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The Plight of the Gothic Heroine: Female Development and Relationships in Eighteenth Century Female Gothic Fiction

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The Gothic novel was a peculiar and typically feminine genre of the second half of the eighteenth century. Peculiar in many respects since Horace Walpole claimed his story – *The Castle of Otranto*, the very first specimen of a long-lasting tradition – to be a blend of the ancient romance and the modern novel, the sentimental and the realistic tradition. Peculiar also because it anticipated a psychological interest in characters then unprecedented in literature with regards to psychological motives lurking behind human actions. It placed much stress on human fears and desires, their causes and consequences. Similarly, the genre's femininity springs from more than one root: although the writer of the first Gothic novel was a man, and many others of his sex followed his example (for instance, Matthew Lewis, Charles Maturin, William Beckford), the number of female gothic writers far exceeds that of male gothic writers; in addition, the reading audience to which these novels found their way and later became addressed were also women. Feminine also because it engendered the emergence of the 'female Quixote' in the form of the gothic heroine who had the opportunity to engage in 'unwomanly' exercises while still maintaining her femininity and almost never violating female propriety.

Nevertheless, the genre bifurcated not much later than it appeared: male and female gothic novels started to be differentiated, where female gothic did not only mean that its authors were women, but also that it "constructed spaces […] defined, codified and institutionalized as masculine which [female gothic novelists] then attempted to rewrite into literature more benignly as feminine"[1]. Hence, Diane Long Hoeveler states that "the female gothic novel should be seen as functioning as a coded and veiled critique of all those public institutions that have been erected to displace, contain or commodify women" (xii-xiii). The institutions Hoeveler refers to – family, marriage, church – are given much space in female gothic texts, which obviously necessitates the presence of a female protagonist who stands in the midst of abuses and dangers posed by the said institutions. Rachel M. Brownstein argues that the female protagonist searches

[1] Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism* (The Pennsylvania University Press, 1998), xii.

for an “achieved, finished identity, realized in conclusive union with herself – as – heroine”[2], which means that the female gothic novel is typically the genre that facilitates the voicing of female experience and female identity as seen in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The present study aims at focusing on the unique figure of the gothic heroine: to what extent she conforms to eighteenth century conceptions of femininity compared to seminal female representations of the century like Pope’s “softer man”, Richardson’s sentimental heroine or Blake’s liberated woman. Texts from these writers may help us define in what the unique position of the gothic heroine stands and how gender distinctions are represented in the gothic novel. We shall focus on gothic novels written by female writers towards the end of the century: Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron*, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest*, each of which gives us different insights into the character of the gothic heroine, but there shall be also occasional references to other narratives written under the aegis of eighteenth century gothic fiction. Clara Reeve claims in the preface to *The Old English Baron*[3] that her 1778 text is the “literary offspring” of that prototype of Gothic stories, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, only it is devoid of its deficiencies that endanger its credibility with the readers. Interestingly, while Walpole introduced two female characters who represent the ‘damsel in distress’ – a stock feature of all Gothic novels to come – Reeve has no principal female character.

Why then should we include her in a study concerned with the development of the gothic heroine? As we shall see, her ‘hero’, Edmund Twyford can be read as a curious mixture of Walpole’s Theodore of unknown origin and his Matilda or Isabella, the helpless victims of tyrannical abuse. Hence, though Reeve seems to have omitted a female protagonist, her principal male character does fit the role of the victimised heroine central to Radcliffe. *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), albeit an oft-overlooked text living in the shadow of Radcliffe’s often-studied and quoted novels, *The Italian* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, is an early precedent of many fine female gothic novels. Besides the presence of all the characteristic features of the genre – the tyrannical villain, the castle, the labyrinth, the usurped property, the first concealed but then gradually disclosed identity of the heroine – the novel displays the development of the gothic heroine. Despite the fact that Radcliffe owes much to Reeve; for instance, Radcliffe’s ‘explained supernatural’ might be traced back to Reeve’s critique of Walpole and her conscious attempt to make her fiction as realistic as possible, *The Romance of the Forest* must be regarded as a huge step forward in the treatment of the heroine, since Radcliffe’s heroine is no longer male.

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[2] Cited in Deborah Kaplan, ”Proper Ladies and Heroines” (*NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 17, NO.1, 1983), 83.

