



## “A surmise of such horror”: Catherine Morland’s Imagination

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CLAUDIA JOHNSON, a critic I admire immensely, has pondered the difference between Janeites—readers and admirers of Austen’s work, from all walks of life—and professional critics. Janeites, she says, concentrate first and foremost on “character,” and they have no qualms in talking about Austen’s characters “as if they were real people.” The academics, on the other hand, pay most attention to plot, in this case the courtship plot, and they consider the Janeite habit of loving and hating the characters inappropriate and amateurish (235).

I certainly count myself an academic, and I know the orthodoxy about recognizing the difference between the real world and a fictional construct and about maintaining a strict academic distance from characters in novels. Nevertheless, just as I choose to suspend my disbelief of fictional events, so also I *like* to respond to certain characters *as if* they were really alive. Kathryn Sutherland is on my side of the issue. “Though now unfashionable as a professional protocol for reading,” she writes, “‘caring for’ or identifying with fictional characters remains highly important when it comes to explaining why we read novels for pleasure” (220-21). And reading novels for pleasure is what I’m talking about here.

Novelists themselves, we know, often become subject to their characters, who like the Frankenstein monster can begin to dictate to their creators. Henry James himself, though the most critically aware of novelists, recognizes that we readers can and do enter into a relation with fictional characters, and he ponders which *kind* of relation he intends to promote. An icy detachment on

the part of his reader is the last thing he is looking for. He *wants* us to “care.”

[T]he figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations. . . . But there are degrees of feeling—the muffled, the faint, the just sufficient, the barely intelligent . . . ; and the acute, the intense, the complete, in a word—the power to be finely aware and richly responsible.

It is these intensely responsive and fully conscious characters, he says, “who ‘get most’ out of all that happens to them,” and so “enable us, as readers of their record, as participators by a fond attention, also to get most.” We readers, you see, are *allowed* to be participants through our fond attention. And our participation is the richer with those characters who are “finely aware—as Hamlet and Lear, say, are finely aware” (James vii-viii). We can surely agree with James. We get more out of Emma Woodhouse, say, than we get out of Harriet Smith. This kind of hierarchy is obviously distinct from the familiar categories of social standing. It’s not because Hamlet is a prince or Lear a king that we value them, but because they are capable of being “finely aware and richly responsible.” Anne Elliot *is* more valuable than Elizabeth Elliot, and not just because we know more about her, but because she knows more about herself.

But Catherine Morland, now. Alas, we can hardly claim that *she* is “finely aware and richly responsible.” John Thorpe proposes, and she doesn’t realize it’s happening. By cheerfully agreeing that she’ll be happy to see him at Fullerton, she gives him encouragement but doesn’t know or acknowledge that she has done so. “[C]heerful and open,” and with a “mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is” (*NA* 18), Catherine is no Hamlet or Lear; and yet she lays hold on our attention and sympathy as firmly as a more intricate Jamesian character. How does this come about?

Part of the answer is that there is something of the Holy Fool about Catherine, the kind of wisdom in simplicity that we find in Lear’s fool or some of Dickens’s prophetic simpletons, like Mr. Dick in *David Copperfield* or Joe Gargery in *Great Expectations*. Catherine entirely misses the light allusive banter between Henry Tilney and his sister about the pains and pleasures of reading “‘real solemn history’”; to her, history consists only of the “‘quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all’” (108). This tossed-off definition could have been a wake-up call to modern historiographers. Her modest admission, “I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible,” is hailed by Henry as “‘an excellent satire on modern language’” (133), and, in these times of literary theory

and specialized terminology, at least one academic I know uses it as an epigraph. For all her ignorance, Catherine is wise, even if only intermittently.

And there's a particular quality to her innocence that we as well as Henry Tilney respond to. Her naive admission that she is always in pursuit of amusement, and Bath provides more than her home, is refreshingly honest. And despite her hesitance to offend, she is "truly heroic," as Elaine Bander writes, in standing up to enormous pressure—from Isabella and John Thorpe *and* her brother James—to go on that trip (215). "If I could not be persuaded into doing what I thought wrong, I never will be tricked into it" (101), says Catherine, with shrewd moral discrimination.

