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Female Quixotism Refashioned: *Northanger Abbey*, the Engaged Reader, and the Woman Writer

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Though there are certainly many examples of gently parodied male quixotes in eighteenth-century letters and life, from Henry Fielding's Parson Adams to Horace Walpole's depiction of himself as a reader, the figure of the female quixote seems almost exclusively associated with uncritical, overly absorptive novel reading.¹ A 1798 essay, "On the Reading of Novels," in *The Monthly Visitor and Pocket Companion* sums up contemporary anti-novel discourse with its contention that most novels "have a tendency to mislead the mind, to enfeeble the heart, to represent nature in improper colours, to excite, rather than to suppress, in the young and ardent, romantic notions of love, and to lead the unwary amidst the winding mazes of intrigue, and the flowery fields of dissipation." Furthermore, "females, in general, are the most inclined to peruse them, and from a fatal inattention to their education, they are the most likely to fall victims to their baneful insinuations."² Such anti-novel discourse was so widespread by the end of the eighteenth century as to be a cliché.

Yet women wrote most of the female quixote characters in later eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novels. At this time when novels were considered a primarily feminized phenomenon, however problematically, women writers had important stakes in legitimating the act of absorptive reading, the reading of novels, and women's reading in general. Professional writers keen to have their books read, whether for fame, profit, or both, were invested in the kind of reader who could both lose herself in the text and distance herself from the intellectual incapacity such absorbed reading purportedly caused. Examining the deployment of the female quixote as a significant mark of literary professionalism, I argue that women who were avowed readers of prose fiction and professional novelists created complex quixotic fictions in recognition of the novel's power. The figure of the female quixote proved particularly poignant

for those writers who courted absorbed readers on the one hand while countering stereotypes about women's critical failings on the other. I contend that by reifying the specter of the professional writer's need for absorbed readers and dramatizing the occasion by which the woman writer demonstrates her own authority, the figure of the female quixote paradoxically becomes the means by which both woman novel reader and woman novel writer can claim intellectual authority.

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) has been cited as both participating in the dominant ideological construction of the female quixote via Catherine Morland and offering a bold innovation: a defense of novels and novel-reading heroines. Reading *Northanger Abbey* in conjunction with several contemporaneous works reveals that accepted notions of female quixotism have often been oversimplified and that the rhetoric of Austen's famous novel defense already had some purchase by the late 1780s. Exploration of the intertextual play between commentary on novel reading in the emergent genre of fashion magazines, Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline* (1788), Henry James Pye's *The Spectre* (1789), and Austen's *Catharine, or the Bower* (written 1792) and *Northanger Abbey* (written 1798–99, and revised in 1816)³ reveals a counter discourse in defense of women's novel reading, even as it is figured as a type of quixotism. The engaged but ultimately discerning woman reader emerges as an ideal in response to the dangerously absorbed, anti-social female quixote. *Northanger Abbey* puts this discourse to work, introducing a female quixote only to break down gendered binaries between good and bad reading, and require that its own readers understand references to a range of cultural touchstones including novels and other fashionable pursuits of the day. While most critics have acknowledged that *Northanger Abbey* avoids moralistic clichés surrounding Gothic novels and other fashionable pastimes, what remains to be clarified are the productive associations between absorbed reading and female knowledge. Though many eighteenth-century readers and modern scholars alike have focused on the means of *curing* the female quixote, Austen's fiction, in particular, shifts the focus away from reforming the heroine. For Austen, quixotism models how engaged fiction reading initiates socialization and subsequently functions both to enable and emancipate the increasingly overdetermined and intertwined categories of women's reading and women's writing.

Northanger Abbey anticipates a reader intimate with not only the conventions of Gothic and sentimental novels but also the fashionable periodical press, which took pains to make productive associations between novel reading and women's intellectual advancement as it began to flourish in the first decade of the nineteenth century.⁴ An 1806 "Extract of a Letter from a German Lady to her Friend," published in John Bell's *La Belle Assemblée: or Court and Fashionable Magazine*, claims that it is "inevitably necessary that women should read Novels, notwithstanding what has been said by professed moralists on that subject. It is true, they preach in the desert." The author recommends novels for their

ability to deter women from less worthy pastimes such as “cards, scandal, and the toilet,” striking increasingly familiar notes on the ways in which novels illustrate “mild and noble sentiments . . . and even awaken in their minds some sparks of philosophy.” Perhaps most significantly, the letter emphasizes how novels “give an elevated zest to their imagination,” thus encouraging the sort of absorbed, imaginative reading that had hitherto been characterized as so damaging to women.⁵

An imitator of *La Belle Assemblée* that sought to appeal to both men and women, *Le Beau Monde, or, Literary and Fashionable Magazine*, links literature and fashion productively in its very title.⁶ An 1809 essay on “Novels and Novel Writing” states that “Perhaps more difference of opinion exists, with respect to the degree of merit which ought to be ascribed to them, than on any other subject: as some people condemn them all alike indiscriminately, while others contend that more useful information may be conveyed through the medium of a novel than by any other means.”⁷ While in 1786 Pye lamented that women could not read novels *without* great absorption, blaming in particular “the influence [of] a serious attention to scenes of imitated passion,”⁸ this writer argues that cursory readers of novels do not have adequate knowledge for assessment, calling to mind John Thorpe’s inability to read Frances Burney’s *Camilla* to the end: “we have not here noticed that class of readers, although we believe they are the most numerous, who seek only for amusement in a novel, . . . we do not consider that they read with sufficient attention to form any opinion on the subject.” Attentive, discriminating novel reading accompanied by reasonable assessment informs critical opinion worthy of notice, while novel detractors are told that if they would read,

a few of our best novels, they would find that whether they sought for morality, wit, humour, or feeling, a correct delineation of society or manners, or a less elevated description of simple nature, they would find them there personified with greater accuracy, and in a style better calculated to secure their effect on the mind of the general reader, than could be met in the best histories, or the most celebrated treatises the world ever produced.⁹