[3] The text of the novel is in HTML-format. Source: <http://www.litgothic.com/Texts/old_english_baron.html>

Wollstonecraft's attempt at defining femininity in a quasi-gothic world is a further improvement of the genre. Though Mary Poovey apostrophises *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798) a sentimental novel[4] and the text is traditionally not labeled as 'gothic', characteristics of the gothic novel as established by Walpole, Reeve and Radcliffe proliferate in Wollstonecraft's writing. Wollstonecraft, however, seems to be removed from the individual plight of the distressed female, and through incorporating legal discourse into an originally fantastic genre she elevates the text to a social if not political level. Though the three woman-writers' treatment of the genre seems extremely diverse, we shall attempt to adumbrate how these women interpreted female experience in the last decades of the eighteenth century through their depictions of the gothic heroine's quest.

From Innocence to Experience: the Development of the Gothic Heroine

Janice Radway asserts that "each romance is, in fact, a mythic account of how women must achieve fulfillment in a patriarchal society"[5] where fulfillment is engendered by transformation, metamorphosis. Since the gothic novel, as Walpole also claims, relies heavily on the romance tradition, Radway's assertion is a case in point: the gothic heroine must inevitably go through transformations of personality in order to formulate a separate and independent identity. In Radcliffe, transformation and development find their objective correlative in physical spaces; in the polarisation of the safe, harmonious pastoral world as opposed to a frightening, urban gothic world. The tender, delicate pastoral world is not only associated with the past, but also with the female sphere, whereas the modern gothic world with its castles and ruins exists in the present and demonstrates restricting male power[6]. The complexity of this pattern is made even more complicated by the introduction of the aesthetic principles of the sublime and the beautiful: as in Burke, these two principles have clear-cut gender associations; the sublime with the male, the beautiful with the female (Kilgour 116). Adeline's past, that is her childhood, cannot be related to her biological parents, as she is taken away as an infant from her real father through the machinations of gothic villainy, and deposited into the hands of one Jean d'Aunoy who, together with his wife, actually raises the infant Adeline, which he confesses only at the present Marquis' trial:

> When the murder [of the then Marquis de Montalt] was perpetuated, d'Aunoy had returned to his employer [the present Marquis], who gave him the reward agreed upon, and in a few months after delivered into

[4] Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 95.

[5] Cited in Mary Anne Schofield, *Masking and unmasking the female mind: disguising romances in feminine fiction, 1713-1799* (University of Delaware Press, 1990), 18.

[6] Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (Routledge, 1995), 115.

> his hands the infant daughter of the late Marquis, whom he conveyed to a distant part of the kingdom where assuming the name of St.Pierre, he brought her up as his own child, receiving from the present Marquis a considerable annuity for his secrecy.[7]

In spite of the fact that we know very little of the conditions in which Adeline was brought up, we may assume that she spent her childhood in a rural world isolated from the corrupt influences of urban life and characterised by the safety and protection of parental love – it is d'Aunoy's wife who gives the little infant the name Adeline. Rousseauian ideology plays an essential role in Radcliffe's fiction, which counsels that the child be brought up in isolation, "away from the corruption of society, to become secure in [her]self, so that when [s]he enters the public sphere [s]he will be able to withstand its evil influences" (Kilgour 115). As such, Adeline's childhood appears to resemble William Blake's world of innocence characterised by parental care. After her mother's death, Adeline is forced to enter the convent, then to adapt to a commercial, mechanical gothic present governed by individualistic feudal tyranny; she is torn out of her familiar/familial world of innocence to be thrown into the dungeon of experience (in Blakean terms) without any parental care to protect her. According to Maggie Kilgour:

> This is the opposition between the natural, simple, happy and loving country, a private realm of the family governed by sentiment and sympathy, and the artificial, cruel, mercenary, and hypocritical city (especially Paris, seen as the centre of decadence), inhabited by isolated individuals who are ruled by self-interest. [The heroine's] movement from an isolated world into a social one, from a situation of detachment from social relations to an involvement in them, is a gothic process of education Rousseau imagines in Émile (117).

As we see, Radcliffe's adumbration of the "gothic process of education" interestingly corresponds to certain states of Blake's fourfold vision. In Susan Fox's interpretation, in Beulah (the vales of Har, idyllic, pastoral realm of innocence) females are both powerful and constructive: they are mothers or nurses who find, comfort and love children[8]. However, the female state is a limited one here; Beulahic valleys are inhabited by females unable to transform: Thel flees at the sight of the grave, incapable of enduring changes brought about by experience which is inevitable in the formulation of a mature personality. Generation, as Fox states, is the realm where females are either passive or pernicious (508); a dichotomy clearly discernible in some gothic novels: Lewis's

[7] Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest* (Raduga Publishers, 1983), 245.

