“A Raised, Restless, and Frightened Imagination”:

Unconventional Reading in the Romantic-Period Novel

Megan Taylor

Department of English

McGill University, Montreal

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ABSTRACT

In Britain at the end of the eighteenth century, the reading public's size and diversity were rapidly increasing. There was an impressive growth in the production of books, periodicals, and newspapers, and a more open, accessible, and sophisticated network was developing for the circulation of such material. More people were reading, and people were reading more, than ever before. This proliferation of readers caused widespread anxiety among writers and thinkers of the age, for reasons both moral and aesthetic. Some critics worried that literary culture would deteriorate, polluted by the growing number of hack authors publishing inferior work. Others feared that certain intellectually vulnerable new readers – women, servants, other members of the lower classes – would be corrupted by the overly absorbed or affective reading that popular fiction encouraged. Recent eighteenth-century and Romantic literary criticism has focused on the prevalence and variety of these negative responses to Britain's burgeoning print culture – but this stance tells only one side of the story.

By examining the representation of readers in the work of six prominent Romantic-period novelists – Jane Austen, Eaton Stannard Barrett, Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Shelley, and Walter Scott – this dissertation demonstrates that such negative responses were not as pervasive as studies have suggested. Many critics have contended that most of these writers were opposed to, or at least suspicious of, Britain's expanding and various readership. In fact, they are some of its most interesting advocates. In contrast to cautionary moralists of their time, these novelists depict thoughtless, absorbed, or emotional reading both as a desirable end in itself and also, often, as a powerful means to foster community and encourage self-improvement. Such positive portrayals of affective or pleasurable reading in the Romantic-period, at a time when

Britain's print culture was changing so unpredictably, encourage us, today, to embrace the transformations of our own reading culture, as the digital age reconfigures our relationships with texts of all kinds.

RÉSUMÉ

À la fin du dix-huitième siècle en Grande-Bretagne, la taille et la diversité du public de lecteurs augmentent rapidement. On observe une croissance impressionnante dans la production des livres, périodiques et journaux, et le développement d'un réseau plus ouvert, accessible, et sophistiqué pour la circulation de tels matériaux. De plus en plus de gens lisent, et lisent plus que jamais auparavant. Pour des raisons morales et esthétiques cette prolifération de lecteurs cause une anxiété largement répandue parmi les auteurs et penseurs de la période. Certains critiques s'inquiètent d'une détérioration potentielle de la culture littéraire qui serait polluée par un nombre croissant d'auteurs amateurs publiant des oeuvres inférieures. D'autres craignent que certains nouveaux lecteurs intellectuellement vulnérables — les femmes, serviteurs, et autres membres des basses classes— pourraient être corrompus par la lecture trop absorbée et affective que la fiction populaire encourage. La critique littéraire récente du dix-huitième siècle et du Romantisme se concentre sur la prévalence et la variété de ces réponses négatives face au bourgeonnement de la culture de l'imprimerie de la Grande-Bretagne— mais cette position ne raconte qu'une partie de l'histoire.

En examinant les représentations des lecteurs dans les oeuvres de six romanciers proéminents de la période Romantique — Jane Austen, Eaton Stannard Barrett, Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Shelley et Walter Scott— cette thèse démontre que ces réponses négatives ne sont pas aussi répandues que ne le montrent les études. De nombreux critiques soutiennent que la plupart de ces auteurs seraient opposés à, ou au moins suspicieux de, l'expansion et la diversification du public de lecteurs. En fait, ils constituent certains des plus intéressants porte-paroles du phénomène. Contrairement aux moralistes conservateurs de leur

temps, ces romanciers dépeignent la lecture irréfléchie, absorbée ou émotionnelle comme un objectif désiré, ainsi que, souvent, un puissant moyen de créer une communauté et d'encourager l'amélioration de soi. Ces portraits positifs de la lecture affective ou plaisante dans la période Romantique – un temps durant lequel la culture de l'impression de la Grande-Bretagne change de façon imprévisible – nous encouragent, aujourd'hui, à épouser les transformations de notre propre culture de la lecture alors que l'ère digitale reconfigure nos relations avec toutes sortes de textes.

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Introduction

Conventions of Reading In The Reading "Revolution"

Written in an untidy cursive hand on the front paste-down end-papers of a 1734, third-edition copy of *The Lover's Secretary; or, The Adventures of Lindamira* (1702) is the following inscription:

Sue Gotobed

fond of reading Books of this

Description

A Silly girl

S. G.

This succinct self-portrait depicts what would become in Britain over the course of the eighteenth century a stereotype of a certain kind of reader: young, foolish, and often female, overly "fond" of "books of [a certain] description" – which we can infer, from the nature of the inscribed volume, to be sentimental tales.[1] Sue Gotobed's surname is apt, suggestive of the absorbed "silly girl" reclining in her private chambers, devouring sweetmeats and novels, neglecting her duties and corrupting her womanly delicacy. Constructed and perpetuated by moralists, writers, and thinkers of the day for whom the period's rapidly expanding print culture was a source of grave concern, the image of this languorous, debased reader is at the heart of my dissertation. Eighteenth-century and Romantic literary criticism has focused on the prevalence

[1] Sue Gotobed's copy of *The Lover's Secretary* has recently been acquired by McGill Library's Rare Books and Special Collections. James R. Forster describes the novel as "the first long English epistolary novel to deal with domestic life," whose plot centres on the star-crossed "love of Lindamira and Cleomidon, a barrister of Lincoln's Inn who must wed a rich lady chosen by his uncle or lose a good estate" (45).

and variety of such censorious responses to Britain's "reading revolution."[2] By examining the representation of readers in the work of six prominent Romantic-period novelists – Jane Austen, Eaton Stannard Barrett, Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Shelley, and Walter Scott – I shall demonstrate that such responses were not as pervasive as studies have suggested, and even that writers previously portrayed as opposed to, or at least suspicious of, Britain's burgeoning and various readership are some of its most interesting advocates.

Reinhard Wittmann's term "reading revolution" is a forceful but perhaps hyperbolic label to apply to the proliferation and growing diversity of the British reading public at the turn of the century. Yet, while it has proven difficult to determine the exact extent of changes in literacy rates or reading audiences,[3] we *do* know that book trade was booming: there was an impressive growth in the production of books, periodicals, and newspapers, and an increasingly open and sophisticated network of circulation for such material. Libraries – whether subscription, circulating, public, or private – were springing up everywhere, and reading clubs and coffee houses were reaching new heights of popularity.[4] It is safe to say that there were more people reading, and people were reading more, than ever before. This growth in readership caused widespread anxiety for reasons both aesthetic and moral.[5] John Guillory argues that the upper echelons of society were reluctant to lose the exclusive "cultural capital" that belonged solely to the "well-educated person" (ix), and that mass literacy, "the emergence of a 'common reader,' a

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[2] Wittmann 311.
[3] See, for example, Chartier, "The Practical Impact of Writing," esp. 157-8; Fergus1-9; H. Jackson esp. 5-9; Love 74-8; Manguel 22-3; Pearson 10-14; Raven, Small, and Tadmor 5-10.
[4] See Brewer 141-64; Chartier, "Labourers and Voyagers," 89-91; Garside, Raven, and Schöwerling 1:1-15; H. Jackson 1-59; Kelly, *English Fiction*, 1-5; Klancher 18-46; Piper 1-18; Raven, *The Business of Books*, esp. 221-56; Raven, Small, and Tadmor 5-15; St Clair esp. 115-21.
[5] See, among others, Brantlinger 1-24; Piper 1-4; Raven, "Promotion to Proscription," 179-81; St Clair 274-84; Tadmor 164-5.

literary 'public,'… could be actively resisted as a process of degeneration" (118). If reading became possible for just anyone, it "signifies to some social groups the possibility of upward mobility," access to culture and knowledge previously barred to them, while at the same time entailing "the devaluation of the cultural capital [already] possessed by other individuals or groups" (118). The rising popularity of novels in particular as "one of the earliest forms of modern, commodified mass culture" (Brantlinger 2) seemed to threaten the sanctity of this cultural capital. In her study on the development of taste as an aesthetic category in the late eighteenth century, Denise Gigante points out that "an increasing demand for 'ephemera,' such as newspapers, memoirs, and novels, posed a serious challenge to the poet who held himself responsible for creating (not catering to) the taste of the public. The danger was always the potentially 'bad' taste of the economically empowered consumer" (15). A writer could no longer be confident that he or she was addressing a select, and selective, audience. As Jon Klancher puts it, the "English Romantics were the first to become radically uncertain of their readers" (3).

It is this general "bad taste," this "devaluation of cultural capital" that William Hazlitt objects to when he complains in 1821 of the "dust and smoke and noise of modern literature" (206). Hazlitt uses the chaos and filth of urban, industrial imagery to disparage the mass production and mass consumption of contemporary literature that pollutes the "calm current of our reflections" (206). With this comparison Hazlitt may be following Wordsworth's example, who had connected modern urbanization and mass readership with the erosion of culture more than twenty years earlier, in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth blames the "increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident" to which "the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves" (64). The resulting productions of "frantic novels, sickly and stupid

German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant verse" have "driven into neglect" the high culture works "of our elder writers" (65).

Like Wordsworth and Hazlitt, Hannah More felt there was a "too-muchness" (Piper 5) to the era's proliferation of print. In her 1799 *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education,* she demands, "*who* are those ever multiplying authors, that with unparalleled fecundity are overstocking the world with their quick succeeding progeny?" (1:169). As a conservative moralist, More's objections were primarily on ethical rather than artistic grounds. She feared for the Sue Gotobeds of her day, worrying that the latest inundation of trashy novels would pervert the mind by causing "the glutted imagination soon [to] overflow[…] with the redundance of cheap sentiment and plentiful incident" (1:170). With this derogatory reference to sentiment, More attacks a crucial aspect of eighteenth-century literature, particularly in the development of the novel. Celebrating extremes of emotion and encouraging imitative responses in their readers, novels of sentiment and sensibility grew in popularity from the seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. This "preoccupation with intense feeling," Stephen Ahern argues, acquired cultural cachet, ultimately signifying "as a mark of social distinction" (13). Suzanne Keen suggests that such novels were also popular because of the perceived connection between sentiment, sympathy, and virtue. Enlightenment philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith theorized a society predicated upon a "universal, natural form of feeling" that "circulat[ed]… through the processes of sympathy" (Burgess 30). One could understand others by imagining how one would feel in their place and could govern one's own behaviour by imagining how it appeared to and affected others. Therefore "novels that invoked strong feelings enjoyed widespread popularity," Keen asserts, "in part because such fellow feeling was esteemed as the source of social bonds: sensibility was believed to lead to compassion and active

benevolence" (44).[6] Literature that focused on representing and eliciting affective responses – that is, reading with feeling, both experienced and expressed – was potentially a tool for moral instruction. Samuel Richardson certainly thought so, explaining that he designed Clarissa Harlowe as "a true Object of Pity" so that she could be an "Example to her Sex."[7] This didactic function might have been Richardson's aim, and that of other writers of sensibility, but Susan Manning contends that they were also conscious of the more dubious appeal of sensationalized literature that stirred the emotions rather than the intellect: "it was evident to commentators, practitioners and consumers alike," Manning argues, "that while the theory of the literature of Sensibility was about instruction, the practice – what kept people actually reading it – had more to do with pleasure" (86-7).

As the eighteenth century advanced, this fear of the more primal, "non-improving pleasures of sympathy" (Manning 87) grew alongside anxiety about an increasingly diverse and ungovernable readership. Hannah More was just one of many who worried that unsupervised, unchecked reading for pleasure might lead to mental and moral degradation. Patrick Brantlinger writes that "other evangelical and utilitarian literary reformers," such as Jane West, aimed "to provide wholesome reading" to counteract the damage that an immersion in popular fiction might cause (5). Writers who did not share the conservative politics of More and her fellows yet shared their concern about the uninhibited, overstimulated reading masses. Mary Wollstonecraft argued that if feelings were unduly indulged, readers would become mere "creatures of sensation" whose reading would foster an "overstretched sensibility [that] naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents the intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it

[6] See also Ahern 12-14; Littau 64-8; Manning 83-4; Van Sant 16-44.
[7] Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, 26 October 1748 (*Correspondence of Samuel Richardson* 8).

ought to attain" (66). For Barthes in the late twentieth century, to become "a creature of sensation" is part of the appeal of absorbed reading: "the pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas – for my body does not have the same ideas I do" (17). For many Romantics, however, this secession of intellectual control was a danger to be avoided. Even Wordsworth, who believed that poetry is under the "necessity of producing immediate pleasure" (73), distinguished between the superior, rational pleasure of poetry – "the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which [man] *know*s, and feels, and lives, and moves" (74, my emphasis) – and the "idle pleasure" of thoughtless, more physical pastimes such as "rope-dancing, or Frontiniac or sherry" (73). Romantic poetry may embrace sensibility, imagination, and "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (62), but it must also be written by someone who has "thought long and deeply" (62) and who draws from "emotion recollected in tranquillity" (82).

Growing fears about the dangerous allure of *un*tranquil, pleasurable reading often focussed on women readers, especially women reading novels. Wollstonecraft is specifically referring to female novel readers when she denounces reading that produces mere "creatures of sensation." Charlotte Lennox's novel *The Female Quixote* (1752), a reworking of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605), popularized the character of the misguided female reader, an extreme version of the "silly girl" reader Sue Gotobed. Lennox's heroine Arabella attempts to live her life according to the rules of chivalry that she reads about in novels and romances, with disastrous results. In the end she must be re-educated by the wiser men in her life to distinguish properly between fact and fiction. The "female Quixote" became a staple figure in eighteenth-century fiction and beyond, and a more general cultural stereotype about women readers in life as well as in literature. In a 1796 book of "Sermons and Exhortations," Joseph Morony castigates "the

fallen female, who, by novel reading, stores her mind with fantastic ideas, and sets morality adrift" (1:140). The general terms of his reproach suggest how much of a commonplace "the fallen female" novel reader had become. Novel reading was considered, to use Jacqueline Pearson's phrase, a "dangerous recreation" for women (196).[8]

The minds and morals of readers were thought to be at risk from the wrong kind of reading, but sometimes physical health became a concern as well. Overly absorbed or affective readers were thought to be more susceptible to "[u]ncontrollable weeping, inflamed passions, and irrational terror," "sensory stimuli" that are "pathological insofar as they are illustrative of a mind unable to rein in the impulses of the body" (Littau 5). Edward Barry described the deleterious physical impact of novel reading in 1797, suggesting that "the very mummery of tale… *swindled* tears from the eyes, and transport from the heart,… [giving] sensations it could not relieve" (Barry 69). Such adverse physiological effects of reading feature in Lady Bradshaigh's description of her response to Richardson's *Clarissa*. In a letter to the author, she complains that

> When alone in Agonies would I lay down the Book, take it up again, walk about the Room, let fall a Flood of Tears, wipe my Eyes, read again, perhaps not three Lines, throw away the Book crying out..., My Spirits are strangely seized, my Sleep is disturbed, waking in the Night I burst into a Passion of crying, so I did at Breakfast this Morning,

[8] For extended examinations of the figure of the female reader in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both in fiction and in life, see Joe Bray's *The Female Reader in the English Novel: From Burney to Austen* (2008); Richard De Ritter's *Imagining Women Readers, 1789–1820: Well-regulated Minds* (2015); Katie Halsey's *Jane Austen and Her Readers, 1786-1945* (2012); Kate Flint's *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (1995); Pearson's *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (1999).

> and just now again... It is all Weakness, downright foolish Weakness. I do assure you I do not agravate the Uneasiness I labour under, no, nor tell the worst."[9]

Lady Bradshaigh portrays her uncontainable emotional turmoil as pathological, taking on the qualities of a serious illness: she is "in Agonies," submerged in a "Flood of Tears," her "Spirits" are "seized," her "sleep" "disturbed." Her husband Sir Roger, a less affective reader whose "Impressions," Lady Bradshaigh admits, are "shewn in a more justifiable Manner," fears for her health, "beg[ging] for God's Sake I would read no more" and "threaten[ing] to take the Book from me."[10] These physical symptoms that Lady Bradshaigh herself attributes to "weakness" persist even after the initial reading experience is over, lingering like the symptoms of any disease after its contraction.

Such harmful effects, perceived to threaten the individual reader, had broader social implications. Regardless of its impression on the mind or body of the reader, the very act of indulgent reading could negatively impact daily life. According to Vicesimus Knox in 1778, novels which "pollute the heart…, inflame the passions…, and teach all the malignity of vice" (1:70) also cause "the consumption of time that might be more usefully employed" (1:71). In a 1795 number of *Sylph*, an anonymous reviewer describes with horror how he or she has "actually seen mothers, in miserable garrets, *crying for the imaginary distress of an heroine*, while their children were *crying for bread*: and the mistress of a family losing hours over a novel in the parlour, while her maids, in emulation of the example, were similarly employed in the kitchen"

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[9] Lady Bradshaigh to Samuel Richardson, 6 – 11 January 1749 (*Correspondence of Samuel Richardson* 52-3). It is difficult to take this hyperbolic account seriously, but whether or not her report is literally true, Lady Bradshaigh taps into contemporary fears about the physically vitiating influence of affective reading.

[10] Lady Bradshaigh to Samuel Richardson, 6 – 11 January 1749 (*Correspondence of Samuel Richardson* 52).

(qtd. in Epstein 219-220). In addition to its potentially corrupting content, the absorbing nature of such wayward reading could prevent people from attending to duties or otherwise improving activities.

The threat of such personal and domestic dissolution could even be eclipsed by the potential for widespread political upheaval. As Brantlinger writes, "in the context of the American and French revolutions, to some observers 'the press' in general seemed both poisoned and poisonous" (5). It seemed entirely possible that a newly literate mass readership, vulnerable to the seductions of sensibility and inflammatory rhetoric, would be infected with the revolutionary fever of the 1780s and 90s. The pro-revolutionary minister Richard Price intimated as much in his *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789) – the sermon to which Edmund Burke replies in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Price writes with enthusiasm that "I have lived to see a diffusion of knowledge, which has undermined superstition and error… I have lived to see THIRTY MILLIONS of people, indignant and resolute, spurning at slavery, and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice;… And now, methinks, I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading" (195). This "diffusion of knowledge" is not the spread of dry erudition or calm rationality. It is linked, rather, to passion, to an "ardour for liberty," and portrayed as a fire, "catching and spreading" through "thirty million[…] people." Price, of course, considers this flame beneficial to society – Prometheus's fire of intelligence, progress, and civilization, "a light" that "warms and illuminates *Europe*" (196). But it is also a violent "blaze that lays despotism in ashes" (196), and that might well rage on uncontrollably, burning everything to the ground.

In his rebuttal to Price, Burke also considers ardour and sensibility as potentially positive attributes, a necessary component of the public's love for their monarchs that guarantees a

unified, peaceful state. Such sensibility is controlled, kept in check by etiquette and calm rationality: it is "superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature" (66). Burke opposes this kind of rational feeling to the affective frenzy of the barbaric revolutionary crowd: he imagines "the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell" that the mob manifests when dogging the captive French royals to their prison (60-61). Burke seems to consider the revolutionary masses incapable of true "understanding," warning that the educated classes who support the revolution will be betrayed by the public they help to inflame: "Happy if learning, not debauched by ambition, had been satisfied to continue the instructor, and not aspired to be the master! Along with its natural protectors and guardians, learning will be cast into the mire, and trodden down under the hoofs of the swinish multitude" (68). As Jon Mee theorizes, Burke did not want radical "philosophers and literati" to "transmit their imaginative warmth to a crowd all too ready to be ignited into enthusiasm and translate imperfectly understood ideas immediately into violent action" (86). Burke's skepticism about the public's capacity for emotional restraint amplifies that of the writers discussed above about their readers. They all fear that the public's understanding is too vulnerable to withstand the immersive fantasy of sensational novels or the incendiary ideas of revolutionary rhetoric. If unchecked affective or pleasurable reading can erode a person's taste, judgment, intellect, morality, and health, what would become of a society made up of such citizens?

From these fears about the deterioration of Britain's culture, health, and political stability emerged a widespread attempt by writers and thinkers of the age to govern reader responses; the country's growing readership could not be trusted to choose proper reading material for itself.

What would become, by the twentieth century, the standard English literary canon was formed partly as a result of this urge to control who read what.[11] Certain older works and select poetry were invested with "high-cultural" status (Kramnick 1) and elevated above novels and serialized publications. This distinction had the contradictory effect of attempting to preserve the exclusive prestige of certain kinds of reading while such exclusivity undermined itself by attracting new readers who aspired to upward cultural mobility. Coleridge implicitly supports the formation of a canon when he argues for the need of a group he refers to as the "clerisy": a secular class of men, learned in all areas of the arts and humanities, who act "to diffuse through the whole community, and to every native entitled to its laws and rights, that quantity and quality of knowledge which was indispensable both for the understanding of those rights, and for the performance of the duties correspondent" (*Church and State* 43-4).[12] The general public's access to culture must be mediated to ensure that it only obtains knowledge that is "indispensable" for the preservation of its "rights" and the fulfilment of its "duties." So the clerisy are, among other things, "institutional guardians" for "literariness" (Mee 296), teachers and facilitators but also arbiters and censors, protecting certain people from certain types of literature and vice versa.

Many novelists themselves, those prolific contributors to low culture, attempted to become the arbiters and censors of their own form, composing careful instructions for how novels ought to be approached. Clara Reeve, author of the influential Gothic novel *The Old English Baron* (1778),[13] also wrote a treatise called *The Progress of Romance, Through Times,*

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[11] Brewer 158-61; Kramnick 1-12; Guillory vii-xiv, 85-133.
[12] Here Coleridge is describing the clerisy at the time of Elizabeth I, but Peter Allen argues that this description "must also be understood as a somewhat idealized portrait of the Anglican establishment in the early nineteenth century" (93).
[13] This novel was first published anonymously in 1777 as *The Champion of Virtue* but became better known by the name under which it was republished, with Reeve identified as the author, in 1778.

Countries, and Manners (1785), which is not just a history of the form's development but also a guide for readers of both romances and novels: "In the following pages," she writes in her preface, "I have endeavoured to trace the process of this species of composition,… and to assist according to my best judgment, the reader's choice, amidst the almost infinite variety it affords, in a selection of such as are most worthy of a place in the libraries of readers of every class, who seek either for information or entertainment" (1:iv). In taking it upon herself to determine, on her reader's behalf, those books which are "most worthy," Reeve reveals her trepidation about the "infinite variety" not just of books but also of their readers ("of every class") and ways to read ("for information or entertainment"). In 1796 another Gothic novelist, Elizabeth Bonhôte, added a two-volume continuation to her didactic work *The Parental Monitor* (1788) that included a discussion of novel reading. In it she echoes Reeve's emphasis on the necessity for leisure reading to be strictly regulated. Bonhôte asserts that reading novels is "a very rational amusement for a leisure hour, but like all other amusements, it must submit to proper restrictions, or it will become a misfortune: It must not only be temperately indulged, particularly by young people, but the indulgence of it should be under the guidance of those whose age, experience, or superior knowledge, can direct them in the choice of books" (4:54). This direction, she goes on to explain, will help young readers to avoid having "their minds misted,… forever thinking of enchantments, castles, ghosts, and dying lovers, assassinations, flowery vales, temples, or summer houses" (4:55) – all the trappings of stereotypically light, sentimental, or Gothic reading.

Bonhôte's disparaging reference to such romance conventions evokes the censure of critics such as More, Wollstonecraft, and Knox against the kind of affective or pleasurable reading that would "pollute the heart" and "inflame the passions" (Knox 1:70). To preserve cultural integrity, to safeguard the wellbeing of women and young people, and to maintain

domestic and political harmony, reading must be controlled and readers must be guarded against the seductions of affect, sensibility, escapism, and other forms of non-intellectual gratification in literature: unconventional reading. Conventionally appropriate reading is therefore the inverse: rational, canonical, supervised, or moderate, and usually a combination of all four qualities. Advocacy for such conventional reading appeared not just in didactic or educational works but in the very novels that enabled the dangerous pleasures of reading. Brantlinger insists that "the inscription of anti-novel attitudes within novels is so common that it can be understood as a defining feature of the genre" (2), and he argues that most novelists themselves believed that "at its best, [novel-reading] is simultaneously both wholesome and poisonous; at its worst, it is poisonous" (11). Many scholars have supported this conclusion in their examinations of Romantic-period novels. In the following chapters, I will offer an alternative analysis of some of these novels in order to challenge this critical consensus.

Using the very novels that supposedly portray reading in an "ambivalent or unambiguously negative" light (Brantlinger 11), I will show that there were many writers, even among those who are typically considered conservative, who were not afraid of the growing literary enthusiasm of their time. They did not reproach readers' "craving for extraordinary incident," nor believe that those who enjoyed "frantic novels" (Wordsworth 65) would suffer from an "overstretched sensibility" (Wollstonecraft 66). Neither did they unequivocally support the kind of conventional reading that contributed only to "rational amusement" or that "submit[ted] to proper restrictions" (Bonhôte 4:55). Indeed, they believed in the beneficial power of a "glutted imagination" (More 1:170) and reading that appealed to the heart and the senses.

In many cases, the ambivalence of these novelists about certain kinds of reading is part of their guerrilla defence: as we have seen, it was not a popular move to endorse the pleasures and

benefits of light or affective reading, and so these authors attempt, in some places, to camouflage such sympathies with didactic subplots and archetypal characters that seem to demonstrate the risks of reading with feeling or for fun. But they are like Sue Gotobed, the reader who has "a silly girl['s]" "fond[ness]" for sentimental books: the bite of her criticism is dulled by its inscription *in* a sentimental book, where only like-minded readers could be expected to discover it. Brantlinger might consider this paradox as conveying "the wholesome" antidote with the textual "poison" (5), but this would be a rather humourless reading of what is, after all, a tongue-in-cheek self-description (she signs it S. G.). The novelists I examine are often similarly sly, as we will discover that their supposedly negative attitudes towards pleasurable or emotional reading are often red herrings and sometimes Trojan horses, smuggling into their novels a defence of the kind of reading that they appear to repudiate. Other times they are more overt, explicitly demonstrating both the unequivocal advantages enjoyed by characters who read with feeling and for fun as well as the risks run by characters whose reading is solely motivated by intellectual ambition or supported by social convention or the standards of "high" culture.

Chapter 1, "The Disreputable Reader," analyzes brief scenes and minor characters in Burney's *Camilla*, Edgeworth's *Belinda*, and Austen's *Emma* and *Persuasion* that display affective reading or reading for pleasure. Contemporary criticism usually interprets these reading moments as flawed, exemplifying either excessive emotion or "bad" taste that seem to cry out for correction. I will argue, however, that each novelist portrays her disreputable readers in different ways to showcase the *lack* of harm caused by such reading: Burney suggests that affective reading is not only innocuous but can offer useful insights into character; Edgeworth defends pleasurable reading by indulging her own textual playfulness as well as that of the readers in her novel; and Austen allows that even her most foolish reading characters can choose books better

for themselves than their wiser, more educated friends.

Chapter 2, "The Conventional Reader," approaches this issue from the opposite side by examining intellectual, regulated, or socially acceptable reading in Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. These novels trouble the position held by Wollstonecraft, More, and others that conventional reading is necessarily equivalent to good reading. The serious, disciplined reading of Shelley's characters exacerbates their unhealthy ambition, isolating them from the positive influences of shared reading and community feeling. Their narrow, and narrow-minded, intellectual reading proves to be ultimately destructive. In *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, Austen explores the gendered power dynamics of reading. She examines, for instance, the conventional relationship of the docile female reader guided by the erudite male intellectual to investigate the way such formulas gloss over the complexities, both good and bad, of this kind of regulated reading.

My third chapter, "The Quixotic Reader," discusses Barrett's *The Heroine*, Scott's *Waverley*, and Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, which feature the kind of disreputable, pleasure-seeking, emotional readers who were minor or ensemble characters examined in my first chapter. Like those characters, these protagonists draw fire from critics of and characters in the novels for their foolish, romantic, or affective reading. Indeed, Barrett's Cherry Wilkinson, Scott's Edward Waverley, and Austen's Catherine Morland are all the more strongly condemned by critics because, as the authors make explicit, their reading is crucial, rather than incidental, to the development of their characters. For this reason they have often been categorized as "quixotic," part of the eighteenth century's vogue for characters who follow in the footsteps of literature's most famous misreader, Don Quixote. I argue that in these works, Barrett, Scott, and Austen depict novel readers, romance lovers, and other maligned enthusiasts of light literature not just as

innocent but as powerful in their own right. These quixotic readers earn long-lasting advantages from their emotional or pleasurable reading – greater knowledge, more social freedom, and stronger communal connections. Their reading fosters relationships with other people through sensibility's imaginative empathy, through shared taste, or even through divergent literary opinions.

Together, these chapters demonstrate that prominent novelists offered a significant alternative response to that of the cautioners, critics, and opponents of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries' "reading revolution," whose voices still predominate in our contemporary critical understanding of the period. Thus, while this study is neither a sociological nor a historical survey of actual readers, it offers a fresh interpretation of how Romantic-period novelists inscribed their work with reactions to the real-world phenomena studied by book historians, print culture specialists, scholars of reading, and affect theorists. Recent interdisciplinary monographs such as Deidre Lynch's *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (2015) and Merve Emre's *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (2017) have grappled with the question of how we should understand the feeling responses of historical readers since the eighteenth century, as English literature became a professional, institutional discipline as well as a culturally elevated activity or a thoughtless leisurely pastime. By basing my study on Romantic-period texts, I address this question in more detail at its earliest stages, and by looking exclusively at representations of reading in novels, I produce a body of evidence different from the sociologist's or the cultural historian's, for it reveals not how people used to read but how novelists believed and wished they would read. As Dorothee Birke puts it, "novels themselves…thus become critical instruments or commentaries on literary practice" (5).

Austen's novels anchor this dissertation for she is fascinated by the pleasures and

problems of reading, returning to them again and again in her work. My investigation throughout is underpinned by late twentieth-century criticism's re-valuation of affect, as a topic examined by and a mode deployed within primary texts, but also as a quality inherent in our own reading of such works.[14] My research demonstrates that a preoccupation with affective reading transcends traditional fictional categories and genres, appearing in the domestic realism of Austen and Edgeworth, Barrett's topical satire, Burney's saga of sensibility, Scott's historical romance, and Shelley's Gothic science fiction. This authorial preoccupation also transcends gender. While issues of gender are certainly at play in these novelists' representations of reading, interest in exploring such representations is not confined to authors of one sex or the other.[15] Indeed, by examining the work of four female novelists and two male novelists, my dissertation shows that both men and women writers were interested in addressing and dismantling gendered ideals and stereotypes of reading, including that represented by Sue Gotobed, the frivolous, impressionable, affective girl reader. In the end, I aim to answer the question that these conclusions raise: what might it mean for today's readers that important Romantic-period novelists resisted the sobering rehabilitation of literature to explore the benefits and possibilities of emotional, pleasurable reading?

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[14] Since the pioneering work of the 1990s by interdisciplinary scholars such as Laurent Berlant, Brian Massumi, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, attention to affect has infiltrated the study of English literature. See, for example, works cited above by Ahern, Keen, Littau, and Van Sant but also work such as Rachel Ablow's *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience & Victorian Literature* (2010) or Joel Faflak and Richard C. Sha's *Romanticism and the Emotions* (2014).

[15] It is perhaps no longer remarkable that two thirds of the writers I focus on are female, for, as we now know, "a high proportion of the novelists of the romantic period were women" (St. Clair 174). See also Garside, Raven, and Schöwerling 2:24; Mandal; Turner 31-59.

CHAPTER 1

THE DISREPUTABLE READER:

CAMILLA, BELINDA, EMMA, AND *PERSUASION*

Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) is a *locus classicus* for Romantic-period novels that are themselves vehicles of anti-novel sentiment, whose authors attempt to differentiate them from the supposedly inferior body of literature to which they belong. Hamilton accounts for this irony in the way that Brantlinger has described above, by arguing that writing against novels *in* a novel is a means by which to provide an effective "antidote to the poison; calculated to make an impression upon those to whom serious disquisitions would have been addressed in vain" (37). *Memoirs* is a warning to thoughtless young female readers, targeting those with a taste for both pseudo-philosophical novels, a literary trend that sprang up in the wake of the revolutionary debates of the 1790s, as well as the more common type of sentimental novel favoured by Sue Gotobed and found in any "circulating library" (85). Readers of the former genre are satirized in the character of Bridgetina Botherim, ugly, amorous, and ignorant (a particularly cruel caricature of the novelist Mary Hays), who "never read anything but novels and metaphysics" (38), and whose principal goal in life is to fill "the breast of some fond youth with…passion" (70). Readers of the latter, sentimental variety of novel are more gently but also more gravely criticized through the character of Julia Delmond. Julia is more virtuous and beautiful than Bridgetina, but her mind is nevertheless made equally vulnerable by reading about "all the joys and all the sorrows of the heroes and heroines" in novels – so much so that "wild and ungoverned imagination reigned paramount in her breast," and "the investigation of truth no longer had any charm" (86). While Bridgetina is ultimately

offered the chance to reform, Julia is sacrificed as a cautionary tale: deluded by her romantic fantasies, she is seduced and ruined by an unscrupulous rake, and eventually sinks under the weight of her crimes to die in penitent regret.

The three novelists discussed in this chapter – Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen – are commonly set alongside Hamilton, thought to share her distrust of readers who privilege feeling and imagination over moderation and reason. Their novels also feature readers, both male and female, who seem to foreshadow or take after Julia: naive characters whose affective reading leads them astray and who must be corrected by their more discriminating friends. An examination of Burney's *Camilla* (1796), Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), and Austen's *Emma* (1815) and *Persuasion* (1817) will demonstrate, however, that readers and critics both then and now have made too much of the rationalist agenda of these novels and the ill-effects that supposedly result from the disreputable reading depicted in them. In *Camilla*, Burney takes pains to portray all kinds of affective reading – a histrionic read-aloud performance of classic poetry, an emotional response to a father's letter, an indiscrete passion for romance novels – as potentially useful. Despite her reputation for didacticism, in *Belinda* Edgeworth defends reading for pleasure and models the delights of textual playfulness alongside her validation of serious literature and its more subdued gratifications. In *Emma* and *Persuasion*, Austen argues that even the least sensible people have the right to read what they want, and that no harm will come to them as a result. Through their disreputable readers, these novels argue that contemporary fears about reading for fun or reading for feeling are unfounded – that such modes of reading do not need to be proscribed or prevented, and that the turn away from affective reading at the end of the eighteenth century might not be as pervasive as described by the typical rise-of-the-novel narrative.

Books "Devoured with Kisses" in *Camilla*

The representation of Frances Burney as a novelist of restraint, dubious of her chosen medium and hostile to excess in any form, gains force from her own protestations. In a letter to her brother Charles she confesses that while *Camilla* is "to all intents & purposes a Novel," Burney shares the popular prejudice against that label: "I annex so merely to that title, in a general sense, a staring Love Story, that I hate so to call [*Camilla* by] it" (*Journals and Letters* 136). Burney's antipathy to "staring Love Stor[ies]" conveys a contempt for their immoderate sensibility that is apparent from the Preface to her first novel, *Evelina*. This Preface chides readers who approach her novel with "the gentle expectation of being transported to the fantastic regions of Romance, where Fiction is coloured by all the gay tints of a luxurious Imagination, where Reason is an outcast, and where the sublimity of the Marvellous rejects all aid from Sober Probability" (96). "Transported" reading is a synonym for affective reading, favouring the "fantastic," the "luxurious," and the "marvellous" that appeal to sensation and emotion over intellectual engagement. Burney affirms that no such sensory immersion or loss of rational agency should be sought in *Evelina*, and similar warnings abound in *Camilla*. While it makes liberal use of the conventions of sensibility to cultivate pathos for its sensitive and suffering heroines – extended emotional scenes of expressive familial devotion, improbably elaborate and painfully felt misunderstandings, and tragic, near-fatal illnesses – this is done, ostensibly, in order to use such melodrama against itself. The source of most of Camilla's difficulties, her "reigning and radical defect," as the narrator frequently reminds us, is "an imagination that submitted to no control" (*Camilla* 84). By nearly succumbing to a self-induced fever at the novel's climax, Camilla elicits her mother's sternest reproof: "it is time," Mrs. Tyrold commands

her daughter, "to conquer this impetuous sensibility, which already, in its effects, has nearly broken all our hearts" (882). Thoroughly chastened, Camilla agrees that all her troubles could have been avoided had she exercised more careful judgement and emotional self-command.

It is tempting to assume, therefore, that *Camilla*'s "tone of high moral seriousness" (Gruner 18) extends its general protest against emotional extravagance to its concern with reading, an important topic in the novel. Betty A. Schellenberg identifies *Camilla*, along with the rest of Burney's novels, as part of a tradition of "rational female fiction" that developed in the late eighteenth century. Schellenberg defines the works belonging to this tradition as "anti-sentimental novels of moral cognition, social survival, and courtship" (148), and one of their key attributes is a self-conscious preoccupation with the act of reading. Specifically, this "rational female fiction" promotes "a resistance to absorptive reading and to writing that represents a frivolous or harmful use of intellectual powers – in more positive terms, an insistence that reading engage the mind and be disciplined by rational self-control" (149). Burney's fiction, Schellenberg claims, idealizes readers who are "anti-sentimental," who "resist[…]… absorptive reading," who are "disciplined by rational self-control." If this were true, there are a number of absorbed readers in *Camilla* whose extremes of affect should be reproved – but these disreputable readers are not, in fact, made into the scapegoats that we might expect. The novel's treatment of such characters instead reveals that affective reading is not merely harmless but that it can be a reliable index of virtue.

