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`Nothing Really In It': Gothic Interiors and the Externals of the Courtship Plot in *Northanger Abbey*

Laura Baudot
Oberlin College

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Abstract
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Keywords
Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey, new formalism, washing bills, courtship plot, Gothic interiors, bodies, Gothic, form, eighteenth-century literature, book history

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The washing bills that the heroine discovers in a cabinet in Jane Austen's early novel *Northanger Abbey* are traditionally read as parodying the Gothic trope of hidden manuscripts. The mundane itemization of male clothing, I argue, does not merely pit the everyday against Gothic improbability. The washing bill plot invites readers to reflect critically on courtship plots and their own emotional investment in happy endings. By drawing attention to the papers' appearance, content, and location, Austen uses the washing bills as evidence for how courtship novels and readers' affective expectations repress the material facts central to both marriage and novel reading: men and books have bodies. The complex interplay of surface and depth that characterizes the washing bill plot is central to Austen's quest to devise a form for the novel that engages the reader both critically and emotionally. By linking the washing bills to the novel's other jarring reminders of the materiality of books and reading, this article makes the broader claim that a full understanding of the form of eighteenth-century novels requires combining the methods of formalism and book history.

THIS ARTICLE identifies a place for formalist readings of eighteenth-century novels by close reading a roll of papers stuffed in a cabinet in Jane Austen's experimental novel *Northanger Abbey*. Composed in the late 1790s, *Northanger Abbey* self-consciously participates in the eighteenth-century novelistic tradition of inquiry into the form of this emerging genre and the nature of its hold over the reader's imagination.[1] In an elaborate game of hide-and-seek with washing bills that spend part of the narrative as a hidden manuscript in a Japan cabinet, Austen hints at the material facts that are fundamental to marriage and reading. These facts are at the surface of both but are driven under cover

[1] As A.A. Mandal points out, some critics debate the exact dates of *Northanger Abbey*, or *Susan* as it was titled before Austen's revisions and its posthumous publication in 1818. The consensus seems to be that the first major composition took place in 1798–99. Mandal, "Making Austen Mad: Benjamin Crosby and the Non-Publication of *Susan*," *Review of English Studies* 57 (September 2006): 509.

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(under the covers of beds and books to be more precise) by literary fashions, the demands of respectability, and the nature of imaginative engagement in fictional universes. By tracing the appearance of the washing bills backward, from their resurfacing in the last chapter of the novel to their first appearance in the heroine's curricle ride from Bath to Northanger, I will argue that Austen uses Gothic interiors, such as the inner locked cabinet compartment, to plant evidence for the matters of fact that the conventions of the courtship plot and the act of novel reading allow readers to suppress. The close reading of the washing bills that Austen invites readers to perform encourages awareness of both their emotional investment in the courtship plot and the ability of the imagination to override material sensation in the act of reading. The washing bills also function self-reflexively as Austen's investigation into how the relationships between inside and outside, surface and depth, the imagined and the empirically experienced, are fundamental to the form of the novel and the nature of the reader's affective and critical engagement. Before presenting my argument in greater detail, I will first address the questions that loom: What do I mean by formalism? What does it mean to talk about the "form" of the eighteenth-century novel?

The Problem of the Eighteenth-Century Novel for Formalism

The formalist method I am proposing as suitable to apply to a study of *Northanger Abbey*, and the eighteenth-century novel more generally, draws from the relatively recent efforts of sceptics, advocates, and trend-spotters to characterize the literary critical movement known as "New Formalism." Although as Marjorie Levinson points out in her introduction to the *PMLA* issue devoted to the movement, "new formalist work concentrates in the areas of early modern and Romantic period study" (in part because of the "prominence of poetry in general and of the lyric more specifically"), new formalists' revisions of the methods of New Criticism render it a much better fit for the eighteenth-century novel than first-wave formalism.[2] A crucial difference pointed out by Mark David Rasmussen is that new formalism remains "closely attuned to the nuances of literary language and form—without embracing the New Critical ideal of formal unity and coherence ... The rallying cry for *this* 'new formalism'

[2] Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?," *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (2007): 562.

might be 'literary reading without organic form.'"[3] Furthermore, the new formalists' call for a return to "literary reading" does not necessarily entail a rejection of the historical turn of the past few decades. Douglas Bruster, for example, defines new formalism as "a critical genre dedicated to examining the social, cultural, and historical aspects of literary form, and the function of form for those who produce and consume literary texts."[4] New formalism does not throw into question the responsibility of the critic to present literary works in relation to their historical contexts; rather, it seeks to work as a corrective against the strains of new historicism that simply mine literary works for cultural content.[5] Attending to the unique properties of the literary, the argument goes, allows critics to offer more nuanced readings of history.

This embrace of history and rejection of "organic form" makes new formalist approaches more amenable to the eighteenth-century "novel," which is too improvisational and too wedded to the cultural circumstances of its production to be apprehended as an object of formal unity and to have its form divorced from social, cultural, and historical contexts. It is a genre under construction, assembled from bits and pieces of romance, epic, spiritual autobiography, criminal biography, travel narratives, and conduct books, to name the most obvious sources, lacking even the stabilizing identity of a name until the end of the eighteenth century. Uneasily straddling the Horatian injunctions to delight and instruct (or, in its less neoclassical guise, to combine fidelity to nature with morally improving examples), its authors often work against the very aesthetic unity that would only increase its sway over the reader. Eighteenth-century novels are also social spaces where interested parties meet and clash: writers seeking to become authors and to reconcile aesthetic and commercial judgment, booksellers seeking to turn a profit or at least not to incur too much of a loss, readers learning to navigate the literary

3 Mark David Rasmussen, "New Formalisms?," in *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements*, ed. Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 7.

4 Douglas Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Question of Culture: Early Modern Literature and the Cultural Turn* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 169; cited in Rasmussen, 4.

5 This is particularly the case for the branch of new formalism that Levinson identifies as "activist formalism," which refers to "those who want to restore to today's reductive reinscription of historical reading its original focus on form (traced by these critics to sources foundational for materialist critique—e.g., Hegel, Marx, Freud, Adorno, Althusser, Jameson)" (559).

marketplace and wield their new power as consumers, critics eager to name the new and shape tastes. The aspects of literary language that New Criticism prized, "contradictions, ambiguities, and paradoxes," do abound in this object that interweaves formal experimentation, market calculation, and various social agendas.[6] They are not of the New Critical variety, however, as they are born as much of accident and compromise as they are of figure and diction, and they can only with great difficulty be marshalled into an argument for formal coherence or unity. The formal features of eighteenth-century novels do not fit together like puzzle pieces to create a complete and self-sufficient artistic representation of reality; rather, they can be pieced together most convincingly when cultural context is part of the puzzle.

