly ashamed. It transpires, however, that Mrs. Tilney had been left at the mercy of a husband who, if not a murderer, had not been a kind companion. Henry Tilney says of his parents that “I will not pretend to say that while she lived, she might not often have had much to bear...his temper injured her” but that “his judgement never did”. (NA 159) These statements are rather vague, but it is clear that Mrs. Tilney had not had an entirely easy existence. From the way the General rules the rest of his family, acquiescing to his laying down the law, we might infer that his wife was equally ruled by him. From the point of his judgement never injuring her we may infer that General Tilney did not use physical force. Mental and psychological terror may, however, be equally detrimental. At the end of the novel, when she hears of what the General’s conjectures and schemes regarding her had been, and that she was sent away from Northanger on account of not being as rich as desired by him, Catherine concludes that she had “heard enough to feel, that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty”. (NA 201) When Catherine’s eyes have been opened, and she understands that General Tilney is not quite a Montoni, she concludes that she had not been entirely wrong either.

3.7.The Gothic as a mirror to domestic violence

At the beginning of the novel Catherine is very unexperienced and very ready to see the good in people, believing them to be as earnest and straightforward as she appears. Through the eyes of the novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* she tries to make sense of a world peopled with characters whose motives she struggles to account for. “The conventions of the Gothic novel, then, speak of what in the polite world of middle-class culture cannot be spoken”¹⁷⁶, as Ellis states. Ellis’ point is that Gothic novels exposes domestic violence as the flipside to contemporary culture’s promotion of the safe home. Through the use of the fantastical and the setting of the story in another age and often in another country, the Gothic is able to explore what can not be spelt out in polite society. I believe it is an important point that domestic violence is not necessarily physical violence, it can also be psychological. General Tilney would certainly be guilty of psychological violence, especially towards his daughter, probably

¹⁷⁶ Ibid p. 7

previously to his wife, and for a brief time towards Catherine. Henry Tilney is also affected by psychological terror, but to lesser degree since he, as a man, is able to have his own home and travel on his own account. As Davidoff and Hall write of the gendered separate spheres; they were increasingly more demarcated, but men were able to move between them:

As the spatial and temporal quarantine between the public and the private grew, they were ever more identified with gender. A masculine penumbra surrounded that which was defined as public while women were increasingly engulfed by the private realm, bounded by physical, social and psychic partitions. Men, in their privileged position, moved between both sectors. These dichotomies and their association with gender identity, inevitably emphasized hierarchy, the fixing of individual social and sexual place.¹⁷⁷

In *Northanger Abbey* we see these divisions in ordinary life, with a detour through the Gothic. Catherine thus, as a reader of Gothic literature is able to use her reading to get at the essentials of the General and life at Northanger. If Gothic, as Ellis suggests, “works to subvert the idealization of the home, and by implication the ideology of ‘separate spheres’ on which that idealization depends”,¹⁷⁸ *Northanger Abbey* works to show us precisely how this subverting of domestic ideology can be applied to ordinary, everyday life.

3.8. Marriage as incarceration or release

It may seem like a drastic, exaggerated depiction of women’s situation to express concerns through imprisonment, violation and deaths in the Gothic, as Davison also points out.¹⁷⁹ However, it becomes rather more understandable when we look at the extent to which women’s lives were confined and tied to strict regulations. We might say that to a degree many women were incarcerated in a domestic space. The domestic sphere was where the majority of middle- and upperclass women of the time spent most of their lives. In addition, it was where many actually died in childbirth.¹⁸⁰ Thus, domesticity in fact came with a high risk of death. Further, Davison writes, “These anxieties were further compounded by the fact that women of the era were both commodified and rendered *femmes couvertes* under established

¹⁷⁷ Davidoff, Leonore and Hall, Catherine: *Family Fortunes, Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* Routledge, London and New York, 2002, p. 319

¹⁷⁸ Ellis, Kate Ferguson: *The Contested Castle, Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1989 p. xiii

¹⁷⁹ Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 86

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*

law".¹⁸¹ Davison cites an interesting passage in this regard from *Commentaries on the laws of England* by William Blackstone, dating from 1765:

The husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose total protection and cover, she performs everything.¹⁸²

In legal terms, thus, women were essentially the property of their husbands. Pending marriage, they were similarly a commodity under the charge of a father, or a father figure.

In the here and now of the novel it is first and foremost Miss Tilney who is the incarcerated female in the castle of Northanger Abbey. She is left there, frequently on her own, in a lonely existence. The events of her life are entirely dependent on the General and what he assumes is to the benefit of the family name. As we learn towards the end of the novel, Miss Tilney has formed an attachment to a man who is not deemed good enough by her father, by way of wanting a title. They eventually marry, but only after the man in question has unexpectedly acquired his title thus giving General Tilney a reason to welcome the union. (NA 204) We may note also that Miss Tilney's change of circumstance is entirely reliant upon men around her, the status of her husband to be, and the General's consent to the match. In her existence before marriage, she is in all the important aspects under General Tilney's command, and reliant upon her brother Henry for relief from what appears a somewhat bleak life at Northanger. Catherine by comparison has a rather happier lot in that her incarceration at Northanger is of shorter duration and at any rate not meant to be permanent.

The General is, in all aspects, mercenary in his decisions on consent or refusal, and what he promotes. We might conjecture that the late Mrs. Tilney's marriage was also founded upon money and/or status she could bring to the union. There is nothing remarkable about that per se within great families at this point in history. The General's very direct and brusque approach to the matter, however, puts the economic underpinnings of marriage into very stark relief. Davison points to the importance of property in *Otranto*, and conflicts regarding it, which makes it a "typical eighteenth-century production"¹⁸³ according to Davison. At the time Austen is writing there is, however, a beginning trend, connected to the burgeoning middle-

¹⁸¹ Ibid p. 87

¹⁸² Blackstone, William: *Commentaries on the Laws of England* cited in Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 87

¹⁸³ Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 71

class, in viewing marriage as something which ought to be based on love, or a mutual understanding at least, rather than purely economic terms.¹⁸⁴

The marriage of Miss Tilney, it is worth noting, appears more of a release than a new incarceration. We are told by the narrator that “the marriage of Eleanor Tilney, her removal from all the evils of such a home as Northanger had been made by Henry’s banishment, to the home of her choice and the man of her choice, is an event which I expect to give general satisfaction among all her acquaintance”. (NA 204) Thus, marriage could be a means of removal from parental tyranny, and some level of room to shape one’s own life. The degree of room for manoeuvre for a woman is, however, exposed as limited when considering the fact that Miss Tilney is entirely reliant on sitting at Northanger waiting for the men around her to act, and for circumstances to intervene so that her intended achieves “unexpected accession to title and fortune” (NA 204) thus removing “all his difficulties”. (NA 204) Similarly, marriage seems a beneficial thing for Catherine, even if it not an escape from parental tyranny in her case. Henry and Catherine are said to “begin perfect happiness” (NA 205) when they marry. Even if the narrator seems somewhat ironical, we may assume that Catherine and Eleanor’s marriages are based on love and companionship, but they cannot escape the dictates of money matters status with which family structures were based.

The castle in Gothic fiction can be seen as a mirror image of the limits, both physically and psychologically, within which women at the end of the eighteenth century lived. When Catherine reads *Northanger Abbey* through the lens of a Radcliffean castle it would, at first, appear to be a naïve juxtaposition of fiction with real life. However, on closer scrutiny *Northanger* works as a castle incarcerating Miss Tilney, and previously her mother. Their lives are to a very high degree ruled by the family unit and dependent on it. This to the degree that their lives may well be seen as ones shut up within castle walls, the family unit is their castle, not necessarily the physical structure of the Abbey.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid

4. Villainous father figures

When Catherine encounters General Tilney she has trouble understanding him and his actions. She also has problems accounting for the unease which she feels in his presence. Since her immediate sense of his character is that of some degree of cruelty, she casts him in the role of a Gothic villain. As will be explored in the following that is not entirely untrue as a means of understanding his motives and actions.

4.1. Father figures in *Northanger Abbey*

When at the beginning of *Northanger Abbey* Austen says of Catherine's father that "he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters" (NA 1) this is a clue to the reader on what to expect from a Gothic villain. This statement about Mr. Morland points the reader to the conventions of the Gothic literature of the day, wherein a number of fair maidens were incarcerated by male relatives or sinister father figures.

