STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXVI, 2, 2021, p. 175 - 190
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2021.2.12

# READING HABITS IN JANE AUSTEN'S *NORTHANGER ABBEY*

**ANA VOICU**[1]

**ABSTRACT.** ***Reading Habits in Jane Austen's*** **Northanger Abbey.** This article focuses on the way Catherine Morland, *Northanger Abbey*'s heroine, is influenced and even guided by the literature she either chooses or is given to read. Her reading habits, as well as her changing typologies as a reader, influence both the development of her character and the narrative. This study also debunks the idea that *Northanger Abbey* is a parody of Gothic fiction, contextualizing book reading in an age when the novel was yet to be considered a respectable literary genre.

***Keywords:*** *wise reader, the avid reader, the hypocritical reader, character development, narrative development, Gothic fiction, novel theory*

**REZUMAT.** ***Obiceiuri de lectură în*** **Mănăstirea Northanger** ***de Jane Austen.*** Acest articol analizează modul în care Catherine Morland, eroina romanului *Mănăstirea Northanger*, e influențată și chiar ghidată de literatura pe care o alege sau care îi este oferită. Obiceiurile ei de lectură, precum și modul în care tipologia ei ca cititor se schimbă, influențează atât evoluția personajului, cât și narațiunea. Acest articol contrazice ideea că *Mănăstirea Northanger* este o parodie a ficțiunii gotice, contextualizând lectura într-o epocă în care romanul nu era încă un gen literar respectabil.

***Cuvinte-cheie:*** *cititorul înțelept, cititorul avid, cititorul ipocrit, evoluția personajului, evoluția narațiunii, ficțiune gotică, teoria romanului*

"That is artful and deep, to be sure…"
(Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*)

Constantly attracting scholarly attention, Jane Austen's work has been not only relevant, but essential to the study of British literature for over a century, currently holding a place in the mandatory bibliographies of any university's courses which focus on the eighteenth-century English literature and the beginnings

[1] **Ana VOICU** has an MA in Cultural British Studies and a BA in English and Norwegian, both of them from the Faculty of Letters of Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. Romania. Voicu's area of scholarly interests includes eighteenth-century English literature with special focus on Jane Austen and gender studies. Email: ana.voicu17@gmail.com

of the novel as a respectable literary genre. Criticised as a young female writer, then discovered and rediscovered, Jane Austen gave us accounts on the genteel society of her time which secured her a valuable place in the history of English literature. When it comes to reading habits, critics were more preoccupied with the way in which Austen's novels are read than with the fiction her characters enjoy. Thorough research has been conducted on the relation between Jane Austen's novels and those of her contemporaries or even to the work of the classics of her time. Nevertheless, there are few instances when the characters' reading preferences are directly analysed. In his article, "Jane Austen and Female Reading", Robert W. Uphaus focuses on "how, through her fiction, she [Austen] established a new practice of female reading and writing" (340). This critic insists very much on the literary context of the age and on the writers that Austen was preoccupied with and influenced by. To him, "Austen uses her own novel to reshape the prior conventions of female reading" (335). While this study does indeed focus on female reading, it is the characters' reading habits that are explored, as well as their typologies as readers which have uncovered new directions of interpretation with regards to her work.

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* was first published in 1818, a year after the author's death, by Henry and Cassandra, her brother and sister. While in a previous attempt of publishing it, the manuscript was delivered by the title of *Susan*, the two close relatives decided on *Northanger Abbey.* A reader who was already familiar with her work might have known what to expect, but in spite of such knowledge, the idea of an abbey could easily be connected with gothic fiction. The question which thus arises is to be explored as it is an essential element in understanding the novel and its characters reading habits. How is *Northanger Abbey* connected to the Gothic novel?

In the "Preface" to The Cambridge Edition of *Northanger Abbey*, Janet Todd points out that Jane Austen "planned the action as a parody, or rather, a double parody, of the popular fiction of the period – the conduct novel or novel of manners on the one hand, and the gothic romances on the other" (XXV). It is imperative to mention the fact that Austen was supported by her family in her literary interests and pursuits. This does not only mean that she was encouraged to be a writer herself, but also that she had the opportunity of being acquainted with the great writers of her time and of reading both literature which was considered good, formative, and literature which was viewed as unsuitable for the sensitive female sex. Interestingly, she made a goal of neither copying the great authors, nor of devaluing those more negatively regarded, but of appreciating both sides by finding her own literary voice and thus contributing to their mission, whether primary or secondary, of establishing the novel as a respectable genre. Consequently, her parodying the novel of manners and the gothic romance

could appear as a negative reaction to these genres only at a superficial level. In fact, Austen presents a story of how these genres can facilitate the acquisition of knowledge of immediate use in a person's and, specifically, a young lady's life choices. This idea can be supported by direct reference to the text of *Northanger Abbey* where the reader, used to a generally objective and unobtrusive third person narrator, may be surprised at finding the following comment:

