

---

## Broken Promises in *Northanger Abbey*

Yih-Dau Wu

### ABSTRACT

This essay explores how the textual history of Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey* shapes the novel's gothic-inflected scenes of broken promises. *Northanger Abbey* began its life as "Susan" around 1798, but was not published until 1817. The failure of a publisher to publish "Susan" as promised caused this long delay. I argue that this publication history casts new light on the novel's allusions to the novels of Ann Radcliffe. Scholars of gothic fiction agree that these Radcliffean allusions bespeak Austen's general concern for women's education in Georgian England. But traces of Austen's publication experience in her gothic plot more specifically reflect how she envisions an ideal cooperation between the two sexes in the publishing industry and laments its failure. Moreover, the Radcliffean allusions in the novel intersect with a sophisticated treatment of promise-breaking and memory, one that evokes Austen's mature style. The drama of broken promises in *Northanger Abbey* fuses the novel's late eighteenth-century origin and its long textual life. This fusion shows that the presence of Radcliffe in *Northanger Abbey*, instead of fixing this novel in the 1790s, testifies to Austen's continuous engagement with this work.

**KEYWORDS** broken promises, *Northanger Abbey*, Ann Radcliffe, textual history, gothic fiction

In her influential book *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel*, Claudia L. Johnson demonstrates convincingly that *Northanger Abbey* (1817/1818) is centrally concerned with breaking promises.<sup>1</sup> Examples of broken promises or breached trust abound in this novel. Catherine Morland agrees to take a walk with Henry and Eleanor Tilney, but her brother James Morland, influenced by his romantic interest in Isabella Thorpe, shows little regard for this pre-engagement. John Thorpe tricks Catherine into abandoning her appointment with the Tilneys. General Tilney's professed hospitality encourages Catherine to believe that her sojourn in Northanger Abbey will be agreeable. However, it turns out that he is the very person who disappoints and humiliates his guest. Likewise, Henry Tilney's improvised gothic pastiche predisposes Catherine to expect that the house she sets foot in is "just like what one reads about" in Ann Radcliffe's novels (161).<sup>2</sup> It is also Henry who insists that Catherine's expectations are detached from reality. Captain Tilney turns a blind eye to Isabella's engagement with James Morland and flirts with her publicly. As Johnson aptly puts it, since "[b]reaking engagements and words of honor of all sorts is the predominant activity in *Northanger Abbey*," the novel presents a world in which "nothing is predictable and no one can be depended upon" (42, 43).

On the face of it, the dominant theme of broken promises in *Northanger Abbey* confirms that the novel belongs to the "early" stage of Austen's literary career and that it is, like *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's "youthful" work. Austen's nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, was responsible for establishing the two distinct phases of his aunt's literary career in the first place. In his influential *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1871), he wrote:

The long interval that elapsed between the completion of "Northanger Abbey" in 1798, and the commencement of "Mansfield Park" in 1811, may sufficiently account for any difference of style which may be perceived between her three earlier and her three later productions. . . . I think . . . the difference [is] between the brilliant girl and the mature woman. Far from being one of those who have over-written themselves, it may be affirmed that her fame would have stood on a narrower and less firm basis, if she had not lived to resume her pen at Chawton. (117)

---

<sup>1</sup> The novel was published in December 1817, but the publication year on its title page is 1818.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay, quotations from *Northanger Abbey* are taken from the Cambridge edition. Hereafter I use *NA* to refer to this novel when it is mentioned parenthetically.

This passage plays a seminal role in predisposing readers of Austen's six major novels to categorize them into two "trilogies." *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Northanger Abbey* belong to Austen's early stage of composition, which ends with the eighteenth century. The next stage, beginning with her residence at Chawton in 1809, yielded the more "mature" novels, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. Austen scholars generally subscribe to this scheme and do not dispute Austen-Leigh's decision to place *Northanger Abbey* in the first category.<sup>3</sup> One thing indicating the roots of *Northanger Abbey* in the 1790s is the identity of the promise-breakers in this novel. Significantly, those who trample on the necessity of keeping a promise and honoring trust are mostly male "guardians of national, domestic, and even religious authority" upon whose benevolence and judgment a socially naïve young woman like Catherine supposedly can depend (Johnson 47).<sup>4</sup> Since the "critical treatment of paternal authority" was a dominant theme of British fiction in the 1790s, in Johnson's estimation, the drama of broken promises in *Northanger Abbey* testifies to the "political contemporaneity" of this text and aligns it with such work as Elizabeth Inchbald's 1791 novel *A Simple Story* (41).<sup>5</sup>

This essay revises the supposed link between broken promises in *Northanger Abbey* and the novel's late eighteenth-century origin, not least by showing how such scenes evoke the novel's long textual history and its impact on Austen. The novel was written and titled "Susan" in the late 1790s, when the gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe were popular. But it was published posthumously in December 1817 (title page 1818), largely because Benjamin Crosby, the publisher who bought "Susan" in 1803, mysteriously failed to publish it.<sup>6</sup> I argue that the novel's long textual history, at the center of which sits Crosby's broken promise, sheds new light on the importance of Radcliffean gothic novels in *Northanger Abbey*. Remarkably, Austen's Radcliffean allusions in the novel frequently coincide with the problem of breaking a promise, in such a way as to suggest that Austen's un-

---

<sup>3</sup> For influential endorsement of this consensus, see Southam 62; Deresiewicz 16; Benedict and Le Faye xxxii; and Burns 197-226. For a small number of scholars who situate *Northanger Abbey* in Austen's late literary career, see Raff 100-29 and Shaw. I owe the Burns reference to an anonymous reviewer.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson reminds us that one major exception to this generalization is Isabella, who changes her mind and breaks her engagement with her fiancé James Morland (44). However, this exception in fact proves the rule of gendered power imbalance. While Isabella must bear with the embarrassment and inconvenience after her broken engagement, in the novel only powerful men "breach trust with impunity" (Johnson 44).

