

BEYOND THE PARODY: GOTHIC AS NARRATIVE METHODOLOGY IN *NORTHANGER ABBEY*

Paula Pope RAMOS*

■ **ABSTRACT:** This article proposes that Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817) is not limited to using the Gothic as a mere object of parody, but rather approaches it as a narrative methodology. The study therefore aims to analyse how Austen mobilises Gothic structures and expectations in order to articulate a critique of patriarchal authority. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative and bibliographical approach, based on close reading of the novel on dialogue with critical studies on the Gothic aesthetics (Botting, 2005), parody (Hutcheon, 2000), and "artefictions" (Lim, 2017). From this perspective, the novel's engagement with Gothic conventions generates interpretative circulations across multiple levels: the narrative, sociopolitical and geographical planes, as well as the novel's own self-reflexivity. Such engagement highlights Austen's literary craftsmanship both as a writer and as a reader, revealing her familiarity with Gothic tropes and with the critical commentary embedded within the tradition. Ultimately, *Northanger Abbey* does not simply laugh at the Gothic; rather, it laughs from within it, assembling and dismantling a sequence of events and misunderstandings that expose not the limitations of Gothic poetics, but the operations of patriarchy.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Gothic. Narrative methodology. *Northanger Abbey*. Parody.

Introduction

Much has been written regarding the extent to which *Northanger Abbey* (1817) constitutes a parody of the Gothic. A considerable body of scholarship has explored the novel's relationship with Gothic fiction and its comic engagement with the conventions of the genre. Critics such as Claudia L. Johnson (1988) and Mary Waldron (2004) argue that Austen's use of Gothic exceeds simple parody, functioning instead as a mode through which the novel exposes the political and gendered tensions embedded in everyday social relations. While Catherine Morland may misinterpret the specific nature of General Tilney's supposed "crimes,"

* UFF – Fluminense Federal University (UFF). Institute of Languages – Department of Modern Foreign Languages (GLE). Niterói – RJ – Brazil – 24210-200 – ppopperamos@gmail.com

both critics note that her suspicions gesture towards a genuine form of domestic tyranny, revealing how patriarchal authority may operate beneath the appearance of respectability within the English household.

Similarly, Genilda Azerêdo, in “Jane Austen e a recodificação paródica do gótico” (2012), emphasizes the complex relationship between author and parodied work, arguing that parody presupposes an intimate knowledge of the conventions it reworks. Consequently, parody facilitates a craftsmanship that emerges from an intense engagement between author-as-reader and literature, even when intended to promote a type of “imitation characterized by ironic inversion”, as argued by Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Parody* (2000, p. 6). Whether written in opposition to or from within it, the Gothic remained an immensely popular narrative mode during the period in which Austen composed her novel.

This article builds upon that established critical tradition while proposing a slightly different emphasis. It aims to analyse how *Northanger Abbey* mobilises Gothic conventions not simply to parody them, but to employ the Gothic as a narrative methodology capable of exposing the structures of patriarchal authority embedded in everyday English life. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and bibliographical approach grounded in close reading of the novel, in dialogue with key theoretical discussions on parody, Gothic aesthetics, “artefictions”, and the novel as genre. From this perspective, parody becomes less a gesture of dismissal than a strategy of critical engagement through which Austen simultaneously reproduces and destabilises the expectations associated with Gothic narrative.

The hypothesis presented here, therefore, is that if *Northanger* is a parody, it is not merely so. Austen crafts something beyond a mockery of the Gothic (that is, beyond simple parody) because she appears to have grasped, with a clarity rare for her time, that Gothic excesses also function to produce a comic effect. Nevertheless, behind this tight-slipped smile lies a critique of the status quo. By situating her narrative within England, Austen diagnoses the English domestic landscape with a subtle assertiveness that the temporal and geographical distancing of an “early Gothic” (produced between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) might otherwise obscure. In doing so, she suggests that the true horror in the lives of young women is not found in ghosts, skeletons, or monks, but in the patriarchy that sustains English society.

A brief introduction to *Northanger Abbey*

The novel traces the life of Catherine Morland, a naïve young girl fascinated by Gothic novels, who is so profoundly affected by these tales that she reimagines her world – one that is terribly modern, and, consequently, lacking the Gothicism she craves – as a Gothic narrative. Austen’s opening lines are often quintessential in establishing the narrative tone, and thus Catherine is immediately introduced

as an improbable heroine. As if trying to resemble the Gothic heroines she reads about, whose lives are affected by a series of losses (of family, fortune, virtue) endured within a hostile world, Catherine is, at best, found wanting. The narrator soon observes that: “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her” (Austen, 2004, p. 5). Thus, the reader can only imagine the lengths Catherine had to cover in order to be able to fit into the “damsel in distress” and “accomplished lady” literary archetypes.

