1-1-1995

Vindicating Northanger Abbey: Wollstonecraft, Austen, and Gothic Feminism

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The world is the book of women. -Jean-Jacques Rousseau

This desire of being always women, is the very consciousness that degrades the sex. -Mary Wollstonecraft

*Dracula* has long been recognized as the epitome of the nineteenth-century male gothic genre. Its climax—the apocalyptic battle of good against evil—is reached when the male warriors are led into the struggle by the intuitions and sensitivities of the infected and clairvoyant Madame Mina. When Van Helsing and Mina are on the outskirts of Dracula's castle and evening falls, Van Helsing draws a circle around Mina and places her in front of a fire and away from the three seductive female vampires who are luring her to join them. At that point we know ourselves to be witnessing a scene that redounds with archetypal significance. Mina is being protected here not simply from women who represent flamboyantly fatal femininity, but from vampires who themselves embody the most repellent male fantasy about women—that they are diseased and that that disease exudes sexuality, lust, and a form of cannibalism. It is crucial that Mina be kept from contact with such polluters, for Mina embodies within *Dracula* the idealized feminine construct as represented by the male gothic tradition. We are told over and over again that Mina is a perfect
specimen of womanhood because she possesses, alone of all her sex, "a man's brain and a woman's heart."

When we are told that the highest praise that can be meted out to a woman in the gothic universe is that she should think like a man and emote like a woman, then we know that we are once again within the parameters of the most prevalent ideology circulating in England during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, the androgynous compulsion. But androgyny as presented by a male gothic author is significantly different when depicted by a female gothic writer. When women present the most praiseworthy heroine they can imagine, such a woman looks very different from Mina Harker. The gendered constructions of femininity that we have from the major British female writers working in the same gothic tradition—at least from Wollstonecraft to the Brontës—look substantially more victimized, less sexually interested or aware, and more self-consciously manipulative of men and the society in which they are battling for their very existences. And yet there is an uncanny similarity between the women in the female gothic canon and Stoker's Mina, and that similarity seems to reside in the need to be or at least to pretend to be a "manly woman." To "think like a man" was an ideal that Wollstonecraft not only embraced as her own, she invented it. Her novelistic heroines and the pathetic women she depicts in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) are all struggling to escape the same dilemma—consciousness of their femininity coded and internalized as difference and weakness.

To tell a woman that she thinks like a man is the highest praise that can be given to a woman in a patriarchal society. But where and when exactly did such an attitude originate among women? It is my contention that the valorization of the masculine woman first assumed widespread circulation in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft. To read Wollstonecraft's two quasi sentimental novels—*Mary, A Fiction* (1788) and *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (published in 1798)—is to realize that the female gothic ideology originated in the hyperbolic gestures and the frenzied poses of victimage that tip these novels over the edge from sentimentality into gothicism. In writing these two novels—the latter unfinished and stalled, as if the author was paralyzed and compelled to imagine only various scenarios of disaster for her heroine—Wollstonecraft exposed the tyranny of sentimental literary
formulae for women. She revealed that for women of all classes, life really was the way it was depicted in sentimental and melodramatic fiction—a series of insults, humiliations, deprivations, and fatal or near-fatal disasters. The female gothic novelistic tradition is generally considered to have originated in the gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, four major novels (1790-98) that provided the subject matter, techniques, and literary conventions of popular melodrama, first on the stage in England, then in France, and later in the Hollywood films that have continued to promulgate what I would call the ideology of "gothic feminism," or the notion that women earn their superior rights over the corrupt patriarchy through their special status as innocent victims.¹

Gothic feminism is not about being equal to men; it's about being morally superior to men. It's about being a victim. My contention is that a dangerous species of thought for women developed at this time and in concert with the sentimentality of Richardson and the hyperbolic gothic and melodramatic stage productions of the era. This ideology taught its audience the lessons of victimage well. According to this powerful and socially coded formula, victims earn their special status and rights through no act of their own but through their sufferings and persecutions at the hands of a patriarchal oppressor and tyrant. One would be rewarded not for anything one actively did but for what one passively suffered. Women developed in this formula a type of behavior that we would recognize as passive-aggression, they appear to be almost willing victims, not because they were masochists but because they expected a substantial reward on their investment in suffering. Whereas Richardson's Clarissa found herself earning a crown in heaven for suffering the advances of Lovelace, the women in female gothic texts are interested in more earthly rewards. The lesson that gothic feminism teaches is that the meek shall inherit the gothic earth; the female gothic heroine always triumphs in the end because melodramas are constructed that way. Justice always intervenes and justice always rectifies validates, and rewards suffering. Terrible events can occur, but the day of reckoning invariably arrives for gothic villains. The message that this ideology peddled actually fostered a form of passivity in women, a psychic fatalism recently labeled "victim feminism" by Naomi Wolf.² But whereas Wolf thinks this sort of behavior is of recent origin, we know, however, that it originated in Wollstonecraft, a writer whose bifurcated
vision spawned a contradictory "feminist" heritage that women are still struggling to understand.