> 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 [as novels], 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. (21)

Needless to say, the heroine of Northanger Abbey reads novels and this is how her literary choices are justified to the reader. It is a fashion which might very well reflect the belief of the author behind the narrator. This is not a critique as much as it is a call for solidarity and for keeping in mind the issue of the questionable reputation that novels used to have at the time. Austen tries to prove the value of the novel through her example rather than mere comments, which she definitely succeeds.

The fresh, inexperienced Catherine Morland leaves her home for the very first time, accompanying a more socially engaged neighbour to Bath, a particularly rich place in terms of society and an unofficially established marriage market. The entrance into the world, along with the innocence of the main character might very well be the initial phase of a Gothic novel where a young woman finds herself in a new, unfamiliar, and hostile environment where she is to be exploited by other characters, usually males who are not exactly well-meaning, but worldly enough to appear so – to her, at least. Nevertheless, Catherine is indicated from the very first sentence of the first chapter not to be the familiar or the traditionally established material for a heroine: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be a heroine" (2). Her life is that of a perfectly ordinary and not exceptionally accomplished young lady of a family whose wealth is in its offspring rather than its material values. She is definitely vulnerable in her youth and freshness, but vulnerable to a world that does not allow "wild and barbaric behaviour" (Todd XXXVI), as Janet Todd described the scope of Gothic fiction and its space. Catherine belongs to "the civilized eighteenth century" (Todd XXXVI). When this unlikely heroine is "about to be launched into all the difficulties and dangers of a six week's residence in Bath" (Austen 7), the author comically and

superbly describes the way Catherine's mother, through her biological instinct of protecting her child against such "difficulties and dangers", advises her against everything but that which could actually threaten her primarily social safety – the less honourable members of the opposite sex. This episode is particularly significant in my view because it gives a concrete example of how the character's background defines Catherine's initial state. Catherine's mother is perfectly genuine in her concern, but partly clueless herself in terms of the way of the world. Well-meaning and kind, the mother might be innocent herself from a social point of view. Therefore, very probably, she is a simple woman of "plain sense" (Austen 2) with little intellectual or worldly education to pass on to her offspring. Thus, the heroine is thrown into the world under the guidance of an irresponsible guardian and little parental advice. She appears to be a damsel in distress almost without her realizing this herself. To Mathison, "it is a character's achieving maturity that makes her a heroine" (140). Consequently, Catherine's innocence can be considered a symptom which can or cannot lead to a heroic ending.

While Catherine's time in Bath does confirm her adherence to an ordinary existence rather than a heroic one, upon arrival at Northanger Abbey, she begins to feel that she is part of an exceptional world, one which is similar to that featured in her top literary delight, Anne Raddcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Similarly to other Austenian heroines, her main pursuit is that of love, but this particular heroine finds herself in more serious conflicts regarding her adaptation to the environment and its ways or rather, adapting the environment to what is it that she believes it to be. As David Blair mentions in his "Introduction" to the Wordsworth Classics edition of the novel, "she marries the first man she dances with, which is pretty good going for a heroine whose ordinariness might arguably disqualify her from being one at all […] This spares Catherine countless agonies of uncertainty about her own feelings and those of multiple choice" (VIII). Naturally, the differences of economic status between Catherine and her beau, Henry Tilney, are reason enough to give way to a courtship plot; yet this plot appears to be, in some ways, secondary, or at least less dealt with than in other novels by Austen. John Thorpe, the only rival young Tilney has, is not even acknowledged as an actual rival by Catherine. There seems to be no other obstacle in the way of the Catherine and Henry's marriage but General Tilney, the young man's father whose own ambitions are also reduced to material value. It is his presence and his own realistic sort of evilness which the heroine encounters and senses but misinterprets through the lenses of the one thing which defined evilness to her: a Gothic novel so far-fetched if taken literally. The mysterious, rather exotic abbey Catherine hopes for and expects to find is, in truth, delightfully English, well-maintained and suggestively decorated by the General who proudly

presents it to her, walks her through every part she is not interested in and tires her. Although the General is the embodiment of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*'s evil Montoni to our heroine, it is clear by this point of the narrative that we cannot speak of a Gothic-inspired course of events. The reason is that while there is definitely something oppressive and vile in General Tilney and the family dynamic he had built in and around his home, the environment is too specifically English and too realistically fitted to its space and timeframe to allow any eventual supernatural, murderous, or barbaric instances.

