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A COMPANION TO
JANE AUSTEN

EDITED BY
CLAUDIA L. JOHNSON AND CLARA TUIE

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The Gothic Austen

Nancy Armstrong

Northanger Abbey was the first of Austen's major novels to be drafted (1794) and the last to appear in print (1818). Written and revised when Gothic fiction was the rage, the novel's willingness to poke fun at Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* has encouraged scholars and critics to align Austen's novels with Augustan reason and wit in contempt of the irrationality of sentimental literature in general and the excesses of Gothic romance in particular. Picking up where the feminist reclamation of sentimental literature during the 1980s and 1990s left off, Claudia Johnson invites us to consider whether *Northanger Abbey* can be read as a defense rather than a satire of Radcliffe, posing the question I mean to address: "Is Austen possibly a Gothic novelist herself?" (Johnson 2003: ix). In opposition to the economy of wit characterizing the Austen style, Gothic romance tends, like sentimental literature, toward the prolix and extravagantly conventional in order to push human feeling and behavior beyond the limits of reason and decorum (Walpole: 10). In appearing to "sabotage" these devices, according to Johnson, *Northanger Abbey* actually translates them into ordinary speech and social interaction and so breathes affective energy into the novel of manners (Johnson 2003: ix). But if *Northanger Abbey* does ridicule Gothic, then what do we make of the satiric treatment of Radcliffe? Can we abstract a paradigm from this novel for reading the Austen novels appearing during the 25-year period between *Northanger's* first draft and its final publication? This essay proposes a way of doing exactly that.

Historians tend to think that when John Locke formulated his theory of property in 1679–80 to counter Robert Filmer's argument that the power of monarchy was virtually unlimited on this earth, he had only landowning interests in mind (Macpherson 1964). If Austen has anything to say about the matter, Locke's theory of property retained explanatory power well after monarchy ceased to pose a threat to landowners, not only because he argues for the owner's sole right to possess his land, but also because he seems to insist on the subsidiary notion of property as that which each individual has "in his own person," elaborated in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Whether or not Locke had landowning men in mind when he came

up with this second form of property, by including it in his *Second Treatise of Government*, he extended citizenship in theory to all who had property in themselves. Gothic offered novelists a way of exposing a discrepancy between the two forms of property. When novels whisk a heroine off to a remote castle, monastery, or convent, she becomes – in fact, if not by law – the property of others, valued only for the material resources attached to her position and possessing no ability to use them to her own advantage. Because the ability to give or withhold consent depends on self-ownership, such standard Gothic plot devices as imprisonment, attempted rape, stifled speech, intercepted letters, and falsified historical accounts create conditions that neutralize even the minimal agency required to withhold consent. By yoking the notion of the property intrinsic in a person to the traditional notion of property as land, Locke made it possible for the difference between them to emerge as a contradiction: are you who you are because you belong to a “house,” meaning both family and land, or are you who you are by virtue of something you possess within yourself, the sense, sensibility, wit, accomplishments, or civility you bring to a household and by so doing make it yours? Gothic conventions put the two kinds of property on a collision course where each imperils the other.

Austen organized what would otherwise be a novel of manners around this contradiction – central to British literature in the decades following the French Revolution – and so formulated a language for imaginatively sustaining civility in a world undergoing violent social transformation. In her novels this incorporation works in two directions. It limits the forms of violence and cruelty that can be inflicted even on heroines like Fanny Price and Anne Elliot, endowed with one kind of property but not the other. At the same time, Austen uses Gothic conventions to turn each novel into a Gothic castle of sorts – a framework in which the traditional notion of property as vested in land deprives individuals of the basis for making rational decisions, the means of self-expression, and even the power to withhold consent. Where in *Northanger Abbey* the irreverent wit and devastating logic of the Austen sentence appear opposed to the Gothic excesses it debunks, such sentences constitute a world that wit cannot illuminate nor logic master so long as the two forms of property composing that world seem poised to cancel each other out.

When is a House a Castle?