The language not only echoes Samuel Johnson’s *Rambler* No. 4 on fiction’s didactic value stemming from its ability to delight, but also Austen’s valuation of novels over rehashed histories and literary compilations. Thus we see the strains of an emerging ideology that characterizes novel reading as beneficial to readers for reasons beyond moral instruction.

Characterizations of women readers within the pages of novels also fueled the debate about the utility of novel reading. In its depiction of a heroine who refuses to read novels, Smith’s *Emmeline* adopts the conservative perspective of novels as toxic to further a more radical critique of women’s limited access to economic opportunities. Separated from her feckless husband in 1787 after

twenty years of marriage and the births of twelve children, Smith made no secret of the pain she suffered trying to support her family through her writing. Because of her dependence on publishing success, it is not surprising that Smith, already an established poet by the time she turned to novel writing in 1788, also wrote to her publisher that she was particularly sensitive to “the taste of the modern world.”¹⁰ *Emmeline* appeals to readers with nearly every popular trope of the late eighteenth century in terms of character, setting, and plot: exquisitely sentimental females, excessively foolish ladies of fashion, conniving villains, insensible aristocrats, faithful servants, and even an illegitimate baby; sublime scenery marked by stormy seas, deep-dark forests, and crumbling castles; a deadly duel and an abduction.

The novel also includes an array of reading women—each of Smith’s female characters reads something either to her great improvement or detriment. The heroine’s early education has been fostered by the lucky discovery of a moldy library. She manages to recover a few books so that she can pass her time reading “Spenser and Milton, two or three volumes of the Spectator, an old edition of Shakespeare, and an odd volume or two of Pope . . . together with some tracts of devotion.”¹¹ When a coarse housekeeper introduces Emmeline to novels, they prove to be utterly inadequate for her cultivated mind. We are told she “could not beguile [her sorrows] by attending to the fictitious and improbable calamities of the heroine of a novel, which Mrs. Garnet probably forgetting to restore it to the library of some former mistress, had brought down among her cloaths, and which had been seized by Emmeline as something new, at least to her.”¹² Here novels are portrayed as contraband, the guilty (because stolen) pleasure of the serving class that should be engaged in more productive labor, and the rightful domain of the aristocratic, who alone have time for such frivolous reading.

Smith establishes Emmeline’s intelligence in contrast to those who plot against her. Ultimately, Emmeline’s birthright is discovered, she gains her lawful inheritance, and she marries—the conventional ending of the sentimental novel—but not before she resists multiple marriage matches as a means to maintain herself. Emmeline likens marriage to “selling her person and her happiness for a subsistence” and hopes to “earn my bread by honest labour.”¹³ One of the novel’s villains voices the fear that learned women may gain economic independence when he protests “against Emmeline for affecting knowledge—‘It is,’ said he, ‘a maxim of my father’s . . . that for a woman to affect literature is the most horrid of all absurdities; and for a woman to know anything of business, is detestable!’”¹⁴ Of course, a professional female writer like Smith *did* know something of both literature and business. Given her own very real economic exigencies, Smith carefully characterizes Emmeline as an anti-quixote while mercilessly exploiting sentimental conventions to highlight her bitter indictment of marriage and, paradoxically, the devaluation of women’s intellectual labor.

Yet Smith was also an avid reader of a wide range of texts. Samuel Egerton

Brydges characterizes her as just the sort of rabid reader a writer could wish for, one who “did not read as a task; nor according to any regular system, which may be more proper for common faculties, but devoured with eager eyes, every book, which fell in her way; an indulgence that enlarged the sphere of her observation, and extended her powers. It did not tend to make her, in the pedantic sense, a learned woman; but surely it tended to make her something much better.”¹⁵ Though his comments suggest that he harbors a distrust of “learned” women, Brydges does indicate that Smith’s reading contributed to a wider perspective on society. It made her, he argues, “something better” than a pedant—a better writer and observer of the human condition. Notably Brydges characterizes ardent reading as a legitimate means to attain human understanding, even while the sense of women’s reading as an “indulgence” creeps into his rhetoric.