Her father, a clergyman of stable economic standing, was well-respected within the neighbourhood, and, the narrator lets the reader know, was not “addicted to locking up his daughters” (Austen, 2004, p. 5). Her mother, far from tragically dying in childbirth, proceeded to have ten children. As she matured, Catherine possessed no particular talent to recommend her, no aptitude for music or the arts, and preferred the company of boys to that of girls. However, her life trajectory changed when she turned fifteen and became interested in more “feminine” pursuits. It was then that her “heroine training camp” started, and 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” (Austen, 2004, p. 7).

As part of a large and happy family, Catherine’s life unfortunately lacked the melodrama found in Emily St. Aubert, the protagonist of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). This comparison is important as it not only positions Catherine against the ideal Gothic heroine, against whom she voluntarily measures herself, but also because Austen employs this archetypal character to denounce the perils of the patriarchy. In *Udolpho*, Emily is a young orphaned girl who falls under the shadow of the predatory signor Montoni, her aunt’s tyrannical husband. Within the terrifying castle of Udolpho, nestled in the Italian Alps, Montoni attempts to coerce her into renouncing her father’s inheritance through threats, and by isolating her in secluded lodgings surrounded by inexplicable noises and dark corridors, where the boundary between natural and supernatural is suspended.

One of the most famous episodes in *Udolpho* occurs when Emily glimpses a figure behind a black veil, perceives it to be a decomposing corpse, and then faints. The horror induced by this seemingly supernatural encounter – which resulted in the complete suspension of her cognitive faculties –, is resolved only hundreds of pages later, when it is revealed that the corpse was, in fact, a wax figure. Here, the Radcliffean device of the “supernatural explained” is deployed, rationalising the event and, in doing so, modulating horror into terror.

According to Ann Radcliffe, in “On the supernatural in poetry” (2000 [1826], p. 168), “Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly

annihilates them”. Tangentially addressing the aesthetic effects of terror and horror, it is noteworthy how Austen’s Gothic also adopts terror as a principle of expansion, albeit one contained within Catherine’s active imagination. If reproachable, the Gothic allows Austen’s protagonist to apprehend the world in a singular manner, one that is perhaps distinctively feminine, as it remains alienated from any sort of formal education and more rational (masculine) environments. Nevertheless, *Northanger* demonstrates that Catherine is obsessed with terror, for when she finally discovers the horrors inherent in a patriarchal society, as shall be discussed later, the idea of ghosts, skeletons and ancient secrets no longer entices her.

In Bath, a city designed by a mercenary social web of second intentions, Catherine falls victim to a series of fictions (this time, not of her own making) that compromise her future, even if only momentarily. Here, the perils are of flesh and blood, and amongst them is Isabella Thorpe, another avid reader of the Gothic, and her brother John, whose combination of arrogance, persistence, and manipulation Catherine transforms into the villain of her personal drama. Whilst John is someone she wishes to avoid, her other new acquaintance, Henry Tilney, quickly becomes the object of her affections.

Upon invitation, Catherine travels to Northanger Abbey, the Tilney estate. She is enthralled by the prospect of not only spending weeks with Henry but in an abbey! As the narrator notes: “To see and explore either the ramparts and keep of the one, or the cloisters of the other, had been many weeks a darling wish, though to be more than the visitor of an hour, had seemed too nearly impossible for desire” (Austen, 2004, p. 96). Aware of her fantasies, Henry feeds her imagination during the carriage ride, narrating tales of terrible incidents, haunted chambers, and mysterious objects. He describes that, upon arrival, Catherine would encounter an old-fashioned cabinet which, after a thorough inspection, would reveal the hidden manuscript of a “wretched Matilda” (Austen, 2004, p. 109). In a turn of events that Austen renders improbable (and thus comical), these episodes befall Catherine. When she attempts to read the roll of papers she has discovered inside a black cabinet hidden in a dark corner of the room, one she believes to be that manuscript, her candle is extinguished, and she retreats to her bed, hiding beneath the covers in complete despair; “Human nature could support no more” (Austen, 2004, p. 117).

However, Catherine’s Gothic expectations are invariably dismantled. The “ancient manuscript” turns out to be a washing-bill, and the long-awaited abbey is nothing more than a refurbished, modern, and luxurious residence. The building’s imagined grandiosity is met with a timid stature and a lack of ancient chimneys, and on entering under the oppressive gaze of her host, General Tilney, the ease of her admission, “without obstacle, alarm or solemnity of any kind, struck her as odd and inconsistent” (Austen, 2004, p. 110). Yet, frustration does not tame Catherine’s imagination, and stimulated by Henry’s stories as well as the partially ancient atmosphere of the house, she constructs her own Gothic narrative. She convinces

herself that the death of Mrs. Tilney hides dark mysteries and projects onto General Tilney a villainy worthy of Radcliffe. Had the General murdered his own wife? She decides she is the only one capable of unraveling the mystery.