<sup>5</sup> The plot of *A Simple Story* demonstrates "that breaches of promise are countenanced by the powerful all the time" (Johnson 42).

<sup>6</sup> Deirdre Le Faye provides readers of the Cambridge edition of *Northanger Abbey* with a detailed chronology of Austen's life and works. That chronology helps me to grasp the textual history of this novel. See Le Faye xvii, xviii, xx.

successful publication experience inspired her to tweak and enrich the gothic plot in her work. Carefully weaving this frustrating experience into her novel, Austen transforms a gothic parody from one that critiques a woman's educators to one that comments on a woman's publisher. Moreover, scenes of broken promises in *Northanger Abbey* reveal how Austen's post-1809 style and sensibility shape and deepen the novel's engagement with Radcliffe's art.<sup>7</sup> The drama of broken promises in *Northanger Abbey* does not simply determine the novel's plot and characterization; it demonstrates how subtly the novel's long textual history infiltrates its gothic elements and how those elements in turn prove Austen's lasting engagement with this text. The representation of broken promises in *Northanger Abbey* indicates the extent to which Austen's Radcliffean references exceed and unsettle the confines of the novel's late eighteenth-century origin.

### **The Publication History of *Northanger Abbey***

The publication history of *Northanger Abbey* involves a reluctantly drawn-out process. *Northanger Abbey* began life as "Susan," which, according to Cassandra Austen, the beloved sister of Jane Austen, was "written" "about the years [17]98&99" (qtd. in Sutherland, "Chronology" 16).<sup>8</sup> In 1803, Benjamin Crosby & Co., a publisher, bought it and apparently attempted to publish it. The firm announced in *Flowers of Literature for 1801 & 1802* (1803) that "Susan" was "In the Press" (qtd. in Benedict and Le Faye xxvi-xxvii), but Crosby never managed to publish it. On April 5, 1809, Austen wrote to Crosby to inquire about this mysterious non-appearance of her novel and to express her wish to seek another publisher if Crosby had lost interest. She received a response in which her potential publisher positively and legally prohibited such a move. But they also offered to return the manuscript and absolve Austen of any legal obligation if she could purchase it back for £10. Austen could not afford this sum of money at the time and did not get the manuscript back until her brother Henry paid the required sum in early 1816. She worked on the manuscript in the same year, renamed the heroine "Catherine," and wrote an "Advertisement" for readers, presumably because she still planned to publish the neglected story. This plan did not materialize. On March 13, 1817, she announced in a letter to her niece Fanny Knight that her

---

<sup>7</sup> Austen moved to Chawton in July 1809. According to her nephew James Austen-Leigh, the novels that began their life in those Chawton years were vastly different from her earlier works. I therefore use the term "post-1809" in this essay to designate the second stage of Austen's literary career.

<sup>8</sup> The full note of Cassandra Austen can be found in Kathryn Sutherland's informative essay on the composition and publication history of Austen's works. See Sutherland, "Chronology" 16.

revisionary efforts had come to a halt: “Miss Catherine is put upon the Shelve for the present, and I do not know that she will ever come out” (*Letters* 348). Thanks to the joint efforts of Henry and Cassandra Austen, who renamed “Catherine” *Northanger Abbey* and discussed with John Murry the possibility of publishing it along with *Persuasion*, Miss Catherine’s story finally left Austen’s shelf and was published in December 1817, five months after the author’s death on July 18 of the same year.<sup>9</sup> Curiously, few Austen scholars have shown interest in how the long publication history of *Northanger Abbey* finds eloquent expression in the novel itself. Most of them regard this history as background information independent of the novel’s central concern.<sup>10</sup> Even Michelle Levy, an expert in literary manuscripts of the Romantic period, chose not to discuss the potential interplay between the textual life and content of *Northanger Abbey* at length. This is because Levy focuses her attention on the “surviving” manuscripts of Austen (184, 182-213).<sup>11</sup> “Susan/Catherine” unfortunately does not belong to that category.

On the face of it, this tendency to dismiss the publication history of *Northanger Abbey* as irrelevant to the novel’s content is justifiable. Austen herself drew a line between the novel proper and its textual misfortune. When Austen’s brother Henry bought the neglected manuscript back from Crosby in Spring 1816, she revised it for another chance of publication and wrote an advertisement for the potential readers of this novel. In this brief advertisement, Austen foregrounds the awkward position of this novel in 1816:

This little work was finished in the year 1803, and intended for immediate publication. It was disposed of to a bookseller, it was even advertised, and why the business proceeded no farther, the author has never been able to learn. . . . The public are entreated to bear in mind that thirteenth years have passed since it was finished, many more since it was begun, and that during that period, places, manners, books, and opinions have undergone considerable changes. (*NA* 1)

---

<sup>9</sup> Benedict and Le Faye describe the publication history of *Northanger Abbey* in detail (xxvi-xxix). My summary of this history here owes much to their account. For another informative description of this history, see Mandal, *Jane Austen* 62-74. According to Mandal, Crosby did not publish “Susan” because of “financial difficulties” (*Jane Austen* 71).

<sup>10</sup> The established consensus that *Northanger Abbey* belongs to the first phase of Austen’s literary career apparently warrants this indifference to the novel’s long publication history. If the novel was completed by the end of the eighteenth century, as Austen-Leigh and many modern scholars believe, then it makes sense to assume that the novel’s content has little to do with its convoluted textual life.

<sup>11</sup> I owe this reference to an anonymous reviewer.