Nevertheless, there is one Gothic element which is embedded into the narrative of *Northanger Abbey* and that is mystery. David Blair notes that "mystery is an element in this novel, as well as in Raddcliffe's, and the strand of plotting which culminates in Catherine's ignominious expulsion from Northanger is extremely carefully laid by Austen in a way that only a second or subsequent reading will disclose" (Blair VIII). Once the reader fully realizes there is no way the narrative could take the path of Gothic fiction, it is most likely that he would stop giving credit to any of Catherine's suspicions, and wait for her fantasy to be deconstructed and have her succumb to the realization of what the world is like, simultaneously rejecting that which seemingly confused her: the novels. And while this impression might stay accurate with some readers, at a closer reading and analysis, it is to be realized that there was, indeed, a mystery behind the invitation to Northanger Abbey: a less spectacular mystery, devoid of fantastical or homicidal intent, yet a real mystery of real vileness. The way Catherine's readings have helped her in this respect is to be explored in a following subchapter of this paper.

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is not, therefore, a parody of the popular fiction of her time as much as it is a testimony of its value as shown by the heroine's progress. John K. Mathison states that "in making Catherine become aware of true values, she [Austen] has helped the reader do the same" (150). Catherine Morland is a character not particularly sensational throughout the novel, but it is exactly this sort of ordinary character that proves a very important point. Novels are not only safe to read, but they are actually developmental in their own fashion. They have value in themselves: "her [Jane Austen's] novel, with no sensationalism, no unreality, no sentimentality, is no escape from life, but as she said that the novel could be, it is an illumination of it" (Mathison 150).

Regarding Catherine, Blair mentions that she "reflects on the whole tendency of her society to create precisely the kind of young woman that she is – ill-informed, anti-intellectual, trivial and entrapped within a limited and devalued agenda of femininity" (Blair XV-XVI). By her choice of readings which is obviously linked to delight and entertainment rather than information and education, Catherine threatens to become something even 'worse' than an intellectual of her sex: a woman who understands her own emotions, does not

fear imagination because she knows it is in her control and, most importantly, a woman who is aware not only of the limits, but of the external construction of her own femininity. While she does not appear to have fully realized all these things by the end of the novel, Catherine manages to surpass her naiveté and finally become an adult and, more specifically, a woman who is married to the love of her life: an intelligent, well-read man.

When it comes to Catherine's typology as a reader, it is only natural to assume that she started off as a "wise reader", one who engaged in readings compulsory for a wise young woman who is set on educating herself. The first chapter of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* provides the reader with a detailed description of the main character's situation in life and, in this particular case, early accomplishments, or rather the lack of accomplishments in those respects where a respectable young lady is supposed to be successfully trained in: reciting fables or poetry, music, drawing, French, and writing. All these activities feel confining to a child of "neither a bad heart nor a bad temper", but who "loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house" (Austen 2). Catherine is, in an Austenian word, unaffected. She is genuine in her person, in her thoughts and actions, she enters the world as a blank canvas which allows no false pretences on her part, no extravagance apart from a most natural longing for the entertainment which is so specific to the youth – entertainment such as curling her hair and going to balls (Austen 4).

In Dorothee Birke's view, "Catherine does not fulfil the requirements of the romance formula" (95) which is constantly hinted at throughout this initial part of the novel, meaning that her situation and accomplishments do not fit the standard – a standard which has been nevertheless explored through the literature she was given to read.

When learning about Catherine's readings of choice, the reader of *Northanger Abbey* is offered a line by Alexander Pope and, more specifically, a line from "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady": "those who bear about the mockery of woe" (Pope qtd. in Austen 6), whom "she learnt to censure" (Austen 6). While neither Catherine, nor the narrator is preoccupied with the analysis of the poem, the reader is invited to ponder upon the meaning of this quotation in relation to the heroine and her literary preferences. While the conclusions of such an examination might differ from one reader to another, it is my personal opinion that the lesson which is supposed to have been learned by Catherine in this particular instance is that she should avoid those who indulge in their misery to the extent that they fail to see anything good in the world, or any greater pain, for that matter. Concurrently, it is a call for her to learn from their negative example and be able to maintain her good-humour and stay a soothing presence in the lives of those of a less happy disposition.