[8] Susan Fox, "The Female as Metaphor in William Blake's Poetry" (*Critical Enquiry*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1977), 508.

Antonia-Matilda (ravished and murdered innocence versus demonic female villain) in the *Monk* or Eliza Parsons' dyad of Matilda Weimar and Mademoiselle de Fontelle (the conventional virtuous young lady in distress versus the evil gossip and conspirator) in *The Castle of Wolfenbach* display the psychological motif of the virgin-whore syndrome.

Radcliffe resides with a relative passivity in female attitude – relative because her heroines unlike those of Walpole, for instance, do take the initiative in certain instances; a notion we shall come back to later. She does not employ an evil woman to confront her heroine, but places her in a gothic present dominated by an individualistic and anti-social if not misanthropic villain, which is juxtaposed to her childhood pastoral, one inhabited by caring and loving adults. Radcliffe's representation of past and present as a continuation from innocence to experience is closely related to female development in *The Romance of the Forest*. In the state of experience, Adeline has to withstand the evil influences of a gothic present, "a bourgeois marketplace of adult individuality" (Kilgour 117) which lacks the protection of a familiar community, where Adeline finds herself the archetypal gothic heroine: helpless and hopeless amongst the labyrinthine pursuits of tyrannical male power. Released from the severe and hypocritical world of the convent and the captivity of banditti, Adeline is placed under the care of Monsieur and Madame La Motte to whom she is devoted with tender filial affections. Her new abode in the forest, though first reminds her of "the late terrific circumstances", soon gains her admiration; furthermore, by establishing a tender parent-child relationship with the La Mottes, Adeline manages to create another seemingly idyllic private world. However, at the appearance of the usurper Marquis, harmony shrinks as Adeline is exposed to the absolute authority of a despotic lord who first only plans to violate the virtue of the innocent maid, then he orders La Motte to assassinate her. The Marquis de Montalt, the archetypal gothic villain, therefore, hinders Adeline in a number of ways from returning to a state of paradise; in addition, he is enabled to transform or rather distort the idyllic world Adeline is striving to create. By holding La Motte in his power, who on account of his past misdeed committed against the Marquis' person and property dares not oppose his will, the Marquis spoils the vulnerable parent-child relation and intends to transform the tender father-figure into a self-concerned, mechanical individual. Nevertheless, the narrative ends with the eradication of evil and the rightful distribution of property: Adeline is returned her father's usurped heritage and is married to Theodore, who fills the conventional role of the inefficient hero of female gothic fiction. Radcliffe describes the couple's habitation as follows:

> At the distance of a few leagues, on the beautiful banks of the lake of Geneva, where the waters retire into a small bay, he purchased a villa. The chateau was characterized by an air of simplicity and taste; rather than of magnificence, which however was the chief trait in the surrounding scene. The chateau was almost encircled with woods

> which forming a grand amphitheatre, swept down to the water's edge, and abounded with wild and romantic walks. […] In front of the chateau the woods opened to a lawn, and the eye was suffered to wander over the lake, whose bosom presented an ever-moving picture, while its varied margin sprinkled with villas, woods, and towns, and crowned beyond with the snowy and sublime Alps, rising point behind point in awful confusion, exhibited a scenery of almost unequalled magnificence. (263)

Simplicity and magnificence, beautiful and sublime are unified where male and female spheres do not contradict but live together in peaceful harmony. By marrying Theodore, Adeline has reached the higher state of innocence – to continue using Blakean terminology – and its corresponding space, Eden where the female merged with its male counterpart has no dependence (Fox 508); in which innocence and experience equally contribute to the birth of a mature female identity or as Jane Spencer calls it "a pastoral world where female virtue and patriarchal authority [that of the husband] are not in conflict"[9].

Clara Reeve does not employ veiled spatial imagery in the hero-ine's identity-building as Radcliffe does; *The Old English Baron* seems to make use of a Walpolean construction: the step-by-step re-membering of the past and the hero's identity. First, it is crucial to understand our interpreting Edmund as the 'melting pot' of masculine and feminine attributes. His androgyny lies in his state of dependency: he is mistaken to be a peasant but because of his virtuous and sentimental character he lives in Lord Fitz-Owen's castle. His virtue and the baron's filial affections towards him breed envy in Lord Fitz-Owen's other relations, which leads to his being shut up in a chamber of the castle, which is believed to be haunted by the ghosts of the former inhabitants who eventually turn out to be Edmund's real parents. Spatial confinement, though mostly affecting women in the gothic novel, cannot be restricted to female confinement only, since the trope can also be found in Walpole.