Austen’s heroine enters Northanger Abbey with a head full of Gothic fiction, and uses its conventions to read the architecture, furniture, *pater familias*, and his dead wife as more of the same. She is upbraided by Henry Tilney, the second son of a landowning family, for eschewing empirical evidence and common sense, and the ethical weight of the novel seems to fall on his call for a rational response:

“What have you been judging from? . . . Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated with being known, in a

country like this, where social and literary intercourse in on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighborhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?" (NA: 197)

Henry is correct that it is ridiculous to believe that his father imprisoned and murdered his wife. Even Radcliffe's demonic Montoni never actually committed that crime. But it is equally ridiculous for Henry to assume that Catherine's education and experience can explain his father's alarming violations of civility and good taste, much less his mood swings: the Abbey is no more ruled by reason than by a secret history of crime and passion. The novel thus invites us to heed Henry's rhetorical questions and consider what *Northanger* might share with Gothic fiction.

While Austen uses Henry to punish Catherine for confusing his father's abbey with Montoni's castle, she also grants him little more freedom than the hero of a Gothic tale when it comes to marrying the woman of his choice. Families marry whom they choose, individuals don't. The inhabitants of the Abbey are subject to a force heedless of both reason and sentiment because heedless of the first requirement for the exercise of either, namely, the property each individual has in himself or herself. Individual family members are members of a single corporate body. When we clear away the confusion produced by both Radcliffe and common sense, we discover that Henry is subject to a family economy rooted in land: "Northanger Abbey having been a richly endowed convent at the time of the Reformation [and then falling] into the hands of an ancestor of the Tilneys on its dissolution" (NA: 142). Henry is a second son in need of an occupation, and the parsonage he plans to occupy is the General's domain and subject to his wishes: "It is a family living Miss Morland; and the property in the place being chiefly my own, you may believe I take care it shall not be a bad one" (p. 176).

Catherine has little property of the kind the General hopes to accrue by taking her into his family, but she is more than the nonentity that Mr Allen acquires through marriage to Mrs Allen, a woman who possesses only "the air of a gentlewoman, a great deal of quiet, inactive good temper, and a trifling turn of mind" (NA: 20). Austen never assures us that Henry Tilney values Catherine's educability over the adulation she bestows on him, but she does put her heroine through a series of trials that establish good manners as the grounding and guide for her expressions of sympathy. In a world where people deploy the outward signs of such virtue to their own advantage, genuine feeling, when properly expressed, appears intrinsic to Catherine — property that she has, so to speak, in her person.

She acquires this property as she abandons a Gothic reading of social relationships within the Abbey. Its architecture initially prompts her to read the Abbey as a fictional castle complete with winding passageways, forbidden chambers, and a mysterious chest of drawers. Although Catherine soon scolds herself for imagining that the chest of drawers in her bedroom contains evidence of some tale of persecution, the pall that General Tilney casts over his household sustains her conviction that he is a ruthless

tyrant cut to Montoni's pattern: "What could more plainly speak the gloomy workings of a mind not wholly dead to every sense of humanity, in its fearful review of past scenes of guilt?" (NA: 187). Catherine misses the mark in assuming the cause of his gloom, but in pursuing his material interests, he does behave like a modern Montoni. Discovering Catherine's scant inheritance, he proceeds to devalue the bond between Henry and Catherine:

Turned from the house, and in such a way! – Without any reason that could justify, any apology that could atone for the abruptness, the rudeness, nay, the insolence of it. Henry at a distance – not even able to bid him farewell. Every hope, every expectation from him suspended, at least, and who could say how long? – Who could say when they might meet again? – And all this by such a man as General Tilney, so polite, so well-bred, and heretofore so particularly fond of her! It was as incomprehensible as it was mortifying and grievous. (NA: 226)

The syntactical disruptions here, along with such nouns as "abruptness," "rudeness," and "insolence," put us in a world where behavior is not regulated by decorum. Adjectives such as "incomprehensible," "mortifying," and "grievous" indicate that the novel has indeed taken a Gothic turn where the exchange of women turns women into property and discounts affective bonds. Catherine thus appears not to have Radcliffe seriously enough, failing to detect the cause so transparent to the reader.