Consider the novel's most extended scene of reading. Camilla and her friends first encounter the university student Melmond at the circulating library, where he was

> reading at a table, and who neither raised his eyes at their entrance, nor suffered their discourse to interrupt his attention; yet though abstracted from outward objects, his

> studiousness was not of a solemn cast; he seemed wrapt in what he was reading with a pleasure amounting to ecstasy. He started, acted, smiled, and looked pensive in turn, while his features were thrown into a thousand different expressions, and his person was almost writhed with perpetually varying gestures. From time to time his rapture broke forth into loud exclamations of "Exquisite! exquisite!" while he beat the leaves of the book violently with his hands, in token of applause, or lifting them up to his lips, almost devoured with kisses the passages that charmed him. Sometimes he read a few words aloud, calling out 'Heavenly!' and vehemently stamping his approbation with his feet; then suddenly shutting up the book, folded his arms, and casting his eyes towards the ceiling, uttered: 'O too much! too much! there is no standing it!' yet again, the next minute, opened it and resumed the lecture. (99)

This extraordinary display is just the kind of rapturous, transported reading that *Evelina*'s Preface rejects, and demonstrates the elevated, overwhelming feeling, the "impetuous sensibility," that is Camilla's ultimate flaw. Indeed, the symptoms of Camilla's self-inflicted illness near the end of the novel recall Melmond's reading frenzy: "her faculties" are "confused, hurried" and "permitted little more than incoherent ejaculations"; she too "trembled" (874), "cast her eyes upward," and "turned from side to side," (875); her "imagination" is "exalted," so much so that she cannot tell whether "what she experienced were a dream" (876); she is similarly "overpowered" (877), "wrapt up in [a] reverie, poignantly agitating" (879). This linguistic echoing aligns the affective expression of Melmond's reading with the feverish symptoms of Camilla's disease and strengthens the pathological connotations associated with absorbed readers of the late eighteenth century. By emphasizing this connection between sensibility and disease, the novel implies that Melmond's reading could be condemned as unhealthy.

This is not, however, what follows. He is laughed at by Lionel (100) and blankly ogled by Indiana (101-2), both superficial and emotionally stunted characters. But by those whom we recognize as the novel's moral protagonists, Melmond's impassioned absorption is well received: his readerly fervour amuses rather than alarms Camilla and even Edgar, "that frozen composition of premature wisdom" (375), to use Mrs. Arlbery's unkind but not inapt characterization. Indeed, when Melmond begins to read aloud a passage on the pleasures of family and quiet study in country retirement, the discerning Edgar "stood pleased and attentive to hear him" (101). The bookish Eugenia, raised to be a scholar's companion, has the strongest reaction to Melmond's fervent reading: "To Eugenia alone it did not appear ridiculous" (99), and, "enchanted, [she] stood on tiptoe to hear him, her uplifted finger petitioning silence all around, and her heart fondly repeating, O just such a youth be Clermont [her intended husband]! just such his passion for reading! just such his fervour for poetry! just such his exaltation of delight in literary yet domestic felicity!" (101). Although we cannot conflate her opinion with Burney's, especially as her immoderate response here is a little comic, Eugenia is the most morally upright character in the novel – her "abilities and… sentiments were each of the highest class, uniting the best adorned intellects with the best principled virtues" (51). And to her, Melmond is an ideal reader: his "passion," "fervour," and "exaltation of delight" in his pastime are indicative not of dangerous excess but of refined virtue and the correct valuation of "literary" and "domestic felicity." The second edition of *Camilla* further legitimizes Melmond's ecstasies by diminishing their pathological connotations while maintaining their intensity. Burney cuts down the above-quoted passage by more than half, removing every mention of his starting, writhing, beating, kissing, and stamping, but still describing his "pleasure amounting to ecstasy," his exclamations of "Exquisite!" and "Heavenly!", and his "shutting up the book" upon being overcome with

emotion only to open it "the next minute" to continue reading (*Camilla*, 2nd ed., 2:181-2).

In case we are tempted to conclude that Melmond's passion is more acceptable because he is a man, with a strong masculine judgment capable of keeping his more feminine feelings in check, Burney emphasizes the correlation between affective reading and virtue in characters of both sexes throughout the novel. Camilla's reaction to reading a lengthy letter of warning, advice, and encouragement from her father is powerfully affective, a product of her sensibility, and also reflects her emotional integrity. She begins perusing the letter with a tranquil mind, but she finds this equanimity impossible to maintain: "The calm sadness with which Camilla had opened her letter was soon broken in upon by the interest of its contents," and she runs an emotional gamut – through "shame" and "fears" (362) to "pride" and "modesty" (362). The sincerity of her feelings is given weight, just as Melmond's was, by the physical expressions her reading elicits: she is "touched to the quick" and "her tears flowed fast," her "blushes" "burn[ed]," and finally, "wholly subdued by the last paragraph," she "press[es]" the letter "with reverence to her lips" (363). Camilla has a similarly physical and emotional response to the letter Mr. Tyrold writes to Lionel upon the discovery of his cruel behaviour towards his uncle. Reading the letter, she "kissed in weeping the handwriting," "sunk upon her knees" (733), and "wept over [it] till its characters were almost effaced by her tears" (734).

Just as the most emotional readers turn out to be the most upstanding characters, the opposite is also true: a superficial relationship with reading signals a concomitant lack of morality. The long-anticipated, supposed scholar Clermont Lynmere finally returns from the continent in the middle of Book VII to reveal himself as a vain, cold-hearted glutton who reads nothing but newspapers (567) and who dismisses his intended bride Eugenia for her "learning," which "is worse than her ugliness" since "'twould make me look a dunce in my own house"

(579). Similarly, the foppish Sir Sedley, though naturally clever, has long lost the habit of "reflection… which had quitted her post, to make room for affectation, vanity, and every species of frivolity." Reading in particular "had been his least occupation, except the mere politics of the day" (406). Burney is just as critical of unfeeling readers as she is of non-readers. Dr. Orkborne, the tedious, self-absorbed pedant, is the most obvious example. Where Camilla's imaginative sensibility may be overactive, it is at the root of her empathy and even adds to her charms, endowing her with "the witchery to create sympathy in the most serious" (84). Dr. Orkborne, on the other hand, may be "copiously stored with the works of the ancients," but he "had a sluggish understanding, and no imagination" (185). His devotion to his narrow, private studies makes him neglect the basic demands of human kindness, social decorum and even, occasionally, safety and self-preservation: his inattention endangers Eugenia (who is under his supposed protection when the scheming rake Bellamy makes off with her during the false alarm of the rampaging bull), Camilla (who pleads in vain for his assistance while being harassed by a licentious youth), and himself (when he is accidentally trapped for a day on a fishing trawler). The disjunction between reading and feeling in Dr. Orkborne makes him not only objectionable but a threat to others and to himself.

Alphonso Bellamy represents the inverse of the threat posed by Dr. Orkborne's selfish intellectual reading. Equally unlike the studious Doctor – all reading and no feeling – and the non-readers Clermont and Sir Sedley – neither reading nor feeling – Bellamy has no reading but is all feeling. He models his behaviour after the traditional romance hero, as his fits of passion, his threats of suicide, and his pleading letters via clandestine channels are taken straight from the pages of sentimental fiction. The unworldly Eugenia is deceived enough by this charade to pity Bellamy, but compassion is the warmest feeling that he ever elicits from her. He may be

charming and handsome, but there is very little substance behind this exterior, and Eugenia instinctively discerns this, frequently comparing him unfavourably to Melmond. On the surface, both young men seem to be playing the same part. When Melmond first sees Indiana, her beauty strikes him with "an admiration as violent as it was sudden," and at the end of their first conversation he loses his head completely and confesses his undying love for her: "'O go not!' he passionately exclaimed; 'leave me not in this abyss of suffering! Fairest and most beautiful! tell me at least, if my death is inevitable! if no time – no constancy – no adoration – may ever dare hope to penetrate that gentlest of bosoms!'" (144). Melmond may be ridiculous, but the novel leaves us no room to doubt his sincerity.

Bellamy's appeals to Eugenia are made in similarly extravagant terms, as in his speech upon accosting her after receiving her letter of dismissal: "'O madam,' he cried, 'what have I not suffered since your barbarous letter! why will you be so amiable, yet so inexorable?... Do not kill me by this disdain! I ask not now for favour or encouragement – I know my hard doom – I ask only to converse with you – though, alas! it was by conversing with you I lost my heart'" (192). There seems to be very little difference between Bellamy's simulated and Melmond's genuine adoration. It is the latter's intense love of literature that distinguishes him from the former. While Bellamy imposes upon Eugenia so far as to convince her that his "passion and constancy" are "the emanations of a truly elevated mind" (193-4), Eugenia still gravitates towards the one whose enthusiastic reading first convinced her – correctly – of his worth. After rejecting Bellamy, Eugenia "secretly rejoiced that it was not for Melmond she had so hard a part to act: and this idea,… rendered Bellamy less an object of regret" (316). Even the judicious Edgar, though unwaveringly skeptical of Bellamy, is favourably "struck" by Melmond's sudden and extreme passion for Indiana. Having witnessed with pleasure Melmond's genuinely emotional

poetry reading, Edgar likewise witnesses his appeal to Indiana and acknowledges, “in defiance of its romance and suddenness,… its air of sincerity” (134).

Similar to Bellamy, Indiana Lynmere’s affective expressions and beautiful exterior mask an absence of inner feeling. Just as Eugenia initially believes that Bellamy’s flowery words express his literary passion, so too does Melmond initially see in Indiana the reflection of his own fervent, literary sensibility. This reflection, like a distorting mirror’s, ultimately proves illusory, but it inspires Melmond’s infatuation. Certainly he is taken in by her exquisite looks. As Lionel – sensibly, for once – asks the already smitten Melmond “how should you know anything of her besides her beauty?” (103), Melmond responds, “Are not those eyes all soul? Does not that mouth promise every thing that is intelligent?” (104). Privy as we are to Indiana’s vapidity, the reader understands the irony of Melmond’s rhetorical questions, and his far-reaching mistake seems to be part of the novel’s basic lesson, grimly driven home by the episode of the lovely “idiot” (306-11), that beauty without does not equal beauty within. But when he first sees her, Melmond is struck not merely by Indiana’s loveliness but also by her apparently rapturous attention to his poetic reading: it is not only “her beauty” and “her youth” that dazzle him, but the “attitude of examination” with which she regards him as he reads (102). Her attention seems to Melmond like spellbound appreciation for the beauty of poetry, and this perceived literary affinity is an integral part of his first impression. The reader knows, however, that Indiana in fact “listened not to the matter” but was merely “struck by the manner in which it was delivered” (101). This early mistake nearly costs Melmond his life’s happiness, and ultimately, he comes, however unwillingly, to make unfavourable comparisons between the vain, unread Indiana and the generous, literary Eugenia – comparisons similar to those that Eugenia learns to make between him and Bellamy. Though he is engaged to Indiana, Melmond begins to feel “a tender

veneration" for Eugenia's high-minded selflessness and "often his secret mind had breathed a wish, that her love of literature had been instilled into her cousin" (800).

So far *Camilla*'s rule – that the virtuous characters are the feeling readers – seems relatively straightforward. Melmond's sister Mrs. Berlinton, the novel's other most emotional reader, poses a potential challenge to this rule. Her pleasure in literature is as intense and sincere as her brother's, and her passion for reading secures her in Camilla and Eugenia's esteem (655). Eugenia in particular sees Mrs. Berlinton as a female version of Melmond, an impression confirmed when the sister begins to read aloud, like the brother, "with tenderest accents, [a] most plaintive ode[…]. Eugenia was enraptured. Ah! thought she, this is indeed the true sister of the accomplished Melmond!... She shall share with him my adoration" (655). Yet Mrs. Berlinton strays from the moral path much more seriously than either of the Tyrold sisters: her acute sense of romance misleads her into forming an improper, ill-fated friendship with Bellamy, and she turns to gambling as a distraction from her thwarted love for him. How can we understand the sensitive, literary Mrs. Berlinton's disgrace in light of the straightforward equation that has so far established sincere affective reading as a reliable index for virtue?

To answer that question, we can turn to the specific source of Mrs. Berlinton's failings: her irreligious and partial education. Mrs. Berlinton was raised by a "fanatical maiden aunt" who taught her prayers "without one single lesson upon good works" or "the practical use of her theoretical piety." All Mrs. Berlinton had to read, the narrator explains in her defence, were "some common and ill-selected novels and romances, which a young lady in the neighbourhood privately lent her," as well as the poetry her brother brought back with him from university. Despite her excellent qualities, her "irregularly principled mind" was inadequately formed by reading that appealed to "an heart the most susceptible, sentiments the most romantic, and an

imagination the most exalted" (487). It might seem, then, that for Burney, laudable affective reading still depends on adhering to a certain kind of conventionally acceptable reading matter. After all, the emotional responses of *Camilla*'s virtuous reading characters are elicited by material that would be palatable to the most conservative critic. The heroine cries herself sick over her father's "affectionate sermon of patriarchal ideology" (Palomo 446); Eugenia's education is classical, rigorous, and supervised, with a focus on scholarly texts; and Melmond supplements his Oxford education with canonical poets of the early eighteenth century – in the novel's most ostentatious display of affective reading, discussed above, Melmond is reading from James Thomson's lengthy, didactic poem "The Seasons," a confirmed literary favourite for over sixty years by the time *Camilla* was published. Melmond introduces his sister to more serious literature, but she must get her disreputable fiction elsewhere: from that most unreliable of readers, "a young lady in the neighbourhood." Burney's explicit qualification that the book loans are undertaken "privately" (487) further accentuates the illicit nature of the goods exchanged.

Before we reach any conclusions about the target of Burney's criticism here, we should examine a scene in which the narrator discusses Eugenia's education – the only other instance in *Camilla* in which novels make a significant appearance. Besieged by Bellamy's attentions, Eugenia reflects remorsefully on the pain of rejection she believes she is causing him while the narrator laments the unworldly innocence of a mind that could be deceived by Bellamy's falseness:

> Having read no novels, [Eugenia's] imagination had never been awakened to scenes of this kind; and what she had gathered upon such subjects in the poetry and history she had studied with Dr. Orkborne, had only impressed her fancy in proportion as love bore the

> character of heroism, and the lover that of an hero. Though highly therefore romantic, her romance was not the common adoption of a circulating library: it was simply that of elevated sentiments, formed by animated credulity playing upon youthful inexperience. (315)

At first glance this assessment seems complimentary, if slightly qualified: Eugenia's strictly controlled reading has "impressed her fancy" with only the most "elevated sentiments." But this passage in fact suggests that Eugenia's reading might be deficient precisely *because* it is confined to the "elevated sentiments" of conventionally approved reading. Burney proposes that a sense of romance that is "the common adoption of a circulating library" would have better equipped Eugenia to detect and defend herself against the base manipulation of a dishonest lover. The narrator subsequently alludes to the edifying properties of less refined books when comparing Camilla's reading to that of her erudite sister. Camilla's "education, though private, had not like that of Eugenia been secluded and studious" and as a result she "was far less credulous than her sister, though equally artless" (370). Camilla has her own faults, but her more general education and, by extension, her more general reading, has given her useful insight while leaving her "artless" virtue intact. Eugenia's natural talent and moral sense combined with her rigorous program of study make her in many respects the pinnacle of wisdom, forbearance, and generosity – but her lack of contact with the social world, and its popular fiction in particular, means that she is dangerously naïve.

The very different reading regimens of Mrs. Berlinton and Eugenia offer a potentially paradoxical assessment of novel reading, neatly captured by each faulty reader's relationship with Bellamy. Their contrasting situations could almost represent a psychological experiment. The women's personalities and romantic situations are control measurements, since they are

nearly identical: both are inherently virtuous, trusting, and passionate about literature, and both are targeted by Bellamy as victims for seduction. Their reading material is the independent variable whose effects are being tested. If Burney meant this experiment to illustrate the perils of novel reading versus the benefits of more educational reading, logically we could expect Eugenia to escape Bellamy's machinations and Mrs. Berlinton to fall victim to them. Yet the result for the two different readers is the same: Mrs. Berlinton, the novel reader, is "easily… captivated by [Bellamy's] description of the sympathy which united, and penetrated by his lamentations at the destiny which parted them" (809). Eugenia, whose wide reading does not include novels, is equally deluded into "believing that all she heard" from Bellamy's lips "issued from the fountain of truth" (192). *Camilla* suggests that novels by themselves provide an insufficient education, but that an education without novels is also inadequate. Similarly, affective reading without proper religious or social education does not provide a solid mental or emotional foundation, but neither does it permanently distort the mind or the heart of the reader. Mrs. Berlinton's errors are remediable, and she is not sacrificed as a warning to other novel readers in the way of *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*' Julia Delmond, expiring destitute in a charity home. As the wise Lord O'Lerney predicts, "I know so well [Mrs. Berlinton's] innocence and good qualities, that I doubt not but the error will bring its own cure, and she will gladly return to… literary and elegant intercourse" (822). Indeed, in the end, Mrs. Berlinton's "mind was yet young enough in wrong" that she eventually "detested her infatuation, and humbled herself to implore forgiveness" (911).

Burney's exculpation of the "romance…of the circulating library" and her positive portrayals of affective reading show that she is not a single-minded adherent to the cause of "rationalist female fiction." If she does favour more serious reading material, she still defends the utility of lighter literary fare as well. And regardless of the material, Burney portrays affective

reading as a useful index for others to assess one's innate virtue. We ought to value those who feel deeply, Burney counsels, and how can we correctly identify such people without an external expression of their capacity for emotion, an outlet like affective reading? This method of moral identification is not without its complications, as Burney shows with a character like Bellamy who mimics the attitudes of a sentimental reader without sincerity. This just means that some practice is required. Eugenia and Mrs. Berlinton cannot recognize Bellamy for what he is because they need more experience – experience, Burney suggests, that they can get through different kinds of reading. Unlike the wary anti-sentiment writers among whom she has been numbered, and among whom she even numbers herself, in *Camilla* Burney shows that there is value in readers of, and reading with, feeling.

An "Increased… Appetite for Books" in *Belinda*

In 1783, fifteen-year-old Maria Edgeworth wrote to a friend about Frances Burney's *Evelina*, which she had "read…over twice, once with the malicious view of discerning <its faults> but alas before I had read it half through I forgot my intention."[1] Despite this tribute, Edgeworth goes on to criticize the fairy-tale quality of Evelina's happy ending: "Evelina has no title & but small fortune, but she married an Earl!—Will no conclusions be drawn from this? will no hopes be raised? Can an improbable event be brought about by probable means, without lessening our Opinion of its probability?"[2] The Advertisement to Edgeworth's *Belinda*, published eighteen years later, is reminiscent of this adolescent disdain for *Evelina*'s fanciful quality: Edgeworth labels her work a "Moral Tale—the author not wishing to acknowledge" that

[1] Edgeworth to Fanny Robinson, 15 August [1783].
[2] Edgeworth to Fanny Robinson, 15 August [1783].

most disreputable of fanciful literary creations, "a novel," since "so much folly, errour, and vice are disseminated in books classed under this denomination" (3). Her hesitation to refer to *Belinda* as a "novel" echoes Burney's reluctance about labelling *Camilla* as one. Burney rejected that classification in her letters, but she also repeatedly avoids it in the opening pages of *Camilla* itself, where she refers to her novel as almost anything but: as "a picture" (its subtitle); in the dedication, as a "little Work," as a collection of "scenes, characters, and incidents," and as "a production"; in the Advertisement again as a "little Work" and as a "species of composition" (*Camilla* 1, 3, 5). This circumlocution suggests even more ambivalence than the Preface to *Evelina*, which attempts to defend "the humble Novelist" – but does so by paying homage to "those few of our predecessors [such as Fielding, Richardson, and Smollett], to whom this species of writing is indebted for being saved from contempt, and rescued from depravity" (95).

Though Edgeworth may have retained her youthful dislike for the overly fanciful, her opinion of Burney has improved. Like Burney, Edgeworth also applies the title of "novelist" more confidently to a predecessor than to herself, but in this case, it is Burney she honours: she admits in *Belinda*'s advertisement that "were all novels like those of… miss Burney," Edgeworth "would adopt the name… with delight" (3). As Anne Bandry-Scubi summarizes, both authors "grappled with the term 'novel,' anchoring their fictions to earlier works which they designated by this term, rather than using it straightforwardly for their own texts" (235). Such displacement encapsulates the cunning defence of pleasurable and affective reading, particularly of novels or romances, that emerges in *Belinda*. For Edgeworth claims to share Burney's fears about novels, yet she also suggests that these fears are unfounded, since Edgeworth has no trouble admitting that Burney writes "novels" – just as Burney seems more comfortable acknowledging her "predecessor" "novelists" than in claiming that title for herself. Each author thus undermines the

pedigree of her own anxiety about the word "novel," for even as they try to avoid using the term to apply to their own writing, they willingly apply it to the works of writers whom they admire. Thus they defend the novel even as they obscure their defence in the next moment with reservations such as Edgeworth's about the average novel's penchant for "folly, errour, and vice."

Such contradictions occur often in *Belinda*. Belinda Portman is a model heroine, glowing with steady virtue from the first page to the last, and, as critics have pointed out, her conventional reading reflects this integrity. Belinda "does not closet herself in the secret space of self-indulgent reading," Heather MacFadyen argues (427), but mainly reads intellectually rigorous nonfiction – moralist essays or works of philosophy – some of which have been recommended by wise and benevolent patriarchs (*Belinda* 174, 228). If Belinda does read fiction, "instead of the novels and romances typically condemned," she prefers "the blameless moral tales of Jean-François Marmontel and John Moore" (MacFadyen 428). In a confrontation with Belinda, the vulgar, ignorant Harriet Freke, whom one critic has called Belinda's "dark double" (Pearson 108), announces that "I never read now. Books only spoil the originality of genius… You, who can think for yourself, should never read." Looking up from her perusal of the moralist "Essay on the Inconsistency of Human Wishes,"[3] which Harriet has interrupted, Belinda corrects her, "But I read that I may think for myself" (227). The novel's recurring emphasis when it comes to reading is on that active verb "to think." Scholars have argued therefore that *Belinda*

[3] The Oxford edition of the novel does not identify this essay further, but it seems to be a reference to Anna Laetitia Barbauld's "Against Inconsistency in Our Expectations" (1773), from which Edgeworth quotes in a later work and cites as "Mrs. Barbauld's Essay on the Inconsistency of Human Wishes" (*Moral Tales* 202).

promotes a calm enjoyment in conventional reading, as long as it is paired with sober reflection.[4]

The narrative certainly provides examples of such laudable readers in addition to Belinda. Mr. Percival and his family are the epitome of ideal companionate domesticity expatiated upon at length in Chapter XVI, "Domestic Happiness." In Mr. Percival we discover that the ideal patriarch is both "a man of science *and* literature," who combines "knowledge" with "gayety" to render him "not only useful, but in the highest degree amusing" (216, my emphasis). Clarence Hervey is most esteemed by the narrator and other discerning characters when he shows off his wit as well as his judgment, his taste as well as his more profound knowledge of books. Hervey gains the admiration of the company at Lady Delacour's one day by his disquisition on chess: "nothing amusing or instructive that could be said upon the game… escaped him, and the literary ground… our hero traversed in a few minutes… By this display of knowledge he surprised even his friend Dr. X. The ladies admired his taste as a poet, the gentlemen his accuracy as a critic" (113). Lady Delacour describes his letters from abroad as similarly "edifying, as well as entertaining," and laughingly declares that "I am only puzzled to know, whether I shall bind them with Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* or Fordyce's *Sermons for Young Women*" (271). Thus, "literature" needs "science"; "gayety" needs "knowledge"; to be "amusing" or "entertaining" one must still be "useful," "instructive," or "edifying"; and if you are romantic enough to be "a poet," you should make sure that you also have the discernment of "a critic" to match.

Many scholars trace *Belinda*'s promotion of restrained pleasure in reading to the influence of Edgeworth's father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and to her previous didactic works *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), *The Parent's Assistant* (1796), and *Practical Education*

[4] See, for example, De Ritter 145-6, 153-8; Grathwol 73-92, 76-83; Kirkpatrick x-xv; MacFadyen 426-8, 435-9; T. F. Robinson 139-76, 140-4.

(1798), the last of which was written in collaboration with her father.[5] According to Kathleen Grathwol, these works promote reason as the root of all good, the best "guide to conduct and… the surest means to achieving the end of virtue and happiness" (74). And indeed, in one of the letters to which Grathwol refers from *Letters for Literary Ladies,* Edgeworth describes an early version of what will become, in *Belinda*, Mr. Percival and Lady Anne's perfect companionate marriage – "a union of interests, occupations, tastes, and affections" (215) – emphasizing intellectual as well as domestic cultivation. In this letter, an unnamed Gentleman describes the ideal mate for "men of science and literature" (*Letters for Literary*, 2nd ed., 114) – the same balanced label that will later be applied to Mr. Percival (*Belinda* 216). The Gentleman attests to the "pleasures" of such men "in an union with women, who can sympathize in all their thoughts and feelings, who can converse with them as equals, and live with them as friends" (*Letters for Literary*, 2nd ed., 114). The Edgeworths' relatively liberal approach to education, particularly for women, has been discussed in detail by critics, but analyses that interpret Edgeworth's novels through the lens of her didactic work overstate the suspicion with which she portrays affective, imaginative reading in *Belinda*. In fact, in Lady Delacour and Virginia St Pierre, characters usually seen as examples of how not to read, Edgeworth develops a defence of their alternative modes of reading, making room for an affective and immersive relationship with literature that is not countermanded by Belinda's more conventional, dispassionate reading.

The character of Lady Delacour has perhaps generated the most critical attention of any aspect of *Belinda,* and her domestication by the end of the novel has been thoroughly explored

[5] For some excellent discussions of the Edgeworths' educational philosophy and whether Richard Lovell Edgeworth's incontestable influence over his daughter's writing was "prohibitive or productive" (Kowaleski-Wallace 96), see Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, pp. 147-50, 165-71; Friedman 35-64; Kowaleski-Wallace 95-137; De Ritter 131-160.

for its implications about "female behaviour" and "autonomy" (Grathwol 87), motherhood and women's bodies (Perry 204-34), authenticity – "surface and depth,… the 'new' and the 'real'" (Britton 443), theatre and performativity (Michals 191-214), or domesticity and aristocracy (Rosenberg 575-96). But almost every examiner of Lady Delacour, regardless of his or her analytic focus, seems compelled to acknowledge the appeal of her distinctive bookishness. MacFadyen has calculated that, in a work replete with references to literature and characters who quote it, "Lady Delacour outquotes them all, alluding to literary texts eight times more frequently" (425). The modern Oxford edition of the novel (2008) glosses fewer than half of these references, as though to allow the current of her wit to flow unchecked. Several of Edgeworth's contemporary reviewers similarly remarked on Lady Delacour's charismatic prominence, some frankly admitting a preference for her over the somewhat banal propriety of the idealized heroine. One analysis from an 1802 issue of the *Monthly Review* argued that Belinda "usurped the superior right of Lady D to give the title to the work: for it is to the character and agency of the latter, in our opinion, that the tale owes its principal attractions" (368). Even the unimpressed appraisal from the *Critical Review*, which considered "miss Edgeworth's literary fame… not benefited by the appearance of *Belinda*" (237), conceded that Lady Delacour, with her "*haut-ton* conversation," is the novel's "primary planet, and Belinda but a satellite" (236). Like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, Lady Delacour has all the best lines and steals every scene, dominating the work with her literary eloquence and enchanting readers despite her quasi-villain status.

According to MacFadyen, such textual *jouissance* is part of what must be curbed in Lady Delacour by the end of the novel. It is unlikely, however, that Edgeworth herself saw the need for Lady Delacour's reformation to extend to her allusive loquacity. Even as she begins to take

on her new role as dutiful wife and mother, her conversation remains irrepressibly playful and erudite right up to the famous final scene: she seizes control of the narrative by offering "to finish the novel for you" (477), orchestrates a closing romantic tableau, and utters the work's last words in the form of a sarcastic epigram that metafictionally refers to the "Moral Tale" of *Belinda*'s Advertisement: "Our *tale* contains a *moral*, and, no doubt, / You all have wit enough to find it out" (478). Lady Delacour's delight in her own textuality persists to the last, archly appropriating in the novel's metafictional conclusion some of the most hackneyed, sentimental literary motifs. One way to explain this might be to pursue the comparison with *Paradise Lost*'s Satan. Perhaps Lady Delacour was ineffectively suppressed by Edgeworth because the author was seduced by the power of her own delinquent creation, as some readings suggest Milton was: he and Edgeworth were "of the Devils party without knowing it" (Blake 35). But if we turn to the novel's first major episode of misreading – Lady Delacour's obsession with "methodistical titles" (270) – we realize that here as well Edgeworth refuses to condemn entirely Lady Delacour's unruly bookish inclinations.

The novel frequently emphasizes Belinda's calm rationality as a contrast for Lady Delacour's tendency to rely on emotion and imagination. By her own admission, Lady Delacour's decisions stem from "the dictates of my heart or my imagination" (44). She has frequent mood swings, vacillating between causeless jealousy of and exalted reverence for Belinda, and these fluctuations "exhaust" her, as she is "worked…up by the force of her powerful imagination" (183). She is, in short, "governed by pride, by sentiment, by whim, by enthusiasm, by passion – by anything but reason" (271). This mounting emotional turmoil culminates in Lady Delacour's unhealthy obsession with the "methodistical titles" (270) to which she turns for comfort at the height of her illness. These books are never specifically named, but

they are described as “of a mystical cast” and “scarcely intelligible,” and the narrator’s disapproval of them seems explicit. Lady Delacour resorts to them because, we are told, her mind is enfeebled: “her understanding, weakened perhaps by disease, and never accustomed to reason, was incapable of distinguishing between truth and errour” (270). Lady Delacour’s misguided affective reading is discovered by Dr. X and cured by Mr. Moreton, both idealized embodiments of benign, learned male authority, who ultimately instil in Lady Delacour a “mild and rational piety” (320) – two adjectives that cannot be associated with the excessive, emotional reading of her past.

The apparent ill-effects of Lady Delacour’s Methodist reading and her ultimate re-education have reinforced critics’ conclusion that in *Belinda* “any work that appeals more to feeling than reason is condemned” (Kirkpatrick xiii). Edgeworth, however, is careful to represent such reading in a way that deemphasizes the part it plays in disordering Lady Delacour’s faculties. As Burney does with Mrs. Berlinton, Edgeworth produces some previously unknown titbits of family history to account, in part, for Lady Delacour’s volatile mental state. While Mrs. Berlinton’s overheated romantic imagination is attributed not just to her novel and romance reading but also to her “fanatical maiden aunt” (*Camilla* 487), Lady Delacour’s agitated fancy, though exacerbated by her spiritual books, has its roots in “the early impressions that had been made on her mind in her childhood by a methodistical mother” (*Belinda* 270). By lessening the blame assigned to Lady Delacour’s reading, Burney prepares us for the surprisingly positive effect that these books have at the climax of her illness. Earlier in the novel, her reading is associated with the “dreadful superstitious terrours” (270) that beset her when she is not enveloped in the protective haze of laudanum. Once she discovers that she is not, in fact, dying, and recovers her zest for life, her previous “superstitious horrors” are traced back to “the source

of her reading," "methodistical books" (316), and she requires someone "to minister to a mind diseased" (316). But in the interim, at the height of her fear for her health, Lady Delacour derives solace from her reading that even the steadier, more rational Belinda, with her "superior strength of understanding" (271), does not possess and cannot provide.

Although Lady Delacour's servant Marriot and Belinda both blame "those methodistical books" for the "melancholy" that has made Lady Delacour "very strange" in the days of suspense leading up to her operation (301), the narrator's descriptions, by contrast, show that she has found in her reading, however misguided or temporary, an emotional anchor. What Marriot has termed Lady Delacour's "melancholy" manner, for example, the narrator describes more neutrally as "thoughtful and reserved" (301). This equanimity emerges from Lady Delacour's reading on the night of the surgeon's and Dr. X's arrival. When Belinda goes to fetch her, Lady Delacour answers the door "with a mild voice," "a firm tone," and "an air of determined dignity in all her motions" while, by contrast, Belinda's "blood ran cold" and she "sunk upon a chair" (303) in trepidation. Lady Delacour notes this disparity herself, consoling Belinda, for once, with her own composure: "do not tremble for me," she says, "you see that I do not tremble for myself" (303).

These demonstrations of fortitude come, Edgeworth emphasizes, just after Lady Delacour has been absorbed in a book. When Belinda enters her room, Lady Delacour "deliberately put a mark in the book in which she had been reading, walked leisurely to the other end of the room, and locked it up in her bookcase" (303). Since we have been told that Methodist literature is all Lady Delacour reads now, we must assume that this book belongs to that category – especially since she locks it away, the action of one who fears "ridicule and contempt" (271) for her choice of reading. Lady Delacour may be ashamed, the other characters may be disapproving, and she

may have to learn her lesson later, but on the eve of her operation these "oratorical," "mystical" books (270) provide solace when no rational comfort is to be had. Dr. X, Belinda, and Mr. Moreton may offer a more lasting and stable foundation for Lady Delacour's mental tranquillity later in the novel – Edgeworth is not, after all, a proponent of Methodism – but at Lady Delacour's moment of emotional crisis, the only books that can reach her are those that under normal circumstances are described as "scarcely intelligible," vivid appeals to feeling and not to reason. In this extraordinary emergency, they fill an affective need that cannot be met by Dr. X or Belinda, those calm pillars of rationality. The benefit that Lady Delacour draws from her affective reading is perhaps momentary, but, like her irreverent and unchecked literariness, it suggests that *Belinda* is not entirely hostile to emotional or imaginative excess in literature. The novel's most prominent misreader, Virginia St Pierre, cements this suggestion, as we realize that here as well Edgeworth refuses to condemn wayward bookish inclinations.

The inset history of Virginia St Pierre as the test subject of Hervey's Rousseauvian experiment in raising the perfect wife is a strangely tangential but fascinating episode in the novel. Just as Belinda "had been educated chiefly in the country" and "was fond of reading" (7), Virginia "lived in the forest" with her grandmother, and when "she did learn [to read]… was always fond of [it]" (368). Belinda, however, has the advantage of learning to "judge from [her] own experience" of society so as not to be "misled" by her "imagination" (126) – that dangerous quality again. She can also rely on the guidance of more experienced readers like Mr. Percival to direct her choice of books (227-8). Virginia, on the other hand, is raised in isolation, neglected by her purported tutor Hervey, and allowed to read only romances. Hervey makes a feeble effort to direct Virginia's reading by eliminating "*common* novels" (380) from her repertoire, but he puts Mrs. Ormond, who is "not a woman of superior abilities, or of much information" (370), in

charge of this task, and she is incapable of managing it. When forced to decide on a book's suitability, she errs on the side of permissiveness, for "Mr Hervey was not at hand" – he is rarely at hand – "to give his advice" (380). So Virginia's reading is essentially unchecked: her "increased… appetite for books" becomes "insatiable" and eventually reading is "almost her only pleasure" (380). She is even provided with a genetic pedigree for her unhealthy predilection, as we eventually discover that Virginia's mother had also been "a sentimental girl, spoiled by early novel reading" (408), who elopes with and is abandoned by Virginia's father.

Largely ignored or dismissed by critics until the last ten or so years, this episode has garnered recent interest for its relevance to Edgeworth's anti-Rousseau and pro-Wollstonecraft educational theories,[6] her exploration of British imperialism and domestic ideology,[7] and her narrative and aesthetic techniques.[8] Scholars concerned with the subject of reading, however, have not spent much time examining Virginia's voracious appetite for romances and her "exalted" (379), affective love of literature. In her study of "the 'true use of books' for eighteenth-century girls" (73) in Edgeworth's work, for example, Grathwol undertakes a detailed analysis of stories in the little-known *Parent's Assistant,* one of which concerns a "young woman whose early education has been badly managed and who has consequently learned to map her world through the lens of sentimental literature" (81). This character seems to be an early incarnation of the one that Edgeworth fleshes out more fully in Virginia, but Grathwol makes no mention of the latter despite going on to discuss *Belinda*.[9] Perhaps critics mostly pass over

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[6] See De Ritter 158-60, Kowaleski-Wallace 100, Toal 212-32.
[7] See McCann 56-77, Montwieler 347-68, Toal 221-8.
[8] See Britton 433-56, Egenolf 73-103.
[9] MacFadyen and Kirkpatrick, both interested in reading in *Belinda,* also dismiss the importance of Virginia's reading: MacFadyen mentions her only briefly as a stereotypical representation of "the trope of female reading" (428), and Kirkpatrick concludes that Virginia's case proves that "novel-reading sometimes *is* dangerous" (xii).

Virginia's reading because it seems like such an obvious part of Edgeworth's larger attack on what Hervey eventually admits was an "absurd" plan of "educating a woman in solitude to make her fit for society" (472). This conclusion does not, however, account for a crucial element of Virginia's story: her ultimate success. Her head may be so turned by her reading that she fixates on a stranger's portrait as the chivalric ideal of romantic love, fantasizing about him by day and dreaming of him by night, but she is not "spoiled" like her mother (408). Instead she actually meets and, it is implied, will marry the original of the portrait and literal man of her dreams. This improbable result, so different from the didactically tragic fate of her similarly flawed mother, is enough to warrant a closer look at the supposed danger of Virginia's reading.

