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‘Only a Novel’: Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817), novel readers and *The Circulating Library* (1804) in ‘fictions about fiction’ in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹

FREYA GYE

The Circulating Library presents a stereotyped image of the novel reader – young, undiscerning, searching for adventure and, above all, female. Northanger Abbey addresses this stereotype, reinforcing through the character of Catherine the perception of the vacuous, voracious reader, while simultaneously putting forward an alternative image of a novel reader who is judicious, reasonable, and, in some cases, male. This article will explore the ways in which the image and the novel present a picture of the novel reader around the turn of the nineteenth century, whether they genuinely reflect the perceptions of society at large, and what light they cast on real novel readers of the time.

The ‘pretty lisper’ in the image entitled *The Circulating Library* is a character that would have inspired little respect in the eyes of many from educated society when the image was published in 1804. The engraving was published in London by Laurie and Whittle, a company that produced engravings prolifically, and depicts a scene familiar to many at the time. Circulating libraries had been popular since the mid-eighteenth century and by the last third of that century they were ‘a major force in publishing’.² They had become, by the turn of the nineteenth century, a place, not only for borrowing and reading books, but also for meeting friends, socialising and being seen in society. They were also commonly perceived to be a significant factor in the proliferation and popularity of novel reading, a practice that was viewed by many with derision.

¹ Barbara M. Benedict, “‘Male’ and ‘Female’ Novels? Gendered Fictions and the Reading Public, 1770-1832”, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, ed. by Alan Downie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.3.

² Edward Jacobs, ‘Eighteenth-Century British Circulating Libraries and Cultural Book History’, *Book History*, 6 (2003), 1-22 (p.2).



Figure 1. Laurie and Whittle, *The Circulating Library*, 1804, hand-coloured etching, 20 × 25.2 cm, British Museum (not on display). Reproduced with permission of The British Museum.

The Circulating Library clearly reflects and encourages this point of view. The image shows shelves of books, labelled to reflect the genre of the shelf. The shelves, labelled ‘Novels’, ‘Romances’ and ‘Tales’, are almost empty – their books are clearly extremely popular choices among the clientele. In contrast, the shelves for ‘History’, ‘Sermons’, ‘Voyages and Travels’, and ‘Plays’ are full, their books seemingly neglected. The implication is clear: patrons of the circulating library do not read what might be called ‘serious’ books. The text accompanying the image drives the message home yet further:

“Pray, my dear Mr. Page,” cried a pretty lisper, looking over a Catalogue, “will you let me have that dear *Man of Feeling*, I have so long waited for: Well, this will do for one. No. 1889, *Cruel Disappointment*, for another. *Reuben, or Suicide*, highho! No. 1746, I suppose he killed himself for love. *Seduction*, yes, I want that more than any thing. *Unguarded Moments*, ah we all have our unguarded moments. *True Delicacy*, No. 2 that must be a silly thing by the title. *School of Virtue*, heaven knows mamma gives me enough of that. *Test of Filial Duty*, at any rate she puts me to that test pretty often. *Mental Pleasures*, worse & worse! I’ll look no longer. Oh! Stay a moment – *Mutual Attachment*, *Assiguation*, *Frederick or the Libertine*, just add these Mr. Page, & I shall not have to come again till the day after to-morrow.

The young reader lists dramatic, emotion-filled titles, befitting any sensational novel or sentimental romance, expresses her unbridled desire for them, and almost in the same breath dismisses titles, such as *School of Virtue*, which imply a level of moral instruction that might appeal to conduct writers of the time. The young woman – clearly young enough still to be under the influence of ‘mamma’ – is uncontrolled in her voracious appetite for novels: and she will be back in two days for yet more. The image ridicules this type of (inevitably female) reader, along with the circulating library that facilitates her.

