



# Jane Austen

## Northanger Abbey (1817)

### The story

Seventeen-year-old Catherine Morland, who comes from the comfortable family of a village clergyman, is invited to accompany wealthy friends, Mr and Mrs Allen, to Bath for the season. This is her first trip away from home, and it will prove a turning point in her life. Catherine is very fond of Gothic novels and has a constant desire to substitute illusion for reality. In Bath she meets Isabella Thorpe, a sophisticated young woman who encourages her interest in romantic fantasies and becomes engaged to her brother, James Morland. She also tries to promote a romance between Catherine and her irresponsible brother, John Thorpe, but Catherine is more attracted to a young clergyman she has met, Henry Tilney, the son of General Tilney of Northanger Abbey. They invite her to their home, where she imagines numerous terrible secrets surrounding the General and his house. There Catherine thinks she has found the proof that General Tilney's wife was murdered, a crime that could easily have come out of one of her gothic stories. She is humiliated when General Tilney returns suddenly from London and orders her to leave the abbey. She returns home but Henry follows her and explains that the General, believing her to be poor, had been anxious to keep her away from his son. Once he knows the truth, the General gives his blessing to Henry's marriage to Catherine. Meanwhile, Henry Tilney's worldly brother, Captain Tilney, has had a flirt with Isabella Thorpe and caused her to break off her engagement to James Morland. But Captain Tilney is not taken in by the pragmatic Isabella, and she is left without a husband.

### The heroine

The heroines of sentimental and Gothic novels were virtuous, accomplished in music and drawing, very sensitive and usually indulged in exaggerated displays of emotions (→Text Bank 57). In the opening pages of *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland is introduced as an anti-heroine: she finds her lessons annoying and prefers physical exercise, she has natural feelings and good sense. However, when she is in Northanger Abbey she acts like a Gothic heroine, letting her imagination run wild and basing absurd conclusions on slight evidence. Like Marianne Dashwood (→Text Bank 55) and Elizabeth Bennet (→Spec 8, 8.12), she loses her illusions as the story develops and improves her power of judgement.

### A parody of Gothic

Although the novel was drafted in 1798–99, it received less radical revision than later works and is therefore an example of the early phase of Jane Austen's art, when high-spirited satire was mixed with a growing sense of more mature themes. *Northanger Abbey* is a satirical work that makes fun of the gothic novels, particularly the work of Ann Radcliffe, that were so popular in Austen's day. It also develops some of Jane Austen's favourite themes, the initiation of a young woman into the complexities of adult social life, the danger of imagination uncontrolled by reason and judgement. Catherine's mistake is that she imposes the values of the melodramatic novels she reads on the reality which surrounds her; in this way she is less certain of the boundaries between the real and the imaginary.

## Born to be a heroine

### Jane Austen

*Northanger Abbey* (1817)

Chapter 1

*These are the opening lines of the novel where the author reverses the conventional presentation of the heroine.*

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected<sup>1</sup>, or poor, and a very respectable man, though his name was Richard – and he had never been

5 handsome. He had a considerable independence besides two good livings – and

1 neglected. Trascurato.