When the notion of property "in oneself" runs aground on the notion of property in a "house," the heroine so dispossessed undergoes an internal split, releasing – much like a genie from its bottle – the Gothic affect that accompanies the breakdown of that one-body-to-one-mind equation we call the modern individual (Armstrong 2005). The individual imprisoned in a Gothic castle is a mind imprisoned in a body not hers to command. The illusion of individual responsibility, individual accountability, and thus individual value vanish with civility, and all those who harbor this illusion, as Catherine does, are subject to the paranoid conviction that something has gone very wrong. As the ethos of individualism gives way to an older and still more pervasive notion of the body as family property, reason, sympathy, the manners that reflect that notion of the body become mere performances rather than self-cultivated properties.

Catherine's expulsion from the Abbey uncovers the semiotics of Gothic architecture in a way that Radcliffe's romance, being romance, does not. By dissolving the individual body into a corporate body, Austen in no way locates the problem in the landowning classes or implies that it is self-destructive to marry into them. That is, after all, what the General disrupts and what Austen's archly comedic ending finally achieves. The novel reaches its nadir, not because Catherine has been taken into a "house," but because she has been tossed into the category of bodies that simply don't matter (Butler 1993: 10). That the possibility for happiness and the narrative endeavoring to realize it are consequently over implies there is no more life outside a "house" in Austen than in a Radcliffe novel. It is only there – and through some

accommodation of family prerogatives to individual feelings – that one can sustain the illusion of self-possession.

No Joking Matter

D. A. Miller (2003) best explains how and at what cost Austen's style remains detached where her heroine is personally invested, and strikes us as most playful when it is recounting that heroine's moments of humiliation. I want to consider what makes these heroines susceptible to such debasement – especially in the novels following *Northanger Abbey* where the operation of Gothic conventions can't be read as satire. Let us assume that Austen understood why Gothic fiction was popular and wanted to use those conventions without becoming a Gothic novelist herself (Miles 2002: 42). Let us assume further that to do so she dropped the reference to Gothic architecture but still used Gothic conventions to expose the contradiction between the notion of property in one's person and the more traditional notion of property as land. To test these hypotheses, let us see how she puts these conventions to work in the novel of manners.

Who can forget Mr Woodhouse, selfish monster that he is? Yet he is only the most adorable of a sequence of irresponsible fathers harking back to Radcliffe's M. St Aubert. Mr Woodhouse differs from Mr Dashwood, Mr Bennet, and even Sir Thomas Bertram only in that the latter hand over the responsibility for marrying off their daughters to willful and selfish women, while Emma's father hands that responsibility over to Emma herself. The "bad mother" offers Austen's heroine to some lesser Montoni who wants her for something, whether imagined wealth and position or the simple thrill of possessing a woman clearly superior to himself, something other than the wit, reason, kindness, or integrity she has in herself. Austen's novels, like Gothic novels, adhere to the principle that it takes bad parents to create conditions where Gothic flourishes.

A father who abdicates his economic responsibilities, and a mother who aggressively pursues them, together put their daughters in much the same position as a Gothic heroine, vulnerable to poseurs and predators. Ensclosed in Hartfield with her father, Emma seems an exception to the Gothic strategy of removal that pulls the foundation of traditional property out from under the heroine and throws her back on whatever property she has in herself: Marianne Dashwood on her sensibility and self-expression, Elinor on her good sense and self-restraint, Elizabeth Bennet on her wit and intelligence, and so forth. But even Emma finally recognizes what she shares with Fanny Price or Elizabeth Bennet, who each have a parent eager to hand her over to an inappropriate husband to bring in property. Austen's opening description of Emma's relation to her father reads like Gothic mismatch: "The evil of the actual disparity in their ages . . . was much increased by his constitution and habits, for having been valetudinarian all his life, without activity of mind or body, he was a much older man in ways than in years" (*E*: 7). In scoffing at the idea that Emma's

governess should marry Mr Weston and “have a house of her own,” Mr Woodhouse presages Emma’s dismal future (*E*: 8). Though drained of the malevolent eroticism that infuses such relationships in Gothic fiction, she is as good as married to her father in that she never gets “a house of her own” in the end.