But how did a variety of eighteenth-century discourse systems converge to construct the ideology of gothic feminism? It would appear that the sentimental novel tradition, the hyperbolic and melodramatic gothic, and the educational treatises by "Sophia" and other eighteenth-century women all combined to produce an ambience rife with anxiety about gender, gender roles, and appropriate gender markings. Codifying what it meant to be "feminine" and "masculine" in this newly rigid bourgeois civilization consumed vast amounts of many people's energies. And central to the dispute about how the "feminine" woman could protect herself were the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, agent provocateur of the notion that women are the innocent victims of a patriarchal system designed to oppress and disfigure their talents and desires. If the patriarchy did not exist, Wollstonecraft would have had to invent it to make her case for women. But fortunately for her, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was writing books that intrigued and infuriated her in almost equal measures. The major problematics and issues in the construction of what we recognize as "femininity" and "feminism" can be found in the strange shadow-boxing Wollstonecraft engaged in with her strawman Rousseau in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. If we have revised history to codify the Vindication as the first "feminist" manifesto, Wollstonecraft herself saw the work in a rather different light. She was writing in the context of both the sentimental novel and the hyperbolic sentimental-the gothic novel and melodrama. Indeed, her own two attempts at novel writing show her constructing the sentimental heroine as the blameless victim of a male-created system of oppression. What we recognize as "feminist" rage at systemic injustice in Wollstonecraft's oeuvre can be understood only if it is set in its full gothic and melodramatic contexts. If gothic husbands can chain their wives to stone walls in caves, then what sort of action is required by women to protect and defend themselves against such evil tyranny? Batting one's eyes and demure, docile behavior is hardly adequate protection against the lustful, ravening patriarch. "Gothic feminism" was born when women realized that they had a formidable external enemy in addition to their own worst internal enemy, their consciousness of difference perceived as weakness.
In 1798 Jane Austen sat down to write the novel that was published posthumously as *Northanger Abbey*. More topical than any of her other works, *Northanger Abbey* reads as a critique of both the gothic and the sentimental sensibilities that were being foisted on women readers at the time. If Catherine Morland, coded as "gothic," is victimized and rather foolish, then so is Isabella Thorpe, coded as "sentimental." In many ways, *Northanger Abbey* fictionalizes the major points in Wollstonecraft's treatise, showing that women who are given inadequate educations will be victims of their own folly as well as of masculine hubris, lust and greed. Taught from birth to fetishize their physical appearance as their only means of survival, women can only become as foolish as Mrs. Allen or as cunning as Isabella. Like lapdogs coddled and petted, such women are physically weak and mentally vacuous, living only for the attentions occasionally doled out to them by their masters. Into such a world of slaves steps the gothic tyrant, the ultimate male master with a whip. But in true Hegelian fashion, the master is as obsessed with the slave as the slave is with the master. If the slave were to write a novel, it would be about the master, and thus we have the Radcliffe oeuvre. If masters were to write novels they would be about slaves, and thus we have the Rousseau and Richardson corpus. In *Northanger Abbey* Austen attempts to rise above both postures and see both master and slave simultaneously. Her Catherine Morland is as sympathetic (or unsympathetic) as Henry Tilney. But Mrs. Tilney is dead and the patriarchal General, her tyrannical husband, is very much still alive, still haunting the dreams of young women who would like very much to live in the sentimental landscapes of their own literary musings. Wollstonecraft hovers over *Northanger Abbey* as blatantly as do Radcliffe, Burney, and Rousseau. In writing this most literarily dense work, Austen sought to reshape and redefine the central historical, social, and intellectual debates of her era. She sought finally to suggest that playing at and profiting from the role of innocent victim was as close as many women would ever get to being "feminists" in a society that polarized the genders as thoroughly as hers did.

By 1803, the year Jane Austen sold the manuscript of *Northanger Abbey*, the gothic heroine was a highly codified ideological figure, complete with stock physical traits, predictable parentage, and reliable class indicators. Clearly, this heroine was ripe as a subject for parody, and such, presumably, was Austen's motive when she created
her gothic heroine-in-training, Catherine Morland. Trying to determine exactly what *Northanger Abbey* is or is not as a work of fiction and who Catherine Morland is or is not as a heroine has occupied Austen critics since the book was published in 1817. But there is no clear consensus on the novel, on Catherine, or on Austen's motives in writing a novel so seemingly dissimilar from her first two works, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*.  

