



## *Northanger Abbey* at the Movies

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“I HAVE HEARD that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London. . . . I have only heard that it is to be more horrible than anything we have met with yet.” The words of Catherine Morland, spoken in a fictional Bath in 1798 or so, could have served as the heading to a news story that appeared in London this past July, two hundred years later. A new adaptation of *Northanger Abbey* is being filmed, to be shown next spring on British TV, and the scriptwriter Andrew Davies says that it will contain a certain amount of nudity and violence. Davies, who in the past three years has written screenplays for the BBC/A&E *Pride and Prejudice*, the ITV/A&E *Emma*, and the very undressed adaptation of Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, told a reporter, “There will be one or two scenes in which Catherine will imagine things that should never happen to young girls” (Thorpe 13). Like Catherine Morland, we will have to wait some time before we can be shocked, but meanwhile we can ponder the 1986 BBC/A&E adaptation of *Northanger Abbey*, which tells us a great deal about Austen’s novel and suggests some of the problems and challenges facing Davies and his collaborators.

The 1986 adaptation was the first BBC/A&E co-production. It is a brief, highly compressed, campy, Ken Russell-style romp that has at least the courage of its convictions. A good deal of screen time is

taken up by Catherine's morbid, gruesome, erotic fantasies, which marry Ann Radcliffe's text and images to a B-movie soundtrack, complete with heavy sighs, synthesizer moans, and eerie choral chants. The film begins, in fact, with Catherine perched on a tree limb, engaging in her favorite, recurring erotic fantasy: she pores over an engraving from Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* that activates her imagination, like that of some teenage boy over a skin magazine, to replay the scene with herself in it—she is being carried in the arms of a stern-faced medieval villain, who drops her on a bed, and...the fantasy always stops at this point. This ninety-minute film came from a talented crew. It was directed by Giles Foster, the veteran British TV and film director who directed (and wrote the script for) the fine 1985 BBC adaptation of George Eliot's *Silas Marner* and also directed the 1994 TV adaptation of Joanna Trollope's novel *The Rector's Wife*. The script was by Maggie Wadey, who wrote the script for the 1994 BBC/A&E adaptation of Edith Wharton's unfinished novel *The Buccaneers* and was one of the writers of the British TV series *The Duchess of Duke Street*. Katharine Schlesinger, who plays Catherine, has not had leading roles on TV or film before or since, but Henry Tilney is played by Peter Firth, Colin's brother, who had been nominated for an Oscar for his role in *Equus* in 1977 and played Angel Clare in the 1989 film version of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Robert Hardy, who overacts gorgeously in the role of General Tilney, played Sir John Middleton in the Emma Thompson/Ang Lee *Sense and Sensibility* (and is perhaps best known as the hot-tempered veterinarian in the TV series *All Creatures Great and Small*). All the same, the 1986 adaptation is a major disappointment, especially when compared with the Jane Austen films and TV adaptations of the past three years. Yet a comparison of the adaptation with its source highlights some important features of Jane Austen's novel.<sup>1</sup>

The 1986 film of *Northanger Abbey* forces us to realize anew the importance of six qualities of Jane Austen's novel. These qualities are: the importance of the self-conscious narrator to our enjoyment of the novel; the lack of significant action in the novel; the lack of Gothic texture in Catherine's everyday experience; the comic disparity between Catherine's social world and her imaginative transformation of it; the carefully unified action of the novel, which means that the Thorpes and their Bath fabrications are present when Catherine is at

Northanger Abbey; and Jane Austen's situation of the action within the heroine's mind and in her growing ability to think and choose. These six aspects of Northanger Abbey are hardly new discoveries of mine (and if they are, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own). The TV adaptation, however, forces us to realize anew how central they are to the novel.