This kind of lesson is actually a piece of wisdom which is passed down from the great writers who had proven their complex understanding of human nature in relation to morality. Their works are lessons of common sense which are often taught by the book, but mostly learnt from experience, especially in the case of young women of good breed whose education is primarily meant to shape them into pleasant and preferably unchallenging companions. This is also the case of other literary references inserted in this part of the novel. Most of them are slightly misquoted as proof of Catherine's attention or imagination having probably been diverted at the moment of reading. All these lessons qualify her as "heroine" material, meaning that they supposedly provide young Catherine with an amount of information, or rather with a set of qualities which are to shape a heroine as it stereotypically evolved from the tradition of the Romance.

Following Pope in this collection of quotes there is Thomas Gray with his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", from which Catherine learns that "many a flower is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air" (Gray qtd. in Austen 6). While this could be considered a pessimistic idea, it is simply necessary for a young woman not to take too much pride in or be too self-conscious about her own beauty. She is to understand and remember that her "sweetness" might go to "waste" or be "unseen" unless supported by favourable temper, character, and manners to recommend her to society, in general, and to a potential suitor, in particular. To an "almost pretty" girl such as Catherine (Austen 4), the reference might not directly implicate a ravishing beauty which she is delicately cleared of on previous accounts, but a consolation to any disappointment which could occur in her future interactions as a result of her not being appreciated. Furthermore, this is a very poetic and specifically romantic point which is suggested in the given verses, one to be contemplated by a heroine who has so many obstacles to overcome, especially when it comes to some of the people she encounters. No matter how accomplished, beautiful and "sweet" she may be, it is of no certainty that these qualities will conquer the world for her or, at least, provide her story with a happy ending.

If ill-humour is to be avoided and beauty of appearance and character might prove futile in the often cruel world, a more optimist thought is to follow, again slightly misquoted from James Thomson's "Spring" part of his poem, "The Seasons": "it is a delightful task / To teach the young idea how to shoot" (Thomson qtd. in Austen 6). "The young idea" might be an impression which must "be taught to shoot" or must be, in my view, developed and properly let out through the gift of expression. This is an important skill for regular young women and heroines alike: they should be able to order their thinking, ensure its propriety and know, in terms of both quality and quantity, how to communicate it. At the same time, it is to be noted that Thompson's poem is about spring: the rebirth

of nature as well as that of human life, for spring regenerates nature literally and the human world metaphorically, and brings about the joys of youth. Catherine must meet people, have suitors, conclude a successful marriage, and proceed to build a family through which to restart this cycle of life.

This information comes in "a great store amongst the rest" (Austen 6) from Shakespeare as well. The first Shakespearian lines supposedly registered by Catherine are selected from Act III of "Othello": "Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ" (Shakespeare qtd. in Austen 6). These verses of warning are, just like the others, only to be validated by specific circumstances the heroine might encounter. Yet, the presence of a linear plot might have aided Catherine understand and internalize the subject, hence the "great store [of information] among the rest" (Austen 6). A handkerchief dropped by Desdemona, a "trifle light as air", is a deadly proof, or "confirmations strong", to Othello's suspicions of his beloved wife's unfaithfulness, or "holy writ". Although Shakespeare's reader is empowered by the events and he can see that Desdemona is just as innocent as her husband is paranoid and obsessively jealous, these lines of wisdom are not exaggerated when related to a society of the most delicate etiquette, where unintentional, but careless movements or replies could be interpreted as subtle hints to other more driven minds. While Austen's reader may be sure that there shall not be the smallest handkerchief to be dropped by Catherine, he or she will realize while reading on and on that this unlikely heroine remains genuinely ignorant in terms of the less obvious – or sometimes clearest – intentions of others. But there is one other piece of information Catherine receives from Shakespeare which is more suited to her character and experience, therefore easier to internalize. "And the poor beetle that we tread upon / In corporal sufferance finds a pang as great / As when a giant dies" (Shakespeare qtd. in Austen 6). This quote from Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure" teaches Catherine the lesson of empathy which her kind heart is naturally inclined to: suffering is the same for everybody regardless of their "corporal" size or rather regardless of their strength or weakness. A heroine must understand this in order not to be cruel and keep a pure heart, the one treasure which promises her success and happiness.

