



Male Novel  
Reading of the 1790s,  
Gothic Literature,  
and *Northanger Abbey*

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BOOKSELLER RECORDS FROM TIMOTHY STEVENS of Cirencester, Gloucestershire, and Thomas Hookham and James Carpenter of London offer new insights into the fiction reading habits of men during the 1790s.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the Stevens records suggest that Henry Tilney's emphatic statement in *Northanger Abbey* (written 1798) that men "read nearly as many [novels] as women" (107) may not be entirely fictional.<sup>2</sup> What is more, male patrons of Stevens's bookshop and library seem to have particularly enjoyed the Gothic as did Tilney, who states:

"The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure. The Mysteries of Udolpho, when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again;—I remember finishing it in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time." (106)

However, while Austen's depiction of male novel reading may be accurate for Gloucestershire, the Hookham records yield little evidence that the majority of men in fashionable London enjoyed novels as much as Tilney.

The Stevens records, which extend from 1780 to 1806, do show that men borrowed and bought more fiction than women during the last decade of the eighteenth century. During the 1790s, the shop had approximately seventy male patrons (including book clubs) who borrowed and/or purchased fiction. The records suggest that men, at least in the locale of Cirencester, were the predominant consumers of fiction during the period. The Gothic, Radcliffe's novels in particular, made up a good portion of their reading material. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) is the most frequent Gothic title listed, suggesting that Tilney's pleasure in reading the novel may have been fairly common. Two of Stevens's customers borrowed *Udolpho*: Mr. Master in 1796, and Mr. Wilbraham in 1798. One man, Mr. Barker, purchased the novel in 1799. Perhaps most significant is that two male book clubs, The Cirencester Book Club and the Fairford Society,<sup>3</sup> purchased the novel, making it available for the clubs' numerous male readers. The book clubs acquired their copies shortly after publication in 1794, which implies an eagerness for *Udolpho* among club members.

The Stevens records show three other Radcliffe titles either borrowed or bought: *The Sicilian Romance* (published 1790, and borrowed by Rev. Washbourn in 1792), *The Romance of the Forest* (published 1791, and borrowed by Mr. Smith in 1798), and *The Italian* (published in 1797, and purchased the same year by Mr. Cresswell).

Several other identifiable Gothic titles were also procured by men. Charlotte Smith's *Marchmont: A Novel* (1796) was borrowed by Rev. Surtees in both 1796 and 1797. Surtees also took out Catherine Seldon's anonymously published *Count de Santerre: A Romance by A Lady* (1797). In 1797 the Fairford Society purchased the anonymous *Count Roderick's Castle: or, Gothic Times, a Tale* (1795). *The Castle Spectre* (either Matthew Lewis's 1796 drama, or the 1797 novel based on it by Sarah Wilkinson) was purchased by the Cirencester book club in 1798. Mr. Lysons purchased George Moore's *Grasville Abbey: A Romance* (1797) in 1799. So, at least among Stevens's male clientele, the Gothic seems to have held as much interest as Austen's Tilney asserts.

While we have no record that these men actually read the books they borrowed and purchased, we do have a record that

points to novel reading habits among men during the 1790s. It appears that Gothic literature, Ann Radcliffe's work in particular, was a common staple in this population's reading diet. What is interesting is that male customers for novels far outnumber women in the Stevens records. While it may be that some male customers were buying or borrowing for female family members, the book clubs' buying suggests that men were likely to be the primary readers of these texts, even if a female had access to them once book club members took the books home.

The records of bookselling partnership Thomas Hookham and James Carpenter in London reveal quite a different pattern of male book buyers and borrowers during the 1790s. A survey of the sizable Hookham ledgers for bookshop purchases largely supports the stereotype that many female patrons consumed fiction, while men generally read non-fiction.<sup>4</sup> It is true that the purchase of a novel occasionally shows up on the accounts of Hookham's male patrons, but there is no guarantee that the novels were not purchased for or by a wife, daughter, or sister. Periodically, a notation in the account signifies that a female related to the patron picked up the book, suggesting that many novels listed may, in fact, have been bought for a woman rather than for the male whose name appears on the account. Perhaps most important to consider in these records is that even though many show novels being purchased by men, there is often little consistency to denote a particular taste in fiction such as the Gothic.