Even the few critics who point out that Virginia gets a happy ending still blame her misguided reading, in part, for her suffering when she is torn between Clarence Hervey and her idealized vision of love. These scholars pinpoint Virginia's overly affective reading as the source of "the nightmares that torment her" (MacFadyen 428) and so as a target of Edgeworth's disapproval.[10] Such analyses take for granted the strength of Virginia's ill-conceived if fortuitously gratified passion – they claim that her romance reading afflicts her so seriously that she falls irrevocably in love with a daydream. Virginia's own conception of her feelings, however, is quite different. Believing that her (perceived) benefactor Hervey wants to marry her, out of gratitude Virginia struggles to conceal the fact that she does not love him. When she finally admits the true state of her emotions, they are much more modest and sensible than she is given credit for, even regarding the portrait she is supposedly in love with: "You ask me to tell

[10] See Britton 445-6, McCann 73, Toal 227-8. Britton suggests that despite Virginia's efforts at self-determination, "her psychological development…is overwhelmed …by her romantic desire, fuelled by the fictional 'Paul,'" a hero in her reading (440). McCann similarly argues that Virginia's torment is "compounded by [her] reading habits… which encourage both ennui and an over-active fantasy life" (72).

you the secret feelings of my heart," she tells Hervey. "The only secret feeling, of which I am conscious, is – a wish not to marry, unless I could see in reality such a person as – but that I knew was only a picture, a dream; and I thought, that I ought at least to sacrifice my foolish imaginations to you, who have done so much for me" (470).

Virginia can tell fact from fantasy, reality from a dream, and she makes it clear that the source of her pain was not her love for a figment of her imagination but her guilt at not being able to love the man whom she thought, and whom Mrs. Ormond told her, she should. Developing a passion for one's guardian is, in fact, a conventional romantic formula – surely Virginia would have encountered some incarnation of the popular Eloise and Abelard story over the course of her "insatiable" romance reading – but it is a motif she avoids re-enacting. Even when confronted with the live original of her beloved picture and "all the ideas of love and romance, associated with this image, rushed upon her mind," Virginia quickly returns to her senses when "the realities, by which she was surrounded, dispelled the illusion" (476). By implying that even a naïve and uneducated girl is relatively impervious to the corrupting influence of sentimental novels and romances, Edgeworth rebuts the eighteenth-century "trope of female reading." One might even argue that Edgeworth uses Virginia to reverse, not just refute, this trope as it is Clarence Hervey, rather than Virginia, who most resembles the stereotypical female Quixote, trying to live out what he has read about in Rousseau (362).

Virginia's subplot also serves Edgeworth's defence of novel and romance reading through, counterintuitively, its excessively romantic nature. For Virginia's story brings to life a profusion of sentimental motifs: her isolated, imprisoned upbringing; her initially unknown paternal parentage; her status as an heiress revealed at the eleventh hour; her father Mr. Hartley searching the globe for his lost child, his wits disordered and health destroyed by grief and

remorse; their perfect emotional reunion; the Pygmalion-like materialization of Captain Sunderland, about whose portrait Virginia spent years fantasizing; the incredible coincidence of the decades-old connections between both Captain Sunderland and Mr. Hartley, and Captain Sunderland and Virginia; and the series of elaborate flukes that brings Mr. Hartley to the attention of Clarence Hervey, and Captain Sunderland to the attention of Lady Delacour. By interpolating such outrageous romance into her "Moral Tale" (3), her "narrative of domestic enlightenment" (McCann 73), Edgeworth bolsters her defence of novel and romance reading in two distinct ways.

First, Edgeworth speaks up for novels in her characterization of Virginia's mother as the stereotypical female reader, "spoiled by early novel-reading" (408). This is a deliciously devious way to undermine anti-novel sentiment by appearing to take its part. Embedding the cliché of the foolish woman reader in an inset romance chock-full of gothic and sentimental stereotypes, Edgeworth burlesques it as just one more improbable detail in a genre of farfetched incidents. It is only *in* extravagant novels that young women are debauched by reading extravagant novels. Secondly, Edgeworth defends the excesses of romance in Virginia's story by indelibly linking them to the more sedate pleasure of Belinda's. The success of Belinda's courtship plot is contingent upon every one of the coincidences and conventions that make up Virginia's, for it is only the discovery of Mr. Hartley (to make Virginia financially independent) and Captain Sunderland (to prompt Virginia's confession of indifference to Hervey) that removes the obstacles preventing Belinda's union with Hervey. Jeanne M. Britton and Andrew McCann respectively propose that Edgeworth links these two stories to criticize the implausibility of all forms of fiction by reminding the reader that fantasy is inherent in any marriage plot.[11] But such

[11] Britton 445; McCann 73.

a position places too much emphasis on Edgeworth the didactic moralist, the writer of educational stories and tracts, and does not give enough credit to Edgeworth the novelist, writing, after all, to please her audience. It is not reading enough like Lady Delacour, whose familiarity with and dexterous use of all forms of literary expression and textual play must originate with their creator.[12]

Edgeworth's appropriation of genre conventions is certainly self-conscious, but this does not mean it is condemnatory. The novel openly acknowledges that the "declaration of love" comprised in a conventional happy ending, whether to a domestic fiction plot or to a fantastical romance plot, "is only the beginning of things," as Lady Delacour remarks (477). Edgeworth reminds her readers that for preposterous heroines and realistic protagonists alike life goes on after a marriage proposal; but she also reminds us, in the satisfaction of her tidy ending narrated with relish by Lady Delacour, that novelistic moments are there to be enjoyed even as their fictionality should be recognized. Through Belinda, Edgeworth depicts the importance of reflection and serious reading, but she is not the novel's only positive model of reading. Through Lady Delacour's Methodist obsession, Edgeworth suggests that even misguided emotional reading might have its uses, and through Virginia's steadfast character, Edgeworth argues that pleasurable, non-intellectual reading is harmless. With Lady Delacour's brilliant allusiveness and the gleeful melodrama of Virginia's story Edgeworth goes further, privileging immersive, emotional literary pleasure by herself attempting to elicit it in her audience. Pleasure and comfort are not synonymous with vice, *Belinda* argues, even when it comes to heedless or heathenish reading. Edgeworth claims to share Burney's misgivings about reading with feeling, but readers

[12] George Ticknor, a visitor to the Edgeworths' estate, saw much of Lady Delacour in Edgeworth (Kirkpatrick xviii).

in *Belinda* demonstrate that these novelists in fact share a more complex attitude. Their defence of the necessity for balanced rationality and canonical, conventional reading does not obviate, and has disguised from many critics, their interest in affective or pleasurable reading as well.

Reading "Not What You Would Think Any Thing Of" in *Emma* and *Persuasion*

As it has done with Burney and Edgeworth, criticism has marked Austen as another Romantic-period author who championed reading with dispassionate intellect over affect or pleasure. Such arguments are not without foundation, as we can see in Austen's reprimand of excessive emotion in *Sense and Sensibility's* Marianne (although scenes of reading in this novel are few) or the depiction of *Northanger Abbey*'s infatuated Gothic novel reader Catherine Morland, who will be discussed below. Though some critics have identified a more subversive element in Austen's seemingly straightforward defence of rational reading, even they tend to give with one hand what they take away with the other. Alan Richardson points out that the charm of *Sense and Sensibility*'s heroines is due, in a large part, to their refined sensitivities, including their literary taste. But Richardson still agrees with most readers that Marianne's passionate delight, in literature as in everything else, is "excessive," "sentimental self-indulgence" ("Reading Practices" 401). Similarly, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey* is most often dismissed as a naïve and ill-judging reader. While Brantlinger acknowledges that "Catherine's reading experience ultimately benefits her," he also believes that her "enthusiastic response to *Udolpho* misleads her" (33). Scholars interested in Austen and reading focus on this last reader, Catherine Morland, as the most complex and extensive case in her works. But *Emma* and *Persuasion* are also interesting for their attention to disreputable reading, using *Emma*'s Harriet Smith and *Persuasion*'s Captain Benwick to put forward a defence of affective or pleasurable

reading that is even more emphatic than either Burney's or Edgeworth's.

With a heroine as complicated as Emma Woodhouse to examine – her lively interiority, her appealing contradictions – it is no wonder that critics for the most part choose to adopt her own attitude towards the rather two-dimensional, minor character of Harriet Smith, whose role is usually figured as relational. To Emma, Harriet begins as a project, evolves into an encumbrance, and ultimately represents a source of shame. Many readers thus interpret Emma's shifting attitude towards Harriet as part of her maturation, and Harriet is usually considered only as she contributes to an understanding of Emma.[13] Although readers are led to question and condemn Emma's judgment throughout the novel, particularly her ill-conceived, arrogant interference in Harriet's life, most do not challenge her general opinion of Harriet. While constantly praising Harriet's beauty and gentleness – her "soft blue eyes" (*Emma* 22) and her "sweet, docile, grateful, disposition" (25) – Emma persists in reminding the reader of Harriet's deficiencies: she is "certainly… not clever" (25) with "no penetration" (26) and "bad taste" (57); she is "so easily pleased, so little discerning" (192), "swayed by half a word" (251); she has, in sum, "very inferior powers" (450). Perhaps we do not fault Emma's affectionate contempt for Harriet because the narrative seems to support this opinion: Harriet's breathless dialogue, full of exclamatory "Oh!"s and "To be sure!"s, her feeble waffling, whether over a purchase of muslin at Ford's or a marriage proposal from Robert Martin, and her unquestioning reverence for Emma, all combine to paint no very flattering picture (unlike Emma's watercolour portrait of her). Some readers have added to this damning list Harriet's taste in literature.

Harriet is not a very great reader. On first meeting her, Emma decides that, among other

[13] For exceptional readings that take a broader view of Harriet's role in *Emma*, see Kramp 147-168; Morris; Zunshine 152-167.

things, she requires "a little more knowledge" and someone to "form her opinions" (23). The subsequent revelation of Harriet's partiality for romance novels has been taken as further proof of her intellectual poverty. Jane Stabler concludes that we are meant to laugh at her when we discover that she has tried to push her featherbrained reading onto the more sensible Martin. "He has never read the Romance of the Forest, nor the Children of the Abbey. He had never heard of such books before I mentioned them," Harriet says in doe-eyed wonder, "but he is determined to get them now as soon as ever he can." (28). Stabler sees this passage as a criticism of Harriet's intellectual deficiencies: Harriet is "so superficial that she… tries to introduce [Martin] to Radcliffe and Regina Roche" (47).[14] While Emma's resolution to improve Harriet's reading is received with skepticism by Mr. Knightley, she is still allowed to be the better reader. Although we cannot "expect[…] any course of steady reading from Emma," Mr. Knightley warns, the books she intends to read still make up "very good lists" that do "her judgment so much credit" (37). Stabler concedes that, compared to Harriet, "Emma… at least knows her reading is deficient" (47).

Moving beyond accusations of mere superficiality, Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan level a more serious charge at Harriet's choice of novels by echoing the apprehensions about reading of Austen's more conservative contemporaries. They argue that for a child of unknown parentage these novels represent a perilous seduction, encouraging "precisely the kind of wish-fulfilling fantasy that she might be expected to crave" (Cronin and McMillan liii).[15]

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[14] See also Benedict and Le Faye xxxix; Halsey 37; Miles, "A Fall in Bread," 78-9.

[15] They point out that the two novels Harriet mentions to Emma, Regina Maria Roche's *Children of the Abbey* (1796) and Ann Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* (1791), "both… tell the story of young women of doubtful birth, Adeline and Amanda, who are, at the last, revealed to be heirs to noble titles and estates, discoveries which permit them to marry the well-bred young men that they love" (Cronin and McMillan liii).

Cronin and McMillan implicate Emma here as well, since she pushes Harriet to believe in visions of her future as farfetched as the plots of the novels she enjoys: "Emma's irresponsible assumption that Harriet must be 'a gentleman's daughter' is the more dangerous because it gives substance to a fantasy in which, Harriet's favourite novels reveal, she may herself indulge."

Emma is certainly misguided in her absurd conjectures about Harriet's illustrious parentage. Her expectations are "governed by literary conventions" (Fletcher 36)[16] like those embodied by Edgeworth's Virginia, wherein a young lady with such natural grace and beauty must inevitably turn out to be an aristocrat or an heiress. Harriet instead proves to be "the daughter of a tradesman," and Emma's ill-conceived assumptions are once again disproven, much to her chagrin (526). Critics who interpret Harriet's taste in novels as shorthand for her silly, errant fancy implicate her in these illusions of her gentle birth. But Cronin and McMillan's language is revealingly qualified: Harriet's favourite novels recount the rags-to-riches fantasies that "she *might be expected to* crave" and that "she *may* herself indulge" (my emphasis). It is pure conjecture that Harriet harbours the same romantic dreams about her origin that Emma does and that her favourite novels promote. What is more, this is a conjecture that the novel itself disputes. While, suggestively, "Emma was obliged to fancy what she liked" about Harriet's unknown history, Harriet herself "had been satisfied to hear and believe just what Mrs. Goddard chose to tell her" (26) – that "she was the natural daughter of somebody" (22) – and she "looked no farther" (26). Despite her enjoyment of books in which every "natural daughter" turns out to be a noblewoman in disguise, Harriet fosters no such pretensions for herself. Similarly, she has no wish to make a match with the conventional hero, a "well-bred young man" from such literature who rightfully expects "titles and estates" (Cronin and McMillan liii) from his bride-to-

[16] See also Blackwell 485-6.

be.

With regard to their familial expectations, Harriet is more sensible than Edgeworth's Virginia, who in this one instance has allowed her reading "to take full possession of her mind" and convince her to "nourish[…] the hope, that she should not for ever be a *deserted child*" (*Belinda* 409). Edgeworth undermines the probability of such a novelistic happening – the climactic reunion between supposed orphan and long-lost, wealthy parent – the same way she undermines the motif of silly girls corrupted by novels: by enacting it within a fantastical tale. Austen's realistic deflation of the foolish female reader convention is more straightforward. Harriet is just the kind of reader that some moralists used in their arguments against romances and novels: the innocent young lady, with no real critical faculties to defend her vulnerable mind, susceptible to the inflammatory influence of such reading. If romance or novel reading were really to blame for the misjudgements that sow confusion throughout Austen's novel, it should be Harriet, not Emma, who is led astray by such literature. Harriet harbours no illusions about her birth, and, as Emma eventually admits to herself, Harriet "might never have thought of [Mr. Elton] but for me; and certainly never would have thought of him with hope, if I had not assured her of his attachment, for she is as modest and humble as I used to think him" (148). Even when Harriet, under Emma's influence, has grown bolder, she still requires Emma's endorsement before she allows herself to set her sights on Mr. Knightley: "but for believing that you entirely approved and meant to encourage me in my attachment," she protests to Emma, "I should have considered it at first too great a presumption almost, to dare to think of him" (442).

Not only does Emma fail to cultivate Harriet's reading – as the narrator tells us, "[Emma's] views of improving her little friend's mind, by a great deal of useful reading and conversation, had never yet led to more than a few first chapters, and the intention of going on

to-morrow" (73) – but we must ask, after all Emma's errors and Harriet's suffering, whether this reading needed to be cultivated in the first place. The "first rate qualities" (358) that Mr. Knightley praises in Harriet, when he revises his assessment of her during the ball at the Crown, are not the qualities Emma hoped to instil – "knowledge and elegance" (23) – but qualities Harriet already possessed. He praises her for being "an unpretending, single-minded, artless girl" (358), virtues that recall Emma's original assessment of her gentle disposition as "sweet, docile, grateful" (25). Harriet's virtuous character and humble, realistic expectations remain constant despite her malleable mind and her frivolous reading, suggesting that Emma's extravagant flights of fancy are perhaps more attributable to hubris than to the influence of melodramatic literary conventions.

An examination of the only scene that directly describes Harriet's favourite novels supports such an interpretation. When first attempting to lessen Harriet's attachment to Martin, Emma asks Harriet if he is a "reading man" (28). Harriet replies in a characteristically scattered manner, but the import of her reply cannot be what Emma expected, or hoped for:

> 'Oh, yes! – that is, no – I do not know – but I believe he has read a good deal – but not what you would think any thing of. He reads the Agricultural Reports and some other books, that lay in one of the window seats – but he reads all *them* to himself. But sometimes of an evening, before we went to cards, he would read something aloud out of the Elegant Extracts – very entertaining. And I know he has read the Vicar of Wakefield. He has never read the Romance of the Forest, nor the Children of the Abbey. He had never heard of such books before I mentioned them, but he is determined to get them now as soon as ever he can.' (28)

Martin, as Mr. Knightley tells us, is a "respectable, intelligent gentleman-farmer" (65), and even

Emma, predisposed against him as she is, must admit that his proposal letter to Harriet expresses "good sense, warm attachment, liberality, propriety, even delicacy of feeling" (53). Martin is thus an example of a very different kind of reader from Harriet Smith. He is a clever, sensitive man, and he is widely read: not just in the "Agricultural Reports" relevant to his farming, but in popular anthology books such as Vicesimus Knox's *Elegant Extracts* and classic novels like Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield.* As Judy Simons points out, even Harriet's rather haphazard description of his reading habits reveals that he is "literate and informed…, that his taste ranges from the practical to the improving" and "encompasses both verse and prose" (469).

What is more, while Martin does not seem to have much experience with novel reading, he is not against it. Simons praises his "open-minded…approach to modern literature" and rightly considers it unusual, and commendable, that he is "prepared to follow up a young woman's recommendations" (469). It is true that Martin forgets to procure the volumes Harriet suggested to him, but Emma's eagerness to put the worst possible construction on his absentmindedness undermines our sense of his wrongdoing and strengthens our sense of her manipulative spin on the incident: "He was a great deal too full of the market to think of any thing else," she assures Harriet, "which is just as it should be, for a thriving man. What has he to do with books? And I have no doubt that he *will* thrive and be a very rich man in time – and his being illiterate and coarse need not disturb *us*" (33). The label of "illiterate and coarse" is glaringly inaccurate, given the reading that Harriet has attributed to him, and Harriet's earlier account of Martin's omission leaves open more possibilities than Emma allows. Harriet tells us that "he has not been able to get the Romance of the Forest yet. He was so busy at Kingston that he quite forgot it, but he goes again tomorrow" (32). Harriet's "but" implies that Martin has renewed his promise to obtain the novel, and from what we come to understand of his character

as well as Emma's, we might be inclined to trust his word over her ungenerous editorializing.

For all their differences, Harriet Smith and Robert Martin prove themselves to be well matched, not only in their good humour and gentleness, but in their reading habits (if not their reading experience). Neither is unduly influenced by his or her reading material: Martin may read "Agricultural Reports and other books" for business, but they do not deter him from serious literature or the potential pleasure of lighter reading; and Harriet's enjoyment of romance novels does not foster in her any false ambitions or prevent her from discerning Martin's value (though Emma may succeed in tarnishing him in Harriet's eyes for a time). They are also both generous in their reading, Harriet willing to submit to Emma's instruction and Martin willing to adopt Harriet's suggestions without prejudgment. Neither conforms to any standard of regular, rigorous, or instructional reading, yet their open-hearted, open-minded approach to literature is a reflection of their general characters, and it is fitting that they should find in one another their own romantic happy ending.

As another devotee of romance literature, *Persuasion*'s Captain Benwick finds his reading habits, like Harriet's, disparaged by both characters in and critics of the novel. Known to readers as the "dejected, thinking, feeling, reading Captain Benwick" (*Persuasion* 181), he meets Anne and her friends when they travel to Lyme, where he is recovering from the loss of his fiancée the preceding summer and soothing (or perhaps exacerbating) his broken heart by the frequent indulgence of a taste for melancholy poetry. Anne considers Benwick's fascination with "all the tenderest songs" unhealthy and recommends that he temper his rich diet of "impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony" (108) with leaner fare, "a larger allowance of prose… to rouse and fortify the mind by the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurances" (108-9). Perhaps taking their cue from this caution of Anne's – with whose inner

life, so thoroughly rendered, the reader becomes implicated – critics have almost unanimously mocked Benwick's maudlin reading proclivities: he is "stylishly melancholy" (Johnson, *Women, Politics, and the Novel*, 148), he "pin[es] Byronically" (Ruoff 56), his interest in romantic poetry is "dangerously self-absorbing" (Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body*, 178), and this makes him "an emotional parasite who feeds on the sympathy of others" (Duckworth 190). In other words, Austen presents Benwick's reading with clear "satiric intent" (Litz 39).[17] But is Austen really so opposed to Benwick's diet of sentimental verse?

To begin with, Austen's discerning heroine is not nearly so condemnatory of romantic poetry, nor of Benwick, as this critical litany suggests. Peter Robinson argues convincingly that in order to discuss literature in such detail as she does with Benwick, Anne must have more than a passing familiarity with the same works that he loves so well (148-50). It follows that, in order for her characters to discuss "whether *Marmion* or *The Lady of the Lake* were to be preferred, and how ranked the *Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*; and moreover, how the *Giaour* was to be pronounced" (108), Austen herself would have to have first-hand knowledge of such works.[18] Anne's urging moderation does not entail blanket disapproval, and indeed when Benwick is criticized by characters in the novel, she comes to his defence: he is "a very pleasing young man" who "bears an excellent character," and who, despite an inclination towards flowery literature, has both "spirit" and "manners particularly pleasing" (186). But most importantly, we must consider where Benwick's reading gets him. Even more explicitly than Harriet Smith and Robert Martin, Benwick and Louisa Musgrove owe their relationship to romantic literature. When Anne first hears of their engagement, she overcomes her initial surprise at their seeming

[17] See also Pearson 143, Pikoulis 30-32.
[18] See P. Robinson 149-50; Todd and Blank xxv-xxx, xlv-lviii.

incompatibility by considering what might have brought them together. It is not merely that Louisa, "just recovering from illness, had been in an interesting state," but that, "of course they had fallen in love over poetry" (182). Anne encourages Benwick to read more prose in the hope that he would learn to conquer his melancholy through "patience and resignation" (109), but Benwick achieves this same end – conquering melancholy – through opposite means: by following his natural inclination for sentimental verse, he finds a new love in Louisa. And though their match may surprise, Anne reflects that there is really "no reason against their being happy" (181).

Many critics, however, disagree, and some have concluded that unlike Harriet, Captain Benwick suffers the consequences of his disreputable reading, as his engagement to Louisa is a punishment for his ill-judged obsession with romance. Joe Bray considers Benwick's choice of wife to be "misguided" and "foolish," and believes that Austen means it as a warning to "highlight some of the dangers of over-involved reading" (164-5). Louisa and Benwick as a couple are often contrasted unfavourably with Anne and Wentworth, the former a cautionary tale of shallow feeling and hypocrisy – "neither is made of durable stuff," Tave remarks (285) – and the latter an admirable example of constancy and emotional integrity.[19] But we must ask once more, does the novel really ask us to condemn Benwick and Louisa's relationship? Perhaps, again, we can look to the opinions of other characters as an influence on the judgment of critics.

Most characters who speak of their relationship do so, at least initially, in lukewarm or unflattering terms. Admiral Croft, who expected Louisa and Captain Wentworth to marry, considers that "the matter has taken the strangest turn of all" (186). Captain Wentworth expresses even greater surprise, for he sees a disparity where the Admiral does not: while Louisa

[19] See, for example, Tave 285-289, Pinch 110-11, Ruoff 56.

is “a very amiable, sweet-tempered girl, and not deficient in understanding,” Benwick’s late fiancée was “a very superior creature” and Benwick himself is “something more… a clever man, a reading man” (199). Charles Musgrove’s ambivalence about the match is apparent in his rather sinister description of Benwick “sit[ting] at [Louisa’s] elbow, reading verses, or whispering to her, all day long” (237) Captain Harville, the brother of Benwick’s first, now late, fiancée, is wounded by the speed with which Benwick seems to have recovered from what ought to have been a more extensive period of mourning: “Poor Fanny!” he remarks reproachfully to Anne, “she would not have forgotten him so soon!” (252). Even Anne, who reconciles herself more quickly to the seemingly incongruous match than anyone else, thinks a little scornfully that “the idea of Louisa Musgrove turned into a person of literary taste, and sentimental reflection, was amusing” (182).

But such opinions should not necessarily guide the reader’s assessment of Benwick and Louisa’s engagement. Because they are so talked of throughout the second volume of *Persuasion*, as Anne discusses the engagement first with one person and then with another, it is remarkable to realize that when Anne departs from Lyme in the immediate aftermath of Louisa’s accident at the end of Volume I, we never see or hear first-hand from either Louisa or Benwick again. With this in mind, we should be careful what conclusions we draw from the various second-hand accounts of the relationship we receive. Austen’s novels are all preoccupied with problems of opacity versus transparency in various forms – the desire for privacy, the expectation of sincerity, the claims of decorum – as her characters struggle to understand themselves and one another. Consider the moment in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth must convince her father of her true feelings for Darcy. This is a fascinating and jarring scene for the reader, who has been privy to the gradual shift in Elizabeth’s emotions, when we realize what her

engagement must look like to the characters within the novel. In an early chapter, Elizabeth ridicules Darcy's repugnant pride to her friends and family, and then, as far as they know, he leaves the neighbourhood and she never sees or speaks to him again. Many months later, he returns with Bingley to Netherfield and abruptly applies to her father for consent to their marriage. The private encounters and emotional revolutions that the reader has experienced along with Darcy and Elizabeth must then be recounted second-hand to Mr. Bennet, who is only convinced "at length, by repeated assurances…, by explaining the gradual change…, relating her absolute certainty [of] his affection, … and enumerating with energy all his good qualities" (*P&P* 418). With Louisa and Benwick's match, the reader is in Mr. Bennet's position: denied access to their courtship first-hand, all we know is that we left them relative strangers at Lyme, and we hear nothing about them for weeks until their engagement is announced. Since the couple cannot speak for themselves and have no stronger advocate for their relationship than the kind but condescending Anne, perhaps it is no wonder that both critics and characters persevere in their skepticism.

Despite this incredulity, the characters of *Persuasion* have ultimately been kinder to Louisa and Benwick than the critics. For even if they remain doubtful of the engagement's suitability, or the speed with which it was made, they still acknowledge the worth of both parties. These acknowledgments provide further evidence that, in Austen, a taste for sentimental reading can never be simplistically equated to weakness of character. Critics who have confined Benwick to this one dimension overlook his other qualities, portrayed by the same characters who are at first so surprised about or dismissive of his unorthodox engagement. The sportsman Charles Musgrove, who remains hesitant about Louisa's changed condition, still describes a better-rounded, more lively man than the languishing Byronic hero that critics portray: "when one can

but get him to talk, he has plenty to say. His reading has done him no harm, for he has fought as well as read. He is a brave fellow… We had a famous set-to at rat-hunting all the morning, in my father's great barns; and he played his part so well, that I have liked him the better ever since" (237). Admiral Croft similarly describes Benwick as "a very active, zealous officer too, which is more than you would think for, perhaps, for that soft sort of manner does not do him justice" (186). Like Harriet Smith, Benwick may have his faults, but Austen is careful to clear his reading material from blame. One may be a silly, persuadable young woman without developing foolish expectations from romance novels; equally, one may be a moody enthusiast of sentimental poetry who is also brave, athletic, and social, seeking happiness in new relationships.

Through Harriet and Captain Benwick, Austen vindicates reading with feeling by arguing, as Burney and Edgeworth do, that it is not a corrupting influence. She is more assertive in this negative defence than either of her predecessors, as she does not repudiate the classification of "novel," nor does she couch her vindication within equal praise of conventional reading's calm rationality. Even though they advocate for or accept alternative modes of reading, Burney and Edgeworth depict ideal readers who seek equally (and equably) pleasure and information. But in Austen's work this ideal is flawed. Her Edgars and Belindas – the more intelligent, sensitive, and better educated characters like Emma Woodhouse and Anne Eliot – are too quick to judge the reading of their perceived inferiors and are wrong about its implications. Austen suggests that even the most correct or judicious bibliophiles do not have the right to dictate to others their choice of books. Chapter 2 pursues this idea of the problematic conventional reader.

Chapter 2

The Conventional Reader:

Frankenstein, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*

Through their positive portrayals of feeling or fun-loving readers, the authors of *Camilla*, *Belinda*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* provide an alternative to the hostility with which many of their peers represent such reading. In other novels, the opposite approach is taken to achieve the same end: rather than celebrating affective or pleasurable reading, the focus is on problematizing conventional reading. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Austen's *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice* contain many variations on *Camilla*'s Dr. Orkborne – characters who seem as though they should not be vulnerable readers: precocious students in pursuit of knowledge; wealthy, well-educated gentlemen building their family libraries; patriarchal figures reading aloud for the benefit of a family circle; sensible young women following the literary recommendations of their wise mentors. This chapter examines the ways in which such conventional reading is represented as failing its practitioners despite, and even because of, its disciplined undertaking, its intellectual merit, or its serious subject matter.

Shelley suggests that isolated, self-absorbed reading can exacerbate destructive ambition, and she does so in order to criticize pseudo-intellectual exceptionalism – readers whose scholarly dedication or studious focus leads to their rejection of the humanizing, enriching influence of feeling and community. They view their narrow reading as another index of their mental superiority while in fact it hardens their selfish disregard for others. Austen examines conventionally accepted models of reading – the sophisticated male intellectual who epitomizes high culture, privilege, and prestige; the demure, tractable female reader whose example didactic

authors urge young women to follow – to offer a more complex depiction of seemingly conventional reading, the ways it can limit and subjugate as well improve or educate. Together, these novelists explore how conventional reading does not always mean good reading when it can encourage unhealthy ambition, abuses of power, or emotional hypocrisy. While these novels focus on such adverse examples, Shelley and Austen do suggest the possibility of a happier alternative – a more positive, productive mode of reading that draws on, but also moves beyond, the affective bent of the disreputable reading examined in my first chapter. By comparing, in the end, the brief glimpses of sensitive, open-minded reading that both *Frankenstein* and *Pride and Prejudice* offer, we will shift our focus away from the compromises and failures of conventional reading to the subject of my final chapter: some of the most powerful, effective examples of successful unconventional reading in Romantic-period novels.

The Dangers of Being "Refined by Books and Retirement from the World" in *Frankenstein*

The structure of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) – its embedded tales-within-tales, its numerous narrators, its formal variety – as well as its complex textual history[1] invites analyses that focus on its interest in the transmission of story and text.[2] As Garrett Stewart maintains, however, *Frankenstein* is "as much about reading as about writing, about narrative consumption as about narrative production" (116). Critics have been particularly interested in Shelley's use of Victor's obsessive studies and the Creature's solitary reading to criticize aspects of science,

[1] The number and authority of different editions – partial, complete, in manuscript and print – are still contested issues. Charles E. Robinson suggests that there are eleven distinct texts of the novel. For further discussion, see his compilation of Shelley's *Frankenstein Notebooks* as well as his "Frankenstein: Its Composition and Publication."
[2] See, for example, Benford, T. Jackson, Garrett.

literature, education, gender roles, and political justice in the nineteenth century.[3] Nonetheless, a more comprehensive view of reading in *Frankenstein* remains to be taken: while scholarship has concentrated on Victor and the Creature as readers, almost all the other characters, down to some of the most minor, have significant reading habits or tastes. Barring bibliographic or textual studies, analyses of the novel also tend to focus on only one of its published texts: either the first from 1818, or the third from 1831.[4] In studying more of Shelley's reading characters than just the central ones and comparing their portrayals in both these editions, a pattern emerges: most of *Frankenstein*'s men of letters are narrow and selfish readers, whose reading, although it is disciplined, professional, or scholarly, is motivated by ambition and self-interest. Their approach to reading mirrors their approach to life, valuing their own fame and fortune as the ultimate good, to the detriment of everyone around them.

Shelley offers a counterpoint to this antisocial reading in the very few characters who privilege literary community – people reading together, with the aim of promoting domestic contentment, mutual affection, and self-improvement. Shelley herself was an avid reader, and J. Paul Hunter contends that the breadth of Shelley's reading speaks to her sociable open-mindedness: "she was driven at least as much by curiosity about strange and unfamiliar things as by positions, outlooks, or doctrines she found sympathetic" (xv). Lisa Vargo agrees, and further remarks that by dedicating the novel to her father William Godwin, who considered reading "a key aspect of a programme of personal and social improvement" (26), Shelley affirms that

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[3] For some influential examples, see Brantlinger 59-65; Gilbert and Gubar 213-247; Mellor, "The Female in *Frankenstein*," 220-32; Moers, "The Female Gothic," 90-99; A. Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism,* 203-12.

[4] Mary Poovey's fascinating article on gender and authorial self-fashioning, "'My Hideous Progeny': Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism," is one of a few notable exceptions (see also Marilyn Butler's "The First *Frankenstein* and Radical Science").

"reading is…. a communal activity" (28). The novel's Preface states that it is dedicated to "the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection" (47) and these claims are borne out by *Frankenstein*'s characters, whose reading has the power to bring people together as well as drive them apart.

The first character whose reading activities are described in the novel is Captain Walton, the author of the epistolary frame narrative and captain of the ship that rescues Frankenstein in the Arctic. Walton is a voracious reader, whose passion for books seems, at first, all the more impressive because he is essentially self-taught. Writing to his sister, he describes his past relationship with literature:

> You may remember, that a history of all the voyages made for the purposes of discovery composed the whole of our good uncle Thomas's library. My education was neglected, yet I was passionately fond of reading. These volumes were my study day and night, and my familiarity with them increased that regret which I had felt, as a child, on learning that my father's dying injunction had forbidden my uncle to allow me to embark in a sea-faring life. These visions faded when I perused, for the first time, those poets whose effusions entranced my soul, and lifted it to heaven. I also became a poet, and for one year lived in a Paradise of my own creation; I imagined that I also might obtain a niche in the temple where the names of Homer and Shakespeare are consecrated. You are well acquainted with my failure, and how heavily I bore the disappointment. But just at that time I inherited the fortune of my cousin, and my thoughts were turned into the channel of their earlier bent. (50-51)

Walton's reading has been solitary and narrow, confined, in his early youth, to tales of adventure. We might excuse these restrictions since he was "neglected," given no direction or

tuition, and he had no other options for reading material since "a history of… voyages… composed the whole of" the books to which he had access. We might become more suspicious of him, though, when we learn that the dying wishes of Walton's father were to prevent him from "embark[ing] in a sea-faring life" – the very life he is pursing. While no reasons are given to justify his father's injunction, those who defy the wishes of their family come to no very good end in *Frankenstein.* But it is Walton's subsequent description of discovering poetry that is the most revelatory, and unflattering, part of this passage. While he claims, with florid banality, that he was inspired to become a poet by others "whose effusions entranced my soul, and lifted it to heaven," his motivations are worldly and rooted in hubris. While pursuing this literary vocation, he glories in a god-like power, living "in a Paradise of my own creation." When he admits that he hungers after "a niche in the temple where the names of Homer and Shakespeare are consecrated," Walton reveals that he cares about credit at least as much as he cares about literature: he wants a "niche" for himself in the "temple" where posterity worships the greatest poets of Western civilization.

When Walton turns from reading adventure stories and poetry to science, it is also in the service of his ambition: he pursues "those branches of the physical science from which a naval adventurer might derive the greatest practical knowledge" (51). Walton is motivated primarily by "ardent curiosity," by a desire to "tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man" (50). "These are my enticements," he freely admits to his sister. Walton wishes to be first in his field, and this, he believes, is his due: "do I not deserve to accomplish some great purpose. My life might have been passed in ease and luxury; but I preferred glory to every enticement that wealth places in my path" (51). Walton thinks that his desire for "glory" entitles him to success. Only secondarily does he consider what his actions might do for others: after describing the personal

triumph he will attain, he adds, almost as an afterthought, "you cannot contest the inestimable benefits which I shall confer on all mankind… by discovering a passage near the pole to those countries, to reach which at present so many months are requisite" (50). Throughout the novel, as his early attitude to reading implies, Walton's personal ambition comes before the consideration of "benefits" to "mankind."

Some critics suggest that the novel operates as a warning for Walton: that in the end, Frankenstein's terrible story of the consequences that attend a life of hubris cures Walton of his destructive ambition.[5] But as Monique Morgan points out, "the captain abandons his journey to the Pole at least in part because his crew is threatening mutiny" (n. pag). This claim should be taken further, however, as it is clear that Walton turns back *only* because his hand is forced. At first, despite the protests of his men, he weighs their lives and his own against his desire for success and finds in favour of the latter. "I had rather die," he swears, "than return shamefully, – my purpose unfulfilled" (237). When he does agree to give up the voyage, it is with the most unwilling bitterness: "Thus are my hopes blasted by cowardice and indecision; I come back ignorant and disappointed. It requires more philosophy than I possess, to bear this injustice with patience" (237). Walton despises the will of the majority as "cowardice"; if the good of the group thwarts his personal wishes, it is "injustice." The failure of Walton's mission has been interpreted as a criticism of the nineteenth-century Western interest in conquest and exploration, and Britain's imperial expansion.[6] What also seems to be targeted here, however, is the

[5] Terry W. Thompson concludes that Walton is "warned away from the precipice of self-destruction by… a dying Victor Frankenstein" (108). See also Benford 327, Poovey 340, Thornburg 64-5, Twitchell 55.
[6] See, for example, Hill 53-88, Lanone 102-3, Vargo 29-31.

motivation behind Walton's excursion: his petulant self-entitlement that risks the lives of others, and that can be traced back to the solitary, self-absorbed reading of his childhood.