In *The Castle of Otranto* Theodore also suffers from entrapment: first under a huge helmet that dashes Manfred's son into pieces at the very beginning of the narrative, then in a turret-chamber from where he is liberated by a female character. In spite of his confinement, however, Theodore is ready to defend female virtue – he escorts Isabella from the underground labyrinth and protects her in the cave, as well – and does not rely on the help of wealthy male companions. Whereas Edmund, in fact, has no efficient, individual action with regards to his own safety: in his search for a legitimate identity, he is aided by a priest, when he is shut up in the haunted apartment two faithful companions stay with him and when it comes down to upholding his rights against the usurper, it

[9] Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen*. (Basil Blackwell, 1986) 207.

is Sir Philip, an old friend of Edmund's real father, who challenges and fights the wicked Lord Lovel.

Edmund's curiosity – a characteristic feature of the gothic heroine – however, leads him to explore the haunted apartment, which paves the way toward discovering and recovering his true identity. As was indicated above, Walpole employed the device of a step-by-step re-membering of the past: the recovery of the past runs in parallel with the re-membering of the statue of the poisoned father; as soon as Alphonso's statue is constructed, the illegitimate line becomes fragmented and the legitimate line with its true heir, Theodore is recovered. Reeve begins the process of recovery and the confirmation of Edmund's true identity similarly with the bloody armour of Edmund's father he finds in a secret chamber, which is followed by the gradual discovery of fragmented clues such as his father's seal in the possession of Edmund's foster-parents, the testimony of his foster-mother, the accounts of the servants, the confession of the usurper and finally the corpse of the murdered Lord Lovel under the floor-planks of the secret chamber. In Radcliffe, we may witness an identical pattern of identity-building: Adeline finds a manuscript that holds the record of her father's sufferings when he was imprisoned by the Marquis de Montalt. Her reading of the manuscript is constantly interrupted; therefore, her and the reader's acquisition of knowledge together with the recovery of truth and the past appears in a fragmentary form.

Wollstonecraft's gothic narrative is a completely different matter. In comparison with Radcliffe or Reeve, where the heroine's development leads from unknown childhood origin to the establishment of a mature personality that culminates in marriage, Wollstonecraft's *Maria* takes the end of earlier female gothic narratives as a starting point. As such, she deconstructs the achievement of the gothic heroine and continues her quest implying that marriage is far from being a satisfactory termination in women's lives in the eighteenth century. Female development, however, remains an issue in Wollstonecraft. As she claims in her famous political treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: "If women are kept in a state of ignorance or perpetual childhood, they are no different in character or nature from a dependent slave"[10]. She counsels women to base their marriages on rational love, mutual affection and also propagates curbing sexual desire in women. These adult qualities stand in direct juxtaposition to Maria's passion and idle romantic imagination on the basis of which she chooses not one but two partners. Her first mistaken choice is George Venables:

> [George] continued to single me out at the dance, press my hand at parting, and utter expressions of unmeaning passion, to which I gave a meaning naturally suggested by the romantic turn of my thoughts. […] When he left us, the colouring of my picture became more vivid—

[10] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 9.

> Whither did not my imagination lead me? In short, I fancied myself in love—in love with the disinterestedness, fortitude, generosity, dignity, and humanity, with which I had invested the hero I dubbed.[11]

It is the choice, suggested by "the romantic turn" of her thoughts that leads to her being shuts up in a lunatic asylum deprived of property and her child alike. Her second choice amounts to no better than her first: Maria singles out Darnford as the embodiment of the romantic hero she has been craving after; an affection simply based on some marginal notes Darnford scribbled into the books lent to Maria, and it is his form she spies from the window of her prison. Although the end of the narrative is fragmented, in one conclusion Darnford takes a mistress and abandons Maria who loses Darnford's child – whether of miscarriage or abortion it is not clear. Although some claim (Johnson, Poovey) that the novel is a celebration of female sexual desire, the outcome of both her passionate relationships tells us otherwise: romantic imagination and passionate love are associated with ignorance and childhood, which, if cherished, have disastrous consequences. Hence, Wollstonecraft seems to highlight the importance of a proper education for daughters, as well; a notion that receives special emphasis in female gothic narratives.