Catherine will never be sophisticated. But Henry Tilney, who for all his intellectual abilities is on the edge of becoming a little jaded, is right to value her "fresh feelings of every sort" and her "honest relish of balls and plays" (79). For Catherine, Bath is a brave new world. "'Tis new to thee," Henry might say drily, like some latter-day Prospero. Habitually ironic and occasionally disenchanted, Henry is somehow regenerated and rejuvenated by Catherine. He needs her.

A heroine so innocent but ripe for impression, with a mind (so far) devastatingly understocked, is like a vessel needing to be filled, an identity ready to happen. And it concerns us that that space should not be alienated to the trite and calculating by Isabella or abandoned to a state of mental vacancy like Mrs. Allen's. The corruption of the innocent is among the painful stories of civilization.

To figure out the role of gothic in the story of Catherine's developing identity, and the proper relation of realistic novel to romance, is necessarily a major task for each reader of *Northanger Abbey*. Back in 1965, the "Paperback Library Gothic" series presented *Northanger Abbey* not as spoof gothic, but the real thing. The cover picture showed a girl in front of a looming building, stalked by a Peter-Quint-like male figure, with the headline, "The terror of Northanger Abbey had no name, no shape; yet it menaced Catherine Morland in the dead of night." And the following title page goes on, in all seriousness,

What was the mystery surrounding the death of Henry's mother?  
Was the family concealing a terrible secret within the elegant  
rooms of the Abbey?

Could Catherine trust her love? Would Henry tell her the  
truth or was he, too, involved in the evil of the house—an evil  
which threatened to enmesh Catherine herself.

FAR FROM HOME AND CLOSE TO DANGER, CATHERINE  
HAS NOWHERE TO TURN!

When I first read this gothic come-on I found it hilarious, a mad example of a publisher who had missed the joke entirely. Now I'm not so sure.

Space, with its vacancies and occupation, is a salient metaphor in gothic fiction, especially in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and in *Northanger Abbey* too. The heroes of both novels commune with the heroine through the open spaces of landscape. Valancourt, trying to bridge space by time, persuades Emily, wherever she is, to watch the sunset, as he does: "You will then meet me in thought, . . . and I shall be happy in the belief . . . that our minds are conversing" (*Udolpho* 163). And Henry, as we all remember, begins to fall in love with Catherine as they examine landscape together, and he coaches her in the theory of the picturesque. But more prominent than landscape are the manmade enclosures of castle and abbey, with their halls and staircases, cloisters and dungeons. Catherine's broodings while she is reading *Udolpho* are typically of "towers and long galleries" (85), "narrow, winding vaults" (88), "broken arches, . . . false hangings, . . . trap-doors" (87). And Blaize Castle is an intensely desired destination for being, as she thinks, "an edifice like Udolpho" (86).

*Udolpho* itself, as Emily St. Aubert first sees it standing high on an eminence, is dauntingly male, a symbol of Montoni's power: "The sun had just sunk . . . , but his sloping rays, shooting through an opening of the cliffs . . . streamed in full splendour upon the towers and battlements of a castle, that spread its extensive ramparts along the brow of a precipice above" (226). But the spaces within it, especially Emily's own remote chamber, are suggestively female. There Emily is particularly threatened by an extra door "that was not quite shut," which leads to "a steep, narrow staircase" too dark to explore (235). She finds when she closes it that she can't fasten it, though subsequently she discovers that it can be locked from the other side. This secret entrance to her sanctum over which she has no control is a source of constant anxiety. "What if some of these ruffians [she asks herself] should find out the private stair-case, and in the darkness of night steal into my chamber!" (319). The symbolism is fairly obvious: forced entry is figurative rape. The towers and secret passageways of *Udolpho*, like the gigantic sword and helmet in *The Castle of Otranto*, are replete with sexual suggestion. Architecture becomes anatomy, and of course the sense of obscure sexual threat is ubiquitous in the gothic novel.