We can, I think, safely postulate that Austen was dealing in all her novels with structured moral dichotomies, and that on some level the dichotomy permeating this particular world would appear to be place, or the notion of place as made manifest in moral and gendered values and as embodied in the supposed split between Bath and the Abbey. But there is no real juxtaposition here. The "feminine" world of Bath—social artifice, hypocrisy, surface show contradicting reality, a species of "imprisonment" (*NA*, 22)—does not actually contrast with the "masculine" world of Northanger Abbey—psychic artifice, self-haunting and haunted, the lies that conceal the mercenary motives for marriage in a vacuous society. Both worlds are equally unreal, rejected by and rejecting of the heroine. Both worlds are essentially the same, Bath being only what we might recognize as the tamer, "cooked" daytime version of the "raw" Northanger, while the Abbey at night, as constructed by Catherine's gothic imaginings, is the nightmare version of Bath. The parody or lack of parody in Austen's work stems from the ambiguity or confusion about this notion of gendered place: either the entire external network that we know as society for women is a gothic monstrosity—or there is no gothic realm at all—only faulty education and the over active imaginations of female gothic novelists feeding false fantasies to adolescent females. We are in the realm here of Berkeley, Locke, and other empiricist philosophers who would tell their readers that all ontological reality is ultimately a mental construct and subject to one's own psychic control and manipulation. If we conceive of Catherine Morland as a proverbial tabula rasa, then we can begin to appreciate what Austen was trying to accomplish with this most misunderstood of her novels.

Individual women in Austen's novels are the raw material on which Wollstonecraft's theories about female education and socialization can be tested and proved. *Northanger Abbey*, as I have already noted, reads as a sort of fictionalized *Vindication*, personifying
in its various female characters the lived results of stunted and pernicious educations. To be schooled in the arts of femininity as effectively as Isabella Thorpe has been is to be fitted for nothing but deception, cunning, and misery. All of the female characters in the novel are pawns, powerless, or fearful of male prerogatives. All, that is, except Catherine. She is the heroine of the novel because she is too dense to understand clearly at any time what is going on around her. She bungles her way to a good marriage, not through any merit of her own, but through the author's conscious manipulations of our (and Henry's) sympathies. When Catherine is victimized by General Tilney and shown the door in very uncivil terms, she earns her special melodramatic status as a "victim" of oppression, malice, and fraud. And once she has earned such status, the heroine is worthy of her man. According to Wollstonecraft's formula, a victim is always rewarded because such is the case in the melodramatic scheme of things. Her suffering is reified as value and stands as lucre to be exchanged for a husband.

But all this is to get ahead of ourselves. Let's begin at the beginning and examine exactly how Austen constructed and at the same time deconstructed gothic feminism. We could begin by examining Catherine's surname, suggesting that like all gothic heroines she exists to accrue "more land." Her social and financial status are the crucial issues throughout the text, as, indeed, they are throughout all sentimental and gothic texts. But Austen passes lightly over this point and begins her novel with the more self-consciously literary statement: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine" (NA, 13). If we read this sentence and conclude only that Catherine does not fulfill the physical characteristics of a heroine, as she clearly does not, we miss the larger allegorical implication that Austen intends here. All women, she hints, are born the heroines of their own rather inconspicuous lives, whether they look the part or not. All women, whether they live in the south of Italy or France or the middle of England, have the desire for exciting, fulfilling, meaningful lives, and all are engaged in quests for such lives whether the conditions are propitious or not. Catherine is Austen's Everywoman heroine—plain, ordinary, insufficiently educated, nothing special—but she still manages to become a heroine by following her instincts, waiting passively, and suffering injustices from the hands of a misguided patriarch.
In addition to her physical plainness—her "thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features" (NA, 13)—Catherine has quite ordinary and shockingly healthy parents. Her father, a clergyman named Richard, has no taste whatever for "locking up his daughters" (NA, 13), and the mother manages to produce ten children and remain in the best of health. No hidden vaults here, no foundlings in the neighborhood, but never fear, in short, "[S]omething must and will happen to throw a hero in her way" (NA, 17). The implication is clear: a heroine needs finally one item to be a heroine, a hero. Appearance, parentage, social trappings and complications, all of these are mere excess baggage. A woman needs a man to test her spirit and define her character, and Catherine is introduced to two: the false suitor John Thorpe and the true suitor Henry Tilney. The double plot, so typical of allegorical poems such as The Faerie Queene and Austen's more immediate satiric target, Charlotte Smith's Emmeline, The Orphan of the Castle (1788), reminds us once again that Austen is manipulating the fairy-tale conventions of the double-suitor plot to suggest the entire artifice of the mating customs that prevail in her supposedly enlightened society. Substitute parents are quickly provided for in the guise of Mr. and Mrs. Allen, who actually take on the qualities of fairy godfather and godmother in that their supposed dowry for Catherine's propels all of the subsequent plot complications. In innocently presenting herself as the ward or heir of the Allens, Catherine participates rather unwittingly in the Bath game of social deception. Her first catch is John Thorpe, but ironically Thorpe snares bigger prey for her by spreading the unfounded rumor of Catherine's wealth to General Tilney, who bites. There is, Austen suggests, no fool like an old fool.

