The Female Gothic: An Introduction

When Ellen Moers wrote of the "Female Gothic" in Literary Women in 1977, she coined a new term and laid the foundation for a new way of thinking about women and the Gothic genre. Certainly, generically gendered distinctions had been made before Moers' book; eight years earlier, Hume had distinguished between "the novel of terror" and "the novel of horror," positing Ann Radcliffe's books as epitomizing the former and M.G. Lewis' the latter. Hume, however, focused his piece on the male-dominated horror-gothic, dismissing Radcliffe and her many emulators as "not serious." This dismissal has since been rectified by a flood of critical attention to both the Gothic genre itself and the female authors within the Gothic tradition, but that flood has produced its own questions. What specifically differentiates between the "Female Gothic" and other kinds of Gothic? From other kinds of novels? Can we read "Female" as "Feminist," or do these novels simply reproduce the patriarchal structures their heroines inevitably struggle against? Is the Female Gothic somehow "personal"? Political? Psychological? And in the final count, to borrow from Jane Tompkins' famous question, is the Female Gothic any good?

In Literary Women, Moers claims that the Female Gothic is "easily defined: the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (Moers, 90). In answering the many questions raised by the spectre of the Female Gothic, I want to complicate that definition by including in its the depiction of women in the Gothic, as well as the depiction of the men in Gothic novels, who inevitably either marry those women or try to kill them, or possibly both. Moreover, because Radcliffe and Lewis (the defining authors of the 18th-century Gothic) were intentionally reacting to each other's work and incorporated that reaction into their novels, I also include Lewis' depiction of heroines and heroes in my definition of the Female Gothic.

This section is constructed to give the student of the Gothic a strong textual and critical introduction to the major issues that play themselves out in the politics of being a female (writer and character) in the 18th-century Gothic. Because so much of these gender politics are founded in the works of Radcliffe and Lewis, I have limited the discussion to their works. Specifically, the section investigates four aspects of the Female Gothic in the Radcliffian and Lewisian traditions: the gendered construction of the Gothic heroine; the similarly gendered construction of the Gothic hero; the link between the Gothic "place" and female sexuality; and the conflation of money/class issues with issues of femininity The last unit is devoted solely to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, for it, too, demonstrates a version of the Female Gothic in the issues it raises, but takes these issues in an entirely new direction.

While this section is certainly not a comprehensive overview of the Female Gothic, it should provide clear direction to readers interested in the constitution of femininity and gender politics in the genre. A bibliography of critical works consulted is available from the Gothic: Materials For Study homepage.
Virgins In Distress and Demons in Disguise: Constructing the Heroine's Identity in the Female Gothic

The very words "Gothic heroine" immediately conjure up a wealth of images for the modern reader: a young, attractive woman (virginity required) running in terror through an old, dark, crumbling mansion in the middle of nowhere, from either a psychotic man or a supernatural demon. She is always terminally helpless and more than a bit screechy, but is inevitably "saved" by the good guy/future husband in the nick of time. This construct certainly has its roots in the Female Gothic of the 18th century, but the reality is much more complex than the modern reader's image might suggest. Gothic heroines, particularly Radcliffean ones, are quite contradictory in their actions and implications. The textual and critical excerpts that follow point to the real complexities in the construction of the Female in the Gothic.


An initial glance at these ladies is apt to be misleading. Radcliffe's heroines, for example, seem to divide neatly into spritely and helpless (those who pick up a candle and go exploring in the hidden recesses and those who cower fearfully behind doors). Yet, as Edith Birkhead remarks with some asperity, "Mrs. Radcliffe's heroines resemble nothing more than a composite photograph in which all distinctive traits are merged into an expressionless type." They are not without talent: "In reflective mood one may lightly throw off a sonnet to the sunset or the nocturnal gale, while another may seek refuge in her water-colours or her lute." Yet their accomplishments and their supposed ingenuity and intelligence are never of the slightest practical use. Their business is to experience difficulty, not to get out of it; and by consequence, any individuality that may be imputed to them at the beginning of the novel is soon dissolved.


Emily comes through all her horrors, and comes face to face at last with Valancourt, not on the final page of *Udolpho* but a good fifty pages from the end. That leaves time enough for Emily to resolve her prudent doubts about her lover's character, which significantly center of the rumor that he is a gambling man. The rumor is, happily, unjustified, and the marriage takes place in the final chapter...To those who have never quite made it to the end of The Mysteries of Udolpho, it is a pleasure to report that Emily ends her days in the pastoral serenity of The Valley, pensively musing on her father's memory, and confident that his injunction to demonstrate the strength of sensibility has been obeyed.

