

Michaela Lesayová, *Becoming a Heroine: Northanger Abbey as a Parody of Novel Conventions*

BA thesis

Opponent's Review

The present BA thesis focuses on the discussion of a single novel by Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1817). The principal question that the student raises is in what way its protagonist, Catherine Moreland, can be viewed as a heroine and what literary conventions are parodied in the process of her creation. In this light she examines the novel's affinity with other types of the novel of the period, such as the Gothic novel, the coming-of-age novel and others. In my review I would like to point out some problematic aspects of her arguments.

First of all, the student claims that *NA* parodies the Gothic novel and the English novel. It is not clear what she means by the English novel: if we are to take it as the pair terms suggest, then it is a specific "genre" in a narrow sense, as the Gothic novel is; this would also imply that the Gothic novel should never be termed "the English novel". If on the contrary the English novel refers to eighteenth-century novels written in English and/or in England, which novels are included and which are not? Is *Robinson Crusoe* parodied in *NA*? Is *Tristram Shandy*? Are the conventions of French novels absolutely excluded from the parodic strategies of Jane Austen? Or if the student works with a specific definition of the English novel as a "genre", then she should have provided this definition and its source, because the term is too widely used in critical literature.

The second problematic term is "heroine". The student admits that the word can be understood in both its meanings, i.e. as an outstanding figure and as the protagonist of a work of art. But when she claims that finally Catherine managed to become a heroine, what status is actually meant? What are the defining features of a literary heroine the student has in mind and which novels present such a type to which Catherine can relate in a non-parodic register? Does the first sentence of the novel mean that she was too plain to be viewed as a potential heroine (as the student seems to hold) or does it mean that she was seen as too foolish and unreformable to conform with ideal female protagonists of fashionable novels? Moreover, the concept of heroism seems to be more complex in *NA* than the student is prepared to admit: the revision of the novel was completed in the time when the entire nation celebrated the heroism of Admiral Nelson – how did General Tilney win his distinctions? Was it through his valiant deeds or his economic and social power? In this light the first sentence sounds more intensely politically vibrant, as it parodically recontextualizes a masculine term in the feminine sphere.

My third objection concerns the student's method of analysis. When she discusses e.g. Austen's parody of Gothic fiction, she rightly points out the way in which the author makes use of certain stock Gothic tropes; it is not certain, however, to what extent the student is actually acquainted with the Gothic novels of the period. As the text of *NA* prevalingly refers to *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, wouldn't it be useful to attempt a more detailed comparison between the two novels? In this way the analysis could have gone far beyond the obvious. Yet the comments on the Gothic novel and its properties make a better part of the thesis. In contrast with this the chapter on the coming-of-age novel is rather poor, depending on presentation of characters merely and often repeating what has been said before. A tendency to describe, reproduce and repeat is characteristic of other parts of the thesis as well, and in this the thesis seems unbalanced. Some statements are inaccurate, e.g. ambiguity and irony should not be presented as two different features since ambiguity often plays the role of a means and tool of irony (p. 12).

Unfortunately, the thesis is also not free from frequent language errors and typos, which were left uncorrected (there is even a discrepancy in the spelling of "Gothic" and "gothic", sometimes within one page). These errors are indicated in my copy.

To conclude: I **recommend** the thesis for defence with a preliminary suggestion of the mark to be very good to good (**velmi dobře až dobře**). The final result should depend on the student's performance during the defence session.

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