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medium for social criticism is strong evidence of its impact on the general public, and one that is to be admired. As long as art does appeal to our emotions, however, there is going to be at least the possibility that it may have negative as well as positive consequences, so this debate will continue.

THE TEXTS

Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote; or, The Adventures of Arabella*; Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

Such concerns come together very interestingly in two novels of our period of study: Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (sold to a publisher in 1803, but not published until 1818, after the author's death). Both novels feature impressionable young women on the threshold of adulthood, who immerse themselves in a world of popular fiction as an escape from the humdrum world they inhabit, developing a 'fiction-maddened imagination' in the process.[4] In each case parental neglect has allowed them to indulge their fantasies by avid reading of romances, seventeenth-century French heroic in Arabella's case (*Female Quixote*), Gothic in Catherine's (*Northanger Abbey*). The heroine's inability, or refusal, to distinguish between fiction and the real world leads to many humorous and often deeply embarrassing incidents, but each author has a serious underlying purpose – to explore the relationship between the imagination and reality. Lennox suggests the greater sympathy with her heroine, presenting her use of romance as a means of revealing the hypocrisy of male behaviour, while Austen's heroine is made to see that fiction can distort her view of reality to the detriment of her development as a responsible member of society. One could say that for Lennox popular narrative is potentially empowering, whereas Austen is more circumspect, even if we could note that, paradoxically, each novelist is using fiction to point up the dangers inherent in fiction.[5]

Arabella grows up in rural seclusion, where her father retreats after the early death of her mother. She is largely left to her own devices, and that includes raiding her father's library, 'in which, unfortunately for her, were great Store of Romances, and, what was still more

unfortunate, not in the original *French*, but very bad Translations' (exactly how the bad translation affects the narrative line of the works is never explained, however).[6] She incorporates the values of those romances into her worldview, assuming that everyone she meets, particularly the men, will share those values and act in the way that her gallery of fictional characters do. Lovers are expected to follow the whims of their mistress to the letter, even if this involves waiting for years to hear a favourable word or engaging in duels to prove the depth of their commitment. Arabella proceeds to adopt both the extravagant language and ideas of this literary discourse, and to act as if nothing had changed from the older worlds they depict. In her case, fantasy equals reality. Not surprisingly, this leads to much confusion, with Arabella constructing an elaborate narrative out of her experiences which others fail to understand. The behaviour she expects of others is so foreign to the social ethos of her day ('I command him to live, if he can live without Hope', as one bemused suitor is instructed after making his addresses, unsuccessfully, to Arabella),[7] that she is in danger of turning into a figure of outright ridicule. This is suggested by those in her circle at more than one point, with her father declaring that, '[t]he Girl is certainly distracted . . . These foolish books my Nephew talks of have turned her Brain!' and her cousin, Miss Glanville, bemoaning the lack of 'Protestant Nunneries' in which to confine Arabella, 'by which Means she would avoid exposing herself in the Manner she did now'.[8] It is hinted at other times that she may actually be certifiably mad, so extreme does her behaviour become in terms of what polite society in eighteenth-century England expected.

Arabella's odd conduct rapidly becomes an embarrassment to everyone who knows her, although it also has the interesting side-effect of bringing out into the open much of the hypocrisy behind male treatment of women. Extravagant declarations of love and devotion are still part of the courtship ritual in this society, and their deferential tone disguises the patriarchal power that men in reality exercise over women. By taking these sentiments at face value, as her reading of romances encourages her to do, Arabella calls the bluff of her male admirers, whose lack of sincerity is swiftly revealed. They may be playing a game, but she is in deadly earnest. As a group, men are nonplussed by what she expects of them, with her peremptory commands, as in the following letter to one persistent suitor, to model their actions on those of her fictional favourites:

> Remember I require no more of you, than *Parasitis* did of *Lysimachus*, in a more cruel and insupportable Misfortune: Imitate then the Obedience and Submission of that illustrious Prince; and, tho' you should be as unfortunate as he, let your Courage also be equal to his; and, like him, be contented with the Esteem that is offered you, since it is all that can be bestowed, by *Arabella*.[9]