Northanger Abbey was Jane Austen’s first completed novel. It was probably started in 1794 when she was just 19 years old; according to her sister Cassandra’s notes, it was finished around 1799, four years before it was sold to Crosby & Co. for publication. This chronology is corroborated by the novel’s stylistic similarity to Austen’s juvenilia and its references to works published between 1794 and the turn of the century.³ There is evidence that the book was revised and parts were rewritten before it was finally published posthumously in 1817.⁴ Whilst precise dating may, therefore, be impossible, *Northanger Abbey* is clearly a product of the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, a period when, according to Benedict, ‘women were held up as the quintessential novel readers’ in a way that was not true earlier in the eighteenth century or later in the nineteenth.⁵

In some ways, the novel seems to proffer the same message as *The Circulating Library* and in a similar way. It uses humour to describe and mock Catherine Morland’s conflation of reality with the fiction she reads, which leads her to make questionable and ultimately offensive judgements when she comes to stay with General Tilney and his family at Northanger Abbey, their home. It offers a satirical look at the way in which young women can be overcome by their imaginations as a result of excessive and unguided reading of novels as opposed to serious literature. It is not, of course, an indictment of all novels and their readers: in many ways, it is the opposite. Austen’s comments on reading within this novel, as elsewhere, are nuanced and astute, despite her youth during its composition. However, like *The Circulating Library*, she uses her art to contribute to the discourse about fiction at the time. Furthermore, both the etching and the text comment on the stereotyped novel reader of the turn of the nineteenth century: she is young and female, driven by a desire for romance and adventure, and is undiscerning in her choices. Yet, is this stereotype, presented particularly starkly in Laurie and Whittle’s etching, representative of contemporary views of the novel reader? And is it, moreover, reflective of the real demographic of consumers of fiction at the time?

³ Cecil Emden, ‘The Composition of *Northanger Abbey*’, *The Review of English Studies*, 75 (1968), 279-287 (p.281).

⁴ Emden, pp.284-285.

⁵ Benedict, p.1.

In many ways, *The Circulating Library* does seem to reflect a widespread view: a review by Walter Scott in *The Quarterly Review* from 1810 expresses surprise at ‘the present degradation of this class of compositions’ – i.e. the novel. The review continues; ‘the elegant and fascinating productions which honoured the name of novel [...] these have entirely vanished from the shelves of the circulating library.’⁶ Scott clearly believes that while novels used to be respectable reading material, ‘modern’ novels, on the whole, are not. This perception is exemplified in *Northanger Abbey*, where Austen uses the oafish character of John Thorpe to express this view: ‘Oh, Lord! not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do [...] Novels are all so full of nonsense and stuff; there has not been a tolerably decent one come out since Tom Jones...’.⁷ Scott’s later review of *Emma* claims that novels are ‘frequently “bread eaten in secret”’, suggesting a similar level of embarrassment over admitting to reading them.⁸ Other writers of the time went further with their disparaging view of novels: Erickson tells us that ‘objections to novels and novel reading ranged from their dignifying idleness to their encouragement of immorality’⁹ while Bray asserts that ‘the most widely-held view [was that] novel-reading was dangerous and corrupting’.¹⁰

This dim view of the contemporary novel may be related to the rise of women as ‘creators as well as consumers of popular novels’, which led women and novels to be increasingly linked in the social consciousness. As women were almost inevitably less educated than men of a similar class, this led to (often justified) accusations of bad writing from female writers, reinforcing the link between women and disposable, low quality literature.¹¹ As Campbell points out, women novelists were in fact nothing new, but writers like Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood were not taken seriously at the turn of the century and ‘the contemporary prominence of women novelists was understood – and often decried – as a new development’.¹² The proliferation of novels and the rise of the female reader coincided. However, although they were linked – female writers became more prominent partly because there was an increase in female readers, and *vice versa* – the link between them was likely overestimated at the time. Certainly, however, Austen seems to acknowledge the perceived link, as a few chapters on from

⁶ Walter Scott, ‘*Fatal Revenge; or, the Family of Montorio: a Romance.* by Dennis Jasper Murphy. 3 vols. 8vo. London. Longman and Co. 1807’, *Quarterly Review* (May 1810), 339-347 (p.340).

⁷ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. by Marilyn Butler (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p.45.

⁸ Walter Scott, ‘*Emma; a Novel. By the Author of Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, &c.* 3 vols. 12mo. London. 1815’, *Quarterly Review* (October 1815), 188-201 (p.188).

⁹ Lee Erickson, ‘The Economy of Novel Reading: Jane Austen and the Circulating Library’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 30.4 (1990), 573-590 (p.583).

¹⁰ Joe Bray, *The Female Reader in the English Novel; From Burney to Austen* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p.1.

¹¹ Benedict, p.5.

