



The Prospect
of Blaise: Landscape
and Perception
in *Northanger Abbey*

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WHEN THE HEROINE CATHERINE MORLAND is invited to stay at Northanger Abbey, her passion for the hero of the novel is in grave danger of being eclipsed by her passion for ancient edifices. The narrator tells us, almost in Catherine's own words, that

She was to be [the Tilney's] chosen visitor, she was to be for weeks under the same roof with the person whose society she mostly prized—and, in addition to all the rest, this roof was to be the roof of an abbey!—Her passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney—and castles and abbies made usually the charm of those reveries which his image did not fill. To see and explore either the ramparts and keep of the one, or the cloisters of the other, had been for many weeks a darling wish.... (141)

The possible embodiment of that wish had first presented itself as early as chapter 11, when the words "Blaise Castle" (Austen's spelling) are dangled before the innocent Catherine by the scheming John Thorpe. Here, Catherine encounters for the first time the idea of a Gothic edifice that can actually be explored rather than simply read about in novels: "I should like to see the castle; but may we go all

over it? may we go up every staircase, and into every suite of rooms?” Catherine eagerly enquires (86). The episode, situated strategically near the end of Volume 1 of *Northanger Abbey*, is a foretaste, for both Catherine and the reader, of the actual encounter with a Gothic abbey in the second volume of the novel. The episodes balance each other and are closely related, although we are inclined to dismiss the earlier Blaise Castle episode as a rather inconsequential example of Catherine’s enthusiasm for the Gothic. The words “Blaise Castle,” which appear only six times in the novel, held a significance for Austen’s contemporary audience not always recognized by a twentieth-century reader. Furthermore, Austen uses this episode as a learning curve for her heroine and as a measure by which readers can judge the progress of Catherine’s education in morals and manners when she is finally tested at Northanger Abbey. This paper will look first at the contemporary significance of the reference to Blaise Castle and its fashionable landscape design, and then at the role this episode plays in the value-structure of the novel.

If we look closely at the Blaise passage in chapter 11, we can see that it is the *idea* of Blaise that lures Catherine away from her social engagement with the Tilneys. The words resonate for her with accretions of Gothic suggestion, built up by her limited reading of the Gothic novel. She cannot resist the bait of John Thorpe’s suggestion that she neglect the Tilneys and, instead, drive with him to Bristol—to “Kingsweston! aye, and Blaise Castle too, and any thing else we can hear of” (84-5). Catherine’s imagination runs riot:

“Blaise Castle!” cried Catherine; “what is that?”

“The finest place in England—worth going fifty miles at any time to see.”

“What, is it really a castle, an old castle?”

“The oldest in the kingdom.”

“But is it like what one reads of?”

“Exactly—the very same.”

“But now really—are there towers and long galleries?”

“By dozens.”

“Then I should like to see it; but I cannot—I cannot go.” (85)

She recalls her commitment to the Tilneys, but Thorpe brushes it aside with a lie, saying he has seen them driving another way. Catherine muses again, “I should like to see the castle,” and when

Isabella assures her she may explore “every hole and corner,” the scheme is too enticing to resist (86). Catherine is thoroughly taken in and, although regretting her walk with the Tilneys, “the delight of exploring an edifice like Udolpho, as her fancy represented Blaise Castle to be, was such a counterpoise of good, as might console her for almost any thing” (86).

If we have not noticed the phrase “as her fancy represented Blaise Castle to be,” we might be forgiven for mistaking Blaise to be a real medieval castle as Catherine surmises and as she is led on to believe by the disingenuous John Thorpe. Austen hardly refers to Blaise again. She mentions it briefly in chapters 13 and 15 but makes no effort to disabuse either Catherine or the reader of Blaise Castle’s real nature. Austen expects her readers to understand her reference to Blaise, and those who do not understand are, like Catherine, taken in and become part of the joke.

It is likely, however, that the majority of Austen’s educated readers at the time would have understood her reference to Blaise Castle. To begin with, they would have known that Blaise was not a real castle at all—certainly not “The oldest in the kingdom”—but simply a modern folly, built to satisfy the picturesque taste in landscape gardening. Furthermore, references to Blaise Castle would have been particularly topical in 1798 when Austen embarked on the writing of *Northanger Abbey*, since Humphry Repton (1752-1818), the leading landscape gardener of the day, had just completed his controversial new designs for the Blaise Castle estate.