The suitor in question is Sir George, who has decided that the best way to ingratiate himself with Arabella is to indulge her romantic fantasies. In modern terms of reference, we might say that he is engaged in grooming her, saying what she wants to hear in order to bring her under his influence – even to the extent of inventing adventures for himself in the style of the romances that Arabella is wholly engrossed by. To any third party Sir George's tale is ridiculous, but to Arabella it is entirely credible and she becomes very absorbed in it. As her letter indicates, however, this is a game Sir George can never really win, since Arabella will invariably respond in the character of a fictional heroine, making impossible demands on him. She cannot relate to him as an individual, only as a fictional ideal, and that means he can never be sure of his ground. The more plausible he is in spinning his narrative the less likely it is that he will succeed in his objective of winning her hand. The primary function of a romance hero for Arabella is to suffer uncomplainingly – and at inordinate length. Whether she has designed it that way or not, it is a particularly effective tactic for keeping unsuitable males at bay. The only problem is that it keeps suitable males, like Mr Glanville, at bay also. It is small wonder that Mr Glanville's father, Sir Charles (Arabella's guardian after the death of her father) takes such a dim view of his son's continuing infatuation with Arabella:

> I am sorry, said he, to find you have set your Heart upon this fantastic Girl: if ever she be your Wife, which I very much doubt, she will make you very unhappy. . . . There is no making her hear Reason, or expecting Reason from her; I never knew so strange a Woman in my Life[.][10]

Perhaps it is this very strangeness, however, that is the source of Arabella's attractiveness to the opposite sex. At the very least her

fantastic ways disrupt the standard pattern of gender relations, constraining men into a subsidiary role to her – which again has feminist implications. Arabella is never the submissive female of patriarchal expectation, and that intrigues, even as it baffles, her male admirers. What one critic has called 'the strained leaps' the character makes in the narrative she creates for herself have the effect of forcing her would-be suitors to reconsider their whole approach to the business of wooing.[11] Arabella proves hard work, which soon weeds out any but the most serious.

Arabella's romance-derived picture of the world causes her to act impetuously which can on occasion even be life-threatening. Out walking with friends one day, she decides on impulse that some horsemen approaching from a distance have villainous designs on the party and so throws herself into the River Thames, 'intending to swim over it, as *Clelia* did the *Tyber*', in order to escape being ravished.[12] If her fictional heroine is successful in her perilous endeavour, Arabella is not. She has to be rescued and falls into a fever from which she takes some time to recover.

It is after this episode that Arabella is finally brought to her senses by a 'Pious and Learned Doctor', who skilfully leads her to realise the eccentricity of her behaviour.[13] He emphasises strongly the dangers of being carried away by our emotions, in words that would have gained assent from Plato:

> It is of little Importance, Madam, replied the Doctor, to decide whether in the real or fictitious Life, most Wickedness is to be found. Books ought to supply an Antidote to Example, and if we retire to a Contemplation of Crimes, and continue in our Closets to inflame our Passions, at what time must we rectify our Words, or purify our Hearts?[14]

The point is forcefully made by the doctor that the romances Arabella has been entranced by are not true to life, and that they foster a distorted worldview. Their exaggerated notions of honour no longer have any place in the world: 'they teach Women to exact Vengeance, and Men to execute it; teach Women to expect not only Worship, but the dreadful Worship of human Sacrifices.'[15] It is just such discrepancies between the imagined and the real that signal a potential problem to moralists then and now. As William B. Warner has noted, 'Arabella's literal faith in the

referent behind the text authorizes the dangerous acting out that had been the target of the antinovel discourse' that arose at the time.[16] Arabella is finally reduced to tears, recognising her foolishness in being taken in by these fantastic stories and promising to resist their influence in future. Predictably enough, marriage to her long-suffering admirer Mr Glanville follows soon afterwards, with Arabella now deemed to be mature enough to take her rightful place in society.

We might just wonder, however, whether something has been lost in the transition to maturity. One could say that Arabella has been made to conform (schooled into 'the ideology of femininity', as Janet Todd has it),[17] and that her imagination will now have to be curbed in line with what society expects of young married women. At the very least her life is about to become far more pedestrian, with the kind of excitement she has become addicted to having to be forfeited in favour of family and social duties. Arabella clearly has the potential to develop an interesting personality, and when given an opportunity to display her rhetorical talents in public shows herself to be more than capable of holding her own in debate. She makes the pompous Mr Selvin look a fool at a Bath assembly through the sheer profusion of examples she can draw on from her reading, where fact and fiction confusingly mix. Shamed 'at seeing himself [op]posed by a Girl, in a Matter which so immediately belonged to him', Selvin proceeds to bluster, but is outmanoeuvred by Arabella, who forces him into a series of blatant errors, thus striking a blow for her sex.[18] Even Sir Charles is moved to compliment her – 'I protest, Lady *Bella* . . . you speak like an Orator'[19] – high praise indeed in a society in which women are supposed to be demure, passive and submissive to the male sex at all times. Arabella stands up for her values, misguided though they may be. It is an act of considerable defiance to refuse to bow to pressure from a figure like Selvin, who has all the weight of patriarchal authority behind him. In this case, popular culture can be seen to have an empowering effect, enabling the heroine to assert herself in a context that most young women of her day probably would find very intimidating. Supporters of popular culture in the twenty-first century would want to make similar claims as to its beneficial effects, arguing that its appropriation can unlock the potential in individuals, giving them values to test out in real-life situations.