My first point, the importance of the narrator to our experience of *Northanger Abbey*, is an aspect of the novel that any film adaptation will have to sacrifice. *Northanger Abbey* was the first novel that Jane Austen conceived of from the first as one told by an omniscient narrator—that is, if one follows B. C. Southam's argument that the other two early Austen novels, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, were originally composed in epistolary form (61), and the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* is the closest Jane Austen comes to Henry Fielding's obtrusive, poised and witty, wise, philosophizing, self-conscious narrator of *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*. Certainly, the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* gives herself all the best lines, just as Fielding had done in *Tom Jones*. Let me remind you of the narrator's prominence:

Whether she thought of him so much, while she drank her warm wine and water, and prepared herself for bed, as to dream of him when there, cannot be ascertained; but I hope it was no more than in a slight slumber, or a morning-doze at most; for if it be true, as a celebrated writer has maintained, that no young lady can be justified in falling in love before the gentleman's love is declared, it must be very improper that a young lady should dream of a gentleman before the gentleman is first known to have dreamt of her. (29-30)

Not only is this narrator, like Fielding's, obtrusive, opinionated, witty, and wise; she also is, like his, professedly "the contriver" (232)—as she describes herself near the end of the novel—of the fiction we are reading.

This very prominent narrator tells us a story that has virtually no striking external action. Film is a medium that must have significant action, yet, compared to Jane Austen's other novels, *Northanger Abbey* lacks visual possibilities. We have nothing similar to Marianne Dashwood being jilted by Willoughby on the dance floor, Marianne's almost-fatal illness and the surprise visit of Willoughby to her sickbed;

no set-pieces like the dance scenes at Netherfield and the Crown Inn or the theatricals at Mansfield Park or the Box Hill picnic; no quasi-melodramatic action like the rescue of Marianne by Willoughby or the elopement of Lydia Bennet with Wickham or the fall of Louisa Musgrove on the Cobb or the banishment of Fanny Price to squalid Portsmouth. Imagine Emma Thompson trying to pitch this novel to Hollywood executives. Catherine, a naive seventeen-year-old in eighteenth-century England, leaves her quiet home in the country to visit Bath with neighbors. There she befriends another girl and reads novels with her; she goes out for a carriage ride with the friend's brother; she meets the hero at a dance, dances with him again at a second ball, and then goes for a walk with him and his sister. She then visits the hero's father's estate, Northanger Abbey; there she secretly visits his dead mother's bedroom and is very embarrassed when caught doing so by the hero. Some days later she is suddenly forced to cut her visit short by the hero's tyrannical father, who has discovered that she is much poorer than he had thought. This unkind eviction brings about a proposal from the hero, and all ends happily. No wonder, then, that excellent film or TV adaptations have been made of four of the other five Austen novels: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, but not of *Northanger Abbey*. Maureen Dowd, reflecting in the *New York Times* in 1995 on the popularity of the Jane Austen films, suggested that Hollywood *could* film *Northanger Abbey*: the movie would have "Sandra Bullock as *Abbey Northanger*, a governess who falls for a ghost" (A23).

This absence of external action leads to my third point about the novel: the prosaic and very un-Gothic texture of Catherine's experience. The adapters of *Northanger Abbey* choose to confront the novel's lack of external action by two bold moves. One is promising, at least in its possibilities, and follows the novel's lead: they show Catherine compensating for, and enlivening, her ordinary life by vividly imagined, if banal, Gothic fantasies.<sup>2</sup> The other, though, is disastrous. The film makes Catherine's social world much more Gothic, much more creepy and bizarre, than it is in the novel. In the novel, Northanger Abbey is a prosperous modern estate: in fact, Catherine reflects as she enters it, "An abbey!—yes, it was delightful to be really in an abbey!—but she doubted, as she looked around the room, whether anything within her observation, would have given her the consciousness" (161–62). In the

1986 adaptation, *Northanger Abbey* is an ominous medieval castle, completely surrounded by a lake and approached over a causeway; as the characters enter, its massive gate swings open, but a portcullis remains suspended above the gateway; the rooms are cavernous, dark, and echo-filled; it has winding stone staircases, peacocks that prowl the grounds, croaking, and even a flock of birds that take flight suddenly as Catherine ascends a staircase. In fact, after the film was shown on British TV in 1987, a letter appeared in the *T.L.S.* from Bernard Richards of Brasenose College, Oxford, protesting that “as a setting [Northanger Abbey] was as glaringly inappropriate and misconceived as almost anything that Hollywood could produce in its most crass and ill-informed moments” (271). Henry’s mother’s bedroom is similarly sinister, with dark hangings and a dressing table reminiscent of Miss Havisham’s (whereas the point in the novel is that Mrs. Tilney’s bedroom is bright, handsome, modern, and bare of romantic trappings). The whole action is similarly Gothicized. Catherine does not simply find in the mysterious black cabinet a set of laundry bills; she also discovers an unsigned note that reads, “The same day at 3. You and I by the statue of the unknown woman” (a note that, Catherine soon discovers, has set up a secret meeting between Eleanor Tilney and her disapproved-of lover).