The last reference in this collection of Catherine's quotes is selected from the Act III of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night": "like patience on a monument, / Smiling at grief" (Shakespeare qtd. in Austen 6), which is, as the narrator specifies, "what a woman in love always looks [like]" (Austen 6). A certain irony is to be sensed in this comment as it is related to so solemn a quote. While it is a wonderful delight to be in love, it is not a circumstance to actually produce that joyous promised effect to most of the ambitious young girls. Being in love can only be fortunate if it is returned not only in intensity of feeling, but through

a well-timed proposal as well – and it is often this proposal, this moment of meeting between personal wishes and the arrangements of the world, which produces and only by itself cures a tremendous "grief", a fear which hardly allows any moment of bliss. It takes the largest amount of patience to survive this period of courtship where one can be so easily deceived, and where the anxiety to encounter the object of one's affection is positively insatiable. This anxiety is to be felt by Catherine as she falls in love with young Tilney and she is all the more justified in her want of patience since she is not supported by anybody in her attempts to find and keep his company.

While she "brought herself to read them [sonnets]" (Austen 6) and manages to learn lines of verified wisdom, all of these difficult readings were less of an aid to her than the novels she could actually grasp and learn to apply – a trial and error process of learning, but a successful one. She is not, in truth, a wise reader, but a young, inexperienced one who attempted the great works of literature too early, but proved herself captivated by those closer to her time and age, thus proving her entering into a second, more advanced stage in terms of reader typologies. Catherine becomes, as it will soon be argued, an "avid reader" who gets to *absorb* literature and its lessons not by rule, but unconsciously by the pleasure of reading.

About a week after her arrival in Bath, Catherine befriends Isabella, the daughter of an old school fellow of Mrs. Allen's. This is a very fortunate event for the heroine since no company could be procured for her beforehand, besides that of young Tilney, a clergyman she takes special interest in and with whom she had the pleasure to dance. Isabella is Catherine's superior in age and experience, which makes her a guiding presence in the heroine's daily activities, especially reading, a habit to which they both adhere with joy and which is no longer a personal endeavour. According to Jody L. Wyett, reading "serves as a touchstone for sociable intercourse throughout the novel" (271). In this particular friendship, reading might be the strongest bond between the two girls because while Isabella provides the material, Catherine shows very enthusiastic feedback or, in other words, they are on the same page – metaphorically and, often, literally. When asked about her reading *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Catherine readily replies to her friend: "Yes, I have been reading it ever since I woke" (Austen 24), which is the exact reaction Isabella might have hoped for. She tries to persuade Catherine to beg for further details to be revealed and as she fails at this particular task, she proceeds to present Catherine with a list of possible eventual readings, "all [of them] horrid" (Austen 24).

In her essay, "Rereading the Patriarchal Text – The Female Quixote, Northanger Abbey, and the Trace of the Absent Mother", Debra Malina suggests that while Isabella's superiority in social matters is clear to both the heroine

and the reader, it is the privilege of the latter to realize this particular character's inferiority in terms of character: "we recognize the selfishness and pretence of Isabella, though our heroine has not" (Malina 285). This is an important point considering the context of the novel: two young women who become enthusiastic readers, neither of them wise, but both of them exactly what they are expected to be. The fact that one is so vain might explain her interest in a genre which is generally disregarded by the highbrow reader of the time, while the other being so authentic and innocent makes her so taken with the unlikely, but exciting plot of a Gothic novel. Nonetheless, they are not the only characters whose opinions on such readings are revealed. For instance, John Thorpe who, besides being Catherine's insistent suitor, is "a boasting, blustering idiot" (Malina 285), expresses his position on novels, more exactly that he never reads them. When referring to Anne Radcliffe's name, he proclaims her novels to be "worth reading" (Austen 31) as if he had been an authority on the matter. Yet, Thorpe is ignorant of her being the author of the very work he had been asked about in the first place. This man and Isabella are, by their similarly shallow personalities, as well as by their different opinions on this subject, exceedingly illustrative in terms of the general reception of Gothic fiction, Catherine's genre of choice. When discussing the subject of her favourite novel with young Tilney and his sister, Catherine receives a different account from that which she had learned to expect:

> The person, be it gentleman or a lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all of Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure. The Mysteries of Udolpho, when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again; - I remember finishing it in two days – my hair standing on the end the whole time. (77)

This account of Tilney's, which is eventually supported by his sister cannot be mistaken for irony or mocking, for although the character seems obviously witty and playful in his conversation drive, he is as authentic as his future wife, Catherine – a masculine truthfulness, therefore one devoid of naiveté or innocence. His opinion as a young man of good character weighs heavily upon Austen's novel's slogan: respect and appreciate literature. He is clearly a well-read man, which is proven to the reader as he proceeds to name characters and describe the many books he had read while studying at Oxford, as well as when he words his appreciation for history books.