The words “books” and “opinions” in this passage allude to Radcliffian gothic novels that were popular in the 1790s and that were the obvious targets of Austen’s parody in *Northanger Abbey*. This passage as a whole also indicates Austen’s familiarity with her contemporary literary scene. By 1816, the popularity of Radcliffe had waned and that of Walter Scott had risen.<sup>12</sup> The apologetic tone of this passage suggests not only how incompatible “Susan/Catherine” was with contemporary literary taste but also how little Austen’s revisionary efforts affected a work conceived in the heyday of Radcliffe’s power. If, as Austen implies in the advertisement, she did not significantly change the contour of “Susan” in 1816 to satisfy the demands of the market in the 1810s, it follows that she found it necessary to explain why she had not published this gothic parody until after the gothic mode had passed its prime. If, as most modern Austen scholars believe, the shape of *Northanger Abbey* in 1816 remained identical to how it had been in 1803, it seems unnecessary to examine how the intervening thirteen years altered the novel.

But the passage that supposedly should discourage us from investigating the intersection between the textual history and textual content of *Northanger Abbey* in fact encourages us to go down that route. Remarkably, in the passage cited above, Austen draws on the novel’s long publication process to make sense of its multiple Radcliffian references. Those references appear unfashionable *because* a bookseller did not publish her work in time. What this causal relationship implies is a subtle way of understanding the gothic elements of *Northanger Abbey*. The importance of those elements is determined as much by intra-textual factors, such as plot and characterization, as by external forces beyond the author’s control, such as an unprofessional publisher.<sup>13</sup> Austen’s apologetic explanation in the advertisement, therefore, does not close down interpretive opportunities and pigeonhole *Northanger Abbey* as a product of the 1790s. On the contrary, it

---

<sup>12</sup> One measure of the decline of Radcliffian gothic novels in the second decade of the nineteenth century is that they can be reduced to predictable formulae. When Scott published *Waverley* (1814), he laughed at such predictability in the first chapter of his novel: “Had I . . . announced in my frontispiece, ‘Waverley, a Tale of other Days,’ must not every novel-reader have anticipated a castle scarce less than that of Udolpho, of which the eastern wing had been long uninhabited, and the keys either lost or consigned to the care of some aged butler or housekeeper, whose trembling steps, about the middle of the second volume, were doomed to guide the hero, or the heroine, to the ruinous precincts” (3).

<sup>13</sup> Burns makes a similar point in her recent book about the publishing history of *Northanger Abbey*. She writes: “the revisions of [this] novel involve a fascinating interplay between what was going on within the book and what was going on outside it” (197). She interestingly points out that “all six examples of Catherine Morland’s reading can be found in books that Crosby sold in 1803” (197). This arrangement may well be Austen’s self-conscious choice to make “Susan” more attractive to her potential publisher (Burns 197, 203). While Burns suggests that the repercussions of Crosby’s failure to publish “Susan” can be seen in *Mansfield Park*, “a much darker work that revisits the main elements of *Northanger Abbey* more grimly” (xii), my essay demonstrates that the repercussions can also be noticed in *Northanger Abbey*.

opens up new interpretive avenues, not least by showing that the textual misfortune of “Susan” can shape our understanding of *Northanger Abbey*.

Indeed, the failure of a male publisher to keep his word was what caused this textual misfortune in the first place. Austen evidently felt annoyed by this breach of trust. Writing to her potential publisher Crosby & Co. on April 5, 1809, Austen told them that she had been waiting fruitlessly for the appearance of “Susan” and signed her name as Mrs. Ashton Dennis. Put together, the initials of this name constitute “MAD,” which “enabled [Austen] half-facetiously and half-seriously to express her . . . veiled anger” (Mandal, “Making” 508). This anger sprang from Austen’s assumption that Crosby & Co. had unprofessionally dishonored a promise made in 1803. She told them in the same 1809 letter: “In the Spring of the year 1803 a MS. Novel in 2 vol. entitled Susan was sold to you by a Gentleman of the name of Seymour. . . . Six years have since passed, & this work of which I avow myself the Authoress, has never to the best of my knowledge, appeared in print, tho’ an early publication was stipulated for at the time of Sale” (*Letters* 182). The fact that Crosby & Co. advertised “Susan” in 1803 indicates that they were once serious about publishing Austen’s work and implicitly confirmed that an agreement about publication had been reached with the author “at the time of Sale.” But when Richard Crosby wrote to Austen on April 8, 1809, he denied the existence of such an agreement and argued that his company had no obligation to publish “Susan.” According to Crosby, “[i]t is true that at the time mentioned we purchased of Mr. Seymour a MS. Novel entitled *Susan* . . . , but there was not any time stipulated for its publication, neither are we bound to publish it” (*Letters* 182-83). He also threatened legal action if Austen dared to publish “Susan” elsewhere (*Letters* 183). Austen’s anger at Crosby’s reply may have had little bearing on *Northanger Abbey*. She may already have finished writing “Susan” before she endured the long delay caused by Crosby. But scrutinizing how the issue of broken promises in *Northanger Abbey* intersects with the novel’s Radcliffean allusions reveals an alternative story. Austen deploys her memory of the textual misfortune of “Susan” to tweak the Radcliffean allusions in this novel. As a result, what appears to be a novel that exposes issues concerning the education of women in Georgian England turns out to be one that delineates women’s engagement with the publishing industry.