General Tilney is much more villainous and exotic: the most blatant touch is that he has a hideous confidante (and possible mistress), the Marchioness, who is ghoulish and French as well. He also has a much more Gothic motive for his misbehavior than in the novel: we are told that he is an inveterate gambler and thus must indulge in mercenary schemes to recoup his losses. In the film, Catherine is in her room and about to go to bed on the night of her arrival when she overhears the General address Eleanor in an angry voice; then she hears Eleanor weeping, and opens her door a crack and overhears Eleanor say to her brother, “I cannot bear it any longer. . . . How long must I go on living in this house?” Again, the film has Catherine informed by a gossip servant that the General made his wife’s life a perfect misery—and that there is something suspicious about her sudden death.

Similarly, Bath is presented with a campy Gothic texture: the ladies at Bath wear towering, Fellini-esque hats, and Catherine makes the acquaintance of Eleanor Tilney amidst a genteel gathering of

ladies—all up to their chests in water in the Roman baths. In the ball scene and throughout, Isabella is an exuberantly garish and giddy vamp—it is hard to believe that even Catherine would not see through her. In short, the Catherine of the adaptation hardly needs to leap very far when she sees the General as a Gothic villain.

And this leads to my fourth point: the novel bases its appeal on the transforming power of Catherine's imagination—that is, on the comic contrast between her social world and her novel-derived imaginings of it. As Jan Fergus has said of Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, “the events, anticipations, responses, and qualities that are ordinary in life become extraordinary in fiction” (11). Whereas the Catherine of the novel contemplates the General's demeanor as he paces the drawing room and decides, “It was the air and attitude of a Montoni!” (187), no such comic contrast exists in the film. The adaptation is remarkably unfunny. In fact, the film makes Henry Tilney seem a great deal more smug, more priggish, more lacking in sympathy and comic awareness when he rebukes Catherine. His speech in the novel ends with the words, “Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?” (198), whereas in the adaptation, he ends with a more rhetorical and directive question, “My dear Miss Morland, has reading one silly novel unbalanced your judgment so completely?” Austen's Henry Tilney, and indeed the author of *Northanger Abbey* herself, has a much more divided and less dismissive view of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. The Henry of the adaptation does just what the novel's Henry does not: he tells the heroine what to think, rather than asking her to think for herself.

My fifth point about *Northanger Abbey* is a more subtle one than the four previous ones. Austen's novel has an elegant unity of structure: Northanger Abbey is not entirely a separate place from Bath, since the Abbey is an embodiment of delusions generated by the Thorpes in Bath: Isabella has infected Catherine's imagination by introducing her to Radcliffe's novel, and John Thorpe's self-aggrandizing exaggerations of Catherine's wealth have prompted General Tilney to invite her there. It might seem that a film adaptation of Austen's novel can be tightly unified by its use of fantasy: in the 1986 version, Catherine Morland has Gothic daydreams even before she goes to Bath, and they continue right through to the climactic events at Northanger Abbey.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Marilyn Roberts argues in an essay on the 1986 adaptation that it has a structural advantage over Jane

Austen's novel: "By depicting Catherine as *Udolpho* obsessed from the start, Wadey prepares the viewer for Catherine's response to the Abbey and her fears that the General is another Montoni" (23). It is true that one satisfying aspect of the adaptation is that, as Catherine comes to know the General, the face of the cruel torturer in her recurrent fantasy becomes more and more evidently that of General Tilney. However, Austen's novel makes quite a different use of Catherine's *Udolpho*-based fantasies. In the novel it is clear that Catherine has not read *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, or any other Gothic novels, till she meets Isabella—the latter says to her, "It is so odd to me, that you should never have read *Udolpho* before" (41)—and the result is that Catherine's vision at the Abbey of the General as a reincarnation of that novel's villain is Isabella acting on Catherine by proxy.