Repton is generally associated with Austen’s criticism of estate “improvement,” especially in *Mansfield Park* where his name is coupled with those who would violate the proper relations between nature and art.¹ His improvements for Blaise Castle estate, however, reveal a concern for social values and utility that Austen not only knew about but applauded. My paper will argue, inter alia, that Austen shared not only Repton’s basic principles about landscape gardening but also his belief in the nexus between design and social morality.



Austen probably saw Blaise Castle estate when she was later living in Bath (December 1800-June 1805), and she may well have visited it as

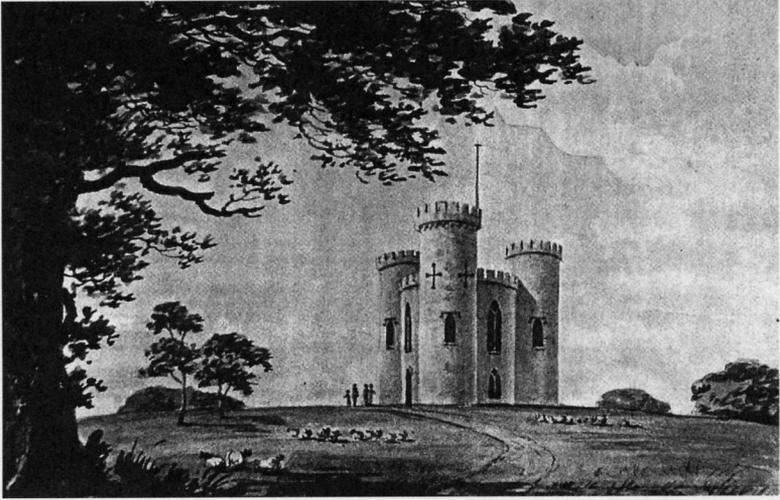


Figure 1: *Blaise Castle*, sketched by Humphrey Repton
in his *Red Book for Blaise Castle*.

early as November 1797 when she was staying with the Leigh-Perrots. The little castle (Figure 1) had been erected in Thomas Farr's landscaped garden at Henbury in 1766,² only two years after Horace Walpole's spine-chilling *The Castle of Otranto* first unleashed the Gothic tradition of terror. *Otranto* provided a model for Ann Radcliffe's horrifying adventures in remote haunted castles like *Udolpho* and filled the impressionable mind of the young Catherine Morland. But there was nothing "horrid" about Blaise Castle; it had none of those dozens of towers and long galleries Catherine longed for. Built on a triangular plan designed by Robert Mylne (1733-1811), it had a tower at each apex and a circular central room that was intended as a summerhouse, complete with paneled wall, stained glass windows, and niches for suits of armor. A kitchen below the central room meant that it could easily have been lived in comfortably, as it was later by an estate worker.

Formal gardens of the late seventeenth century, laid out in the French style of *Le Nôtre*, had once existed on the estate, and an imposing double avenue of trees had led from a great house (since sold) to the top of Blaise Hill, where a small summer-house stood before the "castle" was built. When Thomas Farr, a Bristol merchant

with sugar investments in the American colonies, acquired the estate in the mid-eighteenth century, he developed it as a private pleasure park, using the modern Gothic style as the motif for his castle and landscape design. Influenced by his friend Edmund Burke, he introduced Burke's delightful terror of the sublime (Burke *xxi*) by attaching local and invented legends to particular sites. The dramatic natural scenery obligingly allowed him to "create" a robbers' cave and a Lovers' Leap, both of which Catherine would have enjoyed had her trip not been cancelled—even if she were to be disappointed in the sham castle itself.

When the American War of Independence adversely affected the fortunes of Bristol merchants, Thomas Farr had to sell the estate in 1789 to John Scandrett Harford, a Bristol banker and industrialist. Harford immediately mounted eight cannons on the top of the so-called castle and set about further "improving" the grounds with the help of the professional landscape designer Humphry Repton.

