

Catacombs and Courtship: Life Imitates the Gothic in *Northanger Abbey*

“If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I hardly have words to—Dear Miss Morland...Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you,” says Henry Tilney to Catherine at the climax of Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, rebuking her gothic fantasies as childish and frivolous (186). His position is echoed by a group of literary critics, such as D.W. Harding, who finds the gothic element of Austen’s first novel to be “relatively unimportant” in terms of plot and character development (131). This critical camp argues that Austen’s gothic parody displays immaturity or a lack of structure in the novel. The opposing view, championed by critics such as George Levine and Waldo S. Glock, claims that Austen’s use of the gothic is harmonious with the rest of the novel. They point to passages in the text in which Catherine’s fantasies correspond with her reality: Levine particularly notes that throughout the novel, Catherine is placed in damsel-in-distress situations, like the heroines in gothic stories. Glock, as well as later critic Kathleen Miller, notes how General Tilney fulfills the role of a Radcliffean villain. According to these critics, the gothic scenes and devices complement *Northanger*’s plot and create a full, layered novel.

After reading the critical conversation on *Northanger Abbey*, it is clear that the position held by Levine and his similarly-minded colleagues is better aligned with Austen’s text. A close, careful reading of the novel reveals a parallel structure between the gothic and realistic portions. In this essay, I aim to both identify passages that have been overlooked by some critics and bring together their related arguments into a cohesive whole. In doing so, I will prove that Austen uses the characters and events of the novel to create a balanced correspondence between Catherine’s fantasies and her reality. What occurs in her imagination foreshadows or reflects what happens

in her actual life. This agreement serves the novel in two ways: it allows an informed reader to gain further insight into the characters and events of the story, and it adds another layer to Austen's parody.

Throughout the story, Catherine is thrust into situations pulled from the pages of the gothic novels that preceded *Northanger Abbey*. Though Catherine's misadventures come to a head in the second volume of the novel, these gothic elements are still present in the Bath chapters. One of the earliest instances of fiction invading reality occurs when Catherine is strong-armed into taking a carriage tour with her brother and the uncouth John Thorpe. Though she has prior arrangements to walk with Henry and Eleanor Tilney, Thorpe convinces her he saw them leaving town. However, as Thorpe drives his carriage, Catherine sees the Tilneys on the side of the road and cries, "Stop, stop, Mr. Thorpe... it is Miss Tilney, it is indeed.—How could you tell me they were gone?—Stop, stop, I will get out this moment and go to them" (Austen 83). From here, the tone shifts from a casual ride through town into a comic and malicious (but admittedly low-stakes) kidnapping. Thorpe ignores her protests, and instead "laughed, smacked his whip, encouraged his horse, made odd noises, and drove on" towards the remote Blaize Castle (Austen 84). Austen's language evokes many tropes familiar in gothic fiction. His "laughing" and "odd noises" bring to mind the melodramatic and evil cackle of the horror villain.¹ Additionally, Thorpe's actions correspond with "the violence of such noblemen and baronets as delight in forcing young ladies away to some remote farm-house" that Catherine's mother neglected to warn her about earlier in the novel (Austen 19). This passage places Catherine firmly in a gothic cliché and establishes Thorpe as not only blustery and foolish, but, according to Harding, "thoroughly untrustworthy" and villainous (137). The kidnapping plot

¹ Something like "Mua-hahahahaha-HA!"

foreshadows Thorpe's later function in the novel, when he nearly ruins Catherine and Henry's engagement and is the catalyst to her eviction from Northanger Abbey.

The scene on the carriage also is one of the first moments in the novel in which Catherine fits the damsel-in-distress cliché. This conceit is continued a few chapters later, when John Thorpe and his sister try to badger Catherine into another carriage ride at the expense of a walk with the Tilneys. Levine notes that Catherine fulfills the role of the "entrapped heroine" (347), as "Isabella... caught hold of one hand; Thorpe of the other" (Austen 96). Like the gothic maiden, Catherine is physically restrained by villains while desperately trying to maintain her honor. In a gothic novel, the heroine would have to defend herself from some ill-willed nobleman who wants her maidenhead²; here, she tries to maintain her social honor, i.e. the obligations that she made with the Tilneys. Both this scene and the one before it hint at the ultimately evil nature of the Thorpe siblings, and give credence to Catherine's self-image as a gothic heroine.