Although Catherine aligns General Tilney with Montoni, the Abbey is more a female space than a male one. Once a convent—not a monastery or a castle—it stands "low in a valley, sheltered . . . by rising woods of oak" (142): Catherine's imaginings linger over its "long, damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel, . . . and she could not entirely subdue the hope of . . . some

awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun" (141).<sup>1</sup> Catherine, like Emily, suffers from unwanted sexual advances: when John Thorpe drives her away fast in his gig, against her protests, she is experiencing an updated version of the standard gothic abduction of the heroine in a coach-and-four.

But although Austen playfully picks up on the anatomical suggestions of gothic architecture, her more usual use of the spatial metaphor, as I've suggested, is for the mind. Emily St. Aubert treads the stairways and passages of a metaphorical body; but Catherine more usually finds herself "in wandering mazes lost" (to borrow Milton's phrase) among her own ideas. Austen dwells on "the riot . . . in [her] brain" (113).

The initial description of Catherine as heroine *manquée* draws attention to all the qualities she *doesn't* possess. She's described largely in negatives. Her mind is "unpropitious for heroism." She doesn't water rose bushes, and she has "no taste for a garden" (13). She has "no notion of drawing," and because of that "ignorant and uninformed mind," she doesn't even "know her own poverty" (16). Her admission that her best entertainment at Fullerton is only to call on Mrs. Allen much amuses Henry. "Only go and call on Mrs. Allen!" he repeats. "What a picture of intellectual poverty!" (79). Poverty too is a lack, an absence rather than a presence, another kind of negative or emptiness. We have already learned of Mrs. Allen's "vacancy of mind and incapacity for thinking" (60). As with Catherine's "uninformed mind," we have the metaphor of the brain as a closet or a suitcase, which may be well stocked with ideas, or bulging with junk, or disappointingly lightweight, devastatingly empty. Mrs. Allen is like Sterne's Mrs. Shandy, who, her husband complains, has "such a head-piece that he cannot hang up a single inference within side of it, to save his soul from destruction" (147). In *Emma* we hear similarly of "the many vacancies of Harriet's mind" (183).

A mind may be cluttered without being well stocked. John Thorpe may not have two ideas to rub together, but he's certainly not short of opinions, including incompatible ones. He can emphatically assert, and *believe* too, that James's gig is "the most devilish little ricketty business," likely to collapse any minute, *and* safe as houses, fit to drive "to York and back again" (65). This is not vacancy of mind, but rather double occupancy.

Isabella's mind is equally undisciplined, and also ill stocked with sense. As she and Catherine proceed to the ball together, we find them "supplying the place of many ideas by a squeeze of the hand" (52). You don't find the Tilneys, brother and sister, needing to find substitutes for ideas. Their minds are well stocked and efficiently ordered.

We are invited to watch the process by which Catherine sorts the changing and competing occupants of her mind. When Thorpe has told her authoritatively that the Tilneys aren't coming to fetch her for the walk, her conflicting impulses amusingly jostle each other as "counterpoises":

Catherine's feelings, as she got into the carriage, were in a very unsettled state; divided between regret for the loss of one great pleasure, and the hope of soon enjoying another, almost its equal in degree, however unlike in kind. . . . To feel herself slighted by [the Tilneys] was very painful. On the other hand, the delight of exploring an edifice like Udolpho, as her fancy represented Blaize Castle to be, was such a counterpoise of good, as might console her for almost any thing. (86)

We are reminded of Pope's sylphs in *The Rape of the Lock*, who keep women virtuous by shifting the temptations:

With varying vanities, from every part,  
They shift the moving toyshop of her heart;  
Where wigs with wigs, with sword-knots sword-knots strive,  
Beaux banish beaux, and coaches coaches drive. (1:199-202)

Catherine is similarly bemused, as her meditations toss her between "broken promises and broken arches, phaetons and false hangings, Tilneys and trapdoors," a series that alliteratively confuses her gothic and her Tilney aspirations (87).

