

The Grandeur of the Abbey: Exploring Gothic Architecture in Novels by Helen Maria Williams, Ann Radcliffe, and Jane Austen

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IN *NORTHANGER ABBEY* JANE AUSTEN DRAWS A LINE between the contemplative sublimity of architectural Gothic form, what the narrator terms “the grandeur of the Abbey” (182), and the grotesque, sensationalist distortions of the genre we today label “gothic fiction.” The word “Gothic,” when used in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British discourse was synonymous with “medieval.” When Horace Walpole published his novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) with the subtitle “a Gothic story” he was signifying “a medieval story,” presenting it to the public as an early sixteenth-century tale discovered “in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England.” Austen also uses the word “Gothic” to signify “medieval,” referring to the “Gothic” “form” and “Gothic ornaments” of Northanger Abbey, but never once using the phrase “gothic novel.”¹ Austen’s interest in the actual sublimity of Gothic architecture stands apart from her satire of the irrational horror raised by eighteenth-century writers who manipulated medieval settings to sensationalist ends. In her “Essay on the Supernatural in Poetry” (first written in 1802/03), Ann Radcliffe seeks to distinguish her work from the “horror” genre represented most graphically by Matthew Lewis’s novel *The Monk* (1796). Austen supports this distinction by having *The Monk* endorsed by an unlikeable character, John Thorpe, and then by praising Radcliffe through her novel’s hero: Henry Tilney.

Henry Tilney not only admires Radcliffe’s fiction but also has “a knowledge of Julias” (121), a reference that hints at the influence of Helen Maria Williams’s *Julia: A Novel Interspersed with Poetical Pieces* (1790). The heroine of *Julia* encounters a ruined Gothic abbey in the north of England. Similarly, the heroine of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) explores a ruined abbey in the south of France. Though Austen refers to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) more explicitly in the first volume of *Northanger Abbey*, Volume Two contains multiple allusions to *The Romance of the Forest*, whose heroine experiences a protracted stay within a Gothic abbey. Through their visually rich descriptive prose, both Williams and Radcliffe imbue Gothic abbeys with an atmosphere of sublimity, but they also illustrate how an irrational engagement with the apparent mysteries of Gothic architecture could have destructive results. Through her description of Northanger Abbey, Austen too suggests the aesthetic, contemplative delights of Gothic form, even as she cautions against the imaginative excesses into which they may lead a naïve connoisseur.

In the opening pages of *Northanger Abbey*, Austen clearly constructs Catherine Morland in response to the more idealized heroines of Williams and Radcliffe. At the beginning of her narrative Julia Clifford, the protagonist of Williams’s novel, is a hapless young girl raised by a struggling widower; Adeline de Montalt, the protagonist of Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest* is an orphan who has never known her mother and whose father has been murdered. By contrast, Catherine Morland’s father is a clergyman, “without being neglected, or poor” (5), and her mother is a robust woman of plain sense and good constitution. Austen also distinguishes her heroine from those of Williams and Radcliffe by her appearance. Williams describes her heroine as having “a madona [sic] face” (3); Radcliffe’s Adeline has “An eye, / As when the blue sky trembles thro’ a cloud / Of purest white” (James Thomson, qtd. 17). Austen’s heroine Catherine, on the other hand, has “sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features” (5). At fifteen she is “almost pretty” (7), and at seventeen she is “pretty” (16), but Austen never describes her heroine as “delicately beautiful” (Radcliffe 17).

from William Gostling’s
A Walk in and About the City of Canterbury.
Courtesy of the Huntington Library.

Austen’s realism prevents her from giving her heroine the almost super-human beauty, creativity, and virtue that

Williams and Radcliffe attribute to theirs. In her review of *Julia* Mary Wollstonecraft argues that “the most exemplary degree of rectitude” (99) displayed by Julia makes her a somewhat implausible character. Radcliffe’s heroines are also remarkable for their moral fortitude. Even when Radcliffe’s long-suffering heroine Adeline becomes the target of another woman’s envious rage, she finds peace in the knowledge of her innocence and “the consolations of virtue” (201). The ironic and sensible Austen does not assign impeccable virtue to her heroine but tells us that Catherine “had neither a bad heart nor a bad temper; was seldom stubborn, scarcely ever quarrelsome, and very kind to the little ones, with few interruptions of tyranny” (6). Catherine’s moral imperfections—the narrator implies that she does occasionally lapse into stubbornness, quarrelsomeness, and even tyranny—contrast with the almost saint-like qualities of Julia and Adeline. When she encounters difficulties, Catherine experiences “[f]eelings rather natural than heroic” (92); she does not take pride in her “conscious innocence” (92) but instead admits her fallibility.

