

The Pen is in Her Hands

By Ainsley Gill

History: a near compound word whose meaning has often been far too literal to satisfy its critics. One such critic was 15 year-old Jane Austen, whose precociousness and wit was no less diminished by her young age. Her version of English history promptly points out its poignant and unnecessary gaps, emphasizing that “it is to be supposed that [King] Henry was married, since he had certainly four sons, but it is not in my power to inform the Reader who was his wife” (“The History of England” 67). She calls out the errors of her ancestors, noting that “It was in this reign that Joan of Arc lived and made such a row among the English. They should not have burnt her - but they did” (“The History of England” 67). Austen goes on to fiercely defend Queen Elizabeth I from the criticism of the time, emphasizing the strength of her moral character and religious faith while highlighting how her ministers manipulated her (“The History of England” 71). These were the words of a girl frustrated with the historical narratives that made up a major part of her expected educational curriculum, appalled with the absence of female heroines, and driven to, quite literally, rewrite history.

Later in life, Austen returned to the subject of history in *Northanger Abbey*, mirroring her younger self’s frustrations in heroine Catherine Morland. Catherine finds history “very tiresome,” filled with “the quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all” (*Northanger Abbey* 104). Indeed, Catherine “cannot be

[SCAFFOLD: A SHOWCASE OF VANDERBILT FIRST-YEAR WRITING](#) | Vol. 3 | Spring 2021

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interested in” the “real solemn history” prescribed by the period’s educational expectations for young women, instead finding romances to be far more captivating. (Northanger Abbey 104). Through Catherine’s clear preference for Gothic novels over history, Austen highlights a larger shared experience that women of the time had with traditional history texts and emphasizes the merit of novels as being much more capable of speaking to women’s experiences and interests in order to credit these novels for what they truly were to many - an early form of women’s history.

As a central component of their education, young women of Austen’s time were often prescribed reading lists that were far from empowering. On the advice of Reverend John Bennett, author of *Strictures on Female Education and Letters to a Young Lady, on a Variety of Useful and Interesting Subjects*, young women were commanded to “acquire a taste for the beauties of fine writing” especially through the reading of prominent English periodicals like “the Spectators, Tatlers, the Guardian, the Rambler, the Adventurer, [and] the World” (Bennett 91). These texts were generally considered to provide important “lessons of morality and prudence,” and, as such, were “peculiarly adapted to female reading” (Bennett 91-92). However, when examining the content of these publications, “periodicals like the Guardian and the Tatler stressed the reasons why women ought not to attempt to write history themselves” reinforcing the idea “that females were simply unable to distinguish the important from the trivial, the extraordinary from the mundane, the public from the private” in order to “[provide] further argument for this exclusion” (Woolf 656). It seems that the morals so often taught by these commonly read works were often ones with strong undertones of subjugation and misogyny, actively undermining the female capacity for intelligence and reason. A faithful reading of these texts encouraged young women to subscribe to a worldview in which they were naturally and perpetually below men at a time in their lives when

they were most developmentally vulnerable to such ideas.¹ When such a major portion of women’s educational texts emphasize this supposed gap in ability between men and women, it is no wonder that Catherine Morland and other women of the time found their contents to be “very tiresome,” at best (Northanger Abbey 104).

In addition to these collections of essays, the long form history books recommended to young women often proved equally disappointing. Due to the expectation that it was part of a proper young woman’s education, “women were reading history books in increasing numbers, but it is not clear that they were especially interested in the political and military events that dominated most of them” (Woolf 650). For most young women, the “construction of history as a truthful narrative of kings, statesmen and battles...had limited appeal to a gender largely prevented from turning its examples into practice” (Woolf 650). In the vast majority of cases, these texts were centered on the lives and deeds of men, meaning that there was very little of relevance for young women like Catherine Morland.. As Catherine and Austen point out, there are very few women in these texts, and when they are present, their role is often discounted and their character demonized or sexualized, as in the case of Queen Elizabeth I. Rarely are they the recipients of praise. As such, there was often little within the many pages of these history books to which young women could aspire . While young boys often found role models in the many generals, kings and other great men whose virtues were often extolled in history, the narratives of male heroics, enemies conquered, and wars won did little to appeal to the life experiences of Catherine or her contemporaries.

Mary Astell, a late 17th and early 18th century advocate for women’s education and philosopher, put forth an idea as to why she, Austen, Catherine, and so many other women were unable to find their own role models in these history books. Astell shrewdly pointed

¹ This adolescent period of their lives is now known to be “a critical point of intensification in personal gender attitudes as puberty reshapes male and female self-perceptions, as well as social expectations from others (e.g. family members, peers)” (Kågesten et al. 3).

out that “since the men [were] the historians, they seldom condescend to record the great and good actions of women” (Astell 207). Here, Astell provides crucial insight into the deeper roots of Catherine’s problem with history; simply, that men are the ones telling the story. History texts, of both the periodical and long-form variety, are written by men, about men, and designed for a male audience. In a society dominated by male publishers, editors, critics, and readers, even books widely read as a part of young women’s education are recommended and selected by men like Rev. John Bennett and so are designed to appeal to men first. Female writers had little access to and agency within this formal realm of history. Instead, they found another avenue through which to tell their stories: novels.