It is not only new formalism's reluctance to posit formal unity and its continued, though less imperatively voiced, commitment to historicizing, however, that makes it work for the eighteenth-century novel. The interrogation of the nature and function of literary criticism implicit in the movement, insofar as it seeks to revive aspects of two closely related, largely discredited approaches, Formalism and New Criticism, and disturb reigning pieties about the responsible way to perform literary analysis, is true to the spirit of the eighteenth-century novel. As a genre very much in search of its formal and cultural identity, it was by no means complacent about its social role. This capacity for self-criticism exhibited in new formalism's interrogation of the current methods of literary analysis is itself one of the qualities that new formalists wish to reinstate as fundamental to artworks. As Levinson articulates, for new formalists, restoring works to their "original, compositional complexity" is essential for revealing the "critical (and self-critical) agency of which artworks are capable."[7] Close reading, or what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus characterize as "willed, sustained proximity to the text" is the means by which the "compositional complexity" and the self-critical capacity of artworks are reasserted.[8]

The literary period that seems least hospitable to the methods of close reading and formalist analysis abounds in novels that

[6] Samuel Otter identifies "contradictions, ambiguities, and paradoxes" as the formal features of literary works, particularly poems, that New Critics prized. Otter, "An Aesthetic in All Things," *Representations* 104 (Fall 2008): 119.

[7] Levinson, 560.

[8] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 10.

anxiously display and aggressively encourage the self-awareness that literary critics prize. Close reading eighteenth-century novels allows us to reconstruct how the form of this popular genre emerged from the tendencies of authors to equip their fictions with a critical apparatus in which readers could view their habits of reading and modes of emotional and intellectual engagement. Form is not a finished thing in this genre in the making and to function it requires the participation of the reader. This assertion leads me to the second looming question: What does it mean to talk about the "form" of the eighteenth-century novel?

In "An Aesthetic in all Things," Samuel Otter responds to a notable gap in the articulation of the methods of new formalism by supplying a definition of form, which he identifies as the "tiny, enigmatic pivot in much of the current debate about literary studies" which is nonetheless "often treated as self-evident." Otter's conception of form is central to his mission of offering a mode of reading that weds the formal and the historical in a way that breaks "the intoxicating cycle of antagonism or backlash in which 'form' and 'history' are pitted against one another."[9] In addition to functioning as a way to reveal the overlap between formal and historical inquiry, his definition does not assume or assign organic unity to the work. Quite to the contrary, it helps point to the fault-lines in eighteenth-century novelistic structure that are the result of the pressure to be a successful commercial product while a morally improving force, to appeal to readers while not too grossly offending the artistic sensibilities of their authors. And even more usefully for my purposes in this essay, Otter's conception of form provides an approach for close reading *Northanger Abbey* by identifying precisely the sets of binaries and relations that animate the self-critical dimension of the novel: "In its historical usage as recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary, 'form' (from the Latin for 'shape' or 'configuration') describes arrangements of parts, outward shape and appearance, the essential determinant principle of a thing, and the particular character of a thing. 'Form' refers to disposition, contour, structure, and specificity. It opens, rather than closes, questions about the relations of parts to wholes and inside to outside ... To attend to form, an object of sense and thought, is to press those relations and to

[9] Otter, 118.

assess the circumstances of perception."[10] Several elements of this definition offer points of departure for an analysis of the "function of form" in *Northanger Abbey*.

The relationship that has haunted a variety of literary critical approaches to *Northanger Abbey* is that "of parts to wholes," namely how the parts of the novel that take place in Bath and Northanger Abbey fit together.[11] At stake in this inquiry is whether the novel possesses artistic unity, or if its "self-contained Gothic burlesque is grafted unceremoniously upon [a] sentimental comedy of manners."[12] Against the notion of a fundamental incongruity between parts, many critics working within different critical schools with protocols involving thematic, formal, and cultural readings have argued that the parts are indeed wedded.[13]

10 Otter, 119–20.

11 A brief recap of the two parts is useful at this point. The first part of *Northanger Abbey* takes place in Bath and is an *Evelina*-esque comedy of manners in which the naive heroine, Catherine Morland, is initiated into the pains and pleasures, thrills and disappointments, embarrassments and triumphs of the courtship plot in the fashionable world of Bath. Following an invitation to spend a few weeks with her new friend Elinor Tilney, her brother, Henry Tilney (whom Catherine fancies), and their forbidding but excessively courteous father, General Tilney, the heroine travels to their country seat, Northanger Abbey. In this second part, the heroine's enthusiasm for Gothic fiction leads her into various scrapes, mostly involving the projection of Gothic conventions and expectations onto the inhabitants, furniture, and architecture of the abbey, a favourite architectural setting for Gothic novels and thus perfect for the projection of Catherine's Gothic fantasies.

12 Narelle Shaw, "Free Indirect Speech and Jane Austen's 1816 Revision of *Northanger Abbey*," *SEL* 30, no. 4 (1990): 591. For an account of various attempts to impose an aesthetic unity on the novel, see Frank J. Kearful, "Satire and the Form of the Novel: The Problem of Aesthetic Unity in *Northanger Abbey*," *ELH* 32, no. 4 (1965): 511–27.

13 Christopher Miller identifies a thematic link between the parts by focusing on "surprise" as the "emotional content that runs through both parts" and that smoothens the "novel's stylistic unevenness." Miller, "Jane Austen's Aesthetics and Ethics of Surprise," *Narrative* 13, no. 3 (2005): 240. Everett Zimmerman, using the terms of reader response theory but inflecting them with a historicist approach, argues that "to apprehend the work as an aesthetic unity, the person reading must be able and willing to become the reader implied by the work" and that the "reader implied by the novel is appropriate and consistent." Zimmerman, "The Function of Parody in *Northanger Abbey*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (1969): 54, 62. Claudia Johnson stresses not the disjunction of the two parts but the "complete conjunction" of Gothic fiction and the "novel of manners" and the novel's "two-part format." Johnson's contextualization of the novel in the political climate of the 1790s and Austen's critique of patriarchal authority underscores how both Bath and Northanger "are menacing and 'strange.'" Johnson, "The Juvenilia and *Northanger Abbey*: The Authority of

The question of the relation of parts to whole in Austen's novel has worked for modern critics as a way into the text, as an invitation to engage with it critically. What I wish to make explicit is that Austen "opens" this question of parts to whole so that her readers do precisely this; the modern critic responds to the novel's invitation to interrogate its form. Austen draws attention to the author's production and readers' consumption of form in order to encourage her readers to become critical readers of the courtship plot and of their own affective and imaginative participation in its conventions. To argue for the participatory function of form in Austen's novel and its critical and self-critical function, I will shift the focus from the relation of "parts to whole" in Austen's novel to another set of relations identified by Otter, "inside to outside." In doing so, I plan to make evident how Austen invites readers to attend closely to the appearance of the washing bills in order to reread Gothic depth or "insides" as an ironic reflection on the acts of suppression that courtship plots encourage. The washing bills bring to the reader's attention both the material facts that the marriage plot represses and the very ability of the engrossing courtship narrative to override an awareness of the act of reading itself.