The Hookham records do not compare evenly with the Stevens records; they include a list of library acquisitions from 1791 to 1798, and the accounts of all patrons of the bookshop during the same period. The records for the library (F 730-737) provide little circulation information, certainly no information showing how often a title might have been borrowed. In some cases, titles are associated with specific patrons who had requested the book, but these notations are too few to make any substantive claims about gender and novel reading. The library record does show, however, that at least one man, Mr. Keith Stuart, borrowed Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* in 1791, the same year it was published. Many other Gothic titles are listed in the library record, but there is seldom any record to suggest the gender of the bor-

rower. It is clear, however, that in 1792 several women did take out novels from the library. Mrs. Eyres received *Anecdotes of the Delborough Family: A Novel* (1792) by Susannah Gunning. The novel *The Fair Impostor* (anonymously published in 1792, sometimes attributed to Clara Reeve) was also requested by Mrs. Eyres, in addition to Mrs. Morant. Charlotte Smith's *Desmond* (1792) was taken out by Lady Howard. So, based on Mr. Stuart's request, one could speculate that there was a small population of men requesting fiction from Hookham's library. It seems equally likely, though, that the majority of fiction consumers borrowing from Hookham's were female.

A few records, however, show evidence for at least a minority of fervent male novel readers in London. These records give no indication of a woman in the house and appear to represent an individual's particular taste in fiction. One of the most interesting is that of brewer and member of Parliament Samuel Whitbread, Jr. In addition to listing primarily fiction, Whitbread's account shows that he began to pay for an annual library subscription in 1791. While it may be that Whitbread purchased novels for his recent bride (he married in 1789), the books may just as well have been for himself. He purchased many Gothic titles throughout the decade, usually right after the books were published. His purchases included Charlotte Smith's *Desmond* and *The Old Manor House* (1793), Mary Robinson's *Vancenza; or, The Dangers of Credulity* (1792); Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* and *The Italian*; and Eliza Parson's *Castle of Wolfenbach; A German Story* (1793) and *Mysterious Warnings* (1796) (F 150). Another of Hookham's customers, Mr. Crop, also bought a wide variety of novels and plays including several Gothic titles. Radcliffe's *Udolpho* and Stephen Cullen's *Haunted Priory; or, the Fortunes of the House of Rayo, A Romance Founded Partly on Historical Facts* (1794) were both purchased by Crop in 1794 (F 168).

Readers of *Northanger Abbey* will recall that the discussion of novel reading between Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney is preceded by a similar discussion between Catherine and John Thorpe. Thorpe, unlike Tilney, discounts novel reading, claiming that "Novels are all so full of nonsense and stuff; there has not been a tolerably decent one come out since Tom Jones, except the

Monk; I read that t'other day; but as for all the others, they are the stupidest things in creation'" (48). Thorpe's disparagement of novels excepts those written by men, evidently. One of the many ironies in the statement is that neither Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) nor, more significantly, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) were borrowed or bought by Stevens's customers during the 1790s. While it might be true that these titles simply were not available in the library or bookshop, it might also be true that they were just not as fashionable among Stevens's patrons as were titles by Radcliffe. In London the purchases of the Hookham library (separate from the ledgers for individual customers), also show no record of *The Monk* being requested by borrowers. *Tom Jones*, on the other hand, was purchased by the library in 1793, but there is no indication of the novel's circulation.