The Responsibility of Parents: the Missing Gothic Family

Wollstonecraft in her 1788 essay *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* addresses parents who provide their daughters with "fashionable education": "If what I have written should be read by parents, who are now going on in thoughtless extravagance, and anxious only that their daughters may be *genteelly educated*, let them consider to what sorrows they expose them"[12]. She was not the only woman of the century concerned with the responsibility of parents in their daughters' education and what it may amount to: Mary Ann Radcliffe, author of *Manfroné, or the One-Handed Monk*, a well-known gothic story of the period published a quasi-feminist manifesto in 1799 entitled *The Female Advocate; or an Attempt to Recover the Rights of Women from Male Usurpation*. Though she apologises for "throwing off the gentle garb of a female" and applying the "Amazonian spirit of Wollstonecraft"[13], she vindicates her cause which is necessitated by "unremitting oppression" (Radcliffe, *The Female Advocate* xi). Her chief concern is the educated upper-class woman left without property and she criticises parents who "merit fineness over trade" (Radcliffe, *The Female Advocate* 89). A much earlier example, albeit not to be overlooked,

[11] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 64.

[12] Cited in Vivien Jones (ed.), *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of femininity* (Routledge, 1990), 113.

[13] Mary Anne Radcliffe, *The Female Advocate; or an Attempt to Recover the Rights of Women from Male Usurpation* (Vernon and Hood, 1799), xi.

is Samuel Richardson's Pamela, who is supposed to be the antecedent of the gothic heroine[14], also lays stress on the deficiencies of her education, that she has been taught to sing, dance and play the piano but could not do the work of a kitchen-maid. Cynthia Griffin Wolff asserts that though Radcliffe's heroines are not without talent – they play musical instrument, compose poetry, and draw – these talents do not have the slightest practical use[15]. Interestingly, the gothic heroine is forced to face her disabilities when she encounters the threats posed by the villain, when she finds herself in a situation in which she must admit her helplessness and as a result, endure her inevitable victimisation.

It seems, then, that we have to redefine our conception of the threats that endanger the life and virtue of the gothic heroine: her victimisation is engendered by the improper education her parents provide her with; more often than not, it is the values of the patriarchal family that constitute her confinement and not the labyrinthine machinations of the villain. Katherine Ellis sees the gothic novel as an attack on the bourgeois family's patriarchal values[16]; the family that forces daughters into unwanted marriages and keeps them in a "state of perpetual childhood" through leaving them in ignorance. The gothic novel criticises the bourgeois family and gives expression to this criticism in two ways: either by disposing of the family altogether; thus abandoning children to their own devices or justifying the actions of children when they oppose the will of parents; in other words, "right is always on the side of the children" (Ellis 52). To substantiate this hypothesis, Ellis cites Ann Radcliffe in her *A Sicilian Romance*: "a choice which involves the happiness or misery of your whole life, ought to be decided only by yourself" (qtd. in Ellis 52).

Those heroines who do not revolt against patriarchal will have no possibility to achieve fulfillment: in Walpole's novel Mathilda, submissive daughter of Manfred chooses to obey her father, even though she can see the irrationality of his actions, and she dies by the hand of her own father. Those who refuse to subordinate themselves, eventually gain their reward: Edmund abandons his captivity despite the will of his adopted father in order to find out the truth about his identity, Adeline refuses to be 'buried alive' in a convent, Maria flees from her unloving parents who only care for her despotic brother. As we see, gothic fiction reverses conduct book tradition which prescribes children to obey parents, be they either benevolent or wicked:

> […] of all the acts of disobedience, that of marrying against the consent of the parent is one of the highest. Children are so much the goods, the possessions of their parents, that they cannot, without a kind

[14] Fred Botting, *Gothic. The New Critical Idiom* (Routledge, 1996), 70.

[15] Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "The Radcliffean Gothic Model: A Form for Feminine Sexuality" (*Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1979), 102.

[16] Katherine Ellis, "Charlotte Smith's Subversive Gothic" (*Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3/4, 1976), 51.

