NORTHANGER ABBEY AND JANE AUSTEN'S CONCEPTION OF THE VALUE OF FICTION

BY JOHN K. MATHISON

Although the explicit passages on the value of novels in Northanger Abbey have been frequently commented on, opinion differs concerning how seriously one is to take them. For the most part critics doubt that Jane Austen meant her readers to accept seriously her assertion that the novel is the literary form "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." ¹

Disregarding her words for the moment, one might attempt to analyze Northanger Abbey to ascertain what Jane Austen was attempting in the work in which the words appear, and to discover whether the intention in Northanger Abbey is similar to that in her other completed novels. Northanger Abbey appears to be the best place to begin such an analysis, not only because the passages on novels occur in it, but because it repre-


For the attitude of critics to these passages, see Mary Lascelles, Jane Austen and Her Art (Oxford: The University Press, 1939), Andrew H. Wright, Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), and Elizabeth Jenkins, Jane Austen, a Biography (London: Gollancz, 1938). Mr. Wright and Miss Lascelles both warn against taking the praise of novels literally, arguing from external evidence. It is for this reason, in part, that I wish to try to establish Jane Austen's view of the value of the novel from seeing whether her intention in works corresponds to the claims made in these passages. I do not feel that the ridicule of Mrs. Radcliffe, mentioned by Mr. Wright and Miss Lascelles, is relevant. She cites as good novelists Fanny Burney and Richardson in the same pages. Miss Jenkins casts doubt on the passages by reminding us of Jane Austen's own enjoyment of The Spectator, depreciated in these same pages in contrast to the possible values of novels.

'Northanger Abbey'
sents her earliest work after the juvenilia, written at the period in the author’s career when explicit statements of intention, as well as the effort to embody them closely, are to be expected; it contains, also, much satire on novels of the day, and I believe that it can be shown to be similar in plan and theme to the other completed novels. We need not adopt any attitude to the often quoted remarks until after the attempt to derive Jane Austen’s critical theory from Northanger Abbey as a whole, and from parallels between it and the other novels. It is the nature of the novel that makes the statements exaggerated, joking, ironic, or serious.

Whatever value Northanger Abbey may have as an exemplification or revelation of the more than momentary critical beliefs held by its author depends on similarities between it and the rest of the author’s work. For this reason I should like to list briefly as a starting point some features which all the novels share. In each of the novels we are introduced to a heroine in some way or ways immature, one who has not yet become the person she is inherently capable of becoming, and who has, judging from the circumstances in which she is found, a good chance of failing ever to develop into a person genuinely adult. With each, the immaturity is the consequence of the failure on the part of parents, or those in the place of parents, and of the environment. One need only to allude to the feeble hypochondriac, Mr. Woodhouse, and Emma’s compliant governess, “poor Miss Taylor”; to Mr. Bennet, to Lady Bertram and Sir Thomas; to Sir Walter Elliot and Lady Russell, or to Mrs. Dashwood, to indicate that failure on the part of parents has been a chief cause of the immaturities of the heroines.3


4 The most remarkable feature of the heroines is the way each grows. The comment of M. E. Prior on Shakespeare’s heroes is applicable to the heroines of Jane Austen: “There is a reciprocal relationship between character and action, so that the character is continually being revealed by the course of the action and the action, in turn, is continually being restricted and governed by revelations about the character which increase the probability of subsequent episodes. It is for this reason that a précis of one of the tragic heroes is so sterile and that the results of the familiar ‘character analysis’ of our schooldays seem to bear so distant and naïve a relationship to the original” (“Character in Relation to Action in Othello,” MP, XLIV [1947], 223).
Since the parents usually accept uncritically the prevailing attitudes of their time and place, one can say that they are specific instances of the general environment.

In spite of the obstacles, each of Jane Austen's heroines does mature. A possible exception is Fanny Price of Mansfield Park, although Jane Austen intends the reader to believe that Fanny has become an adult, that she has seen the world objectively, and has made a choice of life intelligently. That, in one case out of six, there may be a partial failure in achieving the intention does not alter the nature of the intention. The special difficulties in Mansfield Park are finely treated by Joseph M. Duffy, Jr. ("Moral Integrity and Moral Anarchy in Mansfield Park," ELH, XXIII [1956], 71-91.)