What the three heroines of Williams, Radcliffe, and Austen do have in common, however, is a keen sensitivity to the contemplative sublimity of natural landscapes. In her own use of landscape to reflect character development within her heroines, Austen questions Edmund Burke’s hierarchical dualism between a powerful (masculine) sublimity that strikes “terror” into the viewer and a comforting (feminine) beauty that inspires “love,” first outlined in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757, 1759). Austen also illustrates the limitations of William Gilpin’s additional third category, the playful picturesque that prompts “curiosity,” and she even mimics Gilpin’s ideas with gentle satire in *Pride and Prejudice*. By the time she wrote *Mansfield Park*, in particular, Austen had moved beyond the categories of Burke and Gilpin to envision a response to nature marked not by terror, love, or curiosity, but by a communal “serenity” (MP 124), “harmony” and “repose” (MP 132).²

In moving through and beyond the categories of both Burke and Gilpin, towards an aesthetic response to nature marked by peaceful contemplation and social consciousness, Austen parallels the work of early nineteenth-century aesthetic theorist Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck. Schimmelpenninck’s *Theory on the Classification of Beauty and Deformity* (1815) engaged with previous theorists, such as Hogarth, Burke, and Gilpin, in order “to combine all their several systems into one whole” (7) that supersedes them all, thus exposing their prior limitations.³ Schimmelpenninck’s aesthetic “whole” moves beyond both Burke and Gilpin by including four categories in total: the “terrible,” the “sentimental,” the “contemplative,” and the “sprightly.” She thus acknowledges Burke’s “terrible” sublime and “sentimental” beautiful, as well as Gilpin’s “sprightly” picturesque but also supplements the systems of both Burke and Gilpin with a new category in British aesthetics: the “contemplative sublime,” characterized by “calm, placid, unshaken” “serenity” and “dauntlessness” (46). Though Schimmelpenninck was the first British writer to theorize this new aesthetic category in non-fiction prose, she acknowledges her indebtedness to the imagery found in “works of British and female genius” (67) published approximately “twenty years” (67) before her own treatise, in the 1790s, the decade within which Williams and Radcliffe published their novels.

Like Schimmelpenninck, Jane Austen acknowledges the importance of her literary foremothers through her narrator’s inclusive statement on women novelists: “Let us not desert each other; we are an injured body” (30). Though Austen does satirize gothic horror in *Northanger Abbey*, she discourages the view of Radcliffe’s work as merely popular, visceral sensationalism. It is the increasingly unreliable interpreter John Thorpe who associates Radcliffe, whose novels he has *not* read, with Monk Lewis’s gothic grotesqueries. Henry Tilney, the hero of the novel and a highly admirable and discerning character, implicitly corrects Thorpe’s view in a conversation with Catherine and his sister Eleanor, set against the natural backdrop of Beechen Cliff. Henry Tilney first establishes his authority as one who has “read all Mrs. Radcliffe’s works, and most of them with great pleasure” (107-08), a fact supported by his sister’s “testimony” (108). He then associates Radcliffe’s novels not with gothic horror but rather with a growing tradition of female bildungsroman, novels of feminine character development focused on intelligent and creative heroines. Insisting on his “knowledge of Julias” (108), Henry emphasizes not only his knowledge of Radcliffe’s writing but also of Williams’s. When we depart from John Thorpe’s association of Radcliffe’s novels with sensationalist horror tales and follow Henry Tilney’s grouping of them with the poetic landscapes of Williams’s *Julia*, different, more contemplative, aspects of these novels emerge.

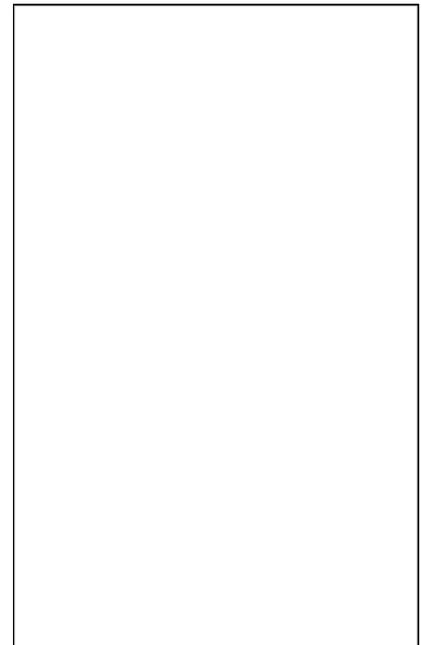
Both Williams’s Julia and Radcliffe’s Adeline find soothing peace in nocturnal natural landscapes that lift their gaze beyond themselves. In *Julia* Williams’s tenderhearted heroine explores northeastern England with her cousin Charlotte and is drawn to scenes of contemplative sublimity that exceed anything her poetic imagination had previously painted. The narrator notes of Julia:

She had, until now, only seen the rich cultivated landscapes of the south of England; but her ardent imagination had often wandered amidst the wild scenery of the north, and formed a high idea of pleasure in contemplating its solemn aspect; and she found that the sublime and awful graces of nature exceed even the dream of fancy. (32)