> of theft, give away themselves without the allowance of those that have the right in them… it belongs to children to perform duty, not only to the kind and virtuous, but even to the harshest and wickedest of parents.[17]

It is clear from Richard Allestree's 1751 *The Whole Duty of Man* (from which the above passage has been taken) that children, especially female ones, were viewed as a property of their parents up until marriage when the owner became the husband. As Hickok asserts "women were seen as existing – legally, economically, and socially – chiefly in relationship to others, specifically their families"[18], which implies that family posits a hindrance to the formulation of an independent female identity. Gothic fiction solves the problem via removing the heroine from under the patriarchal rule of the family and most significantly the will of the father[19].

If then the family is perceived as a hindrance and threat to the identity and integrity of the heroine, the principal figure of the gothic villain should be conceived as the purveyor of the much-desired transformation. We may agree with Leslie Fiedler who suggests that "the villain makes available to [women] the dark, asocial world of fantasy, dream and the unconscious; a subversive attack on the bourgeois values embodied in the heroine"[20]. Without the intervention of the villain, the gothic heroine would have no possibility for development – she would relapse into familial idyll where she is regarded as property and dependent. Hence, the existence of a seemingly negative force becomes crucial in the psychological development of the female. Ellen Moers in her *Literary Women* draws our attention to the same idea in Radcliffe's novels, that is her heroine's representation as the 'travelling woman': "the woman who moves, who acts, who copes with vicissitude and adventure"[21]. She argues that the opportunity for women to travel around and encounter various adventures is allowed for them by the villains who force these maidens to do what they could never do alone (Moers 191).

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[17] Cited in Rita Goldberg, *Sex and Enlightenment. Women in Richardson and Diderot* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 31.

[18] Cited in Lucy Morrison, "Conduct (Un)Becoming to Ladies of Literature: How-to-Guides for Romantic Women Writers" (*Studies in Philology*, Vol. 99, No. 2, 2002), 210.

[19] The father as a sublime and supervising figure is scattered around the pages of conduct books. Richardson's Pamela writes her letters to her father who immediately warns her of the impending danger threatening his daughter's virtue when he hears about Mr. B-'s advances. In addition, the huge body of seventeenth-eighteenth century conduct literature is mostly made up of advice written by fathers addressed to their daughters. See Vivien Jones: *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (London: Routledge, 1990)

[20] Cited in Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman, "Gothic Possibilities" (*New Literary History*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1977), 285.

[21] Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (OUP, 1985), 191.

Radcliffe, Reeve and Wollstonecraft seem to follow diverse paths in their representations of female development: Radcliffe creates spaces that correspond to various stages of the heroine's maturity; Reeve concentrates on the recovery of the fragmented individual, whereas Wollstonecraft highlights the dangers of an improper education, which cause women to suffer in immature marriages. Family has negative implications in the gothic novel as an obstacle that hinders young females from constructing a separate identity until the ambiguous figure of the gothic villain emerges to remove the heroine out of her familial circumstances. The pattern delineated in gothic fiction seems to mirror Ivanov's notion of ecstatic experiences which involves the separation of the sexes: he claims that the female search for happiness is facilitated by the woman's removal from male guidance[22]. The relationship between feminine and masculine principles, male and female characters shall be the subject of the following chapter.

Penetrating the Female Body: Male-Female Relationships in the Gothic Novel

Female body and property became strongly intertwined and associated with one another in eighteenth century literature. As April London asserts:

> Eighteenth century novels consistently locate female characters within plots that allow them to exercise reformative agency by drawing on their properties of industriousness and by realizing selfhood through active relationship with the things of this world. The agency is then relocated within male characters [to assert] the primacy of the real property and hence women's subordination to the men who control it.[23]

In Richardson's *Pamela* Mr. B intends to sexualise the female body to make it his property. His constant attempts to take hold of Pamela, to kiss her, to touch her breasts – emblems of female sexuality and femininity[24] – where her private property, the letters written to her parents are concealed, are directed to assume his power over the female body as property. The letters – literary fruits of female creation – must be possessed by the man: "As I have furnished you with the subject, I have a title to see the fruits of your pen"[25], so that he could subordinate both the body of the woman and her only private property. Assuming male 'title' over female property is relatively easier in the gothic novel, since here the

[22] Cited in Szilárd Léna, *A karnevál-elmélet (V. Ivanovtól M. Bahtyinig)* (Tankönyvkiadó, 1989), 42.

[23] April London, *Women and Property in the Eighteenth Century English Novel.* (CUP, 1999) 7.

[24] Ruth Perry, "Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth Century England." (*Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1991) 228.