¹² Jill Campbell, ‘Women writers and the woman’s novel: the trope of maternal transmission’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Fiction in the Romantic Period*, ed. by Richard Maxwell and Katie Trumpener (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 159-175 (p.160).

Catherine's conversation with Thorpe, she asserts that 'gentlemen read better books [than novels]'.¹³ The link is also made unambiguously in *The Circulating Library*, where the association between the female clientele and the empty shelves of Novels and Romances cannot be overlooked.

In particular, writers of conduct manuals and religious writings, such as James Fordyce, William Cowper and Hannah More, held the view that novel-reading was not compatible with what Griffin calls 'a new ideal of womanhood [...] which required young women to cultivate four primary characteristics: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness'.¹⁴ Fordyce writes, for example: 'there seems to me to be very few, in the style of Novel, that you can read with safety, and yet fewer that you can read with advantage'.¹⁵ More does not hold back when she calls the efforts of novel writers 'unparalleled fecundity'.¹⁶ Even the much more liberal Mary Wollstonecraft, while in many ways opposing the likes of Fordyce, felt that women should read 'those works which exercise the understanding and regulate the imagination' in lieu of novels.¹⁷

'I shall not have to come again till the day after to-morrow,' concludes the young reader in *The Circulating Library*. Indeed, the late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century view of novels as an inferior form of literature likely also has to do with the association of novels with quick, easy reading, widespread availability, and variation in quality. The practice of publishing anonymously 'both intensified the reader's curiosity and protected authors and publishers', and had the secondary effect of 'permitt[ing] publishers to issue novels of uneven quality in a format that suggested they were all equally rewarding to read'.¹⁸ In addition, the huge rise in the number of libraries meant that books were much more accessible. Without the significant cost of buying the several volumes that typically comprised one title, reading a book only once became viable. The young woman in the etching, it is suggested, will not be required to engage with the books in any serious way, because they are not intellectually demanding; however, equally importantly, she has no responsibility for choosing judiciously, because her subscription to the library allows her to read prolifically and cheaply. Contributing to this perception was the idea that novels and romances were not only corrupting, but addictive: Thomas Gisborne, for example, wrote that 'the perusal of one romance leads [...] to the

¹³ Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p.95.

¹⁴ Martha Broadaway Griffin, 'Oceans Apart: Women Readers in the Nineteenth-Century British and American Novel' (Doctoral thesis, University of North Carolina, 2011), p.7.

¹⁵ James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women*, 2 vols (London: A. Millar and T. Cadell, 1800), I, p.113.

¹⁶ Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 2 vols (London: T. Cadell, Jr. and W. Davies, 1799), I p.184.

¹⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, ed. by Miriam Brody (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p.229.

¹⁸ Benedict, p.8.

speedy perusal of another. Thus, a habit is formed'.¹⁹ This is an 'anxiety' levelled at young women specifically, and targets 'the "disposable" literature of circulating libraries' in particular, as also represented in the etching.²⁰

It appears, then, that there was a reasonably prevalent view that novel readers were young, impressionable and female, and that novels themselves were not respectable reading material for the educated classes. *The Circulating Library* perpetuates this stereotype, adding credence to John Thorpe's exclamation that novels are 'all so full of nonsense and stuff' and Catherine's reflection that 'they are not clever enough for [gentlemen]'.²¹

Austen, however, is not so convinced that novel readers are exclusively undiscerning females, nor that those who disparage novels are as averse to reading them as they might seem. John Thorpe is not Austen's most intelligent or astute character, and it becomes clear that his stated view about novel-reading does not reflect his own practice: Thorpe, in fact, reads much the same literature as the heroine. Austen appears to use the encounter in chapter seven as a wry comment on the uneducated parroting of the general view of commentators, suggesting that, although Thorpe's view is relatively wide-spread, so is its hypocrisy. Other comments in the novel support this view as well. Austen addresses directly, in her typically witty style, the habit of other novelists of 'bestowing the harshest epithets' on their own genre, and of 'scarcely ever permitting [novels] to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust'.²² Austen would presumably be equally reproachful of novelists who denied their own contribution to the genre, such as Maria Edgeworth who introduced her novel *Belinda* as a 'Moral Tale – the author not wishing to acknowledge a Novel'.²³ 'I am no novel reader—I seldom look into novels—Do not imagine that *I* often read novels', Austen imagines embarrassed, unnamed readers proclaiming. She goes on:

"It is only a novel!" replies a young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame [...] or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.²⁴

¹⁹ Thomas Gisbourne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (London: T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, 1797), pp.216-17.