Catherine is eventually caught by Henry whilst investigating his deceased mother's bedroom. Henry's famous sermon "remember that we are English" reproaches her delusions by asserting that Gothic atrocities do not exist within the English domestic Protestant landscape. As her fantasies collide with reality, she must endure the humiliation of having allowed her fantasies to override her common sense, attempting to reconcile her always active imagination and the true perils of everyday life. After some deep reflection, she concludes:

Her thoughts being still chiefly fixed on what she had with such causeless terror felt and done, nothing could shortly be clearer, than that it had been all a voluntary, self-created delusion, each trifling circumstance receiving importance from an imagination resolved on alarm, and every thing forced to bend to one purpose by a mind which, before she entered the Abbey, had been craving to be frightened (Austen, 2004, p. 137).

Soon after this episode, Catherine is abruptly expelled from Northanger by the General's order, an act she can only associate with her previous erroneous accusations. This type of violence affects her in a way that Gothic terrors never could, and she is forced to undertake a long journey back to Fullerton alone and penniless. Catherine is rescued from her sorrows by Henry Tilney's sudden appearance who, having been away during her indecorous removal, arrives at the Morland household to apologise and explain his father's actions: Catherine had been expelled because the General, previously misled to believe she was wealthy and heir to the Allens's fortune, was of a modest family and situation. Lacking the money to recommend her, she was no longer a "good" marriage prospect for Henry, which enraged him and caused her violent departure. The story concludes, of course, with their union once the General reconsidered his opposition as his daughter, Eleanor, secured a highly advantageous marriage for her own.

What is Gothic poetics and how does it function in Austen?

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the Gothic, as a narrative mode, was consolidated by the mid-eighteenth century in England. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is classified as the inaugural novel to assemble a specific repertoire of tropes within a single narrative concerning supernatural mysteries, illicit secrets and usurpations – a literary project that was by no means accidental. One must recognise that this same period witnessed not only the expansion of the Enlightenment and its philosophy of reason, but also the rise and consolidation of

the novel as one of the most popular genres in England, despite the widespread and often vexatious criticism directed towards it. However, the kind of story being told at the time seems to have failed to satisfy the appetite for romance and adventure held by Walpole and many other readers. Thus, the emergence of the Gothic reintroduced in that neoclassical society “the horrible, the insane and the demonic, throwing open the contradictions that defined the Age of Reason”¹, as asserts Sandra Vasconcelos in *Dez Lições Sobre o Romance Inglês* (2002, p. 119, translation mine).

Walpole’s Gothic endeavour is remarkably self-conscious, as suggested by the preface to the second edition of *Otranto*. In the text, the author justifies his use of all that medieval and superstitious paraphernalia by arguing that the novel (genre) had been purportedly stifled by the demand for probability required from it. Such enterprise had a clear aesthetic aim since, according to Walpole, he tried to restore to the novel an originality that had been lost, as well as to grant freedom to the imagination. Justifying his Gothic enterprise in *Otranto*, he argues:

It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the greatest resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life. But if in the latter species Nature has cramped imagination, she did but take her revenge, having been totally excluded from old romances. The actions, sentiments, conversations, of the heroes and heroines of ancient days are as unnatural as the machines employed to put them in motion (Walpole, 2000 [1765], p. 123).

As demonstrated above, Horace Walpole presents his work as an attempt to blend and, to an extent, reconcile the ancient romance and the modern romance – that is, what nowadays is classified as romance and novel. Walpole believed that the deficiencies he identified in the ancient romance (too much imagination and improbability), were rectified by the latter, the modern romance (novel), where nature seems to be a guide. However, he argues that the novel’s take on domestic life and probability has “dammed up” the great possibilities within the genre. Thus, Walpole carnivalises the novel’s more “natural” and “common life” stances through the inclusion of ghosts and gigantic helmets inexplicably falling from the sky in order to right wrongs, whilst simultaneously celebrating modern characters whose actions felt more “real”.

¹ In the original: “o horrível, o insano e o demoníaco, escancarando as contradições que marcaram a chamada Era da Razão”.

This cannibalistic approach to the novel as genre—a bastard form, as Vasconcelos (2002) describes it, or the queen of all literary genres, as Terry Eagleton has also referred to it in *The English Novel* (2005) –, is equally present in Jane Austen. As one of the few women writers to have consistently been held in high esteem within the English literary canon, Austen's novels employ various approaches to narrative modes, often utilising a metafictional technique that revisits and revises them; with the Gothic in *Northanger Abbey*, but also with sentimental fiction in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). In doing so, she advances her own understanding of what the genre is and what it might become. In this reading, the “mis-” in Miss Austen's works (misreadings, misinterpretations, misunderstandings, misrecognitions, misspeaking, miseducation) seems to allude to a literary project that is inextricably intertwined with life. That is, it is through literature, and via the (mis)crossing of genres and modes, that Austen advances her reading of literature and its characters, as well as of life and human character – all of which are too complex to be fully apprehended within the confines of some three hundred or so pages.