If this hasty sketch of the heroine of *Udolpho*...sounds like a travesty of the familiar Gothic heroine, that is because of what was done with the figure by the male writers who followed Mrs. Radcliffe. For most of them...the Gothic heroine was quintessentially a defenseless victim, a
weakling, a whimpering, trembling, cowering little piece of propriety whose sufferings are the source of her erotic fascination...Stability and integrity are indeed the major resources of the Radcliffe heroine; her sensibility and her decorum never falter; and however rapid or perilous her journeys, the lares and penates of proper English girlhood travel with her. She always manages to pack up her books, her sketching materials, and her lute, no matter how swiftly she is abducted from, say, Venice to the Castle of Udolpho. Locked up in a gloomy, haunted chamber high in a castle tower, Emily "arranged her little library...took out her drawing utensils, and was tranquil enough to be pleased with the thought of sketching the sublime scenes beheld from her windows." No mean-minded, authoritarian older man (the source of most of Emily's troubles) can be a match for such a young lady. "She opposed his turbulence and indignation," writes Mrs. Radcliffe in a sentence that is my choice for Emily's epitaph, "only by the mild dignity of a superior mind, but the gentle firmness of her conduct served to exasperate still more his resentment, since it compelled him to feel his own inferiority."

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Always for women [in the Gothic novel]...life begins with a blank. The mother, if known, has disappeared temporarily, and an aunt may substitute. The women's names suggest the blank, the white, the innocent, and the pristine: Blanche (who lives in Chateau-le-Blanc), Virginia, Agnes, Ellena Rosalba, Emily St. Aubert, even Signora Bianchi. (In addition, the initial letter A can, I think be a cipher that signifies a blank origin where the name does not do so denotively.) It is only after experience has inscribed some of these blanks with character that the figures' true identity is "discovered," that then it is made known by a retracing of recognized traits from other faces, signally from portraits...In *The Italian*, the question of Ellena's identity hangs on the miniature that hangs from her neck. As Schedoni is about to stab her in her sleep, he draws aside the veil from her bosom and suddenly freezes: the miniature has tumbled out from its concealment, and he recognizes himself in it. When he wakes her, she says it is of her dead father, and Schedoni claims her as his daughter in a sudden, painful revulsion of feeling...Similarly, in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* Emily is placed in the context of her family by her resemblance to a miniature (actually to two identical miniatures).

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Women who are at all self-assertive in *The Monk* are tortured or killed. Ambrosio's mother interrupts his attempts to rape Antonia; therefore, he kills her. The prioress has abused her power
in the convent; therefore, the mob murders her. Agnes has been sexually indiscreet; therefore, the nuns entomb her alive. Like millions of people before and after him, Lewis suggests that the victim is to blame for her own suffering.

In any society where there is an unequal distribution of wealth and power, blaming victims for their own suffering serves the interests of the dominant group. Alice Miller suggests that the tendency to blame victims is rooted in childhood, when parents, the dominant force in the family, teach small children taht "all the cruelty shown [them] in [their] upbringing is a punishment for [their] wrongdoing." As a result, "for many people it is very difficult to accept the sad truth that cruelty is often inflicted upon the innocent (For Your Own Good, 158). People who have been subjected to what Miller calls "poisonous pedagogy" are thus prepared to interpret suffering as a just punishment for the victims' immoral behavior. In a classist society, the poor are blamed for their poverty (they must be lazy, stupid, and incompetent or they wouldn't be poor). In a patriarchal society, women are blamed for everything from the fall of man onward. M.G. Lewis reproduces this "poisonous pedagogy" by blaming women for the violence inflicted upon them by men.


...The female characters in [The Monk] serve only as vehicles for the sexual and emotional overstatements of the male writer. The possible exception is Mathilda, a romantic sketch of a sensual woman who wields natural and supernatural powers. At first she is Ambrosio's lover; then as his partner-protector in crime, she performs her dark arts in full view, displays diabolical skills in calculation, and finally offers herself as a model for all the novel's mature women: not shut up to rot in hidden rooms but crowned with lasciviousness and stupidity, or authority and cruelty. From foolish maiden to mother superior, women discover strength in their youth, arrogance and vengefulness as they come of age. Young knights in the sentimental suplot, however, like Ambrosio before his metamorphosis, are too fragile to cope with the fierce women who victimize them at least as thoroughly as do their own tremulous sensibilities. This bias adds to the novel's mocking tone. It also parodies the underlying idea of false or surrogate mothers so intrinsic to [The Mysteries of Udolpho], and understood in the plight of heroic orphans at the mercy of their female protectors. Mathilda plays this role with Ambrosio as do most of the other female characters in their relation to the novel's sentimental lovers. At their most feminine, the women are interfering rivals; at their most masculine, punitive authoritarians.

The Inner Space: Female Sexuality and Place in the Gothic
No Gothic novel is complete without a huge, ancient, forboding structure of some kind for the heroine to get lost in. In the Female Gothic, this structure is more than simply where the story takes place; the structure in the story becomes the structure of the story, and as the following excerpts suggest, it also becomes the structure of the heroine's emerging sexuality.