I am hardly the first to note how often Austen draws on the language of suffering – anxiety, torment, mortification, and despair – to express the heroine’s reaction to the humiliation parental dereliction brings upon her. By rendering this suffering with Gothic hyperbole, Austen’s wit amuses us at the heroine’s expense. Anticipating a letter from Willoughby, Marianne Dashwood receives one from her mother instead, “and in the acuteness of the disappointment which followed such an extasy of more than hope, she felt as if, till that instant, she had never suffered” (*SS*: 202). “We may treat it as a joke,” as Robert Ferrars explains on hearing that his brother forfeited his inheritance to honor his impecunious contract to Lucy Steele, “but upon my soul, it is a most serious business” (*SS*: 298). Though put in the mouth of an otherwise silly man, this statement serves as a coda for the whole novel. The threats tormenting Austen’s protagonists would be no laughing matter if not represented with Gothic excess. Disappointed in love, the Dashwood sisters face a future no less bleak than the one Jane Fairfax anticipates in her remove to Ireland as a governess. Fanny Price’s benefactor, Sir Thomas, pressures her into a loveless marriage by returning her to her parents’ home in Portsmouth, where she finds herself in a home mismanaged by an indolent mother, terrorized by an alcoholic father, and filled to overflowing by unruly siblings. Against this background, Sir Thomas’s reason for expelling Fanny from Mansfield Park seems more sinister precisely for being couched in understated terms:

He certainly wished her to go willingly, but he as certainly wished her to be heartily sick of home before her visit ended; and that a little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park, would bring her mind into a sober state, and incline her to a juster estimate of the value of that home of greater permanence, and equal comfort, of which she had the offer. (*MP*: 369)

The Gothic effect depends on putting the heroine through a form of self-annihilation such that she must conclude she is nothing in and of herself. The teeming house and harbor that await Fanny at Portsmouth are the most obvious instance in Austen’s fiction of a heroine suddenly transformed into someone virtually indistinguishable from any other. But even in *Emma*, replacement rather than matchmaking becomes the name of the game, as Harriet Smith, the natural daughter of a man of unknown rank, appears to take Emma’s place in Mr Knightley’s affections. Likewise, the day after he is refused by Elizabeth Bennet, Mr Collins “scarcely ever spoke to her, and the assiduous attentions which he had been so sensible of himself, were transferred for the rest of the day to Miss Lucas” (*PP*: 115). Here the occasion for comedy, the transfer of interest from one woman to another, can be devastating. Convinced that Willoughby and Edward Ferrars intend to marry other women,

Marianne and Elinor are swept into a kind of death spiral that deprives them of their sensibility and sense, respectively, so that the sisters feel and behave as two halves of one individual. In no other novel does Austen so clearly rely on the device of doubled heroines to demonstrate that whatever their individual virtues, one woman, when detached from her “house,” becomes much like another, but every Austen heroine endures a dark moment when she suddenly understands her self is not hers to govern and improve.

Nothing makes this point more effectively than the seduction plot. A staple of Gothic fiction – whose ruins are littered with the remains of women who entrusted their affections, and usually their bodies, property, and children as well, to self-serving men – the rake goes to work behind the scenes of each Austen novel, exposing the interchangeability of women. Lydia Bennet falls under the same spell as Darcy’s sister who had nearly eloped with Wickham; Fanny Price rebuffs Henry Crawford who then entices Maria Bertram; just as Colonel Brandon’s ward fell victim to temptation, so her illegitimate daughter succumbs to Willoughby, the man who breaks Marianne’s heart, and Frank Churchill engages Emma in a flirtation that duplicates and deflects attention from his secret engagement to Jane Fairfax. These suppressed narratives surface during the novel, showing that the past never dies but repeats itself and so insists on the interchangeability of women.

Once we identify the Gothic with the narrative conventions that break apart the two kinds of property formulated by Locke and brings them into contradiction, we are left with the twofold question: why was it necessary to establish this contradiction in the first place, and how did it ensure the continuing popularity of Gothic fiction? We know how Austen did it – namely, by incorporating Gothic tropes within the novel of manners. But how she appealed to a nineteenth-century readership turned on what she rendered phobic by this move.