As Susan Fraiman (2004, p. xii) notes, *Northanger's* inconclusive last sentence is reluctant, like the novel, to affirm one position over the other: “I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience” (Austen, 2004, p. 174). Thus, Austen seems to leave it to be settled by scholars of her oeuvre whether her novels are entirely a parody of (literary and cultural) modes, codes, and affections, or purposefully open themselves up for a never-ending series of misinterpretations not only as a narrative methodology but an ethical stance on life and literature.

In discussing Austen's appropriation of the Gothic, it is self-evident that, although the mode was consciously and more formally codified only in the eighteenth century, its machinery had long circulated across various nations and literary landscapes. In an English context, for example, one may observe how the monsters in *Beowulf* unveil the same undecidability regarding the boundary between humanity and monstrosity that is later found in Shakespearean ghosts, or in the tension between creator and creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Embodying similar concerns and anxieties, these monstrous figures return from the beyond or are animated by a cursed alchemy to disrupt the present, incite violence, or expose ethical contradictions of the living world. Consequently, it is entirely conceivable that within Austen's social realism there exists a legitimate space for the Gothic, functioning as something far more profound than mere mockery. What is being suggested here is that the Gothic is not just about haunted houses, but about ontological instability, the fear of not knowing exactly what a person, society or oneself is capable of – or, Austen's “mis-”.

Fred Botting, in *Gothic* (2005, p. 1), defines the Gothic as a writing of excess fascinated by the transgression of limits. As a result, it is both sustained by and

feeds off anxieties, ambivalent feelings and meanings. In more didactic terms, Botting also characterises a group of Gothic tropes common to various periods:

Tortuous, fragmented narratives relating mysterious incidents, horrible images and life-threatening pursuits predominate in the eighteenth century. Spectres, monsters, demons, corpses, skeletons, evil aristocrats, monks and nuns, fainting heroines and bandits populate Gothic landscapes as suggestive figures of imagined and realistic threats. This list grew, in the nineteenth century, with the addition of scientists, fathers, husbands, madmen, criminals and the monstrous double signifying duplicity and evil nature. Gothic landscapes are desolate, alienating and full of menace. Later the modern city combined the natural and architectural components of Gothic grandeur and wildness, its dark, labyrinthine streets suggesting the violence and menace of Gothic castle and forest (Botting, 2005, p. 2).

Even though Austen does not populate her Gothic with spectres, monsters, demons, and doubles, *Northanger* is composed of (supposedly) mysterious incidents and life-threatening pursuits. Furthermore, it features evil aristocrats not as suggestive figures of imagined threats, but as concrete ones. In the absence of literal hauntings, Catherine Morland is pursued by the persistent and gaslighting John Thorpe, and by General Tilney with his mercenary approach to life and marriage. Whilst Catherine may be held accountable for the recurrent fictionalising of her own world and her subsequent misreadings, she is also the victim of a web of fictions which, upon being exposed, reveal that the “common life” may be far more terrifying and dangerous than any Gothic tale she has read. As Susan Fraiman (2004, p. ix) notes in her introduction to *Northanger*, the novel finds “danger for girls not in spooky ruins but in fashionable resorts, slow-moving carriages, and comfortable, middle-class homes”. *Northanger Abbey* is not a Gothic novel, and Austen’s Gothic is not one of grandeur, sublime nature, or hidden labyrinths connecting church to convent; rather, it is one of subtlety, of the suggestive, of an absolute suspense that slowly unveils its horrors.

The circulation of the Gothic & the Gothic as circulation

In *Northanger Abbey* the Gothic functions as an engine driving the narrative forward. Although many of its mechanisms are set in motion by Catherine’s excessive imagination, these fantasies advance the plot by employing the Gothic not only as mere theme or object of parody. Such circulation originates with Catherine herself, who absorbs and redistributes Gothic codes. She reads Radcliffe as one learning an emotional grammar, subsequently decoding the world through Gothic patterns. In doing so, she compels these new readings into the narrative fabric. Whether

interpreting chests, cabinets or manuscripts as gateways to ancestral secrets, the plot progresses because Catherine projects the Gothic onto reality, transforming events that would otherwise lack dramatic weight into “leads” to be followed. For instance, the absence of Mrs. Tilney’s portrait in the drawing room, where it would traditionally be displayed, is interpreted as a sign of a cruel, controlling and murderous husband. In reality, it was hidden away simply because it did not suit the General’s aesthetic taste. Thus, it is not the physical space of the abbey that introduces Gothicisms into the novel, but rather Catherine’s active and fertile reading of her environment.

