

GOTHIC MIRRORS AND FEMININE IDENTITY

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Source: *The Centennial Review*, WINTER 1980, Vol. 24, No. 1 (WINTER 1980), pp. 43-64

Published by: Michigan State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23740372>

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Within an imprisoning structure, a protagonist, typically a young woman whose mother has died, is compelled to seek out the center of a mystery, while vague and usually sexual threats to her person from some powerful male figure hover on the periphery of her consciousness. Following clues which pull her onward and inward — bloodstains, mysterious sounds — she pene-

trates the obscure recesses of a vast labyrinthean space and discovers a secret room sealed off by its association with death. In this dark, secret center of the Gothic structure — typically a bedroom — the boundaries of life and death themselves seem confused. Who died? Was there a murder? Or merely a disappearance? This is the conventional Gothic plot, still being distributed over the counter in drug stores across the country. First popularized by Ann Radcliffe in the late 18th century, its confusions are inscribed into the narrative structure itself, with its misleading clues, postponements of discovery, excessive digressions, indeed, its excess of everything.

But looking more closely, I find a curious thread running through this labyrinth. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for example, although a corpse discovered in a hidden room turns out to be an anonymous soldier, for pages I am encouraged to believe that the heroine's aunt, who functions as her surrogate-mother, was murdered there. Stranger still, later I discover that a woman hinted to be the heroine's real mother — but in fact another aunt — was indeed murdered. In *The Monk*, the underground vaults of a convent reveal the corpse of an infant clasped in the arms of its naively inadequate mother; but the text leading to my eventual discovery first misleads by implying that it is the mother, a "fallen" nun, who has been killed — by her Mother Superior. In *Frankenstein*, Victor creates life from the relics of death, plays a macabre mother, as several critics have noted,³ and then, about to "birth" a second, more terrible — and female — monster, aborts that prospective "child." Mrs. Reed, another surrogate-mother, locks Jane Eyre into a red room — a bedroom — whose "secret," as Bronte puts it, is its locale as the death-room of Jane's benefactor, her *maternal* uncle. From this imprisonment Jane makes her first outraged bid for independence. And locked into the novel's center is another woman, Rochester's mad wife, who must die — whom Jane must displace to assume her own place. Even in a parody of the Gothic novel, Jane Austen provides the quasi-heroine of *Northanger Abbey* with a secret bedroom in which a woman has died.

³See Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 90-99, and Marc Rubenstein, "'My Accursed Origin': The Search for the Mother in *Frankenstein*," *Studies in Romanticism*, 15 (Spring, 1976), 165-194.

What I hope to suggest by my particular focus on dead or displaced mothers is another angle of vision on the Gothic which has been virtually ignored. Most interpretations, written primarily by male critics, attribute the terror which the Gothic by definition arouses to the motif of incest within an oedipal plot.⁴ From this perspective, the latent configuration of the Gothic paradigm would seem to be that of a helpless daughter confronting the erotic power of a father or brother. But interestingly, in elaborating their oedipal point of view, male critics typically focus on male authors and male protagonists. As the very name of the Oedipus complex suggests, the male experience is weighted more heavily. For example, Leslie Fiedler, defining the Gothic mystery as "incest of mother and son, the breach of the primal taboo and the offense against the father," locates the Gothic experience in the villain, and interprets even the ubiquitous "Maiden in flight" as "the spirit of the man who has lost his moral home."⁵ Thus Fiedler goes on to discuss the Gothic as the son's confrontation with paternal authority which he is trying to destroy.

Yet as Fiedler himself points out, "Beneath the haunted castle lies the dungeon keep: the womb from whose darkness the ego first emerged, the tomb to which it knows it must return at last. Beneath the crumbling shell of paternal authority, lies the maternal blackness, imagined by the gothic writer as a prison, a torture chamber."⁶ Although he quickly drops this chilling perception of the maternal space, that space is central to my experience of the Gothic. Indeed, looking with *my* eyes at Gothic fiction, the oedipal plot seems more a surface convention than a latent fantasy exerting force. Rather, what I see repeatedly locked into the forbidden center of the Gothic which draws me inward is the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic

⁴See Devendra Varma, *The Gothic Flame* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964); Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (New York: Meridian Books, 1967); Eino Railo, *The Haunted Castle* (New York: Humanities Press, 1964); Morton Kaplan and Robert Kloss, "Fantasy of Paternity and the Doppelgänger: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," in *The Unspoken Motive* (New York: Free Press, 1973). In the last work, Kaplan and Kloss, writing that "the Gothic genre . . . depicts in varying degrees of explicitness the passions of the oedipal child," themselves acknowledge that they interpret Mary Shelley's work "in the light of male psychology" (p. 145).