Her treatment of the vapid Mr Tinsel, another fixture of the Bath season, is equally dismissive, cutting to the heart of the superficiality

of the season and those who frequent it, with considerable rhetorical expertise and moral disapproval:

> I will allow the Ladies to be sollicitous about their Habits, and dress with all the Care and Elegance they are capable of; but such Trifles are below the Consideration of a Man, who ought not to owe the Dignity of his Appearance to the Embroidery on his Coat, but to his high and noble Air, the Grandeur of his Courage, the Elevation of his Sentiments, and the many heroick Actions he has perform'd.[20]

As a put-down of a self-important society beau this would be hard to beat, and unrealistic as her conception of the past is, and manifestly founded on false data, Arabella's yearning for something more in her life than the tired social round of the upper classes certainly can elicit our support. One senses the author's sympathy shifting behind the character in this instance, too. Arabella's world, with its decidedly 'anti-romantic tenor', is not one in which the cultivation of imagination is going to be encouraged – particularly not the female imagination.[21] There is more to her than any of her contemporaries, and precious little scope for these talents to be developed in any meaningful way: hence her enthusiastic embrace of the heroic romance genre, which offers the excitement and thrills that her life and social position otherwise lack. Popular culture offers a lifeline to the heroine, and her belief in it, and imitation of its language and values, has a positive side, unsustainable though it may be in the longer term.

Catherine Morland has a similarly haphazard upbringing which leaves her unprepared for adult life. Although neither of her parents dies in her youth, as happens to the unfortunate Arabella, they take a very casual attitude towards their children, the younger engaging their attention at the expense of the elder. Catherine grows up to be first of all something of a tomboy, then a keen reader, without any substantial parental guidance: 'from fifteen to seventeen she was in training for a heroine; she read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives'.[22] So far, so like Arabella, but Catherine meets no one onto whom she can project her romance-derived fantasies, no equivalent to Mr Glanville willing to put up with regular embarrassment in pursuit of his objective. She is a much more

reticent figure than Arabella, with the author emphasising her sheer ordinariness. This is much in contrast to Arabella, who throws herself into the role of heroine with gusto, and in all respects is a much more spirited character than Catherine.

When she discovers Gothic romances Catherine is totally entranced. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) becomes her favourite reading and leaves a very deep impression upon her already overactive imagination.[23] Soon she is viewing the world through the eyes of a Radcliffe heroine, seeing danger, dark plots and conspiracies everywhere. Invited to the Tilney family home, Northanger Abbey, as a guest, Catherine allows her imagination to run riot, endowing the place with all the characteristics of the setting of a Gothic novel, complete with the air of menace and foreboding that they would have in her favourite authors. We then have what Peter Knox-Shaw has described as the 'Radcliffean shenanigans at the Abbey', despite its being a mundane house largely furnished in the modern style, quite unlike the gloomy Castle Udolpho that serves as a model for Catherine.[24] On discovering an old chest in her room, Catherine automatically assumes it must hold a mysterious secret, but it turns out to contain only bedclothes. A cabinet then yields up what seems like an old manuscript with several sheets wrapped up in it, but they prove to be nothing more interesting than a laundry list and some bills.

Persisting through such disappointments, Catherine continues to believe there must be dark secrets in the Tilney house, an attitude which is only strengthened when she hears of the death of the Tilneys' mother from a sudden illness nine years earlier. That is enough to suggest foul play to Catherine, especially since Mrs Tilney's room has been left untouched since the event. In true Gothic fashion, Catherine allows the wildest speculations to form in her mind. The fact that General Tilney is a rather forbidding figure, a petty tyrant within his own family, only prompts Catherine to push on and think the unthinkable. Eventually, she is brought to her senses by the sharp response Henry Tilney makes to her prying into the topic. On realising that Catherine has come to the conclusion that his father was to blame for his mother's death, as would so often be the case in the plot of a Gothic novel, Henry is deeply insulted:

> 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. 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. . . . Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?[25]

As the opening sentence of the next chapter pithily puts it, '[t]he visions of romance were over'.[26] Henry's shocked reaction projects Catherine into adulthood, and she is made to realise that her infatuation with Gothic literature is childish and potentially damaging to her prospects in life.