Far from having fixed mental furniture, with a rational ordering of items, Catherine is readily suggestible, and that moving toyshop of her heart can be pushed in different directions. It only takes the General to compliment her on the elasticity of her walk for her to prance home, "walking, as she concluded, with great elasticity, though she had never thought of it before" (103). A mind so suggestible, so open to passing impressions, so trusting, presents an easy target; and it gives me pause to think how Catherine could be colonized, alienated perhaps to Isabella's world of pretension and empty professions. Nature abhors a vacuum, we are told, and Catherine could easily be taken in and taken over, as her brother James is, by unscrupulous influence.

As I read the novel, it is Catherine's absorption in gothic that saves her from a worse fate. "[W]hile I have Udolpho to read," she confesses, "I feel as if nobody could make me miserable" (41). It is indeed a safeguard, a kind of space-saver that excludes worse influences. Granted, she is a resoundingly naive reader. But Catherine does read, and lose herself in her reading. Isabella, by contrast, seems like Emma Woodhouse, better at making lists of books than

actually reading them. I was outraged when I first saw Andrew Davies's screen adaptation of *Northanger Abbey* because it included a scene near the end of throwing copies of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and other gothic novels into the fire. Book burning deeply shocks me in any context, but especially in this one. We all know it's not gothic novels that are wrong, only a too-naïve belief in their literal application to life. And I was greatly relieved, when I saw that adaptation again, to find that that book-burning scene had been excised.<sup>2</sup>

Even the naïve belief in the gothic has its uses. Catherine's gothic fantasies at the Abbey come in two stages: the evening affright about the trunk and the cabinet on her first night at the Abbey, and the more extended suspicions about the General.

We can all agree, I think, that for her first set of terrors Henry himself is largely to blame.<sup>3</sup> His artful parody of gothic, as he drives her towards the Abbey, supplies her with all the matter for her imaginings on that first stormy night. Since he delivers his beguiling narrative in the second person and the future tense—"How fearfully will you examine the furniture of your apartment!" (158)—it has the force of prophecy. Henry being her oracle, Catherine is almost bound to do as he predicts. And he knows full well how suggestible she is. When he concludes, "[Y]our lamp suddenly expires in the socket, and leaves you in total darkness," she exclaims, "Oh! no, no—do not say so" (160). But he does nothing to disarm his dangerous prediction or bring her back to reality. Even Catherine recognizes his responsibility for her delusions, though she blames only herself: "How could she have so imposed on herself?—Heaven forbid that Henry Tilney should ever know her folly! And it was in a great measure his own doing, for had not the cabinet appeared so exactly to agree with his description of her adventures, she should never have felt the smallest curiosity about it" (173).

It's intriguing to me that Catherine's embarrassment over this first set of gothic delusions leads directly to a genuinely illuminating exchange with Henry. When she finds him alone at breakfast on the morning after the storm, she is eager to change the subject from his enquiries on how she slept, and his "arch reference to the character of the building they inhabited": Catherine "was constrained to acknowledge that the wind had kept her awake a little. 'But we have had a charming morning after it,' she added, desiring to get rid of the subject; 'and storms and sleeplessness are nothing when they are over. What beautiful hyacinths!—I have just learnt to love a hyacinth'" (174). Blessed hyacinth! It affords not only a change of subject, but evidence of a happy stride in Catherine's development. For me the moment recalls the

Ancient Mariner's epiphany when he blesses the water-snakes. One might adapt Coleridge:

O happy living thing! No tongue  
Its beauty might declare:  
A spring of love gushed from her heart,  
And she blessed it unaware.<sup>4</sup>