Though the genre was often scorned by men, women found a literary space of their own in novels. Catherine, like many of the young women around her, is captivated by these gothic novels, especially Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. She is enchanted by the medieval tale filled with mystery and intrigue that often occurs within the walls of an eerie castle. But that is not all that draws her in. In these gothic novels Catherine finds “the most thorough knowledge of human nature” paired with “the liveliest effusions of wit and humor...[and] the best chosen language” (*Northanger Abbey* 31). Instead of tracking how the heroics of men shape the world broadly along economic and political lines, as the droning and dull formal history texts often do, these novels have a unique focus on individual change and progress distinct from broader geopolitical concerns. Through gothic novels like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Radcliffe and other women writers were able to craft a “feminist theory of history,” a kind of “meta-commentary on the problems involved in producing history, measuring change, and mapping progress” that “critiques the gendered gauges used to manufacture history” (DeLucia 113). For once, this focus on the female narrative and female development rare in other genres and conventional forms of history provides Catherine with a kind of historical figure she can relate to, whose feelings she can access, and whose past she can translate on to her present.

Catherine was far from the only young woman to find solace in this new literary and historical space. Arabella, the heroine of Charlotte Lennox's novel *The Female Quixote*, is similarly entranced by reading romance novels. In them, Arabella finds representation, "both [personal] and historical, a female legacy that inspires [her] desire for broader social horizons" (Barney 262). While fictionalized, Catherine and Arabella's relationship to novels did not develop in isolation. Instead, it is indicative of the broader experience of women of the time as they discovered and cherished this new medium by which they could better understand themselves and those who had come before them.

Indeed, what Catherine and Arabella found in novels were individuals defining their identities to themselves and those around them in ways that they could relate to, allowing these novels to take on a relevance not diminished by their fictional nature. Socially, a woman's identity was determined by her pursuit of marriage, and after achieving this sole life objective, her identity, quite literally, was reduced to her husband's name with a "Mrs." tacked on in front. Young women were often under great social, personal, familial, and financial pressure to get married, and at the same time, were also trying to judge the character and feelings of the men around them from very limited social situations. In novels, young women could find comfort and solidarity in characters facing the same kinds of internal and external questions and conflicts as they were. What's more, novels went beyond just marriage, often also focusing on the individual identity and personal development of their heroines. So while women of the time would never be asked what they wanted to be when they grew up, novels prompted them to consider who they wanted to be. By doing so, novels encouraged women to consider and define themselves through an aspect of their identity that they had far greater control over - their personal and moral development. For the first time, the central characters driving a text forward weren't men aspiring to a political or military career that was inaccessible for women of the time, but women who, like Catherine and her

contemporaries, were trying to determine their identity and relationship to men in a patriarchal world.

Meanwhile, men like Jacques Du Bosc, an early 17th century French writer and thinker, would continue to wonder “What satisfaction can any seek in Romances, which may not [be] found in History?” For Du Bosc and his contemporaries, likely little. His history books centered around and were written by those with similar life experiences and facing similar social expectations. He could likely connect with and be inspired to achieve the same heights as the heroes, scholars, and politicians whose tales were told in many a weighty tome. However, Catherine and the women of her time had far more in common with the gothic heroine, often weighing similar social and economic pressures or facing similar decisions and struggles with the male presences in their lives, than they ever had in common with the victories of a general or proclamations of a king. Catherine’s internal and external conflicts and her motivations, desires and emotions were closer to those of the female heroines in the novels she so enjoyed, as these heroines enabled Catherine and the women of her time to better situate and understand themselves within a historical context. In this way, novels became an unsuspecting vehicle for women’s history, enabling them to access the lineage of their own emotions and individual development and apply these lessons to their own growth.

Austen never lost her childhood sense of indignation towards conventional historical narratives and their portrayal of women. In her last published novel, her heroine passionately argues that “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands” (*Persuasion* 243). This powerful declaration rings true still today, but the progress brought about by the rise in novels authored by women marked a meaningful step forward. These novels were part of a powerful movement that enabled women, for the first time, to tell their own stories and convey their own history, thereby beginning to shift the needle of narrative power towards equality. Today, Austen’s novels often receive the same treatment as Catherine’s favorites and

are frequently dismissed as “chick lit” for their focus on courtship and marriage plots. However, like the Gothic novels Catherine adores, they are cherished by readers in part because they provide an inside look into the perspectives, lives, and struggles of women in the 18th and 19th centuries -- a narrative of women’s history in which the pen is firmly in Austen’s hand.

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