It is interesting to note that the sinister father figure in *Northanger Abbey* is not actually a surrogate father figure for Catherine, at least he will not be until a point beyond the end of the novel when he becomes her father-in-law. He does, however, covet the money he believes she will inherit, rather in the fashion of gothic villains, and has no interest in her as his charge when it becomes clear that she does not have expectations of the amount of money previously believed. To extent that any surrogate father figure for Catherine appears it would have to be Mr. Allen, a man who by no means wields terrible power over Catherine, or his wife for that matter. Catherine's actual father does also appear to be kind and fairly lax, if not entirely negligent. In all essentials a rather ordinary father.

4.2. General Tilney as a Gothic villain

When Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* is whisked off to *Northanger* it is by invitation not brute force, and it is very much a proposal to her liking. It is, however, clear that the invitation is an idea of General Tilney's rather akin to a command, one which leaves no room for refusal on any of the other concerned parties' behalf. It is Miss Tilney who is supposed to extend the invitation, and who begins to ask Catherine to come with them as they leave Bath. The General, however, enters the room during the conversation and takes over the whole application from his daughter. He says to Miss Tilney to "proceed by all means"(NA 108) and yet he continues "without leaving his daughter time to speak". (NA 108) General Tilney has already secured the consent of the Allens, with whom Catherine resides in Bath.

Notwithstanding Catherine's joy and eagerness to go, it may be seen as presumptuous of the General to arrange matters on Catherine's behalf before she has heard a word of the plan. The manner in which he overrides his daughter is certainly brusque, leaving her only to perform "secondary civilities" (NA 109) in regard to the invitation. The General acts in the fashion of a man who is used to having his way, as well as being used to proceeding to action without reference to the other parties involved. Miss Tilney and Catherine appear a little like puppets controlled by him. Thus, General Tilney acts like a typical powerful patriarchal figure of a Gothic hue. What is different from the sinister patriarchs of Gothic literature is that his engineering, in this case, actually acts to forward something the ladies wish for. The reasons for the General pushing for the invitation, is, however, selfish, as transpires towards the end of the novel. General Tilney attempts to further Catherine's intimacy with his family on grounds of the belief that she inherits money, money which through a marital union would benefit him and his family. I would argue that this shows the ways in which patriarchal control of the people around him appear on all kinds of levels, and that there may be an unsavoury facet to it, whatever the benefits to those concerned may be in the end.

From the outset Catherine is intimidated by the General, and uncomfortable in his presence. She also senses how Miss Tilney and Henry Tilney are more subdued in his proximity, and the more relaxed ways of the Tilney siblings at Northanger when their father is away for few days. Already when visiting the Tilneys in their lodgings in Bath Catherine is puzzled by the lack of enjoyment she finds in meeting the Tilney family together. "Instead of finding herself improved in acquaintance with Miss Tilney, from the intercourse of the day, she seemed hardly so intimate with her as before".(NA 100) Even Henry, who Catherine expected to be happy and at ease in the comfort of a family setting, is rather a different being than what she has experienced previously; "instead of seeing Henry Tilney to greater advantage than ever, in the ease of a family party, he had never said so little, nor been so little agreeable". (NA 100) At first Catherine is at a loss to account for this, she attempts to find its cause in mere accident or that she was at fault, being too stupid. What seems to be her first thought on the matter; "It could not be General Tilney's fault", (NA 100) perhaps points to what her gut feeling really is, that it is his fault. For Catherine "it had been a release to get away from him", (NA 100) in spite of his "great civilities to her – in spite of his thanks, invitations, and compliments". (NA 100) Catherine, already at this point, feels unease in the presence of the General, though she cannot pin-point exactly why.

Signor Montoni of Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is a Gothic villain who acts as father figure for the heroine Emily St. Aubert. Since her father's death and her aunt's

marriage to Montoni, Montoni acquires the legal responsibility for Emily, and thereby the license to wield his power over her and keep her shut up in a dark and sinister Italian castle pending his plans to marry her off in order to consolidate his own position. This regardless of Emily's own wishes and inclinations.

When Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* arrives at the Abbey she sees the location with reference to *Udolpho* and her host General Tilney with reference to villains of the Montoni-type. Tilney is certainly a figure who holds considerable power over his family, both in legal terms and by way of his demeanour and personality. His children are certainly subdued in his presence. General Tilney, in a similar fashion to that of Gothic villains, attempts to hold a tight rein on his children, and decide who they should marry. He refuses Eleanor her choice since her beloved does not rank high enough within his own family, that is his social status is not high enough for the General who is ambitious on his family's behalf. Similarly, the General attempts engineering in order to bring about the union of his younger son, Henry, with Catherine, on the false assumption that she is an heiress.

4.3. The Gothic as a mirror to reality

Emily in *Udolpho* reflects on Montoni that "She knew, that he had invention equal to the conception and talents to the execution of any project, and she greatly feared he had a heart too void of feeling to oppose the perpetration of whatever his interest might suggest." (TMOU 240) Part of the terror Emily experiences is not knowing quite what Montoni is capable of, or the extent to which he will go to further his interests. That General Tilney is a formidable character, and the fact that Catherine does not entirely understand what it is he expects from her, she reads through the image of Montoni. Catherine goes too far, later in the novel, when believing he might be guilty of murder, but the General comes across as a man used to putting his own interests foremost, at the expense of the interests of others, and as such he is rather more alike Montoni than might first appear. Terry Castle says of Austen's writing that "the events of ordinary life, with their special admixture of joy and fiasco, were to be the subject of her fiction - not the sensational doings of romance".¹⁸⁵ But the events of *Northanger Abbey* shows that ordinary life may involve terror of its own, which may be quite as important for the life of those who go through them, as the spectaculars of fantastic fiction.

¹⁸⁵ Castle, Terry "Introduction" to Austen, Jane: *Northanger Abbey* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. xii

The General was, as Austen tells us, “accustomed on every ordinary occasion to give the law in his family, prepared for no reluctance but of feeling, no opposing desire that should dare to clothe itself in words”. (NA 201) Throughout the novel Catherine senses the power the General has over his surroundings, and it is easy to see that she plants the role of the villain from the books she has read onto the General, since that is the reference points she has for a powerful man. Catherine is naïve, with little experience of the world outside her family home and its immediate surroundings. Consequently, she uses literature to supply reference points where her experience is lacking.

We may well say that Catherine in some ways prove “the folly of valuing literature over life”.¹⁸⁶ This is perhaps the most common reading of *Northanger Abbey*, that it exposes the dangers of taking literature to literally. Some recent critics have, however, seen Catherine’s reading as a means of understanding the world which actually aids her knowledge of the real world. Joanne Cordón claims that Catherine’s reading of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* does not alter her language, her way of speaking remains open, as it was before. What Radcliffe’s novel does is that it gives her an avenue through which she can understand her feelings of discomfort regarding Henry Tilney’s father, by seeing him as a gothic villain. As Cordón writes Catherine “benefit(s) from Udolpho’s skepticism about masculine power figures, especially paternal ones”.¹⁸⁷ Although Catherine misjudges the nature of General Tilney’s crimes, she is not wrong in the basics of her assessment of him. Thus, through the Gothic Catherine is able to see the power structures of everyday life. As Claudia Johnson has claimed: “The moral and physical coercion of powerless females which figures so predominantly in gothic fiction is here transposed to the daytime world of manners, where it can be shown for the everyday occurrence it is.”¹⁸⁸ Consequently, in such a reading of Catherine, reading Gothic fiction is not necessarily the undoing of the female reader, it is a catalyst by which she is able to interpret the world around her.