As the dead albatross drops from the mariner's neck at this moment, so Catherine turns from gothic horror to natural beauty. Of course, we get Catherine's experience in "unaffected prose" (26 July 1809), but still we can mark a great gain. She who "had no taste for a garden," would water no rose-bushes and gather no flowers except for mischief (13-14), and who remained stubbornly "indifferent about flowers" (174), suddenly achieves this new aesthetic sensibility. And we are led to believe this is not just an accidental change, but a triumph she has worked at. She has *learned* to love a hyacinth. Henry humorously ponders this claim: "And how might you learn? — By accident or argument?" (174), as though one can take a course in loving hyacinths, get a degree in flower appreciation. Wisely, he analyzes this new acquirement.

"[N]ow you love a hyacinth. So much the better. You have gained a new source of enjoyment, and it is well to have as many holds upon happiness as possible. . . . [W]ho can tell . . . but you may in time come to love a rose? . . . The mere habit of learning to love is the thing; and a teachableness of disposition in a young lady is a great blessing." (174)

It's a central moment in Catherine's development. That freshness and accessibility that makes her so attractive has now been converted from the "voluntary, self-created delusion, . . . from an imagination resolved on alarm" (199-200) to an outward-looking delight in what is actually around her. And of course her "teachableness of disposition" is a crucial factor in Henry's falling in love with her, committed pedagogue as he is. Catherine's frantic assumptions about closets and manuscripts once dispersed, there's room for the new delight in natural beauty. That moving toyshop is being rearranged, and some more important stock takes its place on the shelves.

It's notable, in this first haunting set off by Henry's narrative, that the delusions are all about gothic decor rather than gothic personnel. Henry's narrative had concentrated on gloomy surroundings and spooky furniture, rather than on Montonis, Italians, or Ambrosios and their actions. Aside from Henry's "you," the fictional Catherine herself, there is only the ancient housekeeper Dorothy, who is hardly more than a stage prop; and we are yet to hear of the sufferings of "the

wretched Matilda,” author of the “many sheets of manuscript” hidden in the secret compartment (160). That roll of manuscript, however, does its own work in Catherine’s imagination, and it is she herself who takes the next step in gothic plot, in concocting her own narrative of the wretched Mrs. Tilney:

Of her unhappiness in marriage, she felt persuaded. The General certainly had been an unkind husband. He did not love her walk:— could he therefore have loved her? And besides, handsome as he was, there was something in the turn of his features which spoke his not having behaved well to her. (180)

Reading physiognomy is a recurring activity in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and Catherine aspires to be as expert in the art as Emily St. Aubert.

Soon, as the General silently stalks the drawing-room “with downcast eyes and contracted brow,” Catherine concludes he has “the air and attitude of a Montoni!” (187)—the abuser, incarcerator, and probably the murderer of his wife. Her gothic plot-making once begun, the horrors multiply. The monument in the church may represent Mrs. Tilney as dead, but that doesn’t fool Catherine for a moment:

Were she even to descend into the family vault where [Mrs. Tilney’s] ashes were supposed to slumber, were she to behold the coffin in which they were said to be enclosed—what could it avail in such a case? Catherine had read too much not to be perfectly aware of the ease with which a waxen figure could be introduced, and a supposititious funeral carried on. (190-91)

This mental exploration of the charnel house is going pretty far in gruesome speculation. But the macabre seems to be one necessary excursion of the romantic imagination, a kind of obligatory descent to the underworld. In his dark poem “Isabella, or the Pot of Basil,” Keats generalizes:

Who hath not loitered in a green churchyard,  
And let his spirit, like a demon-mole,  
Work through the clayey soil and gravel hard,  
To see skull, coffined bones, and funeral stole:  
Pitying each form that hungry Death hath marr’d,  
And filling it once more with human soul? (XLI)

Do we all imagine ourselves burrowing like demon moles among the rotting corpses of the dead? Probably not. But such extreme fantasies may serve as a kind of training exercise for the imagination. And I think that wholesome young Catherine, bred in a parsonage and sheltered all her life, may need some such training; or at any rate, that it won’t do her much harm.