So Catherine sets off for "all the difficulties and dangers of a six weeks' residence in Bath," "her mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is" (NA, 18). We chuckle at the uneventful ness of Catherine's separation from her mother. With so many children at home she is, one can only surmise, grateful to have one taken off her hands. But the contrast to the gothic world is made explicit when Mrs. Morland cautions Catherine about the dangers she may face in the outside world. Does she warn her daughter against lithe violence of such noblemen and baronets as delight in forcing young ladies away to some remote farmhouse'? No, her concerns are more practical: "I beg, Catherine, you will always
wrap yourself up very warm about the throat, when you come from
the rooms at night; and I wish you would try to keep some account of
the money you spend; I will give you this little book on purpose" (NA,
18-19). This is the first time we have seen a gothic heroine handle the
books, so to speak. In all of Radcliffe's novels the heroine never
handles her own money. In fact, money appears in Radcliffe's works
only as a landed estate or an inheritance, not as something that can
be freely spent and accounted for by the heroine. The change is
significant, for with Catherine, whose pseudo inheritance is so central
to the plot, we have the figure of a woman who represents empty cash
value and yet who spends her own money. The opposite had been true
with Radcliffe's heroines. The change represents a subtle shift in how
the middle class represented and thought about itself. Once merely
potentiality, they have become embodied. They can spend, whereas
before they merely embodied the potential to spend.

But if Catherine is not the typical gothic heroine, neither is Mrs.
Allen the typical gothic duenna figure. Austen alludes to the older
woman who conspires against the innocent young heroine and
contrasts this figure to the slow-witted Mrs. Allen. The narrator asks us
to wonder whether this woman will "by her imprudence, vulgarity, or
jealousy—whether by intercepting her letters, ruining her character, or
turning her out of doors"—victimize the gothic heroine (NA, 20). In fact,
it is not fashion-crazed Mrs. Allen who will commit any of these
untoward deeds to poor Catherine; she will be too busy trying on
dresses to pay much attention at all to her young ward. But these
outrages will occur and they will be committed by Catherine's "dear
friends," the Thorpes and General Tilney. This instance of foreshowing,
used throughout the text, suggests the ironic distance and narrative
control Austen employs over both her authorial sympathies and her
readers'. By laughing at the stock gothic tortures that assail the typical
gothic heroine before they occur, Austen preemptively defuses their
power when they actually do happen in the text.

No, the greatest tragedy to confront our heroine Catherine is
not to be asked to dance her first night out in Bath. Totally ignored,
Catherine spends her first night as an empty signifier: "Not one,
however, started with rapturous wonder on beholding her, no whisper
of eager inquiry ran round the room, nor was she once called a divinity
by anybody" (NA, 23). The gothic novel, in elevating to a ridiculous

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level a young woman's sense of herself as the object of the obsessive male gaze, can only fail to set up a disappointment for Everywoman. Not to be noticed and praised by a room full of strange men is for Catherine almost as ignominious a fate as an attempted kidnapping and rape in the gothic arsenal of shock and abuse techniques. In fact, later in the week, when the same sad situation occurs again and Catherine finds herself without a dancing partner, she muses that her lot is identical to the fate of an abused and harassed gothic heroine: "To be disgraced in the eye of the world, to wear the appearance of infamy while her heart is all purity, her actions all innocence, and the misconduct of another the true source of her debasement, is one of those circumstances which peculiarly belong to the heroine's life, and her fortitude under it particularly dignifies her character" (NA, 53). A more succinct and self-conscious description of the female gothic heroine could hardly be found. One just laughs at the "disgrace" and feels that Austen has trivialized not simply Catherine, but Adeline and Ellena and Emily and all the other gothic heroines whose "disgraces" perhaps were not so immense after all.

It is not long, however, before our hero is introduced and the real education of Catherine begins. The first conversation between the two lovers is instructive, for it reveals the artificial play-acting that passes for polite discourse between the sexes. Although Henry Tilney is aware that they are acting, Catherine is not, and the ' humor in the situation arises from her complete naivété about social conventions. When Henry presses her on the contents of her journal, she is flustered because she does not keep a journal. A journal, after all, would suggest a level of self-consciousness that Catherine at this stage of her life simply does not possess. But it is significant that for the first time in the novel the act of writing appears as a metaphor for defining and inscribing one's femininity. Indeed, Henry goes so far as to state: "My dear madam, I am not so ignorant of young ladies' ways as you wish to believe me; it is this delightful habit of journalizing which largely contributes to form the easy style of writing for which ladies are so generally celebrated. Everybody allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female" (NA, 27). If keeping a journal is supposed to hone a woman's skill for letter writing, then some sort of not very veiled panegyric on the epistolary sentimental novel tradition appears to be the real subject here. But consider that it was not women who wrote the letters that formed Clarissa and
Pamela, but a man ventriloquizing a woman's sensibility and subjectivity. Henry seems to suggest that both sexes have come to a new level of understanding and rapprochement through the acts of writing and reading each others' works. If Richardson can depict a woman's situation as sensitively as he does in Clarissa, then a female author should be able to understand a man's mind as thoroughly and present that vision to the world through her writing. Needless to say, all this passes right by our Catherine.