In 1795, Repton made his first visit to Blaise Castle, making "On the Spot" recommendations and sketches in August and October of that year. He proposed that the new house, a neoclassical mansion built by the leading Bristol architect William Paty to replace an old manor house, should be raised to stand on a small knoll and present a more commanding appearance. The elegant conservatory, which Repton also suggested, and a working dairy were built several years later by the distinguished architect John Nash (1752-1835), who also created in 1812, in collaboration with Repton's son George, Blaise Hamlet, a Tudor-style rustic village for the estate workers.

Repton's designs for Blaise were completed in February 1796 and set out in his usual style in one of his famous "Red Books," the written recommendations for clients that were bound in red morocco and sold for the price of ten or twelve guineas. The original Red Book for Blaise still survives and is the treasured possession of the City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, which acquired it when the Blaise Castle estate passed to the City Council in 1926. The text is in Repton's fine copperplate hand with headings in semi-gothic script; but the distinguishing feature of the Red Books is always the series of Repton's own watercolor sketches with lift-up flaps of "before" and "after" scenes showing his intended improvements. Repton returned to Blaise twice in 1796, presenting the Red Book in person to Harford

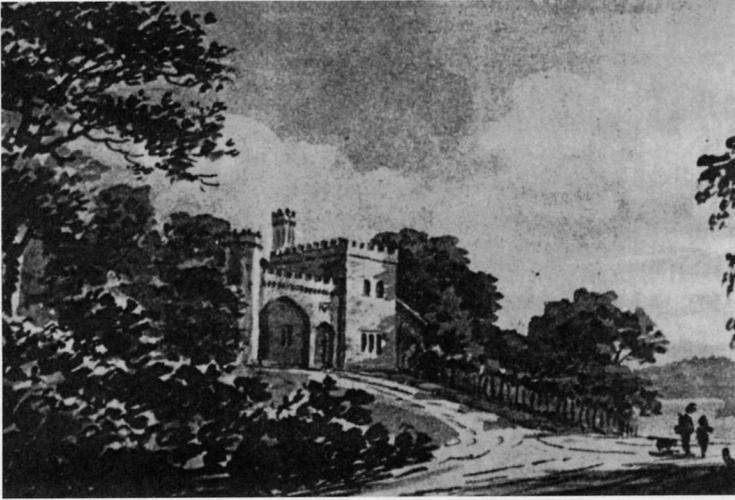


Figure 2: *Repton's Gothic lodge, Red Book for Blaise Castle.*

and then instructing those who were to carry out his designs.

Critics thought Repton's work at Blaise had not been "romantic" enough; Repton explained that however sublime the situation of Blaise Castle, high on a hill commanding a view of the surrounding countryside, the landscape design must also take account of the estate's role as a family residence. He had built a Gothic lodge (Figure 2) and a new approach to the house but, like Catherine on approaching Northanger Abbey, visitors were disappointed when they arrived at an elegant mansion rather than a moldering castle. His defense was simple: "scenes of horror, well calculated for the residence of Banditti" (Loudon 101), as in a Salvator Rosa painting, did not necessarily suit the comfort of his clients. Austen would have agreed. Like Mrs. Radcliffe's novels, such paintings could not be relied on as representations of human nature in the midland counties of England: "Of the Alps and Pyrenees, with their pine forests and their vices, they might give a faithful delineation; and Italy, Switzerland, and the South of France, might be as fruitful in horrors as they were there represented" (NA 200). But the introduction of a wild, rugged nature, found in the prints and paintings of the period, into landscape design ignored the