Like Austen’s juvenilia, Pye’s first novel, *The Spectre*, published anonymously, directly responds to *Emmeline* and prefigures *Northanger Abbey*’s oft-cited defense of novels. Both Pye’s and Austen’s characters invoke *Emmeline* as a means to deploy remarkably similar commentary on female novel reading. Pye’s scene proceeds for almost forty pages, pitting the respected Dr. Andrews and the lively Lucy Sackville against the earnest and upright Sir Edward Lawson in a debate as to whether or not *Emmeline*, which in its sympathetic depiction of a “fallen” woman anticipates Smith’s more resolutely political novels, promotes virtue or vice. The clergyman, Dr. Andrews, sings the praises of *Emmeline* and “the reading of novels” for “giving the young female mind a general taste for reading, which will naturally lead it to become acquainted with the best modern writers.”¹⁶ Sir Edward presents the conventional anti-novel stance, citing the “trash, with which the modern press so perpetually teems” as tending to “vitiate the taste, inflame the passions, and give the ductile imagination of youth impressions of mankind totally unfounded on reason and nature.”¹⁷

Pye had promoted Sir Edward’s position just a few years prior in *A Commentary Illustrating the Poetic of Aristotle*, cited earlier here, but in his unsigned epistolary novel, which might appeal to a broader audience, Pye deploys the Aristotelian debate format. Both interlocutors are esteemed men (Lucy writes the letter and supports Dr. Andrews but speaks very little), leaving readers free to form their own alliances. Further, the novel’s preface nods toward Sir Edward’s stance when warning that we will find *criticism* of *Emmeline*, but wraps this comment around otherwise pro-novel-reading exposition, including an apology for “the criticism which I have introduced on the moral tendency of *Emmeline*.” The more well written a “performance” is, the preface contends, the “stronger the necessity for marking its defects,” effectively separating Smith’s text from Sir Edward’s sweeping assessment of novel “trash.”¹⁸ Yet the preface introduces these comments only after providing a defense of novel reading:

I cannot say I am of the opinion that so much harm arises to young minds from the reading of novels, as some grave writers are fond of supposing. Few of them are of

an immoral tendency, or at all calculated to inflame the passions; and as for inspiring the youth of either sex with romantic notions of love, that may be of ill consequences to their future welfare, I am afraid that danger is very small indeed.¹⁹

The passage both acknowledges and decouples anti-novel discourse from its typically gendered assumptions when suggesting that novels are not so bad for “the youth of either sex.” Further, Pye argues that novels “might, I think, be an improvement on” periodical essays as a vehicle “by means of which the curiosity would be awakened, and the attention fixed, at the same time that the mind is informed.”²⁰ Thus ideas in circulation by the 1780s reverberate in chapter 5 of *Northanger Abbey*, a pointed response to “some grave writers” like James Fordyce who inveigh against the “trash, with which the modern press so perpetually teems” and prefer periodical moralizing.²¹ Even if we characterize Pye’s pro-novel stance as mercenary, he acknowledges a contemporary *debate* in progress whereas most anti-novel discourse violently suppresses the other side.²²

Austen numbered among Smith’s readers, and scholars have often noted Smith’s influence on Austen.²³ Austen’s references to Smith’s novels in *Catharine, or the Bower*, clearly identified as a “Novel” in the dedication to her sister, both prefigure her defense of novels and provide us with a way to understand her use of the female quixote trope as a means of validating the intellectual labor of women readers and writers in *Northanger Abbey*. An exchange about reading between Catharine (Kitty) and her cousin Camilla Stanley initiates what at first appears to be a standard sentimental trope whereby women who share reading tastes also share quick, effusive intimacy, not unlike Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*:

Eager to know that their sentiments as to Books were similar, [Kitty] very soon began questioning her new Acquaintance on the subject, but though she was well read in Modern history herself, chose rather to speak first of Books of a lighter kind, of Books universally read and Admired, [and that have given rise perhaps to more frequent Arguments than any other of the same sort].

“You have read Mrs. Smith’s Novels, I suppose?” said she to her Companion—. “Oh! Yes, replied the other, and I am quite delighted with them—they are the sweetest things in the world—” “And which do you prefer of them?” “Oh! Dear, I think there is no comparison between them—Emmeline is *so much* better than any of the others—” “Many people think so, I know; but there does not appear so great a disproportion in their Merits to *me*; do you think it is better written?” “Oh! I do not know anything about *that*—but it is better in *everything*—Besides, Ethelinde is so long—.” “That is a very common Objection I believe, said Kitty, but for my own part, if a book is well written, I always find it too short.” “So do I, only I get tired of it before it is finished.”²⁴

The passage, rife with irony, ultimately turns on whether or not a novel can hold its reader’s attention. Based on this criterion alone, Camilla values *Emme-*

line, a book whose heroine cannot suffer through more than a few pages of *any* novel, over *Ethelinde* (1789). Kitty judges them equally meritorious yet turns the discussion specifically to the aesthetic concern of which is “better written.” Barbara Benedict maintains that circulating library novels were largely formulaic, calculated to encourage quick, cursory reading and to engross readers at the end of each volume.²⁵ While Austen clearly mocks those extant conventions, she nevertheless does not devalue readerly absorption. Smith, forced to write novels because the social contract of marriage had failed her and her children, portrays novels as tainted goods in *Emmeline*. In *Catharine*, the danger is that a novel will not be read at all or readers will lose interest. Thus the problem for the novelist lies in not being able to captivate readers enough to keep them checking out the subsequent volumes from the circulating library.