It is a character's achieving maturity that makes her a heroine. For, to achieve genuine understanding of oneself and the world is difficult, as we are reminded in the novels by seeing how few of the characters have done so or ever will. Of those who fail there appear to be two groups: those who have the inborn qualities necessary to the achievement, and those who lack these. In the first group, Mr. Bennet is a man with a good mind, but because of a youthful infatuation and the consequent pressure of circumstances he took lifelong refuge in irresponsible irony and incurs much of the blame for the difficulties and failures of his daughters. The most promising daughter, Elizabeth, might have become merely another Mary Crawford. And Mary is a fine example, among those with remarkable potentialities, of the failure to mature. 4 Her failure is more easily understandable than the rare successes of the heroines. Lady Russell is another who we feel should be a mature woman, but, for reasons to which Jane Austen alludes, is not (e.g., her marriage to a man only a knight and her consequent deference from young womanhood to the Elliots and their views). What is always clear is that even with good endowment, it is hard to achieve maturity.

4 See Virginia Woolf's mention of Mary Crawford: "She [Jane Austen] lets her rattle on against the clergy, or in favour of a baronetage and ten thousand a year with all the ease and spirit possible; but now and again she strikes one note of her own, very quietly, but in perfect tune, and at once all Mary Crawford's chatter, though it continues to amuse, rings flat. Hence the depth, the beauty, the complexity of her scenes" ("Jane Austen," The Common Reader [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925], p. 201).
Numerous others, the majority, lack the initial equipment. Harriet Smith of Emma, such middle-aged specimens as Catherine Morland’s chaperone, Mrs. Allen, and the latter’s old friend, Mrs. Thorpe, or Mrs. Jennings, kindhearted and genuinely valuable to Marianne though she is, could never have risen to a clear, articulate grasp of the world. The books are full of these major and minor characters of limited capacities and endowments, from the offensively stupid such as Sir Walter Elliot to others like Charlotte Lucas, who is in many ways attractive and agreeable.

Perhaps most remarkable is that in maturing, each heroine remains an individual. The mature people are not all alike: there is no stereotype of maturity. The fulfilment of her own nature makes each heroine more fully her unique self (one is tempted to say of each one, in the language of Gerard Manley Hopkins, that she has achieved “inscape”); and the individuality is more noteworthy because of the similarities in social position that could be expected to result in likeness.

Although in comparison to the other novels, Northanger Abbey has been slighted by recent critics, it does share these

5 “Compliments on good looks now passed; and, after observing how time had slipped away since they were last together, how little they had thought of meeting in Bath, and what a pleasure it was to see an old friend, they proceeded to make inquiries and give intelligence as to their families, sisters, and cousins, talking both together, far more ready to give than to receive information, and each hearing very little of what the other said. Mrs. Thorpe, however, had one great advantage as a talker, over Mrs. Allen, in a family of children; and when she expatiated on the talents of her sons, and the beauty of her daughters,—when she related their different situations and views,—that John was at Oxford, Edward at Merchant-Taylors’, and William at sea,—and all of them more beloved and respected in their different station than any other three beings ever were, Mrs. Allen had no similar triumphs to press on the unwilling and unbelieving ear of her friend, and was forced to sit and appear to listen to all these maternal effusions, consoling herself, however, with the discovery, which her keen eye soon made, that the lace on Mrs. Thorpe’s pelisse was not half so handsome as that on her own” (V, 32, ch. iv).