### **The Shadow of the Crosby Experience**

It is now a commonplace to observe that in *Northanger Abbey* Austen refers to and parodies Radcliffe’s gothic novels because she wishes to comment on the

problem of women's education. This problem, as Austen understands it, is two-fold. First, young impressionable women read popular gothic novels and, as a result, harbor unrealistic expectations. Second, authoritative men direct the course of female education and turn a blind eye to what women genuinely need. The plot of *Northanger Abbey* bears these two points out. As Diane Long Hoeveler aptly puts it, this novel "reads as a sort of fictionalized *Vindication* [*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in 1792], personifying in its various female characters the living results of stunted and pernicious educations" (129). Indeed, Catherine Morland's avid reading of Radcliffe's gothic novels and the ensuing social embarrassment combine to suggest that "female gothic novelists feeding false fantasies to young women" are partly responsible for the unwholesome development of the female mind (Hoeveler 129). Always concerned with the intellectual growth of women, Austen "mock[s]" gothic novels because she wishes to free female readers from "the false premises and inadequate stereotypes upon which the genre was based" (Hoeveler 142-43).<sup>14</sup> While Hoeveler suggests that Austen ridicules credulous female readers in *Northanger Abbey*, Jacqueline Howard maintains that "masculine vanity and assumed authority" bear the brunt of Austen's parodic energy in this novel (178). That is why this novel is characterized by "[t]he repeated parodying and deflation of . . . male-authored critical and scholarly styles" (Howard 174). One case in point is Henry Tilney's problematic speech about how different his England is from Radcliffe's continental Europe (Howard 166-67).<sup>15</sup> Howard associates Austen's critique of masculine authority with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, for both women writers "challenge . . . those who would denigrate women's intelligence, undervalue their . . . feeling and imagining, restrict their education, and everywhere impose stereotyped expectations" (177, 174-75).<sup>16</sup> Remarkably, even

---

<sup>14</sup> Austen scholars disagree on whether in *Northanger Abbey* gothic novels contribute to women's well-being. While Hoeveler emphasizes the detrimental effect of reading gothic fiction on women, other critics draw attention to the benefit women receive from this literary interest. See, for instance, Jerinic 141 and Johnson 40.

<sup>15</sup> As Howard puts it, "[w]hile it is evident that Catherine's particular imaginings are wide of the mark, it is not the case that a concealed murder is unthinkable in Christian England, or that women are necessarily always safe" (167). Indeed, Henry's passing remark on "a neighbourhood of voluntary spies" in England implies a sense of fear, one that sits uncomfortably with a perfectly safe society (NA 203).

<sup>16</sup> Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is centrally concerned with how to educate women properly. According to Wollstonecraft, English women are intellectually weak because they suffer from "a false system of education" built up by "men . . . anxious to make [women] alluring mistresses [rather] than . . . rational mothers" (71). One example of this male intervention in the education of women is Dr. Gregory's conduct book *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774). Wollstonecraft strongly criticizes the art of "dissimulation" that Gregory teaches his daughters in the book (94). I owe the first Wollstonecraft reference in this note to Howard 177.

though Hoeveler and Howard investigate the problem of female education in *Northanger Abbey* from different points of view, they agree that the novel illustrates central messages in Wollstonecraft's seminal feminist treatises. Given the obvious connection between *Northanger Abbey* and *Vindication*, it seems reasonable to assume that the gothic-inflected episodes about female education in the novel testify to its late eighteenth-century origin.

However, if we examine those episodes carefully, we find that they betray traces of Austen's interaction with Crosby in the early nineteenth century. Indeed, while the episodes apparently comment on a woman's educator, they also reveal a subtle interest in a woman's publisher. The conversation between Catherine and the Tilney siblings about Radcliffe's novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* bears this point out. When Catherine feels embarrassed by her interest in Radcliffe's novels because they are supposedly beneath gentlemen, Eleanor and Henry Tilney draw on their own experience to convince Catherine that they are avid novel readers and that reading a novel is nothing to be ashamed of (NA 107). Responding to Henry's claim that he finished reading *Udolpho* "in two days," Eleanor says:

"Yes, . . . and I remember that you undertook to read [*Udolpho*] aloud to me, and that when I was called away for only five minutes to answer a note, instead of waiting for me, you took the volume into the Hermitage-walk, and I was obliged to stay till you had finished it."

"Thank you, Eleanor;—a most honourable testimony. You see, Miss Morland, the injustice of your suspicions. Here was I, in my eagerness to get on, refusing to wait only five minutes for my sister; breaking the promise I had made of reading it aloud, and keeping her in suspense at a most interesting part, by running away with the volume, which, you are to observe, was her own, particularly her own." (NA 108)

On the face of it, this passage dramatizes Eleanor's fascination with Radcliffe's novel and suggests that Radcliffe's gothic fiction may well be a means of education for women.<sup>17</sup> But in this passage, a man's refusal to honor his promise, the resulting non-appearance of a woman's own book, and the woman's reluctant

---

<sup>17</sup> Radcliffe emphasizes the educational intent of her work at the end of *Udolpho*. In the last paragraph of the novel, Radcliffe writes: "if the weak hand, that has recorded this tale, has, by its scenes, beguiled the mourner of one hour of sorrow, or, by its moral, taught him to sustain it—the effort . . . has not been vain, nor is the writer unrewarded" (672). Modern Austen scholars such as Miriam Rheingold Fuller also suggest that one "original function" of gothic novels "is . . . instruction under the guise of entertainment" (103).

wait combine to imply Austen's enforced inaction in the face of Crosby's unprofessional negligence. Just as Eleanor reasonably expects to find her copy of *Udolpho* when she returns from answering a note, Crosby's announcement in 1803 that "Susan" was forthcoming raised a reasonable expectation in Austen that she would soon see her work published. Both women, however, are disappointed. Just as Eleanor can do nothing to get her book back, Austen had to wait indefinitely for an opportunity to retrieve her manuscript. The subtle correspondence between Eleanor's and Austen's disappointment suggests that Austen draws on her publication experience to deepen her engagement with Radcliffean gothic fiction. Smacking of Austen's unhappy transaction with Crosby, this *Udolpho* episode complicates the importance of the Radcliffean allusions in *Northanger Abbey*. Austen incorporates *Udolpho* into her own work not only to delineate a scene of Catherine's education but also to experiment with how it can help her articulate her own post-1809 discontent.<sup>18</sup>