Dwelling in the frame narration that brackets the central tale told by Frankenstein, Walton is a minor character – but one whose brief history of reading in the novel's opening pages bleakly foreshadows that of the scientist. Self-conscious about being an autodidact, Walton is awed by Frankenstein's sophisticated understanding: "his mind is so cultivated; and when he speaks, although his words are culled with the choicest art, yet they flow with rapidity and unparalleled eloquence" (60). When Frankenstein begins his story, we learn that this cultivation stems from an early education that blended domestic happiness with intellectual rigour. Frankenstein's parents dedicated themselves to the "improvement and health" (64) of the children in their care, so Frankenstein and his small circle of peers – his brothers, his cousin Elizabeth, and their friend Clerval – were taught to excel at their studies in order to please others rather than to secure praise or status for themselves: "Elizabeth was not incited to apply herself to drawing, that her companions might not outstrip her; but through the desire of pleasing her aunt, by the representation of some favourite scene done by her own hand" (66). In this way the children pleased their parents, but they pleased themselves as well: "so far from study being made odious to us through punishment, we loved application, and our amusements would have been the labours of other children. Perhaps we did not read so many books, or learn languages so quickly, as those who are disciplined according to the ordinary methods, but what we learned was impressed the more deeply on our memories" (66-7). This method of learning is presented as an unconventional ideal: intellectual progress is important, but not more so than, or at the expense of, domestic contentment. What such an education lacks in breadth it makes up for in

depth, both intellectual and emotional. “No youth could have passed more happily than mine,” Frankenstein reminisces (66).

So far Frankenstein’s youthful reading is opposed to Walton’s: his education is not neglected, nor is he isolated in his studies. These studies are also directed towards both self-improvement and social utility, in making others happy. Frankenstein strays from this ideal soon enough, however, when he becomes enamoured of natural science and alchemy. When his favourite work by Agrippa is curtly dismissed by his father as “sad trash” (68), Frankenstein “continued to read with the greatest avidity,” (68) but now in “strict secrecy” and “alone” (68). His obsessive pursuit of the creation of life takes root in these solitary studies, and Frankenstein considers that if his father had taken the time to listen to and rationally refute his early interest in alchemy, “it is even possible, that the train of my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin” (68). Frankenstein’s unhealthy ambition begins with his early secret reading, and is nourished by his later, isolating study. When he is old enough to attend university, his passion, like Walton’s, is redirected towards modern science – he “read with ardour those works, so full of genius and discrimination, which modern inquirers have written on these subjects” (77) – but this shift in material does not change his insular study habits: “two years passed,… during which I paid no visit to Geneva [his home], but was engaged, heart and soul, in the pursuit of some discoveries, which I hoped to make” (78).

His pursuit of discovery, we also learn, is not motivated by the precepts of his childhood education, of giving pleasure to others, but, like Walton, by his own desire for power and glory: “A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve their’s” (82). Caught up in these fantasies, Frankenstein neglects his own duty of

gratitude to his family – he never visits, he stops writing, and he ignores the reproof in a letter from his father reminding him of the importance of social connection: "I know that while you are pleased with yourself, you will think of us with affection, and we shall hear regularly from you. You must pardon me, if I regard any interruption in your correspondence as a proof that your other duties are neglected" (83). Frankenstein's domestic failures here foreshadow his parental neglect of the Creature. The nightmarish results of his experiment have prompted much critical discussion over whether Shelley was taking a position against Enlightenment science.[7] As with Walton's Arctic exploration, the target here is not necessarily Frankenstein's vocation but his motivation. Isolated or secret reading nourishes in both Frankenstein and Walton an ambition that "masquerades as a desire to benefit society, although it… is really only the egotist's desire for 'glory'" (Poovey 339).

Shelley provides an early contrast to Walton and Frankenstein in the reading habits of Elizabeth, Frankenstein's fiancée, and Henry Clerval, his childhood companion. They are Frankenstein's closest friends, and Shelley endows them with interests and temperaments almost identical to one another, and opposite to those of Frankenstein. Elizabeth is "lively and animated," but with "feelings…strong and deep," and a "disposition uncommonly affectionate" (65). While Frankenstein tells us he "delighted in investigating the facts relative to the actual world," Elizabeth "busied herself in following the aerial creations of the poets" (66). Clerval is similarly described as a sensitive, loving friend: he has a "soul [that] overflowed with ardent affections, and his friendship was of that devoted and wondrous nature that the worldly-minded teach us to look for only in the imagination" (181). Like Elizabeth, Clerval prefers literary to

[7] See, for example, Bate 49-55, Butler, "*Frankenstein* and Radical Science," 12-14; Goodall and Knellwolf.

scientific reading, as "his favourite study consisted in books of chivalry and romance" (66). Frankenstein emphasizes the importance of imagination to each, using the same word, "fancy," to describe them: he admires Elizabeth's "understanding and fancy" (65) and Clerval's "singular talent and fancy" (66).

These characterizations may appear to establish an opposition between practical science and the creative arts, but this conflict is superficial – remember that Captain Walton, too, delighted in tales of adventure and poetry before he turned to the science of navigation. The important distinction lies in what motivates, and what results from, this different kind of reading. Walton's love of poetry was inextricable from his love of self, his desire for recognition and ascendancy. For Elizabeth and Clerval, their literary taste is rooted in a love of others, fostering community feeling and connection. Their imaginative reading prompts their own creativity. Frankenstein tells us about this social and generative impulse in Elizabeth when he describes their different world views: "the world was to me a secret, which I desired to discover; to her it was a vacancy, which she sought to people with imaginations of her own" (66). After the death of Frankenstein's mother, Elizabeth's "mind had acquired new firmness and vigour," and she devotes her talents to the collective good: she "amused her uncle, instructed my brothers, and I never beheld her so enchanting as at this time, when she was continually endeavouring to contribute to the happiness of others, entirely forgetful of self" (73). Contributing to her own harmless pleasure and the enjoyment of those around them, Elizabeth's "fancy" has very different results from Frankenstein's violent, secret, and ultimately destructive creativity.

Clerval's creativity is even more specifically literary, and just as open and communal. As children, he and his friends act out "plays composed by him out of [his] favourite books," and he writes his own fairy tales, to "the delight and amazement of all his companions" (66). As an

adult, Clerval uses his abilities to comfort Frankenstein, who is shattered by the results of his experiment, and to draw him back into the social world. Frankenstein himself recognizes the very different effects of their respective talents, as he admits that his own studies alienated him from others, "seclud[ing] me from the intercourse of my fellow-creatures, and render[ing] me unsocial" (97) – whereas Clerval exerts "the resources of his mind…[which] were truly astonishing" to push Frankenstein into happy social participation: "his conversation was full of imagination; and very often, in imitation of the Persian and Arabic writers, he invented tales of wonderful fancy and passion. At other times he repeated my favourite poems, or drew me out into arguments, which he supported with great ingenuity" (97). The height of Clerval's literary ambition is not to dominate literary society, as Walton wished, but merely to participate in it. Clerval's father wants him to go into the family business and, notably unlike Walton and Frankenstein, Clerval is willing to honour this obligation. He does not consider his duty and his literary pursuits to be mutually exclusive: "Henry had a refined mind; he had no desire to be idle, and was well pleased to become his father's partner, but he believed that a man might be a very good trader, and yet possess a cultivated understanding" (73). When he and Frankenstein travel to London, for Clerval it is in order to seek out "the intercourse of the men of genius and talent who flourished at this time" (183). Clerval's imagination and fancy are means to reach outwards, to connect and build bonds with others.

This mode of reading is embodied at the centre of the novel in its most fascinating reading character, the Creature, who has been almost universally critically decried as "the worst kind of reader imaginable" (Sharp 82). Michele Turner Sharp maintains that the Creature's better nature, "his native intelligence and innately beneficent response to the world around him," are undermined by his spotty reading, "which leave[s] him entirely ignorant of literary convention or

of the important distinctions that well-schooled readers know to hold between kinds of works" (80). Tony Jackson locates the Creature "in the line of fictional characters – from Don Quixote to Catherine Morland to Edward Waverley… – who have had their sense of mundane reality corrupted by their (mis)reading" (74). In agreement with this, Lisa Vargo considers the Creature to be "the [novel's] most isolated and therefore most misguided reader" (34).

These assessments focus principally on the Creature's description of the way he approaches his reading material. The Creature recounts to Victor how, consumed with loneliness, living in secret in the shed adjoining the De Lacey family's cottage, he learned to speak and read by watching Felix teach his foreign lover Safie from Volney's *Ruins: A Survey of the Revolutions of Empires* (1791). The Creature later comes across a portmanteau in the woods that, fortuitously, contains three books in the language he has learned by eavesdropping on the De Laceys: a volume of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (c. 200 AD), Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). These books he "continually studied" (152), in addition to a final work that he discovers in the pocket of his stolen clothes, Victor's journal recounting "the four months that preceded my creation,… [a] history mingled with accounts of domestic occurrences" (155). The detail that scholars have seized on regarding all this reading is that the Creature admits to reading everything as "a true history" (154) – he cannot tell basic fact from fiction. This same charge has been levelled by scholars at other maligned reading characters discussed in the previous chapter – Edgeworth's Virginia St Pierre and Austen's Harriet Smith – but in their cases, the charge was false. In the Creature's case, he frankly confesses it. But the key question remains to be asked: what are the results of the Creature's supposed misreading? Vargo concludes that "the creature's conflation of the two [i.e. fact and fiction] leads to his confusion" (34). Yet, as with Virginia's and Harriet's

reading, no harm comes of the Creature's. Indeed, he derives sound principles and an understanding of human nature from his reading that hold true, despite his confusion of romance and history.

The Creature describes in detail his subjective, emotional investment in the books he peruses:

> As I read,… I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike the beings concerning whom I read, and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathized with, and partly understood them, but I was unformed in mind; I was dependent on none, and related to none… My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them. (153)

Vargo contends that the Creature's attempt to identify with the characters he reads about is another part of his problem: "his own matter of species leads him to misread, as the works he reads are not applicable to his own situation" (34). What the Creature is describing, though, is not interpretive error or aberration but a universal kind of reading experience. It is human nature to apply things we see or experience or read about to our own situations, to seek ourselves in the external world, and lay readers as well as philosophers, writers, and scientists throughout history are prompted by literature to ask the questions that the Creature asks: "Who [am] I? What [am] I? Whence did I come? What [is] my destination?" The fact that Creature finds himself "similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike" those he reads about is not unique to his situation, however unique his "hideous" "person" or "gigantic" "stature" may be. Women, people of colour, orphans, the disabled, the non-heterosexual or non-cisgendered – all of these readers might

experience similar complexities of identification when trying to relate to Milton's Adam or Goethe's Werther.

Sharp argues that the Creature's attempt to find himself in his reading "teaches him nothing but his own sorry state" and that "books form a mirror in which the monster finds his own prejudices confirmed" (82). This is not what the Creature tells us, however. While listening to Volney, read aloud by Felix, the Creature determines that "sorrow only increased with knowledge" (146); reading Goethe, he is weighed down by "despondency and gloom;" but Plutarch, he says, "taught me high thoughts; he elevated me above the wretched sphere of my own reflections, to admire and love the heroes of past ages" (153). And while his grasp of the material remains imperfect, as "many things I read surpassed my understanding and experience" (153-4), this does not prevent him from drawing on these "new and mightier scenes of action" (154) to derive a moral code: "I felt the greatest ardour for virtue rise within me, and abhorrence for vice… Induced by these feelings, I was of course led to admire peaceable law-givers.... The patriarchal lives of my protectors caused these impressions to take a firm hold on my mind" (154). The Creature applies what he reads not just to himself but to the only little society with which he is familiar, that of the cottagers he lives beside. Though rudimentary and half-formed, the Creature's reading teaches him to value the basic principles of peace and reciprocity upon which ideal communities are founded. Where is the misreading in this?

The Creature would also not be the first reader to find his sympathies inclining towards Satan in his reading of *Paradise Lost*. William Blake famously found Milton's portrayal of the fallen angel the most moving and convincing, and suggested that Milton "wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell,… because he was a true Poet" (35). The Creature acknowledges the danger in this sympathy with Satan when he admits that

"like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me" (154). This vice belongs only to his "hours of despondency and gloom" (155), however, and it contrasts with the better moral feelings that he has learned from his reading: when he remembers the cottagers' "amiable and benevolent dispositions, I persuaded myself that when they should become acquainted with my admiration of their virtues, they would compassionate me, and overlook my personal deformity" (155). Sharp claims that the Creature ultimately uses his "bifurcated sympathies with Adam and Satan to justify his own evil deeds" (82) but nowhere does the novel support such a contention. His descent into vengeful murder is catalyzed not by his own misreading, but by other people's persistent misreading of him.

The Creature casts himself on the mercy of the cottagers, holding an intelligent conversation with the blind patriarch of the family and clinging to his knees in peaceful supplication when the other members of the household return. At their first glimpse of the Creature's grotesque appearance, however, they attack him in horror. The Creature flees, and gives in to temporary despair, but upon reflection decides that his approach was "too hasty" – he hopes, though, that his "errors" are not "irretrievable" (161). But when he returns the next day, he overhears Felix telling their landlord that they must leave the area, for "the life of my father is in the greatest danger" and "my wife and my sister will never recover their horror" (162) from encountering the Creature. The old man, we can thus assume, made no effort to defend the Creature or explain his plea for sympathy to the family. Embittered by their rejection, the Creature sets out to find Victor, and during his long months of travel, he rescues a girl from drowning in a river only to be shot for his efforts. This is the moment where, "inflamed by pain," the Creature "vowed eternal hatred and vengeance to all mankind" (166). It is these experiences,

not his books, that teach him to abhor mankind, and to value their lives as they value his – at nothing.

The Creature's reading has been likened to both Walton's and Frankenstein's: all three are in some sense autodidacts, and all three read in isolation.[8] So all three are often grouped together in arguments that assert that Shelley portrays solitary reading as dangerous. There are some important differences between the Creature's reading and that of the other two, however. To begin with, it is broader. Unlike with Walton's and Frankenstein's narrow repertoires, Shelley has chosen books for the Creature that cover a comprehensive range of subject matters, styles, and genres: contemporary and classical history (Volney and Plutarch), Restoration poetry (Milton), Romantic fiction of sensibility (Goethe), and nineteenth-century science and life writing (Frankenstein's notebooks). Such variety, regardless of how the Creature might muddle fact with fiction, would help to acquaint him with a wide range of human experience despite his own limited life.

Most important, though, are the ways in which, however isolated and self-guided, the Creature's reading is similar to Elizabeth's and to Clerval's, and dissimilar to Walton's and Frankenstein's. It is not motivated by ambition or the personal search for glory, but rather by the profound desire to reach out to others. Before he masters language, the Creature wishes to learn it so that he can participate in society: "I longed to understand the motives and feelings of these lovely creatures [the cottagers]; I was inquisitive to know why Felix appeared so miserable, and Agatha so sad. I thought (foolish wretch!) that it might be in my power to restore happiness to these deserving people" (140). When he begins to master speech and reading, he plans to reveal

[8] Brantlinger points out that despite Frankenstein's close-knit childhood peer group and university education, he still "pursues his course of reading and research in isolation and against the advice of his father and his professors" (60).

himself to the cottagers and beg for their sympathy, but he delays this encounter in order to improve his intellectual faculties: “I found that my understanding improved so much with every day’s experience, that I was unwilling to commence this undertaking until a few more months should have added to my wisdom” (155). All of the Creature’s reading and learning is bent towards the aim of “fit[ting] myself for an interview with them” to “solicit[…] their compassion and friendship” (155) – to form relationships, and to find a useful place for himself in society. As Stewart puts it, “the Creature is humanized by reading” (120). Thus the 1818 text of *Frankenstein* privileges reading that is conducive to human relationships and self-improvement rather than fame or power.

The 1831 edition of the novel strengthens its criticism of narrow, egocentric reading. In her introduction to this later edition, Shelley claims that she “has changed no portion of the story, nor introduced any new ideas or circumstances” (359); though she may have edited the language and style, she has left “the core and the substance of it untouched” (359). Until the late twentieth century, readers were of the same mind, and the 1831 edition was the preferred text for teaching and studying since it seemed to leave the essence of the novel unaltered while refining its rough patches. Over the last few decades, however, critical opinion has shifted to favour the earlier text. Editors like D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf argue that despite Shelley’s insistence to the contrary, “the 1831 edition is largely a different book from the 1818 edition” (Macdonald and Scherf 39), and that the earlier edition “is closer to the imaginative act and atmosphere that spawned this influential novel” (40) – while the 1831 text, as J. Paul Hunter points out, was revised “from a later perspective when [Shelley] was considerably older and more detached from the original conception” (xvii-xviii). When it comes to Shelley’s portrayal of reading, at least, the changes to the text are significantly more substantial than Shelley allows. The 1831 edition of

Frankenstein privileges communal, generative reading by focusing even more on its opposite: by intensifying the alienating qualities of her characters' selfish reading and by undercutting the influence of positive, shared reading. In this way the 1831 text is perhaps a more pessimistic vision of the solitary, self-absorbed reader.

Wolfson and Levao suggest that Shelley's changes were to increase the novel's mass market appeal, emphasizing its sensational Gothic qualities to minimize associations with potentially controversial intellectual debates of the day (328-30). Shelley dedicated the first edition to her father, the philosopher, critic, and novelist William Godwin, "Author of Political Justice, Caleb Williams, etc," and negative reviews pounced on this connection. John Croker writes that the novel is "written in the spirit of his school," and that "Mr. Godwin is the patriarch of a literary family whose chief skill is in delineating the wanderings of the intellect" (382). The *Edinburgh Magazine* is slightly more generous, opining that *Frankenstein* "is one of the productions of the modern school in its highest style of caricature and exaggeration… formed on the Godwinian manner, and has all the faults, but many likewise of the beauties of that model" (249). Perhaps to distance her work from these loaded associations with her father's contentious reputation, in the second edition Shelley removes the dedication. Other details of its publication also suggest a turn away from the philosophical towards the Gothic: released on All Hallows Eve, the novel came with a new introduction by the author that highlights her dreamy, solitary childhood and the ghastly origins of her idea for the story, which, she asserts, came to her in a terrifying nightmare. The introduction also reveals a new motivation for the novel's composition. In addition to "the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection" (47), as the 1818 Preface asserts, Shelley explains in 1831 that the novel is meant to "speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror – one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the

blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart" (356). This is a novel of sensation, Shelley seems to be saying, not a political treatise, and affective reading is encouraged. These changes also have another effect: by diminishing the novel's association with one of the period's most unique intellectuals, and by emphasizing the commonalities of her readers – speaking to "the mysterious fears of *our* nature" – Shelley encourages the kind of reading that focuses on shared rather than individual experience, one that does not turn inward on the self but reaches out towards others.

Shelley's sustained interest in this kind of social and affective reading emerges in another, more negative way in the 1831 edition: characters do less of it, and as a result become less sympathetic. They are harder, more ambitious, more narrow-minded, and Shelley uses their reading, and their attitudes to reading, to reflect such changes. The 1831 version of Captain Walton is more fanatical and more arrogant than his already self-entitled 1818 version. In the early edition, Walton alludes to "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" when he tells his sister that "I am going to unexplored regions, to 'the land of ice and snow,' but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety" (55). In the later edition, Walton expands on this reference when he explains that

> I have often attributed my attachment to, my passionate enthusiasm for, the dangerous mysteries of the ocean, to that production of the most imaginative of modern poets. There is something at work in my soul, which I do not understand. I am practically industrious – painstaking; – a workman to execute with perseverance and labour; – but besides this, there is a love for the marvellous, a belief in the marvellous, intertwined with all my projects, which hurries me out of the common pathways of men. (317)

In addition to extolling his own "industrious," "painstaking," "perseverance" and "labour," here Walton infuses his sense of privilege with the inevitability of destiny. He praises Coleridge's

exceptionalism – "the most imaginative of modern poets" – while proving his own. His "love of the marvellous" means that his reading of Coleridge's poem is different from other people's – more sensitive, more significant. There is an ineffable "something at work in my soul" that makes Walton, in his own eyes, extraordinary, that "hurries him out of the common pathways of men." His reading is just one more condition that proves his unique worthiness.

Similarly, Walton disdains non-readers, suggesting that even their most noble deeds are made less worthy if they have an impoverished education. In the 1818 edition, Walton describes to his sister the heroism of his ship's master: "'What a noble fellow!' you will exclaim. He is so; but then he has passed all his life on board a vessel, and has scarcely an idea beyond the rope and the shroud" (54). In the 1831 edition, this last sentence is altered to read, "He is so; but then he is wholly uneducated; he is as silent as a Turk, and a kind of ignorant carelessness attends him, which, while it renders his conduct the more astonishing, detracts from the interest and sympathy which otherwise he would command" (317). In this version of the ship master's history, Walton concludes that, although the man's actions are just as heroic as in the earlier edition, he is now undeserving of "interest and sympathy" because he is "uneducated" and "ignorant." For all his original arrogance, Walton's character in the 1818 edition is more diffident than in 1831. In the earlier text, Walton is self-conscious about his own slipshod education, admitting to Frankenstein that "I am self-educated, and perhaps I hardly rely sufficiently upon my own powers. I wish therefore that my companion should be wiser and more experienced than myself, to confirm and support me" (61). This more insecure Walton is not so dismissive of a man whose actions are noble even if he is "wholly uneducated." But the 1831 edition removes even this slight hesitation and replaces Walton's wistful desire for friendship with a speech on his own righteous ambition: "one man's life or death were but a small price to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge

which I sought; for the dominion I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race" (318). The man who seeks "dominion" over the elements at any price is not one to extend sympathy to someone less accomplished, however heroic, and even if they might have past difficulties in common.

In the 1831 edition, Frankenstein, like Walton, is both more extreme and less self-critical. In the earlier edition, comparing his personality to Elizabeth's when they were children, he believes that "I was more calm and philosophical than my companion" (66) – in the later text, however, it is Elizabeth who "was of a calmer and more concentrated disposition" (323). This change in temperament sets the stage for Frankenstein's intensified descriptions of his victimhood at the hands of fate. In the 1818 text, Victor speculates that if his father had taken the trouble rationally to disabuse him of his interest in alchemy and turn him towards science, the subsequent terrible events of the novel could have been avoided (68). In the later edition, this conjecture is removed and, instead, Frankenstein sees all the mistakes of his life as the inevitable machinations of a universe that was always out to get him. He claims that "Chance – or rather the evil influence, the Angel of Destruction… asserted omnipotent sway over me from the moment I turned my reluctant steps from my father's door" (328), leaving for university. While such claims suggest powerlessness, positioning himself as a pawn in the hands of fate, Frankenstein also absolves himself of blame, and by rejecting culpability, seems to shore up his own arrogance. The "Angel of Destruction" sends him first to visit Professor Krempe, who asks about his early reading. Although he knows what the professor will think of it, for he himself "had long considered those authors useless," Victor is indifferent to the professor's good opinion: "I replied carelessly; and partly in contempt, mentioned the names of my alchymists as the principal authors I had studied" (329). In the 1818 edition, Frankenstein shows at least a little

humility when questioned about his studies: “I mentioned, it is true, with fear and trembling, the only authors I had ever read upon those subjects” (74).

In these ways, the 1831 versions of both Frankenstein and Walton are made even less sympathetic, as the small changes to their attitude towards reading amplify their intense focus on the self. The character whose reading is changed most drastically in the later edition of the text is Clerval. In the 1818 text, Clerval’s reading is akin to Elizabeth’s and the Creature’s: sensitive, generative, communal, loving literature for its beauty and for the ways in which it connects him with others. In the 1831 text, Clerval still loves “chivalry and romance,” but equally he “loved enterprise, hardship, and even danger, for its own sake” (324). His ambitions are no longer confined to pleasing his family and refining his mind through literary society. Instead, “his hope and dream was to become one among those whose names are recorded in story, as the gallant and adventurous benefactors of our species” (325). Clerval now craves the glory and renown that motivate Walton and Frankenstein. He accompanies the latter to London, not to meet its “men of genius and talent” (183), but to pursue “his design…to visit India, in the belief that he had… the means of materially assisting the progress of European colonisation and trade. In Britain only could he further the execution of his plan” (344-5). Clerval’s study of foreign languages and literatures still has a social focus, but it is conquest, not communication or connection, that he desires. As Anne K. Mellor puts it, “Clerval – who had functioned in the first edition as the touchstone for moral virtue against which Victor’s fall was measured – is now portrayed as equally ambitious of fame and power, as a future colonial imperialist” (“Choosing a Text” 36).

There is another character, yet to be discussed, whose reading changes between the 1818 and 1831 editions: Walton’s sister, Margaret Saville, who is supposedly reading everything that we are, as Walton sends her letters containing his, Frankenstein’s, and the Creature’s narratives.

Stewart argues that there is nothing to indicate whether Margaret ever receives the correspondence, as "Mrs. Saville is nowhere to be found except in the address of the discourse, playing mere narratee in contrast to your role as reader" (117). While this may be true, we are nevertheless encouraged to identify with her, reading, in her stead, the letters meant for her. As such, the way Shelley portrays her reading is important, and she makes one small but significant change to the 1831 edition of the novel that highlights Margaret Saville's role as a reader. In the earlier edition, Walton is rhapsodizing over Frankenstein's virtues and then breaks off to address his sister directly: "Will you laugh at the enthusiasm I express concerning this divine wanderer? If you do, you must certainly have lost that simplicity which was once your characteristic charm" (61). In the 1831 text, this last sentence is altered and amplified to read, "You would not, if you saw him. You have been tutored and refined by books and retirement from the world, and you are, therefore, somewhat fastidious; but this only renders you the more fit to appreciate the extraordinary merits of this wonderful man" (319). This addition seems minor, but, as with other changed details, the small scale speaks to the deliberation with which Shelley made such adjustments. This shift, in keeping with other modifications of the 1831 text, focuses on the negatives of solitary, self-absorbed reading.

The reader with whom we are aligned in the 1818 text is one whose "characteristic charm" is one of "simplicity." "Simplicity" should not be conflated with "simplistic" or "simple-minded," since, particularly at the time, it connoted a lack of pretension, an ingenuous sincerity. The reader with whom we are aligned in the 1831 edition of the novel sounds much more likely to practice the kind of isolated, narrow-minded reading that Walton and Frankenstein perform: like them, Mrs. Saville is "fastidious," "refined," and in "retirement from the world." Indeed, Walton tells us that these are the necessary qualities that "render[…]" one "more fit to

appreciate" Victor – to appreciate a man who may be cultured and eloquent, but whose terrible hubris laid waste to his family. Margaret Saville is no longer a model of "simplicity" to follow, but a warning to heed: other characters in *Frankenstein* who become fastidious by reading in isolation are fated, at best, to be selfish and entitled, and, at worst, to be the instrument of their own destruction.

The only reader in the novel who does not change is the Creature. Buried at the heart of the novel, he is hemmed in by readers like Walton and Frankenstein, and later by Clerval and possibly even by us, the reader outside of the frame narrative whose sympathies might be co-opted by Victor's powerful eloquence, lonely martyrdom, and compelling ambition. Such qualities are attractive – certainly to the Romantics, who sometimes glorified them in exceptionalist character types such as the genius poet, the intrepid explorer, or the Byronic hero. But *Frankenstein*, even over the course of thirteen years of changes, suggests that these types possess attributes inimical to the generative connections so necessary for the peaceful, productive shared experience that the Creature learns to value through his reading. It is part of the novel's tragedy that this more positive mode of reading is not ultimately successful. The salutary effects of the Creature's early reading lessons in virtue are undone by the fearful intolerance of human nature in general and by Frankenstein's neglect in particular. Elizabeth's and Clerval's gentle influence cannot turn Frankenstein from his dangerous obsession, nor are they able to draw him back into tranquil or open participation in their small social circle: he can never bring himself to tell his closest friends and family the truth behind the terrible tragedies that befall them. In the novel's second edition these collaborative readers are made even less effective, as Clerval's literary habits are changed to align with those of the novel's self-centred protagonist. *Frankenstein* offers a bleak view of a certain kind of Romantic reading in men of

talent and individuality: that the pursuit of ambition and glory is a more powerful draw for them than the chance to participate in literary communities dedicated to mutual happiness and benefit.

The Problem with "Books of a Serious Stamp" in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*

In *Frankenstein*, Shelley dwells on the pitfalls of intellectual or disciplined reading motivated by isolated individualism, suggesting an alternative, if an untenable one, in domesticated reading that is motivated by social rather than personal concerns. In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Mansfield Park* (1814) Jane Austen also examines modes of conventional reading in order to undermine them. She demonstrates the ways in which men can abuse the roles of the benevolent patriarch reading to his family circle, or the respectable male intellectual and book collector enjoying his private library. She also explores how the ideal of the complaisant, tractable female reader is used to gloss over the complex emotional and psychological experiences of such reading women. Like Shelley with *Frankenstein*'s Creature, Austen does provide one brief example of ideal reading in *Pride and Prejudice* which I will discuss at the end of the chapter. Standing out from all the flawed or complicated readers, Elizabeth Bennet strikes a balance between the typically conventional and the disreputable affective reader: one who is both emotional and intellectual, passionate but principled, open-minded yet still critical.

Both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* include a scene dramatizing what would be a familiar domestic experience for Romantic-period readers: a patriarchal figure reading aloud to a family group. We have already seen this in *Frankenstein*'s Felix De Lacey reading to his cottage companions, and *Emma*'s Robert Martin reading to his family and their guest Harriet Smith. Eve Tavor Bennet describes the eighteenth century as "an era when there was occasion

for everyone to read aloud from letters, books and papers in social, domestic and working situations" (93). Patricia Howell Michaelson argues that this is because "reading aloud within the family reinforce[d] social bonds and hierarchies: the reader might be a father surrounded by his family, a husband reading to his wife in bed, reinforcing their intimacy, or a paid companion reading to amuse her patron" (526). The first two of these examples emphasize the positive "intimacy," the wholesome "social bond" fostered by a man reading aloud to his domestic circle. It is the hierarchy of this communal ritual, however, that interests Austen, and in her versions of it an entertaining activity becomes an expression of power or an exercise in manipulation: the wise, affectionate patriarch is transformed into oppressor and predator. Through two such scenes Austen creates a suggestive similarity between two seemingly very different readers, *Pride and Prejudice*'s ponderous, self-important Mr. Collins and *Mansfield Park*'s lively, smooth-talking Henry Crawford.

Mr. Collins is an obvious caricature of the male intellectual, a man who entertains a "very good opinion of himself, of his authority as a clergyman, and his rights as a rector" (78) despite a lack of intelligence, judgment, or self-awareness. "Mr. Collins was not a sensible man," the narrator confides, and unfortunately "the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society" (78). The rector reveals his intellectual inadequacy to Mr. Bennet when he pursues him into his library: "Thither Mr. Collins had followed him after breakfast, and there he would continue, nominally engaged with one of the largest folios in the collection, but really talking to Mr. Bennet, with little cessation, of his house and garden at Hunsford" (79-80). Mr. Collins's superficial relationship with literature is obvious through his selection of one of the library's "largest folios" with which to be "nominally engaged." Though he has no actual interest in reading, he cultivates the appearance of it by choosing what must seem, to him, the most

impressive volume because it is the most physically significant – literally representing one of the novel's chief concerns, of judging a book by its cover. Mr. Collins, as the narrator tartly summarizes, is "in fact much better fitted for a walker than a reader" (80).

Mr. Collins's superficial attitude to literature is similarly exposed when he accepts Mr. Bennet's invitation to "read aloud to the ladies" after tea one day. "Everything" about the book he is handed "announced it to be from a circulating library," and he "started back" from it in horror as though he were being offered an insult instead of a novel. Mr. Collins, by his own proud admission, "never read[s] novels" (76) – a damning attitude in Austen's work.[9] Just as there is no indication that Mr. Collins chose the "largest folio" in the library for any other reason than its size, here there is no indication that he knows anything about the contents of the book he is being offered, other than that it is probably a novel. No title is named – we only know that Mr. Collins responds to the general look of the volume, that vague sense of "everything" that "announced it to be from the circulating library." Circulating libraries carried books other than novels – but if Mr. Collins believes the worst stereotypes about novels, it makes sense that he would believe similar stereotypes about circulating libraries and would dismiss both as disreputable sources of frivolous escapism.

Clearly believing that the Bennet sisters require a dose of serious morality, he decides to read to them from Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women,* which has this to say about women and novel reading: that "she who can bear to peruse" certain novels "must in her soul be a prostitute" (1:148). When Mr. Collins takes up the volume,

[9] The most obvious example is *Northanger Abbey*'s oafish John Thorpe, who boasts "I never read novels; I have something else to do" (43).

> Lydia gaped…, and before he had, with very monotonous solemnity, read three pages, she interrupted him… Lydia was bid by her two eldest sisters to hold her tongue; but Mr. Collins, much offended, laid aside his book... Mrs. Bennet and her daughters apologised most civilly for Lydia's interruption, and promised that it should not occur again, if he would resume his book; but Mr. Collins, after assuring them that he bore his young cousin no ill will, and should never resent her behaviour as any affront, seated himself at another table with Mr. Bennet, and prepared for backgammon. (76-77)

This small scene does more than just contribute to Mr. Collins's characterization as a self-important hypocrite. Austen also represents in this episode of reading a microcosm of gender power dynamics.

Mr. Collins is free to force his pompous didacticism on the Bennet women, who are triply held hostage: by the dictates of polite hospitality, by their financial dependence that Mr. Collins has the power to alleviate, and by the social custom that privileges a man's judgment over a woman's, be he ever so ignorant. Jane and Elizabeth must subject their superior taste and intelligence to Mr. Collins, when they would be just as bored as Lydia by Mr. Collins's "monotonous solemnity." They are nevertheless aware of what is required of them, and "bid" Lydia "to hold her tongue," "apologiz[ing] most civilly for [the] interruption." In *Northanger Abbey* Henry Tilney jokes, though with an aptness that stings, that "man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal" (74). He is making an analogy between marriage and dancing, but the aphorism applies more widely than to these two activities alone. "Lydia exclaimed" (76) in disbelief when Mr. Collins rejected the Bennet girls' selection of reading material; she cannot affect his choice, however, so she exerts instead her power of refusal with her unabashed "gape" and her shameless "interruption" of his sermonizing. In the moment, the

victory is hers, but the comedy of the scene, though it might distract, does not obviate the unpleasant truth that there can be serious repercussions for women who choose to exercise their power of refusal. Lydia's defiance is not just an embarrassing breach of decorum. By offending the man who will one day have the right to evict the Bennets from their home, Lydia's actions might imperil the very safety of her family; Mr. Collins claims he "bore his young cousin no ill will," but he declines to be placated or to resume his reading.

Mr. Collins exercises his power of choice for his own satisfaction, selecting a book to suit his taste rather than his audience's, abandoning the activity when his pride is piqued, and rejecting any attempt to influence his actions. Here the traditional tableau of a man reading to his family circle does not "reinforce social bonds" or intimacy; instead it foments dissatisfaction and highlights the unjust, gendered disparity of power that forces women like Jane and Elizabeth to submit to a man like Mr. Collins. A similar scene of reading plays out in *Mansfield Park*. Henry Crawford and Edmund have come into the room just as Fanny has put down the volume of Shakespeare that she has been reading aloud to Lady Bertram. Crawford offers to take up the reading again and does so with a skill that fascinates Fanny against her will. She tries to ignore him, but

> taste was too strong in her. She could not abstract her mind five minutes; she was forced to listen; his reading was capital, and her pleasure in good reading extreme… [I]n Mr. Crawford's reading there was a variety of excellence beyond what she had ever met with… [W]ith the happiest knack, the happiest power of jumping and guessing, he could always light, at will, on the best scene, or the best speeches of each; and whether it were dignity or pride, or tenderness or remorse, or whatever were to be expressed, he could do it with equal beauty. (*MP* 389-90)

Henry seems to be Mr. Collins's opposite in every way: unlike Mr. Collins, he willingly takes up the volume that the family has just been enjoying, and his performance, "expressing a variety of excellence… with equal beauty," puts Mr. Collins's "monotonous solemnity" (*P&P* 77) to shame. Henry's powerful reading of a famous play rather than a dreary sermon also stimulates his listeners rather than putting them to sleep. Despite such differences, these reading men are disconcertingly similar. Henry too has a superficial attitude to literature: he displays a "knack," a "power of jumping and guessing" that is qualified as "happiest" – meaning most fortunate but also implying an element of random chance in the way of Thomas Hardy's "Hap." Here Austen undermines any straightforward connection between superficially good reading and virtue by suggesting that Henry's skilful reading is not rooted in emotional or moral sensitivity but stems from a performer's shallow instinct.

Like everyone except Fanny, Edmund conflates a good performance with insightful reading. "That play must be a favourite with you," he praises Henry, "You read as if you knew it well" (390). Henry himself contradicts this assumption, however: "I do not think I have had a volume of Shakespeare in my hand before," he confesses cheerfully, "since I was fifteen. —I once saw Henry the 8th acted. —Or I have heard of it from somebody who did—I am not certain which" (390). Here Austen satirizes the late eighteenth century's vogue for Shakespeare, when many readers made themselves familiar with mere snippets of his work to ape a cultivated literary sensibility.[10] Henry's joke at his own expense – that he cannot remember whether he knows the play first- or second-hand – also has serious implications, underscoring his dangerous ability to mimic sincere experience. Violence is written into Fanny's brief moment of surrender to Henry's charm: she is "forced to listen." Once the performance is over, "the charm is broken"

[10] See Keymer 118-9, 130; L. Price, 79-80; Rumbold 611-12; Taylor 109-110.

(390) for Fanny – though not for Edmund. He cannot believe that Henry's good reading might be separate from good morals, and similarly confuses Fanny's admiration of the performance with admiration of the performer. When Fanny protests that she and Henry are too different to make a good match, Edmund disagrees, telling her that "You are quite enough alike… You have moral and literary tastes in common…and Fanny, who that heard him read, and saw you listen to Shakespeare the other night, will think you unfitted as companions?" (403). Thus Henry uses this episode of reading to force Fanny into his power. First, albeit temporarily, when she is held as his captive audience, required to listen by the dictates of politeness, as the Bennet women (or most of them) are required to listen to Mr. Collins. Henry also achieves a more lasting and perilous power over Fanny by further ingratiating himself with Edmund, Fanny's only true friend, through his persuasive performance and Fanny's response to it. Henry is a more formidable version of Mr. Collins: each uses his position as a guest and an educated man to impose himself, through his reading, on the women whom he desires to dominate.