Moreover, the circulation of Gothic novels as physical artefacts reinforces this mobility. Catherine reads, recommends and reviews plots in conversation with Isabella, John, and the Tilneys. Consequently, books become social objects that both forge alliances and demarcate character. Whilst novels bring Isabella and Eleanor closer to Catherine, they alienate her from John Thorpe, who despises them. When Catherine asks if he has read *Udolpho*, he replies: “‘Udolpho! Oh, Lord! not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do’”, and then continues: “‘Novels are so full of nonsense and stuff; there has not been a tolerably decent one come out since Tom Jones, except the Monk; I read that t’other day; but as for all the others, they are the stupidest things in creation’” (Austen, 2004, p. 31). The novels Thorpe favours, namely Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749) and M. G. Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), were, upon publication, accused of sensationalism, libertinism, and transgressive behaviour. His literary preferences thus reflect a darker side of his character (literary and personality) that Catherine is too naïve to comprehend, or the reader may be too innocent to conceive at first, but one that his own choices reveal. In this reading, Austen transforms the Gothic into a narrative system that facilitates the plot’s circulation, exerting a potency that is simultaneously creative and destructive.

One must remember that *Northanger Abbey* is, amongst many other things, a novel about novels, the impact of fiction on everyday life, and the manner in which specific genres can shape expectations, affections, and conduct. Austen composed the text at the close of the eighteenth century, though it was only published (due to her considerable persistence) nearly twenty years later. Consequently, her novel converges with a historical moment in which the novel as a genre was among the most widely consumed in England, particularly by women, yet lacked literary prestige – perhaps precisely because its primary readership was female.

It is no coincidence that Susan Fraiman (2004, p. vii) observes that *Northanger* “contains one of the boldest, most self-confident artistic manifestoes in the history of literature”. Austen wrote within a context where the novel was still regarded as a “low” and morally suspect form. William Wordsworth famously dismissed such works as “frantic novels” in the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), and Samuel Taylor Coleridge likened the intellectual virtue of reading a

novel to “spitting over a bridge” in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817). In light of this, it is striking that Austen interrupts her own narrative for several paragraphs to explicitly defend the genre and its authors – most notably, its female authors. Her narrator says:

Yes, novels; — for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding — joining with the greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. [...] 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 fashions, our foes are almost as many as our readers. [...] “I am no novel reader — I seldom look into novels — Do not imagine that I often read novels — It is really very well for a novel.” — Such is the common cant. — “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, only 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 (Austen, 2004, p. 22-23, original emphasis).

This celebrated passage functions as a manifesto of the novel and of female authorship. Susan Fraiman (2004, p. xi) notes that, acutely aware of how genre is intrinsically linked to gender and categorised accordingly, Austen subverts the traditional hierarchy by favouring the works of Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth over the male figures universally admired and recommended by *The Spectator*, with their “improbable circumstances, unnatural characters, and topics of conversation, which no longer concern any one living” (Austen, 2004, p. 23). In doing so, she denounces the prejudice against fiction written and read by women, asserting that the artistic merit of the novel as a form is more capable of offering genuine pleasure than many of the genres legitimised by contemporary critics.

Moreover, the aforementioned passage substantiates the earlier argument that Austen’s fiction operates through a series of “mis-” in order to achieve, as the narrator suggests, a “thorough knowledge of human nature”. Apparently aware of the meta-fictional dimension of her literary project, particularly within *Northanger Abbey*, Austen opens her narrative to the Gothic and to misinterpretations – the

former's inherent ambiguities –, and in doing so she restores to the genre that same liberty which Walpole sought to reclaim in *Otranto*. It is equally possible, of course, that she chose to employ the Gothic machinery simply because it remained not only culturally pervasive but commercially profitable in late eighteenth-century England. Nevertheless, the reality remains that her novel illuminates the sociopolitical dimensions of reading through its sustained engagement with the Gothic, a mode that most definitely contributed to the evolution and shaping of the novel as it is understood nowadays.

Furthermore, it is compelling to observe how the narrator deliberately distances herself from the “ungenerous and impolitic custom” whereby novelists disparage the very genre they inhabit. Rather than succumbing to this performative self-deprecation, she champions the novel's intrinsic merit, claiming that the form offers a uniquely lucid perspective on human nature, its inherent complexities, and the nuances of life. In this regard, Austen eschews the defensive strategies employed by predecessors such as Daniel Defoe in *Moll Flanders* (1722) and Horace Walpole in *Otranto*, who felt compelled to frame their narratives as factual records, be it a “discovered” journal or an ancient medieval manuscript. While these authors sought to evade critical censure and secure a veneer of factuality by displacing authorial responsibility onto fictitious editors or pseudotranslations, Austen rejects such artifice. She does not merely compose a novel about novels; she claims the medium as a legitimate site of intellectual authority. By doing so, she transforms the act of writing from a source of shame into a celebration of female creative agency and the profound utility of the novelist's craft.