Even though this *Udolpho* episode is framed by masculine prejudice denigrating women's intellectual capacity, refuting this prejudice is only one reason why Austen creates this episode.<sup>19</sup> The Tilney siblings recall their reading experience because Catherine worries that Henry disapproves of her literary interest: "gentlemen read better books" (NA 107). And Henry and Eleanor's professed passion for *Udolpho* alleviates Catherine's anxiety: "now I shall never be ashamed of liking *Udolpho* myself" (NA 108). Sandwiched between Catherine's misplaced sense of inferiority and her newfound confidence in her literary taste, the aforementioned banter between Henry and Eleanor vindicates "[w]riting by [w]omen" and undermines "patriarchal power . . . [that] represent[s] women as naturally weak in . . . understanding" (Howard 160, 181). However, this sibling banter is as much about how Henry jokingly convicts himself as about how he cooperates with Eleanor to celebrate women's interest in gothic fiction. Responding to Henry's claim that *Udolpho* fascinates him, Eleanor relates an anecdote of his broken promise to substantiate his claim. Henry adds details to Elea-

---

<sup>18</sup> In her 1809 epistolary exchange with Crosby, Austen mentioned another manuscript of "Susan." She told her potential publisher that she would "command this Copy before . . . August [of 1809]" and that she was willing to submit this manuscript to him if he could soon publish it (*Letters* 182). Kathryn Sutherland, a leading expert on Austen's textual lives, points out that "if her reference to a second copy of the manuscript was more than a facetious threat, [Austen] may at any time after August 1809 have been revising 'Susan' in this second copy for publication as 'Catherine'" (*Textual Lives* 125). In other words, the revision of "Susan" may have begun when Austen's disappointment at Crosby was most intense.

<sup>19</sup> This prejudice was rife in England by the turn of the nineteenth century. The famous fifth chapter of *Northanger Abbey*, in which Austen describes a woman's embarrassment at being caught reading a novel and celebrates the achievement of women novelists, shows that Austen is fully aware of this prejudice (NA 30-31).

nor's account and uses it to prove that he shares Catherine's literary taste. After relating this interesting anecdote, Henry tells Catherine, "I think it must establish me in your good opinion" (NA 108). The fact that this conversation takes place when they are walking toward Beechen Cliff further demonstrates that Catherine's interest in Radcliffe's novel and Eleanor's possession of it transform from a matter of personal enjoyment into a matter of social life. In other words, the cooperation of Eleanor and Henry catapults a woman's private literary pursuit to public discourse, just as Austen's transaction with Crosby theoretically should have resulted in the successful publication of her work. Subtly describing how an intellectual woman collaborates with an intelligent man to bring women's gothic imagination to public notice, this *Udolpho* episode means more than just a defense of women's writing and suggests that it can be a legitimate means of education for women. It envisions an ideal cooperation between the two sexes, one that could draw welcome attention to the fruits of women's literary endeavors.

This ideal cooperation between a man and a woman rewrites the obvious purpose of gothic parody in *Northanger Abbey*. In the novel, whenever Austen appears to laugh at Radcliffean gothic fiction, she reveals the inequality that divides the two sexes. For instance, Henry's lecture on how egregiously wrong Catherine's assumptions about his father are suggests that the gothic mode differentiates the "enlightened" man from the "benighted" woman.<sup>20</sup> Another case in point lies in Henry's improvisation of a gothic novel during his ride with Catherine to Northanger Abbey. Featuring Henry exploiting the formulaic nature of Radcliffe's novels to tease Catherine, this episode exemplifies the alleged "male intellectual superiority" that both Wollstonecraft and Austen disapprove of (Howard 177-78). More subtly, however, Henry's parody of Radcliffe's novels in fact mirrors Crosby's unfair treatment of Austen. Just as Henry's story leads Catherine to assume that she is about to learn what happens to a manuscript containing "memoirs of the wretched Matilda," Crosby's 1803 announcement that "Susan" was ready for publication showed Austen how her manuscript would develop in the near future (NA 164). Both Henry and Crosby suddenly pull out of their literary projects. Both Matilda's and Austen's manuscripts are forthcoming but remain frustratingly out of reach. Henry's parody of Radcliffe's

---

<sup>20</sup> I am aware that by the end of *Northanger Abbey* Catherine's assumptions turn out to be partially accurate. Taking into consideration General Tilney's rude eviction of Catherine from his house, the narrator announces that "in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, [Catherine] had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (NA 256). But I also wish to point out that when Catherine's assumptions are vindicated and the supposed gender difference disappears, Austen is *not* mocking the gothic mode but embracing it.

*Ex-position*  
June  
2022

novels certainly demonstrates the exercise of patriarchal power at the expense of women. But this apparent triumph of masculine superiority also belies fruitful cooperation between the sexes. Indeed, it is Catherine's manifest interest in an abbey—"After being used to such a home as the abbey, an ordinary parsonage-house must be very disagreeable"—that inspires Henry's improvisation in the first place (NA 161). Moreover, Henry does not finish telling his story in one go. He stops, listens to Catherine's response, and responds to her comments accordingly. Catherine sees his improvisation as a book in the making and urges him to flesh out his story: "This is just like a book! . . . Well, what then?" (NA 162). Henry happily obliges. Catherine's comments, in other words, become a precondition for Henry's creative fiction. By showing how Henry and Catherine jointly engage in a book-making process, this particular gothic burlesque means more than just revealing the power imbalance which separates men from women, Henry from Catherine, and Crosby from Austen. It gestures toward a meeting ground for both parties in each of these pairs. The shared interest in Radcliffe's gothic novels can dissolve the socially constructed schism between men and women. However tentatively, Radcliffean gothic imagination overrides and heals gender divisions. In other words, in this episode, traces of Austen's own publishing experience deepen her engagement with Radcliffean gothic fiction. Austen parodies Radcliffean gothic fiction not only to show how socially divided men and women are but also to demonstrate that they can potentially collaborate constructively in the service of celebrating the appeal of gothic novels. Austen seems to be showing that Crosby's interest in "Susan" testifies to and nearly realizes this potential.