Carol Margaret Davison writes that Walpole in *The Castle of Otranto* “harnessed the affective style, ironically an extension of the sentimental tradition, which promoted the primacy of feeling and intense reader response”.¹⁸⁹ Thus, the Gothic, from the earliest output

¹⁸⁶ Ibid p. xiv

¹⁸⁷ Cordón, Joanne: “Speaking Up for Catherine Morland: Cixous and the Feminist Heroine” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, University of Nebraska Press, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2011), pp. 41-63, p. 50 <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A277271357/LitRC?u=ntnuu&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=12b33118> accessed 10.06.2019, p. 51

¹⁸⁸ Johnson, Claudia: *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, p. 37

¹⁸⁹ Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 59

in the genre, focused on the response of the reader, and the reader's active engagement in, and reaction to the action. Peter Garside deemed the Gothic the "last gasp of the eighteenth-century sentimental tradition".¹⁹⁰ Davison points to the truth in this being verified by the fact that most novels of the Gothic tradition are full of sentimental episodes, this is especially true of the Female Gothic she writes. We may see Catherine's reading of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* as attesting to the Gothic's ability to engage the reader. Radcliffe herself writes of her own brand of Gothic that it is meant to "expand(s) the soul" and "awaken the faculties to a high degree of life".¹⁹¹ In line with Cordón and Johnson we may say that reading Radcliffe awakens Catherine's faculties since it helps her channel her impressions and make sense of them.

4.4 Male authority figures, family and the political undercurrent in Austen

Johnson argues that: "The Revolution in France gave rise to the novel of crisis in England, a novel in which the structures of daily life are called into doubt...".¹⁹² The French Revolution brought radical ideas to the fore, ideas questioning old power structures and the hierarchical layout of society. Some of those who took to the pen argued for a higher degree of personal freedom rather than adhering to the constraining power structures of old. For some a reimagining of society might also imply a reimagining of the hierarchical structures within the family, even if, some of those who spoke in favour of ending the slave trade, for instance, might expect a placid and reverent attitude from their own female family members at home.¹⁹³ Writers of a conservative bent saw these dangerous new ideas as threatening to unravel the very fabric of society, if fathers and husbands were not treated as authority figures, this mirrored a disdain for the authority figures of society. Putting one's own preferences and wishes before those of one's family mirrors the chaos one would put society into if everyone adhered to their own pleasures at the cost of the common good. Both Marilyn Butler and Johnson describe how writers of the 1790s were very clear on the link between family life and that of the society as a whole. What happens on the domestic scene is a microcosm of the world at large, and what happens there reverberates to the upholding of the fabric of society itself. In *Northanger Abbey* we see Eleanor Tilney submitting to her father's decisions, at the

¹⁹⁰ Ibid

¹⁹¹ Radcliffe; Ann: 'On the Supernatural in Poetry' cited in Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 90

¹⁹² Johnson, Claudia L.: *Jane Austen, Women, Politics and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988, p. 26

¹⁹³ Ibid

cost of her own happiness as regards marriage for instance. Miss Tilney acquiesces to her father's wishes, who seeks to uphold the hierarchies of society. In Austen's novel we do not see radical characters charging ahead to remodel society, but I find the portrayal of Miss Tilney, for instance, induces us to question the patriarchal dictates of her father. According to Johnson Austen challenges aspects of reactionary ideology rather than confirming them. Johnson sees Austen as a novelist who "advance modest but distinctly reformist positions about female manners",¹⁹⁴ an author who develops narrative strategies to "examine Burkean premises about marriage and patriarchy while eluding the accusation that (she) favored a radical reconstitution of society".¹⁹⁵

The monsters of Gothic literature can be seen to express anxieties in a time of shifting values and moral codes. The Gothic functions as a cultural medium by which social anxieties are given an imaginative expression, something which according to Botting is at its most evident in times of social, political and economic crisis,¹⁹⁶ such as the 1790s was according to Johnson.¹⁹⁷ Radcliffe "may describe the patriarch's oppression of women in an excessively melodramatic vocabulary of images, but this does not discredit her basic insights".¹⁹⁸ Austen "reinvest [the feminine Gothic] with authority by emphasising the political subtext of Gothic".¹⁹⁹ Viewing General Tilney as a Gothic monster I would argue illuminates the role of patriarchal figures in society and as upholders of society, and *Northanger Abbey* thus explores anxieties at a time when patriarchal structures became questioned by a radical spectrum of society. In Austen's work we never see the harshest sides to society depicted, unsavoury facts are left off-stage, as it were. Thus, Austen can be seen as an author avoiding the most difficult subjects. However, I would argue that since they continuously bear on the on-stage action, they are in fact omni-present in a way which rather underscores the way abuse and the harsher sides of hierarchical systems are always part of the picture. This is true regarding General Tilney's treatment of his family, and it is true of slavery and the destitute Eliza figures in Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) as well. That it is not put at the forefront of the action, but

¹⁹⁴Johnson, Claudia L.: *Jane Austen, Women, Politics and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988, p. 22

¹⁹⁵ Ibid

¹⁹⁶ Botting, Fred: *Making Monstrous: Frankenstein, Criticism, Theory* Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1991

¹⁹⁷ Johnson, Claudia L.: *Jane Austen, Women, Politics and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988, p. 26

¹⁹⁸ Pearson, Jacqueline: *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 212

¹⁹⁹ Ibid

always lies just beneath the surface underscores the nearness of tyranny, destitute women, and slavery for that matter. Tyranny begins at home.

Claire Tomalin says of Austen that women's rights were... (a) matter on which she kept quiet".²⁰⁰ However, further on she writes that "Her formal silence on the position of women is qualified by the way in which her books insist on the moral and intellectual parity of the sexes".²⁰¹ I argue that Catherine's reading of the people and places around her through the Gothic lens expose the patriarchal structures of her society, thus, the issue of women's rights is present in Austen's work. I would argue that literature always reflect and comment upon the society in which it is produced, although the ways in which it does so may be an intricate web to disentangle. It is not necessarily a matter of simply mirroring the society it springs from. The Gothic genre's ability to portray the society it originates from in an exaggerated manner can be even more illuminating in showing us the fears and concerns within society at the time. When Austen engages with the Gothic, she also engages with the concerns of gender roles which the Gothic explores. Consequently, *Northanger Abbey* has a political undercurrent, even if Austen is not an overtly political author.

Johnson argues that Austen is a writer which cannot be easily put at one point of a political scale, she was more explorative than that. The Austen Johnson presents is an author who is inquisitive, rather than one who presents a world where duties are clear, good and bad characters are easily distinguishable, "where heroes and villains occupy entirely different moral universes, and where right and wrong are mutually exclusive categories"²⁰² Similarly, Knox-Shaw concludes that the exact opinions of Austen may be difficult to get at, however, what she was not, was dogmatic.²⁰³ Austen, as Johnson explains, shows the world to be more complex than the typical conservative fiction of the time. Austen is interrogative rather than didactic and declarative.

If we look back at the catalogue of Austen scholarship there was, for a long period of time, the agreed view that Austen was a writer who did not engage with the wider world, be that the great events of the time or the philosophical and political debates of Austen's lifetime. The opinion was that Austen put herself on the side-line of history. However, what I think Catherine's reading of the Gothic shows is that Austen was in no sense an ahistorical writer, but "a person fully alive to her age" and "keenly ... engaged with contemporary ideas".²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Tomalin, Claire: *Jane Austen, A Life* Penguin Books, London, 2000, p. 140

²⁰¹ Ibid p. 141

²⁰² Ibid p. 23

²⁰³ Knox-Shaw, Peter: *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 9

²⁰⁴ Ibid

Even if Austen never invokes the French Revolution explicitly and rarely allude to actual historical events outside the handful of country families her novels centres around, what Austen does, according to Johnson, is to “focus on the discourse rather than the representation of politics”.²⁰⁵ In *Northanger Abbey* there may be little direct reference to the politics of the day. But when Henry Tilney, Catherine and Eleanor Tilney are out on a walk, a lecture from Henry to Catherine on the picturesque follows a trajectory where “by an easy transition from a piece of rocky fragment and the withered oak which he had placed near its summit, to oaks in general, to forests, the inclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands and government, he shortly found himself arrived at politics”. (NA 87) What this illustrates is that anything and everything is in fact political, even stones and oak trees, which were initially viewed in aesthetic terms. The political runs through all manner of things around us, and Austen lets us see this in a gentle and non-obtrusive manner.

That the political is an undercurrent is further illustrated by the next phase of conversation, wherein Miss Tilney misunderstands a statement made by Catherine. Breaking the silence Catherine says that “I have heard that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London”²⁰⁶. What Catherine refers to is a new novel. Miss Tilney, however, assumes that the statement refers to political upheaval and riots. In a time of revolution across the channel a statement that something shocking should come out in London is interpreted as referring to political action by the lady more aware of the wider world. It is an example of how “urgent political concerns surfaced” in a “domestic tale” and that “the Gothic novel is inseparable from the intellectual and social process”²⁰⁷ of the time. Contrary to what was, for a long time, the perceived view of Austen, the political shines through her work, but beneath the surface.