In spite of the dual-kidnapping at Bath, Northanger Abbey itself is where Catherine experiences the greatest connection between the gothic and reality. On the way to the Abbey, Henry Tilney teases Catherine with what she should expect during her visit: "How fearfully will you examine the furniture of your apartment... Not tables, toilettes, wardrobes, or drawers, but on one side perhaps the remains of a broken lute, on the other a ponderous chest which no efforts can open" (Austen 150) and "an old-fashioned cabinet of ebony and gold, which... by touching a secret spring, an inner compartment will open—a roll of paper appears" (Austen 151). Henry's narration hints at a gothic plot of intrigue—the broken lute and the imposing furniture seem like potential clues in a mystery. As Catherine explores her room, she discovers nearly all of the

² Levine refers to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, in which Pamela tests her "capacity to keep Lord B. off while she is trapped in his bed" (Levine 347).

objects Henry had predicted and, as Glock notes, “falls almost but not completely under the spell of her inflamed imagination” (41). After seeing a heavy chest, she finds herself “seizing, with trembling hands, the hasp of the lock... resolved at all hazards to satisfy herself at least to its contents” (Austen 156). The “trembling hands” suggest the usual mental state of distress or terror that seems to often overcome gothic heroines. However, when Catherine finally manages to open the chest, she finds nothing but everyday linens, hats and bonnets. She similarly searches the cabinet in her room at night—Austen heightens the gothic parody by including another dramatic struggle with the locks on the furniture—and reveals “a roll of paper pushed back into the further part of the cavity, apparently for concealment... half a glance sufficed to ascertain written characters” (Austen 161). This discovery apparently mirrors the secret message that Henry hinted at in his speech. However, the true nature of the paper is less dramatic. It is merely a hand-written laundry bill, left by a servant.

At first, these events appear to betray the parallel structure between the realistic and the gothic. If Catherine’s fantasies are representative of events in her actual life, we’ve reached a dead end. However, if we consider the paper as a plot device, the correspondence returns. In the gothic novel, the paper would serve as the beginning to a mystery... “Oh! thou—whomsoever thou mayst be, into whose hands these memoirs of the wretched Matilda may fall,” as Henry jokes (Austen 152). As we find out at the end of the novel, the paper conveniently belonged to Eleanor Tilney’s husband, “whose negligent servant left behind him that collection of washing-bills, resulting from a long visit at Northanger, by which my heroine was involved in one of her most alarming adventures” (Austen 234). The tortured manuscript is a call-to-action for the gothic heroine, offering clues to some sort of misdeed that she can uncover and furthering the plot. The laundry bill serves some of the same functions for Catherine. Rather than sparking an

adventure in the old Abbey, however, it begins her adventure in married life. Catherine again finds herself in a situation that a gothic heroine would be in, and although her discovery seems mundane, it foreshadows the eventual outcome of her romance with Tilney. Catherine places no importance on her discovery, but ironically, it provides a solid link to the man who enables her marriage.

Catherine's fantasy of finding a meaningful message in the locked cabinet is ultimately realized in the novel's final chapter. Though George Levine argues, "we can dispense with the connection between Eleanor's husband and the laundry list," he admits that "we cannot do without the husband as a fictional device" (336). But because Austen chooses to include this "last wonderful joke" (ibid), i.e. Catherine's fantastical discovery having implications in reality, the bill shows the interrelated nature of the gothic and reality in *Northanger Abbey*. Admittedly, this connection is more tenuous and forced than some others (we groan at the obvious *deus ex machina* of Eleanor's sudden love interest). but when taken in conjuncture with the other points of correspondence presented through the novel, it is not unreasonable to assume that Austen's choice was deliberate.

As Catherine continues her stay at the Abbey, she falls deeper into her gothic fantasies. This culminates in her exploration of the "forbidden gallery" of the Abbey, searching for clues about the fate of Mrs. Tilney (Austen 178). After a fruitless search of Mrs. Tilney's bedroom, Catherine returns to the hall and is confronted by the sound of footsteps. "To be found there, even by a servant, would be unpleasant; but by the General, (and he seemed always at hand when least wanted,) much worse... At that instant a door underneath was hastily opened... She had no power to move. With a feeling of terror not very definable, she fixed her eyes on the staircase" (Austen 183). Again, as with her earlier "kidnapping" by Thorpe, Austen places her heroine in a

situation familiar to the gothic novel. As with her “trembling hands” fumbling at the chest earlier, Catherine shows the body language and behavior of a typical gothic heroine. She is rendered helpless by fear and trapped without hopes for escape. The circumstances bring to mind Catherine’s earlier fantasies about Blaize Castle and “the happiness of being stopped in their way along narrow, winding vaults, by a low, grated door” (Austen 84). As before, the stakes are noticeably lower for Catherine than for a gothic heroine. At the most, Catherine’s snooping will result in some awkward social interaction rather than actual danger. Still, her discovery does lead to misfortune. After Henry mocks Catherine when he discovers her reasons for exploring, and she leaves with “tears of shame” (Austen 186). Catherine realizes that the “happiness” of fright is only present when she is an impartial. There is no joy in the position she finds herself in, only the fear of losing the affection of Henry.