Despite being described as a “great reader, tho’ perhaps not a very deep one,” Kitty is also clearly identified as the superior developing reader.²⁶ Kitty may well begin the exchange merely as a function of polite conversation, or a concern for potentially shared “sentiments,” but her subsequent questions suggest she has reflected upon her own reading and seeks a qualitative discussion while Miss Stanley’s critical acuity is questioned by her inability to attend to a long work. Marilyn Butler contrasts Kitty’s moral discernment and Camilla’s thoughtless hyperbole to conclude that Camilla Stanley prefigures Isabella Thorpe and thus provides the foundation for *Northanger Abbey*’s anti-Jacobin disapproval of selfishness.²⁷ Conversely, Claudia Johnson contends that the juvenilia are self-reflexive experiments with style and genre rather than manifestations of Austen’s moral values.²⁸ Following from Johnson, we must attend to Kitty’s insistent need to know which of Smith’s novels Camilla thinks is “better written,” for the question reveals a concern with craft that confirms the sensibility of a writer and suggests that good writing leads to engaged reading. Furthermore, for Kitty, absorption does not lead to an inability to judge what she reads. Kitty reads so intently that if a book is written well she laments its end, certainly a sentiment with which any avid novel reader can sympathize. Coupling absorption and discrimination, Austen thus models the ideal engaged reader.

Austen returns to this ideal in *Northanger Abbey*. Catherine Morland is often cited as a too-susceptible reader of Gothic fictions whose lackluster reading abilities must be reformed by the mature reader, Henry Tilney. Catherine’s early reading, dutiful but cursory perusal of Shakespeare, Pope, Gray, and Thompson as “training for an heroine,” sounds much like Emmeline’s chosen course of study.²⁹ Henry Tilney, on the other hand, has read widely and with discernment, proven by his ability to understand the “horrors” Catherine refers to during the walk round Beechen Cliff as an advertisement for a new novel rather than a threat of riots as Eleanor, the reader primarily of history, takes them to be. Henry, like Kitty, has read both Gothic fiction and history, giving him the advantage over his companions whose reading has been more restricted.³⁰

While Henry Tilney represents an idealized reader, one familiar with a wide range of texts and genres and possessed of a superior ability to synthesize this acquired knowledge, we must also recall that he finished Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) "in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time," indicating his absorption in the text.³¹ Certainly Henry read quickly, but his immersion in that novel and the knowledge he boasts of "hundreds and hundreds" of others inform his ability to recognize and enjoy Gothic tropes.³² His playful authoring of a Gothic tale for Catherine during the carriage ride to Northanger has been interpreted as pedantic toying or an indicator of his inability to recognize Catherine's susceptibility. But Catherine's absorption is precisely what goads Henry to continue "writing" in this scene. Her joy stems from her willingness to suspend disbelief, exemplified by her response: "Oh! Mr. Tilney, how frightful!—This is just like a book!—But it cannot really happen to me. I am sure your housekeeper is not really Dorothy.—Well, what then?"³³

On the basis of such guileless enthusiasm, many have deemed Catherine Morland a "bad reader," some letting that simple description stand and others qualifying it by determining what a bad reader is and what sort of reform needs to take place to make her a good reader.³⁴ I contend that by providing Catherine Morland with no entirely adequate mentors—Henry is too smugly satirical, her parents are too provincial, Mrs. Allen is too concerned with muslin—Austen positions Catherine's quixotism as the only means by which she comes to know and understand her social world and the motives of those within it.³⁵ If Catherine is a bad reader because she fabricates stories from the conventions of her Gothic reading matter to explain what she cannot understand in the real world, then we must reconcile her supposed reformation with the fact that her initial perceptions are often not far from the "truth" of her social reality, and intimate knowledge of novel conventions is necessary for the understanding of the characters *within* this novel as well as for readers *of* it.³⁶ The General turns out to be guilty of "parental tyranny" after all and the mysterious owner of the laundry bills, Eleanor Tilney's suitor, turns out to be the hero of a sentimental romance, "the most charming young man in the world . . . instantly before the imagination of us all."³⁷ Even Mrs. Morland's pronouncement that Catherine seems to have matured beyond a "sad little shatter-brained creature" must be taken in tandem with her inability to understand her daughter's emotional state.³⁸ Catherine's mother proves to be the inattentive reader in the end, thinking that a moralistic essay in *The Mirror*—a periodical essay—will cure Catherine of the addiction to fashionable life from which she surely suffers. What Mrs. Morland misses, perhaps due to her own inadequate education in sentimental plots beyond that of *Sir Charles Grandison*, is that Catherine's doldrums stem from being in love. Indeed, *Northanger Abbey* requires of its own readers the capacity to understand the references to novels, Gothic and otherwise, periodicals, and history—the ideal wide range of reading that Smith's Emmeline nearly achieves but in fact falls short of in her refusal to partake of novels.

Thus *Northanger Abbey's* narrative takes as many pains to encourage rather than punish the absorbed reader, and chapter 5's scolding of fellow novelists seems squarely aimed at the likes of Smith as one of the writers "scarcely ever permitting [novels] to be read by their own heroine."³⁹ Austen further exhorts:

Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body. Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. From pride, ignorance, or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers. And while the ability of the nine-hundredth abridger of the History of England, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior, with a paper from the Spectator, and a chapter from Sterne, are eulogized by a thousand pens,—there seems a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them.⁴⁰

Austen's defense, wherein her cited examples of worthy fictions are those written by Burney and Maria Edgeworth, effectively counters the female quixote trope in the interest of promoting fiction, fiction by women, and the novel as a legitimate vehicle for women's absorbed reading. By the end of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine's interpretive instincts have been honed and her engaged reading put to good use. Catherine learns to read widely, inclusive of reading the motivations of other people, as opposed to Emmeline who learns only to eliminate certain kinds of texts from her repertoire.