The villainous father figure in *Northanger Abbey* is General Tilney. He is not, really, a father figure for Catherine herself. He is, however, the patriarch who sets strictures on the lives of the Tilney siblings, and by extension he sets some strictures on Catherine through her friendship with the Tilneys. Even if he has not murdered his wife, as Catherine suspects for a while, life for those around him is marked by trepidation and fear lest they should displease him. As a patriarchal figure who governs the lives of those dependant on him, he does,

²⁰⁵ Johnson, Claudia L.: *Jane Austen, Women, Politics and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988, p. 27

²⁰⁶ Ibid

²⁰⁷ Löwy, Michael and Sayre, Robert: *Romanticism against the tide of Modernity* Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2001, p. 217

therefore, fit the role of a Gothic villain, albeit not quite as literally as Catherine casts him at first. Catherine's reading of him through a Gothic trope thus reveals the extent of power the patriarchal figures of late eighteenth century could have.

5. The damsel in distress, or Catherine Morland attaining an independent outlook?

This chapter focuses on the heroine of novels, the heroine's character and the heroine's reading practices, and what this says about expectations to women's character and behaviour. On the face of it, Catherine Morland is a naïve heroine, who is jostled about by forces stronger than her. As such she might appear the innocent damsel in distress of a classic novel plot. But if we look closer, we see instances where she takes hold of the situation, on her own, refusing to be drawn in by events instigated by others. In this chapter I will look at to what degree Catherine fits the role of the heroine of a Gothic plot. It is not clear, I think, that she reads herself as a Gothic heroine, but she reads her encounters with people and places through the Gothic to the extent that I would argue she actually casts herself as a Gothic heroine unawares, setting out exploring Northanger and its mysteries as if it was part of a Gothic tale. From a discussion of Catherine as a heroine follows a discussion of to what extent reading affects and shapes Catherine, what it does to this reading heroine. Does a reading of the Gothic help her understand the people and places of the world around her and does that aid an independent understanding. The question of the impact of reading is then seen in connection with eighteenth century attitudes to female readers and whether novel reading is dangerous escapism or can be educational.

5.1. The graceful heroine with aesthetic talents

We are told at the outset that Catherine Morland is not suited for a heroine. The novel's very first sentence is: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine." (NA 1) This invites us to think of what a heroine of a novel really ought to be in the first place. If we look at Emily St. Aubert of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* we do perhaps encounter what a heroine should be. Emily is described as having "elegant symmetry of form, ... delicacy of features, ... blue eyes, full of tender sweetness. But, lovely as was her person, it was the varied expression of her countenance, as conversation awakened the nicer emotions of her mind, that threw such a captivating grace around her" (TMOU 5). Catherine on the other hand was "for many years of her life, as plain as any. She had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features" (NA 1). Emily has "uncommon delicacy of mind... sensibility (which) gave a pensive tone to her spirits, and a softness to her manner, which added grace to beauty" (TMOU 5) Emily "exercised herself in elegant arts" and was an "early proficient" on account of

“native genius, assisted by the instructions of Monsieur and Madame St. Aubert” (TMoU 3). Catherine on the other hand draws, but her drawing looks “all very much like one another” whether it be “houses and trees” or “hens and chickens” she portrays (NA 2). Emily’s room contains her “books, her drawings, her musical instruments, with some favourite birds and plants” (TMoU 3), pointing to her interests which would suit the label “heroic enjoyments” (NA 2) which the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* tells us Catherine do not aspire to. Catherine is described as with no remarkable proficiency in writing, accounts and French, and “the day which dismissed the music-master was one of the happiest of Catherine’s life” (NA 2). She does not keep birds and plants, “if she gathered flowers at all, it was chiefly for the pleasure of mischief – at least so it was conjectured from her always preferring those which she was forbidden to take” (NA 2). If we look at a description of Madeline, another Gothic heroine, the heroine of Regina Maria Roche’s *Clermont*,²⁰⁸ she is perhaps even more the ideal woman than Emily. She is “delicately made” with a “fascinating sweetness” and possessed “an exquisite taste for drawing and music, and accompanied the soft melody of her lute with a voice which, though not strong, was inexpressibly sweet”.²⁰⁹ She is also a quick learner; “never did a pupil render the toils of an instructor less difficult than did Madeline those of her father”.²¹⁰

In addition to the descriptions of Catherine herself, Austen also tells us that Catherine’s “situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her”. (NA 1) Yet, we are given to understand that Catherine is, all the same, the heroine of just this story. Thus, we are made aware of the expectations we as readers have, based on conventions of the novel. These are expectations which are overturned already at the first page, but which also illuminate not just the conventions of the novel genre, but conventions in real life regarding what women ought to aspire to. Catherine is apparently the antithesis of a proper heroine, and consequently also of the ideal woman. The tone of Radcliffe’s descriptions of Emily is one of commending her to us, even if she points out that Emily has “a degree of susceptibility too exquisite to admit of lasting peace” (TMoU 5), the tenor is one of presenting an ideal to us. That Catherine is set up as a negative mirror image of Emily illuminates how elevated from real life the ideal can appear. That Catherine, and her family, is portrayed as so ordinary brings a realism to the story, a realism which is continued throughout the novel, despite the Gothic elements, and

²⁰⁸ Roche, Regina Maria: *Clermont* Valancourt Books, Chicago, 2006

²⁰⁹ Ibid p. 5

²¹⁰ Ibid

which I think makes Catherine a more plausible heroine and perhaps also representative of what an eighteenth-century female would be in reality.

5.2. The heroine, a pawn in the hands of the villain

In *The Mysteries of Udolpho* Emily is a pawn in the hands of Montoni, he lays schemes regarding who to marry her off to, which will profit him. Radcliffe uses the word 'sold' when referring to promises made of marriage on Emily's behalf. Emily is not quite sure what Montoni's plans for her are, but she believes "That Montoni had formerly sold her to Morano, was very probable". (TMoU 262) Something has occurred to alter these plans; "that he had now withdrawn his consent to the marriage... it was nearly certain, that a scheme of stronger interest only could have induced the selfish Montoni to forego a plan, which he had hitherto so strenuously pursued". (TMoU 262-263) To sell another human being sounds dramatic, but then again, a marriage settlement may well be termed a sale when considering that the size of the dowry the woman brings to the settlement was of great importance for whether a matrimonial match was to be considered. Even under less fantastical circumstances marriage was about money. In *Northanger Abbey* General Tilney and Mr. Thorpe converse on Catherine's value in monetary terms. Even if none of these have the authority to sell Catherine, to put it bluntly, the discussion is similar to the dealings Montoni conducts. Austen is in all her literature open and blunt in money matters, stating the incomes, and therefore the value of her characters. It is in Austen's work a natural and ordinary concern to be aware of money, it is prudent and rational to consider it. But those who covet money too much often appear to less advantage in her novels. General Tilney is one of these, who, for most readers, will probably seem too concerned with amassing fortune to the family name.

In an earlier eighteenth century novel, *The Female Quixote* (1752), Charlotte Lennox portrays a heroine who reads romances in a fashion which estranges her from an understanding of the real world. According to Margaret Anne Doody

through reading her romances Arabella frees herself from fearing, or even seeing, the dangers of her position in relation to the paternal inheritance. She conceals from herself the sad truth, that she is a pawn in the game of property, by reading books in which women are of great importance.²¹¹

I would argue that Catherine in Austen's novel is actually showing us, through her reading, that women are pawns in the game of property. By casting General Tilney as a Gothic villain

²¹¹ Doody, Margaret Anne in Introduction to Lennox, Charlotte: *The Female Quixote* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998 p. xxi

Catherine is able to make sense of the motives of his actions, motives of amassing money and prestige to the family.