²⁰ Richard De Ritter, 'Making the novel-readers of a country: pleasure and the practised reader', in *Imagining women readers, 1789-1820: Well-regulated minds*, ed. by Richard De Ritter (Manchester Scholarship Online, 2015), p.6.

²¹ Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, pp.45, 95.

²² Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p.34.

²³ Maria Edgeworth, 'Advertisement', *Belinda*, ed. by Kathryn Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.5-6.

²⁴ Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p.34.

Austen's impassioned defence here suggests that the practice of downplaying novel-reading is common, even among novel readers themselves. Though this passage appears in a work of fiction, it rings true as Austen's own opinion, for, in a 1798 letter to her sister Cassandra, she defensively, if light-heartedly, writes of an acquaintance who assures Austen that her library does not 'consist only of Novels': 'She might have spared this pretention to *our* family who are great Novel readers and not ashamed of being so;—but it was necessary I suppose to the self-consequence of half her subscribers'.²⁵ Again, here in Austen's defence of novels, she simultaneously admits that other novel readers may need this reassurance for their own 'self-consequence' – in other words, to make it seem as though they are not novel readers at all.

Furthermore, Austen uses Henry Tilney's character to represent the educated, intelligent, male novel reader, for he tells Catherine in chapter nine that 'I myself have read hundreds and hundreds of [novels],' that furthermore, far from '[despising] novels amazingly,' young men 'read nearly as many as women do', and finally that '[t]he person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid'.²⁶ Austen, at least, does not believe that it is only the 'pretty lispers' of Laurie and Whittle's etching that read novels.

The Circulating Library does suggest that the stock of the circulating libraries was varied, although it represents the poetry, plays and non-fiction texts as sorely under-used. In fact, whilst the first part of this representation does ring true (on average library stock was varied, with only 20% being fiction, though the individual figures ranged between 5% and 90%), there is no evidence that novels were the most popular choices from the libraries.²⁷ De Bolla notes that 'we do not know how many women actually entered into the book-consuming public, nor do we know if it was exclusively women who "demanded" novels', and even asks whether the myth about voracious female consumers of novels was perpetuated as 'a screen to hide the fact that men were the most prolific consumers of illicit texts'.²⁸ Emma J. Clery argues similarly that the idea that women made up the majority of the clientele of the circulating libraries was a 'stereotype' and a 'male fabrication'.²⁹ It is true that there were links between circulating libraries and Gothic fiction in particular: for example, because the proprietor of leading publisher of gothic fiction – the Minerva Press – was also the principal wholesaler of circulating libraries to new entrepreneurs.³⁰ That said, although they 'came to exemplify flawed, female fiction',

²⁵ Letter to Cassandra, 18 December 1798, *The Complete Works and Letters of Jane Austen*, ed. by Dierdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.26.

²⁶ Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p.96.

²⁷ Bray, p.25.

²⁸ Peter De Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.271.

²⁹ Emma J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.98.

³⁰ Erickson, p.582.

Gothic novels were ‘only one subgenre of fiction’ at the time.³¹ Benedict argues that Gothic novels and other gendered ‘female’ fiction were used to create a prejudice ‘mainly based on fictions about fiction, [reflecting] not the reality of the reading public but a gendered discourse that centred on the novel’.³² This discourse of ‘fictions about fiction’ seems to be what Austen is critiquing in her representations of Thorpe and Tilney and their reading habits; social representation of literary culture is highly gendered, but this was not wholly reflected in reality.

