

Perilous Books for Girls: Reflections on Readership in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

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Abstract:

Novels are written for various purposes, not solely to entertain, such is the case of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* – that is a novel about novels, and subsequently about reading. In this article, the topic of readership is approached from a gender and genre perspective, as male characters in the novel police what books are perilous for young women to read. By focusing on the female narrator, on the heroine, and on James Fordyce's *Sermons*, as context to the novel, this article contrasts female and male perspectives on readership and genre by questioning what books are appropriate for girls and how should someone approach literature, which are a key to approach one of Jane Austen's earliest works.

Keywords: Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, female readership, gender, gothic

Northanger Abbey (1818)ⁱ is usually referred to as Jane Austen's satire on the Gothic, mocking the works of Mrs. Radcliffe, and novels like *The Monk* (1796) and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), among others. The opening lines set the tone of the book: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine," (5) as it juxtaposes uneventful everyday life to the hazardous adventures of the Gothic heroine. Yet, this novel about novels also works as a way to contrast gender and genre, as the narrator and characters work in an elaborate critique on how female readership should be approached at the time.

The story narrates how Catherine Morland's journey as a heroine began by reading books and poetry that would come in handy in horrible scenarios that the Gothic would someday provide; and it quickly evolved, from reading Pope and Shakespeare, to reading this new genre of novels, often written by women or about women with titles such as: "Cecilia, or Camila, or Belinda" (22). In a subtle way, Austen is encouraging readers to start thinking of a new literary tradition of female authors and readers. This idea often takes a backseat to the plot as it is pushed aside by some characters disapproving and cynic commentaries, and the quixotic situations in which Catherine often finds herself, as she desperately tries to fit into the heroine mold.

As a novel that confronts male ideas on female readership, *Northanger Abbey* can be placed in the context to James Fordyce's sermons, which we have encountered before in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), as these were considered by Mr. Collins' an ideal source for entertaining his cousins. Although drab and quite sever, his writings were very popular at the time, and could be found in many homes. In *Sermon IV: On Female Virtue* (1766), Fordyce delivers a harsh criticism on what he declares to be "improper Books" of which he states:

We consider the general run of Novels as utterly unfit for you. Instruction they convey none. The paint scenes of pleasure and passion altogether improper for you to behold, even with

the mind's eye. Their descriptions are often loose and luscious in a high degree; their representations of love between the sexes are almost universally overstrained. All is dotage, or despaired; or else ranting swelled into burlesque. (75-76)

Fordyce goes on, condemning these books and its readers, because they go against his concept of female "Sobriety to the mind," and thus we can see an example of how men, at the time, took it upon themselves to censure and police female readership. At the beginning of the sermon Fordyce places the duty of educating women on their brother, and in *Northanger Abbey* the suggestion is followed as it is through Henry Tilney and John Thorpe's observations that Catherine begins to learn what material is appropriate for reading, but more importantly, she begins to learn how to read, so that she might not fall into the excesses depicted above. Nonetheless, eventually our heroine does precisely that as Barbara M. Benedict and Deidre Le Faye point out in the introduction of the Cambridge edition of the novel:

The third strand in *Northanger Abbey* is the satirizing of young women who lose track of reality by immersing themselves in romantic fantasies. Satires of learned, or at least reading-maddened, women had been a commonplace theme for the past hundred years, but with the rise of romantic fiction and the broadening of a female reading public in the middle of the eighteenth century, writers merged this theme with an attack on the addiction to novels. (xxxvii)ⁱⁱ

It is at that point where all of Fordyce's concerns, and dangers that Gothic literature advertises, come to life with somewhat underwhelming and comedic results. However, if Austen's work was that simple, then it would not be a very interesting read. As the plot thickens we notice that even though Catherine is a young and naïve girl who approaches literature as a direct source of learning without questioning it, she and the narrator both deliver very precise observations when it comes to the world of books and readers. In the case of the narrator her voice is filled with the authority of book writing, in Catherine's case it is but a simple comment that is dismissed, but the truth it carries challenges the idea that she is a simpleton.