⁵*Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Dell, 1966), p. 129-133.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 132.

and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of female identity which the heroine must confront.

That both men and women maintain an uneasy truce with femaleness is by now a truism, though its source is less clear. Certainly the prevailing social situation of female rule over infancy promotes ambivalence toward all women.⁷ For as psychoanalysts describe this critical pre-oedipal period of our early infancy, mother and infant are locked into a "symbiotic relation," an experience of oneness, characterized by a blurring of boundaries between infant and mother — a dual unity before the emergence of a separate self. Experienced originally as part of Nature itself before we learn her boundaries, the mother-woman traditionally embodies the mysterious not-me world with its unknown forces, as well as the world of the flesh, the body which is both our habitat and our jailor. And even though an infant gradually becomes conscious of a limited Other, the whole realm of Nature remains imaginatively linked to that first magical figure who seems to hold the power of life and death. Separation and individuation, for both boys and girls, then, means breaking or loosening the primal attachment to the mother.

The boy can use the very fact of his maleness to differentiate himself from this engulfing mother — "I'm not you" he can say with authority, "I'm not a woman; here is a visible sign of my difference." Indeed, by privileging male characteristics, the entire culture can ward off that maternal blackness. But women share the female body, and its symbolic place in our culture. For women, then, the struggle for a separate identity is not only more tenuous, but is fundamentally ambivalent, an ongoing battle with a mirror image who is both me and not me. Not only does the girl's gender identification with her mother make it difficult for her to grasp firmly her separateness, but her mother frequently impedes that process by seeing in her daughter a duplication of herself, and reflecting that confusion.⁸ Mother-daughter confusion is thus woven into the subjectivity

⁷This point is persuasively elaborated in Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

⁸See Nancy Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," *Women, Culture and Society*, ed. M. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1974). Also, her elaboration of this thesis in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

of each, and to unravel that intricacy, or at least to explore it, has been a major task of Western female development.

It is this task that I see Gothic literature addressing and perhaps this is why it has always been especially congenial to the female imagination.⁹ In fact, recently in a jointly authored essay, two readers, Norman Holland and Leona Sherman, have explored the gender-related appeal of Gothic literature by pointing to the importance of the early mother-child relationship in the text and in their responses to it.¹⁰ Both find the castle to be the pivotal image, a nighttime house which admits various projections. "It becomes all the possibilities of a parent or a body," they write, "a total environment in one-to-one relation with the victim, like the all-powerful mother of early childhood." But toward this environment, characteristically untrustworthy in Gothic fiction, their responses break down along gender lines. Uncomfortable with the Gothic plot, Holland, the male reader, concentrates on strategies for avoiding vulnerability to that environment, which he associates with the feminine, while Sherman, the female, finds confirmations as well as threats in the Gothic paradigm. Not only does she take pleasure in the active role provided by the intrusive and questing heroine, but she experiences the power inherent in the heroine's conventional stance of passive resistance. (That stance is epitomized by the heroine of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; she opposes the villain "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*" (italics mine).¹¹

Ultimately, however, reaching toward the center of her response, Sherman writes: "For me, the primary motivating fear is of nothingness or nonseparation." Her subsequent response to the Gothic secret is especially relevant to women: "I find myself harking back to the ultimate mystery, the maternal body with its related secrets of birth and sexuality." If nonseparation

⁹Female readers are by far the largest audience for Gothics; cf. *N. Y. Times*, 18 June, 1973.

¹⁰"Gothic Possibilities," *New Literary History*, 8 (1976-1977), 279-294. Subsequent quotations are from pp. 283, 293 respectively.

¹¹See Moers, p. 138.

from the castle as mother — “mother as nurturer, as sexual being, as body, as harboring a secret” — *is* a primary Gothic fear, women, whose boundaries from the maternal are at the very least ambiguous because of their own femaleness, must find that fear dramatically rendered in the secret center of the Gothic structure, where boundaries break down, where life and death become confused, where images of birth and sexuality proliferate in complex displacements. Thus Sherman, reflecting the Gothic confusion, concludes, “I find myself recreating from Gothic my ambivalence toward a femaleness which is my mother in me: nurturing and sexuality, mother and woman and child, conflicted between her and me and therefore in me as me.”