Austen asserts the visibility and materiality of the washing bills in order to bring into focus the tendency of the novel to be rendered transparent by the act of reading. The material facts to which the washing bills refer and their own materiality draw the reader's attention to "circumstances of perception" that inform novel reading. Extending Otter's definition of form as the object of both "sense and thought" to the novel itself, I will argue that the washing bills invite the reader to "press" (Otter's verb) the relations of inside to outside, in order, ultimately, for the reader to be aware of the physical act of reading and the materiality of the book—the book that comes off the press and that they press in their hands.

Northanger Abbey is clearly a novel about novel reading—most explicitly Gothic novels, but also sentimental novels and Austen's

Men and Books," in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 35, 36. This note does not pretend to offer an exhaustive account of the arguments for the unity of the two parts. My aim is to provide examples of formal, thematic, and cultural approaches to the issue.

own novel.[14] What is rarely pointed out is that *Northanger Abbey* is also a novel about the phenomenology of novel reading. For Austen, questions of form mediate between complete absorption into the story to the oblivion of the materially embodied text and an apprehension of the novel as merely a physical object. As is the case in Henry Fielding's novels, in the foreground of Austen's fictional representation of life's deceptions is a reminder of how the novel itself tends to deceive readers into forgetting about its status as a novel. For Austen more particularly, the power of novels to blind female readers to facts about marriage and courtship stems from the genre's repression of two forms of embodiment—the bodies of men and books. The washing bills hidden in various Gothic interiors contain evidence for the bodies of both. At the same time, a close reading of the appearances of the washing bills allows us to identify Austen's attempts to balance the satirical revelation of surface deception with the fabrication of depth necessary for the reader's emotional engagement in the novel. As Claudia Johnson points out, Austen is unlike her predecessors, Fielding and Samuel Richardson, and the women novelists that were her contemporaries, in that she "pointedly refuses to apologize for novels."[15]

The Bodies of Men and Books

Catherine discovers the washing bills on her first morning at Northanger. Expecting the roll of papers that she finds in a Japan cabinet to be the hidden "memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun" or the "memoires of wretched Matilda" in "true gothic fashion," she is humiliated to learn they are merely an inventory of men's clothing wrapped in a farrier's bill.[16] In the context of this scene, the washing bills function as a reminder of mundane reality that mocks the absurdity of Gothic conventions and of the heroine's faith in them, and this is how they have been traditionally read.[17] But the washing bills appear again,

[14] As Miller succinctly describes, it is "famous as a novel about novel-reading" (239).

[15] Johnson, 28.

[16] Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Susan Fraiman (1818; New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 96, 109. References are to this edition.

[17] As Johnson points out: "Austen may dismiss 'alarms' concerning stock Gothic *machinery*—storms, cabinets, curtains, manuscripts—with blithe amusement, but alarms concerning the central gothic *figure*, the tyrannical father, she concludes, are commensurate to the threat they actually pose"

unexpectedly for the reader this time, in the last chapter of the novel, a chapter that busily sews up the threads of the courtship plot. Making her authorial presence and power keenly felt with much use of the first person, Austen marries off the two heroines of the novel, Catherine and Elinor, taking few pains to disguise the contrivance of the happy endings to her courtship plot. The washing bills, we learn, belong to a character new to the narrative, Elinor's long-standing suitor, whose "unexpected accession to title and fortune" (173) has rendered him worthy of Elinor's hand in the eyes of her snobbish and rapacious father, General Tilney. The latter's joy at his daughter marrying a peer leads him to tolerate the marriage of Henry and Catherine, despite the mediocrity of her fortune. The union between Henry and Catherine, anxiously anticipated by the reader, is made possible by this figure whom Austen takes overtly few pains to flesh out:

> Her husband was really deserving of her; independent of his peerage, his wealth, and his attachment, being to a precision the most charming young man in the world. Any further definition of his merits must be unnecessary; the most charming young man in the world is instantly before the imagination of us all. Concerning the one in question therefore I have only to add—(aware that the rules of composition forbid the introduction of a character not connected with my fable)—that this was the very gentleman whose negligent servant left behind him that collection of washing bills, resulting from a long visit at Northanger, by which my heroine was involved in one of her most alarming adventures. (173)

Though Austen makes reference with the phrase "alarming adventures" to Catherine's humiliating discovery of the washing bills, the revelation of the owner of the washing bills attaches them to a different set of generic expectations and contrivances. The washing bills were left by the servant of "the most charming young man in the world"—a literary cliché from sentimental fiction. The washing bills serve in this passage as a reminder of the contrivances of her own marriage plot and the readers' willingness to overlook such hastily and clumsily sewn up endings provided they are happy ones. The bills also point to the "the most charming young man in the world" as the obliging cipher who makes such happy endings possible.

(35). The washing bills in their guise as a manuscript in a cabinet are not an element of the Gothic section of the novel that has traditionally been considered to warrant much attention.

Austen underscores the schematic nature of this figure with the teasing initial phrase of the passage: "Her husband was really deserving of her; independent of his peerage, his wealth, and his attachment" (173). We expect a brief list of his non-material merits to follow such an introduction; but Austen, as she never does in later novels, refuses to underwrite the surface virtues of wealth and rank with an account of his moral virtues. We do not learn, as we do about Darcy or Knightley, for example, the kindness and genuine regard for others that he possesses in addition to wealth and rank. Instead readers are treated to the oxymoronic combination of "to a precision" with a vague cliché. Similarly, the only pains taken to connect this charming young man to the narrative is his link to the washing bills. The washing bills, this suggests, are an exposure of the sentimental cliché at the heart of the courtship plot, the eligible young man par excellence, and a refusal to render that cliché as a thing other than a cliché. At the same time, Austen reminds readers that she can rely on them to credit this ending and to participate in its violation of probability by recalling the stock hero of sentimental novels, for the most charming young man in the world "is instantly before the imagination of us all."[18]

With this realignment of the washing bills with the courtship plot and the role ascribed to them in the novel's happy ending, Austen invites readers to look anew at the washing bills and the moments in the novel in which they appear.[19] This is implicitly an offer to resist the teleology of the courtship plot, the "hastening together to perfect felicity" (172), as Austen describes in the last chapter of the novel, and consider more carefully the cost of this

[18] Joseph Litvak poses the question of why Austen deprives her readers of a view "of the most charming young man in the world" and concludes that the "problem with two charming young men [Henry and this nameless suitor] is rather one of excessive excitement." Litvak, "Charming Men, Charming History," in *On Your Left: Historical Materialism in the 1990s*, ed. Ann Kibbey, Thomas Foster, Carol Siegel, and Ellen E. Berry (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 264. I would argue that Austen withholds a description in order to underscore how unnecessary it is because of how thoroughly acquainted her readers are already with this figure by virtue of their being novel readers.