The narrator—which is considered a bit unpolished compared to other narrators in Austen's work—enounces a very passionate defense of the novel and to some extent, on a tradition of female authors:

Alas! if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? [...] Let us not desert one another, we are the injured body. [...] There seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist [...] "I am no novel reader— I seldom look into novels —Do not imagine that I often read novels— It is really very well for a novel." Such is the common cant. — "And what are you reading Miss ——?" "Oh! it is only a novel!" replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. (22)

This narrator is very aware of the context in which novels develop, and it is also mindful of its readership. In this short deviation from the plot, the narrator illustrates the interaction between a man and a female reader, who reads the books that appeal to her but is only met with unspoken prejudice, subtle, but that produces shame on her choice of books. This exact situation is repeated in an interaction between Catherine and Mr. Thorpe, which renders the heroine silent and taciturn to speak about novels with other men. Another key moment in the narrator's defense is when she says: "Let us not desert one another," which allows us to imply that this speech comes from the writer herself who not only wishes for a community of novel writers but perhaps for a community of female writers as she asks for the patronage from one heroine to another. In the plot, this defense of the

novel works to highlight, not the novel's power to deceive, but what they can do in the hands of an inexperienced reader, like Catherine, who "invokes the quixotic tradition in order to mock the idealism of naïve but heroic characters who learn about life from books." (xxxiv) Catherine, when compared to other readers in *Northanger Abbey*, comes out as naïve and impressionable especially next to someone like Miss. Tilney, who is a peculiar woman in Austen's diegetic universe, as she not only enjoys novels, but she also enjoys history books, and is well informed, as she probably reads newspapers or *The Spectator* (1711-1712) to keep up with recent events. Catherine, on the other hand, is isolated and her only news of the outside world comes in the books she can get her hands on.

Although Catherine might not be Austen's and the narrator's ideal reader, she is not as daft as her actions would accuse her of being, as she finds herself in a British society that does not provide many options for female entertainment, other than the usual: music, painting, and embroidering, with the new addition of reading. As a reader, Catherine has a very acute sense of both fiction and reality, but this distinction eventually causes her confusion, which might not be entirely due to reading "improper Books" but rather to the hybrid nature of safe and sober history books.

I read [history] a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrel of the popes and kings, with wars or pestilence, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all —it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. (74)

Here Catherine indicates that there is fiction in history and that there is not an absolute in a genre that was associated to be a truthful source of knowledge. History, which was a male-dominated field and therefore associated with reason and the "sobriety of the mind," becomes muddled and not entirely trustworthy. In this passage, Catherine also comes to the root of the problem as she also points out the lack of women in its pages. This defines the character as a reader that wants to see herself identified in books, leaving her no other source for entertainment rather than those novels that were written by and about women. The character raises a valid point when it comes reading and representation, and perhaps answers the question of why so many women were attracted to the genre. Nonetheless, Catherine's opinion is muffled by Mr. Tilney's own, as he preaches on how to read from his point of view. He is clear on the state of affairs of British society and how it could never be truly marred by the events in those novels, that are purely for entertainment and not as true sources of knowledge, making him perhaps the ideal novel reader in *Northanger Abbey*. Every time Catherine ends up discussing literature with other male characters they find a way to police either the content she reads or the way she read it.

All in all, Gothic novels might not be entirely to blame when it comes to Catherine Morland's misadventures, and what Austen points out is the way her society approached literature. *Northanger Abbey* presents samples of different types of reader, both female and male. In the novel, it is only the male characters that comment with the sole purpose of imposing their opinions, dictating what should be read and how to read it. In contrast, female readers simply enjoy the content and comment on it, but their opinions, either on novels or genres, are not meant to be taken as serious criticism. Austen presents the problem of who dictates what content is good and what is not by challenging her reader when it comes to novels especially those that were written and read by women and commenting rather of how some people are ill prepared to be good readers. Nowadays this problem is still relevant, as we can see in Val McDermid's *Northanger Abbey* (2014) as the "improper books" are updated to be paranormal romances for young adults. Nevertheless, there is still a list of books that are considered perilous for girls, now policed by teachers, reviewers, and

parents. What Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* teaches us is that a young female author can write and comment with dexterity disregarding the roadblocks society might put on her way.

Notes

ⁱ All direct quotes to Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* come from the Norton Critical Edition.

ⁱⁱ Source: "Introduction" of the Cambridge edition of *Northanger Abbey*.

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