**Seducing the Viewer: Sex, Power and Heightened Drama in *Northanger Abbey* (2007)**

Almost a decade before this adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* first aired on ITV in the UK and on Masterpiece Theatre in the US, rumors were already abounding of erotic fantasy scenes featuring a naked Henry Tilney and of an explicitly sexual relationship between Isabella and Captain Tilney (Thorpe 1998). The screenplay – a version of which had been finished by the summer of 1998 – was written by none other than Andrew Davies, famous to Austen viewers for having “sexed-up” *Pride and Prejudice* in the hugely successful 1995 BBC television miniseries. Davies unleashed a highly contagious strain of Darcy fever amongst the defenseless public by vividly enhancing Darcy’s sexual appeal in that adaptation. An added fencing episode featuring a sweaty Darcy in an open-necked shirt was allowed to reveal the force of his irrepressible feelings for Elizabeth, and the invented spontaneous swim in his Pemberley lake was a good excuse to show Colin Firth in dripping wet shirtsleeves, looking appropriately rugged (a little compensatory cleavage was offered in the form of the Bennet sisters). Against the background of this favoring of the female – rather than the male – gaze, it would certainly have been of little surprise to find Mr. Tilney, as a more recent newspaper article had suggested, ‘shown naked as he washes one morning’ (Shannon 2007).

Yet, perhaps to the frustration of heterosexual female viewers, Henry Tilney remains fully clothed throughout the final cut; it is predominantly the bodies of women rather than of men that are fetishized and offered up for consumption to the televisual audience in this adaptation. By visualizing the gothic fantasies incited by Catherine Morland’s consumption of the popular gothic romances of Austen’s day, Davies has ample opportunity to dramatize the theme of sexual desire that is held back in the subconscious of Austen’s novel. There are six added dreams and fantasies: one in Fullerton, one in the carriage on the way to Bath and four in Bath itself (none at all, interestingly, at the Abbey). In these episodes, Davies’ Catherine finds an erotic thrill in a loss of power and, on occasion, in the loss of consciousness itself. Nestled in an overgrown patch in the Morland family garden, for example, and stimulated by reading Mrs. Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Catherine imagines herself in a low-cut white gown (simultaneously suggesting innocence and sexual awareness), and an angry villain “forcibly dragging” her into a gaol cell where a man in black awaits her. Tossed into his arms, she smiles coquettishly and then faints. Catherine the reader, who is dressed more sedately, is then shown relaxing onto her back, absorbed in sensuous fantasy. More provocatively, Catherine is later shown reading an overtly erotic passage in Matthew G. Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796) – a Gothic horror novel of sexual exploitation and rape that the more modest Catherine of Austen’s novel does not read. During the voiceover, Catherine becomes increasingly excited by Lewis’ language (partly manipulated by Davies), which is designed to elicit a sexual reaction in its reader: the “amorous monk” admired the “voluptuous contours” of Antonia’s body as a linnet “nestled its head between her breasts and nibbled them in wanton play”. Dressed in white nightclothes with her long brown ringlets tousled loosely about her shoulders, Catherine is shown writhing restlessly on her bed with closed eyes; one of her hands is teasingly not visible to the viewer, suggesting masturbation, and the other is seemingly tied up (it becomes clear that she has a silk ribbon tied around her wrist). As she nears ecstasy, Catherine is heard in the voiceover inhabiting the character of Antonia, exclaiming: “I shall no longer be able to combat my passions [...] I must enjoy you or die!”.

Often women’s lack or loss of power, which this Catherine experiences as viscerally erotic, is contrasted with male physical activity in Davies’ screenplay. When John Thorpe – elevated to a love rival here with his coarseness toned down – and Henry Tilney sword fight at night in an invented fantasy contest for which she is the prize, Catherine is shown in her trusty low-cut white dress, her body showing clear signs of sexual arousal as she arches her back against a tree and moans loudly, shutting her eyes. We are left in no doubt that male violence is an erotic stimulus for Davies’ Catherine (however camp the acting is intended to be here). Also, when the imaginary bandits attack the Allens’ carriage on the way to Bath, the brutal combat of Mr. Allen and the villains overpowers his wife and she faints; Catherine waits passively, first in fear and then, as a bandit comes nearer and touches her, in pleasurable expectation. Davies and the director Jon Jones are also suggesting, it would seem, that Catherine finds the tension between male violence and female passivity sexually exciting. Although Catherine dreams these dreams and is therefore both director and star of her fantasy world, the screenwriter and director are of course ultimately pulling the strings, irresistibly projecting – it could be argued – their own fantasies onto the character of Catherine.