When Catherine is led by Henry's questioning to renounce "the visions of romance" (199), "She saw that the infatuation had been created, the mischief had been settled long before her quitting Bath, and it seemed as if the whole might be traced to the influence of that sort of reading which she had there indulged" (200). The film smooths over Isabella's devious motive in befriendng Catherine by having James Morland introduce Catherine to Isabella *after* James comes to Bath. This connection between Isabella's devious and flattering fictions of friendship and Catherine's delusions about the General is underlined by the fact that Catherine, once she has renounced her vision of General Tilney as another Montoni, has no trouble seeing that the smarmy letter she receives at the Abbey from Isabella, seeking Catherine's help in bringing James back to her, is a tissue of lies. There is no such letter in the film.

In the same way, the novel makes fatuous John Thorpe responsible for both the General's painfully obvious pursuit of Catherine and his abrupt dismissal of her: just as Thorpe had exaggerated her wealth at Bath when he thought he and his sister would both be marrying into the Morland family, so, when he meets the General in London, now speaking as a rejected suitor and someone disgraced by his sister's jilting of James Morland, he asserts that the Morlands are poor and disreputable: "a necessitous family; numerous too almost beyond example... a forward, bragging, scheming race" (246). However, the film obscures this neat logic in events: in the novel, General Tilney behaves quite differently to Catherine after Thorpe has told him of her

wealth, whereas in the film the General pursues Catherine as soon as he meets her. In the adaptation, the General has heard of Catherine's wealth (presumably from the Marchioness) before Thorpe approaches him at the ball with news of Miss Morland, and what had been in the novel his creakingly gallant praise of the elasticity of Catherine's walk the day after Thorpe has been seen talking earnestly with the General at the theatre (95, 103) occurs in the film within forty-five seconds of his meeting her—and is accompanied by a leer and preceded by a close inspection from a distance of three feet. Similarly, in the film the General explodes in anger and expels Catherine after receiving a letter from the Marchioness informing him that the Morlands are now thought in Bath to be not nearly as wealthy as had been generally believed. The close ties between the Thorpes and Northanger Abbey have virtually disappeared in the film.

My sixth point is that the film adaptation highlights another distinctive aspect of Austen's novel: Jane Austen situates the point of view from which the story unfolds within the heroine's mind. We see and hear only what she does. The mind of her heroine is Jane Austen's special territory, despite her famous description in a letter to her niece of "such a spot as is the delight of my life;—3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on" (9-18 September 1814). The film, by contrast, has dozens of scenes that take place outside Catherine's awareness. Our experience of the film is thereby much more fragmented and disjointed than of the novel, especially when such added bits of dialogue seem out of tune with the rest of the script (an example is the two Tilney brothers chaffing each other and taking snuff, or a vignette in which the Marchioness passes on salacious gossip to the General, or indeed the plot-resolving scene in the film, during which Henry rebels against his father and asserts his disinterested love of Catherine—while the General trains a hawk and comes to realize that Catherine's fortune is attractive enough, after all). But even lines of dialogue taken directly from the novel seem very different when Catherine does not experience them; at the ballroom, for instance, John Thorpe's complaint to James Morland that he hasn't come to Bath to drive his sisters about and look like a fool is strangely inconsequential compared with the power of the same line spoken to Catherine herself within the novel (99). Similarly, the very same words that Catherine overhears in the novel with some horror from the lips



of Captain Tilney and Isabella (115) become in the film painfully banal when they are simply the first moves in their secret flirtation. In fact, I would argue that the three recent films of *Emma* (counting *Clueless* as one) derive much of their force from effortlessly following Austen in limiting the narrative point of view to the heroine, while some of the weakest moments in the 1995 *Sense and Sensibility* and the 1996 *Pride and Prejudice* occur when we leave the heroine's viewpoint and see, for instance, Lucy Steele confiding in Fanny Dashwood and Fanny pulling her by the nose in return, or Mr. Darcy seeking out Wickham and Lydia in seedy London lodgings.

Jane Austen uses her chosen vantage point to trace the growth of the heroine's ability to think for herself and make meaningful choices. The Catherine of the film adaptation does not really get the chance to think, let alone choose. Unlike the novel's heroine, she cannot see for herself that Mrs. Tilney's bedroom contains no secret—she is discovered within the bedroom *in flagrante delicto*, whereas Catherine in the novel leaves the room, having realized that she has made a terrible mistake: “and a shortly succeeding ray of common sense added some bitter emotions of shame” (193). And, as mentioned above, the Catherine of the film does not receive a letter from Isabella in the final phase of the action, a letter that allows the novel's heroine to exclaim, “She must think me an idiot, or she could not have written so; but perhaps this [letter] has served to make her character better known to me than mine is to her” (218). The film's Catherine, unlike the novel's heroine, does not discuss with Eleanor and then decide the vexed question of whether it would be proper for her to write Eleanor once she returns home (228–29), nor does she write that difficult letter that she knows will be read by Henry as well as Eleanor (235–36).

