The Politics of Female Reading in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

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Abstract

The essay discusses *Northanger Abbey* (1817) by Jane Austen as a site for interrogating the gendered politics of reading in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Focusing on the figure of Catherine Morland, it argues that Austen's novel participates in contemporary debates about female literacy, novel consumption, and the cultural anxieties surrounding women's affective engagement with novels. Drawing on Janice Radway's concept of reading as affective negotiation within patriarchal structures, and informed by the cultural materialist framework of Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, the essay contends that *Northanger Abbey* portrays female reading as a conflicted practice, simultaneously enabling imaginative agency and reinforcing normative social roles. Rather than simply parodying Gothic conventions or defending the novel, Austen uses Catherine's reading habits to reflect on the ideological contradictions embedded in fictional representation. Catherine's transition from naïve Gothic reader to an increasingly self-aware subject dramatizes the disciplinary potential of reading. The novel stages this transformation not through a repudiation of fiction, but through a recontextualization of interpretive practice. In doing so, *Northanger Abbey* resists reductive binaries of education and escapism, suggesting instead that women's reading constitutes a dynamic cultural negotiation.

Keywords: Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, reading, cultural materialism, female reading

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The figure of the female reader has long occupied a significant position in literary and cultural discourse as a symbol of intellectual agency and a source of moral concern. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the rise of the novel and the expansion of women's literacy, anxieties about female reading intensified. Debates over what women read, how they read, and the effects of reading on them appeared in conduct books, periodicals, and educational treatises, forming part of an institutionalized form of the representation of reading that sought to define and delimit appropriate reading practices for women. These anxieties also surfaced within novels, where women's reading practices were portrayed as socially formative, emotionally charged, and ideologically loaded. Fictional representations of women readers from

this period often reflect broader concerns and debates, presenting reading as both a socially formative and potentially subversive act.

This essay argues that Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* engages with these cultural contradictions by using the figure of Catherine Morland to explore the emotional, ideological, and disciplinary dimensions of women's reading. Drawing on Janice Radway's model of reading as a form of affective negotiation with patriarchal norms, and the cultural materialist framework of Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, this essay contends that the novel presents reading as both an act of resistance and a mechanism of ideological containment. Through Catherine's development from a reader infatuated by Gothic fantasies to a socially embedded subject, it illustrates fiction's capacity to enable imaginative agency while reinforcing normative gender roles. In *Northanger Abbey*, reading is neither purely escapist nor wholly educative; it is a conflicted practice that allows fantasy but ultimately demands correction.

While the novel is frequently read as a parody of Gothic conventions or a defense of the novel because of the famous fifth chapter of *Northanger Abbey*, relatively little attention has been paid to its theorization of reading itself. Catherine's reading habits are central to the novel's narrative and thematic structure. Her identification with Gothic fiction, particularly *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, provides her affective escape and imaginative agency, echoing Radway's view that women read romance not only for pleasure but as a form of emotional replenishment (cf. Radway). Yet Austen also subjects this reading practice to critique. Catherine's Gothic-inspired misreadings result in embarrassment and social correction, exemplifying what Dollimore and Sinfield describe as literature's role in managing subversive energies through containment (cf. Dollimore and Sinfield). However, Austen's irony is double-edged. She both mocks Catherine's reading style and defends the novel form. In doing so, Austen reflects on the ideological contradictions of her time. Thus, this essay aims to explore how *Northanger Abbey* uses fictional reading to reflect on and participate in the cultural politics of female literacy and female reading practices.

Reading in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw significant shifts in women's reading practices, made possible by technological and institutional developments such as the rise of circulating libraries, cheaper printing, and a growing market for fiction. These developments gave women greater access to books, but they also sparked widespread cultural anxiety. Novels were alternately promoted as instruments of moral instruction and condemned as morally corrupting. Ana Vogrinčič, in her study of the eighteenth-century "novel-reading panic," characterizes this anxiety as an early form of moral panic, a term coined by Jock Young and Stanley Cohen to describe public reactions to perceived cultural threats (105). For Vogrinčič, the fear of novel-reading stemmed not only from the content of specific books but also from the "growth of reading public and accessibility of literature, . . . the changing role of women in general, . . . [and the] changed relations between private and public, and with the romantic reconceptualization of love and marriage" (117). The novel's ap-