Miller notes that at Northanger, Catherine “script[s] her life and interactions with people as if she were living in a gothic novel, instead of reality” (132). But can she really be blamed? Her reality is frequently in harmony with gothic scenarios and clichés. Austen again layers the parody: after the run-in with Henry, Catherine has realized that she is not a gothic heroine. Her search for clues has only turned up embarrassment. And yet, ironically, her explorations have resulted in a sort of cliffhanger. Like the Radcliffe heroine who finds a bloody dagger in a hidden chamber, Catherine’s future and (in this case, domestic) safety have been placed into doubt. The fantasy dangers of looking for trouble in an old Abbey are usurped by the real danger of social failure. The novel’s gothic situation is matched by a counterpart in reality.

The strongest evidence for Austen’s intentional marriage of the gothic and the realistic in the novel, as identified by many critics, comes from the character of General Tilney. Throughout the story, even during the chapters at Bath, Catherine views the General with some discomfort.

After spending time with his family, Catherine finds that, “in spite of his thanks, invitations, and compliments—it had been a release to get away from him” (Austen 123). As she spends time at the Abbey and learns about the sudden death of Mrs. Tilney, the initial feelings of unease blossom into elaborate fantasies of the General as a gothic villain. Even something as simple as learning that the General has no picture of his departed wife in his bedroom is enough to set off an illogical conclusion: “A portrait—very like—of a departed wife, not valued by her husband!—He must have been dreadfully cruel to her! Catherine attempted no longer to hide from herself the nature of the feelings which... he had previously excited; and what had been terror and dislike before, was now absolute aversion” (Austen 171). Catherine’s suppositions seem unfounded. On small pieces of evidence, she suspects the General of the most nefarious gothic plots, such as murder or imprisonment. As she learns after being confronted by Henry Tilney about her suspicions, the General seems to be just an ordinary man.

We have another apparent red herring, as with the bundle of paper in Catherine’s cabinet. Again, the narrative reveals that Catherine was not mistaken in indulging her gothic fantasies. After a trip to London, the General returns and tyrannically evicts her. Rather than via an imagined plot against his wife, the General reveals his villainy through the “actual and natural evil” of leaving a young woman to find her own way home, without a servant, money, or even an idea of which direction to travel (Austen 212). Catherine comes to realize that “in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty” (Austen 230). She was not entirely misguided in her suspicions of the General. He is capable of cruelty towards women, but just not in the exact circumstances she imagined. In doing so, he fulfills the role of a gothic villain. This characterization again shows the connection between the gothic and realistic in Austen’s novel.

Kathleen Miller asserts that although the General's actions are indeed frightening, "the horror of her surrounding society is not that men murder their wives, but rather the far more commonplace truth that people marry for money and make their spouses miserable" (135). If what Miller postulates is true, then Henry's rebuke of Catherine and her overactive imagination is misguided. While Henry insists that atrocities cannot occur in modern England, the actions of his father disprove him. The horror of the gothic fiction that Catherine predicts does exist, deeply entrenched in a society that values greed and encourages what Levine would term "personal excess and falseness" (339). The General presents a kind face to Catherine only when he believes she can advance his family fortune. He is as much a villain as the barons who populate Radcliffe's novels.

Though Catherine is prone to excessive bouts of gothic fantasy, I do not accept Harding's position that she is entirely naïve for believing the horrific and mysterious could occur in her life. In the words of Austen, "Catherine sometimes started at the boldness of her own surmises... or feared that she had gone too far; but they were supported by such appearances as made their dismissal impossible" (178). Even while living an ordinary life, Catherine experiences elements of the gothic that have implications in her reality. She is kidnapped, in a sense, by John Thorpe, and later restrained by him and Isabella. These two events establish Catherine as a damsel-in-distress and show the Thorpes to be villains, which is revealed as true later in the novel. She finds a roll of paper—mundane rather than mysterious—that nonetheless serves as a plot catalyst much like a hidden manuscript diary. She finds herself exploring the recesses of a musty old building, fearing discovery. Finally, she experiences a casting out by General Tilney, a man who is revealed as the villain that Catherine suspects him of being.

The examples from the text show, in the words of Waldo S. Glock, that when it comes to reality and fantasy, “Both parts of *Northanger Abbey* are thematically and structurally related with contrasts of character, recurring motifs, and pattern of meaning representing totality of form... [and] aesthetic equilibrium” (36). My analysis of *Northanger Abbey*’s characters and events reveal the complexity of Austen’s allusions to the gothic. Her meticulous attention to detail and the sheer number of examples of fantasy reflecting reality in the novel lend credence to the critics who defend *Northanger Abbey*’s balanced structure. Austen’s use of the gothic additionally furthers her parody. Catherine Morland sometimes sees herself as a character in a gothic novel, which makes her seem naïve. However, she *is* a character in a novel, and she frequently experiences gothic tropes outside of the books she reads. So Catherine is right—she actually is a gothic heroine, like the young women in her favorite Radcliffe novels. While the gothic elements of *Northanger Abbey* may seem disjointed to some readers, they actually reveal Austen’s already flourishing skill as a novelist.

Works Cited

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