The differences between Jane Austen's novel and the 1986 film become especially clear if we compare the conclusions of the two works. The film moves rapidly to a campily romantic finale. Catherine is back at home, and while her parents and the Allens sit at a table outdoors tediously exclaiming over General Tilney's bad behavior, she walks off into an adjoining field, which is suddenly very misty—and out of the mist on horseback appears Henry Tilney, who dismounts, tells her not to be frightened, asks her in convoluted eighteenth-century syntax if she loves him, and adds, “You know I do not need my father's permission to marry.” Catherine regards him intently and asks,

“But he knows you are here?” Henry replies, “Yes,” and the crucial questions and answers having been conveyed by gaze rather than speech, he sweeps her into his arms and kisses her. The lovers are interrupted by Catherine’s younger brother, who had interrupted her tree-branch reverie at the start of the film, and the film credits begin to roll over a freeze-frame close-up of the lovers gazing at each other, still in each other’s arms, but now contemplating their life together in society. The scene is strange: crudely romantic, yet also arch in its use of film cliché. It is a blend of Jane Austen, vintage Hollywood, and Monty Python. This scene illustrates, as does the adaptation as a whole, what Deborah Kaplan has called the “harlequinization” of Jane Austen’s novels in the film adaptations of them.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but not if the picture is unremarkable and the words are Jane Austen’s. The witty, obtrusive “contriver” dominates the novel’s final pages: there is no dialogue in the last two chapters of the novel. At the novel’s end, instead of romantic rescue and embrace we find sentences such as the following: “The anxiety, which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity” (250). Rather than ending conclusively, the novel’s final sentence combines narrative closure with playful ambiguities of significance and tone:

To begin perfect happiness at the respective ages of twenty-six and eighteen is to do pretty well; and professing myself moreover convinced, that the General’s unjust interference, so far from being really injurious to their felicity, was perhaps rather conducive to it, by improving their knowledge of each other, and adding strength to their attachment, I leave it to be settled, by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience. (252)

This paper is not meant to be, and I hope it is not, adaptation-bashing. The film adaptations of Jane Austen’s novels provide great pleasure: I have seen every one of the film and TV adaptations and look forward to seeing future ones, no matter how shocking they may

be. My argument, however, has been that the film version of a Jane Austen novel, in this case the 1986 adaptation of *Northanger Abbey*, brings into clearer focus the distinctive qualities of its original. The viewer of adaptations of Jane Austen's novels is in much the same position as Jane Austen herself when she visited three exhibitions of paintings in London in May 1813, four months after *Pride and Prejudice* was published: "I had great amusement among the Pictures," she wrote to Cassandra, but "there was nothing like Mrs D. at either [exhibition].... I can only imagine that Mr D. prizes any Picture of her too much to like it should be exposed to the public eye.—I can imagine he wd have that sort of feeling—that mixture of Love, Pride & Delicacy" (24 May 1813). Like Jane Austen at the spring exhibitions, we will not find a close likeness of her heroine among the pictures, but we will discover more about the novel that the heroine inhabits.

#### NOTES

1. At this point in the presentation, the audience was shown two scenes from the film adaptation, each lasting about ten minutes. The first displayed the main characters at the cotillion ball at Bath, and the other presented the scene in which Catherine Morland is discovered by Henry Tilney secretly visiting his late mother's bedroom.
2. In Matthew Francis's stage adaptation of *Northanger Abbey*, performed at the Greenwich Theater (in England) in 1996, some of the most striking effects come from the play's use of two levels of reality, Catherine's everyday world and her transmutation of it into *Udolpho*-land. A central figure in the play is Annette, the servant of Emily, the heroine of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.
3. Francis's play *Northanger Abbey* also presents Catherine as immersed in *Udolpho*-derived fantasies from the start—that is, before she comes to Bath.

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