parent encouragement of vertical social mobility further intensified these concerns (117). Critics worried that excessive novel-reading among women would encourage unrealistic expectations, idleness, emotional volatility, and even physical ailments, such as poor posture or weak eyesight due to long hours spent reading in solitude (109). These concerns manifested in multiple cultural forms, from sermons to conduct books, reviews and moral essays, all of which reinforced a consensus that reading novels was potentially dangerous. According to Fordyce in *Sermons to Young Women*, "There seems to me to be very few, in the style of Novel, that you can read with safety, and yet fewer that you can read with advantage" (113). Gisborne, in *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex,* claims that women should not hide their intellectual abilities, and he recommends reading as an ailment. However, he does not include novels in his recommendation as even "those which are deemed to have on the whole a moral tendency, a very few perhaps might be selected, which are not liable to the disgraceful charge of being occasionally contaminated by incidents and passages unfit to be presented to the reader" (Gisborne 227). Furthermore, he claims that the reading habits of women "produce mischievous effects" (228) such as the corruption of mind. Reviewers, often adopting combative or regulatory tones, sought to influence both literary production and reception. While they framed their guidance to readers in conciliatory terms, emphasizing democratic access to literature, they simultaneously distinguished between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" readers, shaping normative expectations of taste and propriety (Maciulewicz 9). This period also saw the rise of conduct books to resist the "mischievous effects of reading," thus creating books with an educational purpose. Stott notes that the guidance from conduct books exhibited a subtlety that critics have not fully acknowledged, which is that "[s]arcasm and the display of learning was criticized in men and women when it would humiliate those with a lesser understanding, and style of address was linked to social distance" (Stott 89). In his essay, Stott views Elizabeth Bennett as a character who rather than discarding "conventional ideas about female propriety and deference," actually interprets them within the framework established by the conduct books of Fordyce (88, 106). The features that Vogrinčič attributes to moral panic can all be seen in these examples from conduct books, namely, concern. hostility, consensus, disproportionality and volatility.

In *Eighteenth-Century Manners of Reading*, Eve Tavor Bannet claims that there is a gendered distinction in reading habits because reading was never a uniform activity but a set of socially differentiated practices that varied by class, gender, and purpose (117). Women's reading, in particular, was shaped by instructional literature that aimed to train not only literacy but taste and virtue. Reading itself was a complex activity, encompassing practices such as silent, individual reading; reading aloud within familial or social settings; and "discontinuous reading," where readers engaged with fragmentary texts or excerpts (cf. Bannet). Bannet highlights the diversity of methods used by readers, to suit distinct intellectual, economic, and pedagogical needs. The act of reading also holds significant social implications as it was also framed as a means to social mobility. Polite reading became a sign of gentility, aligning with the cultural aspirations of the middle class. Reading sentimental fiction became part of polite reading with exemplary authors such as "Richardson, Sarah Fielding (1710–68),

Henry Brooke, Frances Sheridan (1724–66), and Mackenzie" (Goring 146). However, as Bannet emphasizes this opportunity was fraught with contradictions. Practices like "discontinuous reading" were common among readers with limited time, attention or access to books, which could be both deliberate and circumstantial because readers might borrow odd volumes from circulating libraries, read only segments of novels aloud to friends, or engage with multiple texts simultaneously in fragmented doses (4). Bannet points out that this method was so common that printers and authors actively structured their texts to accommodate "the 'generality of readers' who were growing the market for print, had limited attention spans, little time for sustained reading, and no patience, desire or ability to follow long convoluted arguments" (4). However, discontinuous reading was often coded as lower-status or a feminized form of reading.

These intersecting anxieties about women's reading practices highlight how reading was more than a private intellectual activity: it was an ideologically charged, institutionalized form of representation. The gendered construction of reading shows the extent to which female literacy was shaped not only by access but also by prescriptive frameworks designed to create virtuous readers.