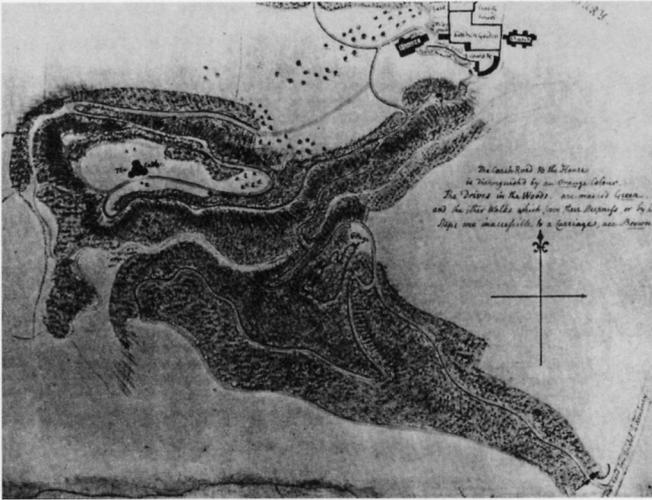


Figure 3: *Repton's map of Blaise Castle Estate, showing his improved coachroads and new approach to the house, Red Book for Blaise Castle.*

importance of the social considerations of a garden.

The “very fine situation” of Blaise Estate is Repton’s initial remark in the Blaise Castle Red Book. Its overhanging woods and rocky ravines, the existing mock-gothic castle with its commanding views of the mouth of the River Severn and the distant Welsh Mountains, provided a ready-made romantic setting. He felt that at Blaise he had only “to preserve and heighten the native beauties” and to adapt the already picturesque scenery to human habitation. Contrary to the general perception of him, Repton knew when not to intervene in nature.

Combining the romantic associations of the “castle” and the name of the estate with the building of a fine neoclassical house was Repton’s chief problem at Blaise. He first removed the entrance from Henbury village, where various houses cluttered the approach, and designed a new, more isolated gatehouse in the Gothic style (see south-east corner of map, Figure 3), to accord with the “castle” visible from the road. His next project, a new approach road from this gatehouse (north to the house), involved major engineering of a road that wound down through a deep ravine in the woods. The new road

followed the natural topography and provided scenes that, according to Repton's Red Book, "excite admiration and surprize without any mixture of that terror which tho' it partakes of the sublime, is very apt to destroy the delights of romantic scenery." Repton explains that the Gothic architecture of the lodge and castle should accord with the romantic scenery of the ravine and precipice, but as the road reaches more level ground the landscape becomes more benign and begins to betray signs of human habitation: "I expect the stranger will be agreeably surprised to find that on quitting this wood, he is not going to a mouldering castle whose ruined turrets threaten destruction, and revive the horrors of feudal strife, but to a mansion of elegance, cheerfulness, and hospitality where comfort of neatness is blended with the rude features of nature, without committing great violence on the Genius of the Place." The expectations of his clients were rather different from those of Catherine Morland.

Social consideration was uppermost in Repton's mind when he was developing the drives around the estate: he found it "remarkable that no attempt should have been made to render objects of so much beauty and variety accessible in a carriage" and lamented the fact that his sketches were not able to describe the "numberless beauties... brought before the eye in succession by the windings of a road, or the contrast of ascending or descending thro' a deep ravine of rich hanging woods." Repton made sure that both young and old could experience, for example, the view from the mouth of a cavern or the precipice, both of which he provided access to by coach.

He paid particular attention to the principal view from the house, which looked south-west towards the castle, woods, and ravine where he had made his new approach. It was with caution that he advised the use of the dreaded axe: "This is the first instance in which I have been consulted where all improvement must depend on the axe, and tho' fully aware of the common objection to cutting down trees, yet, it is only by a bold use of that instrument that the wonders of Blaise Castle can be properly displayed." The trees initially formed a solid line, part of the old avenue, with a white rail fence in front that caught the eye in a horizontal line between wood and lawn. Repton first removed the fence. Then he opened a bay in the wood beneath the castle to give depth and extend the eye toward it, though he left the castle "embosom'd high in tufted trees" (Figure 4). Careful thinning of