The messages put forward by *The Circulating Library* and *Northanger Abbey* now seem very different. *The Circulating Library* intentionally perpetuates the stereotype of the vacuous, voracious young female reader, while Austen’s work gives a vehement defence of the novel and, in places, presents a cutting attack on the hypocritical commentator that disseminates the stereotype. However, the similarities between Laurie and Whittle’s ‘pretty lisper’ and Austen’s heroine Catherine, which were touched upon above, cannot be overlooked. Austen’s comment on Catherine’s adolescent reading habits in the first chapter could as easily be applied to the eager young reader in the etching: ‘provided nothing like useful knowledge could be gained from them, provided they were all story and no reflection, she had never any objection to books at all’³³ Catherine’s own effusive exclamations about her latest favourite book, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, could equally well be included in Laurie and Whittle’s accompanying text: ‘Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it’.³⁴

The difference between the two pieces, and their messages and intentions, comes down to the difference between the two mediums. The etching is, and can only be, a snapshot – it is a satirical look at a moment in time, meant as a disposable, commercial piece of entertainment, reflecting a common view, and not aiming to challenge it. Austen’s novel, however, shows progression and character development, and presents multiple, nuanced views. Katie Halsey calls Austen a ‘resisting reader’ and an ‘appropriative reader’;³⁵ she engaged with what she read, often challenging or mocking it in her letters and her fiction. Her novels ‘bear the allusive traces of her own reading,’ as is particularly evident in *Northanger Abbey* with the obvious influence of both the Gothic novels she had read, and Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*.³⁶ In other words, Austen was an active, engaged, intelligent reader of novels, and this is what she advocates in her writing. Catherine, as an example, grows to understand her own folly and to use her reason over her reliance on fiction, and she is rewarded for her increasing

³¹ Benedict, p.2.

³² Benedict, p.3.

³³ Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p.15.

³⁴ Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p.36.

³⁵ Katie Halsey, *Jane Austen and her Readers, 1786-1945* (New York: Anthem Press, 2012), p.10.

³⁶ Halsey, p.5.

awareness. On the other hand, Isabella Thorpe is the archetypal frivolous, undiscerning novel reader, and receives no such redemption. There is further evidence for this view in Austen's letters, where it becomes clear that the Austens are thoughtful, critical readers: of *Arthur Fitz-Albini* by Egerton she says, 'I expected nothing better [...] There is very little story, and what there is told in a strange, unconnected way,'³⁷ and on *Clarentine* by Sarah Burney she comments that 'it is full of unnatural conduct and forced difficulties.'³⁸

Indeed, other contemporary sources suggest that, although conduct and religious writers may have condemned all novels, many critics were more discerning in their views, as Austen was. A review of *John de Lancaster* by Richard Cumberland does not praise the novel it writes about particularly highly, but admits to its 'rank far above the usual stock in trade of the circulating library'.³⁹ This admission acts both as a reinforcement of the stereotype of *The Circulating Library* and as an explicit public recognition of the fact that some, or even many, novels are worth reading. Stephen and Gifford comment in their review of Edgeworth's *Tales of Fashionable Life* that 'the customers of the circulating libraries are so numerous, and so easily imposed upon, that it is of the utmost importance to the public, that its weights and measures should be subject to the inspection of a strict literary police'. They also concede that although she is 'not perhaps what is called a fine writer,' Edgeworth still 'cannot be allowed to the ordinary class of manufacturers of novels'.⁴⁰ Again, here is an explicit differentiation between 'classes' of novels and novel writers, as well as the implication that novels that vary in quality may make their way into the circulating libraries.

Among the main criticisms and fears about female novel readers was that the unthinking young reader would be 'drawn inexorably to repeat the fate of that character in her own real life', and *Northanger Abbey* can be seen as a moral tale, warning young women to guard themselves intelligently against that very thing.⁴¹ Tilney's scolding of Catherine towards the end of the novel summarises this moral message: 'Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? [...] Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you'.⁴² Perhaps this is a warning from a young Austen to other young novel readers. Here is where *Northanger Abbey* and *The Circulating Library* intersect, for each in its own way advises readers to read actively, to choose judiciously and to engage intelligently with their reading.

³⁷ 'Letter to Cassandra, 25 November 1798', *Complete Works*, p.22.

³⁸ 'Letter to Cassandra, 8 February 1807', *Complete Works*, p.120.

³⁹ Walter Scott, '*John de Lancaster: a Novel*. By Richard Cumberland, Esq. In 3 Vols. Cr. 8vo. pp. 884. London. Lackington. 1809', *Quarterly Review*, May 1809, 337-48 (p.337).

⁴⁰ Henry John Stephen and William Gifford, '*Tales of Fashionable Life*. By Miss Edgeworth, 3 vols. 12mo. Johnson, London, 1809'. *Quarterly Review* (May 1809), 146-54 (p.146).

⁴¹ Campbell, p.161.

⁴² Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p.172.

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