Considering the amount of criticism the novel suffered, one can readily imagine the even more precarious position occupied by the Gothic novel with its narratives of pursuit, usurpation, libertine villains, and heroines threatened by manifold forms of violence and dispossession. The anonymous article “The Terrorist Novel Writing”, published in 1798, argued that the novel ought to be a representation of human life and manners intended to correct conduct and rectify failings – the antithesis of the Gothic project:

But what instruction is to be reaped from the distorted ideas of lunatics, I am at a loss to conceive. [...] Are the duties of life so changed, that all the instructions necessary for a young person is to learn to walk at night upon the battlements of an old castle, to creep hands and feet along a narrow passage, and meet the devil at the end of it? (The Terrorist Novel Writing, 2000 [1798], p. 184).

Such criticism appears particularly curious when one considers the widespread circulation of Gothic novels during the period. The literary market of the late eighteenth century was infected by the Gothic. As Robert Miles observes in “The 1790s: the effulgence of Gothic” (2002, p. 42), the genre maintained a presence

of 30% over nearly two decades (1788-1807), reaching a peak of 38% in 1795. Given that the novel was the primary vehicle for the production and reproduction of Gothic poetics, it is reasonable to assume that this mode played a fundamental role in the popularisation and dissemination of the novel during an era ostensible dominated by reason.

Given the significant hiatus between *Northanger's* composition and its eventual publication (roughly 1798 to 1818), one must recognise that the initial Gothic “fever” had, in many respects, already abated. Austen was acutely aware that even the most definitive tropes of the “early Gothic” might, by then, appear stereotypical or even farcical. In her 1816 advertisement to the novel, she noted that certain observations were necessary “upon those parts of the work which thirteen years have made comparatively obsolete” (Austen, 2004, p. 216), urging the public to remember that such a period inevitably brings considerable changes in places, manners, books, and opinions.

As professor Júlio França (UERJ) suggested in his lecture “*A abadía de Northanger: Jane Austen e as artimanhas do gótico como poética*” delivered at the “Colóquio UFF: Jane Austen, 1775-2025” at Fluminense Federal University (UFF) in December 2025, Austen occupies the interstices between the Gothic as a “style of the period” and as a formal, trans-historical and reasonably universal poetics characterised by identifiable aesthetic effects. In this regard, she did not merely subvert the genre; Austen contributed to the evolution of the Gothic as we recognise it today.

Dated or not, Austen seems to have captured the ontological essence of the Gothic: its reliance on farce, fabrication, and what Amy Lim (2017) defines as “artefictions”. In “Gothic ‘artefictions’: fabricating history in Horace Walpole’s Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto*” (2017), Lin argues that these are replicas historically grounded in research yet rendered in a contemporary, self-consciously synthetic format. Walpole’s Gothic-style mansion Strawberry Hill in Twickenham, London, utilised these “artefictions” to evoke a sense of a medieval past, offering an emotional and sensorial alternative to the cold, rational historiography of the Enlightenment. In this sense, Strawberry Hill is far from a Gothic building in ruins, but a deliberate farse performed in the heart of South West London. This architectural project provides a vital lens for understanding Austen’s project. Like Walpole, she recognises that the Gothic is less about historical authenticity and more about the performance of atmosphere.

By relocating her “artefiction” to the social theatre of Georgian Bath, and later to an overtly modern abbey, she demonstrates that the Gothic is a portable system of fabrication that can be constructed anywhere, even within the most “rational” modern environments. Rather than deploying Radcliffian sublime landscapes, Austen weaves her Gothic through subtlety and suggestion, reconfiguring the mode to suit the realities of an ostensibly rational, Protestant England. Consequently, she

identifies danger not within typical Gothic iconography, but amidst the assembly rooms and spas of Bath, within middle-class homes, and in the reactionary desire to impose order upon a tumultuous England in the wake of the French Revolution (Fraiman, 2004, p. ix).

In *Northanger Abbey*, fiction informs reality rather than the reverse. While the narrative may lack the traditional Gothic apparatus of ghosts, labyrinths, or gigantic helmets falling from the sky, it is nevertheless replete with threats of a different order: the economic, social, and political power of men, which dictates the destinies of others; the moral surveillance that regulates female conduct; and the matrimonial logic of the marriage market that reduces women to mere commodities of exchange. At the heart of these tensions lies the issue of Catherine's miseducation. On a sociopolitical plane, the systematic lack of education afforded to young women results in distorted readings of reality and precludes the possibility of more nuanced, alternative interpretations. In this light, Austen's critique is directed not at the Gothic itself, but rather at the underlying oppression of social structures already diagnosed in many Gothic novels.