Through these brief scenes, Austen undermines the idealization of family reading to show how even conventional, seemingly innocuous moments of home life can expose women to coercion or predation. This motif appears in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) as well, in one of the only significant mentions of reading in the novel: "One evening, Mrs. Dashwood, accidentally taking up a volume of Shakespeare, exclaimed, 'We have never finished Hamlet, Marianne; our dear Willoughby went away before we could get through it. We will put it by, that when he comes again… But it may be many months, perhaps, before that happens'" (98). This passing moment alludes to an episode that is not even dramatized in the novel, but it repeats a similar pattern: though here we can assume the Dashwood women – or at least Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne – made a willing audience, this is because they do not know Willoughby's true

situation, character, or intentions. Like Collins and Crawford, he uses the intimacy of a family reading circle to achieve influence over the woman he is, it emerges, dishonourably pursuing. Austen shows how even communal reading, which can create bonds and foster community when undertaken in good faith, can be manipulated by insincere or superficial readers.

Villains such as Mr. Collins and Henry Crawford are not the only characters whom Austen uses to complicate representations of the respectable masculine intellectual. *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr. Bennet and Mr. Darcy differ from Hunsford's rector and *Mansfield Park*'s rake in that they are by and large good men who also seem to be good readers – cultured, intelligent, well-educated. Mr. Bennet, we are told, is fonder of nothing than "of the country and of books" (262); he spends most of his time in his library, "where he had been always sure of leisure and tranquillity" (80); and he loves and respects best his elder daughters who are most like him in wit and intelligence, bringing to family discussion "much of its animation, and almost all its sense" (67). Mr. Darcy is similarly characterized: comparing him to his friend Mr. Bingley, the narrator explains that "in understanding Darcy was the superior. Bingley was by no means deficient, but Darcy was clever" (17). He also greatly prizes his books: in response to Miss Bingley's fulsome compliment on his contributions to the "delightful library" at Pemberley, Darcy replies, "I cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in days such as these" (41). Alan Richardson argues that "in the world of Austen's novels, the very possession of books can serve as a marker of social pretension and intellectual attainment" ("Reading Practices" 401) – but not necessarily as a marker of good judgment or moral authority. This becomes particularly clear in the way Austen portrays the direct consequences of Mr. Bennet's and Mr. Darcy's bibliophilia.

Mr. Bennet's passion for literature offers him a refuge from what seem to him petty and ridiculous household dramas. When his *sanctum sanctorum* is broken in upon by the oblivious

Mr. Collins, Mr. Bennet is particularly disturbed by this incursion because, as he tells Elizabeth, "though prepared… to meet with folly and conceit in every other room in the house, he was used to be free from them there [in his library]" (80). This is amusing, but it also demonstrates that Mr. Bennet is used to retreating to his library and shutting out his family whenever it bores, annoys, or imposes upon him. As with Frankenstein, his devotion to his reading comes to be associated with his neglect of his family. We soon see proof of this when Elizabeth declines Mr. Collins's marriage proposal, and Mrs. Bennet begs her husband to force their daughter to accept him. After Mr. Bennet drily tells Elizabeth that "Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do," he refuses to engage any further in the affair: "My dear," he tells his outraged wife, "I shall be glad to have the library to myself as soon as may be" (125). We do not want Mr. Bennet to force Elizabeth into marriage, but at the same time his carelessness on the subject is disturbing. His wife's distasteful avidity for matchmaking still demonstrates a concern for her daughters' precarious future, which Mr. Bennet has failed to provide for – we discover that he "often wished… that, instead of spending his whole income, he had laid by an annual sum, for the better provision of his children" (340). Mr. Bennet's habitual desire to "have the library to himself as soon as may be" is representative of his habitual disregard – his inattention to and even mistreatment of his family.

While deriving such pleasure from his own reading, Mr. Bennet's negligence even means that he does not trouble to pass on this value for literature to his children. Elizabeth herself admits this when evading the impertinent questions of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who for once makes a good point about the Bennets' household mismanagement. Discovering that the girls have had no regular education, Lady Catherine exclaims, "without a governess you must have been neglected" (186), and Elizabeth's witty parrying during this comic exchange might obscure

for the reader the serious import of her reply: “Compared with some families, I believe we were; but such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might” (186). Elizabeth reveals that, while perhaps they were “encouraged to read” as children, their education was left to their own inclination – and suddenly it becomes more surprising that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet have any sensible daughters at all than that they have only two.

The most dramatic repercussion of Mr. Bennet’s preference for his peaceful library over his rambunctious family is, of course, his youngest daughter’s disastrous elopement. Overruling every reasonable remonstrance Elizabeth can make against Lydia’s planned trip to Brighton, which gives her the opportunity to run off with Wickham, Mr. Bennet allows it because, he says, he “shall have no peace” if Lydia remains at home (256). Lamenting this decision, Elizabeth mourns the misapplication of her father’s intellectual gifts, exercised to please himself rather than to become an attentive parent and husband: though “respecting his abilities,… she had never… been so fully aware of the evils arising from so ill-judged a direction of talents; talents which rightly used, might at least have preserved the respectability of his daughters, even if incapable of enlarging the mind of his wife” (262-3). It is a pointed irony that Mr. Bennet’s misdirected talents lead him, a sensible, educated man, to indulge in the kind of escapist reading typically associated with female romance readers – “With a book he was regardless of time” (13) – and that the consequence of his literary immersion is the very consequence that conservative alarmists feared would result from unchecked female reading: a scandalous elopement.

Despite his “delightful” family library – or rather, because of it – Mr. Darcy is similarly aligned with a negative kind of reading: a superficial one, status-based, with an emphasis on prestige and appearance rather than content. Richardson argues for “the importance of a ‘family

library'" in *Pride and Prejudice* because it brings together the central love interests, "establish[ing] an initial connection between Elizabeth Bennet, who unfashionably prefers reading to card playing, and Mr Darcy, whose library at Pemberley is the 'work of many generations,' extensively augmented by himself" ("Reading Practices" 401). The scene to which Richardson refers, however, creates contention rather than connection, and ultimately exposes the qualities in Darcy that we, and Elizabeth, find most alienating. Richardson is mistaken in asserting Elizabeth's unfashionable preference for reading over card playing: it is the spiteful Caroline Bingley who declares that "Miss Eliza Bennet… despises cards. She is a great reader and has no pleasure in anything else" (40). This bizarre, unfounded characterization certainly hints at the kind of reader Caroline Bingley might be, as it implies a sympathy with those conservative moralists who view female reading with concern: already considering Elizabeth an adversary, Miss Bingley must hope to denigrate her rival in Darcy's eyes by painting her as an unfeminine bookworm. Elizabeth's response to this allegation suggests her own, more fair-minded attitude towards reading. Overlooking, or appearing to overlook, Miss Bingley's obvious antipathy, Elizabeth allows for both the positive and the negative connotations of being a "great reader": "'I deserve neither such praise nor such censure,' cried Elizabeth; 'I am not a great reader, and I have pleasure in many things'" (41).

When Darcy joins the discussion, he reveals an outlook that does not seem very compatible with Elizabeth's. His pronouncement, that he "cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in days such as these'" (41), reminds us of the growing availability of books in the early nineteenth century, but it also emphasizes the prestige of a well-stocked library in this period. Darcy seeks cultural capital, to use John Guillory's phrase, but he does not express more interest in reading books than in having them, perceiving value in the social status they confer as

possessions. This way of valuing literature connects Mr. Darcy uncomfortably with Mr. Collins, who judges the worth of a book by its size or its cover, and with the manipulative Caroline Bingley, who pretends to be interested by a book "she had only chosen because it was the second volume of [the one Mr. Darcy is reading]" (60). Austen allows Miss Bingley's insincerity to speak for itself, as Miss Bingley "gave a great yawn" before declaring her extreme pleasure in reading, after which "she then yawned again, threw aside her book, and cast her eyes round the room in quest of some amusement" (60). Mr. Collins and Miss Bingley are dislikeable characters and obviously bad readers who choose books for what they look like and not what they contain. It is unpleasant, therefore, to realize that Darcy shares this interest in books for their surface value, as objects that can influence how we appear to others.

Darcy uses books as a measure of status even when he places value on their literary contents instead of their significance as objects. Disputing Bingley's generous, and general, admiration of the neighbourhood's young ladies being "so very accomplished, as they all are" (42), Darcy counters that he "cannot boast of knowing more than half a dozen [women]… that are really accomplished" (42). Miss Bingley, eager to curry Darcy's favour, chimes in with a catalogue of skills and attributes necessary to earn this label. "All this she must possess," Darcy grandly agrees, but qualifies that "to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading" (43). While Bingley uses the term "accomplished" as an expression of appreciation, Darcy's extensive list turns it into a standard of judgment, a means by which to determine worth. "Extensive reading" is just one more box to be checked in an assessment of pedigree. At this moment in the novel Darcy's emphasis on such a criterion also reads like a gibe at Elizabeth, responding to her admission just a few lines earlier that she is "not a great reader." Just as she was "not handsome enough to tempt" him to dance

(11), Darcy implies that she is not well read enough to deserve the title of "accomplished." So far from bringing them together at this point, "the importance of a family library" ("Reading Practices" 401) to Darcy's pride only cements Elizabeth's poor opinion of him during this visit: "I have spent four days in the same house with him," she tells Wickham, "and I think him very disagreeable" (87). Mr. Darcy's attitude to reading, as it is represented this early in the novel, is part of his problem. His dedication to his family library is not an index of his robust masculine intellect but of his sense of social superiority, providing him with one more reason to look down on others – an undisguised contempt that repels the woman he eventually wishes to attract.

Mansfield Park shares this wariness of superficial reading. We have seen this in Henry Crawford's stylish performance yet shallow understanding of Shakespeare, and we see it in the reading habits of other questionable characters. Mr. Rushworth's literary valuation of Count Cassel, the role he is to play in *Lovers' Vows*, is based purely on the character's described appearance. Mr. Rushworth is blind to Cassel's absurdity, impressed instead by his flamboyant wardrobe – playing the Count entails "the necessity of his being very much dressed" (162), and "Mr. Rushworth liked the idea of his finery very well, though affecting to despise it" (163). Mr. Rushworth also takes pleasure in the number, rather than the content, of his lines: he brags to Edmund that "I come in three times, and have two and forty speeches. That's something, is not it?" (164). Like Mr. Collins, size matters to Mr. Rushworth when it comes to literature. The far more intelligent Miss Bertrams despise Mr. Rushworth for his obtuseness, but they too are identified as problematic superficial readers. When Fanny, the poor, uneducated charity case, first arrives at Mansfield Park, "ignorant of many things with which [Maria and Julia] had been long familiar, they thought her prodigiously stupid" (20). Like Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, "to the education of her daughters, Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention" (22),

and so under the influence of the spiteful, grasping Mrs. Norris the Bertram sisters had "promising talents and early information" (21) but were still "entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility" (22). By the end of the novel, after Maria's disgrace and Julia's mediocre marriage, their father has miserably concluded that "something was wanting *within*" (535) and that "with all the cost and care of an anxious and expensive education, he had brought up his daughters, without their understanding their first duties, or his being acquainted with their character and temper" (536). Mr. Rushworth and the Miss Bertrams represent deficiencies of either nature or education, and he in particular, like Mr. Collins, is a caricature of self-important ignorance. They are clearly conceited, superficial readers, but they have no scenes of actual reading in the novel. The only character to do much reading, other than Henry Crawford and his performance of Shakespeare, is Fanny Price, and through her Austen complicates another gendered ideal of reading: that of the decorous, biddable, conventional female reader.

Many critics see Fanny Price as exactly that: the model female reader described in conduct books, similar to Edgeworth's Belinda Portman – quiet, moral, and, in Fanny's case above all, tractable. Fanny's meek tremulousness has made her, according to many, Austen's least congenial heroine. Lionel Trilling has famously said that "Nobody, I believe, has ever found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*" (212), and Nina Auerbach agrees, suggesting that "[Fanny is] a heroine who was not made to be loved" (11). Even Austen's mother, as the novelist faithfully recorded in her log of "Opinions on *Mansfield Park*," "thought Fanny insipid" (*Later Manuscripts* 231). What makes Fanny so "insipid" and unlikeable are the same qualities that associate her with conservative morality. She embodies quiet and obedient femininity, a "supine" and "shrinking" woman (Tave 158), "unredeemed by any humour" (Amis

439), who is "debilitated and undeviating… for Righteousness' sake" (Tanner 143) while seeming to "accept[…] or internalize[…] the mandates of patriarchal power" (Wiltshire, Introduction, lxxiii).

This timid malleability and strict morality appear to underpin Fanny's reading habits as well. Though her female cousins despise her ignorance, Edmund "knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading which, properly directed, must be an education in itself" (24-5). This is the "proper direction" for young people's reading that concerned eighteenth-century critics like Clara Reeve and Elizabeth Bonhôte recommend, and Edmund sees himself as the guardian "whose age, experience, or superior knowledge, can direct… the choice of books" (Bonhôte 4:54). Thus Edmund "recommended the books which charmed [Fanny's] leisure hours,… encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment" (25). Fanny's quotations from Cowper (66, 499) and the books on her table – Macartney's *Unpublished Writings*, Crabbe's *Tales in Verse*, and Johnson's essays (183) – speak to the serious, moral, conservative taste imparted to her by a future clergyman. When Fanny speaks about poetry and nature, she is proud to assure Edmund that "*you* taught me to think and feel on the subject, cousin" (132). So it is in keeping with her sense of propriety and devotion to Edmund that she, like he, is horrified by the selection of the risqué *Lovers' Vows* for Mansfield's amateur theatricals. The episode of reading when Fanny first takes up the play, however, is important not because it highlights her primness and loyalty but because it triggers responses that reveal, instead, the complexity of her motivations and the deceptiveness of her passivity.

Once the play has been chosen, the actors disperse to begin preparations and Fanny is free to

> take up the volume which had been left on the table, and begin to acquaint herself with the play of which she had heard so much. Her curiosity was all awake, and she ran through it with an eagerness which was suspended only by intervals of astonishment, that it could be chosen in the present instance—that it could be proposed and accepted in a private Theatre! Agatha and Amelia appeared to her in their different ways so totally improper for home representation—the situation of one, and the language of the other, so unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty, that she could hardly suppose her cousins could be aware of what they were engaging in; and longed to have them roused as soon as possible by the remonstrances which Edmund would certainly make. (161)

On the one hand, this passage underscores Fanny's value for feminine modesty and her reliance on a trusted male mentor's corrective influence to preserve general respectability – both traits that a conservative moralist would applaud in a female reader. On the other hand, this passage emphasizes the flurry of intense and disconcerting emotions, conveyed by Austen in subtly evocative language, that Fanny experiences while reading a salacious drama. Fanny does not just read but "takes up" and "acquaints herself" with the play, implying an intimacy beyond the mere skimming of pages. Her response is one of titillation before disapproval, as "her curiosity" is "all awake" and she "r[uns] through [*Lovers' Vows*] with… eagerness." Even when she begins to appreciate how unseemly the play is, her excitement is "suspended only" – not arrested or dampened, but just occasionally paused in "intervals." And the feelings that succeed her realization of the play's impropriety are still fervently pitched and suggestively phrased: she is "astonish[ed]," and she "long[s]" for Edmund to "rouse" the others. Fanny's shock and disapproval are entwined with less easily acknowledged feelings of stimulated interest and awakened curiosity. Fanny's involuntary affective responses point to the fictionality of the

docile, decorous female reader stereotype that she is supposed to, and strives to, embody. Austen suggests that affective responses are natural even to the most repressed, and oppressed, of readers.

This moment of reading, complex in itself, also opens the door for Fanny's first real act of defiance in the novel. Her distaste for the play combines with her dread of attention to support her in a protracted and public disagreement with the rest of the household, who urge her to take a small part in the play that no-one else is free to fill. Although she is "most frightened," "shocked," (171) "growing more and more red from excessive agitation,… looking distressful[…]" (172), and finally brought to "tears" (173) by Tom's relentless exhortations, Fanny resists, repeating (four times) "you must excuse me" (171-2). She resists even as she is unsupported by her usual champion Edmund, who is "unwilling to exasperate his brother by interference" on her behalf (172). Fanny's insistent adherence to her own readerly convictions, even when entreated otherwise by those she wishes to please, sets the precedent for her "commitment to the prerogative of her own judgment" (François 253) in refusing Henry Crawford when the stakes are even higher.

Fanny's complicated response to her reading of *Lovers' Vows* – the current of suppressed eroticism that it implies, and the resistance it entails – resurfaces during her conversation with Edmund after he goes back on his resolution to boycott the play. For the first time Fanny is in complete disagreement with his judgment, and nothing he says convinces her otherwise. Her disappointment in him is not framed in terms of moral disapproval, however, but is mixed up in her jealousy and her concern for appearances. "I am more sorry," she sadly tells Edmund, "to see you drawn in to do what you had resolved against, and what you are known to think will be disagreeable to my uncle. It will be such a triumph to the others!" (181). Fanny is less worried

about the ethics of Edmund's reversal than about how it will look, and how it will gratify those whom, we must conclude, she takes righteous pleasure in resisting. "To be acting!" she continues to herself, "after all his objections – objections so just and so public!... Could it be possible? Edmund so inconsistent. Was he not deceiving himself? Was he not wrong? Alas! It was all Miss Crawford's doing. She had seen her influence in every speech, and was miserable" (183-4). Here Fanny's criticism of Edmund is based in part on the fact that his original "objections" were "just" – but the fact that they were also "public" is placed on an equal footing with their justice. She is as upset that Edmund will *seem* inconsistent, as that he will *be* inconsistent. And to complicate Fanny's motives further is her envious despair at Miss Crawford's growing influence over Edmund, which every day increases her "jealousy and agitation" (187). Once Edmund has given in, Fanny's own moral stance crumbles under the weight of her anguished sense of betrayal: "things should take their course; she cared not how it ended. Her cousins might attack, but could hardly tease her. She was beyond their reach; and if at last obliged to yield—no matter—it was all misery *now*" (184). Fanny may be genuinely disturbed by what she perceives as a scandalous play, but her disapproval is at least partly generated by pride and sexual jealousy, while also spurring her on to independent thinking and even defiance – making her reading the site of more complex reactions than are usually attributed to the demure young lady scandalized by sensational literature.

Fanny's other moments of reading in the novel are similarly layered. In describing her East room – hers because of "the deficiency of space and accommodation in her little chamber above" and because it is a room that "nobody else wanted" (177) – the narrator mentions the books that Fanny "was still glad to keep there" (177) and "of which she had been a collector, from the first hour of her commanding a shilling" (178). Even this short phrase suggests more

than a serious-minded young woman who would rather buy books than trinkets. The passage is part of a larger description of Fanny's lifetime of persecution – relegated to a tiny room that no-one else wants, filled with cast-off furniture, never warmed by a fire, and where she still often experienced "the pains of tyranny, of ridicule, and neglect" (178). Fanny's agency as a "collector" of books, someone who has "command," even if it is just over her own choice of reading and "a shilling," is a bright spot of freedom in a life of subjugation. For once, isolated reading is represented as a good thing – escape from a frequently oppressive, hostile society. Fanny revels in the limited independence of having a room of her own to stock with whatever books she likes. The "consolation" of these books is not unmixed, however. It comes in part from an almost masochistic pleasure in suffering assuaged: "the whole" of her experience, both good and bad, "was now so blended together, so harmonised by distance, that every former affliction had its charm," Fanny muses (178). When she encourages her sister Susan to read because "she longed to give her a share in her own first pleasures" (461), Fanny's generosity is similarly mixed with other more complicated feelings: that same sense of power and freedom – "to be a renter, a chuser of books!" (461) – and a soothing forgetfulness or denial – "if reading could banish the idea" of Edmund's impending engagement to Mary Crawford "for even half an hour, it was something gained" (462).

In Fanny, Austen destabilizes the ideal of the prim, docile female reader dependent on and directed by the choices of a wiser (or more masculine) judge. Fanny is not nearly so meek nor so malleable as she might seem, and her relationship with books helps to reveal this. Ellen Gardiner contends that Fanny's exertion of literary judgment is powerful, forcing "the other characters…to recognize her capacity… to perform that activity of 'reading' normally reserved for the literary critic or professional intellectual" (144). Ultimately, Gardiner claims that this

elevates Fanny above the other characters, for she "demonstrates better than any other character proper aesthetic appreciation for all sorts of texts" (144). But just as Fanny is not as timid as she might seem, neither is she a consummately wise or infallibly perceptive reader. While conceding that she is the novel's only "superior reader" (307), Susan C. Greenfield argues that Fanny's self-knowledge is impeded by her internalized sense of conventional propriety: "just as she never reads beneath the surface of *Lovers' Vows* and cannot see past the drama's more scandalous details, Fanny never seems to understand the meaning of her own experience" (321). Indeed, Fanny's self-deceptions are frequent, as she struggles to mask, to herself as well as to others, feelings of jealousy, contempt, and self-righteousness. John Wiltshire remarks that her "stronger passions are known to the reader not in their expression, but through their substitutions, denials, and displacements" (Introduction lxxix).

The reliability of Fanny's judgment is also undermined by the times when the narrator steps away from Fanny's point of view to suggest where she might be mistaken, as with Miss Crawford's character. Believing Miss Crawford to be irredeemably corrupt since her morals have not improved even under Edmund's influence, Fanny "may be forgiven by older sages for looking on the chance of Miss Crawford's future improvement as nearly desperate" (423). The narrator disagrees, however, hinting that "experience might have hoped more for any young people so circumstanced, and impartiality would not have denied to Miss Crawford's nature that participation of the general nature of women which would lead her to adopt the opinions of the man she loved and respected as her own" (424). Fanny is not the clear-eyed reader who is "never, ever wrong" (Tanner 143)**,** nor is she a model for conservatives who prefer their women readers entirely biddable. The fact that Fanny cannot be reduced to either absolute is what makes her such an unusual protagonist. As Wiltshire puts it, "here for the first time is a heroine whose

quiet and acquiescent exterior is matched by an inner life of complex and agitating feeling, a dutiful heroine conceived with an ego, with strong convictions and emotional demands" (lxxviii). Fanny's reading proves the aptness of this characterization, exposing her sensitivities, passions, and contradictions.

Austen uses the many reading characters in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* to undermine superficial ideals, and particularly gendered ideals, of what it means to be a good reader – the didactic, intellectual patriarch and the compliant, delicate female reader are types that Austen breaks down to reveal their complexities and even the dangers they pose. Her characters are not held up as models to follow but as representations of how these ideals might be compromised in realistic, multifaceted readers. There is, however, one character who does seem to represent a true ideal of reading for Austen: perhaps surprisingly, Elizabeth Bennet, who has declared herself to be "not a great reader" (41). In the longest scene of reading in all of Austen's oeuvre, Elizabeth peruses Darcy's explanatory letter in which she learns the truth about his interference in Bingley and Jane's relationship and his history with Wickham. This is a beautifully orchestrated scene, for Austen presents the letter to the reader without any narrative commentary or responses from Elizabeth, so we read the letter for the first time from start to finish, knowing that Elizabeth is, in effect, reading it along with us, but without knowing what her reactions are. Then Austen devotes a new and entire chapter to recording the progression of Elizabeth's thoughts and feelings as she repeatedly pores over each part of the letter – so we too re-read it, essentially, in seeing it through her eyes.

Elizabeth reads at first "with an eagerness which hardly left her power of comprehension, and from impatience of knowing what the next sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of the one before her eyes" (226). After this emotional partial read-through,

Elizabeth takes up the letter again, despite the unpleasant truths with which it confronts her, to "read, and re-read with the closest attention," and "weigh[…] every circumstance with what she meant to be impartiality" (227). Ultimately, Elizabeth has to adjust her preconceptions, "giving way to every variety of thought, re-considering events, determining probabilities, and reconciling herself as well as she could, to a change [in her understanding of Wickham and Darcy] so sudden and so important" (231).This must be the kind of reader that Austen herself wishes to write for: someone who will be emotionally invested in the story, caught up despite herself and impatiently devouring every word in eager anticipation of those to come. But also someone who will then take pause – who will return again to read more slowly and carefully, to examine with the head what she first reacted to with the heart. And finally someone who is willing to reconsider her fixed opinions and to learn something new, even if it challenges or disturbs her. Elizabeth's intense reading experience marks the turning point in the novel: her eyes are opened, but only because she was willing to make the effort and engage again with material that she at first vows "she would not regard…, that she would never look in… again" (227). Such a reader – affectively as well as intellectually responsive, who is opinionated and passionate as well as flexible and fair-minded – would make the perfect audience for, and derive the most benefit from, complex, thoughtful novels that are meant to be read and re-read.

These qualities are reminiscent of Shelley's Creature: a curious, empathetic, open-minded reader who seeks not just to gratify his curiosity but to improve his understanding of and relationship with other people. This is a more sophisticated kind of feeling reader than the disreputable ones examined in my first chapter. While *Camilla, Belinda, Emma,* and *Persuasion* began to explore how affective or pleasurable reading could demonstrate personal worth or encourage social connections, their strongest defence of it was a negative one, arguing that such

reading caused no harm. *Frankenstein* and *Pride and Prejudice* use the Creature and Elizabeth Bennet to suggest more powerful benefits: that such reading *can* change one, but for the better. It can encourage thoughtful self-reflection, and that more than providing enjoyment over shared taste, it can help to reconcile dissenting minds, to bridge gulfs of experience and understanding. It is true that while the Creature and Elizabeth read with feeling, they are certainly not reading lightly, or just for pleasure. Like many of the affective readers in *Camilla*, *Belinda*'s Lady Delacour, or *Persuasion*'s Captain Benwick, the Creature and Elizabeth have serious aims in their reading. The Creature seeks to understand his place in the world through classic works of literature and history, not to fill his leisure hours, just as Elizabeth peruses a life-changing, revelatory letter, not a sentimental romance or the latest offering of the circulating library. My final chapter will demonstrate, however, that sometimes novelists saw the same opportunities for self-improvement and community building not just in affective reading but also in the kind of pleasurable, absorbed, or even seemingly thoughtless reading enjoyed by the likes of *Belinda*'s Virginia St Pierre or *Emma*'s Harriet Smith.

Chapter 3

The Quixotic Reader:

The Heroine, *Waverley*, and *Northanger Abbey*

The disreputable readers of Chapter 1 may have their moments of folly or excess, but their reading is usually a contained act, remarkable for its affect or pleasure but kept, for the most part, within certain bounds. In this respect readers like *Camilla*'s Melmond, *Belinda*'s Virginia St. Pierre, and *Persuasion*'s Captain Benwick are not entirely "quixotic," a term which denotes not merely excessive feeling – "enthusiastically chivalrous or romantic" – but "visionary" folly or delusion, and "demonstrating or motivated by exaggerated notions" of heroism or fantasy (*OED*). While someone like *Camilla*'s Mrs. Berlinton might fit this definition, she is a minor character and so offers only a limited opportunity to examine what is, in fact, an important character type in the Romantic-period novel. Discussed in this chapter are quixotic readers who are also the focus of their respective novels, offering more extended, more acute, and ultimately more powerful examples of disreputable reading. Each novel is, in effect, one long scene of reading, and the narrators frequently remind us that their characters form relationships, pursue goals, and make choices under the explicit influence of the books that they enjoy.

Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine* (1813), Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817) are commonly read as the ultimate advocates for regulated reading. Robert Mayo notes that, according to many critics, "the vogue for sentimental terror continued unabated through the second decade of the nineteenth century,… until *The Heroine* (1813), *Waverley* (1814), or *Northanger Abbey* (1818) turned the tide of popular favor

elsewhere" (59) through their attack on romance reading and the foolish people who enjoy it. The primary goal of these novels, it is argued, is to explore the negative consequences of romance or novel reading, taken to the extremes feared by Wollstonecraft and others. Barrett's, Scott's, and Austen's protagonists are defined by their roles as frivolous readers, and the "overstretched sensibility" (Wollstonecraft 66), the "state of savage torpor" (Wordsworth 64), or the "glutted imagination" (More 1:170) that result from their misguided reading are blamed for their many bad decisions and their erratic, even dangerous behaviour. They have succumbed to the quixotic state that Bakhtin has described as the "specific danger inherent in the novelistic zone of contact", where "we ourselves may actually enter the novel" and "substitute for our own life an obsessive reading of novels, or dreams based on novelistic models" (32). Each novel has thus been read as an updated homage, in the vein of Charlotte Lennox's earlier *Female Quixote* (1752), to Cervantes's famous knight errant. Like Don Quixote, these protagonists are not just misled but indoctrinated by their reading, and, like Don Quixote, they must suffer a series of humiliating misadventures that ultimately prompts a repentant epiphany: they reach a crisis in which they recognize their irrationality and its cause, renounce their wayward, fanciful reading, and resolve to accept henceforth the plain truth of real life over the specious seductions of fantasy.

I will argue, however, that even as they seem to promote the cause of serious reading these novels belong in the opposite camp. *The Heroine*'s Cherry Wilkinson, *Waverley*'s Edward Waverley, and *Northanger Abbey*'s Catherine Morland demonstrate the enjoyment, power, and insight that can be derived from absorbed, emotional, or pleasurable reading. These reader-protagonists follow Don Quixote's trajectory of delusional reading, subsequent tribulations, and ultimate reform, but they are also like him in that their penitential volte-face is not entirely

convincing. James Wood finds Don Quixote's "deathbed change of heart… disconcerting" (164), an abrupt and uncharacteristic revolution out of step with his presentation in the nearly one thousand preceding pages. The disavowals of romance professed by Barrett's, Scott's, and Austen's protagonists are similarly suspect, for although these characters acknowledge the trouble their reading has brought upon them, they also derive benefits from it – both emotional and tangible – that persist even once they have supposedly reformed. Ultimately, we will see that some of British literature's least respected readers are in fact some of its most successful.

The Results of "A Five Years' Course of Novels" in *The Heroine*

Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine* (1813) was well-received upon first publication,[1] but the novel's popularity steadily dropped over the course of the nineteenth century and it went out of print after a final edition in 1927. It was not resurrected until more than eighty years later when Valancourt Classics issued an edition in 2011. The novel's twenty-first century editors account for its decline by postulating that later readers have less respect for extended parody, considering it "a parasitic and inferior literary form" (xiii), and finding, in particular, *The Heroine's* mocking treatment of Gothic romances and sentimental novels relentless and one-dimensional. In 1909, for example, Walter Raleigh took exception to a critic of 1816 who favourably compared the novel to *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote* – Raleigh considered this a "monstrous pronouncement." He maintained that "of character, there is next to none in *The Heroine*," which is all story and no reflection: why bother with any "dissection of the heart," he inquires sarcastically, "while there are crowns to be broke?" Readers who could enjoy such a

[1] Horner and Zlosnik xii-xiii; Kelly, "Unbecoming a Heroine," 227. Jane Austen was among the novel's many admirers, writing to her sister Cassandra that, "I finished the Heroine last night & was very much amused by it… It diverted me exceedingly" (*Letters* 266).

"perilously slender illusion," he concludes, must "like a book that saves them from the more exacting companionship of their own thoughts" (x-xi). The scorn of this assessment carries an even greater sting since it does not come from a critical essay or review but from Raleigh's own introduction to the novel.

It is undeniable that *The Heroine*'s satire of romance and its readers is insistently sustained. Barrett makes the Quixote connection clear before the novel begins, in its subtitle – "Adventures of a Fair Romance Reader"[2] – and even more explicit in a bizarre preface, "The Heroine to the Reader." In it we are addressed by a nameless being, a reflection of the novel's heroine – yet "not the [same] fictitious personage whose memoirs you will peruse" (3) – who has taken corporeal form and resides on the moon along with similar embodiments of every character ever written, from classical literature to contemporary novels to political profiles in early nineteenth-century newspapers. These creatures survive on the moon as long as their source texts are still being read on Earth.[3] This "Moonite" (3) version of Cherry describes her first moments of existence, having sprung into life upon the publication of the novel, and the first person she meets is Don Quixote. Despite his "lank and grimly figure," she tells us, "we soon found each other kindred souls" (4). Cherry wastes no time in proving this kinship once the novel proper begins, as she announces in its opening pages that her "ambition is to be a Heroine" with a capital "H" (10). Despite her comfortable station in life as the daughter of a wealthy middle-class

[2] Although this subtitle was changed in subsequent editions to the less pointed "Adventures of Cherubina," the satiric connotations remain – the preposterous affectation of "Cherubina" recalls, even for today's readers, the extravagantly named heroines of romance, "Celestina, Angelina, Seraphina," upon whom Cherry models herself (*Heroine* 11).

[3] Horner and Zlosnik explain this strange preface by situating it within a literary tradition that drew on advances in astronomy "[giving] rise to speculation that the moon might be a parallel world." Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers often "described a lunar world in order to satirize the politics and customs of their own" (292, n. 1).

farmer, she is determined to undergo "privations and inconveniences… sentiment, adventure, and melancholy" in order to achieve her ambition and live the heroic life she spends all her time reading about.

The next 250 pages recount Cherry's strenuous attempts towards this end: she changes her name, disowns her father, flees her childhood home, and embarks on a string of adventures involving an arrest and a trial, a castle siege, several abductions, and still more attempted seductions. As she traipses from escapade to escapade, Cherry is shadowed by Robert Stuart, a handsome, respectable, intelligent young man of the middle class, who contrives to mitigate the harm she causes to herself and others. After Cherry's many follies have been exposed and she has nearly died from the obligatory repentant bout of illness, she finally learns the important difference between romance and real life. This narrative arc follows the familiar trajectory of the female Quixote – such as Lennox's Arabella, Edgeworth's Lady Delacour (discussed in Chapter 1), and Jane Austen's Catherine Morland (discussed below) – and *The Heroine* has thus been placed squarely in the genre of proscriptive literature against literature, whose central purpose is to decry the vitiating effects of novel and romance reading, particularly on women readers.

While Horner and Zlosnik optimistically posit that, despite its tired premise, *The Heroine* is primed for a recovery in reader reception,[4] other late twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics do not see much beyond *The Heroine*'s obvious burlesque. Most either agree with Walter

[4] "For the twenty-first century reader, schooled in post-modern irony and aware that meaning is created by the reader's interaction with the text," Horner and Zlosnik insist, "*The Heroine* presents itself as a work that moves skillfully between the discourses of Romanticism, sensibility, and the Gothic in order to produce a witty and penetrating analysis of the literature, politics, and culture of its time" (xiii).

Raleigh's dismissive assessment of its simplistic parody,[5] or, if they do take it more seriously, consider it a harshly conservative attack on women and novel reading. Gary Kelly, for example, designates Barrett "an Anti-Whig, Anti-Jacobin, anti-Sentimentalist, antifeminist writer" ("Unbecoming a Heroine" 227) whose intention, by closing *The Heroine* with Cherry's reformation and a speech from Stuart about the importance of sensible books, was to "assign[…] women a purely domestic role" (230) and to "terminate novel reading for a better life" (241). Other critics agree, suggesting that Cherry's fate undermines any more complex or positive reading of the foregoing pages: she is "restrained" and "transformed" (Howard 159) as Barrett overwrites her "female disorderliness" and "misreading" with "allegedly-superior, male-authored and male-authorised texts and reading practices" (Pearson 206).[6] But there is another way to read *The Heroine*: instead of seeing Cherry's final transformation as a repudiation of her previous adventures, we can look more closely at how these adventures contextualize and qualify her transformation. From the beginning, Cherry attributes her choices to an unusual motivation. She is not just driven by romantic fancy, but by a metafictional professional ambition: she sees her role of heroine as a career choice, and to fulfil that role she adopts another one, that of professional author, manipulating events to please her future reading public for whom she plans to transcribe all her adventures.

Harold Perkin pinpoints the early nineteenth century as the moment where Britain began to shift towards a predominantly "professional society" (17-18). As urbanization and

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[5] See, for example, Lau 34, 50; Kendrick 416; Noske 164. April London suggests that Barrett's warning satire is redundant even for its era: "By the time of Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine*, the issue [of the credibility of romance] no longer engages serious attention" (71, n. 3).
[6] See also J. Jackson 161-74, P. Lewis 411-4. Even Horner and Zlosnik, though they argue convincingly for *The Heroine*'s more subtle investigation of Romantic-period culture, still admit that its conclusion "safely recuperates its transgressive heroine back into middle-class ideology" (xxiv).

industrialization continued to grow, and higher standards of living became accessible to more of the British population, the professional classes took on new and increasing respectability. According to Janet Todd, they "grew less dependent on a few rich patrons and more on their own groups as clients. They became institutionalized," and to have a profession carried connotations that were "not just monetary but moral and disciplinary" (204). Kelly argues that Barrett, as a striving professional himself, was "a man eager to become a leader in the struggle to define and exert leadership within the professional middle classes" ("Unbecoming a Heroine" 227), and that this social evolution is one of *The Heroine*'s central concerns. The novel, Kelly suggests, attempts to separate "entertaining and fanciful (female) culture" from, and subjugate it to, "learned and professional (male) culture" by associating women with novel-reading and then denigrating both (221). It is surprising, then, that Kelly does not address the repeated instances in the novel when professionalism is explicitly invoked not by the authoritative male characters, but by its heroine, a teenaged girl.