[19] Both Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne provide literary precedents for demanding that readers go back and reread certain chapters in order see what they missed the first time. These writers do so in ways that are both more bossy and facetious than Austen. Austen's invitation is less compulsory as she is more at ease with the notion that readers might become uncritically absorbed in her fictional universe.

happy ending. This entails revising initial assumptions about the parodic function of the washing bill plot as an exposure of Gothic conventions. What clues, this last passage asks readers to consider, did they miss that link the washing bills to the courtship plot, and to Austen's own novel?

Recent critics have taken a second look at the washing bills and have shifted the focus from their relationship to the Gothic conventions to the courtship narrative. Susan Zlotnick rescues the bills from their relegation to a "moment of comic deflation" by arguing that the "washing bill is both a joke and a genuine uncanny artifact, indexing what Catherine continually represses: the economic motivations that haunt the courtship plot."[20] Jillian Heydt-Stevenson translates the message of the discovered manuscript more starkly: "Here in the financial reckonings is the symbolic currency of marital prostitution."[21] Therefore, as Heydt-Stevenson points out, although a humiliated Catherine thinks she has encountered something that exposes the absurdity of Gothic fantasy, she discovers what is properly Gothic about marriage in Regency England—bartering women for money. As insightful as these readings are, they translate the washing bills too rapidly into their thematic content and into social critique—an unveiling of the financial underpinnings of marriage and courtship. Several aspects of the bills get lost in this rapid translation into their thematic and economic import: their specific reference to the cliché of the "most charming young man in the world" and thus their exposure of the generic conventions underlying sentimental fiction; their bringing to the surface of the narrative, not just what Catherine represses, but what readers of Austen's own novel repress; the critical rereading that their appearance (both in the sense of where in the novel they turn up and how they look) explicitly invites readers to pursue. The modern critic's insight about the economic motivations of marriage is one material fact among others that Austen invites her readers to uncover through an interrogation of the relationship of the content of the washing bills to their form—and by this I mean, following Otter's definition, "their outward shape and appearance."

[20] Susan Zlotnick, "From Involuntary Object to Voluntary Spy: Female Agency, Novels, and the Marketplace in *Northanger Abbey*," *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 3 (2009): 277.

[21] Jillian Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 131.

Catherine's shocked response to the discovery of the washing bills mingles references to how they look and what they say. The bills in both content and appearance so completely defy her generic expectations that she has trouble crediting her senses:

> Could it be possible, or did her senses play her false?—An inventory of linen, in coarse and modern characters, seemed all that was before her! If the evidence of sight might be trusted, she held a washing-bill in her hand. She seized another sheet, and saw the same articles with little variation; a third, a fourth, and a fifth presented nothing new. Shirts, stockings, cravats and waistcoats faced her in each. Two others, penned by the same hand, marked an expenditure scarcely more interesting, in letters, hair-powder, shoe-string and breeches-ball. And the larger sheet, which had inclosed the rest, seemed by its first cramp line, 'To poultice chestnut mare,'—a farrier's bill! (118)

This "inventory of linen," we learn right away, is in "coarse and modern characters." The mundane monotony of the contents is reinforced by the description of the sheets being "penned by the same hand" "in letters"—the latter is a particularly odd reminder of the self-evident. The last line, though in the past tense, gives a kind of first-hand reading experience, a decipherment of the "first cramp line" followed by an exclamatory disappointment—"a farrier's bill!" Rereading this passage with the knowledge of their owner, readers are confronted with the anatomy of the "most charming young man in the world" from head ("hair powder") to toe ("shoe laces") and everything in between ("stockings," "breeches," "shirt," "waistcoat," "cravat"). The fact that this inventory of the sartorial composition of a "charming young man" is a washing bill and not a tailor's bill, for example, underscores the presence of the body underneath the clothes, the body responsible for their needing to be cleaned. This washing bill is not just a revelation of the sum of the expensive parts that make up the charming young man, but also the revelation that under that fashionable façade is a physical body. The material body replaces the non-material depth, the moral virtues, that the passage in the last chapter introducing this generic suitor so teasingly withheld.

With these interwoven references to the appearance of the written sheets and the articles of male clothing, readers are simultaneously reminded of the fashionable articles that compose the literary cliché of the young man and of the characters and sheets that are the basis for the fictional world their imaginations

so readily embrace. The twin evocation of the male body and the embodied act of writing suggests that the reader's ability to repress the material facts related to the male body, and supply instead idealized sentimental clichés, is a symptom and product of the ability of readers to forget the embodied nature of novels. It is precisely the immediacy with which the reader's imagination supplied the image of the charming young man in the last chapter that short-circuits an awareness of the physical book. Catherine's slow and sceptical discovery of the contents of the washing bill that "faced her" is a very different mode of reading than the instant supply of a literary cliché. To deconstruct or undress this literary cliché, Austen reveals not just that the literary fantasy of the most charming young man in the world has a body but that the book does as well.

The washing bills not only reveal material facts repressed in the absorptive reading of novels and the ready supplying of idealized clichés, but they also point to Austen's own complex participation in the generic conventions of the courtship plot. Reference to the secret facts of the male body and the body of the book are ultimately part of their commentary on her own novel, an avowal of how reality is dressed up in her fiction. Heydt-Stevenson notes that, "within the context of the novel, the subjects of these financial accounts—clothes, letters, and horses— ... replicate in miniature the topics of conversation and plot throughout the narrative."[22] The washing bills replicate in miniature more particularly the topics, plots, and preoccupations of the Bath section of the novel—the section of the novel that conforms to the generic expectations of the courtship plot. Austen thus buries sheets of paper marked with abbreviations of her own courtship plot in the Gothic interiors of the Northanger section of her novel. Buried in the Gothic parody, in other words, is an account of what the courtship plot represses. They provide an inventory of the events and materials that are the basis for her fiction but whose very materiality needs to be disguised for the fiction to appeal to readers' imaginations. The financial realities of the bills seem in this self-reflexive reading a disclosure of the raw materials that Austen must both clothe and clean up for her fiction to be both commercially viable and formally complete.

This reading of the washing bills as Austen's account of her concessions to the demands of the literary marketplace and the

[22] Heydt-Stevenson, 130.

expectations surrounding novels is suggested by Catherine's critique of the bills. Not only do the washing bills fail to meet the expectations derived from reading popular Gothic novels, but they also disappoint on an aesthetic level. Her terms of opprobrium, "a third, a fourth, and a fifth presented *nothing new*" and "*scarcely less interesting*," recall the criteria used to judge novels: "novelty" and "interest" ("interesting" in the context of novels evokes the capacity to engage the reader's sympathy). The contents of the bills lack novelty and interest, and the bills themselves are "coarse." In addition to originality and the engagement of the sympathetic imagination, novels must also be respectable. The bills communicate the virtues that novels need to possess and the facts that they need to repress in order both to please and to appease the novel-reading public.