6 Mr. Wright says, “Northanger Abbey’s delight lies principally in the amusing parody which it presents” (Jane Austen’s Novels, p. 102); Mr. Mudrick considers that Jane Austen “sets for herself her first mature novelistic problem” in Sense and Sensibility, following Northanger Abbey’s completion (Jane Austen, p. 60); and Miss Lascellles finds in it a lack of unity of conception characteristic of early work (Jane Austen and Her Art, p. 64). All these writers tend to separate Northanger Abbey from the other novels. The later works are certainly greater, but I believe Northanger Abbey does nonetheless embody the same theme as the later ones, and shows her attempting a work of the same nature.
qualities I have been mentioning with the other books. Catherine Morland, notably immature at the beginning, makes progress toward maturity, not without setbacks, during the novel, and is on the threshold of true adulthood at the end. Her achievement, like those of the other heroines, would seem at first unlikely to the reader. There are genuine obstacles in her way, as well as necessary aids, some of which appear obstacles. The reader feels a sense of triumph in Catherine's accomplishment, as he does in Anne Elliot's, Emma's, Elizabeth's Bennet's. What an analysis of Northanger Abbey will show about Jane Austen's beliefs concerning the nature and value of the novel would be confirmed by her other works.

To set out to make a girl like Catherine Morland achieve emotional and intellectual adulthood convincingly was a difficult undertaking. For Catherine has the least reason for dissatisfaction with her original situation, or impulse to change or develop, of any of the heroines. All the others had some reason to desire change. But Catherine is at first just a nice girl, as we might say. In adolescence she is not particularly pretty, nor is she interested in "improving" herself, but she is very pleasant. Everyone is glad to have her around, although some laugh at her naiveness, her ignorant, innocent honesty.

Furthermore, she is aware of no problems. She is too young to worry about failure to secure a husband. With her brothers and sisters she has a happy home life,* and above all, in contrast to the other heroines, she has very pleasant, happy par-

* "She never could learn or understand any thing before she was taught; and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid.... Her mother wished her to learn music; and Catherine was sure she would like it, for she was very fond of tinkling the keys of the old forlorn spinnet; so, at eight years old she began. She learnt a year, and could not bear it;--and Mrs. Morland, who did not insist on her daughters being accomplished in spite of incapacity or distaste, allowed her to leave off. The day which dismissed the music-master was one of the happiest of Catherine's life. ... Writing and accounts she was taught by her father; French by her mother: her proficiency in either was not remarkable, and she shirked her lessons in both whenever she could" (V, 14, ch. i).

* The following lines, describing Catherine's return home, characterize her home life: "Happy the glance that first distinguished Catherine!--Happy the voice that proclaimed the discovery!—But whether such happiness were the lawful property of George or Harriet could never be exactly understood" (V, 233, ch. xxix).
ents, although not ones with a strong impulse toward developing Catherine's powers. A person in such easygoing, happy, undemanding circumstances may easily fail to grow up, becoming less delightful with the passing years, but for a number of reasons, including the reading of good and bad novels, Catherine does grow up. In the growth of Catherine, we see Jane Austen's technique and intention, her theory of the value of novels.

For Catherine to develop she must be removed from her home, and this necessary step is accomplished in a manner both plausible and unexciting. She is taken for a visit to Bath by a childless couple, good friends of her family: "Mr. Allen, who owned the chief of the property about Fullerton, the village in Wiltshire where the Morlands lived, was ordered to Bath for the benefit of a gouty constitution;—and his lady, a good-humoured woman, fond of Miss Morland, and probably aware that if adventures will not befall a young lady in her own village, she must seek them abroad, invited her to go with them. Mr. and Mrs. Morland were all compliance, and Catherine all happiness" (V, 17, ch. i). Although all the "adventures," in Bath are held to the probable and normal, these expectable and outwardly trivial events, both pleasant and unpleasant, work together toward educating Catherine. Jane Austen introduces nothing "dramatic" for the divertissement of the casual reader, as her admired predecessor, Fanny Burney had done, but sets out to show that the kinds of events that normally take place in the life of a young girl of Catherine's position may be sufficient both for the maturing of the heroine, and for the subject of a novel.