Julia and Charlotte walk near a mountain lake in the evening, with its “pensive gloom so soothing” to Julia’s “soul” (32). When the moon “beams suddenly spread their light over the whole lake, except where long deep lines of shadow were thrown from the rocks on its surface,” Julia experiences “transport,” “admiration and wonder” (32). Williams’s narrator reflects on how such scenes lead us to “repose with divine confidence” on the “Deity” “who has thus embellished his creation” (32). Julia later crystallizes this experience of contemplative sublimity into a poem, her “Sonnet to the Moon,” which reflects, “To me congenial is the gloomy grove, / When with faint rays the sloping uplands shine” (136, ll. 5-6). Radcliffe’s heroine Adeline also moves from contemplating “gloom and silence” (22) to “confiding in the benevolence of

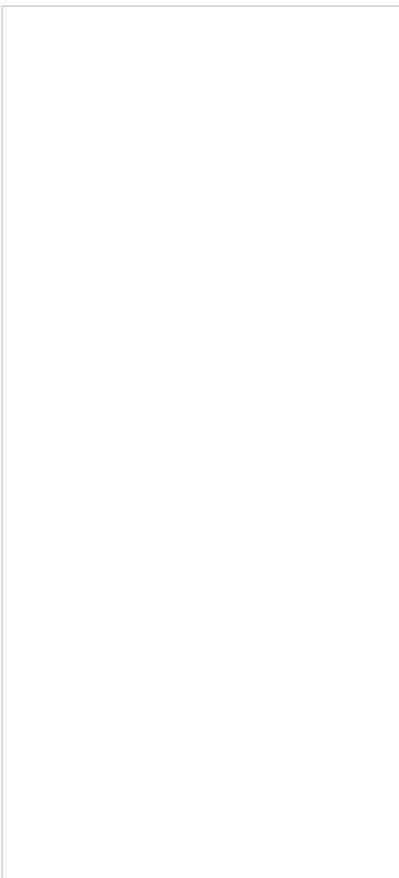
God" (22) and eventually praising nocturnal landscapes as conducive to "pensive thought" and "peace" in her poem "Night" (294, ll. 3, 16).

At first, Jane Austen's heroine Catherine expresses her love of nature in a tomboyish manner that differentiates her from Williams's sensitive Julia or Radcliffe's "delicate" Adeline, but as Catherine matures she reaches a more sober appreciation of contemplative sublimity in natural landscapes that draws her closer to these earlier heroines. As a young girl, Catherine "was fond of all boys' plays, and greatly preferred cricket not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, [or] feeding a canary-bird" (5). Catherine's indifference to vulnerable creatures stands in direct contrast to Williams's Julia, who saves a linnet's life and writes an elegy to a fallen thrush, and to Radcliffe's Adeline, who befriends a fawn in the forest. Austen's narrator informs us that the young, "wild" Catherine embraced the pleasure of the outdoors with a self-centered joie de vivre: she "hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house" (6-7). Unlike Julia and Adeline, Catherine "could not write sonnets" but "brought herself to read them" (8). As she matures, Catherine tastes the delights of intellectual conversation during her sociable walk at Beechen Cliff with the Tilneys, experiences a moment of isolating fear during a thunderstorm at the abbey, comes to love a hyacinth under the tutelage of Eleanor Tilney, and finally shares a mournful moment of sublime repose with Eleanor in a "gloomy" grove of Scotch firs (183).⁴ Catherine thus moves from an appreciation of the picturesque (in amiable social interaction at Beechen Cliff), to the Burkean sublime (the thrill of a thunderstorm during her first night in the Abbey), to the Burkean beautiful (love of a small flower), and finally the contemplative sublime (pondering the past with Eleanor in a space previously loved by Mrs. Tilney).



The Inside of Canterbury Cathedral.
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Despite their variations in character, all three heroines—Julia, Adeline, and Catherine—are drawn to contemplative sublimity in gothic edifices as well as natural landscapes. The cultural fascination with Gothic architecture increased through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This shift in taste was largely due to the influence of Edmund Burke. Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1759) argues that "greatness of dimension" and "extension" (72) will almost always render an object sublime and reflects, "A perpendicular has more force in forming the sublime than an inclined plane" (72). These qualities of dimension and extension are found in Gothic cathedrals as well as in mountainous landscapes, and Burke addresses architecture specifically in his concept of the "artificial infinite" (139) created by a series of columns, such as those found in Canterbury Cathedral.



Burke asks "why a successive disposition of uniform parts in the same right line should be sublime" (141). For Burke, the artificial "infinite consists in an uniform succession of great parts" (139), but "uniform pillars set in a right line" are only sublime when there is an exact repetition in the shape of each pillar. "To produce therefore a perfect grandeur in such things as we have been mentioning there should be a perfect simplicity, an absolute uniformity" (142), which causes the eye to glide along the pillars into the distance. Spatial depth or vastness is sublime for Burke because ideas of infinite extension cause spectators to face their own limitedness and mortality, a terrifyingly sublime realization.