Cultural Materialism

Cultural materialism, grounded in British Marxist literary criticism developed by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield in the 1980s, emphasizes that literature must be understood as a historical product, one that reflects, produces, and negotiates the dominant ideologies of its time (cf. Dollimore and Sinflield). Rejecting the idea that literary texts are autonomous or politically neutral, cultural materialist criticism analyses texts in relation to the social institutions, class structures, and power dynamics from which they emerge (vii-viii). In their foreword to *Political Shakespeare*, Dollimore and Sinfield describe their approach as a "combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis," and state that cultural materialism treats literature as a cultural practice which studies the "implication of literary texts in history" (vii-viii). It begins from the premise that culture "does not (cannot) transcend the material forces and relations of production," and that literary meaning is contingent on the ideological field in which it is produced and received (viii). In other words, texts are shaped by dominant discourses, such as those governing gender, class, and morality, but they can also register, express or even momentarily subvert those discourses. One of the key contributions of this method is the concept of "containment," whereby texts may acknowledge social contradictions or subversive elements only to ultimately neutralize them (29). As they explain, by quoting Raymond Williams "the dominant culture . . . at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture," staging dissent only to manage it within acceptable boundaries (130).

Moreover, cultural materialism draws attention to not only what the novels say about reading, but also to the historical and institutional forces shaping how those representations would have been understood by contemporary readers. Writers

like Austen and Edgeworth were aware of the ambivalent status of novels and the ideological debates surrounding it. The advertisement of *Belinda*, for instance, refers to the book as a "Moral Tale" rather than a "novel,"

> The following work is offered to the public as a Moral Tale –the author not wishing to acknowledge a Novel. Were all novels like those of madame de Crousaz, Mrs. Inchbald, miss Burney, or Dr. Moore, she would adopt the name with delight: But so much folly, errour, and vice are disseminated in books classed under this denomination, that it is hoped the wish to assume another title will be attributed to feelings that are laudable, and not fastidious. (Edgeworth 4)

Still, seventeen years later Austen referred to *Belinda* as a novel, in the fifth chapter of *Northanger Abbey*, which is often referred to as the defence of the novel. Here she claims that novels such as "*Cecilia*, or *Camilla*, or *Belinda*" exhibit "the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (23). According to Bannet, eighteenth-century criticism's master-terms were,

> . . .value-laden and emotive. Terms marked positive and desirable, such as taste, nature, beauty, the "best" authors and "polite literature" persuaded learners and the public not only that the "standards of taste" that critics promoted were the "best," the most "refined," the most "natural' and "polite," but also that those who adopted them would be part of an elite and aristocratic club." (Bannet 165)

The superlatives of Austen's text emphasise what the novel does best: depicting human nature with all its intricacies and weaknesses. Furthermore, the language used by Austen matches Bannet's list. Thus the novel is best suited for describing how humans behave, not necessarily prescribing how they ought to (Colon). Nowhere in this list of the novel's merits does the narrator claim that novels are a fitting vehicle for moral instruction. Instead, this "defence of the novel" advocates against the consensus among authors who "scarcely ever permit[ing] them [novels] to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take[s] up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust" (*Northanger Abbey* 30). This point is also emphasised in the novel itself, as it is concerned with the protagonist reading and enjoying novels while being confronted by the prejudices surrounding novels.

Northanger Abbey also reflects on the state of the Gothic novel at the time. On the one hand, Catherine's Gothic-fuelled fantasies are mocked, as even before the reader learns that Catherine will fall victim to the type of reading she enjoys, they are faced with a parodic narrative from Henry Tilney. As they go to Northanger Abbey Henry teases Catherine with an exaggerated description of life at the abbey:

> After surmounting your unconquerable horror of the bed, you will retire to rest, and get a few hours' unquiet slumber. But on the second, or at farthest the third night after your arrival, you will probably have a violent storm. Peals of thunder so loud as to seem to shake the edifice to its foundation will roll

> round the neighbouring mountains— and during the frightful gusts of wind which accompany it, you will probably think you discern (for your lamp is not extinguished) one part of the hanging more violently agitated than the rest. (162)

Although his comical approach and parodic tone are evident from the beginning, in addition to Henry basing his story on the events of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Catherine nevertheless fails to perceive his intended humor until Henry can no longer "command solemnity either of subject or voice" (164). On the other hand, the sense that this novel is a parody is balanced by Austen's defense of novels. The passage shows a self-aware reclamation of the novel as a form capable of intellectual, moral and emotional labor:

> Yes, novels;—for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding— joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust . . . Oh! it is only a novel!" replies the young lady . . . Now, had the same young lady been engaged with a volume of the Spectator, instead of such a work, how proudly would she have produced the book, and told its name; though the chances must be against her being occupied by any part of that voluminous publication, of which either the matter or manner would not disgust a young person of taste. (31)

Here, the novel offers both a critique of excessive or credulous reading and insists on the legitimacy of reading novels as a meaningful practice. From a cultural materialist perspective, this ambivalence can be read as an insistence of ideological contradiction. As Dollimore and Sinfield argue, "[s]ubversiveness may for example be apparent only, the dominant order not only containing it but, paradoxical as it may seem, actually producing it for its own ends" (Dollimore and Sinfield 11). In *Northanger Abbey*, Gothic novels are not banned or wholly repudiated. Instead, the novel's imaginative power is acknowledged, staged, and then redirected into a narrative moral development. Catherine's reading habits are not eliminated but recontextualized, she learns to apply her interpretive instincts with greater care and social awareness.

Reading in *Northanger Abbey*

In *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen not only parodies the Gothic genre but also explores different reading habits and the transformative power of literature. Rather than presenting reading as a harmless pastime or a straightforward threat to social order, *Northanger Abbey* uses reading as means to highlight its contradictory force. Reading is shown to be both pleasurable and perilous, empowering and disciplinary, educative and potentially misleading. Thus, *Northanger Abbey* does not merely parody

Gothic fiction or defend the value of novels; it uses Catherine's journey as a reader to explore how women engage with narrative forms, how those forms mediate their social realities, and how reading itself becomes a mode of self-fashioning. This section argues that Catherine Morland's reading habits illustrate the tension inherent in women's literary consumption during the period.

From the very beginning of the novel, Catherine is defined by her relationship with reading. Introduced as an unlikely heroine, plain, active and unremarkable in intellect or disposition, her development is marked by her literary education (Austen 5). The early narrative underscores her progression as a young girl "in training for a heroine," presenting her readings – "works as heroines must read" – as a crucial aspect of her character development (7). Initially confined to works approved by her parents, Catherine's primary exposure to literature in Bath, she encounters novels like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and the Gothic genre in general, and when she starts reading this novel she is "delighted with the book" (33). Furthermore, for Catherine reading *The Mysteries of Udolpho* creates an opportunity to discuss novels with others, particularly Isabella Thorpe (33). Before Catherine even has the chance to finish the book, Isabella already makes plans for their next readings, "when you have finished *Udolpho*, we will read the Italian together; and I have made out a list of ten or twelve more of the same kind for you" (33). This list includes *The Italian* by Ann Radcliffe, *Castle of Wolfenbach* and *Mysterious Warnings* by Eliza Parsons, *Clermont* by Regina Maria Roche, *Necromancer of the Black Forest* by Karl Friedrich Kahlert and translated by Peter Teuthold, *Midnight Bell* by Francis Lathom, *Orphan of the Rhine* by Eleanor Sleath, and *Horrid Mysteries* by Karl Friedrich August Grosse, translated by Peter Will (33). However, she discusses her favorite book with other acquaintances too, such as John Thorpe, Henry and Eleanor Tilney. With all three of them the topic of the discussions is mostly *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Catherine recommends the book to John Thorpe who believes that novels, with the exception of *Tom Jones* and *The Monk*, "are the stupidest things in creation" (43). Thorpe acts as a mouthpiece for common criticism of the novel in the eighteenth century outside of the world of the novel. However, Austen offers a contrary view too through Henry and Eleanor Tilney, who have positive views on novels.

> . . . the person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe's works and most of them with great pleasure. *Udolpho*, when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again;—I remember finishing it in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time. (107-8)

Henry's views not only contradict that of John Thorpe but also that of Fordyce or Gisborne discussed earlier. Oftentimes, Catherine changes the subject of her conversation to reading not because she feels uncomfortable, but because that is her favorite topic: ". . . [She] ventured at length to vary the subject by a question which had been long upper most in her thoughts; it was, "Have you ever read *Udolpho*, Mr. Thorpe?" (Austen 43). Eleanor Tilney is also familiar with *The Mysteries of Udolpho* as her brother read it out loud for her (108). As the two siblings talk to Catherine the

reader also learns that Eleanor has a positive opinion on the book as she says, "Come, Miss Morland, let us leave him to meditate over our faults in the utmost propriety of diction, while we praise *Udolpho* in whatever terms we like best. It is a most interesting work" (109).[1] Catherine's particular attachment to Radcliffe's novel exemplifies her emotional investment in narrative, especially in forms that promise mystery, drama, and heightened sensation.