Cherry introduces the discourse of professionalism early on and refers to it often. She reads escapist novels as though they were didactic literature, a guide to self-improvement. She does not just wish or imagine herself to be a heroine: it is her "*ambition* to be a heroine," a "*vocation*" in which she "hope[s] to succeed" (10, my emphasis). She refers to her heroism in such occupational terms throughout the novel. When she arrives in London, she plans to spend her first days in the metropolis with an eye to work as well as pleasure, deciding that "tomorrow I mean to go shopping, and I may, at the same time, pick up some adventures on my way; for business must be minded" (29). Similarly, in the thick of her adventures, Cherry explains to her new friend and follower Jerry Sullivan that a truly career-minded heroine would sacrifice any practical advantage for a little Gothic atmosphere: "A heroine of good taste, and who wishes to

rise in her profession," she instructs him, "would infinitely prefer the desolation of a castle to the comforts of a villa" (208). In the most extended scene of this kind, near the novel's climax Cherry encounters a fellow heroine with whom she compares notes, colleague to colleague: "'And how do you get on at the profession?' asked she. 'It is not for me to say,' replied I. 'Only this, that ardor and assiduity are not wanting on my part.' 'Of course then,' said she, 'you shine in all the requisite qualities. Do you blush well?' 'As well as can be expected,' said I" (263). Their discussion lasts for several pages, covering the strategies for and merits of a heroine's various duties and attributes – blushing, fainting, weeping, sighing, and the most desirable tints of tresses (263-5).

Certainly, there is a strong element of ridicule in these passages, whose humour lies in the discord between Cherry's serious pursuit of her ambition and its absurdity, obvious to the reader thought not to her. The novel's mocking treatment of her quest for a profession might account for its neglect by critics – but there is more to Cherry's attempt at self-fashioning than its satirical element. Her metafictional attitude, for instance, is unusually perceptive for a typical Quixote, whose requisite failings include an oblivious self-delusion. Cherry is usually classified as such a heedless heroine – Beth Lau, for example, remarks that Cherry "*has come to regard herself* as the heroine of her favourite novels" (34, my emphasis), referring to her in the way that most other critics do, as a gullible innocent who starts to believe that she lives the romantic fancies she reads about.[7] But as we have seen, Cherry does not imagine or believe herself to be a heroine; rather, she aspires to make herself into one. It is also unusual for would-be heroines to consider their role as an occupational one, as a task requiring work. Cherry's incongruous attitude is part of the joke, but it also distinguishes her from both the average female Quixote

[7] See also Howard 153, 156; Kelly, "Unbecoming a Heroine," 235.

character – the silly Miss whose mind has been perverted by novel reading – *and* from its real-life counterpart: the young woman of the emerging middle class at whom these satires are often directed, as warnings against idling away newfound leisure time in dissipated reading.

Cherry is a member of this class, the daughter of "a thrifty, substantial, honest farmer" (12-3) whose days are spent in a bourgeois domestic comfort that she derides: "rising with no better prospect than to make breakfast for Papa… At dinner, nobody but a farmer or the Parson; and nothing talked about but politics and turnips" (10). In running away from home, Cherry seems to embody the fear that romances will encourage their young female readers to neglect their household duties, and even lead them into debauchery. But her flight from home is also a rejection of the dissipated idleness to which critics feared these vulnerable female readers would succumb through their immersive reading. Instead, Cherry's "five years' course of novels" (10) prompts her to pursue an invigorating alternative both to confined family life and to indolent escapist reading. By leaving home to seek her fortune, Cherry might deny the duties of humdrum domesticity, but equally she denies the lethargic pleasures associated with romance reading. Instead she sets out to pursue a profession, a means by which to participate in life outside of the home. In this way Cherry resembles the heroes of romance more than the heroines, for it is heroes who undertake quests: from Homer's epics to tales of King Arthur's court to the satire of Don Quixote's adventure, heroes (or would-be heroes) through the ages leave home to seek their fortunes while heroines (or would-be heroines) must have adventures befall them, as the victims of circumstance. Barrett modernizes the romantic quest narrative by turning it into a career search – he further modernizes it by playing with its gender conventions. In seeking to imitate romance models of femininity, Cherry seizes the masculine privilege of pursuing her ambition and determining her own fate.

For while Cherry may flee her traditional household duties, she does so in order to take on responsibility on a larger scale. She proclaims herself to be the long-lost heiress of a rich estate and adopts the role of feudal lord over the faithful vassals that she collects along her journey. Her major undertaking is to outfit an abandoned ruin as her ancestral estate, to recruit a retinue of men to serve on it, and ultimately to lead them into battle as they defend her keep against a siege. Throughout Cherry exhibits industry, resourcefulness, and a strong sense of responsibility toward her household retainers – domestic management writ large. She may make promises to the men that she cannot keep, assuring them that "Each man shall have an acre of ground, a cottage, and an annual salary.… [S]uch are the privileges that I propound to you" (245). Yet even such a preposterous commitment reflects Cherry's sense of her duty to the men who have chosen to trust and follow her.

The ludicrous aspects of Cherry's adventures are obvious and have been widely discussed. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which her pursuit of a profession affords her opportunities like the siege at Monkton Castle, to develop this sense of social responsibility, and to exercise her intellect and resourcefulness – as the pursuit of a profession should. For instance, in London when Cherry is framed by a pickpocket who steals her purse but claims, when caught, that it was the other way around, Cherry is brought before a magistrate to defend herself. Hoping that this will turn into a romantic adventure, Cherry stalls for time to give her story's hero – whoever he may be – a chance to intervene: "'I am only watching for the tall, elegant young stranger, with an oval face, who is to enter just at this crisis, and snatch me from perdition.' 'Did he promise to come?' said the magistrate. 'Not at all,' answered I, 'for I have never seen the man in my life. But whoever rescues me now, you know, is destined to marry me hereafter. That is the rule'" (35). An example of Cherry's ridiculous attempts to force true life to

accommodate "the rule" of romance, this incident equally illustrates, in what follows, Cherry's clever self-sufficiency and her awareness that the real world and her fictional ideals are not entirely compatible. Realizing that her hero might never come, Cherry "now saw that something must be done" (36) – and she does it, devising a scheme on the spot that entraps the lying pickpocket and proves her innocence to the court. She must be both heroine, embroiled in dramatic difficulty, and hero, producing an eleventh-hour solution to save the day. And not just for herself: in this same scene, Cherry also formulates a way to rescue Jerry Sullivan, an Irish woollen draper, from being transported for a crime of which he too is innocent.

In another instance, Cherry takes refuge from a storm in an abandoned building where she stumbles upon the wounded Stuart, who has been waylaid and kidnapped on his way to the Wilkinson farm. Cherry binds his injury, helps him flee the house undetected, and even deliberately blows it up in order to attract help for the incapacitated Stuart from the surrounding households. Howard considers this improbable adventure with skepticism, citing it as an example of Barrett's heavy-handed agenda to "ridicule Cherubina" that "mak[es] *The Heroine* at times close to travesty" (95). It is a mistake, however, to conflate the ludicrous situations that Barrett has Cherry manufacture for herself and those that Barrett manufactures for her. The storm, the robbers, the shooting, the kidnapping – all lifted from the pages of melodrama – do not occur in Cherry's imagination or through her contrivance. Rather, these events are thrust upon her, and she capably rises to challenges that, if unlikely, are nevertheless part of her life. Cherry herself is critical of how this adventure unfolds, but only insofar as it is incompatible with the stereotypical gender roles of romance heroes and heroines: "perhaps," she muses regretfully, "if [Stuart] had saved my life instead of my having saved his… the man might have made a tolerable hero" (25). Here again Cherry adopts, however unwillingly, the role of hero – this time to Stuart's heroine –

flouting her beloved conventions of romance with regret but without hesitation when a friend's life is in danger. Indeed, the novels that Mary Wollstonecraft suggests "prevent[…] the intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain, to render a rational creature useful to others" (66) have the opposite effect on Cherry. In the devoted pursuit of her profession, she is as useful as possible to both Jerry Sullivan and Stuart, whose lives she saves with the quick thinking and bold action inspired by her favourite "flimsy works" (Wollstonecraft 194). By giving Cherry qualities such as determination and resourcefulness, Barrett tempers the farcical aspect of aligning romance with professionalism.

The resistance at Monkton Castle represents the climax of Cherry's career trajectory – "Ah! what times for a heroine!" she exults, as she prepares for war (*Heroine* 243) – and the excitement of this crisis recalls what is at stake for her. Her comment on the similarities between heroines and patriots may be a vehicle for Barrett's satire against political bombast – "I now found that it was not difficult to make a popular speech; and I judged that the same qualities which have made me so good a heroine, would, if I were a man, have made me just as illustrious a patriot" (245) – but it also underscores the repressive gender politics that Cherry seeks to escape. If she were a man, she reminds us, she would be free to live out her quest narrative as she saw fit. She would be able to pursue a public life of active political participation as a "patriot" delivering "popular speeches." The ignominious reason for her ultimate surrender after her military victory is a similar reminder. She is forced to capitulate when she realizes that, in order to withstand a prolonged onslaught by holing up in her castle, she will have to compromise her female modesty by sleeping in the same room as her men. Women of the real world are hemmed in by such limitations, confined to the home and excluded from professional life. Cherry seeks the satisfaction of a profession – activity, industry, and responsibility – by inventing a career

modelled upon the only women she has encountered who seem to see anything of the world: the heroines of romance. She has even improved upon this option by annexing some of the privileges of romance heroes. Yet as we see, even Cherry, who has violated countless social conventions in order to get this far, cannot cross certain bounds of feminine decorum. This concession to society shows that even at the height of her role playing, Cherry still understands that her position is untenable – the freedom that these characters exercise in novels is still, she knows, fundamentally incompatible with the mores of her time.

To put it in her own terms, Cherry can only rise so far in the heroic profession. She has, however, an alternative but parallel career that she pursues at the same time: the career of a heroine's author. Throughout her adventures, Cherry exercises authorial power by manipulating events to conform as closely as possible to the plot of a generic romance. Writing was one of the few activities in the early nineteenth century that respectable women could undertake to earn money. Though still carrying a certain stigma, female authorship was becoming increasingly common, allowing women to occupy a liminal space between civic life and home life: publication offered women a chance to circulate by proxy, through their work, in the public sphere.[8] Cherry's professional investment in her writing and her desire for this kind of circulation are obvious from her interest in publication. Reflecting with satisfaction, for example, on her triumph over an insolent young man in a verbal sparring match, Cherry thinks that "the best of it is, that every word he said will one day appear in print. Men who converse with a heroine ought to talk for the press, or they will make but a silly figure in her memoirs" (169). Here the role of heroine is coterminous with that of author. By aiming to be not just a professional heroine but the professional author who writes herself into being, Cherry doubly

[8] See, for example, Behrendt 3-4, Levy, Wolfson 15.

asserts her entry into the public sphere. She combines the hypothetical with the real as she conflates writing and imagining with performing and embodying. At the time that she narrates her adventures, Cherry's text is not yet written, so she stands in for the text rather than the other way around: she obviates the liminality of authorship by circulating herself in the public sphere instead of her work, entertaining her live reader-audience by physically enacting what a novel conveys on the page.

The metatextual awareness of this performance further refutes the accusations of delusional folly Cherry has often faced from critics. Even while acknowledging her pretension to authorship, they still deny the conclusion that necessarily accompanies it: if Cherry manufactures her adventures as an author would write them, she must be conscious of their fictionality.[9] We have seen how her active pursuit of a career as heroine, working to make herself into one, refutes the suggestion that she *believes* herself to be one. Her authorial ambition reveals the same self-consciousness: Cherry's escapades are not the product of a delusional "virgin led astray by books" (Kendrick 416) but the contrived predicaments of an author deliberately shaping the complications of her story. After several of her characters have converged on her accommodations in London, Cherry takes stock of her work in progress:

> [M]y plot is entangling itself admirably; and such characters as Betterton and Stuart will not fail to keep the wheels of it going. Betterton is probably planning to carry me off by force; Stuart and our hero are coming to a misunderstanding about me; the latter will,

[9] Paul Lewis identifies Cherry's "double vision," through which she "regards everyone she meets… as a potential character in the romance of her life" (412), yet he refers to her adventures as "indulged fancy" (412) and a "fantasy life" (413). Though Howard describes Cherry as "author[ing] her life" (153), she also considers her to be "very stupid in her obliquity" (153).

> perhaps, return with his arm in an interesting sling, and another parting-forever interview cannot be far distant. Such is the promising aspect of affairs. (79)

Cherry is a good judge of character, and this accurate summary of the situation is typical of her perceptiveness. Kelly suggests that "the reader always sees more going on than Cherry is able to," and that "repeatedly… things and people turn out to be not what they seem to the heroine" ("Unbecoming a Heroine" 235), but this is seldom the case. After discovering Betterton's lecherous designs on her, for example, Cherry is never taken in by his attempts to reconcile with her. Instead, she keeps him around for the opposite reason, convinced of his continuing evil designs. She confides to us, "Were he merely a good kind of good for nothing old gentleman, it would be losing time to cultivate an acquaintance with him. But as the man is a reprobate, I may find account in enlisting him amongst the other characters; particularly, since I am at present miserably off for villains" (72). Betterton's depravity makes him a valuable literary commodity, whose utility – not her ignorance – blinds Cherry to the more serious threat he might, and eventually does, pose.

Before Betterton presents himself as such an eligible villain, Cherry initially considers casting her father in that role. Her knowledge of his true character, however, as well as the requirements of romance prevent her from doing so: "as to personating (what I perceive you aspire to) the grand villain of my plot, your corpulency, pardon me, puts that out of the question forever… you are only a sleek, good-humoured, chuckle-headed gentleman…Continue then what nature made you…. but never again attempt to get yourself thrust into the pages of a romance" (64). She makes a similar assessment of the mad poet Higginson, who warns her of one of Betterton's plots to abduct her. After deciding that Higginson is not implicated in the plot,

Cherry assures him of her good will: “though I cannot countenance you as a villain, I will at least respect you as an honest man” (88) – which he subsequently proves himself to be.

It is also clear that Cherry understands Stuart’s quality as well as Grundy’s worthlessness, despite casting the latter as her hero. She does so in concession only to the demands of romance convention, which require a melodramatic flair in a hero that Stuart lacks. Early in their acquaintance, Grundy’s intrigue with their landlady comes to light, but Cherry overlooks it although she tacitly acknowledges its truth: “How can he possible exculpate himself…? I confess I am predisposed to credit any feasible excuse which he can assign, rather than find myself deceived, outrivaled, and deprived of a lover, not alone dear to me, but indispensable to the progress of my memoirs” (96). Cherry’s pride as well as her literary ambition are the chief motivations for keeping Grundy in her cast of characters, not her blindness to his faults. Only as her novel progresses, and the inevitable romantic dénouement looms, does Cherry begin to worry about the implications of Grundy’s true quality: “I do not feel my mind quite prepared to marry Grundy at so short a notice. Hitherto I have thought of him but as a lover, not as a husband – very different characters, in general” (115). When Grundy finally loses two of his teeth in an undignified drubbing, Cherry seizes with telling alacrity the opportunity to write him off. Despite his pleas, she resolves “never” to think of him “as a lover” again and advises him to “put that out of your head at once. Oh! it shocks me to think I should ever have received you as one” (240). This final exclamation could almost be a confessional aside, implying as it does a long-standing aversion that the terms of Cherry’s favoured genre would not allow her to express.

Similarly, Cherry’s partiality to Stuart has always been plain, both to the reader and to herself. When she first rescues him from the bandits, she acknowledges his heroic qualities and regrets the prohibitive lack of certain important trappings that preclude him from starring in her

novel: “I will… do him the justice to say, that he has a pleasing countenance… Perhaps, if he had saved my life, instead of my having saved his; and if his name has consisted of three syllables ending in i or o; and, in fine, were he not an unprincipled profligate, the man might have made a tolerable hero” (25-6). Upon further acquaintance, Cherry becomes increasingly interested in Stuart despite his mundane good qualities, since “it was the first time in my life that I had a rational conversation (as it is called) with a well-informed young man, and I confess I felt gratified. Besides, even his serious remonstrances were so happily interspersed with humour and delicate irony, that I could not bring myself to be displeased with him” (81). Ultimately, she tries to make excuses for Stuart’s unromantic qualities in an obvious bid to justify her preference for a character who is not supposed to have top billing. While admitting that Stuart is a “laughing, careless, unpathetic creature,” Cherry argues that he does have at least one heroic qualification: he is “a poet, and a poet of feeling” (135). Enjoying every minute of the time she spends with Stuart when they have left Grundy and London behind, Cherry admits guiltily that “I have never once thought of that amiable youth since I last beheld him” (122). In her dedication to her craft, Cherry attempts to force her own feelings as well as external circumstances to fit the unaccommodating mould of romance novel requirements.

As a professional, Cherry counterintuitively views her role as romance heroine and author with very little romance. She is practical, hard-working, goal-oriented, and keenly focused on improving in both of her chosen professions. These are the values that her novel reading has inculcated, and they are qualities that flesh out her character beyond the caricature that critics such as Howard, Kelly, and Raleigh deride. Certainly Cherry has her flaws. Barrett clearly enjoys using her excessive enthusiasms to burlesque the extremes of Gothic and sentimental fiction, and even plays on her foibles for more serious satire – for example, of the superficial

piety that such novels hypocritically espouse. Suffering from a fever and seeking divine consolation, Cherry regrets that "I knew nothing of religion, except from novels; and in these, though the devotion of heroines is sentimental and graceful to a degree, it never influences their acts or appears connected with their moral duties" (146). Acknowledging Barrett's satire, however, does not preclude a more serious reading of Cherry – the two meanings are held in tension to create a layered, oxymoronic text.

We have seen how, despite his jokes at her expense, Barrett invests Cherry, as a professional heroine, with determination, resourcefulness, and powers of persuasion that she uses to assist others. As a professional author, Cherry is equally concerned with the public good. When trying to convince a dressmaker to give her a masquerade costume intended for another customer, Cherry articulates her authorial mission statement:

> I am a heroine; I am, I give you my word and honour. So, you know, the lady being wronged of the dress, (inasmuch as she is but an individual), is as nothing compared with the wrong that the community will sustain, if they lose the pleasure of finding that I get it from you. Sure the whole scene, since I came to this house, was contrived for the express purpose of my procuring that individual costume; and just conceive what pretty confusion must take place, if, after all, you prevent me! My dear girl, we must do poetical justice. We must not disappoint the reader. (107-8)

This passage encourages a multilevel reading: certainly it is an example of the outrageous behaviour entailed by Cherry's adherence to heroic examples. But in light of the many instances that privilege Cherry's concern for her narrative's proper development, it is also a declaration of Cherry's interest in the circulation of texts, the success of which depends on reader reception. As an author, she attempts to "contrive" the "whole scene" according to the conventions of romance,

not just for self-gratification but for the gratification of the "community," her audience. As an experienced reader herself, she knows what incidents her own readers will expect and enjoy; it is their "pleasure" as well as her own that Cherry is thinking of. She wants to write something worth reading.

Indeed, Cherry's sense of social responsibility is one of her defining qualities, since it not only inflects her professional behaviour but, at times, transcends it. When faced with the distress of the impoverished cottagers with whom she briefly takes shelter, Cherry is disgusted by their violation of romantic decorum. "I wished to pity them," she confesses, "but their whining, their dirtiness, and their vulgarity, disgusted more than interested me… [M]isery that looks alluring on paper is almost always repulsed in real life. I turn with distaste from a ragged beggar… while the recorded sorrows of a Belfield or a Rushbrook draw tears of pity from me as I read" (189). Barrett's satire on the superficial, hypocritical compassion of romance that has no pity for the grubbiness of real suffering is short-lived in Cherry, however, when he reveals that, in fact, her shallowness itself is shallow. Barrett might be criticizing the romanticization of distress in novels, but he is not claiming that such portrayals have undue influence over their readers, since Cherry's instinctive sympathy persists despite her claims to the contrary. We discover that in return for their kindness to her, Cherry takes on the cottagers' menial tasks to alleviate their unromantic suffering: "What bewitched me, I cannot conceive, for the humanity of other heroines is ever clean, elegant, and fit for the reader… I can only say, in vindication of myself, that those who sheltered me were poor and helpless themselves, and that they deserved some recompense on my part for their hospitality to me. So you must not condemn me totally" (201). Later in the novel, Cherry even abandons this apologetic tone when she offhandedly relates the many times that she goes to assist, be company for, or give money to the cottagers (211, 223,

231). By investing her with active benevolence along with all her other good qualities, Barrett evidently wants his readers, at least in part, to admire his heroine. The novel's most alienating episode is Cherry's complicity in her father's imprisonment in a madhouse, a cruelty it is difficult to laugh off as the quirk of an aspiring heroine.[10] In the novel's subsequent editions,[11] Barrett softens and excuses Cherry's behaviour in several places, including a significant addition in which Grundy threatens to prosecute her father and have him hanged if Cherry does not go along with the deception.[12] Horner and Zlosnik consider that the alterations to the second edition make the novel "a little blander" (ix) While this may be true, changes like this one, by refining and elevating Cherry in small ways, also serve to make her more heroic and less parodic.

The virtues that Cherry develops while pursuing her roles of heroine and author should influence the way we understand her original role of romance reader. Cherry emerges as a reader whose good qualities have not been perverted by her reading, and who has been inspired by her favourite novels to seek not romance but employment and stimulation that were inaccessible to most women in the early nineteenth century. Though the end of the novel sees her thrown into a feverish fit of remorse over the damage done by her heroic escapades, recovering only to be re-educated by and married to the sensible Stuart, this conclusion does not undermine Cherry's

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[10] While Simon Dickie reminds us that eighteenth-century audiences "openly delighted in the miseries of others" (1), true heroes or heroines would necessarily be above such behaviour.

[11] Barrett was involved with two more editions of the novel: one in 1814, which, although the changes are relatively minor, is "undoubtedly neater" (Horner and Zlosnik ix) with tangents and odd episodes pared down or removed completely. The third edition of 1815 is the same as the second but with added endnotes to explain some of Barrett's allusions.

[12] Grundy writes in a letter to Cherry, "Now, my love, let not a lurking kindness, which I fear you still retain for Wilkinson, prevent you from joining in this plot against him. Indeed, to confine him is an act of humanity; because if the ruffian be suffered to walk at large, he will probably…contrive to have you assassinated. With this conviction on my mind, I must declare, that if you betray my scheme to him, I shall feel myself perfectly justified in prosecuting him for a conspiracy against your life, and have him hanged" (*Heroine*, 2nd ed., 186-7).

powerful journey, despite the overwhelming critical consensus to the contrary – for Cherry's point has been gained. She gives up her dreams of professional heroism in exchange for a more realistic existence, but also a more fulfilling one than the life she began with: "I now pass my time in an alternation of instruction and amusement. Morality, history, languages, and music, occupy my mornings; and my evenings are sometimes enlivened by balls, operas, and familiar parties" (288). And though Cherry may have sacrificed her ambition of being a professional heroine, she has clearly not sacrificed her ambition to be a professional author: the novel that we've just finished reading is presented as Cherry's. Her memoirs have appeared on the literary market, full of audience-pleasing melodrama and romantic incident, justifying all of her madcap adventures and validating her counsel to the imprudent young man who should have remembered to talk to a heroine as though he were talking for the press.

Cherry, therefore, is not a bad reader, though she may not have been an ideal one at the novel's outset: *The Heroine* does admit that although romance reading can produce surprising benefits, reading *nothing* but romance also leads to dangerous excesses, which accounts for Cherry's illness at the end. Stuart's caution in the novel's final pages, urging Cherry to "counteract the[…] bad effects [of certain novels] by some more rational line of reading," is a warning against the degree, and not the kind, of Cherry's romance reading. He maintains that "romances such as the Mysteries of Udolpho, the Italian, and the Bravo of Venice, which address themselves to the imagination alone, are often captivating, and seldom detrimental." It is only when "indulged in the extreme" that they may prove harmful (287). This position echoes the sentiments of the "exemplary pastor" (286) who first begins to re-educate Cherry as she is recovering from her illness. Indeed, the pastor's comparison of novel-reading with religion is almost a defence of romance. It is not the material that is at fault, but an excess of focused

passion: “religion itself, he said, if indulged with immoderate enthusiasm, at last degenerates into zealotry, and leaves the poor devotee too rapturous to be rational, and too virulent to be religious” (286). It is limited reading – too narrow and therefore becoming too intense – that can be dangerous, when “principles [are] formed upon such books *alone*” (288, my emphasis). Cherry shares this negative quality with readers like Frankenstein and Captain Walton discussed in Chapter 2, whose blinkered, isolated reading leads them into trouble as well. Unlike them, however, Cherry’s isolation is involuntary, and her narrow reading motivates her, like Shelley’s Creature, to break free of her seclusion and search for a way to participate more in society. Eventually, this makes her an even better reader. She begins the novel confined to talking of “turnips” with “nobody but a farmer or the Parson” (10). Her new program of education allows her “to mix in the world, to copy living instead of imaginary beings, and to study the customs of actual, not ideal society” (288). She enjoys all the benefits of London society and culture, and broadens her “five years’ course of novels” with an interesting variety of books. By the end, Cherry has developed from a narrow though strangely effective reader into a three-dimensional, flourishing reader.

Indeed, the only trenchantly anti-romance characters in the novel are far from being voices of authority. The first is Cherry’s father, who disapproves of Cherry’s “famous romances” (11), and who lives up to his label of “chuckle-headed gentleman” (64) by his jolly but fatuous bluster and the neglect of his daughter’s education. The other is an unpleasant woman with whom Cherry shares a carriage early in the novel. She is “huge and hideous,” and, treating Cherry with “a supercilious sneer,” the woman praises with evocative malapropisms her daughter whose “eyes are the very squintessence of perfection” and who “has all her catechism by heart.” This unappealing young woman also, her mother adds proudly, has a “mind…

uncontaminated by romances and novels, and such abominations" (26). By pitting such ineffectual antagonists as these against "such abominations," Barrett further discourages an indiscriminate rejection of them.

Critics who still read *The Heroine* this way – as a wholesale denunciation of novels and romance – rely on Cherry's reformation at the novel's conclusion to prove their point. Cherry's own description of her relationship with Stuart could suggest as much, as he "sits by my side, directs my studies, reassures my timidity, and corrects my mistakes" in order to rid her of her "former follies and affectations" (288). But just as *Belinda's* Lady Delacour refuses to be subdued even by her own resolution to change her ways, Cherry is irrepressible to the last. And just like Lady Delacour, she provides a metafictional conclusion to the novel, saying to her new husband Stuart, "after all your pains to prevent me from imitating romances, you have made me terminate my adventures like a true romance – in a wedding. Pray with what moral will you now conclude the book?" Stuart, for once, is at a loss for words: "I will say, returned he, that virtue – no. That calamity – no. That fortitude and resignation — oh no! I will say, then, that Tommy Horner was a bad boy, and would not get a plumcake, and that King Pepin was a good boy, and rode in a golden coach" (291). Readers have had trouble interpreting Stuart's obscure lines, the last of the novel. Horner and Zlosnik propose they mean "that the moral of *The Heroine* should be absolutely clear to the reader, otherwise Stuart might as well be telling a pack of lies" (338). Whatever moral they have in mind does not seem "absolutely clear," however, in this concluding piece of nonsense. Instead, the novel ends the way it began, on Cherry's terms. She repackages her reformation and marriage as the true fulfilment of her early ambition to live the life of a heroine – her story, just like theirs, ends in a wedding. And she forces Stuart to admit that, despite his new role as her "counsellor" (288) and husband, he might not have all the answers.

Such an ending is more in keeping with the novel's inadequate anti-novel characters, and with Cherry's disreputable early reading that frees her from a life of narrow seclusion and turns her into a well-read, well-rounded woman of the world.

With this view of Cherry in mind, *The Heroine*'s peculiar preface becomes less enigmatic. The strange time-line laid out by the preface encourages us to go back to it once we have finished the novel, since, as we will recall, it is written in the voice of the "Lunarian" Cherry, who has come into being only after the novel has been published. Thus the preface situates itself, chronologically, as an epilogue rather than a prologue. Returning to it, then, we remember that "Lunarian" Cherry lives on the moon along with all other written characters who are still current in the public's imagination. Now that we have read the novel, we can more easily understand Cherry's reception by these other "Moonite" characters: "As I proceeded, I met the Radcliffian, Rochean, and other heroines; but they tossed their heads, and told me pertly that I was a slur on the sisterhood" (4). Before reading the novel, we might wonder why its titular heroine is rejected by her own kind. Now we know that their rebuff signifies that Cherry has become too well-rounded for them. By combining the roles of hero and heroine, by becoming her own author, and ultimately by giving up her melodramatic ambitions to embrace the challenge, variety, and pleasure of an "ordinary" life, Cherry has betrayed the stereotype of the victimized, angelic heroines of Ann Radcliffe's and Regina Maria Roche's romances. Cherry may still enjoy reading about them, but she no longer emulates them. She is too similar to the realist characters that these heroines also dismiss: "they likewise shunned the Edgeworthian heroines, whom they thought too comic, moral, and natural" (4). The characters with whom Cherry is aligned are "moral" and "natural" – it is important to acknowledge, however, that they are also "comic." This qualifier reminds us that the realist character can be part of, and the well-

rounded reader can enjoy, light as well as serious literature. The preface's sympathetic portrayal of Don Quixote fulfils a similar function, for we are invited to laugh at his antics – at one point he and Captain Shandy of *Tristram Shandy* become embroiled in battle, "the one with his spear, and the other with his crutch" (6) – but we are also encouraged to view him sympathetically. He is both generous and insightful, defending and guiding Cherry as they traverse the alien moonscape (4-5). The assertion that he and Cherry are "kindred souls" (4) thus takes on a different meaning: they are not merely matching fools or satirical targets, but fellow questers, brave romantic optimists.

"The Power of Curiosity and the Influence of Romance" in *Waverley*

Like Cherry Wilkinson's exploits, the misadventures of *Waverley*'s hero are rooted, we are told, in his reading habits. An early chapter entitled "Education" is not a description of Edward Waverley's schooling so much as a lament over his misspent youth. Despite possessing "powers of apprehension…so uncommonly quick, as almost to resemble intuition," Waverley is unfortunately governed by an "indolence…of disposition which can only be stirred by some strong motive of gratification, and which renounces study so soon as curiosity is gratified." As a result, he "acquir[ed] his knowledge in a slight, flimsy, and inadequate manner" (12), pursuing his "love of literature" (13) in order "rather to awaken the imagination than to benefit the understanding" (14). Waverley's preferred genres – those, we are told, that create his ominous "dissipation of mind" (14) – include "romantic fiction," "romantic poems," "memoirs, scarcely more faithful than romances," "romances so well written as hardly to be distinguished from memoirs," and "romantic lore" (14). Repeated five times and applied to a range of genres from novels and poetry to autobiographies and mythology, "romance" becomes a catch-all term

applying to any type of reading that appeals to affect over intellect. Waverley's reading caters to his "intuition," "fancy," "talent," and "imagination;" these impulses are linked to "indolence" and "gratification," to what is "slight, flimsy, and inadequate." Respectable reading like "study," or the pursuit of "knowledge" and "understanding," is placed in virtuous opposition. The novel's subsequent events are grounded in this pejorative association between romance reading and the non-intellectual responses it encourages: the narrator links Waverley's laziness, impatience, and self-absorption to his early reading, and blames it for the "evil consequences, which long continued to influence his character, happiness, and utility" (13).

So far this negative portrayal of absorbed but fitful and fanciful reading, privileging "imagination" over "understanding," echoes standard fears about the quixotic reader, whose literary taste is not just disreputable but detrimental, resulting in "evil consequences." More particularly, it is a description of the typical *female* Quixote. Compare Scott's description with Wollstonecraft's of the kind of woman reader most vulnerable to novels of sensation and sensibility: "by fits and starts they are warm in many pursuits; yet this warmth, never concentrated into perseverance, soon exhausts itself" (65), and their sensibility eventually "prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain" (66). Just like these hypothetical women, Waverley is "indolent," "renounc[ing] study so soon as curiosity is gratified." As a result of this lassitude and his taste for romance, his rational knowledge is "slight, flimsy, and inadequate" (13). By characterising Waverley like this, Scott presciently portrays what some studies have now confirmed: that, as John Brewer puts it, "the flighty novel-reader was just as likely to be male as female" (Brewer 161). Indeed, Waverley seems to represent the stereotype of the female Quixote reader more convincingly than, for example, *The Heroine*'s Cherry ever did. *The Heroine*'s story begins when Cherry takes decisive action,

abandoning the ease of her conventional domestic circumstances to court adventure. *Waverley* also begins with the protagonist heading off on a journey, but we soon discover that his quest is precipitated by his aunt's efforts to prevent his falling in love with a local girl. She suggests to his uncle "the necessity that the heir of his house should see something more of the world," and the uncle acknowledges that perhaps "Edward was a little bookish" (19). Thanks to the influence of his father, who also "thought with pain on the boy's inactivity" (20), Waverley is made a captain in the Hanoverian army and is sent to join a troop in Scotland. So at first, Waverley himself does not seek out adventure, as a hero should, but instead adventures are thrust upon him, more like the experience of a heroine. Once he joins the army, however, everything seems in train for his re-education, for a military career to counteract the effeminate qualities of dreaminess, lethargy, and a taste for romance that his disreputable reading has encouraged. But we shall discover instead that Waverley charts a similar course to Cherry's in their defiance of gendered reading stereotypes. Just as her romance reading prompts her actively to participate in the masculine world of heroic quests, thereby securing her happy ending, it is Waverley's taste for romance literature, by encouraging his more feminine attributes of emotion and imagination, that guarantees his own ultimate success.

Inauspiciously, many of Waverley's early experiences bear out the narrator's grim prognostication that he will suffer "evil consequences" thanks to his early wayward reading. After joining the army, for example, he quickly becomes disheartened by his inferior martial abilities compared to those of the other officers, wondering "why his memory, so alert upon most occasions, did not always retain technical phrases, and minute points of etiquette or field discipline" (31). The narrator knows why, however, lamenting the "fits of absence" to which Waverley is liable and explaining that they stem from the self-indulgence of his early reading:

"the vague and unsatisfactory course of reading which he had pursued,… had given him that wavering and unsettled habit of mind which is most averse to study and riveted attention" (31). In opposition to *The Heroine*'s Cherry, who is desperate for a profession, Waverley quickly loses interest in his, and this disaffection leads him to take an extended leave of absence at Tully-Veolan where he meets the Highlander revolutionaries whose acquaintance causes him such lasting trouble. When a serious misunderstanding first arises between Waverley and his British regiment because of the political double-dealings of his father, he is ill-equipped to discover its cause because "his habits [had not] at all led him to investigate the politics of the period in which he lived, or remark the intrigues in which his father had been so actively engaged" (135). And when introduced to "Bonny Prince Charlie," whose charisma and striking figure make him seem more "like a hero of romance than a calculating politician" (206), Waverley's imagination overwhelms his common sense and he pledges himself to the ill-fated Stuart rebellion, a commitment he later has so much cause to regret.

Despite repeatedly blaming Waverley's wayward reading for all of his problems, the narrator attempts to distance his tale from its quixotic forebear. "My intention," he writes, "is not to follow the steps of that inimitable author [Cervantes] in describing such total perversion of intellect…but that more common aberration from sound judgment, which apprehends occurrences indeed in their reality, but communicates to them a tincture of its own romantic tone and colouring" (18). Perhaps the intention is to make Waverley more sympathetic by depicting him as misguided and eccentric rather than insane; or perhaps it is an attempt to make the tale a more effective warning against indiscriminate reading by making its "evil consequences" more probable-seeming, the results of a "common aberration" that anyone might fall into. The disclaimer functions more as apophasis than as differentiation, however, ensuring that we have

Cervantes's hero in mind as we read about Waverley's misadventures. Other moments in the novel revive and cement this association. Fergus Mac-Ivor, the Highland chieftain who befriends Waverley and recruits him to the Jacobite cause, jokingly refers to Cervantes's work as a way to communicate with Waverley by speaking a language he understands. "Ah, long rest thy soul, Cervantes!" Fergus apostrophizes, "without quoting thy remnants, how should I frame my language to befit romantic ears!" (121). When Waverley attempts to journey back to England, he enlists the aid of a surly innkeeper as guide whose comic ineptitude, bizarre figure, and incongruous title of "squire," sarcastically bestowed by the narrator, evoke the shade of Sancho Panza: "our hero, though not in a very gay humour, could hardly help laughing at the appearance of his new squire, and at imagining the astonishment which his person and equipage would have excited at Waverley-Honour" (149). Reinforcing the affinity between Waverley and Quixote that the narrator dismisses so disingenuously, such allusions further encourage us to view the novel as a cautionary tale about the "misadventures" resulting from an "undisciplined and undiscriminating approach to books" (Allan 7).

In addition to the practical trouble that Waverley's romantic reading occasions him, his resulting "indolence" earns him disapproval from some of the novel's other characters, and most of its critics. Although fond of Waverley, Fergus Mac-Ivor does not fully respect him. "Though [he] be always a man of sense and honour," Fergus tells Charles Stuart, "I have hitherto often found him a very absent and inattentive companion" (210). When discussing with Rose Bradwardine Waverley's day-dreaminess and disregard for the internal politics of the Stuart cause, Flora Mac-Ivor points out that "if he were the hero you suppose him, he would interest himself in these matters." He is better suited, she says disdainfully, to "admire the moon, and quote a stanza from Tasso," and "would never have been his celebrated ancestor Sir Nigel, but

only Sir Nigel's eulogist and poet" (250). Though Fergus and Flora are portrayed as misguided Stuart supporters, both are nonetheless depicted as active, intelligent, and, in Flora's case, sensible. As in the cases of Austen's Harriet Smith and Captain Benwick, critics of *Waverley* usually share the contempt expressed by other characters for the romantic, supposedly misguided reader-protagonist. Scott's contemporary Maria Edgeworth was dismissive of all of his heroes, even though she was his friend and admirer. She found his leading men "paltry and pusillanimous," vehicles for the interest of his plots and the beauty of his writing: "they are mere sticks round which he twines his flowers – the less the stick is seen the better."[13] Present-day readers feel much the same way about Waverley. In her introduction to the Oxford edition of the novel, Claire Lamont observes that "criticism has often centred on the weakness of the hero" (xiii). Scholars argue that "Waverley," a name Scott invented, is an aptonym: Edward "notoriously 'wavers'" (Bour 817) and is "notoriously passive" (Orr 715). Critics follow the prompting of the narrator and the novel's other characters to blame this feebleness on Waverley's undisciplined reading habits.[14] As we have seen in so many other instances, romance reading is positioned as a self-indulgent weakness, a reprehensible evasion of labour, activity, or duty.