Those terrors, I suggest, are sexual. If so, the pattern is complete. The imagery, changing from wasteland to fairy-tale kingdom and then to sexuality, parallels the plot of Emilty's emotional journey. Just as she would in any novel of initiation, Emily is leaving the known (her childhood) to venture into the unknown (her adulthood). She pauses in a sterile wasteland (presexuality, a break with the past), moves through a never-never land (courtship magic, illusion, dream), and then arrives at full sexuality (female adulthood, as Radcliffe subconsciously perceives it). But the entire journey is described from a passive, almost negative rhetorical stance. The tone says terror, the alliteration suggests fear, the diction points to agony, the syntax indicates hesitation and evasion. Finally, by using imagery which unites sexuality with fairy tales, the author implies that her commitment is not to sexual fulfillment but only to sexual innuendo cloaked in nightmare and dream...

Emily is rewarded, not by a mature adult relationship, but by a promise of fairy-tale sex that titillates rather than fulfills. Radcliffe waves her magic wand in the final pages of the book and rekindles the love of Emily and Valancourt "by the spell of a fairy." Such is the ending of any children's story where the fairy godmother unites the princess and prince, and such is the ending of the formula most popular among adult women readers. One gets no sense of maturity, no suggestion of a heroine tempered by experience. Udolpho, filled with banditti and villains, could have been the setting for a number of initiation rites, especially since Radcliffe obliquely prepares her readers for certain activities by using sexual imagery to describe the castle. But sex never quite happens, impropriety never even takes shape, and experience never touches Emily's mind or body.


Since Gothic danger lies in susceptibility as much as in circumstance, tenebrous settings and mysterious places victimize heroines as fully as do villains and other specific perils. For, whereas minor characters tend to be literalists and realists, the heroine possesses the romantic temperament that perceives strangeness where others see none...Her progress, therefore, from adolescence to maturity simultaneously weds plot to the central theme of emotional identity and
demands that circumstantial, outward strangeness speak for the more perilous strangeness of her unknown inner self...

All the imprecision and vagueness typical of Gothic description and setting serve these central dislocations of outer and inner mystery. The heroine, for example, is conventionally isolated in gloomy places that compound nameless fears about her heritage, her suitors and herself. She nevertheless extricates herself from these dangers in order to find inheritances, annuities, and the arms of a lover waiting at the altar. Then, according to Gothic formula, her profound uncertainty gives way to confidence and reason: married love conquers fear unless she confronts the Gothic face of love, not leading sentimentally to marriage, but grinning at her darkly from every cornerstone of setting. Metaphorically, place intimates that her most sinister enemy is her own awakening sexuality; the web of circumstantial dangers she must unravel ensnares her nature as sensual woman.


Mrs. Radcliffe must be credited with popularizing the bedroom door that has a bolt on the outside only; such a door plays havoc with Emilty's tender sensibilities in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*:

[Emily] was alarmed by a strange and loud knocking at her chamber door, and then a heavy weight fell against it, that almost burst it open... A kind of instinctive remembrance of her remote situation from the family heightened [her fear]. She looked at the door which led to the staircase, expecting to see it open.

Merely the geographic configuration of this situation can be a source of repeated and continuing terror as eachnight the fearful fantasy returns:

"What if some of these ruffians," said she, "should find out the private staircase, and in the darkness of night steal into my chamber?"

It is scarcely necessary to emphasize the specifically sexual component that is latent in such scenes.

After Ann Radcliffe had begun to exploit the highly stylized paraphernalia that we now associate with the Gothic novel a castle or abbey that is for the most part a safe place, but which has as its foundation some "complicated maze of underground vaults [or] dark passages" and in its bedrooms "sliding panels and trapdoors" [Watt, 23] this endlessly reenacted [sexual] fantasy is always figured in terms of "inner space." Thus the Gothic building (whatever it may be) that gives the fiction its name may become in this treatment of the tradition a way of identifying a woman's body (in imagination, of course, the woman's own body) when she is undergoing the seige of conflict over sexual stimulation or arousal.

Agnes' ambivalent attraction to and mockery of the ghost, her impersonation, the abysmal poem, Raymond's "incestuous" mistake about these identities, all point to a fateful resemblance between girl and ghostly mother that would have driven Emily [St. Aubert] into paroxysms of dread. Agnes, however, suffers no anxieties over the subsequent revelation of her actual kinship with the nun who was destroyed by her illicit passion. Then, too, although Agnes had to cross through the mysterious room (scene of the nun's sexual crime) in order to escape her presumptive castle of danger, we later realize she must already have been pregnant with Raymond's child and is therefore Lewis' tongue-in-cheek recreation of her literary ancestors. Neither Agnes nor her grim penalties for this transgression are to be read symbolically. Narrative and structure in the subplots are episodic and their chief function is to provide variations on the theme of sexual mastery.