Having moved from gothic decor to gothic plot, Catherine is the more likely to get into trouble; and she does. This time Henry catches her in the act of snooping near his dead mother's room, and Catherine is overwhelmed with guilt.

Henry is onto her suspicions in a flash—so fast, in fact, that he creates some suspicions himself. “[Y]ou had formed a surmise of such horror [he reproaches her] as I have hardly words to——” (197), and indeed words fail him. But just how much evidence is there for Henry to deduce her horrid surmise? True, she's clearly guilty about her unwarranted explorations to his mother's room. And her own words certainly suggest suspicion: “[Your mother's] dying so suddenly . . . and you—none of you being at home—and your father, I thought—perhaps had not been very fond of her” (196). That's all she says; and it's not much to go on, is it? And yet he guesses, “[Y]ou infer perhaps the probability of some negligence—some—(involuntarily she shook her head)—or it may be—something still less pardonable” (196). If he can so swiftly guess her surmise, and on such slender evidence, doesn't it suggest he knows that the General *was* brutal to his wife, that he did drive her to an early grave, even if he didn't actually murder her? At the end of the novel, sure enough, after the General's outrageous behavior to Catherine herself, we are told, “Catherine . . . 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” (247).

If Henry intuitively grasps Catherine's suspicions because they match his own, then we must read his famous speech, “Remember that we are English, that we are Christians” (197), not as a wise lecture that cures her of her gothic delusions but as a cover-up. Perhaps the Tilney family does have a skeleton in its closet, in the best gothic tradition, but Henry's filial duty requires that he keep it hidden. And perhaps that rhetorical question in the Paperback Library Gothic edition, “Would Henry tell her the truth or was he, too, involved in the evil of the house?” is not so far off the mark after all!

Is *Northanger Abbey* the story of a naive girl who is educated out of her foolish gothic fantasies by a sensible right-thinking male? That is certainly a familiar reading, and it might justify an adaptor in providing a final scene of throwing gothic novels on the fire. But to me Catherine's vivid (albeit naive) response to her reading is not her error but her imaginative awakening and her means of growth. Soon after believing in an enlarged fictional world of secret passages and hidden manuscripts, she learns to respond to natural beauty. And her horrid surmise about the General, which is wrong in detail but cor-

rect in spirit, becomes a necessary advance in awareness of human deviousness and evil, and an approach to the truth.

Earlier in the novel Catherine has had no confidence in her sound instincts, or her judgment either. Even after suffering “the effusions of [John Thorpe’s] endless conceit,” she hardly dares allow herself to “doubt of his being altogether completely agreeable. It was a bold surmise” (66). Oh, come, how bold can *that* surmise be! In the case of the General her surmise is instinctive and more or less accurate.

After the news that she is to be expelled from the Abbey for no reason that she knows of, we have the most genuinely moving passage on Catherine’s state of mind:

Heavily past the night. . . . That room, in which her disturbed imagination had tormented her on her first arrival, was again the scene of agitated spirits and unquiet slumbers. Yet how different now the source of her inquietude . . . —how mournfully superior in reality and substance! Her anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability. (227)

I know that this passage can be read as a complete rejection of gothic and its artificial chilling of the spine. For many a year I read it that way myself. But now I believe that those synthetic horrors of fiction have actually given her fuller access to her own experience, deepened her consciousness, refined her awareness. Isn’t that what literature is *supposed* to do for us?