They also, as we shall see, substantially tone down the sensitivity to sexual and power inequalities which Austen instills in the character of Henry Tilney. Austen shows that Henry is sensitive to sexual inequality during the much-celebrated exchange on matrimony and dancing, in which he tells Catherine, “You will allow that in both man has the advantage of choice and woman only the power of refusal” (65). From a position of reactive rather than active agency, Austen’s Catherine nevertheless has instinctive faith in Henry: When she sees him arriving at a dance in the Upper Rooms, for example, with ‘a fashionable and pleasing-looking woman’ on his arm, ‘Catherine immediately guessed [her] to be his sister’ (41). In turn, after Catherine’s imagination has run away with her, leading her to commit a fanciful error of judgment, Austen is at pains to show that Henry is sensitive to her feelings and situation: ‘the only difference in his behaviour to her was, that he paid her rather more attention than usual. Catherine had never wanted comfort more, and he looked as if he was aware of it’ (183). Henry does not exploit his superior position and greater agency in the novel; rather, as Catherine reflects whilst listening to his conversation, he is only guilty of ‘indulg[ing] himself a little too much with the foibles of others’ (16).

In Davies’ screenplay, however, sexual inequality is deliberately heightened. Henry is rendered more powerful and intimidating whereas Catherine is made even more guileless and vulnerable. Henry’s understanding of power inequalities between the sexes is omitted, as is his comment that, in terms of taste, “excellence is pretty fairly divided between the sexes” (15). When they first dance, Henry is allowed to display his social experience in conversing with women (to the point that he can satire such exchanges), yet Catherine is, in reply, characterized as more culturally ignorant and artless than she is in the novel. When Mr. Tilney asks her whether she has already been to the theater, a concert, and the Upper Rooms in Bath, Austen has her answer in the affirmative on all three counts (13). Yet in Davies’ version of events, Catherine replies negatively to all three, and does so in an incredulous tone. Also, when she sees Henry again, this time with his sister Eleanor on his arm, Catherine is clearly hurt, fearing him to be married, until Henry corrects her in a rather smug and self-satisfied manner. Austen could not be clearer on the point that there is no confusion (‘it had never entered her head that Mr. Tilney could be married’, 41) and mocks how melodramatic such confusion would have been: ‘thus unthinkingly throwing away a fair opportunity of considering him lost to her for ever, by being married already’ (41). In contrast, Davies knowingly exploits this “fair opportunity” by having Catherine fear exactly that. Henry’s insensitivity to her weaker position reaches its dramatic nadir when Catherine confesses her suspicions of General Tilney’s wrongdoing. Far from being concerned (“You look pale. I am afraid I alarmed you by running so fast up those stairs”, 179) and guiding her to more rational-based judgment (“Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English: that we are Christians”, 182), Davies’ Henry takes on some of the tyrannical aspects that his father has embodied and intimidates Catherine into feeling pain and guilt at her imaginative wanderings. With the advantage of height, age, sex and added authority, he looks down on her, imploring her in an intolerant tone of voice: “Catherine, how could you?”. With a swish of his black, bat-winged cape and an unanswerable parting jibe – “Perhaps, after all, it is possible to read too many novels” – he gallops off in the rain on his white stallion. Catherine is left alone, utterly overpowered, in awe of Henry’s temper and in tears.

This is not the only example of Davies gothicizing characters and events – and thereby removing much of Austen’s *parody* of the gothic – in order to heighten the drama for contemporary viewers. Austen scores comic mileage out of the Abbey not living up to Catherine’s Radcliffe-inspired expectations: ‘To an imagination which had hoped [...] for painted glass, dirt, and cobwebs, the difference was very distressing’ (146). Yet in Davies’ recreation, the Abbey is transformed into a hugely impressive, full-blown castle (the grand Lismore Castle in Ireland) which seems to magnetically attract terrifying bolts of lightning and bleak skies (Austen uses such weather occasionally and humorously as a form of irony; Davies and the director use it repeatedly and generally without irony to intensify atmosphere). In a clear reversal of Austen’s meaning, Catherine excitedly remarks when she first sees Northanger from the open carriage: “It’s exactly as I imagined! It’s just like what one reads about”. The dead Mrs. Tilney’s mysterious chamber – which Austen describes as being in the modern part of the Abbey, much to the disappointment of Catherine’s imagination (178) – is relocated to the ancient attic by Davies, and reached by ascending an imposing staircase and passing a stuffed hawk pinned as if swooping on prey. Cobwebs drably hang from the mantelpiece of the chamber and a sheet of dust covers the wooden floor. In such surroundings, Davies’ Catherine is prevented from the development towards maturity and self-knowledge that Austen’s Catherine undergoes. In Austen’s novel, Catherine learns to differentiate between reality and fancy, in part because Northanger fails to live up to the expectations shaped by her reading and Mr. Tilney’s teasing (‘A moment’s glance was enough to satisfy Catherine that her apartment was very unlike the one which Henry had endeavoured to alarm her by the description of’, 147). In contrast, Catherine in fact becomes *less* self-assured in Davies’ remolding of events as she realizes the world can indeed be like the fantasy tales which she so eagerly reads. By exploiting the gothic in order to make their adaptation more commercially entertaining, Davies and Jones make Catherine prey to a tremulously overwhelming environment in which reality and fantasy are continually confused; in the process, they also try to convince us, as we have seen, that Catherine finds this situation sexually arousing.