Henry, in fact, acts out this female ventriloquizing when he next engages in a conversation with Mrs. Allen about the price of muslin. If she can haggle over muslin by the yard, so can he. Henry wins Mrs. Allen's total devotion by confessing that he managed to buy "a true Indian muslin" for just five shillings a yard. He impresses her even further by worrying aloud about how Catherine's muslin will hold up to washing. By this time, even Catherine begins to suspect that the two of them have been the objects of his ever-so-solicitous mockery: "Catherine feared, as she listened to their discourse, that he indulged himself a little too much with the foibles of others" (NA, 29). But Austen is making a point here about education and about who is best qualified to instruct young women in the arts of "femininity." That is, Henry implies to Mrs. Allen that she has failed miserably in her duties to Catherine and that he, a mere man, is forced to step in and complete her educational process. As a credential he brandishes his superior skills in bargaining for fabric. But the more serious intent is to suggest that women's education is too serious a subject to be left to female amateurs. Only men have the sufficient backgrounds and knowledge to educate women, and until they do so women will suffer in their ignorance.

Henry also parodies in these two exchanges the "man of feeling," the effeminate man who is acceptable to women because he has been effectively castrated by the social conventions of sensibility and civility. Catherine finds him "strange" (NA, 28), suggesting that his female ventriloquism is not to her more primitive tastes. She is going to insist on playing the gothic game, and as such she needs a strong abusive father figure before she can appreciate and accept the castrated son figure. Enter Henry's father General Tilney, benighted enough to put credence in the rumors spread by the oafish John Thorpe. The General's villainy, as several critics have noted, is not
particularly on the grand gothic scale, but merely a matter of simple mercenary greed and insensitivity to Catherine once he learns that she is not the heiress he had assumed she was. Although compared several times to Radcliffe's "Montoni," the General is only a common garden-variety father: boorish, self-important, overbearing.

But the issue that has gone largely unnoticed in this confusion about Catherine's supposed inheritance is the importance that the role of rumor and gossip play in shaping people's perception. Both forms of unofficial and unsanctioned "feminine" discourse constitute the crux of a suppressed female oral tradition that preserves the stories that male tyrants want long forgotten. Largely employed by female servants, the rumors and gossip that circulate about the Marquis de Villeroi's role in the murder of his wife (in *Mysteries of Udolpbo*) and Schedoni's murder of his brother (in *The Italian*) take the entire text to be spelled out. But the power of accumulated rumor finally forces the truth out into the open, thereby saving the heroines from the mystifications that happen when one is dealing only with false surmises and conjectures based on partial narratives. Power structures exist by mystifying their own edifices and methods. Rumor and gossip force those methods out into the light of day for examination. It is no coincidence that gossip as a negative term is generally associated with women, servants, and other marginalized and easily scapegoated groups. They have, after all, nothing to lose and everything to gain by circulating stories about tyrants and the abuse of power.

So what does it mean that John Thorpe is the source for the majority of gossip and rumor throughout this text? Does dealing in rumor and gossip "feminize" him, In fact, quite the contrary. The anthropological studies we have on gossip show that the right to gossip is generally viewed as the province of those who have earned their membership in the inner circle of the tribe or clan. Gossip is condemned only when it is engaged in by those who do not have full membership status in this inner circle. (Thus, at that point, women and servants are condemned for dealing in gossip, because they are not recognized as full members of the power community.) But research consistently demonstrates that the more powerful a man is, the more he deals in gossip as a source for information about the community—all of its dealings and events.\(^5\) It makes perfect sense that John Thorpe and General Tilney would be gossiping about Catherine

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Morland, a new source of income on the market. Discussing her supposed financial status would be little different in their minds from discussing the value of stocks and bonds and any other projected or potential investment. The fact that neither had the slightest idea of her real worth forms the core of the humorous irony. When John Thorpe thinks he has a chance to acquire Catherine, then she is immensely rich and desirable. When he learns that she has decisively rejected him, then he constructs her as a pauper. Neither version is an accurate depiction of her financial standing. And yet both versions of Catherine reveal the woman as blank slate. For the Thorpes and Generals of this world, woman is only what the more powerful man says she is; she has no ontological reality in herself, only as much or as little as he assigns to her.

The stage is further set for the pedagogical project when Catherine meets her false female mentor, Isabella Thorpe, John's hopelessly mercenary and manipulative sister. Isabella shrewdly decides that novel reading will be the basis of their alliance, and once again the subject of writing emerges in the text as an indicator of gender acculturation. The discussion about novels, particularly women's novels, reveals a defensiveness that is both amusing and painful to read. Catherine loves to read novels because, as the narrator shrewdly observes, she is in a novel herself: "Alas! If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard?" (NA, 37). The narrator's very self-conscious fictitiousness here is strikingly original as is the narrator's dismay that women are embarrassed to be seen reading the novels of, say, Fanny Burney when they would be praised instead for reading some dull volume of the Spectator. But why does Isabella want Catherine to read gothic novels with her? The answer would appear to lie in Isabella's desire to find someone who will share her novelistically induced fantasies about life. In Isabella's mind she is a heroine in a sentimental novel, penniless but deserving, the object of love and adoration from countless men who will be only too willing to lavish riches for the privilege of purchasing her. Unfortunately, she has read too many novels and imbibed from them the false belief that women can manipulate and control men in life as easily as they do in sentimental novels.
Isabella as false confidante is doubled by Henry's sister Eleanor, the true confidante who is shown at the end of the novel to have more power over her father than anyone. Eleanor's power stems from her rather sudden marriage to a titled aristocrat, which gives her leverage over the General. But throughout the text Eleanor acts as a foil to the showy, empty Isabella, who is supposedly engaged twice and comes up with nothing. The subplot we would rather see would concern the courtship of Eleanor and Lord Longtown, the adventures of the Lord's maid and her laundry list, and the identity of "Alice." When Eleanor asks Catherine to write to her at Lord Longtown's residence "under cover to Alice" (NA, 228), we sense that the more interesting gothic plot was occurring elsewhere all the time.