The Unthinkable

Turning to *Persuasion*, published with *Northanger Abbey* in 1818, we find a heroine threatened with self-annihilation because she *does* belong to a family of some distinction and property: “Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way; – she was only Anne” (*P*: 5). As if it were not enough to stifle her self-expression, first by thwarting her attempt to marry for love, then by encouraging her to marry to secure the family estate, the novel concludes by linking Anne’s fate to her poor and debilitated girlhood friend, Mrs Smith. About to slide off the map of those individuals acknowledged for their intrinsic attributes, Mrs Smith is rescued by Captain Wentworth through her friendship with Anne, and she goes from a woman who can barely get by to one who can both enjoy and be appreciated for the property she has in herself, “for her cheerfulness and mental alacrity did not fail her; and while

these prime supplies of good remained, she might have bid defiance ever to greater accessions of worldly prosperity" (*P*: 252). Lest this tribute make her intrinsic property outweigh the advantages of belonging to an established house, the novel gives each a share in the other's abundance. Mrs Smith gains property through Anne's intervention, and Anne gains some of Mrs Smith's cheerfulness through hers, chiasmatically linking the two kinds of property.

Captive to her family, Anne languishes and "her bloom had vanished early" (*P*: 6). But once the novel starts, she can afford the luxury of following her heart against the dictates of property because she is no longer attracted to a man who had "nothing but himself" to bring to marriage (*P*: 26), for Captain Wentworth has "distinguished himself" and "made a handsome fortune" (*P*: 29–30, Solinger 2006). The navy is exactly what Sir Walter, her father, criticizes it for being, "the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of" (*P*: 19). In this respect, the navy works counter to Gothic conventions that expose the powerlessness of the property one has in and of oneself once detached from property that descends through a family. However we look at it, some combination of land, wealth, and position is prerequisite to the exchange of personal property that makes for a companionate relationship: "Anne was tenderness itself, and she had the full worth of it in Captain Wentworth's affection" (*P*: 252). Coming after so many years of their "loving" each other even after "hope is gone" (*P*: 235), can such a conclusion really be the source of readers' gratification?

Until now, I have used the term "property" as if it were something one either does or does not possess, something solid in contrast with the ineffability of intrinsic attributes. But "property" is not so monolithic as I have implied. There is no such thing as inheritance pure and simple. Austen's novels revolve around conflicting property forms and claims: settlements on second sons, dowries, women who inherit property, purchased commissions in the military, hereditary entailments, widows and children left unprovided for, legal derailments of hereditary arrangements, British estates that depend on colonial plantations, wealth that originates in trade, and so forth. The result is a snarl of competing interests. When Admiral Croft leases Kellynch Hall because Sir Walter Elliot cannot pay his debts; when the heir to the baronetcy, Anne's cousin Walter, fears that Sir Walter will sire a son and deprive him of an inheritance; when this same Walter refuses to help Mrs Smith recover the money coming to her on her husband's death; how can we know what belongs to whom? Anne's life – including her initial rejection of Wentworth, her visit to Uppercross and then to Bath, as well as her cousin's offer of marriage – is choreographed by a need to maintain the family estate.

If contemporary readers fasten onto the concept of property in oneself as the more problematic strand of discourse in Austen's fiction, it is no doubt because we live in an age of embattled democracy, where the situation is the reverse of what it was in Austen's day. The notion of property in oneself, the very substance of the liberal individual, is both firmly established and clearly on the defense in our own century. Reading retrospectively, we enjoy Anne's achievement of a form of individual

gratification that would not have been possible had she married a man of title. But Austen's original readership probably did not revel in the triumph of the "little guy," or what was then an emergent form of value, over and above distinctions based on rank. Self-ownership in the fiction during Austen's time serves much the same purpose Warren Montag attributes to that form of property in Locke: "it consolidates the alliance between the laboring classes and agrarian capitalists, by asserting that any attack on even the largest productive estate simultaneously calls into question the humblest laborer's ownership of his very person" (Montag 2005: 155). While Austen's readership did not encompass this social spectrum, the principle nevertheless applies. By showing the new form of property to be powerless unless backed up with land, Austen's novels provided her readership with a basis for identification. In the process, Gothic conventions rendered each of the two opposing forms of property relatively monolithic. We may smile at the patently artificial endings that reconcile the two forms of property at the conclusion of each Austen novel, but a smile hardly guarantees a novel's success. It is possible to enjoy such an ending because a complex and conflicted tangle of vested interests has been torn apart and consolidated into a binary opposition. Thus we must ask what Austen accomplished by creating this contradiction in the first place: what do the two kinds of property, as she represents them, allow her to exclude from consideration?