The novel's frequent attacks on romance could support this interpretation of *Waverley* as "an extended case study of an ill-regulated imagination" (Davis 444). The narrator does not introduce the novel's characters until its second chapter, using the first to ridicule the

[13] Edgeworth to Honora Edgeworth, 13 August 1824.
[14] Jana Davis refers to Waverley's inclination to "live[…] more in his daydreams than in the world around him" (445) as a "mental disorder" caused by wayward reading: "while romances and family legends store Waverley's mind with romantic images and stimulate his power of fancy, his judgement remains undeveloped" (446). See also Bour 817-18; Orr 718-19; Allan 7; Dekker 134.

conventions of romantic literary genres and to insist that its readers prepare themselves for a realistic tale. The narrator points out the virtue of contriving an original name for his hero, since it will be free from frivolous or hackneyed connotations: "from the chivalrous epithets of Howard, Mordaunt, Mortimer, or Stanley, or from the softer and more sentimental sounds of Belmour, Belville, Belfield, and Belgrave" readers would expect "pages of inanity, similar to those which have been so christened for half a century past" (3). The next two paragraphs detail a series of motifs from contemporary novels that readers must *not* expect to find in the following pages: "a profligate abbot, an oppressive duke,… black cowls, caverns, daggers, … a heroine with a profusion of auburn hair, and a harp" (3-4). Cherry Wilkinson seeks such clichéd trappings when she sets out to author the romance of her life, and *Waverley* disavows them as roundly as *The Heroine* does. Such mocking interjections punctuate the novel. A little further on, for example, the narrator interrupts his synopsis of British politics and country customs to apologize for the mundanity of such subject matter, but suggests that readers – especially women, who, he implies, are more likely to be bored by the minutiae of civics and history – must prepare themselves for more of the same: "I do not invite my fair readers…. into a flying chariot drawn by hyppogriffs, or moved by enchantment. Mine is a humble English post-chaise, drawn upon four wheels, and keeping his majesty's highway" (24). *Waverley* seems to dismiss any kind of reading that privileges the fanciful over the rational.

This subordination of romance to realism is, finally, accepted by Waverley himself. As his difficulties mount, he begins to acknowledge that his penchant for romance and his selective reading habits might have stunted his development. In his futile attempt to convince Flora to accept his marriage proposal, he admits that "a thousand circumstances of fatal self-indulgence have made me the creature rather of imagination than reason" (131). When he discovers the

terrible repercussions that his desertion from the Hanoverian cause has brought upon the men he used to lead, he condemns himself even more seriously: “O, indolence and indecision of mind! if not in yourselves vices, to how much misery do you frequently prepare the way!” (219). This dawning awareness culminates in Waverley’s glum epiphany following the skirmish at Clifton that separates him, once and for all, from Fergus and the Stuart rebellion: “it was in many a winter walk by the shores of Ulswater, that he acquired a more complete mastery of a spirit tamed by adversity, than his former experience had given him; and that he felt himself entitled to say firmly, though perhaps with a sigh, that the romance of his life was ended, and that its real history had now commenced” (283).

Waverley’s mournful tone and hesitant language invite skepticism, however. The comic wordiness of his locution undercuts its persuasiveness. He does not simply tell himself “firmly” that romance is dead, but diminishes the strength of this solid adverb with diffident qualifying phrases: Waverley “*felt himself entitled to say* firmly, *though perhaps with a sigh*...” The language of feeling also undercuts this turn away from romance and emotion to reason and reality. Waverley does not “decide” or “think” or “resolve” that the romance of his life was over – instead he “*felt*” that it was so. Lonely winter walks, sighs of regret, and the depressing weight of adversity all prompt Waverley to renounce romance not through a resolute decision but out of loneliness and guilt. He is confined in a drab, dispiriting place, “solitary and secluded,” pining for “the advantage of company or conversation with men of cultivated minds” (282-3). He has nothing to distract him from dwelling on his mistakes and wallowing in self-recrimination, “reveries he was permitted to enjoy, undisturbed by queries or interruption” (283). No wonder he sighs, no wonder his spirit is tamed. This passage sounds less like an awakening and more like

an unwilling defeat, incongruous for a work supposedly meant to champion the real history that Waverley accepts so reluctantly.

The genres of romance and history are held in tension throughout the novel, and some critics argue that this conflict is part of Scott's campaign for realism, his attempt to subordinate the former to the latter. Many of his contemporary readers agreed, even going so far as to classify *Waverley* as more history than romance. In her survey of early nineteenth-century reviews, Ina Ferris demonstrates that "the vocabulary of assessment" used by reviewers of the novel "merges easily (if not fully) with that used for nonfictional works" ("Translation from the Border" 299). Ferris identifies in the novel's early reception a "struggle" to "establish its distinction from the dubious romantic fictions of the common novel" (300). Critics then and now claim that Scott himself attempts to create the same distinction, adding numerous footnotes to the 1829 edition that apologize for some of his more melodramatic scenes, addressing the complaints of readers who have objected to them on such grounds. But as with Waverley's epiphany – and Cherry's reformation, and Don Quixote's before her – there is something suspect about these apologies. They might begin by expressing contrition, yet they always culminate in self-justification, and the further along in the novel these notes appear, the less apologetic and the more defensive they become.

What start as admissions of fault turn into vindications, as Scott claims historical bases to justify the romantic flights of fancy he seems about to repudiate. He addresses, for instance, the tableau that Flora stages for Waverley – a scene of "romantic wildness" (106), where she plays an ancient Highland battle-tune on her harp with a raging waterfall for a backdrop. In his note Scott grants that this scene, "as described, has been justly censured as too theatrical and affected for the lady-like simplicity of [Flora's] character" (397-8, n. 41). We might recall, as well, that

the opening pages of the novel deride the image of a heroine and her harp as a romantic cliché. In his next sentence, though, Scott backtracks, appealing to the historical prejudices of his assumed Anglophone readership to justify his characterization: "something may be allowed to [Flora's] French education, in which point[15] and striking effect always make a considerable object" (398, n. 41). Scott writes of Flora as though she were a real person, with a traceable cultural background, in order to justify the unrealistically romantic quality he has given her.

The scene of the great Highland hunt and "the romantic effect" created by its "sylvan camp" (119) is another moment of contention. Scott complains that "the author has been sometimes accused of confounding fiction with reality. He therefore thinks it necessary to state, that the circumstance of the hunting described…. is, so far as he knows, entirely imaginary" (398, n. 50). Scott is clearly impatient with readers who approach *Waverley* as a work of fact rather than fiction, thus distancing himself from the reviewers who try to recuperate his novel as history. This distance is increased as he uses fact not to renounce but to shore up his fiction. He contends that, imaginary or not, the scene and its "romantic effect" have foundation in reality: "it is well known such a great hunting party was held in the Forest of Brae-Mar, under the auspices of the Earl of Mar, as preparatory to the Rebellion of 1715" (398, n. 50).

Scott's longest and most exasperated note appends to his depiction of Charles Stuart, which some readers have suggested "paint[s] the young Adventurer in colours more amiable than his character deserved" (404, n. 82). Here Scott drops all but the barest pretence of apology. He concedes that he has drawn on the accounts of potentially biased witnesses, and "something must be allowed… to the natural exaggerations of those who remembered [Stuart] as the bold and

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[15] Here Scott uses the word "point" in its now rare sense relating to the theatre, "a gesture, vocal inflection, or some other piece of theatrical technique used to underline a climactic moment in a speech, role, or situation" (*OED*).

adventurous Prince" (404, n. 82). After admitting as much, however, Scott spends nearly three pages defending the reliability of these accounts, referring to numerous sources. He cites the favourable description of Stuart by James Maxwell of Kirkconnell, a "fair and candid" (405, n. 82) follower of the Prince, and he attacks the validity of conflicting evidence offered by the memoirs of Chevalier Johnstone, "a single malcontent" (404, n. 82). At the same time as he uses historical accounts to defend his romantic depictions, Scott accuses the sources he disputes of themselves being too fanciful to be believed: Johnstone's version of events cannot be trusted because "some part at least of that gentleman's tale is purely romantic" (404, n. 82). This balancing act is complex, but not hypocritical. Scott does not claim to be writing history, so he demands creative license. At the same time, he insists that his romance has more authority than other fictional accounts because of its closer relation to, though not its exact rendition of, reality. As Scott affirms in his postscript, "the most romantic parts of this narrative are precisely those which have a foundation in fact" (340).

As with Edgeworth's and Burney's protests against novels, Scott's defensive explanations in *Waverley* are equivocal, often espousing, in the end, what they pretend to reject. In light of this ambivalence, particularly towards romance, we should examine Scott's assertion that the similarities between his education and Waverley's are restricted to their youthful taste in fiction. In his General Preface to the novel's 1829 edition, Scott admits that his description of Waverley's "surfeit of idle reading" (15) is based on his own "vague and wild use" of a well-stocked library when he was a young invalid (351). But he insists that "the resemblance" between his education and that of his protagonist "extends no farther." In fact, he claims that in his training to become a lawyer he enthusiastically undertook the kind of "severe studies" and "serious labour" (351) so distasteful to his fictional counterpart. This disavowal, however, is as

ambivalent as Waverley's epiphany and Scott's pseudo-apologetic notes. For despite this apparent shame of his "desultory" (351) past reading, he does not disguise his enduring enthusiasm for "the specious miracles of fiction" – an ambiguous conjunction in itself – that he enjoyed as a child. Nor does he repent the time he passed inventing wild romances to recount to his friends, a treasured period in his life that "still forms an *oasis* in the pilgrimage which I have to look back upon" (350). Beyond the pleasure and distraction derived from his boyhood reading, Scott also acknowledges its utility: by becoming "a glutton of books" and devouring mostly "romances, old plays, and epic poetry," he was, like *The Heroine*'s Cherry, researching for his future profession, "unconsciously amassing materials for the task in which it has been my lot to be so much employed" (350). When Scott names this profession, he does not refer to himself as a writer merely, but as a "romance-writer" (349) specifically – an unexpected self-identification for one who supposedly objects to the genre.[16]

By his own admission, Scott's past reading helped to shape his future success. He cloaks this revelation in ambivalence and self-criticism, thereby staving off the disapproval of conservative readers and their anti-romance prejudices. Scott uses the same rhetorical sleight to disguise but not to disavow the fact that, like his own, Waverley's early romance reading has shaped him for the better as much as for the worse. The chapter "Education" is explicit in its reservations about Waverley's indulgence in literature, and this disapproval is often cited as the novel's definitive position on romance reading. In the chapter immediately following

[16] Scott's reading history is an interesting amalgam of the reading habits Shelley attributes to Walton, Frankenstein, *and* Clerval in her novel. Scott spent much of his youth alone, avidly reading tales of adventure, like Walton; in his early manhood he was single-minded and studious, like Frankenstein; but most significantly, in the end he is most like Clerval of *Frankenstein*'s first edition: Scott reflects on the time he spent inventing stories for his friends as the high point of his youth and, in the end, pursues this imaginative and social activity on a wider scale by becoming a best-selling author.

"Education," however, Scott qualifies its position by elaborating on the important qualities that Waverley's reading nourishes. For if Waverley's reading has made him absent-minded and indecisive, it has also taught him a curiosity and an imaginative empathy that, as we will see, prove crucial to Scott's stated intention for the novel. Waverley loves romance for its "heart-stirring" nature, its tales of "generosity… sufferings and fortitude" at which "his heart glowed and his eye glistened" (16). The elaborate fantasies he loves to read and hear about during his solitary youth at Waverley-Honour are focused on emotion arising from incident rather than incident for the sake of mere adventure. He imagines a scene of tragic reunion from his family's past, for example, by dwelling on the feelings portrayed in the story: "In the corner of the large and sombre library," Waverley experiences

> the electrical shock occasioned by the discovery;… the astonishment of the bridegroom; the terror and confusion of the bride; the agony with which Wilibert observed that her heart as well as consent was in these nuptials; the air of dignity, yet of deep feeling, with which he flung down the half-drawn sword, and turned away for ever from the house of his ancestors. (17)

Reliving the "astonishment," the "terror and confusion," the "agony," and the "dignity" – in short, the "deep feeling" variously experienced by all the different characters in this drama, Waverley nurtures the habit of feeling for others. Eaton Stannard Barrett jokes in *The Heroine* that Cherry's romance reading promotes a shallow kind of sensibility that does not translate into true feeling (though it does not pervert her natural empathy). Scott is more Richardsonian in his treatment of romance as a means to build emotional connections between individuals.

Waverley's curiosity and empathy, as well as his passion for the reading that has cultivated them, are essential to the important relationships that he develops, some of which are

explicitly predicated on a shared love of literature. In the early days of his visit to the Baron of Bradwardine's estate, Waverley must live alongside the Scottish noble with whom it seems, at first, he has nothing in common: "their characters and habits of thinking were in many respects totally opposite" (56). Waverley is young, English, and mostly apolitical though nominally Hanoverian; he is also "warm in his feelings, wild and romantic in his ideas and in his taste of reading, with a strong disposition towards poetry." By contrast, "Mr. Bradwardine was the reverse of all this" (56). Elderly, Scottish, and a passionate Jacobite, the Baron prefers unadorned prose over flowery fiction and derides what he calls "the 'vain and unprofitable art of poem-making'" (57).

Yet the Baron, like Waverley, practices a method of study that makes up for in ardour what it lacks in assiduity: "His learning was more diffuse than accurate, and he was rather a reader than a grammarian" (26) – a description that might easily apply to Waverley. Similarly, the Baron shares with him a passion for literature that can sometimes embroil him in difficulty. The narrator recounts an anecdote in which the Baron was taken prisoner by the English during the 1715 Jacobite uprising, and though he managed to get away, he was recaptured when he returned for a treasured book, "his Titus Livius, which he had forgot in the hurry of his escape" (26).[17] The Baron and Waverley are also united in their indulgence of romantic whimsy. The Baron enjoys nothing more than reliving in long-winded detail the adventures of his youth, and he finds a spellbound listener in Waverley, whose imagination is caught by the passion and substance, if not the style, of the Baron's stories, so much like Waverley's early reading. We

[17] The Titus Livius episode demonstrates the Baron's similarly excessive, even imprudent devotion to literature, but it is also an illustration of the important bonds that can be forged over passionate reading. For it turns out that his English captor is also a devotee of Roman literature, and favourably impressed by "the devotion of the North Briton," he goes out of his way to "accomplish[…] the final discharge and deliverance" of the Baron (26).

know that he is unusual in this respect, from the great store the Baron sets by "a youth devoid of that petulant volatility, which is impatient of, or vilipends, the conversation and advice of his seniors" (57). Despite "tastes so opposite," then, Waverley's romantic predilections help him to develop a rapport with the Baron, and "they contributed greatly to each other's amusement" (57). While their relationship might at first cause Waverley more harm than good – at Tully-Veolan he first meets the men who convert him temporarily to the Jacobite cause – in the end the Baron gives his daughter's hand in marriage to Waverley, thus securing his lifelong happiness.

Waverley's marriage is another of his relationships that began in a shared love of literature. On the first evening of Waverley's visit, Rose performs a song for him with a "sensibility to poetry" and a "delicacy of feeling" (59) that enchant him, and recall his own. He has brought with him books that expand Rose's heretofore limited access to reading material, providing "the opportunities of increasing her store of literature" (65). More importantly, he offers her an increased enjoyment in reading as "these new pleasures became gradually enhanced by sharing them with one of a kindred taste" (65). Like Louisa and Captain Benwick, Rose falls in love with Waverley over their romance reading. Ironically, and unlike the couple in *Persuasion*, Waverley's own romantic notions make him at first oblivious to Rose's attractions because "she had not precisely the sort of beauty or merit which captivates a romantic imagination in early youth" (66). In the same way, he becomes enamoured of Flora for her dramatic beauty, suited to a heroine of fantasy. Flora's rejection and her zeal for the Jacobite cause ultimately convince Waverley of his mistake, however, and he returns to the woman with whom he shares a "kindred taste" for literature. He begins to notice Rose more favourably during the rebels' sojourn at Edinburgh, where "she omitted no opportunity within her reach to extend her knowledge and refine her taste" (247). At an afternoon tea party before the march from

Edinburgh, Waverley notes with pleasure her defence of Italian over Gaelic poetry and her preference for Waverley's reading of Shakespeare over Fergus's flute-playing. Waverley's own bias convinces him that not only is "her manner…most engaging" but that "she has a more correct ear" (255) for literature than Flora, and her emotional response to his reading from *Romeo and Juliet* reveals to him that "she has more feeling too" (256).

Even as it helps to attract friends, Waverley's love for romantic literature sometimes reconciles him to his enemies. When he is first suspected of treason and arrested at Cairnvreckan, Waverley makes an ally out of an enemy in the clergyman Mr. Morton, who visits him in captivity. Mr. Morton, like Waverley, is also a romantic at heart, whose "love of letters, though kept in subordination to his clerical studies and duties… had tinged his mind in earlier days with a slight feeling of romance, which no after incidents of real life had entirely dissipated" (162). This "tinge of romance" derived from his "love of letters" is essential to Mr. Morton's sympathy for Waverley. When Waverley tells him of his adventures with Donald Bean Lean, Mr. Morton expresses relief that Waverley did not describe this Highland encounter to his arresting officer. Waverley's actions, the clergyman tells him, are "capable of great misconstruction on the part of those who do not consider the power of curiosity and the influence of romance as motives of youthful conduct" (168). While Waverley's romantic proclivities are partly responsible for his precarious situation, Mr. Morton understands and excuses this behaviour because he can identify with it. "When I was a young man like you," he tells Waverley, "any such hair-brained expedition… would have had inexpressible charms for me" (168). The unimaginative Major holding Waverley in custody and convinced of his guilt cannot believe that anyone would pay a visit to the Highlands out of a sense of romantic adventure. Mr. Morton, on the other hand, can easily believe that "youth" could be "misled by the wild visions

of chivalry and imaginary loyalty" and thus "may plead for pardon" (163). Because of this sympathetic bond, Mr. Morton defends Waverley to the Major, ensuring kinder treatment than the prisoner might otherwise have received. In his vulnerable position, Waverley's taste in literature secures the friendship of another romantic lover of letters.

So far we have looked at instances in which Waverley's romantic reading has directly facilitated his relationships with other readers. But Waverley's taste for romance also enables his connections with some who are not portrayed as readers at all – like the highlander Evan Dhu, who arrives at Tully-Veolan to negotiate a peace between his clan and the Baron's people. Evan is a proud, taciturn man with an aversion to the English, and his appearance is so foreign as to make Waverley "start[…] at the sight" and almost suspect at first "the intrusion [to be] hostile" (73). After a second glance, however, Waverley is, of course, intrigued by Evan's romantic, war-like appearance, and Evan, despite his prejudices against the English, responds to Waverley's interest in him, "flattered with the attention,… and his curiosity about the customs and scenery of the Highlands" (75). Similarly, at the ball on the eve of the crucial Jacobite march, Waverley's "powers of imagination,… poetry, and… that eloquence which is allied to poetry" translate into a powerful sociability. He captivates not just "kindred spirits," but even "those of more cold and calculating habits," who "were hurried along by the torrent" of his charm. Waverley's "desultory" (11) education has prepared him to give, in this moment, "universal delight" (209). Even with his spirits at their lowest ebb, when he is in hiding with the farmer's family after the battle of Clifton, Waverley possesses "that gentleness and urbanity which almost universally attracts corresponding kindness" (283), securing his safety. More than this, he contributes to their improvement, influencing "their simple ideas" with "his learning" – as unsatisfactory as it might have been – which "gave him consequence" with them (283).

Waverley's genius at relationships raises the question, why are readers of the novel so ready to denounce him, and to believe what the narrator says of the "evil consequences" attendant on his romance reading? In all of these interactions with other characters, Waverley embodies what the early chapter "Castle-Building" has posited: that there is a connection between heightened emotional sensitivity, a capacity for empathy, and a taste for romance. The narrator suggests the same thing when he describes Waverley listening avidly to the Baron's stories: "Edward… loved to fill up and round [them] with the colouring of a warm and vivid imagination, which gives light and life to the actors and speakers in the drama of past ages" (57). As we have seen, Waverley does not just share his imaginative sensibility with other readers but reaches out farther to see "light and life" in strangers, imagined and real, "from past ages" or other cultures. Waverley's power of imagination and taste for romance, cemented by his early reading, do not just lead him into danger: they open him to possibility; they promote connection, foster sympathy, and attract diverse, even seemingly incompatible people. Waverley is not "wavering" but flexible, with a transgressive power that allows him to be all things to all men. Scott foreshadows this function when he explains why he invented his hero's name. He did so to avoid not only literary cliché but also any kind of preconceived association: it is a name without connotations, "an uncontaminated name, bearing with its sound little of good or evil, excepting what the reader shall hereafter affix to it" (3).

Waverley occupies a unique position in the novel, as he moves unscathed between one side of a national conflict and the other. His romantic imagination gives him sympathy for both Jacobites and Hanoverians, with an insight that not even some of the novel's most admirable characters can approach. Captain Talbot, for example, proves himself to be a man of integrity and feeling, even as a prisoner impressing Waverley with his "dignity,… such a mixture of

military pride and manly sorrow" (236). Upon better acquaintance, Waverley comes to admire Colonel Talbot even more, finding him "a man of extended knowledge and cultivated taste" (246). Despite these attributes, Colonel Talbot cannot comprehend the compassion that Waverley feels for the Jacobite cause and refuses to see any good qualities in the benevolent and honourable Baron – whom he characterizes as "an intolerable formal pedant" (246) – in the kind and cultivated Rose Bradwardine – "a little uninformed thing" (247) – or in the bold, handsome Fergus Mac-Ivor – "a Frenchified Scotchman,… cunning,… proud, vindictive" (246). Waverley's politics, by this time, are the same as the Colonel's, but he still argues against prejudice and encourages imaginative identification with those we dislike or have trouble understanding: "For shame, Colonel Talbot; you swell at the sight of a tartan, as the bull is said to do at scarlet. You and Mac-Ivor have some points not much unlike, so far as national prejudice is concerned… I assure you," he continues, after Colonel Talbot disdains to acknowledge any similarity, "that you judge too harshly of the Highlanders" (262).

Other than Waverley, only the readers of the novel can acknowledge the truth of this assessment, since through his eyes we have witnessed the different qualities, good and bad, of the novel's diverse cast of characters. Waverley reveals a similarly diplomatic and generous attitude when conversing with the clergyman Mr. Morton. At the time of his capture, he is not only opposed to Mr. Morton politically – Jacobite versus Hanoverian – but religiously as well, Anglican versus Presbyterian. Even at the height of his distress, Waverley insists on extending the benefit of the doubt to a stranger: "were I to be guided by the prepossessions of education," Waverley tells Mr. Morton, "I might distrust your friendly professions in my case; but I have observed that similar prejudices are nourished in this country against your professional brethren

of the episcopal persuasion, and I am willing to believe them equally unfounded in both cases" (167). In Waverley, imaginative empathy is the enemy of prejudice in all its forms.

Motivated by this dominant quality, Waverley is the only character able to understand the real tragedy of the Scottish rebellion. He is not blinded by a victor's delight or a loser's bitterness but experiences the triumph and pain of each side. He feels the deaths of the soldier Houghton and Colonel Gardiner of the Hanoverian army as painfully as he does the execution of the Jacobite rebels Fergus Mac-Ivor and Evan Dhu. By the end of the novel, Waverley occupies a unique, liminal space, politically speaking: he has been pardoned for his treason and is an avowed Hanoverian patriot. Yet he marries Rose Bradwardine, the daughter of a steadfast Stuart ally, and remains so sympathetic to the Mac-Ivor clan that he still acts as "an adopted son of their race." He even takes on the role of "their protector… which he so amply redeemed, that his memory still lives in these glens by the name of the Friend of the Sons of Ivor" (325) – a role he performs without, it seems, attracting the ire of the Hanoverian government. In a novel full of physical, political, cultural, and linguistic barriers, Waverley traverses them all – and more or less with impunity, as the happy conclusion of the novel attests. Its final tableau is a celebratory feast at Tully-Veolan, the seat of the Baron of Bradwardine, whose Jacobite household breaks bread with the Hanoverian Colonel Talbot and his family. Waverley is responsible for this peaceful union, and he shares a bond of some fashion with everyone at the table, be they young or old, Highlander or Lowlander, Stuart or Hanoverian, soldier or scholar.

Waverley represents the kind of reader Scott wants his own readers to be. His goal in writing about Scotland "Sixty Years Since," he explains in his final chapter, has been to capture and commemorate "a race [which] has now almost entirely vanished from the land, and with it, doubtless, much absurd political prejudice; but, also, many living examples of singular and

disinterested attachment to the principles of… old Scottish faith, hospitality, worth, and honour" (340). Scott needed a character who could reveal both the "prejudice" and the "principles" of this fading national culture. Who better than a young man whose romantic reading has stimulated an eager, curious, over-active imagination that seeks the fullest possible experience? Waverley offers an example for Scott's readers to follow, not a warning for them to heed. And indeed, Waverley within the novel has begun the same kind of cultural conservation that Scott hopes the novel itself will accomplish with readers in real life. Waverley's new young English friend Frank Stanley "has been seized with a tartan fever ever since he heard Edward's tales of old Scotch manners" (339). Scott wishes to foster this kind of compassionate curiosity, and Waverley models for Scott's own readers the kind of open-minded enthusiasm required for such new experiences. Rather than admonishing the early nineteenth-century interest in romance and popular novels, Scott encourages readers to experiment – whether it involves learning to understand and sympathize with a foreign, even an enemy, culture, or embracing a new genre of hybrid literature that boldly mixes fact with fiction, history with romance.

"Read[ing] Better Books" in *Northanger Abbey*

Cherry and Waverley both gain from their stereotypically disreputable reading: not only in their happy marriages, but in their character growth. Cherry's reading prompts her to make her own opportunities to exercise her intellectual faculties and broaden her horizons; Waverley's reading prepares him, once he is out in the world, to develop good relationships with all kinds of people and bridge divides between disparate groups. In *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Austen's protagonist Catherine Morland is also a lover of novels and romance who, though she draws a good deal of scorn, derives surprising benefits from her disreputable reading. Perhaps most

unusually, however, in Catherine Austen defends the one benefit of such reading that the other novelists discussed here hesitate to champion explicitly: pleasurable reading for pleasure's sake. According to Austen, reading for pleasure does not entail "the obvious and traditional moral judgment of pleasure as something for which one must eventually pay in… spiritual terms" (Faubert and Schmid 13). Rather, it can be celebrated for "its pure existence as a 'thing' to be experienced bodily, without reflection" (13). Burney, Edgeworth, Barrett, and Scott defend pleasurable reading in a number of ways: by claiming that it is harmless or by arguing for its social, moral, or practical benefits. They might portray but they do not overtly defend the delight itself of reading for amusement, and by doing so in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen proves to be the least apologetic proponent of reading for feeling and for fun.

Catherine is even better known than her contemporaries Cherry Wilkinson and Edward Waverley as the ultimate example of the quixotic novel reader. Standard interpretations of *Northanger Abbey* agree that the novel is characterized by "a confusion of literature with reality" (Welsh 18), taking aim at "sensibility and… absorbed reading" and portraying Catherine as the "foolish female reader who cannot distinguish between forms of fiction and forms of experience" (Ferris, *Achievement of Literary Authority*, 55).[18] The narrator seems to encourage this interpretation of Catherine and her reading from the outset of the novel, joking that, "provided that nothing like useful knowledge could be gained from them, provided they were all story and no reflection, [Catherine] had never any objection to books at all" (*Northanger Abbey* 7). The narrator further implies that Catherine expects, like Cherry, to live her life as the protagonist of her own romance: although "no one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would

[18] See also Babb 88; Benedict and Le Faye xxxiv; Chaplin 200; Kelly, *English Fiction*, 121-3; Levine 340; Littau 71-6; Paulson 178; Tanner 45-8; Tave 56, 62; J. Thompson 140; Uphaus 335.

have supposed her born to be an heroine" (5), by her adolescence "appearances were mending" (7). Such a beginning encourages us to view Catherine with sardonic detachment and to anticipate her journey along the typical quixotic narrative trajectory, from mistaken reading through error and humiliation to re-education.[19]

Such expectations seem borne out by Catherine's misadventures at the Tilneys' family home, the titular Northanger Abbey, as she begins her visit there expecting to discover within its walls the same macabre trappings – secret passages, mysterious servants, haunted bedchambers – that adorn the pages of her favourite novels. When first invited to stay with the Tilneys, Catherine savours the name of their estate: "with all the chances against her of house, hall, place, park, court, and cottage, Northanger turned up an abbey" (143). Just like the heroines of her reading, Catherine is shocked at her first sight of the grand house she is to stay in. Her surprise, however, comically derives from the opposite circumstance to theirs, as her eager expectations of a forbidding ruin are thwarted by the sight of a "low" building of "modern appearance" (164) fronted by a "smooth, level road of fine gravel" and furnished "in all the profusion and elegance of modern taste" (165). The first half of Volume II continues in this satiric vein as Catherine's hunt for the sensational yields no return. She encounters a mysterious chest (167) and a sinister cabinet (173), and even detects a diabolical murder plot (192), but a rational explanation emerges to dispel the Gothic from each scenario. When her suspicions are exposed to the sensible disapproval of her love interest Henry Tilney, she is humiliated. "Dear Miss Morland," he reproves her, "what have you been judging from?" He urges her to abandon the expectations she has derived from her romance reading and, instead, "consult your own understanding, your own

[19] Karen Littau argues that "rather than creating a bond of sympathy between Catherine and her reader," this opening "creates an ironic distance to Catherine, deliberately opening up a space for readers to judge her rather than identify with her" (71)

sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you" (203). Chastened and disillusioned by this rebuke, Catherine, like Waverley on the gloomy shores of Ulswater, and like all the Quixotes before him, renounces her dream of living out the adventure she reads about: her "visions of romance were over," and she "was completely awakened" (204).

Recent critics have questioned interpretations of *Northanger Abbey* as a simple attack on romance reading,[20] but even they sometimes hesitate to clear Catherine of the charge of quixotism. Robert Miles allows that Catherine's romantic imagination "discovers resemblances between her reading and the General" (*Gothic Writing* 145) – Henry's father, who is not quite the Gothic villain Catherine imagines but who does possess the more prosaically wicked qualities of selfishness, greed, and insensitivity that are exposed at the end of the novel. Still, Miles considers Catherine "a female Quixote" who "never learns; no sooner do events chasten her fantasies, when some new object fans them to life again" (141). Such conclusions are understandable, from the narrator's prejudicial characterization of Catherine "in training for a heroine" (*NA* 7), and from her silly mistakes in the novel's second volume. But this interpretation of Catherine's character is entirely at odds with her depiction in the first volume. In the first half of the novel, Austen takes pains to illustrate that Catherine's reason is uninfluenced by the Gothic novels she reads, especially when it comes to following the bad examples set by heroines of the genre.

Catherine's first entrance into public life provides an early indication of her modesty and sense. If she intended to follow in the footsteps of a romance heroine, she might hope to be distinguished by the admiring multitude when she first sets foot in a ball room, as Cherry

[20] See, for example, Halsey 43-4; Howard 160-82, Johnson, *Women, Politics, and the Novel*, 28-48; Miles, *Gothic Writing*, 136-48; Murphy 47-52; Pearson 209-17.

Wilkinson does. As an aspiring heroine who attempts to mimic the behaviour of her predecessors, Cherry hopes that this experience will be "the most interesting moment of my life… the moment when I was to burst, like a new planet, on the fashionable hemisphere" (*Heroine* 167). Catherine, by contrast, has no such wishes for herself. Spending an afternoon primping for her first assembly, Catherine only "hoped at least to pass uncensored through the crowd. As for admiration, it was always very welcome when it came, but she did not depend on it" (*NA* 13). And indeed, the ball is disappointing – she has no one to dance with and no one to talk to besides her chaperone – yet at the end of the night, when she overhears two young men call her pretty, her spirits rebound and her humble ego is more than gratified: "she felt more obliged… for this simple praise than a true quality heroine would have been for fifteen sonnets in celebration of her charms" (16). Such an unassuming temperament is not quite compatible with that of a "true quality heroine."

Catherine similarly lacks another staple quality of a romance character, the jealous or insecure temperament that has occasioned so many tragic misunderstandings. We remember, for instance, the complications caused by the jealous baroness in M.G. Lewis's sensation novel *The Monk* (read by some of *Northanger Abbey*'s characters) when she suspects that the object of her affection loves another: "Who is she? Answer me this moment. Hope not to conceal her from my vengeance! Spies shall be set over you; every step, every look shall be watched; your eyes will discover my rival; I shall know her; and when she is found, tremble, Alphonso, for her and for yourself" (139). Austen burlesques such overreactions of the female hysterics in Gothic fiction with Catherine's very different response when she sees Henry stroll past her at an assembly in the company of another woman: "he looked as handsome and lively as ever, and was talking with interest to a fashionable and pleasing-looking young woman, who leant on his arm" (48). If

Catherine really were the suggestible reader who expects life to unfold like romance fiction, she would have made the assumption that he was "lost to her forever, by being married already" (48), which would naturally lead to her "turning a deathlike paleness, and falling in a fit on Mrs. Allen's bosom" (49). Instead, however, "guided only by what was simple and probable," Catherine "immediately guessed" this fashionable young woman "to be [Henry's] sister" (48) – and so she is.

So far Catherine's humility and good sense conflict with the suggestion that her head has been turned by her novel reading. It might be argued that although Catherine may not be egotistical, hysterical, or whimsical, her disreputable reading and deficient education have still made her naïve, weak, and unobservant, "as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is" (10). The narrator certainly laughs at Catherine,[21] but it is a mistake to read this teasing as disdain. Indeed, the narrator's playful treatment of her heroine perhaps distracts readers from the surprisingly frequent descriptions of Catherine's superlative qualities. She is, in fact, far from ordinary, possessing a range of virtues to rival any romance heroine: she is strictly truthful (68); she is principled but not obstinate (105); she is kind and good-natured (135); she displays "the real delicacy of a generous mind" (51); and she speaks with "simplicity and truth, and without personal conceit" (69). In addition, she possesses a solid, intuitive good sense that belies her youthful timidity. Although in her diffidence Catherine gives the benefit of the doubt to the obnoxious John Thorpe, the coquettish Isabella, and the disingenuous Captain Tilney, she has her suspicions of all of them, almost as soon as the reader does. In her first encounter with Thorpe, he exposes his ignorance and vulgarity through his bragging, bullying conversation.

[21] Benedict and Le Faye hypothesize that this perceived disdain is why Benjamin Crosby, the original purchaser of *Northanger Abbey*'s manuscript, never published it: "he found [the novel] disconcerting and full of mockery…The author seemed to be laughing at her characters" (xxvii).

Intimidated by his bluster, Catherine responds to him meekly, "fearful of hazarding an opinion… in opposition to that of a self-assured man" (42). But she is not deceived into misjudging him: his "manners did not please Catherine" (44), and when her brother James asks her how she likes Thorpe, her timidity prevents her from saying but not from thinking, "I do not like him at all" (45).

Catherine works harder still to preserve her esteem for Isabella Thorpe, out of loyalty to her as the first friend who alleviated Catherine's loneliness in Bath. Her thoughts about Isabella, however, are marked by hesitant qualifiers, even early on. When Catherine wants to point Henry out to her friend, in her typically insincere, self-absorbed way Isabella professes great eagerness to see him but immediately forgets this in the more interesting pursuit of her own flirtation, and Catherine "could not avoid a little suspicion at the total suspension of all Isabella's impatient desire to see Mr. Tilney" (53). Similarly, when Isabella cannot conceal her disappointment in the small sum that Mr. Morland will provide James upon marrying her, Catherine tries to overlook the avaricious implications of Isabella's distress and "endeavoured to believe that the delay of the marriage was the only source of Isabella's regret" (139). When Isabella begins her intrigue with Captain Tilney despite her engagement to James, Catherine labours to exonerate both of them. "To doubt [Isabella's] truth or good intentions was impossible," Catherine thinks, but then gives the lie to the impossibility of such doubt in her next thought, which begins "and yet" – "and yet, during the whole of their conversation her manner had been odd" (150). Although "not allowing herself to suspect her friend" – another lie to herself that she immediately exposes – Catherine still "could not help watching her closely," and "the result of her observations was not agreeable" (152). Catherine is equally disturbed by Captain Tilney's part in the dalliance. She may refer to him as "poor Captain Tilney," but she is not taken in by him: "his looks did not

please her" (152). She does not want to believe that he knows of Isabella's engagement and is still dishonourably pursuing her, but to clear him she has to deny first-hand evidence, an incriminating conversation she overhears in which his prior knowledge of the engagement is evident: "in spite of what she had believed herself to overhear in the Pump-room,… she could not, upon reflection, imagine him aware of it" (153). Catherine's hesitant circumlocutions in fact display her good nature and timidity, not her ignorance or folly.

