



A Heroine's
Visions Undermined:
Expectation,
Disillusionment,
and Initiation in
Northanger Abbey

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*I am giddy, expectation whirls me round
The imaginary relish is so sweet
That it enchants my sense*

Shakespeare

Troilus and Cressida, III.ii.1

JANE AUSTEN'S *Northanger Abbey* is a multifaceted novel that can be read and interpreted in various ways, using any number of critical approaches. It functions perhaps most conspicuously as a biting satire of, and at the same time a playful homage to, the Gothic and sentimental novels of the late eighteenth century. It is a comedy of manners as well as a romance in its own right. It can be studied for Austen's arresting use of the authorial intrusion, for the author's precise use of language, or for Austen's adept ability to delineate and sculpt her characters in ways that make them seem to jump off the page and come to life. Viewed under a wider lens, however, *Northanger Abbey* can be seen primarily as a dramatization of the inconsistencies that emerge between expectation and reality, and the individual's ensuing struggles to reconcile these forces. Upon close inspection, the novel is, in many ways, about expectations subverted, illusions

unmasked, and innocence fallen. Through the heroine Catherine Morland's cyclic experiences involving her sanguine, romanticized expectations and the prosaic, diminished realities of life, as well as through the narrator's parodic, metafictional reminders of the novel's subversive design, Austen infuses her work with a sense of perpetual inflation and deflation, thus establishing within the novel a vision of tenuous hope—a hope ever created and ever destroyed.

As a sign of things to come, the first line in the novel immediately suggests that the expectations of both reader and character will be constantly undermined: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine" (13). With this line, Austen begins satirizing the formulaic designs of the Gothic romance and the overworked, hackneyed devices that eventually turned it into a rather predictable—though incessantly popular—genre of fiction. Because Catherine did not possess the comportment or appearance of the typical heroine during her youth, but was rather plain looking and "tomboyish" in her manner, it was not expected of Catherine to rise to the "heroic" heights she does. Of course, within the context of the literature of the times, it might be more accurate to describe Catherine as a mock-heroine of sorts; in this light, the reader's expectations of her less-than-heroic status are *not* wholly subverted, for Catherine's prescription at least as a conventional heroine is never duly filled in the novel. Austen situates Catherine in this sort of shifting, duplicitous gray area of literary heroism.

Another instance of reader expectations being subverted, but only partially, comes in chapter 2, when, after Catherine's first dance at Bath, "the company began to disperse" (23). In this scene, the narrator again interrupts in a metafictional manner to proclaim that "now was the time for a heroine . . . to be noticed and admired" (23). But much to Catherine's (and perhaps the reader's) dismay, not a single young man "stared with rapturous wonder on beholding her, no whisper of eager inquiry ran round the room, nor was she once called a divinity by anybody" (23). Austen, thus, gently mocks the reader's romantic expectations that Catherine will immediately meet the man of her dreams and fall madly in love. Such romantic expectations are not wholly overridden, though; in the very next paragraph, it is noted that Catherine "*was* looked at, however, and with some admiration; for, in her own hearing, two gentlemen pronounced her to be a pretty

girl" (24). Even though the reader's romantic expectations are significantly deflated by this lack of attention paid to Catherine, they are also subsequently re-inflated, at least to a certain extent, after learning of the two men's subdued, though complimentary and unarguably genuine, remarks about Catherine's countenance. It is such recursive undercutting and fulfilling of expectation that govern great portions of the novel and suggest the complex mergings of imagination and reality.

Other examples of this parodic defusing of reader expectation pepper the novel. But perhaps more central to the novel's thematic core are Catherine's own subverted expectations, her progressive disillusionment, and the learning and maturing processes that accompany them throughout the story. With a romantic sensibility fueled by her voracious appetite for reading Gothic novels like Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Catherine's initial visions of the world are governed largely by her imagination and often tease the borders between fiction and reality. The first instance of such romantically inspired visions and expectations comes in chapter 11 of volume 1, as the proposed trip to Blaize Castle is mentioned to Catherine. Her imagination piqued, Catherine asks Thorpe if the castle is "like what one reads of" (85), eagerly hoping for the mysterious old towers and galleries that are common to the novels she consumes.

Later in the novel, during Catherine's journey to Northanger Abbey and her stay there, the heroine's romanticized expectations are brought to fuller fruition, and her hopes finally to confront (in real life) the sensational horrors that she has read about in her Gothic romances are more conspicuously dramatized. These hopes, while born of Catherine's own imagination, are intensified by Henry's playful goadings during their carriage ride to the abbey. Henry successfully brings his young companion's expectations "to the boiling point," so to speak, with stories of the abbey's "gloomy passages" and "ancient housekeepers" (158), of a mysterious empty room, a haunting portrait, and a "ponderous chest" (158). Once Henry mentions the likelihood of a "violent storm" (159) and tells Catherine about a certain underground passageway running between the chapel and the bedroom she will be occupying, Catherine is hooked, completely enraptured by his stories and the possibilities they bring. Feigning great distress at the seemingly horrifying abbey, Catherine tells Henry to stop, but in the

same breath also urges him to continue: “‘Oh! No, no—do not say so. Well, go on’” (160). It is as if Catherine wants to be led on, to have her imagination worked upon by these fantastic yarns.