Austen's way of posing a contradiction among forms of property makes the world feel whole, as if virtually anyone can claim one form of property, if not another. Of all her novels, *Persuasion* makes it most obvious what cannot be thought, much less discussed, when all the world is property. In this novel, Austen reverses her own formula and fashions a heroine out of material she had previously dismissed as lacking intrinsic value, namely, all the faceless Miss Greys and Miss Mortons, women whom men pursue strictly for the property attached to them. It follows that Anne cannot receive acknowledgment for the property she has in herself by marrying into a "house," as she would were she to accept her cousin's proposal. Instead, she rejects a house in the country in favor of a ship in the Royal Navy.

Austen goes to some lengths to establish a warship as an ideal home. "Women may be as comfortable on board, as in the best house in England," Mrs Croft assures Mrs Musgrove early on in the novel (*P*: 69). Why should a novel take pains to transform a ship into a home, if not to turn the English home into a vehicle capable of extending the English definition of property throughout the world? As it insists that British domesticity can be established virtually anywhere, Captain Wentworth's floating household directs our attention to the very threat that it endeavors to keep at bay: "the dread of a future war [was] all that could dim [Anne's] sunshine" (*P*: 252). The timing of this reminder of war is notably bad, suggesting, against the background of turbulence, that the principle of property is up for grabs. But Austen's other novels also contain within them the traces of what they strive to render unthinkable.

Northanger Abbey intimates that the world of property is not all that stable. Overhearing Catherine repeat the rumor of "something very shocking" in London, something "more horrible than anything we have met with yet," Eleanor Tilney implores

her “to satisfy me as to this dreadful riot.” As if to render the idea of a riot impossible, Henry ridicules it by showing that Catherine was referring to “nothing more dreadful” than a new Gothic novel. But he also lends substance to the idea by explaining that his sister is imagining “a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George’s Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood, a detachment of the 12th Light Dragoons . . . to quell the insurgents” (NA: 113). Austen’s other novels offer briefer glimpses of a wider world that puts property in question: Colonel Brandon “was with [his] regiment in the East Indies” while the woman he loved, having been forced into marriage with his older brother, ran off, became pregnant, and contracted consumption (NA: 206); Edward Said calls attention to Sir Thomas’s property in Antigua and his involvement with slavery (1994: 25); and closer to home, within a half mile of Highbury to be exact, are the gypsies who appear out of nowhere to frighten Harriet Smith out of a shilling. Lacking respect for private property and insisting on their rights to travel freely, settle nowhere, and live off the excesses of the well-to-do, Austen’s gypsies call up the specter of the migratory laborers who roamed the English countryside and set fire to farms that refused them work (Thompson 1971).

Pride and Prejudice alone seems to lack any trace that cannot be integrated into a world made all of property. If *Persuasion* can be called Austen’s melancholic novel, *Pride and Prejudice* is the “too light & bright & sparkling” novel, the one that Austen felt “wants shade.” But she came no closer to identifying that missing element than expressing a regret that she hadn’t included something external to the plot or even to the novel itself, “an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte – or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness and Epigrammatism of the general stile” (*Letters*: 203).

D. A. Miller rightly observed that had Austen found her fiction wanting, she could have worked such a topic into her plots (Miller 2003: 102). The missing element cannot be named. Property provides the conceptual ground on which her fiction, like Radcliffe’s, is constructed, and from property, Austen builds a world over which her words sustain the illusion of complete command. Yet at arbitrary points in her other novels, phenomena that challenge the integrity and solidity of property, phenomena that do not belong in a world of property, emerge within it and are almost instantaneously dispersed (the gypsies), relegated to the margins (slavery), pushed into the past (the British presence in the East Indies), or into the future (war). At such moments the Gothic – which exposes the ephemerality of property – and realism, for which property is contrastingly intractable, become one and the same.

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