### **The Traces of Austen's Post-1809 Intervention**

One measure of how complex the Radcliffean allusions in *Northanger Abbey* are is that they can involve a broken promise in such a way as to evoke Austen's post-1809 style and sensibility. The issue of breaching a social contract demonstrates that the three blunders that Catherine makes in *Northanger Abbey* should not be read as identical. Her mind heavily influenced by Radcliffe's novels, Catherine mistakenly believes that a ponderous chest in her room conceals secrets, that a manuscript in a cabinet bespeaks crimes, and that General Tilney imprisons his wife (NA 167-68, 174-76, 192-98). It turns out that the chest contains nothing other than "a white cotton counterpane," that the manuscript is a washing bill, and that Mrs. Tilney dies of a natural cause (NA 169, 176-77, 202). Austen scholars commonly do not differentiate these three mistakes because

their equally comic nature justifies seeing them collectively as part and parcel of Austen's gothic parody.<sup>21</sup> But there exists a significant difference. While all three mistakes involve the "deflation of expectations" characteristic of gothic parodies, Austen only introduces into the representation of the first mistake a heightened sense of breaking a social contract (Howard 165). The first mistake culminates in a description of General Tilney's impatience. Having spent some time thinking about the chest, Catherine is aware that she has been distracted from a more pressing event: joining her host's dinner. When the appearance of Eleanor Tilney reminds her of this event,

Catherine had no leisure for speech, being at once blushing, tying her gown, and forming wise resolutions with the most violent dispatch. Miss Tilney gently hinted her fear of being late; and in half a minute they ran down stairs together, in an alarm not wholly unfounded, for General Tilney was pacing the drawing-room, his watch in his hand, and having, on the very instant of their entering, pulled the bell with violence, ordered "Dinner to be on table *directly!*" (NA 169)

This passage suggests that an implied social contract intensifies one's awareness of time. Catherine's decision to finish dressing quickly, Miss Tilney's "fear of being late," and the General's watch combine to suggest that "a strict timekeeping regimen" governs the daily life of Northanger Abbey (Kickel 153). Shortly after Catherine arrives at Northanger Abbey, she finds out that she is required to follow this strict regimen: "Catherine found herself hurried away by Miss Tilney in such a manner as convinced her that the strictest punctuality to the family hours would be expected at Northanger" (NA 166).<sup>22</sup> The General's impatience at Catherine's late arrival indicates that she has violated a code of behavior binding the host and the guest. In addition, the General's visible impatience breaches another "word[] of honor" (Johnson 42). He has promised Catherine that "no endeavours shall be wanting on our side to make Northanger Abbey not wholly disagreeable" to her, but his refusal to relax his rules of punctuality is one reason why Catherine has a disagreeable time (NA 142). Connecting the problem of promise-breaking, social impropriety and a heightened awareness of time, Catherine's first misstep in Northanger goes beyond the blunder of a silly girl. It

---

<sup>21</sup> For instance, Hoeveler suggests that "gothic incidents" in *Northanger Abbey* are similarly "designed . . . to garner our amusement and cause us to chuckle" (137).

<sup>22</sup> Kickel points out that Bath, another important location in this novel, differs from Northanger Abbey in that the former allows for a more relaxed approach to "the clock's regular rhythm" (151).

subtly smacks of Austen's 1809 epistolary exchange with Crosby, in which she complains that she has been waiting reluctantly because the publisher has failed to honor his promise to publish "Susan" in as timely a fashion as his professional duty dictates.

This subtle treatment of a breached social contract and its repercussions further distinguishes *Northanger Abbey* from Austen's early works such as *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. In those two novels, Austen appears uninterested in exploring the negative effect of a broken promise on a woman. In *Sense and Sensibility*, when Colonel Brandon mysteriously withdraws from the excursion to Whitwell and breaks his promise to take his friends to see a fine country-house, Marianne Dashwood is not seriously disappointed (74-77). She instantly joins Willoughby for another form of entertainment (78). In *Pride and Prejudice*, the threat of a broken promise is hardly ever touched upon. In that novel, the moral and social implications of a broken promise are reduced to Lydia Bennet's hedonistic remark that "it would be the most shameful thing in the world if [Mr. Bingley] did not keep [his promise of holding a ball]" (50). In sharp contrast, Austen's three late novels explore in all seriousness how fatal dishonoring a promise can be to a woman's happiness. The elopement of Maria Rushworth (née Bertram) with Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, Frank Churchill's apparent reluctance to keep his secret engagement with Jane Fairfax in *Emma*, and Anne Elliot's decision to end her engagement with Frederick Wentworth in *Persuasion* combine to show that Austen was, in the later stage of her literary life, profoundly interested in the emotional distress and moral implications attending a broken promise.<sup>23</sup> The heartfelt unease of Eleanor and Catherine in the face of General Tilney's strict time management reveals a similar recognition of how important a social contract is. This similarity becomes understandable if we consider the fact that in 1816, there was probably in Austen's mind an intermingling of "Susan" and her three mature novels. Indeed, when Austen retrieved "Susan" from Crosby and revised it in 1816, she had already published *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, was working on *Persuasion*, and remembered keenly Crosby's breach of trust.<sup>24</sup> The fact that this post-1809 fascination with promise-breaking coincides with Austen's parody of Radcliffean gothic fic-

---

<sup>23</sup> In *Sense and Sensibility*, Lucy Steele appears very happy and prospers financially after she breaks her engagement with Edward Ferrars. Such light-hearted treatment of a broken promise contrasts sharply with the poignant drama of Maria Rushworth's ruined reputation, Jane Fairfax's intense despair, and Anne Elliot's faded bloom.