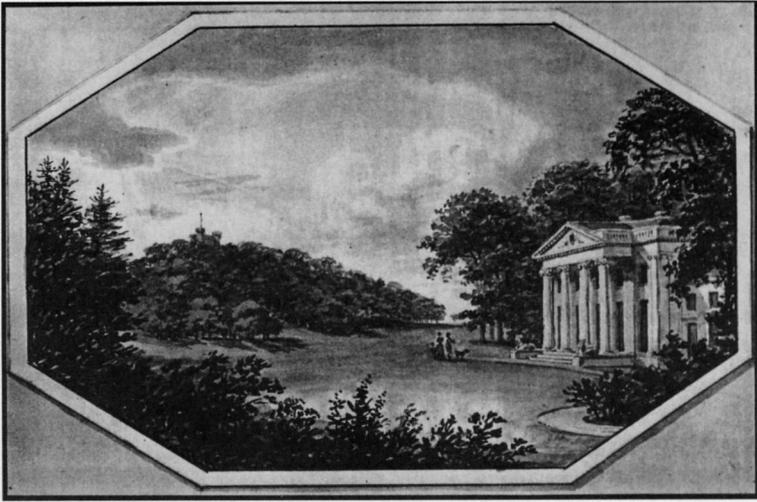


Figure 4: *View from the Blaise Castle House towards the castle, Humphry Repton's Red Book for Blaise Castle.*

the remaining bank of trees brought a woodman's cottage into view from the house and revealed a clearing of ground that provided "an air of cheerfulness" in the gloom of the woods. It is possible that this was the occasion Austen was thinking of when she penned Fanny's regret for the avenue at Sotherton (rather than Repton's removal of a few trees at Stoneleigh Abbey, her cousin's estate). Certainly this particular view of the new Blaise landscape was well-known, and there were some who saw the felling of the trees as wanton destruction.

The dreaded axe was put to use on another occasion at Blaise. Especially keen to open up the picturesque, structured view of the River Severn, which gave only a single perspective, tightly framed by trees, "like peeping thro' a long tube," Repton removed this barrier so that "the whole expanse of water, of shipping, and distant mountains will pass before the eye." Repton advised the planting of more trees elsewhere on the estate to hide scars in the land made by the "barbarous taste" of previous improvers who had tried to create a canal where no water existed.

The movement of objects in a scene or the movement created by the viewer passing through the scene was crucial to Repton's social

aesthetics. The cottage, for example, in its function as “the habitation of a labourer who has the care of the adjoining woods” was to provide animation and movement. Smoke from its chimney would spread a thin veil along the glen, providing human interest and a “kind of vapoury repose over the opposite wood.” Such movement ensures the variety of a natural landscape that no painting can capture.

As early as his first publication (*Sketches and Hints*, 1795), the year he began his work at Blaise, Repton had realized that a painting limits one’s perspective of a scene, whereas “the gardener surveys his scenery while in motion; and, from different windows in the same front, he sees objects in different situations” (Loudon 96). It is this breadth of perception that Catherine Morland needs to acquire, rather than the limited vision presented by picturesque jargon or Gothic novels.

Repton’s early affinities were with the cult of the picturesque, but by the time he came to work at Blaise Castle he was in mid-career and his initial aesthetic ideas had matured. He was a professional with clients to satisfy. His purely visual, picturesque tastes had been increasingly tempered by social considerations, and his designs had become more intricate—a far cry from the bare sweeps of lawn founded by his mentor “Capability” Brown. Austen would have approved of the theory and practice of landscape gardening found in Repton’s recommendations for the Blaise estate.



When Austen embarked on the writing of *Northanger Abbey* in 1798, Repton’s design for Blaise was newly completed and much talked of; hence, the reference to Blaise Castle would have referred as much to the contemporary landscape of the estate as to the sham Gothic castle itself. Catherine never learns that she is mistaken about the identity of Blaise Castle; only her friends and the attentive reader can appreciate Austen’s joke. The reader may laugh at Catherine’s ignorance: how could she confuse Blaise with a real medieval castle? Our superiority to Catherine places us comfortably with the narrator and her dramatic irony. But that irony is also directed against us, against those who would confuse fashionable Gothic follies with genuine historical edifices, against those of us who too readily accept fashion above moral or social value.

The Blaise episode is part of the larger moral structure of the novel. Austen simply mentions the phrase “Blaise Castle.” Catherine seizes on it and is whisked away in flights of fancy by an imagination stimulated by novel reading. We have seen that her contemporary audience would have known not only that Blaise was a modern folly but that Blaise estate had recently been recreated in Repton’s modified picturesque mode. Its landscape had been changed, ostensibly for the better; the venerable trees had been thinned to allow for different vistas and a modern carriageway that now directed the eye of the visitor toward a new perception of the old scenes. The Gothic landscape had been accommodated to human activity and comfort. One could now read the landscape differently, with fresh aesthetic and moral perspectives.