The self-reflexivity of the washing bills provides insight into the complexity of Austen's position in relation to her reading public and the genre of the novel. At this point in its history it is a popular genre—a fact Austen does not lament, as she makes abundantly clear in her famous defence of novel reading in chapter 5. Given her realism about the demands of the literary marketplace, also on display in chapter 5, Austen's washing bill plot suggests her desire to develop a form for the novel which makes a space for both sophisticated approaches to the genre and an affective and imaginative absorption in the fiction.[23] In burying evidence of the coarser materials that novels transform and repress in various Gothic interiors of Northanger Abbey, Austen invites, rather than compels, readers to pursue this critical narrative that resists the teleology of the marriage plot and undermines its faith in happy endings. At the same time, in striving to strike a balance between her own satirical impulses (which are given full rein in her juvenilia) and her desire to write a novel that pleases and engages her public, Austen explores how novelistic depth can be a reworking of satirical exposure.

Insides and Outsides: The Bodies of Men

The reading, or rereading, I am proposing of the washing bills argues for their dual function: they offer both a critical narrative of the courtship plot and function as Austen's self-reflexive

[23] Zimmerman likens the parody of *Northanger Abbey* to that of Don Quixote because it "allows the reader to enjoy what his critical faculties tell him to reject" (55).

experiment with the form of the novel. In particular, they capture her exploration of how to balance the readers' critical awareness of generic conventions with their pleasure in the fulfillment of the self-same conventions, that is, how to have her satirical cake and let the readers eat it too. These two main functions of the washing bill plot can be mapped onto the two different versions of Catherine's encounters with the bills. In the first encounter, she finds not a linen inventory but a Gothic manuscript. This version is the oral Gothic tale that Henry unfolds during their carriage ride from Bath to Northanger. While his purpose is primarily to flirt with Catherine and make fun of the Gothic, Austen takes advantage of his Gothic parody to hint at the repressed content of the courtship plot. With Catherine's second encounter with a manuscript that she expects and hopes following Henry's narrative will be the memoirs of an abused heroine, Austen maps a possible middle ground between satirical exposure of surface and Gothic assumptions of depth. Both washing bill plots function critically by mobilizing the binaries of the observed and the overlooked, inside and outside, and the closely related binary of surface and depth. The critical washing bill narrative exposes the surface facts that courtship novels repress; Austen's self-reflexive investigations consider how to balance methods of satirical exposure with the illusion of depth necessary for novelistic absorption.[24] As I will argue in the last section of this essay, the variety of media and objects to be read that surface in the washing bill plot—oral tale, manuscript, washing bills, and Japan cabinet—are part of Austen's dramatization of the phenomenology of novel reading.

Henry's oral Gothic tale, starring Catherine, is recounted to a charmed and terrified heroine in their ride in Henry's curricle from Bath to Northanger. This carriage ride is the transition, literally and metaphorically, between the courtship plot and the Gothic parody: "Henry drove so well,—so quietly—without making any disturbance, without parading to her, or swearing at them ... And then his hat sat so well, and the innumerable capes of his great coat looked so becomingly important!—to be driven by him, next to being dancing with him, was certainly

[24] Kearful describes the novel as an experiment "with an artistic form compounded of radically different elements"—satirical and the novelistic. He argues that Austen's point in combing the two is to "make our expectations work at cross-purposes" (514).

the greatest happiness in the world" (107). Catherine's happy meditations while watching Henry drive skip from his expert handling of the horses to his skills on the dance floor. She also admires the way he wears his hat and his driving costume. All the elements of the courtship plot that are inventoried in the washing bills are present in Catherine's summary of the pleasure of riding with Henry—gentlemen's attire, balls, and carriage rides. (The washing bills make specific reference to the toilette for a ball—"hair-powder, shoe-string and breeches-ball"—and they are enclosed in the farrier's bill.) Henry's Gothic tale intimates where all this happy flurry of balls and suitors and carriage rides ultimately ends up. While Henry is amusing himself at the expense of Catherine and naive readers of the Gothic like her, Austen is communicating information that could disabuse her female readers of misconceptions regarding happy endings, or at least indicating that they are tinged with pain.

Henry's narrative scripts Catherine's third night at Northanger, recounting her adventures before getting into bed. He imagines her finding a secret door behind a tapestry, and he describes how she would open this door "only secured by massy bars" and go into the unknown space: "with your lamp in your hand, [you] will pass through it into a small vaulted room" (109). When Catherine balks at the idea that she would be capable of such an investigation, Henry insists, urging her forward:

> What! not when Dorothy has given you to understand that there is a secret subterraneous communication between your apartment and the chapel of St. Anthony, scarcely two miles off—Could you shrink from so simple an adventure? No, no, you will proceed into this small vaulted room, and through this into several others, without perceiving any thing very remarkable in either. In one perhaps there may be a dagger, in another a few drops of blood, and in a third the remains of some instrument of torture; but there being nothing in all this out of the common way, and your lamp being nearly exhausted, you will return towards your own apartment. In repassing through the small vaulted room, however, your eyes will be attracted towards a large, old-fashioned cabinet of ebony and gold, which, though narrowly examining the furniture before, you had passed unnoticed. (109)

Henry presumably includes the plot detail of the heroine having missed a cabinet despite, "narrowly examining the furniture before" in order to mock the predictable plot twists of the Gothic—in particular its methods of building suspense and

drawing the reader forward into the narrative with a pleasurable deferral of pain. Austen uses the opportunity, I argue, to intimate what pains are concealed by the courtship plot's mode of building suspense and pulling the reader into the narrative: the deferral of the happy ending in marriage. At the same time, this play on what is observed and not observed seems to hint at the reader's inevitable obliviousness to the significance of this passage when read for the first time. It is crucial that there be a "repassing" through the passage in order to observe what is significant.

Henry's heroine is nonplussed by the evidence of torture in the form of drops of blood, a dagger, and the remains of an instrument of torture that she finds in the subterranean passageway. The phrase that signifies both the banality of such horrors in Gothic fiction and the heroine's paying them little mind is worth pausing over: "but there being nothing in all this out of the common way." In "repassing" through this passage with the courtship plot in mind, the standard stuff of the Gothic acquires a different kind of commonness. Encoded by Austen in "a secret communication" between bedroom and the chapel, I suggest, are the realities of the wedding night: the specificity of a "*few* drops of blood" signifies the loss of virginity; the dagger, painful penetration; the instrument of torture, perhaps the bed, for which the heroine of Henry's Gothic tale, feels "an *unconquerable* horror" (108). Buried most deeply in the Gothic plot, in a Gothic tale within a tale, and in a hidden room in a hidden tunnel, is the secret of penetration. The fact that Henry urges her forward into a "secret subterranean communication" (109) that she as listener to his tale insists she would be too frightened to explore also suggests sexual initiation.