Citing *Northanger Abbey* as evidence, Clifford Siskin has argued that Austen contributed to a shift in the cultural work of fiction during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a division between "high" and "low" forms of literature that effected a "Great Forgetting" of much of the sentimental, feminized, fiction of the eighteenth century. Siskin contends that by rendering reading and moralizing more complex than previous novelists, Austen tames the "threat" posed by sentimental fiction wherein readers could be subsumed by novels and damaged by writing's transformational ability. Siskin predicates the elevation of Austen's writing on her refusal to participate in the sentimental tradition or contribute to the periodical press; both, he argues, are parodied in *Northanger Abbey*.⁴¹ Yet such high (male) and low (female) distinctions prove reductive. Betty Schellenberg sees Siskin's argument as one instance of critics setting up women writers as victims of patriarchy who were only able to espouse proper female domesticity. Schellenberg argues that by acknowledging Edgeworth and Burney in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen "identif[ies] the influential role in constructing literary history played by professional women readers—that is women readers who are themselves publishing writers—who name or deny the texts they read."⁴²

Indeed, while Austen calls out her fellow novelists for forbearing to write

novel-reading characters, both notably gendered female, she also genders the periodical press as male, citing only *The Spectator*. Thus her attack upon the male literary establishment, including reviewers and men who merely recycle the works of dead male authors, makes her call to band together in defense of novels seem pointedly directed at women as potential innovators. One of Mary Lascelles's notes to the Chapman edition of *Northanger Abbey* suggests that Austen's defense was particularly aimed at Edgeworth, who did not deign to call her works "novels."⁴³ But as I have established here, Smith does not escape the indictment. Furthermore, the call goes out to not only fellow novelists, but also the readers of novels, referred to as still more numerous than the novel detractors of the male literary establishment and exemplified, again, as female. Austen specifically portrays a female reader who is reluctant to admit to reading novels:

"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.—"It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;" or, in short, some work 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.⁴⁴

Austen picks up the standard gendered arguments of her day wherein only women read novels, arguments heard in the periodical press both against and, increasingly, *for* the value of novel reading.

The emphasis within *Northanger Abbey* on inclusive reading practices accompanied by readerly discernment that I argue for here depends upon a reconsideration of other leisurely pursuits of the middling classes depicted within the novel. Austen's characterization of quixotism as not only harmless but also perhaps even an important stage in a young person's development is supported by *Northanger Abbey's* treatment of knowledge of contemporary fashion and popular culture in general. While Austen's defense of novel reading seems predicated on extant gendered hierarchies, her characterizations within the novel confuse typically gendered assumptions about novel readers. Henry Tilney's knowledge of both novels and muslin identifies him as attuned to the latest fashions. E. J. Clery notes that this queering of Henry evidences Austen's keen recognition of the social construction of gender and is complemented by the characterization of Catherine as learning the conventions of sentimental femininity after a childhood spent in traditionally masculine athletic pursuits.⁴⁵ The gender reversal extends to the consideration of novel reading. For if Henry Tilney is indeed the text's ideal reader, his knowledge of the wide range of fashionable endeavors of his time suggests a way to reread his pivotal lecture to Catherine as a reminder to consider novels in their broader context, not to

forgo reading them at all. Henry specifically addresses the ways in which the engaged citizen is familiar with the latest fashion simply by reading the periodical press, gossip columns and all. He chides Catherine with the reminder that “such atrocities” as murder could not 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.”⁴⁶

Fictional plots are foiled by the British free press—a press concerned with frivolous gossip about neighbors *and* attendant to the mortal business of war and social unrest. There is political resonance here with Austen’s intertextual use of *Mysteries of Udolpho*, set partially in France and thus cheekily if obliquely evocative of the French Revolution and the Terror when Catherine ponders how “Italy, Switzerland, and the South of France, might be as fruitful in horrors as they were there represented” in Radcliffe’s novels, but assures her newly, purportedly “awakened” self that “in the central part of England . . . Murder was not tolerated.”⁴⁷ Austen subtly invokes her political context as a reminder of the serious stakes beyond the pages of unrealistic fictions. Jillian Heydt-Stevenson argues that Henry’s “history lesson” also conveniently elides the violence English citizens and particularly wives were subject to, while Catherine’s subsequent musings on the likelihood that Gothic violence only occurs in exoticized, foreign space evidence her inability to forget.⁴⁸ Thus novel reading and reflection catalyze Catherine’s nascent, politicized adult consciousness.

Consequently, the broad range of allusions to matters both trivial and mortal found within Catherine’s reading serve a socializing function. Gillian Russell contends that Catherine realizes her identity via her sociable interaction and that “Austen places great emphasis on becoming a woman as the corporeal and material experience of socialization—the crossing of an actual threshold into the polite ‘world.’”⁴⁹ Because it is such a significant part of the socialization process, reading serves as a touchstone for sociable intercourse throughout the novel. It becomes a conversation opener for Catherine in almost all of her social interactions, figuring prominently in her exchanges with not only Isabella and John Thorpe but also Henry and Eleanor Tilney. While Catherine’s choice of conversational topic may too often turn to Gothic novels, this can be seen as a sign of her constricted reading rather than outright dismissal of popular novels.⁵⁰ Further, the characterization of certain kinds of reading as “fashionable” is not, in Austen’s context, a cause for moralistic dismissal.⁵¹ Though General Tilney’s obsession with his acquisition of the latest china and his “improvements” to his home are clearly one means of recognizing his superficiality and greed, John Thorpe’s ignorance of any Radcliffe composition and dismissal of Burney’s work are also means of marking the boorishness of “the discerning and unprejudiced reader of Camilla” in contrast to Henry, the enthusiastic consumer of *Udolpho*.⁵² Therefore, while Austen both offers Edgeworth as an exemplary novelist in the chapter 5 defense of novels and attacks her for refusing to

call her works “novels,” *Northanger Abbey* may also be seen as disapproving of Edgeworth’s didacticism, wherein fashionable pursuits, including novel reading, threaten proper domesticity.