5.3. The heroine with a degree of independent action

When Count Morano in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* enters Emily's chamber to induce her to elope with him he says to her that: "You hear, that Montoni is a villain... a villain who would have sold you to my love!". (TMoU 262) Emily replies: "And he is less, who would have bought me?" (TMoU 262) whilst "fixing on the Count an eye of calm contempt". (TMoU 262) Even if Emily is an incarcerated heroine at the mercy of Montoni, she does show some independence of spirit, as in this instance, pointing out the unjust treatment of both men who seek to trade, with her as the commodity to be sold. Similarly, she forces her own agenda when earlier in the story she attempts to put a stop to the suit by Count Morano and any agreement between him and Montoni. She tells Montoni that "If you have condescended to be my agent, it is an honour I did not solicit. I myself have constantly assured Count Morano, and you also, sir, that I never can accept the honour he offers me, and I now repeat the declaration". (TMoU 199) Emily here takes initiative to shape her own future, thus showing how the Gothic novel does allow for a mediation between the vulnerable position of women and the potential to partake in the shaping of one's position. The vulnerable heroine does in fact have some room for manoeuvre, she has the power of refusal.

Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* similarly shows independence when refusing the courtship of John Thorpe when she is made aware of it, which admittedly she is slow to detect. There is no wavering in her eagerness in undeceiving him. When Isabella makes her aware of Thorpe's suit and attempts to encourage it and saying that Catherine had given him "the most positive encouragement" (NA 112) Catherine is eager undeceive her friend. "Catherine, with all the earnestness of truth, expressed her astonishment at such a charge, protesting the innocence of every thought of Mr. Thorpe's being in love with her, and the consequent impossibility of her having ever intended to encourage him" (NA 112). Catherine begs her friend to "undeceive him as soon as you can... I would not speak disrespectfully of a brother of your's, Isabella, I am sure, but you know very well that if I could think of one man more than another – he is not the person" (NA 113). Catherine has already fixed her eyes on Henry Tilney, though she seems to have no clear notion of whether their union would actually be possible. We might argue that accepting Thorpe could be a prudent course of action, given that the Tilney family is above her station and therefore on the margins of realistic, and her

circle of acquaintance might not allow for anything else which may be better. Even so, Catherine follows her own inclinations. At first light it may appear that Catherine simply blunders through the story, being lucky to end up with the man she wishes. I would suggest, however, that having read stories such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* Catherine has been made aware that she may refuse, that she, like Emily St. Aubert, does not have to accept the first thing proffered to her, even when unsure of the alternative. It is not perhaps a conscious link there for Catherine, that she specifically thinks of Emily when she refuses to consider Thorpe. It would be a testament to literature's ability to influence its readers in more indirect ways, which goes beyond expecting any castle to have gothic windows or pasting the contents of a novel directly on to one's real life. It is to do with the ways a reader can use what she has read to think in new ways. According to Ana Voicu *Northanger Abbey* is Austen's story of how the novel of manners and the Gothic romance "can facilitate the acquisition of knowledge of immediate use in a person's and, specifically, a young lady's life choices."²¹²

Already at Bath, before some of Catherine's naïve notions are overturned, we can note that she shows some independence of spirit in the presence of the otherwise fairly influential, Isabella Thorpe. When Isabella puts forward pride and insolence to account for the Tilneys' subdued appearance when Catherine visited them in their Milsom Street lodgings, Austen says bluntly and clearly that "Isabella's opinion of the Tilney's did not influence her friend; she was sure there had been no insolence in the manners either of brother or sister; and she did not credit there being any pride in their hearts". (NA 101.102) Her feeling on the subject soon appears justified, as the Tilney's show her the usual kindness and attention the next time they meet.

5.4. Catherine resisting the feminine archetype

Regarding Catherine's marriage to Henry Tilney, that it comes to pass is perhaps not entirely down to luck, even if Catherine might appear to stumble into a happy ending. It could be argued that it is in fact Catherine's endeavours which brings it about. That is not say she is a fortune hunter like Isabella Thorpe, flirting her way through eligible bachelors. Rather, Catherine's natural eagerness to be pleasant towards someone she likes makes Henry Tilney see her qualities. As the narrator says; "though Henry was now sincerely attached to her... I must confess that his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude, or, in other words,

²¹² Voicu, Ana: "READING HABITS IN JANE AUSTEN'S NORTHANGER ABBEY". *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai - Philologia* 2:175-190. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=959325> accessed 12.04.2023, p. 177

that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought.” (NA 198) With reference to Fanny Burney’s *Camilla* (1796) Austen writes that “The advantages of natural folly in a beautiful girl have been already set forth by the capital pen of a sister author”. (NA 86) Austen continues to say that “in justice to men, ... though to the larger and more trifling part of the sex, imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms, there is a portion of them too reasonable and too well informed themselves to desire any thing more in woman than ignorance.” (NA 86) Catherine laments her ignorance and want of knowledge, but as Austen says: “Catherine did not know her own advantages – did not know that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man”. (NA 86) It is interesting to note that, according to the narrator of the novel, Henry Tilney is encouraged to think of Catherine because she shows partiality for him when that is not really considered the proper way for a heroine to go about things. When Catherine protests that she has not encouraged John Thorpe, her reasoning is that because she is unaware “of every thought of Mr. Thorpe’s being in love with her” there is a “consequent impossibility of her having ever intended to encourage him” (NA 112). According to this line of thought encouragement is never given unless the heroine knows the man is interested in her. “Polite society in Austen’s time was predicated upon strict standards of decorum, particularly for women”,²¹³ and to offer oneself forward when unsure of reciprocated feelings was not proper behaviour. “Custom and the conduct books forbid the woman's initiative in courtship and decree that only the man may declare his love or propose marriage. Until he takes the initiative, she must ‘never [tell] her love’”.²¹⁴ But that is precisely what Catherine does towards Henry Tilney. She does so, however, without artifice, and probably without really being aware that she does, in contrast to her friend Isabella who flirts and puts on a mask of artifice towards several men throughout the book, Catherine does not appear severely censured for it by the narrator, whilst Isabella’s superficiality appears ridiculed. According to Paula Byrne “Austen was often less interested in observing the customs of the day than in showing her heroines transgressing them”,²¹⁵ but the transgression

²¹³ Byrne, Paula: “Manners” in Todd, Janet (Ed.): *Jane Austen in Context* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 300

²¹⁴ McMaster, Juliet: “Female difficulties: Austen’s Fanny and Burney’s Juliet” in *Persuasions : the Jane Austen journal* 2014, Vol.36 (36), p.66-79 <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A418089197/LitRC?u=ntnuu&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=b38271a8> accessed 10.05.2023

²¹⁵ Byrne, Paula: “Manners” in Todd, Janet (Ed.): *Jane Austen in Context* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005 p. 303

has limits, and what we may conclude on the basis of her presentation of Catherine Morland is perhaps that “sincerely good manners are bound up with goodness of heart”.²¹⁶

As shown above Catherine in small but important ways resist some aspects of the archetypal female novel protagonist. Joanne Cordón explores *Northanger Abbey* in light of Hélène Cixous’ idea of ‘écriture féminine’.²¹⁷ According to Cixous ‘écriture féminine’ is a way of challenging the patriarchal norms of literature, and language is at the centre of constructing a feminine identity in Cixous’ project. Language has been both the site of oppression and the point from which one may launch liberation. The traditional conduct books of Austen’s day were one of the sites of oppression of women. Through these, women were taught how to be accomplished, to be pure and modest. Women ought to be inquisitive and seek knowledge, without being improperly curious. Women were to be obliging, in order to, Cordón writes, win the social lottery and attain a suitable matrimonial match.²¹⁸ The result is a degree of superficiality in the stereotypical feminine behaviour. According to Cordón Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* transgress the norms these conduct manuals prescribe for women. Rather than putting on a façade of what is expected, Catherine speaks her mind, directly and without artifice. She is able to speak her mind, which as Cordón sees it makes her a feminist²¹⁹. Not only that, Cordón goes on to say that:

The power of Catherine’s speech manifests itself not only in her ability to speak her thoughts and feelings directly. In an even more radical move she also teaches Henry Tilney how to deviate from cultural constraints and speak his own feelings, so that the novel also demonstrates a kind of feminist version of the female bildungsroman.²²⁰

To call Catherine a feminist is to my mind perhaps a step too far. However, in small steps she carves out some independence. To some degree Catherine is “seeming to submit... [showing] docility and restraint even ... [while] uncovering the delights of assertion and rebellion”.²²¹