William Gilpin nuances Burke's duality between the terrifying sublime and comforting beautiful with a third category: the intriguing picturesque, within which he includes ruined abbeys. Gilpin's *Observations on the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmorland* (1788) notes three phases of Gothic development. He illustrates the early stage when "the round, Saxon arch began to change into the pointed one" (16) with Salisbury Cathedral. Gilpin's second stage, when enlarged windows were "trailed over with beautiful scrawl-work" and pillars "began to increase in height, and elegance" (16), finds expression in parts of Canterbury Cathedral.

Finally, Gilpin's third stage is marked by the decline of Gothic form in the "architecture of . . . the flat, stone, roof" (17) exemplified by King's College Chapel, Cambridge. Gilpin laments that the ornaments of this structure are "so affectedly introduced, and patched on" (17), as opposed to the middle, second style, "in which every ornament arises naturally from the several members of the building; and makes a part of the pile itself. Nor has the flat roof, with all its ornaments, in my opinion, the simplicity and beauty of the ribbed, and pointed one" (18). Like Austen and Burke, Gilpin prefers natural simplicity to self-conscious affectation.

For Gilpin, the unnatural affectation and ornamented polish of a flat-roofed structure like King's College Chapel is countered by ruined abbeys, with their more organic form. He argues, "the ruins of abbeys, . . . being naturalized to the soil, might indeed, without much impropriety, be classed" as a natural part of the British landscape (13). Later he reasserts "they may be called, not only one of the peculiar features of English landscape; but may be ranked also among its most picturesque beauties" (18). Despite arguing elsewhere that writers should avoid "rapturous epithets" (xix), Gilpin's own enthusiasm bursts to overflowing on the topic of ruins: "A ruin is a sacred thing. Rooted for ages in the soil; assimilated to it and become, as it were, part of it; we consider it as a work of nature, rather than of art" (188-89). J. M. W. Turner also naturalizes the ruin in his paintings of Tintern Abbey; as Deborah Kennedy remarks, "Somehow Turner animates the very stone, evoking a sense of mystery and awe" (83).

Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck sees mystery and awe in Gothic architecture, returning Gothic abbeys from the picturesque back to the sublime through the example of Tintern Abbey. She argues that exact followers of William Gilpin's aesthetic system could not fully appreciate "the silent remains of Tintern; especially when seen by moonlight, its brown shadow . . . dilated over the clear surface of the Wye, even to the woods of the opposite shore. For such a view is singularly destitute of that boldness, roughness, and irregularity, which they have pronounced constituent parts of the picturesque" (7). Alluding to Burke, she suggests the sublimity of Gothic form arises from its "altitude" (235), continuing, "Gothic architecture . . . though so much ornamented in its detail, strikes the eye at once by the perfect simplicity of its design, and by the marked perpendicularity of its lines" (262). For Schimmelpenninck historical, social associations are also central to the sublimity of Gothic abbeys. She asks why the aesthetic appeal of supposedly ancient buildings is lost when we are told they are in fact modern structures built "in imitation of the antique" (11).⁵ Her answer is that with the loss of the buildings' historicity we also lose "the association of valor, long established bravery, power, generosity, great deeds and high moral qualities, which we annexed to them" (12). For Schimmelpenninck ruined abbeys evoke the contemplative sublime because communities of prayer, contemplation, and benevolent action were alive within their walls for centuries. In the foldout explanatory chart at the very back of her book, she restricts the terrible (Burkean) sublime to "castellated" architecture, giving Norwich Castle as her example, and places "ecclesiastical" architecture under her unique category of the "contemplative sublime," providing "Tintern Abbey," "Westminster Abbey" and the "Crypt to Canterbury Cathedral" as her examples but also including Netley Abbey, a site visited by Jane Austen and her family.⁶

The representations of ruined gothic abbeys in novels by Radcliffe and Williams provide an important bridge between Burke's and Gilpin's depiction of architecture as a source of sublime terror or picturesque curiosity, respectively, and Schimmelpenninck's and Austen's references to ecclesiastical structures as evocative of contemplative sublimity. Janet Todd argues that Radcliffe's use of dark interiors "exemplifies the Burkean sublime" (*The Sign of Angellica* 261), but both Williams and Radcliffe modify Burke's definition of sublimity, expanding it to include contemplative repose as well as terror. Williams does follow Burke in depicting the heights of a Gothic ruin as dangerous. In her novel *Julia* the heroine is actually injured while exploring a ruined abbey with her cousin and friends. At first they move through a picturesque landscape marked by "wild variety" (66), but the scene shifts towards sublimity as they advance along "the edge of a precipice" (66). This "formidable road" (66) foreshadows the danger of the abbey itself, which is characterized by the "enlarged window" of Gilpin's second stage:

A mouldering gothic gate led to a spacious area overgrown with tall grass: huge fragments of stone, which had fallen from the decayed towers, were scattered upon the ground, and . . . towards the east a large gothic window, which shook at every blast, and appeared to be entirely supported by the branches of tall elms that had grown in the inside of the building. (66)