The narrative strands of sex, power and embellished drama in Davies’ screenplay intertwine in Captain Tilney’s treatment of Isabella Thorpe. In Austen’s novel, the two engage in a flirtation, flattering each other’s vanity until the Captain turns his attentions to another and removes to his regiment – an event which Davies magnifies into a seduction plot. Eleanor sets the scene by warning Catherine that Isabella “is far out of her depth with [Frederick]”; the Captain is then shown in his regimentals, guiding Isabella into private brothel-like chambers as an officer delights at a pair of breasts (“Look at the size of these!”) to squeals of female laughter. The next shot is a post-coital one of Isabella lying naked on a bed, wearing only a garish necklace (emblematic of her artificiality) and a sheet to cover her breasts, and of the Captain smoking in a loose shirt in front of an open fire (representing the heat of his sexual drive). “And, are we engaged?” asks Isabella hopefully, and is framed looking forlorn when the Captain disappoints her. “He is accustomed,” Eleanor tells a wide-eyed and alarmed Catherine, “to having his way”.

Of course women in Austen’s day *were* particularly vulnerable to such seductions as well as feelings of timidity and a powerlessness to genuinely influence the course of events. However, what is noticeable about Davies’ reshaping of Austen’s narrative is that he strongly sexualizes the vulnerability of women for the titillation and amusement of the viewer (presumably in order to achieve a wider – and perhaps more male – audience share). This intention is most explicit in an invented dream sequence deleted before the North American transmission but broadcast on British television screens and retained in the European DVD, in which Catherine is seen lying in a bathtub in idyllic sylvan woodland after a country walk with Henry and Eleanor. In a voiceover, Catherine recalls a passage from *The Monk* in which a magical talisman empowers the male protagonist to rape Antonia (in Davies’ imaginative spin, even the suggestion of rape is allowed to be shown as sexually stimulating for the young Catherine). Naked except for her silver cross necklace and submerged up to the neck in milky bathwater (an image freighted with Freudian connotations), Catherine ducks her head under when Henry, dressed in full parson’s attire, emerges from the blossoming trees, holding an open bible. “It’s all God’s creation,” he tells a visibly insecure Catherine. “Come,” he says, beckoning her out of the bath; swallowing hard, she takes his hand, shyly stands up, and we see her wet naked body from behind. What is fascinating about the wider conflict being dramatized in this scene between sexual desire and Christian propriety – represented by Henry the clergyman, the gold-rimmed bible, and her silver cross (quite literally a weight around her neck) – is that Davies makes only the woman feel guilt and shame for having sexual thoughts. Instead of reassuring her, Henry’s address and pious garb actually serve to highlight and heighten what Catherine experiences as unholy desires. In fact, if a branch of myrtle is the Monk’s talisman in Lewis’ novel, investing him with the power to rape Antonia, Henry’s talisman in this episode is the authority of Christianity itself, enabling him (and the viewer) to see and experience Catherine in the nude for the first time.

For Davies and Jones, the sum of Catherine’s awakening does not seem to be that she becomes a wiser reader of books, herself, and others, as in Austen’s novel. Rather, her awakening is primarily a sexual one in this recreation: she painfully learns that love and desire are inextricably tied up with power. Intimidated by her experiences of unpredictability and powerlessness, Davies’ Catherine first steps back in fear when Henry finally arrives at Fullerton on his horse and approaches her. Her first words to him are also ones of apology. Far from being harmoniously resolved, the power imbalance is still in place and continues to be experienced by Catherine as threatening. When Henry proposes (an event conveyed by Austen in the third person, 228) and their lips meet in the (inevitable and invented) screen kiss, Catherine presses her palms against Tilney’s chest and pushes him into the bough of the spring trees behind them. By overpowering him in the moment of romantic union, Davies’ Catherine shows that she has learned the lessons of love: there can be no sex without power.

With much of Austen’s irony and parody flattened, and key elements being either removed, reversed or sensationally exaggerated in the transition from text to screen, a quite different – and more modern – narrative emerges, namely the story of a young girl’s suppressed sexual longing and sexual awakening. In an Anglo-American culture saturated with reality television shows, an entertainment industry geared towards the sensational, and the internet having drastically inflated the proliferation of sexual images worldwide, it is not difficult to imagine why Jane Austen adaptations have become – in this example at least – more racy and titillating. It is, of course, the viewer who is ultimately being seduced in Davies’ adaptation. Fittingly it is Isabella who lets this slip: in a comment loaded with dramatic irony and delivered with a coy smile whilst lowering her bosom-busting bodice into the camera’s center frame, she exclaims: “Lord! What would the men think if they could see us now?”