Catherine receives the essential help, witting and unwitting, from a number of new acquaintances. There are the Tilneys, of whom she is helped positively by Henry and Eleanor—Eleanor as an ideal and Henry as a critic through his lively ridicule of her speech, ideas, and taste in reading—and General Tilney and Captain Tilney—the first as a puzzle who forces her really to think, and the latter as a bad example, who teaches her to discriminate: not all people even in a nice family need be nice. She begins gradually to see people as they are, not as they are officially classified in society, and to frame her own standards of human merit. Not only the Tilneys but another

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family of new acquaintances helps her. At first she is well disposed to the Thorpes, who as friends of Mrs. Allen must be proper people. Isabella strikes her as brilliant, completely informed about the world, and of very good principles. The study of Isabella, and the penetration of her façade, teach Catherine much. She learns much also from Isabella’s brother John: there are evil motives she could never have suspected. In the key of routine, daily life, not of heroic tragedy, he exemplifies the “motiveless malignity” attributed to Iago, and irresponsibly causes serious but useful suffering for Catherine.

The complete cipher, her chaperone Mrs. Allen, unintentionally achieves much. Unable to rely on Mrs. Allen, Catherine must struggle to puzzle out answers to the problems which the brave new world of Bath has presented to her. One of the biggest crises in the earlier part of the novel occurs over an invitation to take a walk with the Tilneys. This commonplace event, like similar ones throughout *Northanger Abbey* and throughout the other novels, provides a real basis for growing insight leading to maturity, because the heroine has the capacity to make good use of it. The episode begins with an unpremeditated invitation from Miss Tilney for a rural walk near Bath. A problem develops because the appointment, casual at first, soon becomes both uncertain and definite: “At twelve o’clock, they [Miss Tilney and Henry] were to call for her in Pulteney-street — and ‘remember — twelve o’clock,’ was her parting speech to her new friend” (V, 80-81, ch. x). On the other hand, Eleanor had made the equally clear condition that if the weather were bad, the walk would be automatically postponed without further communication. As it turns out, the day is almost rainy. Although it becomes apparent by twelve-thirty that the afternoon will be clear enough for the walk, the Tilneys have not called for Catherine half an hour after the set time.

At this point the Thorpes appear and try to talk Catherine into a drive, including a visit to an old Castle (a plan dear to Catherine because of her recent reading of Gothic novels). Learning that she is expecting the Tilneys, John Thorpe, previously mentioned for his trivial motiveless malignity, says that he has seen Henry drive out of town with a “smart-looking girl” (V, 85, ch. xi). Disappointed in her apparent desertion by the Tilneys, and tempted by the castle, Catherine accepts
the Thorpe's invitation. As they drive off, she sees the Tilneys approaching, and they see her, but Thorpe deliberately "lashed his horse into a brisker trot" (V, 87, ch. xi). Catherine is grievously distressed at her appearance of rudeness and its probable consequences, knowing now that the Tilneys had started out as soon as the weather permitted. Throughout, Mrs. Allen has been of less than no use, only adding to Catherine's inability to know whether to accept the Thorpes' invitation, or to wait for the Tilneys. At the point where Catherine has the least idea of what she ought, or wants, to do, Mrs. Allen tells her to do "just as you please, my dear" (V, 86, ch. xi).

Catherine is subsequently able to explain her action to the Tilneys, but of more immediate importance is her insight into the folly of her chaperone, and her realization that there are people—John Thorpe—who derive pleasure from promoting general ill will among friends. When the plan of the rural walk is revived for another day, the Thorpes again try to interfere, since they have plans which require Catherine's presence. She refuses to join the Thorpes, whereupon John Thorpe runs off to the Tilney's house and makes her excuses to them anyway. Catherine is appalled. No longer indecisive, no longer asking Mrs. Allen what to do, she runs to the Tilney's, rushes into the house without being announced and breathlessly explains. "Her explanation, defective only in being—from her irritation of nerves and shortness of breath—no explanation at all, was instantly given. 'I am come in a great hurry—It was all a mistake—I never promised to go—I told them from the first I could not go.—I ran away in a great hurry to explain it.—I did not care what you thought of me.—I would not stay for the servant'" (V, 102, ch. xiii).

Catherine's experiences show her that people need not be what they seem, that Isabella, who had formerly dazzled her, is actually "ungenerous and selfish, regardless of every thing but her own gratification" (V, 98, ch. xiii). Even her own brother's urging (he has arrived in Bath, intending to marry Isabella Thorpe) has no effect on her opinion or decision. To his remark, "You once were the kindest, best-tempered of my sisters," "'I hope I am not less so now,' she replied, very feelingly; 'but indeed I cannot go. If I am wrong, I am doing
what I believe to be right” (V, 100, ch. xiii). Mrs Allen’s feebleness and Catherine’s growing perceptions have forced her to reason and decide independently.