And we soon see that her experience has enlarged her human sympathies too. When Eleanor Tilney begs her to write, just once, to reassure her of her safe arrival at Fullerton, Catherine at first refuses, because Eleanor asks her to write under cover, and Catherine is too proud to stoop to this subterfuge. But Eleanor’s sad acquiescence and “look of sorrow” is “enough to melt Catherine’s pride in a moment, and she instantly said, ‘Oh, Eleanor, I *will* write to you indeed’” (229). Such a battle between pride and deep affection is a new development in Catherine, quite different from the synthetic gushings that echoed Isabella’s.<sup>5</sup>

Austen began “Susan,” the first version of *Northanger Abbey*, in 1798. Another major literary event of that year was the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. Critics have often noted Austen’s affinity with Wordsworth: as he wrote in his famous Preface, he chose to present “incidents and situations from common life” (Abrams 2:159); and she chose to present those “3 or 4 Families in a Country Village” (9 September 1814). Wordsworth denounced the con-

temporary “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation” (161); Austen parodied the gothic novels that fed that thirst. But from the outset, as Coleridge told us in his *Biographia Literaria*, the *Lyrical Ballads* project had been twofold: Wordsworth was to give “the charm of novelty to things of every day,” but Coleridge was to write of “persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic,” and yet to cast over these figures “a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief . . . , which constitutes poetic faith” (Abrams 2:397-98).

My quotations here have been not only from Pope the Augustan, but also from the Romantic poets Coleridge and Keats. For to me *Northanger Abbey* is a validation of the Romantic imagination, as well as a caution against it. Austen, like Wordsworth and Coleridge combined, gives us both “the anxieties of common life” and “the alarms of romance” (NA 201). Once disabused of her delusions, Catherine doesn’t go back to being the “ignorant and uninformed” teenager whom we met at the outset. Back then she was immune to the snippets of Pope and Grey and Shakespeare that she encountered in the schoolroom. It took gothic novels to latch on to her imagination. They make a reader of her: if not a highly discriminating reader, certainly an intense one. Now she has been through a process that enables her not just to swallow her fiction—hook, line, and sinker—but to *choose* to suspend her disbelief. Gothic novels have been for Catherine what *Clueless* and other screen adaptations of Austen are for today’s teenager, who will graduate to better things hereafter. Let’s not throw *Udolpho* on the fire, or Austen movies either!

Through responding intensely to this reading matter, Catherine is awakened to art. All right, gothic novels aren’t Shakespeare, or Mozart, or Michelangelo. They aren’t even *Sir Charles Grandison* or *Cecilia*, or “some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, . . . the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language” (38). But they are a way in, an imaginative awakening, an enlargement of understanding. Catherine is a better and a larger person<sup>6</sup> for having imagined beyond those tame “midland counties of England” (200).

That’s why we can love Catherine, as Mr. Knightley does Emma, “‘faults and all’” (462). As well as learning to love Henry Tilney and a hyacinth, Catherine, like all Jane Austen’s readers, has learned to love fiction. And it is well to have as many holds upon happiness as possible.

## NOTES

1. Sheila Graham-Smith has convincingly demonstrated that a source for Henry's gothic parody, and hence Catherine's imaginings, was T. J. Horsely Curteis's *Ancient Records, or The Abbey of St. Oswyth* of 1801. Here there is an ill-fated nun incarcerated in an Abbey, with similar chests and cabinets; and the heroine reads a hidden manuscript about a Matilda who turns out to be her mother.
2. "Adaptor-in-chief" of Austen's novels, as Kathryn Sutherland calls him (228), Andrew Davies seldom makes such egregious errors. I saw the book-burning episode in 2007, when his *Northanger Abbey* first aired. When it was re-broadcast in Canada in 2010, however, that scene had been excised, whether as a deliberate revision or as a cut for the sake of timing I do not know.
3. Elaine Bander, in a stimulating essay, argues that it is less her gothic fantasies than her love for Henry that leads Catherine astray: "She can read romantic novels without danger, but she cannot 'read' Henry Tilney without disordering her judgment" (217).
4. Adapted from Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), lines 282-85. There are notable differences between the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* version and later revised ones, but this particular stanza is the same.
5. I am grateful to Jan Fergus, the reader for *Persuasions*, for this insight.
6. For Catherine's growth to personhood, see Sheila J. Kindred, "From Puppet to Person: The Development of Catherine's Character in the Bath Chapters of *Northanger Abbey*."

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