So, the passage from *Northanger Abbey* seems to be satiric when viewed from the perspective of actual book buying and borrowing habits. Thorpe appears to be a closet novel reader, and his taste in fiction may be a bit unfashionable. The satire grows when Thorpe confesses that Radcliffe's novels are "'amusing enough'" and "'are worth reading'" (49), despite having just noted how nonsensical such novels are. He covertly confirms Tilney's assessment of Radcliffe as well as the tastes of Stevens's male customers. Unlike Mr. Tilney, though, Thorpe and his family reside "near London" (33). It may be that in fashionable London male novel reading was an effeminate activity. This might account for what appears to be few male patrons of fiction in Hookham's records, as well as Catherine Morland's "fear of mortifying" (49) Thorpe when she points out to him that *Udolpho*, the novel he both discounts and seems to enjoy, "'was written by Mrs. Radcliff'" (49).

Austen's satire on male novel reading is preoccupied with, but not limited to, the Gothic. The irony within Catherine's and Thorpe's discussion escalates when Thorpe admits to sampling Frances Burney's *Camilla* (1796). He damns the book as "'stupid'" and "'unnatural'" (49). The Stevens records, in fact, show that Burney was popular with male patrons in Cirencester. *Camilla* was purchased by the Cirencester Book Club and the Fairford Society in 1796, and borrowed by four men: Mr. Cripps and Mr. Lucas in 1796, and Rev. Kings and Rev. Matthews in 1797. Burney's ear-

lier novels were also being purchased by Stevens's men during the 1790s. Mr. Tyndale bought *Cecilia* (1782) in 1791 and *Evelina* (1778) in 1792. Mr. Jenner also purchased *Evelina* in 1796. Thus, Thorpe's characterization of male novel reading seems not to match the book buying and borrowing of Stevens's men. It may be, though, that Thorpe's reading habits and attitudes about novel reading were characteristic for men in London.

The Hookham records do seem to show that men in town were not large consumers of fiction, despite the provocative book sales record of Samuel Whitbread. The portrayal of John Thorpe's reading habits, ironic and satiric as it is, may be rather accurate for a London gentleman. What is more, Henry Tilney's family is from Gloucestershire, suggesting that Austen's portrait of his reading behavior may be more consistent with male reading in the country. Indeed, perhaps Northanger Abbey was not far from Cirencester.

#### NOTES

1. Special thanks to Jan Fergus for making available to me her research on the Stevens records and for providing me a microfilm copy of the Hookham and Carpenter records. The Stevens records consist of four folio ledgers and reside at the Gloucester City Library. The Hookham and Carpenter records exist in the Public Records Office (C 104/75/1-3), surviving a Chancery lawsuit.

2. See Paul Kaufman, "In Defense of Fair Readers," *Review of English Literature* 8 (1967): 68-76, whose study of James Marshall's circulating library records from the 1790s shows that the majority of borrowers were men. Since Marshall's records do not include titles, see Lee Erickson, "The Economy of Novel Reading: Jane Austen and the Circulating Library," *SEL* 30 (1990): 573-90. Erickson has since questioned the validity of Kaufman's claim that Austen represented an accurate view of male novel reading habits of the 1790s (588). For additional discussion of reading in *Northanger Abbey* see Amy Elizabeth Smith, "'Julias and Louisas': Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and the Sentimental Novel," *English Language Notes* 20 (1992): 33-42, and Jung-Hwa Oh, "Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney: Two Readers in *Northanger Abbey*," *English Language and Literature* 40 (1994): 657-74.

3. For additional discussion of the reading habits of these book clubs see Jan Fergus and Ruth Portner, "Provincial Subscribers to the *Monthly* and *Critical Reviews*, and Their Book Purchasing," in *Writers, Books, and Trade: An Eighteenth-Century English Miscellany for William B. Todd* (ed. OM Brack, Jr., New York: AMS Press, 1994), 157-76; and Paul Kaufman: "A Bookseller's Record of Eighteenth-century Book Clubs," in *The Library* ser. 5, 15 (1960): 278-87, and "English Book Clubs and Their Role in Social History," in *Libri* 14 (1964): 1-31.

4. For an example of this view of readership see chapter two of Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: UCP, 1957).

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