Jane Austen herself was clearly not above indulging in fashionable pursuits. Judy Simons argues that Austen was “addicted to contemporary culture” and that her “taste was eclectic.”⁵³ Isobel Grundy makes the case for Austen’s wide reading as marked by a lack of snobbery: Austen “dislikes pedantry.”⁵⁴ Even a cursory perusal of Austen’s letters manifests her personal interest in fashionable clothing. Though detailed descriptions of dress are less common in the novels, Daniel James Cole argues for their significance in “placing Austen’s characters in a vitally observed world around them.”⁵⁵ Indeed, while Jeffery Nigro reminds us that *Northanger Abbey*’s narrator chides Catherine for her concern about what to wear to a ball with the remark that “dress is at all times a frivolous distinction,” he also cites multiple instances of attention to clothing to deem *Northanger Abbey* “the most ‘fashion conscious’ of the completed novels.”⁵⁶ In *Northanger Abbey*, essays on the frivolity of fashion are characterized as reactionary moralizing akin to those that decry novel reading: “Catherine knew all this very well; her great aunt had read her a lecture on the subject only the Christmas before; and yet she lay awake ten minutes on Wednesday night debating between her spotted and her tamboured muslin. . . . Not one of these grave reflections troubled the tranquility of Catherine.”⁵⁷ Ten minutes is, of course, not much time at all, suggesting that Catherine is no more obsessed with clothing than any other girl of her age and, in turn, not much the worse for her time spent pondering it. I am suggesting that Austen’s coy parody of the fashionable Gothic novel in *Northanger Abbey* can be set alongside her gentle reproach of Mrs. Allen’s sartorial obsession.⁵⁸ While Benedict contends that *Northanger Abbey* parodies the “cynical use of literature as fashionable display,” I would argue the key issue here is the cynicism, not the fashion.⁵⁹ Furthermore, for Catherine Morland and Mrs. Allen, the problem lies more with monomania, not the attention to a range of fashionable pursuits. Mrs. Allen’s obliviousness to anything but clothing marks her as an unworthy social guide for Catherine; Catherine’s fixation on Gothic plots taints her ability to interact with her hosts at Northanger. On the contrary, a wide-ranging interest in fashionable pursuits prepares one for the social world.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the figure of the female quixote had become the symbol of women readers’ susceptibility to print, yet that purported susceptibility had to be reckoned with alongside a writer’s need for absorbed readers. Austen’s fascination with fellow authors’ figurations of female quixotes continued well beyond the period of *Northanger Abbey*’s initial composition. She wrote to her sister in January of 1807 about reading Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752) with the women in the family, “which now makes our evening amusement; to me a very high one, as I find the work quite equal to what I remembered it. Mrs. F. A. [Mary Gibson, married to her brother Frank]

to whom it is new, enjoys it as one could wish; the other Mary [her brother James's wife, Mary Lloyd Austen], I believe, has little pleasure from that or any other book."⁶⁰ Here Austen characterizes a group of women readers, reading aloud from a book about a woman reader, and responding to it quite differently. Austen's comments suggest her own habit of returning to favorite novels and a qualitative assessment of Lennox's abilities as a fiction writer. Mary Gibson Austen perhaps finds herself engaged by the plot and the characters, as "one," if one were a novelist, "could wish." And Mary Lloyd Austen is summarily dismissed, as anyone who does not like books must be. In March 1814, Austen also read Eaton Stannard Barrett's quixotic fiction, *The Heroine, Or, Adventures of a Fair Romance Reader* (1813) and "was very much amused by it. . . . It diverted me exceedingly." She writes to Cassandra, "I have torn through the 3rd vol. of the Heroine, & I do not think it falls off.—It is a delightful burlesque, particularly on the Radcliffe style."⁶¹ Austen's comments on Barrett's novel are consistent with the estimation of good fiction made in *Catharine, or the Bower*, valuing a novel's ability to not "fall off" as the volumes progress.

Unlike *The Heroine*, *Northanger Abbey* proves to be more than a burlesque of the Gothic or even of the figure of the female quixote. Austen fashions for her readers a complex consideration of the perils of capitulating to dominant ideology, be it about reading material, dress material, or what constitutes appropriate affective ties between people. While we celebrate Austen's clever, complex, and playful depictions of reading in *Northanger Abbey*, we must remember that the novel also encourages a wide range of activity associated with the formation of sociable citizens of the time. Austen numbered one among many such citizens; she was not alone in promoting the interests of novel writers and readers, and women who were deeply engaged as both. Yet Austen's re-fashioning of female quixotism as a means to develop analytical insight and to marry critical reading with more absorptive reading practices evinces both the value of the deeply engrossed reader to novelists and the burden that women writers in particular felt to absolve such reading from charges that it precluded any serious reflection. For Austen, female quixotism not only signals female readers' susceptibility to print, but also the way in which such engaged reading could manifest personal transformation in surprising and often unconventional ways, thus shifting emphasis from the didactic "cure" of a delusional woman to the capacities of the human imagination and the fantasy of a world where various kinds of verbal and intellectual interplay can both feed a woman's mind and put food on the table—at once the most sublime and quotidian of concerns for the professional woman writer.