Later, when Isabella is engaged to marry James, Catherine has a clear understanding of Isabella’s motives and well-grounded doubt that the match could be successful. Still later, when the match is broken off, she is able to confirm her conjectures about Isabella’s motives. And, of course, confirmation of correct analyses is as valuable for her mental development as later understanding of early mistakes and their causes.

The complicated episode of the Tilney walk is only one of the numerous situations through which Catherine is weaned from dependence on others and moves toward objective understanding. Before she had had the opportunity to see behind Isabella Thorpe’s façade, however, Isabella was able to contribute importantly to Catherine’s education by introducing her to the delights of fashionable fiction. True, Catherine had read some standard eighteenth-century novels previously, and Isabella’s favorites had negligible value as criticisms of life. It seems odd that Jane Austen’s defense of the novel should use Gothic novels as its major exhibit, and those parts of Northanger Abbey relating to the Gothic stories have been thought mere incidental, or topical satire. But Jane Austen, with her liking for doing difficult things, has chosen to argue that even bad novels may be valuable.

To the reader of Northanger Abbey it becomes abundantly clear that the trashy horror stories supplied by Isabella were educationally useful to Catherine, if only because of the difficulties and confusions in which they involved her, nor can it been seen how the work of the “nine-hundredth abridger of the History of England,” or an anthology of “some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior, with a paper from the Spectator, and a chapter from Sterne” (V, 37, ch. v) could have done as much.

*Miss Lascelles contrasts Northanger Abbey with Sense and Sensibility as follows: “Thus, the burlesque element in Northanger Abbey has a pretty intricacy and variety. Its strands are ingeniously interwoven with one another—but not so well woven into the rest of the fabric. . . .

“Now, the mockery of the world of illusion in Sense and Sensibility has not this pretty intricacy, and variety of pattern, but it is subtler, more allusive, and it is more closely interwoven with the fabric of the story” (Jane Austen and Her Art, p. 64).
even though readers of novels are often ashamed, and a young girl found reading the abridged history or the anthology would have shown off the volume as a mark of her culture. The latter would have provided Catherine with slight materials for polite conversation; the novels, even Gothic ones, provide her a measuring-stick to use on her friends and acquaintances.  

How does the addiction to Gothic horror and mystery make Catherine more aware of reality and thus contribute to her achievement of maturity? First, she enjoys them so much that their attitude toward life becomes hers; she is transplanted into a new world and sees everything with new eyes, and grasps it with an altered mind. Of course, her new glasses contain extremely distorting lenses, but in Fullerton she had merely accepted her world without reflection as do the undeveloped characters like Mrs. Allen. And the pleasure itself is good: her enjoyment makes her more fully alive and capable of various experiences. Second, in the course of her travels, the preposterousness of the Gothic view of things is inescapably borne in upon her. She must reject the Gothic as she had rejected her first valuation of the Thorpes, and what she arrives at in her rejection of the Gothic can not be mere unthinking return to adolescence but an advance to a truer view of society. Third, since Isabella is an enthusiast for Gothic novels and scorns the major eighteenth-century works, Catherine comes rightly to connect Isabella's shallowness with her interest in Gothic novels only. Fourth, perhaps most important, the Gothic novels make Catherine aware of her own ignorance and follies. She sees, after her blunders at Northanger Abbey through interpreting the world in Gothic terms, how absurd she herself is and, despite

10 The use of the "classics" in Catherine's world is made clear in the discussion of her education: "From Pope, she learnt to censure those who bear about the mockery of woe."

"From Gray, that
  'Many a flower is born to blush unseen,
  'And waste its fragrance on the desert air.'"

"From Thompson, that
  —— 'It is a delightful task
  'To teach the young idea how to shoot.'

"And from Shakespeare she gained a great store of information—amongst the rest, that
  —— 'Trifles light as air,
  'Are, to the jealous, confirmation strong,
  'As proofs of Holy Writ.'" 