Austen's secret communication of the everyday pains of the wedding night, which we can imagine might extend to the perils of childbirth (the bed has a "funereal appearance" [108]) is performed under the cover of Henry's parody of the Gothic. The play on what is concealed and what is noticed extends then to what novels acknowledge of reality and what they leave out. Austen's artful concealment of the unspeakable realities of the wedding night is suggested by the initial rent in the tapestry that Catherine's avatar in Henry's narrative discovers: "Unable to repress your curiosity in so favourable a moment for indulging it, you will instantly arise, and throwing your dressing-gown around you, proceed to examine this mystery. After a very short

search, you will discover a division in the tapestry so artfully constructed as to defy the minutest inspection, and on opening it, a door will immediately appear—which door being only secured by massy bars and a padlock, you will, after a few efforts, succeed in opening,—and with your lamp in your hand, will pass through it into a small vaulted room" (108–9). As above, Henry makes fun of the skills Gothic heroines possess, particularly the violations of probability that allow an otherwise vulnerable and delicate heroine to perform impossible feats of strength. But there is a deeper irony here: the ease with which secret doors give way to the curiosity of the heroine conveys how un-secret this knowledge actually is. Novels create barriers to its acquisition. The Gothic, particularly with its distinctive architectural features, at least provides a means to allegorize painful discoveries that sentimental fiction ignores.[25] The play with what is hidden and what is evident, what goes unnoticed and what is narrowly examined is Austen's recognition of the mystifications that novels create simply by leaving things out. The division in the tapestry so artfully constructed ultimately points to Austen's own ingenuity in creating a secret communication between the Gothic and the courtship plot. With the hidden subterranean passageways and concealed interiors of cabinets—the deep places of the Gothic—Austen can plant evidence for the painful realities of marriage that the happy ending of courtship plots suppress.

Satirical Surface and Gothic Depth

In Austen's revision of Henry's Gothic narrative, or Catherine's further adventures with a cabinet containing a hidden manuscript, the cabinet has a different appearance and location. Although to Catherine the difference is negligible, its alterations provide crucial clues for identifying Austen's extension of the critique of the marriage plot and for uncovering her less satirical project of investigating the function of depth in the experiences of novels. Before reading the contents of the Japan cabinet, Catherine reads the cabinet itself, in this way illustrating its function in the novel as an exploration of the relationship between the literary imagination and the material world:

[25] For a fascinating account of the Gothic as the exploration of the dark side of the marriage plot, see Barry McCrea, "Heterosexual Horror: *Dracula*, The Closet, and the Marriage Plot," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 2 (2010): 251–70.

> Catherine, having spent the best part of an hour in her arrangements, was beginning to think of stepping into bed, when, on giving a parting glance round the room, she was struck by the appearance of a high old-fashioned black cabinet, which, though in a situation conspicuous enough, had never caught her notice before. Henry's words, his description of the ebony cabinet which was to escape her observation at first, immediately rushed across her; and though there could be nothing really in it, there was something whimsical, it was certainly a very remarkable coincidence! She took her candle and looked closely at the cabinet. It was not absolutely ebony and gold; but it was Japan, black and yellow Japan of the handsomest kind; and as she held her candle, the yellow had very much the effect of gold. The key was in the door, and she had a strange fancy to look inside it; not however with the smallest expectation of finding any thing, but it was very odd, after what Henry had said. (115)

Despite Henry's fiction dictating that she carefully attend to an object initially overlooked, Catherine is content to ignore major differences between the factual and the real cabinet in her candlelight study of its appearance: "It was not absolutely ebony and gold; but it was Japan, black and yellow Japan of the handsomest kind; and as she held her candle, the yellow had very much the effect of gold." The difference between a cabinet of ebony and gold and a Japan cabinet is one of surface. The black lacquered surface of the cabinet reproduces the look of ebony. Similarly, the yellow painted on the lacquer surface has the "effect" of gold. The presence of a Japan cabinet in an English bedroom also suggests a superficial exoticism. In moving the cabinet from the subterraneous passageway to Catherine's room, Austen similarly reduces the Gothic depth of field. This altered location and look of the cabinet conforms to its satirical function as the revelation of the superficial charms of the most charming young man in the world, as intimated by the washing bills that Catherine eventually discovers in this cabinet.

Novels, particularly the Gothic, trump the awareness of empirical reality through faith in the revelatory power of hidden depths that they promote. Catherine exhibits this belief in the truth of hidden depths in her assumptions about the roll of papers she discovers in the interior space of the Japan cabinet: "her quick eye directly fell on a roll of paper pushed back into the further part of the cavity, apparently for concealment, and her feelings at this moment were indescribable" (118). Catherine's quick eye does not generate a description of the roll of paper

but an assumption of the sequestering of some horrible events in a hidden secret cavity. The ironic phrase used to signal this is "apparently for concealment." Though the narrator's summary of Catherine's assumption makes sense in terms of capturing Catherine's conclusion that the manuscript was hidden there on purpose, the ironic clash of "apparently" with "concealment" intimates the readily apparent and unconcealed nature of what she finds. The depths planted in Gothic novels to embroil readers in the story—the hidden compartments containing scandalous hidden secrets of unmentionable abuses—are linked in this passage to a standard shortcut for creating psychological depth in Gothic fiction: "her feelings at this moment were indescribable." This oft-repeated device for describing a character's response to sublime terrors is not reserved for the Gothic; in novels of various types it promises a depth of feeling without the labour of precision. In this way, it is not different from the sentimental shortcut, "the most charming young man in the world." At the same time, this phrase is crucial for suggesting how the promise of hidden depths that so successfully engages readers of Gothic fiction can be converted into an equivalent power in more probabilistic courtship plots.

Catherine feebly attempts to assert probability over her Gothic reading of the cabinet with a sceptical phrase that is swept away in a quick succession of assumptions: "Henry's words, his description of the ebony cabinet which was to escape her observation at first, immediately rushed across her; and though there could be nothing really in it, there was something whimsical, it was certainly a very remarkable coincidence!" The expression "and though there could be nothing really in it," though an attempted assertion of scepticism, captures precisely what gives the Gothic power over the imagination of the reader: the possibility of *something* in it. The phrase refers both to whether it is significant that her experience of the cabinet matches that described by Henry and whether or not there is something inside the cabinet. The two in fact are linked. Its possession of literary significance is dependent upon there being something inside its locked compartment. Austen demonstrates how the interior spaces of the Gothic and the depth they introduce into narratives engage the imagination of readers and pull them into the fiction.

Austen makes good on Catherine's bad faith assertion that there is "nothing really in it" by replacing a hidden Gothic manuscript with evidence of mundane reality and furthermore with evidence for two kinds of surface, clothes and bodies. What she reveals in exploding the Gothic hidden manuscript trope is that the charming young man does not necessarily possess any depth either; the reader's faith in the charming suitor "being really deserving of her" supplies the assumption of depth that engages the reader in the fiction through an anxious desire for the happy ending. This depth is not the secret of monstrous acts, as in the Gothic, but the assumption of real merit. Austen's later novels will substitute a satirical revelation of surface and false depth for a withholding of the merits and intentions of the romantic lead until the end of the novel. The mystery of the hero's intentions will create an expectation of depth, or a mystery surrounding what is inside, that engages readers' emotions and keeps them reading to the happy end.