NOTES

1. See Horace Walpole's 1736 letter to George Montagu, cited in Margaret Anne Doody's introduction to *The Female Quixote* (Oxford, 1989), xi–xxxii, xv–xvi.

2. I. S., "On the Reading of Novels," *The Monthly Visitor, and Pocket Companion*, July 1797–Dec. 1800 4 (July 1798): 242.

3. See Kathryn Sutherland, "Chronology of Composition and Publication," in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge, 2005), 12–22.

4. There is no direct evidence that Jane Austen read fashion magazines but Katie Halsey lists periodicals among the works Henry Austen sent from London to his mother and sisters (*Jane Austen and Her Readers, 1786–1945* [New York, 2012], 17).

5. E. R., "On Novels and Romances, with a Cursory Review of the Literary Ladies of Great-Britain. Extract of a Letter from a German Lady to Her Friend," *La Belle Assemblée: or Court and Fashionable Magazine* (November 1806): 531. John Bell also ran a London circulating library and thus had a vested interest in promoting reading (see Alison Adburgham, *Women in Print: Writing Women and Women's Magazines from the Restoration to the Accession of Victoria* [London, 1972], 218). Jacqueline Pearson labels *La Belle Assemblée* "conservative" (*Women's Reading in Britain, 1750–1835: A Dangerous Recreation* [Cambridge, 1999], 80), while Cynthia White suggests it promoted domestication (*Women's Magazines, 1693–1968* [London, 1970]). Jennie Batchelor's work reveals how such binary categorizations as "conservative" (versus radical) and "domestic" (versus public) can be reductive, especially allowing for potential gaps between production and reception; see *Dress, Distress and Desire* (New York, 2005), and "'Connections, Which Are of Service . . . in a More Advanced Age': *The Lady's Magazine*, Community, and Women's Literary Histories," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 30, no. 2 (2011): 245–67.

6. John Bell's son, John Browne Bell, launched *Le Beau Monde*, taking the title from a section of his father's successful magazine (Adburgham, 222–23).

7. R. S. E., "Novels and Novel Writing," *Le Beau Monde, or, Literary and Fashionable Magazine, 1806–1809* 5, no. 31 (February 1809): 11–13, 11. Note the echo here with Austen's *Catharine*, which I discuss below (see 266–67).

8. Henry James Pye, *A Commentary Illustrating the Poetic of Aristotle, by Examples Taken Chiefly from the Modern Poets. To Which Is Prefixed, a New and Corrected Edition of the Translation of the Poetic* (1786; London, 1792), 145, emphasis added.

9. "Novels and Novel Writing," 11.

10. Smith, letter to Joseph Wharton, 31 August 1791(?), British Library Add. MS. 42.561 fol. 230.

11. Smith, *Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle* [1788], ed. Loraine Fletcher (Peterborough, 2003), 47.

12. Smith, *Emmeline*, 63.

13. Smith, *Emmeline*, 135, 66.

14. Smith, *Emmeline*, 240.

15. Samuel Egerton Brydges, *Censura Literaria: Containing Opinions of Old English Books*, 10 vols. (1805–9; New York, 1961), 4:71. Austen's dismissal of Brydges's literary abilities also serves to highlight her own indiscriminately broad reading. When her father procured Brydges's novel *Arthur Fitz-Albini* (1798) against her advice, she wrote to Cassandra, "these scruples, however, do not at all interfere with my reading it" (Austen to Cassandra Austen, 25 November 1798, in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 4th ed. [Oxford, 2011], 22–23, 23).

16. Pye, *The Spectre*, 2 vols. (London, 1789), 2:79–80.

17. Pye, *The Spectre*, 2:81.

18. Pye, *The Spectre*, 1:xv.

19. Pye, *The Spectre*, 1:vi.

20. Pye, *The Spectre*, 1:x.

21. Halsey argues that Austen's defense of novels is a direct response to James Fordyce's *Sermons for Young Women* [1766] (42–43).

22. Pye is now best known as the butt of many jokes for garnering the post of Poet Laureate as a political favor despite his dubious poetic ability. M. O. Grenby places Pye

within a tradition of cynical anti-Jacobins who used anti-novel discourse for political purposes (*The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* [Cambridge, 2001], 199). Thus Pye's volte-face between *The Spectre* and his anti-Jacobin (and anti-novel) novel, *The Aristocrat* (1799), was likely economically and politically motivated.

23. See, for example, Loraine Fletcher, "Charlotte Smith's Emblematic Castles," *Critical Survey* 4, no. 1 (1992): 3–8; Jillian Heydt-Stevenson, "Northanger Abbey, Desmond, and History," *Wordsworth Circle* 44, nos. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2013): 140–48; Jacqueline Labbe, "What Happens at the Party: Jane Austen Converses with Charlotte Smith," *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line* 30, no. 2 (2010); Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (London, 1939); and William H. Magee, "The Happy Marriage: The Influence of Charlotte Smith on Jane Austen," *Studies in the Novel* 7, no. 1 (1975): 120–32.