Catherine's lack of discernment, though it propels the narrative, plunges her into a series of perilous situations caused largely by misunderstandings, a direct consequence of a deficient critical formation. Although she is far from a fragile heroine, being both imaginative and curious, she remains vulnerable because her education has left her wanting. As the text suggests, Catherine reads, but she reads in isolation; she interprets, but without a framework for analysis; she seeks to comprehend the world, yet has received only fragmented, moralising instructions. Her hyper-active imagination is not a character flaw, but a symptom of a pedagogical system that privileges the ornamental over the autonomous. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in "Shut Up in Prose: Gender and Genre in Austen's Juvenilia" (2004 [1979], p. 279), "*Northanger Abbey* describes exactly how a girl in search of her life story finds herself entrapped in a series of monstrous fictions which deprive her of primacy". In this light, Austen is close to Mary Wollstonecraft's arguments in *A vindication of the rights of women* (1792), in which she defends that the limited, superficial and ornamental education given to middle-class women not only restricts their opportunities, but makes them vulnerable to mistakes in life, easy preys to male manipulation and emotional dependency.

Rebecca West, in "The Feminism of Jane Austen" (1932), ponders whether it was Austen's inherent feminism that prevented the publication of *Northanger Abbey* immediately after its completion. The novel had been purchased by the publishers Crosby & Co. in 1803; yet, despite being advertised, it remained unpublished. In 1806, Austen sent a letter to the firm signed 'M.A.D.' (the acronym for Mrs. Ashton Dennis, but also a clear allusion to her fury), in which she offered a duplicate manuscript should the original be lost, or expressed her intent to repurchase it. Richard Crosby accepted the transaction, and Austen reclaimed her

novel for ten pounds. West speculates that Crosby may have been unnerved by Austen's implicit and conscious feminism: her commentary on the humiliating and dangerous position of Georgian women, her robust defence of the novel, her critique of *The Spectator*, and her representation of General Tilney's patriarchal cruelty and mercenary pursuit. As Gilbert and Gubar (2004, p. 278) observe, "this apparently amusing and inoffensive novel finally expresses an indictment of patriarchy that could hardly be considered proper or even permissible in Austen's day".

The awareness of the horrors of patriarchy is what definitely separates Catherine from her Gothic fancies. Once expelled from the abbey, she has to face the consequences of being a woman in a man's world, and her conversation with Eleanor Tilney further reveals its vulnerability. Apologising for such a rude expulsion, she tells Catherine: "I trust you will acquit me, for you must have been long enough in this house to see that I am but a nominal mistress of it, that my real power is nothing" (Austen, 2004, p. 155). Returning to her room, she reflects:

and with a mind occupied in the contemplation of actual and natural evil, the solitude of her situation, the darkness of her chamber, the antiquity of the building were felt and considered without the smallest emotion; and though the wind was high, and often produced strange and sudden noises throughout the house, she heard it all as she lay awake, hour after hour, without curiosity or terror (Austen, 2004, p. 156).

Catherine's Gothic imagination proves a poor match for the stark vulnerability of a patriarchal world, where true power resides in the hands of a few influential men. By the novel's climax, the traditional apparatus of Gothicism, whether imagined or real, loses its potency; it is replaced by a far more tangible horror. Here, the "actual and natural evil" of patriarchy become the source of Radcliffean horror: one that "contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates" Catherine's faculties and render her unable to react to the very circumstances that previously made her nerves stand on end.

Geographically, Austen displaces the Gothic from Spanish, French, and Italian locales to the heart of England. It is true that Clara Reeve, in *The Old English Baron* (1778), and Sophia Lee, in *The Recess* (1783), had already rejected the "exotic" geography of the genre in favour of an English context. However, the fundamental distinction lies in their treatment of temporality. Both Reeve and Lee operate within a remote historicity (medieval castles, ancient lineages, and ruins steeped in the past), meaning their English Gothic remains tethered to a restored medieval imaginary, a past distant enough to facilitate the suspension of disbelief.

Austen, conversely, shifts the Gothic into the contemporaneity of the Georgian period, devoid of ruins, historical distancing, or ancestral armour. Nothing in *Northanger Abbey* evokes the medieval aura typical of Reeve, Lee, or Radcliffe –

much to the chagrin of the unfortunate Catherine. The abbey is not crumbling, contains no subterranean passages, and is not situated in a legendary past. Rather, it is a modern, well-illuminated, and refurbished estate; it is almost banal. Precisely therein lies Austen's innovation: by extracting the Gothic from medieval temporality and inserting it into bourgeois daily life, Austen does not merely localise the mode in England: she naturalises it within the present, transforming it into a lens through which to view "common life". Terror no longer depends upon distant ruins; it inhabits respectable spaces: the sociable luminosity of Bath and the modernised country house of Northanger Abbey.