As an object that Catherine reads, the Japan cabinet testifies to the link between the imaginative power of novels and the expectation of depth. This connection is built into its appearance: its outside offers a figurative scene behind which is a locked interior. It contains the key to novelistic construction in its combination of figures or images on the outside and hidden depths and possible secrets on the inside. Although the kinds of figures and scenes depicted on the exterior of the Japan cabinet are not described, it is tempting to imagine they might, as Japan cabinets often did, represent a landscape. If so, the Japan cabinet could be seen as Austen's mode of creating a theory of fiction based on the compositional methods of the picturesque, which Henry unfolds to an ignorant Catherine during their courtship in Bath. Connections between the Japan cabinet and landscape theories aside, Henry's lecture on the method of composition of picturesque landscape implicitly addresses the question of representation and depth: "He talked of fore-grounds, distances, and second distances—side-screens and perspectives—lights and shades;—and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar, that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape" (76–77). The study of the picturesque is to identify views in nature that as William Gilpin stipulated, "would look well in a picture";

it is, paradoxically, to produce a landscape already determined by the rules of art.[26] The particular compositional elements that Henry pedantically lists, "fore-grounds, distances, and second distances—side screens and perspectives—lights and shades," are more particularly aimed at creating the illusion of depth in a painting or drawing of a landscape. Catherine adds another necessary element to this lesson with her rejection of the city of Bath. She intuitively grasps that aesthetic protocols and trends determine what belongs in the frame and what is "unworthy of inclusion." Her voluntary rejection of all of Bath as "unworthy," also reveals Austen's methods for creating depth in *Northanger Abbey*—pointing to what novels consider unworthy of inclusion.

Objects of Sense and Thought: The Bodies of Books

The tendencies that characterize Catherine as a Gothic reader and that make possible the reader's faith in the happy ending of the courtship plot—slighting surface in favour of depth and misreading outsides in favour of assumptions about insides—are, Austen's novel suggests, endemic to the experience of novel reading itself. Through a variety of media, Austen draws the reader's attention to the surface of texts in order to reveal how reading is a process of overlooking outsides—the material book—in an absorptive experience of insides—the imaginary world conjured by the words on the page. While Austen draws our attention to this ability to lose sight of the material book, it is not necessarily to destroy the power of reading to override an awareness of the material surface of books. Her aim is simply to draw the reader's attention to the ability to forget.

Austen provides a reminder of such forgetting in the last chapter of the novel in a passage that highlights the reader's emotional involvement in the story, particularly the desire for the novel to end with the marriage of the hero and heroine: "The anxiety, which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages

26 As Rosalind E. Krauss describes in her brief discussion of the picturesque in *Northanger Abbey*, "landscape becomes a reduplication of a picture which preceded it." Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 163.

before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity" (172). The metaphor of hastening together to perfect felicity recalls the carriage ride that drives the heroine to Northanger and that allegorically presents the desires that drive the courtship plot. Austen casts a shadow over the "perfect felicity" to which the courtship plot is presumed to drive with a revelation of the pains of the wedding night. She also stops the readers short here with a reminder of the book before their eyes. Austen both forces the reader to acknowledge their own emotional investment in the novel's ending happily and jarringly reveals the extent to which fictional outcomes are deduced from the physical appearance and tactile reality of the novel. This reminder of how the reader gathers information about plot from the look of the material book threatens the reader's emotional investment in the story by drawing attention to its embodied form in a book. It also reveals how stubbornly the imagination overrides material sensation. Empirical reality of reading, "the tell-tale compression," is the basis for conjectures about fictional outcomes, not a reminder that this is just a book.

Although it does not necessarily impede the reader's emotional engagement, Austen insists upon a level of awareness of the physical book that Catherine is able to ignore in her complete absorption in Gothic novels. This is evident not just in her falling completely under the sway of Henry's oral narrative, but also in her reading of the manuscripts contained in Gothic novels. The following passage describes her initial assumptions about the "manuscript" discovered in the Japan cabinet and her disappointed sense that it does not resemble those she has read about in novels: "She now saw plainly that she must not expect a manuscript of equal length with the generality of what she had shuddered over in books, for the roll, seeming to consist entirely of small disjointed sheets, was altogether but of trifling size, and much less than she had supposed it to be at first" (118). Catherine compares the roll in her hands with the virtual one encountered in books. The phrase "shuddered over" conveys how palpably she imagined the fictional rolls and how little the physical novel containing the description of the fictional roles impeded her sense of their unmediated presence.

Austen's method of incorporating references to the physical appearance and sensation of books and manuscripts clearly

departs from their use in Gothic novels, which only engage the reader more fully into their fictional universes. The empirical nature of Austen's manuscript is stressed by the phrase, "she now saw plainly." At the same time, she does not seem to want to rob the novel entirely of the charm of escaping into a fictional universe. Henry offers an example of this conflation of reality with fiction when he explains to Elinor what Catherine means by "something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London" (77). When Catherine uses this "something shocking" to refer to a new Gothic novel, but Elinor understands the phrase to refer to an uprising or riot, Henry provides a demystifying clarification: "new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duodecimo volumes, two hundred and seventy-six pages in each, with a frontispiece to the first, of two tombstones and a lantern—do you understand?" (78). The description of the physical features of the book mediates in a misunderstanding in which fiction is mistaken for life—Catherine's imprecise language reveals her own tendency to allow reading to supplant reality, while Elinor's misunderstanding innocently translates fiction into reality. Henry's description of the length (3 volumes, 276 pages in each), format (duodecimo), and typical paratextual matter of Gothic fiction ("frontispiece of two tombstones and a lantern") reduces the horror to a predictable material form and at the same time makes strange the physical book. This physical description is accompanied by a reminder of the mode of distribution of Gothic fiction, the "circulating library," and thus the typical readership for the novel.[27] What is stressed is the appearance of Gothic fiction: both how it looks and where it turns up, in circulating libraries. The horror is demystified here in an atomization of its parts that reveals not just the physical features of the Gothic novel but its standardization, that is, its commercial quality.

Austen's approach to the relationship between fiction and reality is far more subtle than Henry's demystifying revelation of the formulaic and commercial nature of the Gothic. Her investigation of the experience of reading and the apprehension of reality resembles the dialectical drama that Bill Brown describes: "the experience of texts—be they mediated by books or boulders

[27] For an account of *Northanger Abbey* and circulating libraries, see Lee Erickson, "The Economy of Novel Reading: Jane Austen and the Circulating Library," *SEL* 30, no. 4 (1990): 573–90.

or billboards—amounts to a dialectical drama of opacity and transparency, physical support and cognitive transport, representation as object and as act."[28] Austen provides a variety of textual media in order to capture the way the object of reading comes in and out of focus, or how the process of reading is itself a matter of losing sight of the very object being read. Henry's oral Gothic tale, the Japan cabinet, and the manuscripts Catherine shudders over in Gothic novels are all subject to Catherine's ability to render the text transparent. The washing bills, the tell-tale compression of pages of *Northanger Abbey*, and the three volumes in duodecimo are momentary interruptions of opacity as they force an awareness of representation as object. But overall what interests Austen is how to balance awareness of empirical reality with the pleasure of imaginative transport.