[25] Samuel Richardson, *Pamela: or, virtue rewarded.* (Penguin Books Ltd., 1985) 242.

property of the heroine amounts to castles and lands, the penetration of which more often than not results in the growth of male desire to penetrate the female body, as well. Fred Botting argues that the castle of gothic fiction is a "figure of power, tyranny and malevolence" (133), although the original owner of it is almost always female. The castle is governed by a male owner who actually usurped a female property, since Theodore claims the ownership of Otranto through his mother, the Marquis usurps the inherited property of Adeline, and we learn that the usurper Lord Lovel can get hold of Edmund's rightful property if he marries Edmund's mother, who refuses him but dies in childbirth when she escapes her confinement. In other words, the property that the villains usurp does not actually belong to men but women; thus, male usurpation upon women is double-layered: it implies the violation of property and the female body.

Wollstonecraft relies on property-laws of the eighteenth century to define the exploitation of women – Maria's marriage-bond deprives her of property and even the custody of her child. According to April London, "characteristic fates of eighteenth century heroines – marriage or death – render them women without property" (London 8), a tendency relevant to female gothic fiction where the female has to be sexualised or murdered – in short eradicated, disposed of, suppressed – so that men could define themselves in a patriarchal world where identity is linked to possession.

The problem of defining an identity arises as crucial in romances. Schofield claims that in romances women are defined by men (18), a notion that echoes some seventeenth-eighteenth century opinions. William Blake, for instance, wrote in the margin of his 1789 edition of Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man* that "the female life lives from the light of the male" (qtd. in Fox 507 – 508) and Mary Poovey cites a certain Dorsetshire clergyman from the period, who said that: "A good wife should be like a Mirrour which hath no image of its own but receives its stamp from the face that looks into it" (qtd. in Poovey 3) Interestingly, gothic fiction once again reverses romance tradition: although women need the intervention of the gothic villain to be able to define themselves, the relation is mutual; the villain desperately needs the female to define himself, more specifically, he needs the negation, the eradication of the female, the feminine principle, in particular, so that he can formulate an independent identity in an individualistic, competitive world.

Elisabeth Bronfen in her extensive study of nineteenth century aestheticism sketches the reason why men seem to be obsessed with representations of dead women: she understands the "equation of corpse with artwork" as a "translation or exchange that erases rather than preserves the body"[26], thus portraits of male artists negate the female body by subjecting it to a symbolic relation between matter and representation. Bronfen goes even further when saying that "a rhetorical privileging of symbolicity over iconicity (e.g. embalming corpses) can

[26] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*. (Manchester UP, 1992) 110-111.

serve to articulate a tendency to prefer […] signs that represent fatherhood as opposed to a form of semiosis that is analogous to the bodily contact of maternity" (111). In other words, the portrait is a lack rather than a presence; by negating the female body it serves as a shield between artist and model, the former remains untouched by the triad of "matter-materiality-maternity which indexically figures death" (Bronfen 111). On the basis of this argument we may assume that in the gothic novel male tendency to suppress or annihilate the female body serves to protect him from death – the ultimate annihilation of identity. In this context the woman is nothing but an empty space, an "immobile obstacle" in Jurij Lotman's character-typology, which the mobile character, the one who "enjoys freedom" is enabled to penetrate, to cross.[27] Theresa de Lauretis goes on to say that this mobile hero, who might be regarded as identical with the gothic villain, uses his capacity to penetrate the other space, the heroine and her feminine sphere, to become the "active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences" (qtd. in Armstrong 251).

We must admit that the idea of the woman giving character to man is not the invention of gothic writers. Alexander Pope in his "Epistle to a Lady" interprets the female as characterless character-giver; and Samuel Richardson's Mr. B claims that Pamela "has given [him] a character" (219). However, the significance of the gothic novel, especially the female gothic novel, lies in the fact that it allows the gothic heroine to step out of the role of the objectified, victimised woman. As Nóra Séllei describes the differences between male and female writers of gothic fiction:

> The conventional plot of gothic fiction tends to digress at a crucial point depending on whether it was written by a male or a female writer: male gothic fiction, which can also be read as a tale of seduction, concludes either with the death of the victimized heroine [Matilda in Otranto] or with the hero's rescuing her at the last moment [Isabella]. On the other hand, in female gothic fiction, the heroine appears to be much more independent and active: she herself plays a significant role in releasing herself from a situation in which she may become inevitably victimized.[28]

In the first chapter we have already indicated that Radcliffe's heroines cannot be regarded as entirely passive: Adeline continuously attempts to escape confinement imposed on her by the Marquis; and it is also crucial to see the relative inefficiency of (the 'hero') Theodore's guidance he offers in these attempts. Although he removes Adeline from the enclosed garden – the space of

[27] Cited in Nancy Armstrong, *The violence of representation: literature and the history of violence* (Routledge, 1989), 250-251.