For Austen’s readers the name “Blaise Castle” would have reverberated with suggestions not only that Catherine was mistaken but also that she was ignorant in reading landscape. She was ignorant in perception. This is clearly stated just a few chapters later when Catherine finally takes the promised walk with the Tilneys. Like the young Jane Austen, who was, as her brother Henry pointed out, “from a very early age enamoured of Gilpin on the Picturesque” (*NA* 7), Henry Tilney and his sister are capable of “viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing” and can therefore decide “on its capability of being formed into pictures with all the eagerness of real taste” (110). They advocate Gilpin’s ideal criteria for a scene, but Catherine is confused. “It seemed as if a good view were no longer to be taken from the top of an high hill, and that a clear blue sky was no longer a proof of a fine day” (110). Catherine realizes her ignorance—her lack of perception—and Henry Tilney undertakes to be her instructor.

Their walk is up Beechen Cliff, overlooking Bath, and from these heights Henry delivers “a lecture on the picturesque”: “He talked of fore-grounds, distances, and second distances—side-screens and perspectives—lights and shades;—and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar, that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape” (111). The fashionable habit of declaiming in picturesque jargon is being ridiculed here. In the hands of picturesque tourists, Gilpin’s careful observations were soon hardened into a set of instructions on what to

admire or to deplore. Even Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* had complained “that admiration of landscape scenery is become a mere jargon” (97). Catherine’s literal-mindedness reduces her friends’ picturesque principles to a formula.

Jane Austen’s criticisms here are not really leveled against the aesthetic pleasure, as shown in the Tilneys’ delight in picturesque talk. The speakers are people both Catherine and the reader have learned to respect; Henry Tilney might indulge himself too much in other people’s foibles, but his judgment is sound. The abuse Austen objects to derives from Catherine’s inability to distinguish between a learned response to nature—the static framed vision Repton objected to in painting—and the evidence before her own eyes. Henry himself appeals to this same criteria when he later realizes with real horror the lurid thoughts of his father that Catherine has been entertaining: “‘Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? [Catherine of course has been judging from Gothic novels]...Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you—’” (197). Catherine is too quick to embrace a learned response without the judgment of the Tilneys. She lacks not only aesthetic perception but social discernment.

We saw how Repton valued movement in landscape to create different perspectives and how our understanding of a scene is limited if our view is restricted by a fixed lens or frame. Catherine’s readiness to exchange one perspective for another is amusing, but Austen is surely underscoring the importance of understanding a learned or fixed perception. The picturesque focuses our view, and, like Catherine, we are often not aware of its prevalence in our judgment of scenes. A learned perception can be valuable, but when it becomes the measure of all things it can obscure one’s judgment. Catherine’s passion for castles has obscured her better judgment. In the Blaise Castle episode, her vision is focused through a Gothic lens that distorts her moral judgment. She should have waited for the Tilneys who were better people than the Thorpes; she should have honored her previous engagement and rejected the temptations of Gothic grandeur.

The temptation of “Blaise Castle” led Catherine to commit a social sin. She suffers, and she admits she was wrong: she is punished, though not very severely. John Thorpe proves to be an insufferable

bore, the trip to Blaise is aborted, and Catherine is genuinely sorry for her rudeness to the Tilneys. When the same temptation is repeated two days later, when the Thorpes and her brother again demand her company on another drive to Clifton, she resolutely refuses to commit the same error twice. “Modern manners” are firmly rejected in favor of old-fashioned common decency to others. Catherine had made a promise and she would keep it. Only later does she learn from Mr. Allen that the scheme itself, of unrelated “[y]oung men and women driving about the country in open carriages!” (104), is morally dubious. Her natural politeness and sense of right have saved her from an error of “real consequence,” from a “breach of propriety” (105). Her lesson in landscape further helps her to view the actions of her friends from a different perspective and to see through John Thorpe’s deceptions and bad manners, but she has not yet learned to control her imagination.