Austen's washing bills invite a critical rereading of the novel that exposes the surfaces that are repressed by courtship novels—the body of the charming suitor and the engrossing novel. The location of the washing bills in Gothic interiors also hints at the function of depth in drawing the reader into the imaginary world of the fiction. I have demonstrated the necessity of close reading, "of pausing over the medium of expression," for revealing Austen's self-critical investigation of the courtship plot and her invitation to readers to self-critically calibrate their critical and emotional engagement in its conventions. In closing, I would like to take up this invitation myself and engage in self-critical reflection on my own reading of the novel. This exercise in turn indicates ways in which *Northanger Abbey* can inspire broader meditations on the nature of close reading and recent trends in the field of literary study, namely the rise of new formalism and its somewhat tense relations with history of the book, another new old kid on the block.

What has perhaps not escaped readers' notice is my reliance on the very methods of close reading that the novel ridicules. The claim that Austen sequesters an allegory of the pains of the wedding night, material facts repressed by courtship plots, in the

[28] Bill Brown, "Introduction: Textual Materialism," *PMLA* 125, no. 1 (2010): 26.

secret places of the Gothic novel is the mode of reading into things that the novel parodies. This interpretation fills a cabinet and a Gothic convention that Austen exposes as having "nothing really in it" with content—sociological critique of sentimental novels. The critic in hot pursuit of a reading is not that different, it seems, than the novel-mad, sleuthing heroine who reads the world around her with an eye for the secrets it conceals. The point of this avowal is not, in a perverse move, to discredit my own argument, but to make a broader point about the function of depth for literary criticism. What I wish to acknowledge is how both Catherine's eager investigation of the Japan cabinet in search of Gothic thrills and the act of close reading testify to the pleasure of reading into things. For both the close reader and the heroine, surface teases with the promise of an overlooked or hidden narrative. In other words, the projection of depth responsible for the appeal of novels also furnishes the attractions of literary critical inquiry. Is the role of pleasure in driving the construction of literary critical narratives the repressed content of literary studies?

Northanger Abbey is particularly useful for raising questions about the nature of critical inquiry at this moment in the history of the discipline. Austen's self-reflexive play with reminders of the materiality of books resonates with current debate about the role of surface and depth in literary criticism and the renewed interest in book history. In a recent issue of *Representations* entitled, "Surface Reading: Or How We Read Now," Best and Marcus track the current rejection and/or modification of the "hermeneutic of suspicion" that has dominated literary critical approaches since the 1970s. Summarizing Jameson, they characterize the assumption that underlies this depth-exploring approach: "the critic restores to the surface the history that the text represses."[29] Best and Marcus identify book history as a mode of surface reading that has emerged in recent years as an alternative to the hermeneutic of suspicion as it "attends to the literal surfaces of book themselves, making signs inseparable from their material supports."[30]

Similarly, Leah Price contrasts formalism and book history approaches by underscoring book historians' attention to the

[29] Best and Marcus, 5.

[30] Best and Marcus, 9.

"externals" of books: "When critics speak of 'formalism,' they usually mean verbal form; in contrast, book historians keep redrawing the boundary separating the words themselves from extrinsic features such as spelling, spacing, and typeface. Far from replacing hermeneutics by pedantry, book history insists that every aspect of a literary work bears interpretation—even, or especially, those that look most contingent."[31] In a move that anticipates current book history approaches, Austen counters her heroine's probing of hidden depth with reminders of the material supports of novel reading and courtship plots. Catherine's shock and dismay at finding washing bills, "in coarse and modern characters," where she expected to find a manuscript revealing a repressed history of suffering and abuse is similar to the way Price describes the current interruption of bibliographic methods in a literary critical culture that conceives of interpretation as the detection of hidden depths: "In a discipline that prides itself on discerning hidden depths, superficiality shocks like a purloined letter."[32]

But this analogy between a literary character's experience of reading and current literary critical practices begs the question of how we talk about the reminders of the externals of books and written surfaces that are not literal but figurative—that are part of the plot of novels or encoded in their formal patterns. Attending to the way literary characters talk about and experience the surfaces of books and written texts is not the same as a bibliographic approach. It is one thing to discuss Austen's title page and another to discuss her character's reference to a frontispiece. It is one thing to reveal moments in the novel when characters are reminded of the embodied experience of reading and another to treat the actual history of reading novels. Tracing Austen's various methods of drawing readers' attention to the material status of the novel is a critical endeavour somewhere between formalism as currently practiced and book history. Formalism would be enriched by embracing the methods of book history. Such a union would generate a mode of literary criticism that, rather than privileging either surface or depth,

31 Leah Price, "Introduction: Reading Matter," *PMLA* 121, no. 1 (2006): 11.

32 Price, "From *The History of a Book* to a 'History of the Book,'" *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 122.

attends to their interplay in both the experience of reading and in the construction of literary critical narratives.[33]

Although it is not his explicit intention, Otter's definition of form makes a space for both formalism's attention to "verbal form" and book history's privileging of "extrinsic features." It encompasses the physical book, given that it addresses the "particular character of a thing," which includes "its outward shape and appearance." His approach to form not only makes a space for the material book and the bibliographic, but it also defines formal inquiry as an investigation into the relationship between what we might call the internals ("structure" and "arrangements of parts") and the externals: "To attend to form, *an object of sense and thought*, is to press those relations and to assess the circumstances of perception."[34] Otter's verb "press" expands to evoke the physical experience of holding a book, the mechanical means of its production, and a deeper intellectual engagement with the object. I have sought here to give an account of a similarly complex interplay of pressures within *Northanger Abbey*.

Laura Baudot is an assistant professor of English at Oberlin College. She is writing a book about the discourse of vanity, the science of vacuums, and eighteenth-century literary experimentation.

[33] Henry Turner usefully organizes different conceptions of form into four "broad categories": "stylistic," "structural," "material," and "social." His comprehensive account of form thus includes the tangibles of format and the intangibles of "verbal patterning" and the structural relations among parts. Turner prefaces his schema with the avowal that "these senses do not sit easily with one another." I subscribe to his belief that "some of the most interesting work on the problem of form results from studying gaps and tensions between the categories." Turner, "Lessons from Literature for the Historian of Science (and Vice Versa): Reflections on Form," *Isis* 101, no. 3 (2010): 580.

[34] Otter, 119–20.