The heroine’s romantic expectations are, thus, at their pinnacle as the carriage approaches the abbey: “As they drew near the end of their journey . . . every bend in the road was expected with solemn awe to afford a glimpse of its massy walls of gray stone, rising amidst a grove of ancient oaks, with the last beams of the sun playing in beautiful splendor on its high Gothic windows” (161). These expectations, however, are promptly undercut upon Catherine’s first sighting of the actual abbey:

But so low did the building stand, that she found herself passing through the great gates of the lodge into the very grounds of Northanger, without having discerned even an antique chimney.

She knew not that she had any right to be surprised, but there was a something in this mode of approach which she certainly had not expected. To pass between lodges of a modern appearance, to find herself with such ease in the very precincts of the abbey, and driven so rapidly along a smooth, level road of fine gravel, without obstacle, alarm, or solemnity of any kind, struck her as odd and inconsistent. (161)

Dramatized here is the deflation part of the inflation–deflation pattern, as Catherine realizes that reality is not matching up with expectation. Along similar lines, at the beginning of chapter 21 when the heroine is shown to her room, the narrator affirms, “A moment’s glance was enough to satisfy Catherine that her apartment was very unlike the one which Henry had endeavored to alarm her by the description of it” (163). Nothing is exactly as Catherine hopes.

Though Catherine does show signs of becoming increasingly more disillusioned upon arriving at the abbey and seeing it with her own eyes for the first time, reality still offers good enough reason to keep her hopes up for plenty of instances of Gothic horror and excitement. After all, she does sight “a large high chest, standing back in a deep recess on one side of the fireplace” (163), thus keeping alive (for the time being anyway) the possibility that there is some truth in Henry’s stories. Of course, shortly thereafter, an anxious and excited

Catherine proceeds to open the mysterious chest, only to find it functioning as a storage space for hats and bonnets. Her hopes dashed once again, Catherine is forced to move on to the abbey's next prospect of mystery and to explore its Gothic possibilities. Thus begins an interminable cycle of hopeful expectations and disappointing realities. Her subsequent investigations of the cabinet in her room (which turns up only a hidden laundry list) and of Mrs. Tilney's death (which she eventually finds out was not the result of a murder) demonstrate how Catherine's hopes for the sensational are invariably undermined and supplanted by realities that are far from extraordinary and insipidly commonplace.

It is important to notice, though, that Catherine's expectations are oftentimes *partially* fulfilled or somehow played out in reality in a distorted or subdued manner. For instance, it storms the first night at Northanger, but not in any remarkably violent way. The portrait in Mrs. Tilney's bed chamber is compelling to Catherine, but not unusually frightful: "It represented a very lovely woman, with a mild and pensive countenance, justifying, so far, the expectations of its new observer; but they were not in every respect answered" (191). The last part of this passage seems to encapsulate the novel's overarching vision: that expectations get answered only in fragmented, incomplete ways.

Perhaps the best example of this fragmented inconsistency between expectation and reality involves Catherine's perceptions of the general. While not the murderer Catherine had at first suspected him of being, General Tilney does indeed turn out to be a cruel, contemptible man who ends up banishing his guest from Northanger—neither giving Catherine fair warning nor having consulted with her first—because of her apparent deception regarding her financial station. Thus, Catherine's initial perceptions are not wholly inaccurate; they have just been modified to some degree by reality.

Eventually, Catherine, forced by Henry to become aware of the inconsistencies between her romantically informed hopes and the less-than-glamorous reality around her, learns that she must throw off the chains of her naive expectations and enter into a more rational and objective world. At the beginning of chapter 25, her romantic indulgences having just been called into question by Henry, Catherine is thoroughly disillusioned: "The visions of romance were over. Catherine

was completely awakened. Henry's address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done. Most grievously was she humbled" (199). In short, Catherine comes to realize that she must temper her expectations with prudence and reason in order to form and maintain a more proper and manageable psychic balance and a more objective perception of the world at large.

It is not that Austen necessarily believes expectation breeds folly. Using Henry and Catherine as sounding boards, she suggests rather that the individual must learn to base expectation and judgment on common sense rather than on romantic longing. Thus, considering late-eighteenth- to early-nineteenth-century patriarchal culture—a world that generally valued rational thought and evenhandedness over emotion and subjectivity and perceived women to be hyper-emotional and eternally borderline hysterical—Austen struggles against the dominant cultural assumptions of the times and contends that women can and indeed ought to strive to become rational, objective creatures. Ultimately, Catherine, via her successful attempts to jettison her lingering romantic naïveté and innocence, becomes initiated into a mature world of reason and objective experience, thereby serving as a fictional paradigm for Austen's conception of the ideal maturing woman.

In the final analysis, then, one might argue that by imbuing *Northanger Abbey* with the incessant ebb and flow of expectations constructed and subverted, Austen recreates on the page one of the dominant sensations of human experience and establishes as her primary vision the idea of hope (and, by extension, life) ever created and ever destroyed. It is a vision that at first may seem somewhat bleak and dispiriting. But with Catherine and Henry's marriage, things do seem to get much brighter toward the close of the novel. In fact, when considering in broader overview Austen's trademark "wedding bell endings," it becomes difficult to walk away from any one of her novels not hoping for and expecting the best out of life.

WORK CITED

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