(V, 15-16, ch. i)
experience, continues to be. As Catherine and Henry Tilney approach Northanger Abbey, he describes it, we recall, in such a way as to make her exclaim, "Oh! Mr. Tilney, how frightful!—This is just like a book!" (V, 159, ch. xx) The mere arrival at the abbey, so different from Henry's teasing description, should have cured Catherine of her Gothic fancies, but since she is presented as a normal human being, her immaturity and false judgment can survive more than one blow.

Very shortly afterwards, she is convinced that an old chest in her room contains mighty secrets, but is interrupted by the arrival of dinner time from discovering them. At bed time she contrasts this abbey with "normal" ones: "How much better to find a fire ready lit, than to have to wait shivering in the cold till all the family are in bed, as so many poor girls have been obliged to do, and then to have a faithful old servant frightening one by coming in with a faggot!" (V, 167, ch. xxi)

In spite of all evidence that Northanger is not an abbey like those in books, Catherine becomes fascinated with a cabinet that must contain a manuscript, rises from bed, gets the cabinet open, finds some papers in it, and simultaneously through awkwardness extinguishes her candle. When she is able to study the manuscript the next morning, it is, of course, revealed as a bundle of laundry lists, with a few other household notes. "She felt humbled to the dust. Could not the adventure of the chest have taught her wisdom? A corner of it catching her eye as she lay, seemed to rise up in judgment against her. Nothing could now be clearer than the absurdity of her recent fancies. To suppose that a manuscript of many generations back could have remained undiscovered in a room such as that, so modern, so habitable!—or that she should be the first to possess the skill of unlocking a cabinet, the key of which was open to all!" (V, 173, ch. xxi)

But the three items, the abbey itself, the chest, and the cabinet, cannot cure Catherine overnight. Subsequently she invents a character for General Tilney. Superior to the Mrs. Allens of the world, she needs a hypothesis to explain so curious a person, but the Gothic stories lead her for the time to a very false one. She comes seriously to believe that either he has murdered his wife, or else that her death and funeral were "supposititious," and that Mrs. Tilney is now living confined in

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a dungeon under some part of the abbey. And she tries to make architectural calculations about the possible location of the dungeon. To relieve Catherine of the charge of immoderate stupidity, one might allude to Charlotte Bronte’s presentation of the relation of Rochester and his wife. Henry finally discovers her theories: “‘If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly words to—Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. . . .’”

“They had reached the end of the gallery; and with tears of shame she ran off to her own room” (V, 197-198, ch. xxiv). Catherine, still a young girl, is on the road to a critical, judicious attitude toward people. General Tilney’s real, but modern and plausible, villainy subsequently continues her education.

Fifth, most likely to be overlooked is that the Gothic tales hold an element of truth. Lionel Trilling (The Opposing Self, p. 207) observes in a passing allusion that Catherine’s belief that life is violent and unpredictable is truer than the reader’s belief that it is sane and orderly. With her experience of Gothic fiction, Catherine was better able to accept the possibility of such behavior as General Tilney’s throwing her out of his house, when he erroneously comes to believe that her family is poor, than so intelligent a man as Henry Tilney himself, or even some critics of the novel. Why General Tilney’s conduct, considering his abject devotion to money and rank, intensified by his explicitly presented unimaginative military rigidity, should be thought unbelievable is hard to say, and Miss Elizabeth Jenkins has effectively defended Jane Austen’s portrayal (Jane Austen, a Biography, 1938, pp. 138-139).

From the Gothic novels, Catherine had come to believe in the possibilities of cruelty, violence, and crime that her sheltered life had shown her no signs of. The forms of cruelty and violence in the Gothic novels were unreal, but cruelty and violence do exist in the well-ordered society of the English midlands. Amazed and amused at Catherine’s fabrication of General Tilney’s domestic past, based on what would be expectable in the Gothic world, Henry had said to her:

What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the
probable, your own observation of what is passing around you—
Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws
connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known,
in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on
such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighborhood of
voluntary spies; and where roads and newspapers lay every thing
open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?
(V, 197-198, ch. xxiv)

Absurd as were Catherine’s provisional hypotheses, her own
understanding and observation, which Henry recommends her
using, have rightly made her suspicious of General Tilney, and
have been alerting the reader from his first appearance, prepar-
ing the reader and Catherine for the actual cruelty and tyranny
he does finally display.