When Catherine picks up The Mysteries of Udolpho, she knows that she is reading a book that, as she admits, she could spend her whole life reading with pleasure. The conspiracies that Catherine is compelled to spin out about the General murdering his wife, or perhaps just burying her alive in a deserted wing of the Abbey—these imaginings are more obviously cribbed from The Sicilian Romance. Later John Thorpe names The Monk as his favorite novel, perhaps unaware that its tale of matricide and incestuous rape of a sister reveals more than he might like about his own interests. We know the moral fiber of these characters by knowing the moral visions of the novels they prefer. This is a world of mirrors where blatantly self-consciously fictional characters define themselves by their allegiance to other blatantly self-conscious fictional creations. In a hall of mirrors there is no reality, only constructions and constructions of constructions. One senses that Catherine's challenge as a literary character is to emerge from the gothic universe of Radcliffe and situate herself instead as a character in a Burney novel. It is a particularly propitious sign that John Thorpe does not like Burney's work, "such unnatural stuff" (NA, 49), suggesting that if he does not understand it it must be profound.

With the major characters and conflict established, let us examine the three major gothic incidents in the text as keys to understanding Austen's manipulation of the conventions of gothic feminism. The first episode concerns the General's character and the Abbey as a ruin, the second Catherine's discovery of ordinary domesticities in the dead mother's cabinets and bedroom, and the final...
incident involves Catherine's expulsion and flight from the Abbey. These are familiar scenes and have been discussed at length before, but I intend to argue that Austen was hopelessly ambivalent about her attitude toward what I would label "gothic feminism" and that this ambivalence causes the alternate hyperbole and deflation in these episodes. Almost like melodramatic setpieces in a period drama, Austen inserts the gothic incidents as virtual *tableaux-vivants*, designed on the surface to garner our amusement and cause us to chuckle. But tenet effect of mingling the gothic with the domestic and sentimental romance produces instead a strange hybrid—the awareness that the domestic is gothic or that we cannot think any more about the domestic without at the same time recognizing its gothic underpinnings, its propensities for violence, abuse, and exploitation of women.

The first time Catherine sees the General she is struck by his physical attractiveness. Later when she visits the Tilney residence she finds the General infinitely more attractive than Henry. In fact, she muses to herself that the General was "perfectly agreeable and good-natured, and altogether a very charming man, ... for he was tall and handsome, and Henry's father" (*NA*, 129). That last phrase, tacked on as if as a reminder to herself, suggests that Catherine’s initial attraction is less to the son than to the father. All this changes, however, almost as soon as she sets off for Northanger Abbey. Catherine is convinced that it is the General who changes once he is within his own domicile. But clearly his character—imperious, demanding, manipulative, and dominating—is simply revealed more starkly. Suddenly Catherine sees that the General "seemed always a check upon his children’s spirits, and scarcely anything was said but by himself" (*NA*, 156). He is a veritable master of the dining room, pacing up and down with a watch in his hand, pulling the dinner bell "with violence," and ordering everyone to the table immediately (*NA*, 165). Only in his presence does Catherine feel fatigue. The strain from answering his boorishly probing questions about the size of Mr. Allen's estate has begun to wear on our poor heroine.

The General, living in his Abbey, is a patriarch and usurper, similar to the patriarch and usurper inhabiting Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*. Northanger Abbey, we are told, was "a richly endowed convent at the time of the Reformation" (*NA*, 142), but it fell, as did all
property belonging to the Roman Catholic church, like spoils into the hands of Protestant warlords. General Tilney, whose military mien is no accident, continues the war on convents, so to speak, by preying on the prospects both of his daughter and the supposed inheritance of Catherine. The female gothic, suggests Austen, concerns itself with just this sort of tale of female disinheritance and suppression.

Catherine thinks that in living in an abbey she will wander around "long, damp passages," explore "its narrow cells and ruined chapel," and thrill to "some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun" (NA, 141). It is the buried nun, the rightful owner of the usurped Abbey, who haunts the female gothic. But within the domesticated landscape that Austen and her heroine inhabit, the nun becomes first the murdered wife and then the murdered wife becomes simply an ordinary woman beaten down and defeated by the demands of life with three children and an ill-tempered husband. The idea of the Abbey as a female community of nuns, living in seclusion from men and escaping the demands of marriage and childbirth—this is what the General and his ancestors have usurped. There is no longer in England any form of communal escape for women. There is only the reality of women as property, sources of income, breeders of heirs—the sad and oft told tale of female disinheritance, "buried nuns."