Fortunately, things work out well for Catherine, with Henry forgiving her and eventually marrying her – despite some mildly Gothic tyranny on the part of his father in opposing his son's choice. But it could so easily have gone horribly wrong, and Catherine has been taught a lesson about the dangers of becoming too embroiled in fictional worlds. These must never be confused with real life, and it is a critical part of her rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood to come to this realisation. Catherine has to learn to read the world around her correctly and to make sober assessments of the people in it. Just as Northanger Abbey is far more ordinary than Castle Udolpho, so life in general is far more ordinary than any fantasy dreamed up by a Gothic author. 'Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for', as the author puts it in her most pointed fashion.[27]

Catherine has to be humiliated to experience her fateful epiphany, but her friend Isabella Thorpe fails to make the same transition from childish behaviour into responsible adulthood within the course of the narrative. Catherine has soon made a solemn resolution 'of always judging and acting in future with the greatest good sense', but that is patently beyond Isabella, who continues to act with all the impetuosity of the heroine in a Gothic tale.[28] Suitors are treated with disdain, with Isabella revealing herself to be emotionally immature and only too likely to enter a bad marriage – no small matter in a society where marriage is almost the entire basis of a woman's existence. A 'mixture of sentimental claptrap and selfish ambition', as Mary Waldron has damningly described her, Isabella stands as a warning to Catherine of what can happen when one neglects to learn the rules of social conduct.[29] For

women especially, reputation is crucial, and by switching her affections from Catherine's brother, James, to Henry's brother, Frederick, Isabella leaves her own reputation badly stained, drawing the disapproval of the social circles in which she moves. Henry for one believes that Isabella is fickle enough to go off with yet another, acidly remarking that Frederick might still escape his entanglement with her if 'a baronet should come in her way'.[30] Isabella is simply not to be trusted, and by implication Gothic literature has much to answer for in her case, exacerbating existing character failings. For those who follow Plato's line on the issue, that is always going to be the fear of what emotionally charged literary material can do to the impressionable.

The proper attitude to adopt towards literature is the one exhibited by Henry Tilney, who is more than happy to admit to finding enjoyment in reading Gothic romances:

> 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.[31]

Henry goes on to say that he prizes 'invention' above all in his reading, but it is clear that he regards fiction as a form of entertainment, a pleasant diversion from the problems of everyday life rather than an accurate guide to it, as Catherine and Isabella are plainly taking it to be.[32] Neither of the latter seems able to recognise that the work of such as Radcliffe really is invention, and to be appreciated on that level alone; but then they live much more circumscribed lives than does Henry, who has already had the benefit of a university education to broaden his knowledge and understanding of the world. Opportunities of this kind are not open to Austen's heroines: women are still very much second-class citizens with very restricted horizons. Ultimately, that is one of the key points the author is making: that it is a lack of education and experience that leads women like Catherine and Isabella to escape so enthusiastically into literature, or what Peter Knox-Shaw has neatly termed 'gothic chic'.[33] Their need for an alternative reality is an indictment of the one in which they live, with its strict notions of decorum, particularly as regards women, and narrow social vision overall. What

Sandra Shulman notes of Arabella, that she is '[i]mprisoned as much by the conventions of her gender as by her delusions', is equally true of Catherine and Isabella.[34] Beyond finding a suitable marriage partner, there is little that the women of Catherine's class can aspire to; no career structure for them to take advantage of and thus exercise some degree of control over their lives. It is the sheer lack of opportunity for self-expression that makes Gothic romances, with all their lurid tales and narrative twists and turns, so appealing to young women of this class. One could argue that it is boredom more than anything that prompts imitation of popular culture, boredom with one's lack of acess to self-expression – an observation probably as true in our own day as it was in Austen's.