Catherine's mode of reading is immersive and affectively driven. Rather than approaching texts with irony or detachment, she internalises their tropes and expectations and tries to live them out. This leads her to interpret her experiences at Northanger Abbey through a Gothic lens, culminating in the mistaken belief that General Tilney is responsible for his wife's death. However, this misreading is less a matter of "wrong reading material" than a "wrong reading style" (Simon 76). Jukka Mikkonen's concept of the principle minimal departure, while developed to describe to real-life readers, also applies to the fictional reader Catherine Morland. Mikkonen argues that readers generally assume fictional worlds resemble the real world unless clearly signaled otherwise. "According to MD, readers understand fictional worlds and their components by drawing on background knowledge of their own world, unless otherwise indicated" (72). This principle relies on what Mikkonen, following Ryan, calls cognitive economy "meaning the tendency to minimize the processing effort, and naturalization, the integration of textual strangeness and ambiguity, such as telepathic dragons or enunciative heterogeneity, within the more general overarching sense pattern of what is familiar to the reader" (72). As Catherine arrives to Northanger Abbey, she recognizes the similarities between the fictional place Castle of Udolpho and her own temporary residence and reads her surroundings through Gothic conventions. In this sense, Catherine's approach reverses Mikkonen's concept of the principle minimal departure, by assuming that the real world resembles the fictional world she reads about.

Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* emerges from an academic and historical environment characterized by debates within American Studies over the legitimacy and scope of cultural analysis. Her methodology draws from ethnography, semiotics, reader-response theory, feminist, and neo-Marxist theory. Conducting an ethnographic research project with a group of women from Smithton, Radway explores the social functions of romance novels, and the meanings they derived from the texts. She argues that romance reading is not merely escapist entertainment but a strategic emotional activity that enables women to negotiate the pressures of patriarchal domestic life. Many of her respondents described reading as a form of "emotional replenishment," a way to carve out time and space for self-care within otherwise demanding familial roles (119). Radway's findings challenge the idea that readers are passive recipients of ideology (197). Instead, she situates them within what she – drawing on Stanley Fish – calls „interpretive communities," socially constituted groups whose shared reading strategies and cultural positions shape the meanings they derive from the texts (8). For the Smithton women, reading romances functioned both as an act of temporary

1 For a detailed analysis of the reading habits of John and Isabella Thorpe, Henry and Eleanor Thorpe see Simon, "Readers and Reading" (89-112).

resistance and a reaffirmation of certain patriarchal norms, especially the ideal of heterosexual romantic fulfilment. She argues that romance novels are not simply tools of patriarchal indoctrination but rather sites where women readers symbolically reclaim the emotional nurturance often denied to them in real life. Romance reading, she asserts, becomes a way to negotiate the contradictory expectations of femininity: "a form of individual resistance to a situation predicated on the assumption that it is women alone who are responsible for the care and emotional nurturance of others" (12). Despite her historical distance from the Smithton women, Catherine's Gothic reading reflects this dynamic. Her immersion represents a kind of symbolic resistance to the limited, regulated life of a young woman in Regency England. Her reading gives her access to adventure, danger, and agency that her own world denies. This is explicit in Catherine's exclamation: "Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it" (33). Her enthusiasm is not simply for the story but for the affective and imaginative escape it offers. This form of engagement with fiction is far from frivolous. As Radway notes of the Smithton readers, such texts help women "replenish" themselves emotionally, often compensating for what patriarchal family structures fail to provide. Catherine's emotional engagement with *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and her "wrong reading style" shows that the way women read is shaped by the cultural narratives available to them. Her reliance on Gothic tropes reflects the limited "lessons" available to her, but her eventual ability to move beyond these conventions represents a reorientation rather than a rejection of fiction. Catherine's uncritical reading at first makes her a victim of her illusions and leads to misconceptions. However, when she is confronted by Henry, she realises her mistake, and it is at that moment that she becomes the heroine of a domestic novel. At last, she admits that,

> Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the Midland counties of England, was to be looked for. Of the Alps and Pyrenees, with their pine forests and their vices, they might give a faithful delineation; and Italy, Switzerland, and the South of France, I might be as fruitful in horrors as they were there represented . . . Upon this conviction, she would not be surprised if even in Henry and Eleanor Tilney, some slight imperfection might hereafter appear; and upon this conviction she need not fear to acknowledge some actual specks in the character of their father, who, though cleared from the grossly injurious suspicions which she must ever blush to have entertained, she did believe, upon serious consideration, to be not perfectly amiable. (205-6)

The confrontation makes Catherine no longer seek Gothic adventures. From this point on, "the visions of romance were over" (204), her rationality surfaces, and she becomes a heroine of real life. Based on what Henry tells her (see 203), she believes that crimes, such as the one Catherine ascribes to General Tilney cannot be true because it is not in the nature of the English. Previously her horizon of expectations and preoccupation (see Rosenblatt) were derived from the same source,

her reading of *The Mysteries Udolpho*, but after the confrontation, she adopts Henry's perspective. Being sent away by the General and acknowledging her follies at the abbey help Catherine mature and realise that she cannot label people either good or bad because, in real-life, human nature is more complex than in novels. She realises that even people she loves and views as intellectually superior can have bad qualities. Through her experiences, Catherine gradually matures and eventually realises that she is not a heroine in a Gothic tale but an ordinary living girl. She remains a reader, capable of recognizing both power and the limits of narrative in shaping experience. In this sense, she becomes a sagacious reader in the last seven chapters of the novel, which "encapsulates Catherine Morland's transformative journey from a naive girl captivated by Gothic imaginings to a self-assured heroine attuned to the nuances of her domestic milieu" (Simon, "Reading Habits" 82). *Northanger Abbey* ultimately celebrates not just reading, but how it allows readers like Catherine to learn, change and claim agency in her story, and, by extension, in her world.

Conclusion

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* offers a complex meditation on the ideological and emotional stakes of reading for women in the early nineteenth century. As this essay has demonstrated, Catherine Morland's journey from immersive, affective reader to increasingly self-aware subject is a reflection of the cultural significance of reading. Austen presents reading as an ambivalent act, one that offers imaginative freedom and emotional engagement while also subjecting the reader to social correction and ideological constraint.

Janice Radway's work on romance reading as a practice of emotional self-care offers a lens for interpreting Catherine's attraction to Gothic fiction. Her reading habits are not merely escapist, frivolous or naïve, rather, it represents an attempt to navigate the limited emotional and social spaces available to her. Gothic novels offer her access to emotional intensity and narrative agency otherwise unavailable to young women of her social position. However, as Radway emphasises, such practices of reading and literary engagement are never detached from the cultural expectations and patriarchal structures within which the reader and the texts themselves operate. Austen reflects this negotiation by showing how Catherine's reading fosters desires and insight but ultimately requires modification to align with prevailing norms.

Through the perspective of cultural materialism, *Northanger Abbey* can be read as a text that engages with the ideological contradictions of its cultural moment. Austen acknowledges the subversive potential of reading, its power to disrupt expectations, generate fantasies, and assert imaginative agency, while simultaneously illustrating how literature also functions to regulate such practices. Catherine's imaginative Gothic misreadings are not punished with exclusion or ruin, as one might expect. Instead, they are gradually redirected and contained. Catherine is not told to stop reading, but to consider her environment, her culture. Her interpretive practice subverts Mikkonen's concept of the principle minimal departure, but this "wrong reading style" is not punished, rather it is a source of transformation. Austen engages

with the concerns surrounding the novel and female readership by asserting its capacity to shape more thoughtful and grounded forms of engagement. Ultimately, *Northanger Abbey* resists reductive readings of fiction, specifically novels, as either dangerous or purely entertaining. Catherine remains a reader, but by the end of the novel, she has learned to interpret more responsibly to distinguish between fiction and fact. In doing so, Austen positions fiction as a space for both imaginative exploration and ideological negotiation.

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