²¹⁶ Ibid p. 300

²¹⁷ Cordón, Joanne: “Speaking Up for Catherine Morland: Cixous and the Feminist Heroine” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, University of Nebraska Press, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2011), pp. 41-63, p. 50
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A277271357/LitRC?u=ntnuu&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=12b33118> accessed 10.06.2019

²¹⁸ Ibid p. 43

²¹⁹ Ibid p. 41

²²⁰ Ibid

²²¹ Gilbert, Sandra M. & Gubar, Susan: *The Madwoman in the Attic, The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2000, p. 168-169

5.5. Female readers in a patriarchal literature

Pam Morris writes that the woman reader as well as women writers have not been able to resist the “‘virile myths’ that justify a patriarchal, godlike right to judge and regulate women”.²²² Male identity is allowed heroic proportions, whilst women are constructed as frail with a yielding passivity, even in literature written by women Morris argues. Women have been “content to dream through dreams of men when they often work against women’s interests”.²²³ As Morris writes, even the woman reader becomes complicit in the patriarchal control of women, since the “active, judging consciousness”, which we naturally ally with, is usually a male; “the female is almost always the passive object of the narrative gaze, to be judged or praised or punished”.²²⁴ For a woman reader it is therefore, as Morris sees it, important to oppose the ideological implications of the classic plot structures, finding spaces of freedom for women in the text “against the often relentless logic of the story”.²²⁵ On the face of it we may assign Henry Tilney the role the male gaze who judges the female, Catherine. A female who is moreover ready to be moulded. On the other hand, *Northanger Abbey* is a novel playing with the expectations of a classic plot structure, showing an awareness of the conventions, but throwing up unexpected twists. We might well argue with Cordón that Catherine is able to teach Henry Tilney something, and that consequently she resists the role of a passive female ready to be judged. She even questions, in her direct, blunt way the conventions of superficiality in the society she encounters at Bath. Thus, Catherine resists the role of the passive female in her own story, and she resists the victimised, passive role she could have taken on as a woman reader.

5.6. How does reading affect Catherine

Clerly notes that “Gothic writers often trafficked in passion”²²⁶ and that it was a main selling point of the genre. Many of the stories were stories of passion, but they also created passion within the reader. The great excitement which *The Mysteries of Udolpho* generate with Catherine and Isabella testify to this. When Catherine and Isabella meet at the Pump-room at Bath, early on in their acquaintance, Isabella asks how Catherine has got on with *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Catherine replies that “I have been reading it ever since I woke; and I

²²² Morris, Pam: *Literature and Feminism* Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2000, p. 27

²²³ Ibid

²²⁴ Ibid p. 29

²²⁵ Ibid p. 33

²²⁶ Davison, Carol Margaret: *History of the Gothic, Gothic Literature 1764-1824* University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2009, p. 60

am got to the black veil” (NA 23) The conversation follows thus, where Isabella who has already read the book says:

‘Are you, indeed? How delightful! Oh! I would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are not you wild to know?’

‘Oh! Yes, quite; what can it be? – But do not tell me – I would not be told upon any account. I know it must be a skeleton. I am sure it is Laurentina’s skeleton.’ (p. 23)

Radcliffe is able to create great excitement. To the extent that Catherine exclaims that not only is she “delighted with book!” (NA 23) but she says “I should like to spend my whole life in reading it” (NA 23). It is clear from the passage quoted above that reading has great ability to absorb Catherine’s mind. And, as I have shown in the previous chapters, a great ability to shape Catherine’s reading of the real world.

As we have seen earlier, in the eighteenth century, the reader of literature, and particularly the female reader, was fiercely debated. To some degree it would seem obvious that the reader is important to literature; as Eagleton writes: “Literary texts do not exist on bookshelves: they are processes of signification materialized only in the practice of reading. For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author”.²²⁷ Literature comes alive when somebody reads it. Thus, the reader is quite as important to literature as the writer. Consequently, we may see literature as a process of interaction between the writer and the reader, wherein both parties contribute to the creation of meaning. As we have seen, Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* contribute to creating meaning of Radcliffe’s novel. She takes what she sees and hears around her into *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and then reflects that back onto the real life around her. Radcliffe’s story becomes a mediator between Catherine and the world around her.

According to Wolfgang Iser, one of the foremost proponents of what is called reception theory, or reception aesthetics, meaning is not immanent in the text; it is not enclosed within the text for the reader to attain. Meaning is formed during the process of reading, as a meeting of the text and that which the reader brings to the text. The text holds certain cues for the reader to develop meaning from. The text is full of gaps for the reader to fill in. During the process of reading the reader fills in these gaps with guesses based on previous knowledge of literature and its conventions, as well as knowledge of the world in general. The assumptions the reader forms will usually be modified during reading as the text adds information, and perhaps does unexpected twists and turns. Thus, the formation of

²²⁷ Eagleton, Terry: *Literary Theory* Blackwell, Oxford, 2002, p. 65

meaning is a continuous process of interacting between the reader and the text.²²⁸ As I suggested in chapter two and have expanded on in chapters three and four, I would argue that Catherine on the other hand uses *The Mysteries of Udolpho* to fill in gaps in the real-life world around her. The gaps she has in her understanding of the world she fills with elements from Radcliffe's work, in order to make some sense out of them.

On the face of it, it may appear that the concern in public debate, in the eighteenth century, regarding reading was more preoccupied with which kind of meaning the text imposes upon the reader, and whether it is a suitable idea that is conveyed, rather than what the reader brings to the text. However, the concern for appropriate reading, for women in particular, as well as the danger that people may read in the wrong way to my mind actually implies that the reader brings something to the process of reading, whether that be previous knowledge, or lack thereof, or a propensity to be too easily swayed and uncritical towards the text. This was a particular concern regarding novels.

5.7. The value of reading novels

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen engaging in the debate on what the readers attain from literature. The value of novels and novel reading is a subject which runs through the plot and much of the dialogue in *Northanger Abbey*. Catherine is thoroughly immersed in the reading of novels, and one in particular, throughout the story, but assumes novel reading is looked down upon by those with a superior knowledge. Catherine expects Henry Tilney not to be a reader of novels. It appears he does read them, and enjoys them, that he has read *The Mysteries of Udolpho* with great pleasure and excitement. It is worth noting that Henry Tilney, a character we as readers are expected to like, reads novels, and John Thorpe, who is portrayed less likeable, is eager to avoid association with them. Herein, I would argue, lies a judgement in favour of novels. Catherine is perhaps too obsessed, but that does not mean delving into novels per se is a bad thing.

The very popularity of particular types of fiction, especially amongst the female reading audience, have often been seen as a marker of lesser quality, and therefore less commendable as reading material. This was the case with Gothic fiction in the 1790s, and when a particular type of Gothic fiction acquired popularity, it was copied in rather formulaic

²²⁸ Iser, Wolfgang: *The Implied Reader: patterns of communication in prose fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* John Hopkins University Press, London, 1974

writing, underlining the notion of lower quality.²²⁹ Regina Maria Roche's *Clermont* (1798), for instance, which figures on Isabella Thorpe's recommended reading list, repeats what became conventions in the early works of Ann Radcliffe. The great mass of Gothic writing in the 1790s raised questions of literary taste and social class at the turn of the nineteenth century, as Michael Gamer writes.²³⁰ The Gothic became, in many reviewers' minds, associated with "the unthinking mass production... of hack writers".²³¹ There were even publishers, such as the Minerva Press, who specialised in catering for the high demand in Gothic fiction.²³² Minerva published all the Gothic novels mentioned in Isabella and Catherine's reading list of Gothic horrors to devour in *Northanger Abbey*, except *Midnight Bell*, by Francis Lathom. Minerva did not, however, publish Radcliffe's books, which *Northanger Abbey* engages more closely with. The great mass of Gothic literature of the 1790s raised issues regarding the definition of literary value. At this time "its associations with female readers, circulating libraries, repetitive narratives and mechanistic production served to define its class position within late eighteenth-century literary hierarchies".²³³ That is, both the writers and the readers of such mass-produced horror fiction were placed at the bottom of the literary hierarchy.