24. Austen, *Catharine, or The Bower*, in *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 6 vols., 3rd ed. (1932–34; Oxford, 1988), 6:192–240, 192, 198–99. The brackets here signal Austen's strikethrough, perhaps not because she thought it digressive or hyperbolic, but rather too derivative. Thanks to John Leffel for noting that this conversation also echoes one between Smith's heroine and her cousin in Volume 2 of *Ethelinde* (1789).

25. Barbara M. Benedict, "Jane Austen and the Culture of Circulating Libraries: The Construction of Female Literacy," in *Revising Women: Eighteenth-Century "Women's Fiction" and Social Engagement*, ed. Paula Backscheider (Baltimore, 2000), 147–99, 171.

26. Austen, *Catharine*, 5:198.

27. Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford, 1975), 170. Similarly, Robert W. Uphaus contends that Austen's fiction sanctioned the moral authority of women and novels by providing "both story and reflection" ("Jane Austen and Female Reading," *Studies in the Novel* 19, no. 3 [1987]: 334–45, 336).

28. Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago, 1990), 31.

29. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, in *Novels*, 5:11–252, 15.

30. In contrast, Johnson views Henry as a cursory novel reader who dismisses the violent realities represented by Gothic fictions to uphold a Burkean view of social stability as predicated on upper-class, paternal power (37–41).

31. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:106.

32. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:107.

33. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:159.

34. For example, Pearson thinks the "novel certainly laughs at Catherine" (211) while Butler describes Catherine's mind as "a somewhat implausible blank" (178). Joe Bray, on the other hand, uses psychoanalytic and cognitive psychological theories to argue that Catherine's reading practice "balances 'absorption' with a critical 'attention'" (*The Female Reader in the English Novel: From Burney to Austen* [New York, 2009], 23.)

35. Tara Ghoshal Wallace interprets Henry's authorial power over Catherine as the source of Catherine's misapprehension of the General's behavior and thus as evidence that Henry is an insufficient mentor ("*Northanger Abbey* and the Limits of Parody," *Studies in the Novel* 20, no. 3 [1988]: 262–73, 270).

36. Here I employ Scott Paul Gordon's definition of quixotism as a problem of "making rather than finding the real" (*The Practice of Quixotism: Postmodern Theory and Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing* [New York, 2006], 13).

37. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:252, 251.

38. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:234.

39. Heydt-Stevenson argues that *Desmond*, on the other hand, implicitly defends novel reading since the abused and abandoned Geraldine notes how her own unfettered pre-nuptial reading did not prevent her from being an obedient wife. Heydt-Stevenson sees Smith's justification embedded within Austen's, evoking a "sisterhood" of "women writers and readers . . . as a defense against assault" (141–42).

40. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:37.

41. Clifford Siskin, "Jane Austen and the Engendering of Disciplinarity," in *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism*, ed. Devoney Looser (New York, 1995), 51–67.
42. Betty A. Schellenberg, *The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2005), 163, 165.
43. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:328.
44. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:38.
45. E. J. Clery, "Gender," in *Cambridge Companion*, 159–75, 160, 159. See also Judith Wylie, "'Do You Understand Muslins, Sir?': Fashioning Gender in *Northanger Abbey*," in *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature*, ed. Cynthia Kuhn and Cindy Carlson (Youngstown, 2007), 129–48. The gendered reversals in *Northanger Abbey* anticipate those in *Sanditon*: the novels she reads for pleasure do not unreasonably influence Charlotte Heywood while Sir Charles Denham's sentimental reading leads him to fancy himself a Lovelacean seducer.
46. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:197–98.
47. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:199–200.
48. Heydt-Stevenson, 144.
49. Gillian Russell, "Sociability," in *Cambridge Companion*, 176–91, 182.
50. Elspeth Knights emphasizes how Catherine's naive reading and her talkativeness feed her appetite for sociable experiences ("'The Library, of Course, Afforded Everything': Jane Austen's Representation of Women Readers," *English: The Journal of the English Association* 50, no. 196 [2001]: 19–38, 24). In contrast, Benedict characterizes Catherine's reading as a commodified site of moral conflict in a commercial culture where self is defined by taste (see "Circulating Libraries").
51. I am indebted to Hannah Doherty Hudson for her ideas about the cultural and material value of fashionable reading here.
52. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:49.
53. Judy Simons, "Jane Austen and Popular Culture," in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Johnson and Clara Tuite (Chichester, 2009), 467–77, 467.
54. Isobel Grundy, "Jane Austen and Literary Traditions," in *Cambridge Companion*, 192–214, 198.
55. James Cole, "Hierarchy and Seduction in Regency Fashion," *Persuasions On-Line* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2012).
56. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:73. See Jeffery Nigro, "Estimating Lace and Muslin: Dress and Fashion in Jane Austen and Her World," *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 23 (2001): 50–62, 54.
57. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:73–74.
58. Wylie argues that Mrs. Allen subversively uses the language of fashion to illustrate how women are deemed useful only insofar as they function within patriarchal constructs (see esp. 137–39 and 145–46).
59. Benedict, "Reading by the Book in *Northanger Abbey*," *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line* 20, no. 1 (1999).
60. Austen to Cassandra Austen, 7–8 January 1807, in *Letters*, 119–22, 120.
61. Austen to Cassandra Austen, 2–3 March 1814, in *Letters*, 265–68, 266–67.