The others in her party express concern regarding the stability of this ruined structure, but Williams's heroine Julia, like Austen's Catherine, lets her enthusiasm carry her away:

Julia was eager to explore every part of the ruins, and ascended the staircase. . . . This ascent opened on a turret which commanded a noble prospect . . . Julia gazed from the turret on the sublime landscape which surrounded her . . . with that solemn emotion so grateful to a contemplative mind. "Surely," thought she, (in the fervor of an elevated spirit,) "surely the inhabitants of this retreat were happy!" (67)

Prompted by the sublimity of her surroundings, Julia imagines the lives of the medieval nuns who had inhabited the abbey in a moment of "contemplative" elevation. With a Johnsonian irony that predates and perhaps influenced Austen's, the narrator brings her back down to earth, responding to Julia's effusion with a wry comment: "Such were the reflections which passed in Julia's mind, but which only lasted till she was out of sight of the abbey" (67). Nevertheless, for Williams, as for Schimmelpenninck, associations of past community imbue Gothic structures with their contemplative sublimity.

Williams next emphasizes the actual, physical perils of the ruined structure. As Julia descends from the turret, her cousin Charlotte hopes that she is "not determined to take up her abode at the abbey; because . . . though our own house is less sublime, it has the advantage of being roofed" (67). This gentle, corrective use of Horatian satire to temper sublime enthusiasm is paralleled not only in the teasing of Catherine by Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* but also in the dialogue between the Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* where Marianne's profession of "transporting sensations" in autumn is answered by Elinor's raillery: "It is not every one . . . who has your passion for dead leaves"

(101). In Williams's narrative, Charlotte essentially reminds Julia that not every one shares her "fervor" for a ruined abbey. Julia consents to leave the abbey, but as she passes through its Gothic gate,

a gust of wind shook the building, and some loose stones fell from the top of the wall and rolled with velocity down the hill, in the direction where Julia was walking. . . . She received . . . a blow from a small stone, that struck her ankle [sic], which was bruised by the stroke, and became swelled and painful. (68)

Just as Marianne in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* will catch a fever after walking out in a sublime landscape, Julia is "overcome with pain of body and agitation of mind" (68) after her accident at the abbey and spends several days confined in bed with a fever.

One year after Williams published *Julia*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* appeared. In her *Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen* Janet Todd argues that *The Romance of the Forest*, in particular, "provides creepy parallels to the abbey imaginings" (38) of Austen. Todd also suggests that both Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* and her later *The Mysteries of Udolpho* were appreciated by Austen "for their powerful engagement of the reader with their terrified but resourceful heroines" (38). Radcliffe's protagonist Adeline indeed displays remarkable wit, fortitude, and courage within the ruined Abbey of St. Clair.

Adeline's responses to the sublimity of the abbey and its surroundings bear fruit in her poems, which express Burkean terror, but in the reality of the narrative action she is able to keep her fear—and imagination—in check. She is not paralyzed in passive horror but enlivened by a sublime terror that leads to dauntless action. Adeline encounters the ruined Abbey of St. Clair while under the care of Monsieur de La Motte and his wife, who are fleeing their debts in Paris. Monsieur de La Motte sees the abbey as a refuge within which he can hide. The narrator describes his initial view of

the Gothic remains of an abbey: it stood on a kind of rude lawn, overshadowed by high and spreading trees, which seemed coeval with the building and diffused a romantic gloom around. . . . A Gothic gate, richly ornamented with fret-work, which opened into the main body of the edifice, but which was now obstructed with brush-wood, remained entire. Above the vast and magnificent portal of this gate arose a window of the same order, whose pointed arches still exhibited fragments of stained glass. (15)

La Motte is initially transfixed by the abbey and, like Williams's Julia, finds himself imagining the community of worship that once prayed and lived together within its walls. When "he entered what appeared to have been the chapel of the abbey, where the hymn of devotion had once been raised . . . he felt a sensation of sublimity rising into terror—a suspension of mingled astonishment and awe!" (15). While contemplating "ages past" (16), his imagination intensifies with the "deepening gloom" as he passes from the "chapel" through the "nave" and "cloisters." When La Motte brings Adeline, his wife, and his servants back to the ruined abbey after nightfall, Adeline observes his growing fearfulness and "with a smile, inquired of La Motte if he believed in spirits" (my italics 18). As Claudia Johnson points out, "placed alongside men who are not to be valued especially for their self-command, or their valour . . . Adeline behaves like a pretty good man" (78). Later on, when the La Mottes and Adeline have retreated into the depths of the abbey, away from an intruder, La Motte is too frightened to leave this hiding place, and Adeline "surmounting her fears, . . . offered herself to go" (62).