When Catherine is invited to stay at Northanger Abbey, she repeats the imaginative excesses begun by the words “Blaise Castle.” In her excitement, Catherine forgets the social misconduct that attended her flight towards Blaise. The readers, however, do not forget. When she goes to Northanger, she acts out the promises of the aborted Blaise Castle episode, and our sense of anticipation of the traps the heroine will fall into is raised by expectations of her disappointment. As Catherine seeks dark passages, bloody skeletons, and secret drawers, we watch with equal suspense as she unknowingly slips into a web of social misunderstandings and is cruelly evicted from the Abbey—ironically, with all the suspicion and drama of a true Gothic heroine!

Catherine failed both to exercise “a sense of the probable” and to read the Reptonian landscape of Northanger Abbey where theories of the picturesque were tempered by utility and social convenience. Her initial expectations of the Abbey had been disappointed: instead of gray Gothic walls and windows “rising amidst a grove of ancient oaks” (161), or an approach through terrifying gorges, she finds herself approaching a comfortable edifice with ease. Catherine is puzzled by the discontinuity between her learned perception—the images of castles she has seen in pictures or read about in novels—and the actual landscape. She is not yet proficient in interpreting the evidence of her own eyes:

She knew not that she had any right to be surprized, but

there was a something in this mode of approach which she certainly had not expected. To pass between lodges of a modern appearance, to find herself with such ease in the very precincts of the abbey, and driven so rapidly along a smooth, level road of fine gravel, without obstacle, alarm or solemnity of any kind, struck her as odd and inconsistent. (141)

—“inconsistent,” that is, with her picturesque idea of how an abbey should be situated. On the next day when she views Northanger Abbey from the lawn in front, she is delighted by its prospect. Had Henry been there, he could have instructed her about how it had been laid out in a manner reminiscent of Repton: the house in a low sheltered position but set off by a vast sweep of lawn, its side wings obscured by knolls of old trees or luxuriant plantations to suggest the vastness of the edifice, and steep wooded hills rising behind. The very name of the abbey highlights the importance of this favorable site: the house facing south towards the sun, with a “hanger” or hanging woods on a steep hill behind, sheltering it from the north.

General Tilney takes particular pride in his landscaped park; he is something of an improver with his modern lodges, the smooth gravel drive (a favorite recommendation of Repton), and the kitchen garden with hot-houses providing for his convenience. Not all is “improved,” however. Despite the General’s dislike for the cold, damp path of the melancholy grove of Scotch firs—a hangover from an earlier style of emblematic gardening—the feature has been preserved for its human associations. As Eleanor explains: “I am particularly fond of this spot.... It was my mother’s favourite walk” (179). Northanger estate displays the equivalent good sense in accommodating the social needs of the owners while at the same time preserving the picturesque “grandeur of the Abbey” that we saw in Repton’s design at Blaize. Austen expects us to view the landscape through the Tilneys’ lens. Again, the narrator has used landscape to indicate the balanced perception her heroine must acquire.

Catherine finally learns that viewing Northanger Abbey through the lurid spectacles of the Gothic novel can only disappoint, embarrass, and distress. Those of us who understood Austen’s reference to “Blaize Castle” could have warned her against the mistaken perceptions of a picturesque imagination and directed her to an estate where the land-

scape appeals “less to the eye than to the understanding” (Loudon 120). The Blaise Castle episode, initially used as a joke to reveal the ignorance of her young heroine and to ridicule picturesque devotees in general, becomes—with insight into Repton’s designs for the estate—another example of how Austen used the language of landscape to further her artistic and moral purposes.

NOTES

1. See in particular Alistair Duckworth’s *The Improvement of the Estate*, a view reaffirmed in his “Preface” to the paperback edition (1994).
2. The following information about Blaise Estate has been gleaned from several sources, including research at Blaise Castle House Museum; material in the City Museum and Art Gallery, Bristol; and David J. Eveleigh, *“A Popular Retreat”: Blaise Castle House and Estate* (Bristol: City Museum and Art Gallery, 1987).

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