<sup>24</sup> *Mansfield Park* was published in May 1814, *Emma* in December 1815 (with 1816 on its title page). Austen began writing *Persuasion* in August 1815 and finished it in August 1816. Henry Austen brought the manuscript of "Susan" back to Jane Austen in the spring of 1816. See Le Faye xix-xx.

tion is suggestive. It suggests that the value of the Radcliffean references in this novel evolves as time goes by. In the late 1790s, they bespoke Austen's engagement with contemporary popular novels and her interest in female education. In the second phase of her literary career, when Austen needed to demonstrate how a broken promise took a toll on a woman's life, she found the Radcliffean allusions useful for accomplishing this task.

William Deresiewicz has argued convincingly that the novels written and published in the second phase of Austen's literary career feature a sophisticated understanding of memory, one that departs significantly from that found in the early novels. The early novels tend to see memory as "a recorder of isolated mental images that remain unchanged by intervening lapses of time" (Deresiewicz 29). As a result, they present the "hidden wounds" of their protagonists, be it Darcy's fraught relationship with Wickham or Colonel Brandon's frustrated romance, rather straightforwardly to their audience, as if those past events were simply "a painting hanging on a wall" (Deresiewicz 29). In contrast, the representation of Fanny Price's unpleasant life in *Mansfield Park*, indisputably Austen's mature novel, reveals a profound belief in the power of memory not "merely to recall the past, but rather to transform it" (Deresiewicz 58). When Fanny decides to stay away from the controversial family theatrical and feels uncomfortable about her decision, she retreats to her favorite East room and thinks about her (un)happy days in her uncle's house: "she could scarcely see an object in that room which had not an interesting remembrance connected with it. . . . [T]hough she had known the pains of tyranny, of ridicule, and neglect, yet almost every recurrence of either had led to something consolatory; . . . the whole [i.e., pain and consolation] was now so blended together, so harmonized by distance, that every former affliction had its charm" (*Mansfield Park* 178). As Deresiewicz aptly points out, this episode shows how memory has initiated a comforting act of substitution at a painful moment. Fanny's bitter-sweet reminiscence shows that her memory intervenes to substitute for what she desires but cannot obtain at present, such as the undivided affection of her cousin Edmund Bertram (Deresiewicz 59-60). This complex treatment of memory is absent from *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Austen's last finished novel, *Persuasion*, also illustrates how the representation of memory differentiates Austen's mature works from her early ones. *Persuasion* is centrally concerned with "widowhood, and all that it implies—grief, memory, wrenching adjustments, the painful attempt to move forward or the refusal to try" (Deresiewicz 128). Such deep engagement with sad memories cannot be found in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Neither Mrs. Jennings in the former nor Lady Catherine de Bourgh in the latter mourns the loss of their husbands.

Significantly, it is such treatment of memory that underpins Catherine's response to Henry's apparent failure to keep his word. Austen carefully describes what Catherine feels and thinks when, wrongly convinced that Henry has voluntarily broken his promise to take a walk with her, she allows John Thorpe to take her to see Blaise Castle:

*Ex-position*  
June  
2022

Catherine's feelings, as she got into the carriage, were in a very unsettled state; divided between regret for the loss of one great pleasure, and the hope of soon enjoying another, almost its equal in degree, however unlike in kind. . . .

They passed briskly down Pulteney-street, and through Laura-place, without the exchange of many words. Thorpe talked to his horse, and she meditated, by turns, on broken promises and broken arches, phaetons and false hangings, Tilneys and trap-doors. (NA 84-85)

Like Fanny Price, Catherine relies on memory to counteract the pain of unpleasant social interactions, not least by exploiting the power of the former to replace the latter. Like Fanny's memory, Catherine's memory of key elements of Radcliffean gothic novels functions as "a substitute: something [she] seizes upon as ostensibly equivalent when [she] cannot have what [she] really wants," namely, walking with the Tilneys (Deresiewicz 59). Austen's sentences also alert us to this fact: "To feel herself slighted by them was very painful. On the other hand, the delight of exploring an edifice like Udolpho, . . . was such a counterpoise of good, as might console her for almost any thing" (NA 85). Moreover, like Fanny Price, Catherine not only recalls past events but also transforms them. Just as Fanny's memory dilutes her history of suffering in Mansfield Park, Catherine's remembrance of Radcliffean novels downplays their focus on women's suffering. If, in Fanny's case, when "harmonized by distance," "every former affliction had its charm," something similar happens to how Catherine understands the affliction of Radcliffean heroines. Physically distant from such typical gothic settings as "broken arches," "false hangings," and "trap-doors," Catherine recalls them not because they gesture toward the distress of Radcliffean heroines but because they charm away the pain of her own disappointment. The memories of Fanny and Catherine similarly redeem narratives of female misery and remove their stings. The similarity between Fanny's and Catherine's use of memory shows that this particular Radcliffean allusion in *Northanger Abbey* serves as a platform on which Austen's post-1809 interest in promise-breaking and understanding of memory intersect. In other words, this particular episode is like a palimpsest with two layers of meaning. The first layer is composed of references to Rad-

cliffe's gothic novels, a sign of the birth of *Northanger Abbey* in the late 1790s. The second layer concerns Austen's post-1809 intervention in the novel, one that is characterized by her deepened engagement with the problem of promise-breaking and more sophisticated understanding of the power of memory.