In Northanger Abbey, then, what has Jane Austen done?
She has made us witnesses of the education of a young girl.
In revealing the growth of Catherine Morland (how different
would a character sketch of Catherine be, based on the facts
at the beginning of the book, from one based on what she is
at the end) she has made the reader, as well as Catherine,
consider what is important, what trivial, what admirable, and
what detestable in life and behavior. In making Catherine
become aware of true values, she has helped the reader do the
same.

She has also shown what a good novel can and should be, by
giving us a specimen of one in sharpest contrast to the foolish
popular fiction of her (or any) time. The charges against
fiction made by people who say “I never read novels” have
been refuted: her novel, with no sensationalism, no unreality,
no sentimentality, is no escape from life, but as she said that
a novel could be, an illumination of it.

Sir Philip Sidney considered “poetry” the best teacher be-
cause it was able to provide ideal characters, noble specimens
of what “ought to be.” Jane Austen considers the novel a
better teacher than history or essays on different grounds, that
it cuts through the surface of things to what is. She allows
Catherine to learn how futile or even harmful parents and
guardians may be, that social position has little to do with
worth of character, that cruel acts may be performed by proper
people. She has revealed not only the foibles of society (in
such characters as Mrs. Allen) but grave faults in such characters as John and Isabella Thorpe and General Tilney.

Antithetical to Jane Austen's claims for fiction and to her solution to the problem of its value, hinted to her no doubt by the greater novelists of the eighteenth century, is a critical passage in the preliminary pages of The Heart of Midlothian. Scott's mouthpieces, the young lawyers, speak as follows:

"The inventor of fictitious narratives has to rack his brains for means to diversify his tale, and after all can hardly hit upon characters or incidents which have not been used again and again, until they are familiar to the eye of the reader, so that the development, enlèvement, the desperate wound of which the hero never dies, the burning fever from which the heroine is sure to recover, become a mere matter of course. I join with my honest friend Crabbe, and have an unlucky propensity to hope when hope is lost, and to rely upon the cork-jacket, which carries the heroes of romance safe through all the billows of affliction."...

"The end of uncertainty," he concluded, "is the death of interest; and hence it happens that no one now reads novels."

"Hear him, ye gods!" returned his companion. "I assure you, Mr. Pattieson, you will hardly visit this learned gentleman, but you are likely to find the new novel most in repute lying on his table,—snugly entrenched, however, beneath Stair's Institutes, or an open volume of Morrison's Decisions."

"Do I deny it?" said the hopeful jurisconsult, "or wherefore should I, since it is well known these Dalilahs seduce my wisers and my betters? May they not be found lurking amidst the multiplied memorials of our most distinguished counsel, and even peeping from under the cushion of a judge's armchair? Our seniors at the bar, within the bar, and even on the bench, read novels; and, if not belied, some of them have written novels into the bargain. I only say, that I read from habit and from indolence, not from real interest; [Italics mine]. . . . But not so in the real records of human vagaries—not so in the State Trials, or in the Books of Adjournal, where every now and then you read new pages of the human heart, and turns of fortune far beyond what the boldest novelist ever attempted to produce from the coinage of his brain." (Rinehart Edition, 1948, pp. 10-11).

Scott's solution, as the continuation of the passage and his novels themselves make clear, was to depend on historical fact for the serious aspect of his novels. The fictional form is a concession to popular taste; the worth of the novels depends on the historical facts contained in them, on what is learned about the historical struggles and conflicts of the Scottish people. In
contrast, Jane Austen demonstrated that fiction could be true and genuine in the same way that Aristotle in his day had argued that tragedy and epic were true, when he said that poetry was more philosophical than history in that it treated not particular accidents but, arriving at general truths on the basis of sufficient observation, represented not merely the possible but the probable.

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