During Austen's writing career novels divided into "two sharply distinct kinds"²³⁴ according to Richard Cronin. By the beginning of the nineteenth century "novels were of two sorts, one of which was literature and the other of which was trash".²³⁵ And Austen, according to Cronin, enjoyed both kinds. The main distinction for her was that one type of novel was readable, and the other was rereadable.²³⁶ I believe that a lesson from Catherine's reading of Gothic novels is that there is something to gain from reading both kinds of literature. Most of what appears on Isabella Thorpe's reading list would presumably enter the category to read once. Ann Radcliffe was generally held in higher esteem at the time and could probably be reread. However, the fact that the other novels on the list appear as if more of the same, I suggest point to Gothic more generally, and not merely Radcliffe's novel, being able to

²²⁹ Miles, Robert: "The 1790s: the effulgence of Gothic" in Hogle, Jerrold E. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 59

²³⁰ Gamer, Michael: "Gothic fictions and Romantic writing in Britain" in Hogle, Jerrold E. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012

²³¹ Ibid, p. 91

²³² Ed. McCalman, Iain: *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, British Culture 1776-1832*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, entry on 'Minerva Press', p. 605

²³³ Gamer, Michael: "Gothic fictions and Romantic writing in Britain" in Hogle, Jerrold E. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 92

²³⁴ Cronin, Richard: *Literary Scene in Context* p. 295

²³⁵ Ibid

²³⁶ Ibid

impact the reader, and being possible avenues to make sense of things through. Even if Catherine, during the course of the novel at least, never gets around to reading the rest of the list.

5.8. The dangers of women reading and thinking for themselves

The amount of material in print at the end of the eighteenth century sharpens questions regarding how readers respond to what they read and how it influences their thinking.²³⁷ The reading of romances and novels may have been seen as dangerous previously, taking away from more important pursuits; E. J. Clery writes that in “Richardson’s novels the worst accusation levelled at the heroines is that they are readers of romances; in other words, fantasists and time-wasters”.²³⁸ Vacuity of the mind is a bad thing. However, filling it with too many bright ideas, which were now more available, may also be perceived as a peril. From the point of view of a conservative in the 1790s the amount of radical philosophy available to the general public was a dangerous thing. Where these ideas would formerly have been rather more obscure, now they were at the forefront of public debate. Claudia Johnson points for instance to Issac Disraeli complaining in *Vaurien* (1797) that “politically dangerous ideas are too accessible. The ‘speculations of philosophy’ were formerly ‘told only in whispers, or published with a solicitous ambiguity.’ But now, unfortunately, anyone who can read at all can find ‘philosophic scepticism’ and ‘political inquiry’ anywhere, and as a result they are ‘of greater importance in society, than in any preceding period’”.²³⁹ Johnson goes on to say that “To the degree that ‘philosophy’ convinces people of their own entitlement to happiness, it destabilizes the hierarchical network of social and familial interdependencies that conservative novelists cherish”.²⁴⁰

I pointed out in chapter 2 that the Gothic can be seen as a dramatic mirror to patriarchal structures of the day, and through the two preceding chapters I have shown that Catherine’s reading of the Gothic tropes of ‘the castle’ and ‘the villainous father figure’ into real life makes clear the validity of the Gothic mirror. Catherine’s application of the mirror is too literal at first, but it does lay bare some of the dependencies of women, and the limits to their agency. In this lies a potential for radicalism, reading of the Gothic could make

²³⁷ Johnson, Claudia: *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990

²³⁸ Clery, E. J.: “The genesis of ‘Gothic’ fiction” in Hogle, Jerrold E. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 22

²³⁹ Johnson, Claudia L.: *Jane Austen, Women, Politics and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988, p. 12

²⁴⁰ Ibid

Catherine an agent for change, spur her on to destabilise the social structures which make figures like General Tilney so influential and intimidating. Córdon, as referred to above, argues that Catherine is a feminist. If she is, she is not a radical who goes about tearing down society. But I argue her reading makes her more aware of the structures of the world. To a degree this give her the ability to carve out some independence, within certain limits. Throughout the novel she develops a better sense of being critical towards other people's motives and what they say. However, her future happiness, it would appear, is dependent on men, in the first instance on marriage to Henry Tilney, and in the second on the General in order make the marriage possible at all. Thus, she can not escape the dependency on men to bring about the main events of life and arrange the structures which govern life.

Both Johnson and Marilyn Butler show that the 1790s brought an array of novels from a conservative standpoint which sought to counter dangerous destabilizing ideas through showing the reader the pitfalls of pursuing personal happiness at the expense of family and society. Many of these conservative novels portray women who read without supervision, and attain too many new ideas. Much of what they come across in their reading gives them the idea that their own opinions as regards matters concerning themselves are valid, and gives them the impetus to reflect on received ideas and make choices based on what they themselves find satisfactory. Reading extensively, without a guiding hand to tell an impressionable young woman what to read and what not to read, in these novels lead to a lack of regard for the authority of parents and husbands, lax morals, ideas such as that of living together outside of matrimony or taking the vows of marriage too lightly. Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray* (1804) is one of the examples Johnson uses, where a young woman of 19 reads unsupervised and consequently forms and lives out the unconventional idea that the matrimonial relationship needs only the 'honor' of equal partners and not a legal ceremony.²⁴¹ In the novel we are invited to see the preposterous in that a young person, let alone a young woman, should advocate new ways of living based on the reading of new-fangled ideas and relying on her own reflections, rather than listening to the dictates handed down by society through the centuries.

²⁴¹ Opie, Amelia: *Adeline Mowbray; Or, The Mother and Daughter*, 3 vols. London, 1805, vol. 1, 104, quoted in Johnson, Claudia L.: *Jane Austen, Women, Politics and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988, p. 12

5.9. *Northanger Abbey* as a novel of attaining self-control and reason

Themes of education and moral development permeated eighteenth-century fictional and non-fictional prose”.²⁴² *Northanger Abbey* is placed squarely in the debate regarding the influence of reading and attempting to reason for oneself. What Austen gives the reader is hardly a polemic for radical liberties, neither is it a clear-cut classic conservative fiction of what goes wrong when the heroine reads and dares to think for herself. Catherine is at the outset a heroine who defers to others in order to make sense of things, she does not let herself think her ideas quite to the end. Austen’s fiction has, as Johnson shows, heroines who are bolder in their beliefs and actions than Catherine, without them being the brazen and ridiculous caricatures which many conservative novelists portrayed. One such is Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth is a character we are invited to like. She is not a timid model of female propriety, nor is she a representation of a radical new woman who serves her own interests first. Elizabeth is daring enough to speak against her betters, such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh, or stomp about the countryside alone and rather indecorously, by the standards of the time, to enquire after her sister at Netherfield Hall. What makes Elizabeth a heroine to be approved of, rather than an example for ridicule, is, for one thing, that Austen according to Johnson, uses Elizabeth’s younger sister Lydia as a form of decoy, she is allowed to represent the silly and self-indulgent, and Elizabeth by comparison is therefore less likely to be read as bending the laws of decorum too much. The other point Johnson makes is that rather than use “conduct-book moralizing about women”²⁴³ Austen makes us see different sides to female conduct. In the scene where Elizabeth runs to Netherfield its inhabitants are rather shocked to see her appearance and that she has walked all the way, alone. The point here is that showcasing female energy in the way Elizabeth does is not seen as proper, it gives her a lustre which is sexually attractive. On the other hand, Bingley points to the amiable quality of concern for her sister. Thus, what is correct female conduct is, in a quiet and gentle way, made ambiguous. In a similar fashion, when Elizabeth ventures opinions of her own regarding younger sisters’ claims to ‘be out’ when elder sisters are not married to Lady Catherine, we, as readers, know it is not expected behaviour for Elizabeth, but the manner of Lady Catherine in general does not invite us to regard her authority at the expense of Elizabeth’s. In some ways I believe *Northanger Abbey* even more clearly gives us the impetus to think of what we

²⁴² Stabler, Jane: “Literary Influences” in Todd, Janet (Ed.): *Jane Austen in Context* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 43

²⁴³ Johnson, Claudia L.: *Jane Austen, Women, Politics and the Novel* University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988, p. 22

expect from female conduct. Already from the first sentences we are invited to think of the expected norms of novels, and on from there to the expected portrayals of women.