And yet Northanger Abbey has managed to elide its gothic past almost totally. The General, we learn, is an energetic remodeler, even transforming the ruined section of the Abbey into a suite of offices for himself. Instead of dark and dank, Catherine finds light and airy. Instead of old and moldering, she finds new and absolutely up-to-date furnishings. She does succeed, however, in locating two old chests, and we know ourselves suddenly to be in The Romance of the Forest. One chest in that text contained the father's skeleton and the other the manuscript he left behind recounting his final hours awaiting murder. Catherine has been primed by Henry to play the gothic game with the chests, and she is only too willing. Both, however, disappoint. The first contains only linen and the second the famous laundry list left by Lord Longstown's maid. Hoping to have found a broken lute, perhaps a dagger (preferably blood stained), instruments of torture, a hoard of diamonds, or the "memoirs of the wretched Matilda" (NA, 158-60), the domesticities can only be a bitter disappointment to the overly imaginative Catherine: "She felt humbled to the dust. Could not
the adventure of the chest have taught her wisdom? A corner of it, catching her eye as she lay, seemed to rise up in judgment against her. Nothing could now be clearer than the absurdity of her recent fancies. To suppose that a manuscript of many generations back could have remained undiscovered in a room such as that, so modern, so habitable!—or that she should be the first to possess the skill of unlocking a cabinet, the key of which was open to all!" (NA, 173). The self-chastisement that occurs here is predicated on the belief that other women have gone before Catherine and that they have had the same compulsions to ferret out the truth that lies buried within the patriarchal family. The large and imposing cabinet with the visible key tropes the family’s apparent transparent status as an institution that is open to complete scrutiny and understanding by all. A deeper examination of this episode suggests that in fact women have not explored or analyzed the structure of the family. They have accepted its bulk and its power to contain and define them. They have, in very real senses, allowed themselves to be buried alive within all of the separate cabinets that dot the landscape of England. The linen and the laundry list are the visible residue of women’s lost and unpaid labor for the family. The domesticities, rather than reassuring Catherine, should have horrified her.

We are next presented with Catherine's growing obsession with the dead Mrs. Tilney. She is figured first through her daughter's memories of her mother's favorite walk, a path that the General studiously avoids. Next we learn that the General is so insensitive as not to want to hang his dead wife's portrait in a prominent place in the Abbey. From these two facts Catherine spins out her murder plot and finally admits to herself that she truly hates the General: "His cruelty to such a charming woman made him odious to her. She had often read of such characters" (NA, 181). But why such an investment of emotion in the General? Why does he elicit such strong feelings in Catherine? Protesting too much, we already are aware of her attraction to him, an attraction that she could only repress and deny by inventing such a horrible crime that he would have to be truly unworthy of her regard and admiration. Yes, the General must have killed his wife; therefore, I cannot be attracted more to him than to his son.

Further playing the oedipal detective, Catherine decides to snoop next into the circumstances of Mrs. Tilney's death, learning that...
it was caused by a fever that came on suddenly when her daughter was not at home. Catherine leaps to the conclusion that Mrs. Tilney, like the Marchioness de Villeroi in *Udolpho*, has been poisoned by her husband and that the General has been suffering from guilt ever since. No wonder he stays up late at night: "There must be some deeper cause: something was to be done which could be done only while the household slept; and the probability that Mrs. Tilney yet lived, shut up for causes unknown, and receiving from the pitiless hands of her husband a nightly supply of coarse food, was the conclusion which necessarily followed....all favoured the supposition of her imprisonment. Its origin-jealousy perhaps, or wanton cruelty—was yet to be unravelled" (*NA*, 187-88). Can the search for a gothic stone cave be far behind? The psychic transition here from imagining murder to revising it to imprisonment simply—all this suggests childhood and adolescent anxieties about adult sexuality. The fixation on "something" that is "done which could be done only while the household slept"—all this is too familiar. We're dealing here with a child's imaginings about what her parents do at night when they are no longer under her watchful gaze. The notion that the mother is secretly imprisoned, "shut up for causes unknown," and fed only at night by the father—this is a crude version of a child's sense of sex as a violation and a physical assault. We need not ponder too long to realize that Catherine fears marriage as much as she claims to desire it.

Now, Catherine has no knowledge of life except as it has been presented to her in novels, mostly female gothic novels. She chooses to read the General as a character in a novel, mixing Montoni and Mazzini with a dash of Montalt and Schedoni. Yes, she muses, she knows his type all too well. She has, after all, read dozens of novels: "She could remember dozens who had persevered in every possible vice, going on from crime to crime, murdering whomsoever they chose, without any feeling of humanity or remorse; till a violent death or a religious retirement closed their black career" (*NA*, 190). But whether the General literally murdered his wife or merely made her life so miserable that she found her own way to the grave is irrelevant. The result in either case is the same: the mother is dead and the General is alive.