Jane Austen's initial representation of the snugly renovated, inhabited Northanger Abbey follows neither Gilpin nor Turner but does pick up on Williams's and Radcliffe's subtly ironic cautions regarding enthusiasm for abbeys. Within her own response to gothic aesthetics in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen parodies fearful, individual reactions to gloomy ruins but also allows for aesthetic, communal appreciation of Gothic form. As Narelle Shaw argues, "Austen uses free indirect speech to comic effect" by giving us glimpses into Catherine's consciousness, "emphasizing the conviction with which Catherine believes in a gothic world" (343). When the Tilneys first invite Catherine to stay in their home, the narrator reflects: "She was to be their chosen visitor, she was to be for weeks under the same roof with the person whose society she mostly prized—and, in addition to all the rest, this roof was to be the roof of an abbey!—Her passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney—" (143). Here, Austen's representation of Catherine's passion for Gothic abbeys is in accord with Schimmelpenninck's observation of medieval architecture's emotional appeal: "Perhaps it was this impression which led Horace Walpole to say that Grecian architecture was addressed to the tastes, and Gothic architecture to the passions" (262).

Catherine passionately looks forward to sharing in the abbey adventures of her favourite late eighteenth-century novels—perhaps imaging herself climbing a high turret overlooking a sublime landscape, like Julia, or exploring the cavernous recesses of gloomy naves and cloisters, like La Motte—but her Gothic imaginings collide with the prosaic realities of Northanger, the "improved" home of General Tilney. Elinor Tilney initially intensifies Catherine's passion by assuring her "of Northanger Abbey having been a richly-endowed convent at the time of the Reformation" (144). Catherine has been reading Radcliffe, and so she hopes for "long, damp passages" "narrow cells and [a] ruined chapel" (143). These hopes are sorely disappointed on her arrival at the abbey. As she approaches Northanger, Catherine expects "with solemn awe" to see "the last beams of the sun playing in beautiful splendour on its high Gothic windows" (164), but she is instead confronted with the reality of a "low" building without even one "antique chimney" (164). There is no sublime perpendicularity. The narrator reflects Catherine's response to the windows inside the abbey: "The windows, to which she looked with peculiar dependence, from having heard the General talk of his preserving them in their Gothic

form with reverential care, were yet less what her fancy had portrayed. To be sure, the pointed arch was preserved—the form of them was Gothic—they might be even casements—but every pane was so large, so clear, so light!” (165-66). Catherine’s imagination, which had expected intricate scrawl-work and broken stained glass, is thwarted by the modernized technical functionality of the abbey.

Similarly, in her non-fiction travel narrative, *A Tour in Switzerland* (1798), Helen Maria Williams notes the effect of the industrial revolution on “Gothic abbeys . . . transformed into manufactories” (21) by the post-Reformation Swiss populace:

the hollow echoes of the long-resounding aisles, which were once only responsive to the solemn, slow-breathed chant, now repeat the rude dissonance of the workman’s tools. A strange confusion of images is excited in the mind by the present contemplation of these antique edifices, which imagination has been accustomed to appropriate to congenial inhabitants, pacing silently along their vaulted passages in floating garments, instead of which you now meet the bare-armed, brawny artificer, and all the ideas of solemn stillness vanish amidst the rude gabble of his noisy brood. No doubt an artisan is far more useful than a monk, but he looks much less picturesque when placed beneath a ruined arch, and gazed at in perspective. (21-22)

Before Austen’s light satire of William Gilpin’s reverence for “sacred” Gothic ruins, Williams was already placing nostalgic yearnings for picturesque monks in ironic tension with the pragmatic modern purposes an abandoned abbey could fulfill.

Strangely, in their representations of Catherine’s approach to the abbey, neither the 1987 nor the 2007 film adaptation of *Northanger Abbey* depicts Austen’s effect of intentional bathos—a fall from high expectations to low realities—created through Catherine’s severely disappointed imagination. When Austen’s Catherine first approaches the abbey, it is not at all what she has imagined, not at all like what one reads about in Williams, or Radcliffe, or even Gilpin. There is no view of a “grand broken arch . . . illumined by a departing ray” (Gilpin 84), and Austen’s narrator captures Catherine’s disappointment: “there was something in this mode of approach which she certainly had not expected. To pass between lodges of a modern appearance, to find herself with such ease in the very precincts of the abbey, and driven so rapidly along a smooth, level road of fine gravel, without obstacle, alarm or solemnity of any kind, struck her as odd and inconsistent” (164-65). The lack of danger, difficulty, and terror in Catherine’s approach to the Abbey is inconsistent with the “formidable road” leading to Williams’s abbey and the “wild and solitary” forest surrounding Radcliffe’s.

Austen’s emphasis on the clash between Catherine’s readerly assumptions about an abbey and *Northanger’s* reality is ignored in both film adaptations due to their eager imitation of popular Gothicism. In the 1987 BBC adaptation of *Northanger Abbey*, Henry’s transportation of Catherine to the abbey gates is accompanied by medieval-sounding music that accentuates its Gothic, rather than its modernized, aspects.