According to Butler the 1790's was a period of reaction, a reaction to a previous period of sentimentalism. Sentimentalism turned the focus towards the inner life of a character. These novels were focused on a character's internal reaction to external events, and were conditioned by these, often episodic and disconnected features of life, rather than by a clearly outlined plot with a moral impetus. At the end of the 18th century the novel entered an age of reason. Reason took precedence over the sentimentalists' focus on the irrational side of human life and behaviour. According to Butler novelists of all political opinions were essentially of the same view with regard to a focus on rationality and a penchant for novels of education. Self-indulgence is condemned on both sides, attaining self-control, self-restraint, prudence is the moral ethos, which is to be achieved through a proper education.

It is in this context that Austen writes *Northanger Abbey*. Austen's novel reads as a journey of attaining self-control. *Northanger Abbey* is a novel of education, of how the heroine, Catherine, gradually learns to navigate her social world in a more mature way, in which she is less reliant on first impressions, and more aware of the nuances to peoples' motives. According to Voicu Catherine throughout the novel becomes "a woman who understands her own emotions, does not fear imagination because she knows it is in her control and, most importantly, a woman who is aware not only of the limits, but of the external construction of her own femininity"²⁴⁴.

At the beginning of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, when Madame St. Aubert has passed away, Emily's father advises her to "let reason... restrain sorrow", and tells her "I would not annihilate your feelings, my child, I would only teach you to command them; for whatever may be the evils resulting from a too susceptible heart, nothing can be hoped from an insensible one" (TMoU p. 20). Education and moral development "underpin Ann Radcliffe's Gothic novels, blended with sensational adventures and descriptions of sublime scenery"²⁴⁵. The moral from Monsieur St. Aubert is to avoid too much sensibility and base one's conduct on reason. Herein lies a teaching for Catherine as well, one which she through her own mixture of new experiences mingled with Gothic adventure seems to take to heart. For all the

²⁴⁴ Voicu, Ana: "READING HABITS IN JANE AUSTEN'S NORTHANGER ABBEY". *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai - Philologia* 2:175-190. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=959325> downloaded 12.04.2023, p. 179-180

²⁴⁵ Stabler, Jane: "Literary Influences" in Todd, Janet (Ed.): *Jane Austen in Context* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 43

fantastic and wild aspects of Emily's story, rationality lies at the heart of Radcliffe's story, and is in the end also brought to bear on Catherine's perception.

We might well see the Gothic romance of the eighteenth century as the beginnings of Romanticism, with its focus on passions in its characters, and stirring emotion amongst its readers. Similarly, the focus on the sublime and dramatic in landscape foreshadows treatment of landscape in Romantic poetry and painting. Radcliffe spends much time on descriptions of landscapes of the kind which creates an emotional reaction. "The Gothic type of fantastic literature carried an explosive psychic charge".²⁴⁶ On the other hand, I find there is a very clear current of Enlightenment thinking to Radcliffe's fiction. Her novels are the supernatural explained. Although Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* stirs up herself in anticipation of various dreadful prospects, and we as readers may be carried away, there is never anything supernatural at play. Everything, at the end, has a rational explanation. This sense of realism and rationalism at the ultimate point, is I believe, very in tune with Austen's thinking.

Catherine, as we have seen, is the heroine of Austen's novel, and yet she is not the typical heroine who embarks on a Gothic adventure. She is not as accomplished and graceful as Emily in Radcliffe's novel. Although she is naïve, I believe she is not quite as naïve as first appears. Even if her reading of the Gothic into real life at the outset seems too literal, I argue that ultimately many of the things she assumes is not that far removed from the truth. Thus, her reading is beneficial to her as a means of understanding the world around her. I argue her reading is in fact helpful for her, that it aids her to become more rational and better able to understand the actions and motives which govern others. Austen's novel consequently delves into eighteenth century debate regarding rationality, the impact of reading and literature's ability to mould women. *Northanger Abbey* reads as a novel of attaining reason, but not simply through rejecting novel reading, but through a careful mediation between fiction and real life.

²⁴⁶ Löwy, Michael and Sayre, Robert: *Romanticism against the tide of Modernity* Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2001, p. 217

Conclusion

Austen's novel is to a great extent a play with the conventions of the Radcliffean Gothic, in vogue at the time of writing. Catherine's reading of the Gothic is illuminative, both for her and for us as readers of her adventure. I argue in this thesis that Catherine by her reading of people, buildings and places through the lens of Gothic tropes comes to better understand some of the motives behind other people's actions. This process illuminates the patriarchal structures which underpin the society Catherine lives in. I do not argue that this makes Catherine a feminist with a new ideological and theoretical framework through which to view society, but it does give her a more thorough understanding of society. Thus, her reading is educational for her. For us, as readers of her adventure, Catherine's reading through the Gothic exposes the limits and possibilities for women at that time. It shows us that the dramatic nature of some of the Gothic's key features convey truths about gender roles. In the mediated form, acquired by Catherine's latching the Gothic onto real life, we see that portraying women in the home as incarcerated in a castle, and patriarchal male figures as Gothic villains moving around women as innocent heroines in a play for money and status, is perhaps, not that farfetched. The Gothic may be an exaggerated and sometimes less nuanced mirror of reality, but there are clear links to the actual position of women in real life society.

Through looking at Catherine as a female reader gendered views on reading practices are also illuminated. Viewing Catherine as a reader shows some of the stereotypes connected to the female reader, and therefore some of the limits she has. But the story also shows some of the possibilities for broadened understanding through reading. Thus, Austen's novel engages in contemporary debate on the impact of reading and how it influences the female reader. The novel is also a story of becoming rational. We might assume that the tenor of book is that reading fiction and using that to make sense of the world gives the reader warped ideas of the world, thus, novel reading is detrimental to attaining a rational mind. However, as I have argued, Catherine's reading in my view aids her understanding since it helps her find avenues through which to explore what she senses and feels in her encounters with people and places. Thus, to my mind reading the Gothic can be a road towards a rational outlook on the world.

I would argue that even if both Austen and Radcliffe's heroines may be consigned to a traditional role in a patriarchal system in the end, marriage being the end point of both novels, what is explored along the way to there contains material for radically reviewing women's position in society. That is not to say that such is Austen or Radcliffe's goal in writing. We as

readers may, however, use their novels as a reflection of the precarious position of women in society. Terry Eagleton writes of Richardson's *Clarissa* that it is "arguably the major feminist text of the language".²⁴⁷ This is not because Richardson is an ardent proponent of women's rights, as Eagleton says: I am not out to suggest that Richardson was a radical even in his own society's terms, let alone in ours", what Eagleton is concerned with is exposing what seems to him "the genuinely subversive effects of *Clarissa*, which far exceeded its author's intentions".²⁴⁸ This, to my mind is important; a piece of literary output may convey more than what the author explicitly intends. Whatever the author's position is, or her aim in writing is, I would suggest that her writing is, nevertheless, the result of a particular point in history, conveying the difficult duality of women's position wherein they are both subjected to a traditional patriarchal order, and in some regards have impetus to more freedom. What Austen does in her treatment of Radcliffe, through *Northanger Abbey*, is to show that the gender issues which are explored in Radcliffe is relevant on an everyday level, in real life. Again, this is not necessarily Austen's conscious aim. I do believe that Austen sees literature as relevant for real life, that it is not just a matter of escapism. But whether one could claim that she intends to show us gender issues with any political aim attached to it, that is less certain. However, as an author who read much and was keenly aware of the debates of her day, the great issues of the day resonate through her work, albeit in less politicised a fashion than in the output of some of her contemporaries.

²⁴⁷ Eagleton, Terry: *The Rape of Clarissa* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986, p. viii

²⁴⁸ Eagleton p. ix

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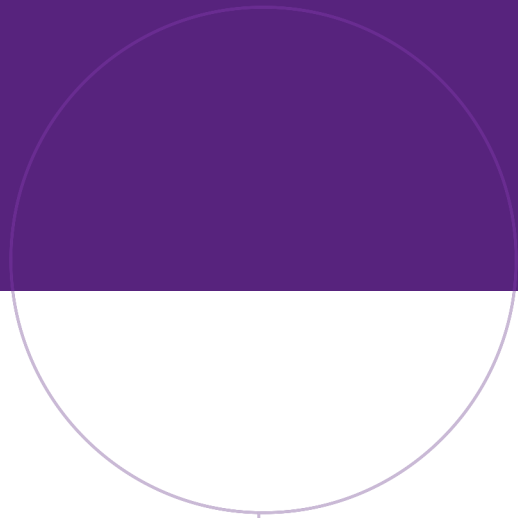
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