Catherine's quarrel with her brother and the Thorpes during an afternoon walk around Bath's Crescent dramatically demonstrates her integrity and strength of mind. Catherine resists their attempts to emotionally blackmail her into breaking a date with the Tilneys in order to accommodate their own, later-formed plans, and is horrified when John Thorpe returns from cancelling on her behalf, without her consent and by lying about a previous engagement. The Thorpes are forced bodily to hold Catherine as she struggles to get away and expose the deception. No Gothic heroine's midnight escape from the clutches of an evil count is more exciting than the moment when meek, good-natured Catherine revolts at this final, most outrageous imposition. She refuses to be seduced by their wheedling or cowed by their threats, and wresting herself from the Thorpes' grip she proclaims that "if I could not be persuaded into doing what I thought wrong, I will never be tricked into it" (101). Catherine's spirit, courage, and honour in this passage would befit the most peerless heroine of the most extraordinary romance.

Catherine's qualities suggest, therefore, that she is more than a burlesque anti-heroine, a female Quixote taught to read books and the world more effectively by her older, wiser lover. Some critics read Henry as a gentle guide, a "preceptor" (Miles, *Gothic Writing*, 138) whose "kind but thorough scolding" (Benedict and Le Faye xxxviii) helps her finally to "reassess her

actions and reactions" (Littau 71).[22] Often focusing on passages that deal with Catherine's skimpy learning, other critics suggest that Henry's influence is repressive, one of the targets of Austen's attack on a patriarchal system that ensures the inadequacy of female education.[23] Indeed, Austen is bitter upon the subject. While Catherine laments her lack of knowledge about the picturesque, the narrator sardonically confides to the reader that this is "a misplaced shame," since to most men "imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms." The narrator seems to make an exception for more intelligent men like Henry Tilney, but this exception has been looped back into further criticism by the end of her sentence: there are some men, she generously allows, who "are too reasonable and too well informed themselves to desire any thing more in woman than ignorance" (112). Claudia Johnson sees Catherine as a casualty of this system whose "female speech" – under which heading, in Johnson's treatment, reading also falls – "is dictated" by Henry and others "so as to mirror or otherwise reassure masculine desire" (*Women, Politics and the Novel* 37). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar agree, arguing that the "gullible" Catherine is a powerless reader, manipulated by the men of the novel who read her into the fictional roles they desire. Gilbert and Gubar conclude that Catherine "seems at the Abbey finally to fall into literacy, to be confined in prose" (139).

Whether Henry is read as a benevolent teacher or as a sinister example of the attractive face that repressive patriarchal authority can wear, almost all critics see the relationship between Henry and Catherine as one of pedagogue to pupil: he teaches her how to read, even at a foundational level – they have recurring arguments over the importance and meaning not just of books but of words and expressions – and her re-education culminates in a renovated world view

[22] See also Kiely 126, Levine 340, Litvak 348, Pearson 210, Tave 56.
[23] See, for example, Gilbert and Gubar 134-6; Johnson, Introduction, xiii-xv, xvii; Johnson, *Women, Politics, and the Novel* 36-9; Sedgwick 833-4; Sulloway 198; Wilt 146-51.

that privileges “the anxieties of common life” over “the alarms of romance” (206). This hierarchical configuration of their relationship is not compatible, though, with the independence and integrity that Catherine has displayed. Refiguring her rapport with Henry as one based on generative debate rather than intellectual dominance fits better with both their abilities and generosity as readers.

Interpretations that stress Catherine’s intellectual subservience to Henry can find passages in *Northanger Abbey* to support such a position. Midway through the novel, the narrator explains Catherine’s growing feelings for Henry in these superlative terms: “it was no effort to Catherine to believe that Henry Tilney could never be wrong. His manner might sometimes surprize, but his meaning must always be just” (115). And indeed, on certain topics, such as the picturesqueness of Bath, Catherine deplores her own ignorance, voluntarily adopting Henry’s more experienced perspective as her own (112-3). This deference, however, is not a consistent feature of Henry and Catherine’s relationship. She frequently departs from her stated belief in his infallibility both before and after she privately acknowledges her growing affection for him. When Catherine and Henry are first introduced during an assembly at Bath’s Lower Rooms, she feels all the good luck of meeting such a charming, gentlemanlike young man whose arch manner intrigues if it also bemuses her. Yet even as she is pleased and interested by this first meeting, Catherine registers a resistance to Henry: “[she] feared, as she listened to [Henry and Mrs. Allen’s] discourse, that he indulged himself a little too much with the foibles of others” (21).

Such resistance, apparent before Catherine begins to fall in love with Henry, is still in evidence even after her feelings grow and she devotedly decides that he “could never be wrong.” Take, for example, the exchange in which she explains to him her newly-learned love of

hyacinths and he makes some airy comments about the importance to women of an interest in flowers, since it will get them out-of-doors more often than they are usually inclined to go (178). Gilbert and Gubar see Catherine's reply to Henry's glib generalization as meek and ignorable: "she is left quietly to protest that 'Mamma says I am never within'" (139). Catherine's response is in fact much more robust than this reading acknowledges. Before she can speak up Henry has already changed the subject, but she changes it back again to refute his statement about women's disinclination for fresh air. Her refutation, moreover, is not contained in a mere six words ("Mamma says I am never within"). These words rather conclude a fuller assertion of the enjoyment she has always received from being outside, insisting that "I do not want any such pursuit to get me out of doors. The pleasure of walking and breathing fresh air is enough for me, and in fine weather I am out more than half my time. Mamma says, I am never within" (*NA* 178). There is nothing in this passage, either, to indicate that Catherine's protest is made "quietly," as Gilbert and Gubar characterize it. This adverb suits their reading of Catherine as meek and browbeaten but does not accurately reflect the gist of her speech, which reveals a willingness to disagree with Henry despite her admission of his supposedly supreme wisdom. Her defiance is most apparent in their exchanges about reading and writing, as they discuss letter-writing, journal-keeping, the definitions of words, and the value of different books.

The first such conversation occurs during Catherine and Henry's initial meeting at the assembly, when they are seated at tea. While most critics read Catherine as the straight woman to Henry's comedian, she reveals the glimmerings of her own sense of humour in her responses to Henry's stereotypical jokes about ladies' journal-writing habits. His dismissive treatment of the

subject has given offence to some critics on Catherine's behalf,[24] but their indignation seems superfluous as Catherine both encourages and contradicts Henry's teasing. After prompting him to advance various possibilities for her hypothetical journal entries, Catherine arrests his flow of wit with the mischievous suggestion (which she never finally confirms or denies) that "perhaps, I keep no journal" (19). Catherine is then the one to change the tone of the conversation when Henry facetiously suggests that women always write better letters than men. Catherine becomes more serious, sincerely pondering the validity of this observation. Despite beginning in jest, Henry seems moved by Catherine's gravity to utter his first serious remark, uninflected by irony: "in every power, of which taste is the foundation, excellence is pretty fairly divided between the sexes" (20). This conversation demonstrates both Catherine's assertiveness in the face of Henry's provocative wit and Henry's growing respect for Catherine as an interlocutor. And it is with Henry's egalitarian pronouncement – that men and women are equals in matters of taste – that their first tête-à-tête concludes.

Henry and Catherine's second extended conversation furthers the democratic nature of their relationship as it adopts, at the outset, the characteristics of a debate. Spending time with Catherine at a ball, Henry calls into question the "definition of matrimony and dancing" (74) by drawing an analogy between them, and Catherine disputes the point. The two appear to be more at odds in this scene than in the previous one, as each adheres more closely to his or her natural inclination. Henry cleaves to his tongue-in-cheek analogy, and the more literal Catherine to her sense of the insurmountable differences between marriage and dancing. Yet even as they are firm

[24] Gilbert and Gubar argue that "[Henry] claims to worry about the poor figure he will make in her journal, and while his ridicule is no doubt meant for the sentimental novels in which every girl covers reams of paper with the most mundane details of her less than heroic life, such ridicule gratuitously misinterprets (and confuses) Catherine" (138-9). See also Johnson's *Women, Politics, and the Novel* 37.

in their own points of view, both acknowledge the legitimacy of the other's position, and the conversation alternates evenly between the two speakers. Henry remarks of Catherine's objections, "taking it in that light certainly, their resemblance is not striking; but I think I could place them in such a view." He may be teasing, but he is still willing to engage and convince, rather than overrule or dismiss. Catherine echoes Henry's polite concessions, admitting "Yes, to be sure, as you state it, all this sounds very well; but still they are so very different" (74-5). This mixture of allowance and refutation persists until the debate ends in a draw when Henry tactfully changes the subject. The rest of their conversation retains the form of a friendly dispute, as they disagree over how long and for whom Bath continues to be interesting and over the merits of living in the country. There is nothing of the coarse obtuseness or selfish misconstruction that John Thorpe and Isabella bring to their disagreements with Catherine.

The reciprocity of this open-minded discourse is most interestingly demonstrated during Henry, Eleanor, and Catherine's walk around Beechen Cliff – most interesting, because it is so often interpreted as the opposite, as an example of Henry using his superior education and facility with language to reform Catherine's feeble ignorance. At times Henry's authority certainly seems to dominate. Catherine is more than usually self-deprecating, not believing that Henry would enjoy novels as much as she does since "they are not clever enough" (107) and eagerly absorbing his lecture on the picturesque, in which, as the narrator describes with amusement, "his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in everything admired by him" (112-3). Henry seems to cement his authority by seizing upon Catherine's inaccurate use of words, which he does three times. According to Johnson, "because Henry dictates the parameters of words, the kind of control he exercises extends to thought itself" (*Women, Politics, and the Novel* 38). But it is through these very challenges to Catherine's use of

language that she gradually begins to find her own intellectual footing. First, Henry criticizes her vague use of "amazingly" as an imprecise amplifier, and Catherine, presumably overpowered by Henry's voluble speech following his criticism, makes no response (108). Next, Henry mocks her slangy application of "nicest," but here she makes her own defence: "'I am sure,' cried Catherine, 'I did not mean to say anything wrong; but it *is* a nice book, and why should I not call it so?'" (109). Though this is not a very sophisticated rebuttal, it is nevertheless a response to Henry's correction and marks Catherine's finding her own voice, of which she makes excellent use in the ensuing discussion with Eleanor about the genre of history.

Scholars often use this conversation against Catherine as further proof of her poor reading habits, since she does not enjoy anything so instructive as history. But her objections, we discover, are intelligent and droll, and for the first time we get a sense that Austen herself might be speaking through Catherine, as she occasionally seems to through Henry or the narrator. Austen's own "History of England" was a parodic response to the famous eighteenth-century work of the same name by Oliver Goldsmith, and takes issue with many of the qualities of history writing that Catherine also attacks. Catherine dislikes reading about "the quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention" (110). In this protest Catherine expresses her own point of view more fully and more firmly than she has yet done, and with a wit that suggests she has benefited from her reading, despite its elision of history. And indeed, here we discover that Catherine's reading is more extensive than critical fixation on her taste for Gothic novels allows. She may disdain history, but in addition to novels she acknowledges that she also enjoys "poetry and plays, and things of that sort, and do[es] not dislike travels" (109).

Reflecting this broader taste, Catherine keeps an open mind when listening to Eleanor's defence of history's merits. Though she does not concede her own opinion, Catherine admits the validity of others – retaining, all the while, her playful tone. "You are fond of history!" she exclaims, "and so are Mr. Allen and my father; and I have two brothers who do not dislike it. So many instances within my small circle of friends is remarkable. At this rate, I shall not pity the writers of history any longer" (110). This clever and amiable exchange demonstrates that Catherine is not really out of her intellectual depth when conversing with the Tilneys. The discussion also seems to fortify her, for when Henry makes his final challenge to her diction in mocking her use of "torment" as a synonym for "instruct" (111), she finally fully engages with him. In their earlier discussion about dancing versus marriage, Catherine had difficulty departing from her ideas of literal truth to engage with Henry's humorous analogy. Here we see a developed sophistication in Catherine's thinking, as she transcends the literal to propose a figurative link between instruction and torment. Henry meets her halfway, abandoning his persistent mockery to engage seriously with her point. Finally, he suggests a compromise that Catherine willingly accepts: if instruction is a torment, he offers, it is a necessary one (111). This exchange marks a shared interest in challenging, amusing discussion where each can question the other's reading without belittling it.

By denying the didactic function of the novel's courtship plot, we can approach Catherine's reading at other points in the novel from a fresh perspective. For if Henry is not the ultimate authority over Catherine's developing judgement, what are we to think of the undeniable errors she makes on the strength of her Gothic reading experience, and the chastisement she seems to earn from him for her runaway imagination? Critics who have granted Catherine a measure of sense are often careful to distinguish between her actions in the first and

second volumes. Benedict and Le Faye argue that although she "has no delusions about herself" when she is socializing in Bath, once Catherine leaves Bath for a place with such Gothic potential as Northanger Abbey, she becomes convinced that "the world around her must contain the spotless heroines, ferocious villains and terrifying mysteries she has so far encountered only in books" (xxxviii). Claire Grogan similarly contends that Catherine "does not read life as though it were a romance while she is in Bath" because it is in keeping with her limited life experience. "Problems arise at Northanger," by contrast, because Catherine is transplanted into a romantic setting – or a setting rife with romantic potential, at least – and so her expectations too are transplanted from the real to the fantastical. Her reason too weak to resist such a shift, Grogan says, "[Catherine] interprets events and people's actions according to the novels she has read" (20). It is unconvincing, however, that Catherine's good sense, which has been proven time after time in the first volume and over the course of her relationship with Henry, should break down in such a dramatic way. As with the previous epiphanies examined in this chapter, too much stock has been put in Catherine's apparent revelation in which she declares to herself that "the visions of romance were over" (204). Just as the narrator's mocking treatment of Catherine distracts from her superior qualities, this epiphany – an anticipated event as a convention of the quixotic reader's reformation – distracts from the powerful benefits of pleasure and insight that Catherine's Gothic excesses provide her.

Northanger Abbey defends the pleasure of novel reading in general, and Gothic reading in particular, on several fronts. Through Catherine, this defence has been largely negative. Just as the authors discussed in Chapter 1 did, Austen takes pains to show, as Katie Halsey says, "that Catherine's judgement has not been ruined by her reading" (44). Indeed, Catherine preserves not just her native common sense but also her moral rectitude and pleasant disposition, even as an

ardent consumer of Gothic fiction. Elsewhere in *Northanger Abbey,* Austen is more explicit than any of the other novelists previously discussed. Every scholar of fiction is familiar with *Northanger Abbey's* famous defence of the novel, when the narrator interpolates a two-page diatribe to argue that novelists are "an injured body" and that "no species of composition" more than novels "has been so much decried" (30) – decried unfairly, since they are works "in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which 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" (31). The narrator's examples of such brilliant works are all realist, domestic, or sentimental fiction: Frances Burney's *Cecilia* and *Camilla,* and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*.

No justification is made here of lighter reading, but Henry Tilney offers one midway through *Northanger Abbey*, this time with Gothic examples: "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. 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 end the whole time" (108). Henry's claim that people who do not like novels must be "intolerably stupid" is embodied in that rude clown John Thorpe. According to Thorpe, the only novels worth reading are *Tom Jones* and *The Monk,* which presumably interest him for their notoriously ribald content, and he disparages the works of Frances Burney – "such unnatural stuff!" – on the basis of his xenophobia: "as soon as I heard she had married an emigrant, I was sure I should never be able to get through [*Camilla*]" (43). As with the aspersions cast on novels by the unpleasant crone from *The Heroine*, Thorpe's criticism constitutes an effective vindication of that literary form.

Henry's description of his experience with *Udolpho* reminds us of Gothic fiction's original purpose: to entertain through affective pleasure. Henry delights in a book that has his "hair standing on end" (108). Catherine loves nothing more than to revel in "the luxury of a raised, restless, and frightened imagination over the pages of Udolpho" (46). In her defence of the novel, the narrator argues for the value of this kind of amusement: novels are important not just because they can showcase "the greatest power of the mind," but because they are "productions [that] have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world" (30). Austen gives us an example of the kind of benefit that can be derived from such harmless pleasure when Catherine rejects Isabella's suggestion that she will become despondent if Henry Tilney forgets her. "You should not persuade me that I think so very much about Mr. Tilney," Catherine gently admonishes, "for perhaps I may never see him again…, but while I have Udolpho to read, I feel as if nobody could make me miserable" (34). Her Gothic reading fortifies her against rather than increases her susceptibility to emotional turmoil.

Why then, are we so quick to censure Catherine when she seeks the same harmless, pleasurable thrills from her pseudo-Gothic surroundings as she does from her Gothic reading? When Catherine arrives at the Abbey and is disappointed by meeting with no "long, damp passages,… narrow cells," or "ruined chapel," when her "hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun" (143-4) has been quashed, she makes the most of the lamentably ordinary reality she encounters and invents her own Gothic adventures. The language with which Austen describes Catherine's approach to the mysterious chest and the sinister cabinet is telling: she advances with "fearful curiosity" and "impatience" upon items "so well calculated to interest and alarm" (168). When she discovers the secret manuscript (which

turns out to be bills for washing), she "eagerly" seizes its pages "to enjoy the luxury of their perusal" with "a greedy eye" (176). The "luxury" of gratifying "fearful curiosity" and "impatient" "alarm" at the Abbey is described with the same language of pleasure that Austen has previously used to depict Catherine's enjoyment of Gothic fiction – "the luxury of … a frightened imagination" (46).

Austen also uses the same language to describe both Catherine's reactions to the anti-climactic debunking of each "Gothic" discovery and her reactions to being identified as a novel reader. When Catherine discovers that the mysterious chest in her room merely contains bed sheets, she experiences a "blush of surprise," and Eleanor's discovering her in the act contributes to her "rising shame" (169). Her embarrassment increases when she realizes that the strange manuscript she has found in the cabinet is actually a linen bill: "she felt humbled to the dust" (177). Her humiliation peaks with Henry's discovery and censure of her apprehensions about his father. After his reproof, "most grievously was she humbled. Most bitterly did she cry" (204), and she believes that "she must ever blush to have entertained" such suspicions (206). The pain of Catherine's embarrassment convinces her, at the time, that it is merited, and perhaps this unhappiness is what also convinces critics that Austen is censorious of Catherine's romantic predilections.

But notice the similarity between Catherine's feelings of repentant shame in these instances, and those she experiences as a novel reader. She has internalized the cultural disdain for novel reading that *Northanger Abbey* combats, and could be a model for the young lady that the narrator sympathetically describes in her defence of the novel who is caught *in flagrante de-libro*: "'And what are you reading, Miss— ?' 'Oh! it is only a novel!' replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame'" (31). Like this

young lady, when Catherine asks John Thorpe if he has ever read *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and he replies that he has better things to do, she is "humbled and ashamed" (43). She later parrots this dismissive attitude to Henry and Eleanor in her suggestion that novels "are not clever enough" and "gentleman read better books" (107). It takes all of Henry's assurances to the contrary for Catherine to begin to surmount what Austen portrays as another "misplaced shame" (112). Why should we be ashamed to enjoy reading what can give us harmless pleasure, Henry and the narrator ask? By using the same language to describe Catherine's delight in and then shame over both novel reading and Gothic fantasizing, Austen prompts us to ask the same question about her escapades at the Abbey. Why should Catherine be ashamed of seeking a little Gothic excitement from a harmless cabinet or manuscript?

From Henry's point of view, Catherine's error is in allowing her Gothic imagination to extend beyond her personal enjoyment: in suspecting General Tilney of murdering his wife, she betrays her own judgment and impugns the General's reputation. Catherine makes no such illogical leaps in the first volume, and, as we have seen, critics like Benedict and Le Faye and Grogan have argued that the difference in her behaviour is linked to location. The Gothic novel has no serious influence on Catherine while she is immersed in the mundane social reality of Bath; she becomes vulnerable to her melodramatic inclinations only when she succumbs to the romance of living at an Abbey (despite its regrettably modern appearance). There is another, more important difference between Catherine's actions in Bath and at the Abbey, however. In Bath, Catherine's judgement is usually in conflict with her romantic taste. Despite her familiarity with romance conventions – the respect and awe due to heroines upon their public appearance, or their hysterical sensitivity when neglected by their suitors – Catherine's common sense prevents her from expecting the unwarranted admiration of strangers or from irrationally pining over

Henry Tilney. When Catherine's judgment seems to surrender to the influence of romance in her suspicions about General Tilney, this capitulation is not because her imagination overcomes her reason but because the two, for once, coincide. Catherine's Gothic fantasy provides a framework through which to understand General Tilney's true iniquity, and indeed, male iniquity more generally.

Young, unworldly, and female, Catherine is accustomed to deferring with the utmost respect to masculine authority, as we have seen in her earlier thoughts about John Thorpe:

> Little as Catherine was in the habit of judging for herself, and unfixed as were her general notions of what men ought to be, she could not entirely repress a doubt, while she bore with the effusions of his endless conceit, of his being altogether completely agreeable. It was a bold surmise, for he was Isabella's brother; and she had been assured by James, that his manners would recommend him to all her sex; but in spite of this, the extreme weariness of his company…induced her, in some small degree, to resist such high authority, and to distrust his powers of giving universal pleasure. (63)

Austen's portrayal of Thorpe is almost cartoonish, so obvious does she make his loathsome qualities, and humour lies in the discrepancy between her unflattering characterization of him and Catherine's tentative accumulation of timid disclaimers and qualifiers: she is "little…in the habit of judging," has "unfixed… notions" about men, entertains doubts "not entirely" repressed, can "resist" the "high authority" of her brother's judgment only in "some small degree," and concludes, with hesitant understatement, that she can only "distrust" – though she cannot bring herself to deny outright – "[Thorpe's] powers of giving universal pleasure." Yet the truth at the core of this passage is far from comic. Programmed more effectively in the gender norms of middle-class nineteenth-century England than *Pride and Prejudice*'s Lydia, Catherine is used to

deferring to masculine authority, even of a man as odious as Thorpe – an authority doubly enforced here by his being at once a man and a friend of her beloved brother (whose own powers of discrimination yet prove far worse than hers, despite his higher claim, as an older man, to rationality). Because Thorpe never listens to a word Catherine says, she has no real means of resisting him or exercising her own judgment the way she does with Henry.

The same powerlessness initially directs Catherine's encounters with General Tilney. After her first visit with the family at their Bath residence, Catherine wonders why, when she left, "it had been a release to get away from [the General]… It could not be [his] fault. That he was perfectly agreeable and good-natured, and altogether a very charming man, did not admit of a doubt, for he was tall and handsome, and Henry's father" (131). Again, the humour of a man being "perfectly agreeable and good-natured" not for his personality or conversation but because he is "tall and handsome" and someone's father somewhat obscures the grim truth that Catherine's reaction to the General reflects the day's standards. There is nothing surprising in a young woman more willing to doubt her own senses and experience than to think ill of an attractive, respectable, older man. The novel's readers, especially today's readers, have the distance and freedom to recognize the General, in his irascibility, his self-absorption, and his avarice, as the ordinary scoundrel that he is. Restricted by the mores of the patriarchal culture in which she has been raised, Catherine's difficulty in coming to this same conclusion is understandable. Her solution to the problem is creative. She is able to accept her instinctive and merited dislike of the General only by deciding that he must have been a vicious husband and even a murderer in the style of *Udolpho*'s nefarious Montoni: "Catherine attempted no longer to hide from herself the nature of feelings which, in spite of all his attentions, he had previously excited… His cruelty to [his wife] made him odious to her. She had often read of such

characters" (185). Until this point she has been "hiding from herself" the dislike that his unpleasant behaviour "had previously excited" – her feelings are not created but merely justified by her outlandish conclusion.

By shifting into the Gothic register, where handsome, respectable men are habitually villains in disguise, Catherine can account for an antipathy that has more legitimate roots than she is able to acknowledge. As Johnson observes, "Gothic novels teach the deferent and self-deprecating Catherine to do what no one and nothing else does: to distrust paternal figures" (*Women, Politics, and the Novel* 39). General Tilney's subsequent behaviour demonstrates that Catherine's suspicions were not so farfetched after all. Thinking her an heiress, he invites her to stay with his family at the Abbey to promote her match with Henry. When he discovers her relative penury, he evicts her from the house without explanation, sends her on the long journey home without accompaniment or proper funds, and forbids his children from ever seeing her again. His behaviour, while not violent or illegal, is so shocking as to defy credibility – Maria Edgeworth wrote in a letter to her aunt that this neglect of "the common civilities which any bear of a man not to say gentleman would have shewn is quite outrageously out of drawing & out of nature."[25] This very implausibility brings the General closer to the infamy of Gothic villains than Henry, in chastising Catherine for her suspicions, would have thought possible.

Indeed, Henry experiences an epiphany about his father that mirrors Catherine's earlier humiliating revelation, and that proves more accurate than hers. When he has to explain to her the extent of the General's perfidious actions, he "was almost as pitiable as in their first avowal to himself. He blushed for the narrow-minded counsel which he was obliged to expose" (236). Catherine, meanwhile, realizes that she need not have blushed quite so profoundly when Henry

[25] Maria Edgeworth to Margaret Ruxton, 21 February 1818.

upbraided her for her dark imaginings about the General. In one of the novel's most famous lines, she concludes that "in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (236). This comic exaggeration again only partially conceals the truth of her assessment: she was right to dislike and be wary of the General as he posed a real threat to her safety and happiness, demonstrating that a little Gothic suspicion may usefully temper the placid docility expected of an average young woman. As Johnson has argued, Austen "revalu[es] Gothic fiction as figural rather than literal representation that illuminates and dignifies the ambiguous distresses, dangers, and betrayals of ordinary life" (Introduction xxiii).

By the end of the novel, Catherine's rewarding relationship with Henry and the revelation of the General's wickedness have taught her not to distrust but to put more faith in her reading. The opposition between Gothic novels and the "better books" that she imagines gentlemen must read proves to be a false dichotomy. Like Cherry's, Catherine's romance reading allows her to transgress some of the limitations and defy some of the stereotypes that bound women readers in the early nineteenth century. Her Gothic reading helps to refine her understanding of human nature and to put faith in her own judgement over that of gentlemen who hide their flaws behind the mask of respectability afforded by their gender and class. And like Waverley's, Catherine's romance reading helps her to connect with others – to build friendships upon both shared tastes and divergent opinions. Unlike either of these two other characters, however, Catherine is also portrayed, positively, in the act of enjoying her reading. Grogan notes that *Northanger Abbey* can be read in a multiplicity of ways, as a "burlesque," a "parody," or a "*bildungsroman*;" as having primarily "feminist sympathies" or "economic preoccupation[s]," or as making a "socio-historical commentary" (22). But it can also be read, Austen encourages us to remember, for fun.

According to the novelists discussed above, and to Austen in particular, lighter reading can be surprisingly instructive, but the fact that it is also simply enjoyable is not the least of its benefits.

Afterword: The Futures of Unconventional Reading

A portrait of Jane Austen adorns the new British ten-pound note issued on 14 September 2017, with a quotation from *Pride and Prejudice* accompanying her image: "I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading!" Not as straightforward as it might appear, this statement is, however, one with which Austen and her contemporaries Barrett, Burney, Edgeworth, Scott, and Shelley would certainly agree. These Romantic-period novelists embraced the affective intensity of absorbed or pleasurable reading, portraying it sometimes as a harmless pleasure in itself but also, often, as a means to foster not just empathy but open-minded community and even self-improvement. Taken as a group, these authors provide what seems to be the first collective *positive* response in Western culture to the abundance, variety, and emotional stimulation of unconventional reading. Looking forward, it behoves us to ask, were they also some of the last? Do their affirmative portrayals of such reading persist beyond their time, or was this response of its moment, a topical but transient movement generated to oppose contemporary fears of literary excess? And how are we, as readers today, affected by their response?

To begin answering these questions, we might look at one of the best-known misreaders of the later nineteenth century, the titular heroine of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). We learn that "when she was fifteen, Emma [Bovary] spent six months breathing the dust of old lending libraries," devouring "novels [that] were solely concerned with love affairs, lovers and their beloveds, damsels in distress swooning in secluded summerhouses, postilions slain at every posting-house, horses ridden to death on every page, gloomy forests, wounded hearts, vows, sobs, tears, and kisses" (34). Pejorative in its implication that such novels are both narrow and clichéd – "solely" concerned with certain tired motifs repeated "on every page," from work to

work – this list conjures the litanies against romance and sentimental reading in British fiction from more than fifty years earlier: Elizabeth Bonhôte's concern in 1796 about readers "forever thinking of enchantments, castles, ghosts, and dying lovers, assassinations, flowery vales, temples, or summer houses" (4:55), and Walter Scott's determination in 1814 to disappoint readers who hope *Waverley* will contain "a profligate abbot, an oppressive duke,… black cowls, caverns, daggers, electrical machines, trap-doors, and dark lanterns,… a heroine with a profusion of auburn hair, and a harp, the soft solace of her solitary hours" (3-4). Nurtured by her reading, Emma Bovary's penchant for such trappings of romance seems to limit her understanding and corrupt her taste. She cannot appreciate her secure but mundane middle-class existence or the quiet devotion of her husband, a kind if pedestrian country doctor who is nothing like the heroes she has read about: Emma "tried a few times without success to ignite a spark of passion in her heart" for him, but she is "incapable… of believing anything that did not manifest itself in conventional form" (40).

Dorothee Birke contends that this portrayal of Emma Bovary has made her "the most famous quixotic reader in nineteenth-century European fiction" (129), a dubious honour that many critics have confirmed. Ian Watt compares her explicitly with Don Quixote, asserting that, thanks to her reading, her "conception of reality" is "equally distorted," and that "she is mistaken, not about sheep and windmills, but about herself and her personal relationships" (205).[1] In the trial prosecuting Flaubert for subverting public morality with *Madame Bovary*, his attorney defended the novel by arguing that it is "a classical case of a cautionary tale" (Birke 141) – a racier version of Charlotte Lennox's *Female Quixote* or Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, but still meant to demonstrate the evils that result from a woman's

[1] See also, for example, Littau 72-74, Huyssen 44-49, Felski 80-87.

unchecked, affective, irreligious reading (Birke 141-2). The court evidently found this claim convincing, and Flaubert was cleared of all charges. *Madame Bovary*'s preoccupation with "the dangers of particular ways of reading" (Felski 83) might indicate that Romantic-period fears about the same dangers were perpetuated widely and well into the nineteenth century. There is an alternative to this interpretation, however, suggesting that, despite her unhappy ending, Emma Bovary may have more in common with powerful, positive quixotic readers such as Barrett's Cherry Wilkinson or Austen's Catherine Morland than with the deterrent examples of Lennox's Arabella or Hamilton's Julia Delmond.

In his introduction to Flaubert's novel, Malcolm Bowie acknowledges that the author "seems to imply" that "if Emma had read better books, and read them better," she would never have fallen into "her advanced delusional state" (xvi). He goes on to argue, though, that "Flaubert's criticism of poor reading habits does not in fact take him very far in this direction," and that "if Emma behaves self-defeatingly in her choice of reading matter… and is rather contemptible in her taste for far-off things, she is altogether admirable in her creaturely self-assertion" (xvii). Bowie maintains that Emma's reading-based fantasies are valiant, aspirational attempts at self-fashioning, and that Flaubert does not invite his reader to judge them but to identify with them, as indeed he does himself: "Flaubert is too self-conscious an artist," Bowie reasons, "to miss the points of comparison between his own calling as a novelist and the plot-making in which Emma indulges" (xix), and this sympathy should influence the way we read Emma and her reading. Flaubert demands an "imaginative absorption" that means we will find ourselves "wincing, cringing, or laughing aloud at [his] performance" but that also means we are alive to the "emotional texture" of Emma's own readerly imagination and absorption (xviii).

Bowie's characterization of the novel locates Flaubert in the tradition of Austen, Barret, Burney, Edgeworth, Scott, and Shelley. Flaubert too is interested in the profound effects of immersive, emotional reading, and he too complicates a "cautionary tale" about its risks by exploring the richness and urgency of the spirit that uses such reading to reach beyond the stifling confines of convention or humdrum reality. These novelists depict and encourage us to respond to their passionate reading characters, and in doing so they help us examine how complex our pleasure in narrative is, how it shapes our relationships with others and our very sense of self. This issue is important to Romantic-period novelists, and the fact that it remains important to Flaubert, who has been called "the founding father of modernism" (Felski 80), suggests its continuing relevance to the novel as literature evolved through the nineteenth century and beyond.

Such an affirmative response to such unregulated reading is more relevant today than ever, as the digital age reconfigures our relationship to texts of all kinds. The anxiety of those Romantic-period writers who feared the "too-muchness" of their bookish age might be more familiar to today's critics who see an equal but opposite problem in our own changing times: that we are afflicted with a reading "not-at-allness." Rather than concern about *what* people are reading, there is widespread worry about whether people outside of academia are reading anything, when leisure hours can more easily be filled with television, film, Netflix, YouTube, Facebook and countless other forms of electronic entertainment. Caleb Crain recently published an article in the New Yorker entitled "Why We Don't Read, Revisited" – a follow-up piece to his 2007 article, "Twilight of the Books." The figures he cites tracking decreases in time spent reading are discouraging, and he grimly prognosticates that "the long march to secondary orality," a post-literate stage of society theorized by Walter Ong, "seems well under way." Crain

also admits, however, that the ultimate implications of such self-reported statistics, particularly those tracking internet use, are unclear. People today might be diverted from reading by distractions, the number and nature of which would have horrified the Romantics – but people today also have access to both an abundance of reading material and a variety of readerly communities that the Romantics could never have imagined.

Digitized publications made available on the internet are increasing levels of access to literature around the world. Book clubs and reading groups are no longer confined to homes, coffee houses, or even physical spaces, as they connect virtually in chat rooms and on message boards. Websites post fan fiction of all kinds and quality, aspiring authors can self-publish while still reaching a broad audience, and YouTube channels abound where spoken-word poets perform, and other writers read their work aloud. Audiobooks and e-readers allow people to read more easily while they commute, exercise, and even work. Twitter, the social media platform which limits posts to 280 characters (roughly the length of three lines of text on this page), has given rise to a new literary form, micropoetry. The website Goodreads, which allows users to search catalogues of titles, to rate books, post reviews, and get recommendations, to form discussion groups and mailing lists, and to track publications by author or genre, has gone from 10 million members in 2012 to 75 million members at the time of this writing.[2]

The true significance of such modern reading communities and forms, and the way today's writers are responding to them as the Romantics did to the products of their own "reading revolution," remains to be determined. My own response is guided by the fact that, for Romantic-period reading, it was the optimists and not the alarmists who were ultimately justified. Anyone, particularly scholars of literature after 1800, would acknowledge today that

[2] Membership numbers taken from Kellogg, and "About Goodreads."

"ephemera" such as newspapers, periodicals, and novels did not ruin literature and its readers as many critics feared it would but accomplished just the opposite, enriching and shaping the progress of Western culture and society. By taking heart from this, and modelling ourselves upon the generous, playful, and passionate readers in Romantic-period fiction, we might, as they did, derive both benefit and pleasure from the developments that are transforming our own reading culture.

The new Austen ten-pound note is a microcosmic example of, and an opportunity for, this kind of reading. The very decision to put Austen on England's national currency is a testament to her continuing popularity with readers of all stripes. The Bank of England Governor Mark Carney explains that "Austen's novels have a universal appeal and speak as powerfully today as they did when they were first published" (Shaw). But when the note was unveiled, there was an outpouring of indignation – not from Austen opponents but from Austen admirers,[3] a reaction that also attests to the feeling with which readers still relate to her and her work. These fans vociferously objected to the quotation on the note which, in the context of *Pride and Prejudice*, is not a sincere affirmation of the pleasures of reading but a blatant piece of hypocrisy uttered by the scheming Caroline Bingley, who is trying to ingratiate herself with Darcy. The moment after she declares there is no enjoyment like reading, Miss Bingley drops her book and her charade, casting about for something more interesting to do. One aggrieved Austenite complained on Twitter, "Dear @bankofengland, why disrespect Jane Austen with a quote from a detestable character who despised reading? In poor taste. #janeausten200."[4]

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[3] See, for example, Ahsan, Pemberton, Sweeney.
[4] Omar Moore, @popcornreel, *Twitter*, 18 July 2017, 8:32 am, https://twitter.com/popcornreel/status/887334312789594113.

I admire this reader's vehement response because his hostility does not negate his enthusiasm, nor his willingness to engage with others about his reading in a public forum. His somewhat limited reading of the quotation, and the banknote situation more generally, could, however, be productively and amusingly opened out. It is not unreasonable, for example, to perform a straight reading of the quotation from the novel: Caroline Bingley might not believe in the enjoyment of reading, but Austen certainly did. For other enthusiasts of Austen and her sly, mocking humour, a different view of the quotation and the situation presents itself: Austen might feel amused, rather than "disrespected," that years of bureaucratic planning and effort on a national scale to honour her literary contribution culminates in such an ironic misread of a non-reader's false praise of reading. As another Twitter user speculates, "Austen, the queen of irony, would have loved it."[5] The fullest understanding of the Austen quotation, and of the public furore it caused when it appeared on England's currency, takes all these possibilities into account. These layers of multiple meanings suggest that as we continue to explore the reader's relationship with reading – whether today or in other eras, enacted in life or represented in literature – we might derive the most comprehensive insight by reading both situations and texts in the way Romantic-period novelists have shown us: with an eye to various interpretations, with pleasure, with feeling, with flexibility.

[5] Deborah, @debsbed, *Twitter*, 18 July 2017, 1:31 pm, https://twitter.com/debsbed/status/887409638001528832.

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