[28] Séllei Nóra, *Lánnyá válik, s írni kezd: 19. századi angol írónők* (Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1999), 71. The Hungarian text has been translated into English by the author of this article.

the Marquis – they are tracked down by the Marquis's footmen, and he is imprisoned. His passivity in prison is contrasted to Adeline's freedom and the safety she enjoys in the company of La Luc; furthermore, Adeline's evidence in the trial also contributes to the villain's fall and Theodore's release. Wollstonecraft's text offers a parallel here: it is Jemima who releases Maria from the asylum, whereas Darnford must passively endure captivity.

Women's survival in the gothic world of male oppression necessitates female acquisition of some masculine attributes, to throw off "the gentle garb of a female" – to use Mary Ann Radcliffe's expression. Women must resolve to cunning, like Pamela, to eloquence, like Maria at court, to aggression and toughness, like Jemima, or to wandering and detecting, like Adeline or Edmund, the feminine hero. They have to go against patriarchal ideals of feminine perfection so that they could release themselves from the passive role of the victimised woman. Female companionship is crucial in this world; however, it tends to dissolve in the suffocating presence of the villain.

Jealousy or Companionship: Women's Relationship in the Gothic Novel

Pauline Nestor tells us that in the nineteenth century there was much public debate on women's capacities for friendship.[29] She refers to articles in the *Saturday Review* from 1870 according to which "women could only form true friendship if this friendship conformed to conventional heterosexual roles" and women "are possessive, competitive, untrusting" (qtd. in Nestor 12). These arguments can be applied to eighteenth century gothic fiction, as well. If we have a closer look at female relationships in the analysed novels, we shall recognise the truth of the above statements.

In Walpole's novel Manfred's wife Hippolita never questions her husband's actions and would accept a divorce from him and Manfred's marriage with her daughter's friend, Isabella, although she is well-aware that this marriage would be against Isabella's will. Adeline shows filial affection toward Madame La Motte from the hour they first met, yet the older women suspects that the girl's lingering in the forest might be connected to her husband's absences. Mathilda is the monk's demonic support in his ravishment of Antonia. Jemima confesses to Maria that once she contributed to the miserable state of another woman when she took that other woman's place in a household. Jemima, however, gains salvation by being able to correct her past misdeed when she releases Maria from captivity, finds Maria's child and revives the woman after a suicidal attempt. Once again, Wollstonecraft is very critical about female behavior: she alone points to female companionship as inevitable to achieve happiness and withstand the abuse of men. One of her solutions for Maria is a quasi-lesbian relationship between Maria and Jemima, living in a family without men.

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[29] Pauline Nestor, *Female Friendships and Communities: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell*. (Clarendon Press, 1985) 7.

It is also deliberate on Wollstonecraft's part that she does not narrow down her observations to the individual plight of one woman. As she claims in the preface to her novel: "…the history ought rather to be considered, as of woman, than of an individual. [Her intention is] to show the wrongs of different classes of women, equally oppressive, though, from the difference of education, necessarily various" (Wollstonecraft, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* 5 – 6). A similar pattern is discernible in Eliza Parsons' *The Castle of Wolfenbach* in which the parallel stories of Matilda Weimar and the Countess of Wolfenbach display the quintessence of narratives concerned with the sufferings of women, that is, oppression of women characterises eighteenth century British society in general and at the same time these narratives endeavor to offer women possible ways to cope with their hardships.

On reading these eighteenth century narratives grouped under the omnibus-term 'female gothic', we can recognise the diversity of the genre and the differences between individual authors. This study addresses one perspective in these novels; that of the gothic heroine, whose representation offers the best insight into eighteenth century female experience and individual women authors' conception of femininity and oppression impending over their sex. Their concern with the development of the female mind and the relationship between sexes and that of members within one sex show the significance of the genre. Hence, female gothic fiction cannot be dismissed as an irrelevant picture bred by idle female fantasy with no other aim but to entertain the reader. In spite of its often fantastic covering, the genre provides a credible record of female plight, establishing a tradition that continued well into twentieth century British and American literature.

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