Furthermore, Austen anticipates the domestic turn of Victorian Gothic, a development that would consolidate in the latter half of the nineteenth century. By establishing the English home, rather than the medieval castle, as her stage for terror, she demonstrates that the true *locus horribilis* is far closer than previously imagined. Within the Georgian context, she identifies that female precariousness, constant surveillance, economic control, and patriarchal power constitute threats far more tangible than any supernatural peril. In other words, Austen reveals that the home (ostensibly stable, enlightened, and modern) more often than not is a site of oppression, inequality, and dread. Thus, *Northanger* helps pave the way for the understanding that modern terror (or horror) is domestic, quotidian, and entirely possible within respectable houses governed by equally respectable men.

Final thoughts

Northanger Abbey functions as a complex exploration of the processes of (mis)interpreting texts, people, spaces, and social codes. Within this framework, the Gothic operates as a narrative methodology, a constellation of codes, expectations, and reading strategies that Austen mobilises to observe, test, and dismantle the way her heroine (and, by extension, her readership) constructs meaning. Consequently, the novel dramatizes the very condition of the late eighteenth-century female reader, navigating a landscape of moral debates, paternal censorship, and discourses regarding the "impropriety" of fiction for women. In this sense, *Northanger* is a profoundly political text – not only for the reasons listed by Robert Hopkins in "General Tilney and Affairs of State: The Political Gothic of *Northanger Abbey*" (1980) –, but for the feminist argument Austen articulates regarding interpretive failure and the systemic miseducation of middle-class women. Catherine's errors are, therefore, simultaneously individual and systemic.

Operating across multiple levels of circulation (narrative, genre, sociopolitical, and geographical) *Northanger Abbey* suggests that the Gothic is not a collection of antiquated, static conventions, but a potent critical tool capable of illuminating everyday life. By transposing the Gothic from continental Europe to the English home, the Georgian present, and the ostensibly safe social spaces of domesticity,

Austen reveals, with a perspicacity of her own, that true horror was never found in abandoned castles. Rather, it resides within the power structures that shape and restrict female existence.

Thus, instead of resembling parody, her laughter seems to “strike a mean between the two”, comedy and tragedy, as addressed by Virginia Woolf in “The Value of Laughter” (1986 [1905], p. 58). The result is “something too serious to be comic, too imperfect to be tragic, and this we may call humour” (Woolf, 1986, p. 58). Humour, which has been denied women, or so we were told, is found in Austen’s oeuvre through her laughter. It is one that restores our sense of proportion, reminding us that we are neither entirely heroes nor villains, but merely human. In *Northanger*, Austen laughs because she speaks through the mouth of a transgressive, subversive Gothic that rejects the pomp and solemnity of masculine discourses, including those that dismiss the novel for its “lack of seriousness”. Perhaps Austen understood the Gothic better than many scholars and critics have allowed, which ultimately suggests that she does not laugh at the Gothic, but from within it. And the girl of two hundred and fifty years is still laughing – at us.

RAMOS, Paula Pope. Para além da paródia: o gótico como metodologia narrativa em *A abadía de Northanger*. **Itinerários**, Araraquara, n. 62, p. 245-262, jan./jun. 2026.

■ **RESUMO:** *Este artigo propõe que A abadía de Northanger (1818), de Jane Austen, não se limita a utilizar o gótico como mero objeto de paródia, mas o aborda como uma metodologia narrativa. O estudo tem como objetivo analisar de que maneira Austen mobiliza estruturas e expectativas góticas para articular uma crítica à autoridade patriarcal. Metodologicamente, a pesquisa adota uma abordagem qualitativa e bibliográfica, baseada na leitura atenta do romance e no diálogo com estudos críticos sobre a estética gótica (Botting, 2005), sobre a paródia (Hutcheon, 2000) e “arteficções” (Lim, 2017). A partir dessa perspectiva, o engajamento do romance com as convenções góticas produz circulações interpretativas em diferentes níveis: nos planos narrativo, sociopolítico e geográfico, bem como na própria autorreflexividade do romance enquanto gênero. Tal engajamento evidencia o fazer literário de Austen tanto como escritora como leitora, revelando sua familiaridade com os tropos góticos e com o comentário crítico inscrito nessa tradição. Em última análise, A abadía de Northanger não apenas ri do gótico, mas ri de dentro dele ao montar e desmontar uma sequência de acontecimentos e mal-entendidos que expõem não as limitações da poética gótica, mas os mecanismos do patriarcado.*

■ **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Gótico. Metodologia narrativa. *A Abadía de Northanger*. Paródia.

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