Let the scene shift to Catherine’s greatest gothic adventure: the perilous journey down galleries and deserted wings of the abbey to the
dead mother's bedroom. The room itself is bright and ordinary and empty; there is absolutely no mystery or intrigue or wax figure or prisoner at all. Death is as real as the female gothic tries to make it unreal. The empty room stands as a simple reminder that in real life death cannot be wished away, cannot be denied, cannot be covered over with fantasies of a mother who comes back as if from the dead. The female gothic novel, in dealing with the territory of wish-fulfillment, attempted to convince its readers that evil and mortality can be denied by the resourceful female gothic heroine. Catherine receives here instead the slap of life across her face. And Henry's rebuke does not make the realization any easier to accept: "Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetuated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? (NA, 197-98). This statement, generally considered to be the high point of anti-gothic sensibility in the text, has been analyzed exhaustively by a number of critics, most of whom read it straight. But it is a highly coded ideological statement that positions masculine-controlled “newspapers” as discourse systems superior to female gothic novels as sources for the truth. It suggests that in the perfect state that is England, literacy and “education” have eradicated evil, and yet there is no universal educational system for women or the lower classes. It smugly asserts that “neighbourhood spies” will report all wrongdoing, as if such a system of veritable espionage were a selling point for the area. And what about our “laws”? Surely they do not protect the lives or estates of married women and children. In short, Henry seeks to persuade Catherine that she has all the advantages that he, as an upper-class, educated, and employed male, possesses. The logic here seems to run something like this: As a male I consider the visions proffered by female gothic novels to be foolish and untenable, and if you were as wise as I am you would agree with me. In valorizing Henry’s smug enlightenment attitude, it would appear that Austen shares or at least would like to share Henry’s outlook and privileges; it would appear that Austen wants to be one of the boys.
The novel’s final gothic episode is almost anticlimactic. Catherine is expelled from the abbey at 7:00 in the morning with no escort and even less money. This incident is frightening and embarrassing for Catherine, largely because it is so inexplicable. Catherine has been unable to understand the General’s motivations throughout the novel, and this final episode merely reverses the General’s blunt and self-seeking behavior. Whereas before he had been laboring under the mistaken notion that Catherine was a wealthy heiress, now he embraces the mistaken notion that she is a pauper. The General as evil gothic villain is just perpetually and perceptually confused and mistaken, and such, apparently, is the extent of evil in Austen’s novelistic universe. The rejection Catherine suffers, however, is smoothed over as effortlessly and hastily as an antigothic novelist can manage. Eleanor appears as *deus ex machina*, Henry proposes offstage, and the newlyweds begin their life together surrounded by “smiles.”

The gothic, it would appear, has finally been buried, and all is right with the world. But the gothic has functioned throughout this text as a continually disruptive and undercutting presence, and the conventions of romance cannot bury the atavistic presence of Radcliffe and her imitators. The dead mother, the stolen convent, the incestuous and adulterous impulses that seethe just beneath the surface of this highly polished veneer of a novel—all suggest that Austen was as attracted to the potential for evil in life as she was compelled to finally deny its power and allure. Voicing Henry’s enlightenment pieties gives her a feeling of safety and power, a sense that she is immune to the decay and death inherent in marriage and childbearing, that they are indelicacies that affect other women, not her heroines, not her. Austen’s Catherine will find out what is behind the black veil only on her wedding night, and by then the novel will be safely concluded. But gothic feminism, playing at and profiting from the role of innocent victim of the patriarchy, will continue and thrive as a potent female-created ideology. Enter Jane Eyre.
Notes

1. My use of the term "gothic melodrama" is indebted to the discussion in Peter Brooks, particularly his observation that melodrama, like the gothic, deals in "hyperbolic figures, lurid and grandiose events, masked relationships and disguised identities, abductions, slow-acting poisons, secret societies, mysterious parentage" (3). See Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976). The evolution of the ideology I have dubbed "gothic feminism" is developed more fully in my forthcoming book Gothic Feminism: The Melodrama of Gender and Ideology from Wollstonecraft to the Brontës."


5. The critical commentary on Northanger Abbey is, like much of the work on Austen as a whole, contradictory and highly speculative. Among the dozens of secondary studies, I have found the most suggestive work on Austen's treatment of the gothic to be found in the writings of Howells, Wilt, and Morrison. See Coral Ann Howells, Love, Mystery, and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction (London: Athlone, 1978); Judith Wilt, Ghosts of the Gothic: Austen, Eliot and Lawrence (Princeton, NJ Princeton

6. Some of the most influential anthropological studies done on gossip were conducted by Max Gluckman and Robert Paine, who concludes that "a man gossips to control others and accordingly fears gossip as it threatens to control him. Hence, a man tries to manage the information that exists about others and himself by gossiping about others (and drawing others into gossip-laden conversations), on the one hand, and by trying to limit gossip about himself." See Paine, "What is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis," *Man* 2 (1967): 283; and Max Gluckman, "Gossip and Scandal," *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963): 307-16. For a more literary treatment of much of the same material, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).