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Austen’s Catherine discerns the difference between *Northanger Abbey* and Radcliffe’s gothic *Abbey of St. Clair*, to comic effect, but the film Catherine remains agog. In Austen’s novel General Tilney makes his falsely modest comment about comfort and convenience when he notes Catherine’s critical eye, but in the film Catherine’s uncritical awe is maintained throughout. This effacing of Austen’s ironic juxtaposition between Catherine’s imaginings and the abbey’s reality is repeated, though on a smaller scale, in the 2007 adaptation.

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In the 2007 adaptation, Catherine sees the abbey and says, “It’s exactly as I had imagined; it’s just like what one reads about.” When Austen’s Catherine first sees the abbey, however, with its low stature and windows filled with clear glass, it is an affront to her imagination and pales in comparison to the abbeys she has read about. In Austen’s novel, it is only after spending a night in the abbey during a thunderstorm that Catherine believes she is “really in an Abbey” (171).

Catherine’s actual appreciation of the abbey’s full reality from a healthy aesthetic distance does not come until she is on a walk with Eleanor Tilney. She is then

struck . . . beyond her expectation, by the grandeur of the Abbey, as she saw it for the first time from the lawn. The whole building enclosed a large court; and two sides of the quadrangle, rich in Gothic ornaments, stood forward for admiration. . . . Catherine had seen nothing to compare with it; and her feelings of delight were so strong, that without waiting for any better authority, she boldly burst forth in wonder and praise. (182)

Here Austen uses Edmund Burke’s word for aesthetic responses to the sublime, “delight,” which he opposes to the

pleasure prompted by the beautiful. Austen combines the idea of “strong” delight with the words “struck” and “grandeur” to suggest architectural sublimity. However, Austen diverges from Burke in the lack of terror within this scene. In this fresh response to the abbey, Catherine is no longer controlled by “horror,” alone inside the abbey in nocturnal obscurity, but is now able to extend her discussions with Eleanor towards a rational assessment of the abbey’s actual, formal merit in the clear light of day.

Eleanor and Catherine, *Northanger Abbey* (1987).

Catherine is not paralyzed by Burkean fear of the abbey’s terrible sublimity but is rather “bold” in her praise and admiration of it as a real, aesthetic object, with its geometric “quadrangle” and artistically crafted “Gothic ornaments.” Catherine’s boldness comically alludes to Adeline’s fortitude in surmounting her fear within *The Romance of the Forest* and comes close to what Schimmelpenninck refers to as the “dauntlessness” (46) of the contemplative sublime.

Austen deploys “grandeur” in association with contemplative sublimity again in *Persuasion* while referring to the natural seashore at Lyme. In her descriptions of the seascape she does not focus on it as primarily a source of Burkean terror but emphasizes its role as a source of empowering contemplative repose. In lyrical descriptive passages Austen notes how the bay’s “dark cliffs” afford opportunities “for watching the flow of the tide, for sitting in unwearied contemplation” (103). She praises “the grandeur of the country” (104) surrounding Lyme and later evokes “the grandeur” (110) of the flowing tide on the sands at sunrise. These uses of the term “grandeur” to signify natural sublimity in *Persuasion*, the novel published by John Murray along with *Northanger Abbey* in one 1818 printing, suggest that Austen’s phrase “the grandeur of the Abbey” is not ironic but indicative of the abbey’s contemplative sublimity.⁷

In *Persuasion* Austen illustrates how dauntless social consciousness may arise from contemplative sublimity through Anne Elliot’s bold response to Louisa Musgrove’s accident. Just before this accident Anne shares a moment of contemplative sublimity with Captain Benwick as they consider the ocean view from the windy heights of the Cobb in light of “Lord Byron’s” poetic phrase “dark blue seas” (117). Louisa’s subsequent jumping from the Cobb draws Anne’s attention and then her heroic action. When Louisa rashly jumps a second time from the Cobb, she falls on the pavement to be “taken up lifeless!” (118). This accident amidst a sublime setting recalls Julia’s injury at the ruined abbey in Helen Maria Williams’s novel, but this accident is far more serious and strikes a momentarily paralyzing “horror” in “all who stood around!” (118). Even Captain Wentworth loses his strength, and Anne takes charge of the situation with a calm, unshaken dauntlessness. When she speaks, “Captain Benwick obeyed” (119), and when she says, “‘A surgeon!’ . . . it seemed to rouse [Wentworth] at once” (119). Her dauntless action lifts the men out of their despairing paralysis. Her steadfast calm amidst the horror of Louisa’s fall has arisen from her connection to sublime repose.