Catherine cannot really share this opinion (Austen 78) since, to her, there is nothing in them that she can relate to. History belongs to men. There is no room for women neither in the course of the events, nor in their being registered in writing. It is also to be mentioned that this particular reticence the

heroine feels towards history is no impediment to her appreciation of her beau. "[A] good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man, unless circumstances are particularly untoward" (80). Foolish as she might appear to a contemporary reader, Catherine is simply charming to a potential husband who cannot but look forward to having a wife who can appreciate just the right amount – or genre – of literature. It is chiefly for this very reason that Henry Tilney appears to mock or at least confuse her, especially in a later episode where he presents her with a scenario of her experience at Northanger Abbey. Following Gothic patterns and motifs, he directs Catherine's attention to the possibly frightening, but equally exciting prospect of "a room without windows, door, or furniture" (114), "the ancient housekeeper" (114), "gloomy passages" (114), "a ponderous chest which no efforts can open" (114), and many other elements meant to support the idea of the residence being "haunted" (114). Then he proceeds to describe the adventures as well as the responses Catherine might give to the unlikely, yet appropriate course of events, including the discovery of a secret door leading to a series of secret chambers, one of them furnished with a sophisticated cabinet which hides the diary of a "wretched Matilda" (115). While Catherine does not fall into a suspension of disbelief at this fantastical plot, it is definitely an encouragement if not a trigger for her to suspect that at least part of the fictional world she had read about had partially invaded her own. In "Early Experiments and Northanger Abbey", Mary Waldron mentions that "it is here that Gothic fantasy and real life mesh for Catherine; for the first time her reading is her only guide" (31). However, it is not the space itself as it is its inhabitants that Waldron refers to in the quote; it is the family dynamic, as well as their behaviour towards herself which Catherine fails to understand, never having encountered something of the sort anywhere else but in the novels. Having learned that evil is to be expected, she senses it and exaggerates it according to the Gothic pattern, especially in the case of General Tilney who is "as immediately recognizable to the modern reader as he must have been at the turn of the nineteenth century as the archetypal domestic tyrant" (Waldron 31). While the building itself is typically English, modern and neat rather than eccentric and dark, there is a tension within its walls which manages to make it feel like a prison, without looking like one. It is the atmosphere which confuses Catherine; she finds right upon arriving that "the strictest punctuality to the family hours would be expected at Northanger" (Austen 117). This strictness intensifies the tension which the despotic head of the household, the General, seems to be creating: he rules the daily lives of his family members, this being another reminiscent of the Gothic villain.

At this point in Austen's novel, the reader might already be convinced that the heroine will marry Henry Tilney and might suspect that her visit to Northanger Abbey is, even to the naïve Catherine, an opportunity to deepen the acquaintance with the family and be courted by her chosen one. In spite of the legitimacy and favour of such an idea, it is soon to be realized that the object of affection is rather absent, as he is an already independent young man with a residence of his own – one which is not too far, yet bearing the obstacle of his father who presides over him at least from the point of view of their meeting. Eleanor, the polite, kind sister, is the only person who can provide pleasant company and entertainment to Catherine, yet her endeavours are either restricted or called off by her father, the absolute master of his home and its inhabitants. Nevertheless, while their position might soon be understood by the reader, it is not the case of Catherine. As Waldron explains, "both tolerate their situation and repress their reactions; their superior education and cultivated habits impress Catherine, who mistakes their sophisticated demeanour for happiness" (32). But it is not long before the heroine notices the anxious behaviour of Miss Tilney towards her father – a notice that might have never come to her if it had not been for the novels which shaped the little awareness she has of the situation: "impressions of horror rush in to fill the vacuum left by her education" (Waldron 32). Her growing concerns about her surroundings would have been a matter of parody if there had not been any glimpse of truth in them, but there is truth in them indeed, and Catherine's instinct if not her intellect is trained enough to sense it. According to David Blair, "in projecting the Radcliffean paradigms of the Gothic villain, Catherine is extrapolating from her own authentic responses to him and to the dark undercurrents of the Northanger milieu over which he presides" (Blair XI).