The aforementioned intertextual dialogue between *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park* enriches Claudia L. Johnson's comments on the importance of gothic fiction in the former novel. According to Johnson, "[w]hen the deceived Catherine meditates on 'broken promises and broken arches; phaetons and false hangings, Tilneys and trap-doors' . . . , her associations betray a seepage of the gothic into the quotidian that begins to localize her anxieties" (43). Catherine is anxious because she begins to realize that "the figures one has been taught to trust" are the "least" trustworthy, and that "familiar institutions" such as the patriarchy in fact pose a serious threat to socially powerless women such as herself (Johnson 43). Since describing "figureheads of political and domestic order" as morally problematic is a dominant theme of British fiction in the 1790s, in Johnson's estimation, the merging of gothic fiction and a broken promise in Catherine's mind indicates the origin of *Northanger Abbey* in the late eighteenth century (40-41). But traces of Fanny Price in Catherine's evocation of Radcliffe's novels suggest that on this occasion, Austen is interested not only in critiquing patriarchal power but also in exploring the power of memory to influence a woman's life, a power that manifests itself most clearly in her late novels such as *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*. In other words, the convergence of promise-breaking and the Radcliffean allusions in *Northanger Abbey* need not situate this novel exclusively in the early stage of Austen's literary career. Instead, it can remind us of the long textual history of this novel, during which Austen reworks it with fresh insight.

## **Conclusion**

Investigating the textual history of *Northanger Abbey* and its impact on parts of the novel ultimately addresses one important question: What did the numerous references to Radcliffe's gothic fiction in this novel mean for Austen in the second phase of her literary career? As D. W. Harding suggests, this question is "well worth asking . . . because Jane Austen was asking it herself when she" revised "Susan" in 1816 but found the revised version unsatisfactory (146, 128-29). Her wavering suggests that as an experienced novelist, she judged that parts of this early work "[were] worth salvaging" for publication and parts were not (Harding 128-30). According to Harding, "the Gothic element" in the novel appeared to be a serious liability to the mature Austen because Catherine's Rad-

Ex-position  
June  
2022

cliffhanger fantasy is no more than “a . . . form of childish makebelieve” and because such fantasy “stretches her naivety too far in the direction of sheer silliness” (130-31). But a different picture emerges if we suspend Harding’s focus on the plot of *Northanger Abbey* and scrutinize instead how the content of the novel is influenced by external events beyond Austen’s control. In the novel, references to Radcliffe’s gothic fiction both reveal Austen’s perennial interest in women’s education and indicate her lasting engagement with the publishing industry. And gothic-inflected scenes of broken promises in the novel also evoke her post-1809 style and sensibility. These details demonstrate that when the mature Austen revisited “Susan,” she regarded the gothic ingredients therein not as an impediment that crippled her literary creativity but as useful material that unleashed such creativity. The gothic components of “Susan” enabled her to subtly weave an unhappy real-life scenario into the texture of her novelistic art. They encouraged her to work on scenes of broken promises meticulously to engender subtle layers of meaning. When read in relation to the long textual life of *Northanger Abbey*, the Radcliffian allusions in the novel cease to mean merely Austen’s parody of popular novels in the 1790s. They reveal the extent to which Austen’s interest in Radcliffe, her memory of the Crosby experience, and her meditation on how to revise “Susan” collaborate to shape the present form of *Northanger Abbey*.

## WORKS CITED

- Austen, Jane. *Jane Austen’s Letters*. Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.
- . *Mansfield Park*. Ed. John Wiltshire. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005.
- . *Northanger Abbey*. Ed. Barbara M. Benedict and Deirdre Le Faye. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- . *Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. Pat Rogers. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- . *Sense and Sensibility*. Ed. Edward Copeland. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Austen-Leigh, James E. *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*. Ed. Kathryn Sutherland. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.
- Benedict, Barbara M. and Deirdre Le Faye. Introduction. *Northanger Abbey*. Ed. Barbara M. Benedict and Deirdre Le Faye. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. xxiii-lxi.
- Burns, Margie. *Publishing Northanger Abbey: Jane Austen and the Writing Profession*. Delaware: Veron, 2021.
- Deresiewicz, William. *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004.
- Fuller, Miriam Rheingold. “Let Me Go, Mr. Thorpe; Isabella, Do Not Hold Me!': *Northanger Abbey* and the Domestic Gothic.” *Persuasions* 32 (2010): 90-103.

- Harding, D.W. *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays on Jane Austen*. Ed. Monica Lawlor. London: Athlone, 1998.
- Hoeveler, Diane Long. *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1998.
- Howard, Jacqueline. *Reading Gothic Fiction: A Bakhtinian Approach*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1994.
- Jerinic, Maria. "In Defense of the Gothic: Rereading *Northanger Abbey*." *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism*. New York: St. Martin's, 1995. 137-49.
- Johnson, Claudia L. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988.
- Kickel, Katherine. "General Tilney's Timely Approach to the Improvement of the Estate in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 63.2 (2008): 145-69.
- Le Faye, Deidre. Chronology. *Northanger Abbey*. By Jane Austen. Ed. Barbara M. Benedict and Deirdre Le Faye. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. xv-xxi.
- Levy, Michelle. *Literary Manuscript Culture in Romantic Britain*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2020.
- Mandal, Anthony A. *Jane Austen and the Popular Novel: The Determined Author*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- . "Making Austen MAD: Benjamin Crosby and the Non-Publication of *Susan*." *The Review of English Studies* 57 (2006): 507-25.
- Radcliffe, Ann. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Ed. Bonamy Dobrée. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Raff, Sarah. *Jane Austen's Erotic Advice*. New York: Oxford UP, 2014.
- Scott, Walter. *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since*. Ed. Claire Lamont. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015.
- Shaw, Narelle. "Free Indirect Speech and Jane Austen's 1816 Revision of *Northanger Abbey*." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 30.4 (1990): 591-601.
- Southam, Brian. *Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts: A Study of the Novelists Development Through the Surviving Papers*. New ed. London: Athlone, 2001.
- Sutherland, Kathryn. "Chronology of Composition and Publication." *Jane Austen In Context*. Ed. Janet Todd. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 12-22.
- . *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: from Aeschylus to Bollywood*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Ed. Janet Todd. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

**Broken Promises  
in *Northanger  
Abbey***

\*\*Manuscript received 29 June 2021,  
accepted for publication 8 Apr. 2022