There is more evidence for Austen’s sincere respect for contemplative sublimity paired with social consciousness near the very end of another novel, *Sense and Sensibility*. After Marianne Dashwood’s serious illness, which has prompted her reform, she promises her sister Elinor,

‘we will take long walks together every day. We will walk to the farm at the edge of the down, and see how the children go on; we will walk to . . . the Abbeyland; and we will often go to the old ruins of the Priory, and try to trace its foundations as far as we are told they once reached.’ (388)

Austen here integrates Marianne’s interest in the contemplative sublimity of a ruined Gothic convent with her increased social consciousness. Marianne does not plan to walk alone to this ruin in solipsistic meditation but intentionally invites Elinor and plans a benevolent visit to a group of farmer’s children along the way.

Austen approves an attraction to Gothic architecture tempered by social consciousness. Just as the reformed Marianne imagines social interactions with a rural family while walking towards a Gothic priory with her sister, Catherine Morland is able to rightly appreciate Northanger Abbey’s “grandeur” while on a social walk with General Tilney and his daughter Eleanor. After Gilpin intensified the passion for Gothic ruins in the 1780s, Helen Maria Williams followed with her caution against the physical perils of such ruins in 1790, and Ann Radcliffe extended such caution from the physical to psychological dangers of enthusiasm for abbeys. Austen renders such enthusiasm with hyperbolic irony through Catherine Morland’s enflamed imagination in *Northanger Abbey*. However, her interpretation of Gilpin, like Williams’s and Radcliffe’s, is complex. Ultimately, Austen makes room for measured aesthetic responses to the grandeur of Gothic architecture, as long as those responses do not lead into melancholic self-indulgence or harmful speculation. Instead such delight should serve to strengthen real, affective bonds between sisters, friends, and the community as a whole.

NOTES

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1. The use of “gothic” to indicate to a specific body of fictional works became popular after Austen’s lifetime: Walter Scott initiated the literary critical use of the term in 1825 (O.E.D. entry for “gothic”).

2. See my chapter "'Sublime Repose': The Spiritual Aesthetics of Landscape in Austen" in *Jane Austen Sings the Blues* (2009) for more detail on Austen's witty engagement with the picturesque in *Pride and Prejudice* and construction of a mature aesthetic of contemplative repose in *Mansfield Park*.

3. For example, Schimmelpenninck claims that by reducing aesthetic experience to Burke's dichotomy "persons debar themselves from so many sources of innocent enjoyment" since "a consistent follower of Mr. Burke ought not to admire the cheerful landscape, varied with knolls and studded with white cots, or diversified with waving cornfields, poppies, and intersected by hedgerows, for a landscape of this sort comes neither under his definition of the beautiful or the sublime" (7).

4. See my article "'Motionless Wonder': Contemplating Gothic Sublimity in *Northanger Abbey*" for more in-depth analysis of the interaction between Eleanor and Catherine as they discuss Mrs. Tilney's death.

5. One example of such faux-Gothic structures, or follies, in *Northanger Abbey* is Blaize Castle, towards which John Thorpe rushes Catherine with urgency.

6. On Wednesday, June 22, 1808, Jane Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra, "I shall think of you tonight as at Netley, & tomorrow too, that I may be quite sure of being right—& therefore I guess you will not go to Netley at all." Later that year she wrote to Cassandra regarding a visit with her nephews, "I had intended to take them to Netley today . . . , but I am afraid there will be rain" (25 October 1808).

7. The full title of the Huntington Library first edition of this text is *Northanger Abbey: and Persuasion. By the Author of 'Pride and Prejudice,' 'Mansfield Park,' &c. With a Biographical Notice of the Author. In Four Volumes.* The publisher is John Murray, Albemarle-Street, London, and on the back of the title page, at the very bottom, are the words "London: Printed by C. Roworth, Bell-yard, Temple-Bar." The four volumes are a definite set—*Northanger Abbey* comprising volumes one and two and *Persuasion* comprising volumes three and four—and all four volumes are bound in matching green leather with gold gilt. Narelle Shaw argues that Austen's use of free indirect speech in *Northanger Abbey*, a technique more prominent in later novels such as *Emma* than in earlier work such as *Sense and Sensibility*, indicates that Austen was revising the narrative up until at least 1816, the year she was also finishing *Persuasion*.

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Helen is of the moralistic novel variety, and while it is more character driven than typical of the style IMO, the characters do serve (and suffer a little from) the overarching point of the story. The length got a little tedious, I must admit, but it did serve to illustrate the value of truth and honesty, even when falsehood seems necessary for the happiness of the deceived party, in reality it only causes more pain and distrust. She is a very clear sighted young woman and brutally Maria Edgeworth was the best-selling author in Jane Austen's

time, and it's not hard to see why. In Helen, she sketches some really excellent characters so that you sympathise with almost all of them. Helen Maria Williams's best known works are her several volumes of letters and sketches. They narrate the French Revolution, the Age of Bonaparte, and the restoration of the French Monarchy. She was a supporter of the revolution and she wrote these letters to her countrymen in England. Nevertheless, Williams wrote a number of antiwar poems during the 1780s, like Edwin and Eltruda and An Ode to the Peace. A Song Analysis. First Stanza.