Despite her ability to sense trouble, there is no way she could have possibly suspected the real, worldly sort of evil in General Tilney. Her lack of wisdom is backed up by an embarrassing misunderstanding which finally proves the malice of his character, as well as his indifference to others. Tilney victimizes his own daughter by consequences of his mistake. The abbey tour he offered to Catherine was not meant to make him appear a welcoming host, but to display his wealth to her in the hope that it might mean to her what it means to him. Therefore, wealth should become a perfectly sufficient if not excellent reason for Catherine to accept his son's eventual proposal of marriage. In denying her access to his late wife's apartments, General Tilney has no intention of hiding a sinister secret, as Catherine suspects. It is simply that this part of the residence might not ensure a sight impressive enough to be worth his scarce time and effort to present. Although Catherine expresses her wish to see this particular part of the abbey and the General's daughter is actually excited to

show it to her, Tilney's mind cannot be changed. To him, the sentiments and the preferences of either his guest or his daughter are equally unimportant. As David Blair argues, the "General's patriarchal control and his ways of imposing it" are by "bullying others by hypocritically appearing to consult them only to pre-empt the result of the pseudo-consultative process" (XIII). He is perfectly indifferent to the feelings and wishes of those around him, strangers and family alike, and if there is any willingness in him to give them any comfort, it is merely because it is, in one way or another, in his own interest. His kindness towards Catherine is, therefore, a necessary step in his process of securing her interest in his home. Nonetheless, it is this exact goal that shatters his whole act once a misunderstanding is eventually proven to have occurred. This misunderstanding was caused, of course, by just another weak character. The proud John Thorpe was so sure that Catherine would become his wife that he decided to acquaint the world with his good luck and exaggerated the expectation of his supposed future wife's wealth and status. The heroine has neither an outstanding financial status, nor is she of superior birth, yet the circumstances she finds herself in seem to have tricked others into thinking she actually was – a mistake of their own prejudice, and one that Catherine has not suspected for a moment. She appears to be surrounded by evil, an evil situation which has General Tilney at its core.

While the house tour episode is the main trigger of Catherine's "enchantment" with the surroundings (Hofkosh 101), as well as her eventual awakening, there are other several instances where Catherine finds herself an unlikely heroine of the Gothic. She is amazed at finding "an old-fashioned black cabinet" (Austen 122) in the very regular room she has been assigned at Northanger Abbey. She feels quite embarrassed both at her own excitement and at Miss Tilney's discovery of this object. The latter calmly accounts for the object's presence. The fact that Catherine's chief finding in the drawers is not the diary of a "wretched Matilda", as Henry envisioned in his wild scenario (Austen 115), but a most unimportant note probably left and forgotten by a servant does not put an end to a fantasy she appears to be enjoying.

While Catherine appears to be carried away by the fantasies she encountered in novels, she does not allow them to completely shut her out of her own reality. The stories Catherine has read guide her by filling in the blanks of her wisdom and experience, but without ultimately concealing her own folly from her. They excite Catherine's instincts confronting danger which is nothing she has ever known before in her short, pleasant, and quiet life. The tension and the evil make her situation, indeed, delicate. Catherine is devoid of any immediate authority to protect her maybe not from literal imprisonment or murder, but from misfortunes of the more usual kind, such as humiliation or unsuitable marriage – misfortunes which, in real life, tend to equal the gravity

of those in the novels. Nevertheless, it is of utmost importance to mention that the Japan cabinet episode is primarily driven by Henry Tilney's scenario, while the events which are to follow are focused on his father who gradually becomes the Montoni of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* to Catherine. Much as she might try to temper herself, Catherine cannot help interpreting every new detail, be it about the late mistress of Northanger Abbey or its master. The General's morning walks and late-night readings, the seemingly too private circumstances of his wife's passing, as well as the consistency of the tension in the family dynamic seem far too suggestive for Catherine to resist them. Consequently, she allows a narrative of her own making to take control of her thoughts and actions. Catherine resolves to explore the apartments which do not seem to give her a moment of peace. To Catherine, they are the key to solving the mystery she cannot help reading into. The fact that the Gothic romance, which is her guide, deals with domestic danger, with the interior, with a book which might contain a note or a piece of furniture hiding some hint of violence fuels her quest. When exploring the rooms, she has become most interested in, Catherine realizes her own folly:

> Catherine had expected to have her feelings worked, and worked they were. Astonishment and doubt first seized them; and a shortly succeeding ray of common sense added some bitter emotions of shame. She could not be mistaken as to the room; but how grossly mistaken in everything else! (140)