The overall aim of Austen's project in *Northanger Abbey*, therefore, is didactic (even if it has been suggested that she overdoes the irony in achieving her objective).[35] It is her intention to warn us against both an emotional overindulgence in art and the dangers of under-educating the young such that they fail to have a sense of proportion about art. Austen is well aware of literature's power to affect us – as an author she could hardly be otherwise – but she is aware as well of the necessity of not allowing this to get out of hand. If we let our emotions dominate us, then we must expect there to be unpleasant consequences. Isabella Thorpe is prone to just such behaviour, as a result of which she is fast becoming a social pariah by the end of the narrative, her 'insincere jargon' fooling no one.[36] At one point Catherine's mother delivers herself of the trite sentiment that 'we must live and learn', but it holds a moral for the tale none the less: Catherine does live and learn, Isabella fails to, and their respective fates are meant to convey a lesson to the reader.[37] The newly mature Catherine becomes painfully aware of Isabella's shallowness of character and comes to regret their friendship. Catherine has managed, in other words, to distance herself from her past, and with that the baleful influence of popular culture and the media; these will no longer be allowed to dominate her thoughts and form her worldview.

CONCLUSION

The differences between the two treatments of the theme are indicative of the wide range of response that the topic evokes. How, and to

what extent, the media and popular culture affect our behaviour is very much an open question and one that still vexes parents and our political guardians alike. There are many who favour greater censorship of material for the young than is currently in place, and they point to apparent copy-cat crimes as evidence for the need to be stricter in controlling the output of popular culture and the media. The issue becomes particularly controversial when it involves violence and pornography, which still tend to polarise opinion. The latter hardly figures in the novels that are being read by either Arabella or Catherine (although it does in other eighteenth-century productions such as John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748–9; better known as *Fanny Hill*) and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796)),[38] but violence is certainly present. Arabella's rather casual attitude towards duels indicates a certain amount of desensitisation has taken place through her reading, and it is precisely such desensitisation that campaigners for censorship are most worried about. Arabella has come to regard violence as a standard part of her world picture, without ever having to deal with it in reality. Rather like children exposed to cartoons nowadays, she cannot appreciate that real suffering and pain lie behind the reality: a cartoon character may bounce back to life after being the subject of extreme violence; human beings do not.

There is little explicit violence in Radcliffe either, but it is certainly there in the world in which the villainous Montoni and his peers move, with its complex political intrigues and constant conflicts between states and rival factions. As pictured by Radcliffe, Italy is a land bordering on anarchy. Again, there is a danger of desensitisation on the assumption that this is simply the way the masculine world operates, and that women must accommodate themselves to it as best they can, accepting a degree of violence as part of the normal run of affairs. Radcliffe provides an antidote to this masculinist ethos in her heroine's development of a sensibility that marks her out from the crude culture of Montoni and his ilk, but it is not this moralistic side of the author's approach to Gothic that seems to attract Catherine and Isabella; rather, it is the more shocking material that suggests evil is a very real presence in human affairs. While this is an important realisation to make as one grows up, it does depend on what effect it has on the individual. One suspects that neither Catherine nor Isabella draws the moral lessons from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* that the author wanted her audience, and her female audience above all, to do, and that is where

the worry would lie for those concerned with the welfare of the young. Radcliffe's heroines are invariably models of moral probity, but their milieu leaves much to be desired in that respect. It requires careful reading to avoid the 'gothic chic' of the latter and recognise the virtue of the former.

Popular culture and the media will always exert an influence for good or bad, and the argument surrounding censorship is essentially over whether one outweighs the other: do we accept the bad effects because of the good, or decide that no amount of good will excuse the bad? It is the liberal position versus the conservative, freedom of speech versus the need for protection of the vulnerable (which is usually interpreted as meaning mainly the young). Neither of our authors argues for censorship, but both demonstrate a strong concern for guidance and education when it comes to the consumption of narrative. What is tantalising about both Lennox and Austen is that they suggest that women have untapped reserves of imagination which are largely going to waste. There is a culturally subversive quality to this aspect of their work that deserves to be highlighted, even if it is fair to say that Lennox seems to have more feeling for her heroine in this regard than Austen does for hers (hence the observation of Amanda Gilroy that 'Arabella's earliest readers write about her as though she were a familiar friend and absorb her into their lives').[39] We could imagine Arabella turning into a novelist in later life, but hardly Catherine. Nevertheless, both heroines succeed admirably in pointing up the ways in which their societies strive to 'imprison' young women within their gender, and in consequence their respective dialogues with popular culture take on layers of meaning that still have relevance to our own debates on the topic.