Needless to say, there is nothing irregular, nothing strange or dark about the apartments, and the heroine's sense of shame brings her back to reality. But it seems that in order for her to really understand the nature of her own illusion and renounce it, there must be somebody to give her some explanations. That somebody happens to be not only he who has initially excited her imagination, but he whose appreciation and approval she is most ardently looking for: Henry Tilney, the object of her affection. Upon analysis, he immediately realizes Catherine's motives and feelings, and replies to them accordingly. He gives her the sad, but ordinary account of his mother's passing. He also describes to her the nature of his father's feelings and concludes with the following comment on Catherine's ideas:

> If I understand you rightly, you have formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly words to – Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. 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 […] (144)

This is one of the few instances when Henry Tilney addresses Catherine's feelings and confusions with such directness that she cannot possibly miss the reproach beneath his words. Young Tilney could not be a proper, omnipresent guide in this journey of hers as their bond, as well as his own problems, did not allow it, yet he is the only one able to really understand and finally "awaken" her (Austen 145). He basically determines her to reason and reconnect with her surroundings after having presented very clearly the truth of the events that are of so much concern to the heroine. The reader may trust him as much as Catherine does, since he has proven himself to both in many previous instances. Yet, it is not to be forgotten in this particular case that Henry's own education, his delicacy, as well as his filial duty, might have prevented him from giving a perfectly accurate account, at least when it comes to his father's character. As Mary Waldron argues, "he cannot, because of current standards of filial respect, say, My father is a cruel and hateful man and that is why you feel as you do", even if he manages to say just enough to clear the General of Catherine's suspicions (33). It is exactly this piece of information which he cannot share that the heroine has learned through her novels.

When Jody L. Wyett discusses Catherine's supposed typology as a reader, she argues that,

> If Catherine is a bad reader because she fabricates stories from the conventions of her Gothic reading matter to explain what she cannot understand in the real world, then we must reconcile her supposed reformation with the fact that her initial perceptions are often not far from the "truth" of her social reality, and intimate knowledge of novel conventions is necessary for the understanding of the characters within this novel as well as for readers of it. (268)

While the heroine was wrong and exaggerated in her supposition, there was, as explained by this quote, some truth in her seeing evilness in her surroundings and, more specifically, in General Tilney. Her shame in having taken her instincts too far is only natural and formative in its own right. Yet, while she had been foolish, she had never been dumb – and that is, to a certain extent, thanks to her reading, which provided an unlikely, yet useful set of ideas.

Catherine, an avid reader of Gothic novels, did not simply excite her imagination too far – as it may appear on a first reading of *Northanger Abbey* – fiction developed her instincts and awakened her sense of danger, helping her figure out a truth she needed to know, but which no one could tell her. At a time when no previous experience, knowledge or wisdom could guide her steps, Catherine found a sense of direction in the novels she read. In other words, fiction came in to help her make sense of the world and ultimately shape it.

In conclusion, the analysis of Austen characters' reading habits adds important points with regard to their personalities, development, success, and misfortunes. While *Northanger Abbey* is the most straightforward of the Austenian novels in showing the way fictions shape the world even within fiction, each and every Austenian novel is connected to the reading habits of the novelist's time. Austen employs these reading habits in order to support the characters and the development of the narrative.

## WORKS CITED

Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*, introduction by David Blair. Wordsworth Editions, 1993.

Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. Harper Collins, 2010.

Birke, Dorothee. "The Institutionalization of Novel Reading: Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey". *Writing the Reader: Configurations of a Cultural Practice in the English Novel*. Walter de Gruyter, 2016, pp. 91-125.

Hofkosh, Sonia. "The Illusionist: Northanger Abbey and Austen's Uses of Enchantment." *A Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite, Blackwell, 2009, pp. 101-112.

Malina, Debra. "Rereading the Patriarchal Text – The Female Quixote, Northanger Abbey, and the Trace of the Absent Mother." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol 8, no. 2, 1996, pp. 271-292.

Mathison, John K. "Northanger Abbey and Jane Austen's Conception of the Value of Fiction." *ELH*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1957, pp. 138-152.

Todd, Janet. "Preface." Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Cambridge UP, 2006, pp. xxiii-lxi.

Uphaus, Robert W. "Jane Austen and Female Reading." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1987, pp. 334-345.

Waldron, Mary. *Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time*. Cambridge UP, 2001.

Wyett, Jody L. "Female Quixotism Refashioned: Northanger Abbey, the Engaged Reader, and the Woman Writer." *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2015, pp. 261-276.