In this light, the heroine’s active exploration of her entrapment in a Gothic house is also an exploration of her relation to the maternal body which she too shares, with all its connotations of power over, and vulnerability to, forces within and without. In *Udolpho*, for example, Radcliffe’s initial representation of the castle Udolpho both suggests a version of the maternal body and establishes the terms of Emily’s subsequent exploration of this “sovereign frowning defiance on all who dared to invade its solitary reign.”¹² For as if from a child’s perspective on this giant house, moving first from eye-level upward and then downward, Radcliffe focuses my attention on the castle’s body-parts in terms which allude to defense, penetration and entrapment. From “the gateway . . . of gigantic size,” the eye sweeps up to “two round towers . . . united by a curtain pierced and embattled” and then down again to “the pointed arch of a high portcullis surmounting the gates” (227). Once inside, Emily finds that the space relegated to her raises similar issues: the door of her room “had no bolts on the chamber side, though it had two on the other” (235). Yet while her own chamber is “liable to intrusion” (242), she herself aggressively intrudes into the secret chambers of the castle; that is, with her own boundaries in question, she nevertheless explores and penetrates the mysteries of Udolpho, transgressing the boundaries of her role as a woman.

¹²Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 227. All subsequent page references to this edition appear in the text.

Wandering through both a physical and historical labyrinth, both in space and time, she — and I as a reader — discover first at Udolpho and later at its innocent and protective counterpart, the Chateau Blanc, her relations to the women who are the original owners of “the castle,” women who are specifically represented by the text as her doubles, her own originals. For example, at the center of Udolpho, we discover the ghost of Laurintini, the true owner, a strongwilled and sexually voracious woman who had disappeared and is presumed dead. Radcliffe alludes to a connection between Laurintini’s disappearance and a secret horror which Emily unveils early in the novel, but which Radcliffe keeps tauntingly veiled for me until the conclusion. When that mystery is disclosed, we find the horror to be a waxen figure of a decaying body which Emily had assumed was Laurintini’s corrupted body. But her misapprehension is itself a metaphor that I read, and in this sense there is no mistake. It is precisely Laurintini’s corruption through the flesh, through the strength of her sexual desire, that we discover in the penultimate chapter, when her story is disclosed. Having been allowed from childhood to indulge her impulses, Laurintini had conceived a passion for a Marquis and became his mistress. But when he married another woman, Laurintini, obsessed with desire, designed the murder of the innocent Marchioness. Abandoned then by her lover, she entered a convent and became the deranged nun, Sister Agnes. In her final interviews with Emily, she spies her own corruption reflected in Emily’s own hidden desire. Laurintini, then, as victimizer by virtue of her sexual desire, is presented as Emily’s potential precursor, a representative of the consequences of such transgression.

But the murdered Marchioness, whose innocent past is the historical center of the other Gothic house, the Chateau Blanc, is Emily’s precursor also. Emily literally is told to look into a mirror to see the Marchioness, is identified mistakenly but metaphorically both as the Marchioness and as her daughter, and draped in her veil, is named the living embodiment of the dead Marchioness: the *passive* victim of desire. Although Emily struggles to throw off that veil, refusing to accept *that* identification, mirror images and mother-daughter confusions continue to haunt her in this paradigmatic Gothic novel, creating

that labyrinth of relations through which both she and I thread our way.

But after Emily has explored this labyrinth, has allowed her imagination full sway so that at least one critic places Udolpho and its dangers within Emily's mind,¹³ after Radcliffe herself has confused me about what is inside Emily's mind and what outside, has aroused my prurient imagination by titillating and obscuring innuendo, has indulged in every excess of sensibility which she explicitly warns against, Emily is returned to the happy valley of La Vallée. No Gothic castles or transgressions of boundaries here, but an innocent pastoral paradise which denies the Gothic experience. Thus the novel allows me first to enjoy and then to repudiate the sexual and aggressive center of Udolpho, which, as the mad nun had warned, leads to madness and death, and leaves me safely enclosed — but significantly, socially secluded — in an idealized nurturing space.

This disjunction between the Gothic experience and the novel's conclusion illustrates a pervasive ambivalence in the Gothic paradigm. On the one hand, it allows me an imaginary space in which I can re-experience the more aggressive, less inhibited pleasures of childhood, — the word we significantly use is “tom-boy” — in which I can transgress conventional gender boundaries and confront those perilous extremes usually reserved for male adventurers. But in that space I am also seduced by the experience of terror; I delight in the dizzying verge of that ubiquitous Gothic precipice on the edge of the maternal blackness. Ultimately, what I confront are the mysteries of identity, which turn on discovering the boundary between self and a mother-imago archaically conceived who threatens all boundaries. To this confrontation, the characteristic response of the Gothic heroine is escape; as Holland and Sherman put it, “I will not let the castle force itself into me. I will put myself outside it.”¹⁴ Putting herself outside it, the conventional Gothic heroine puts herself outside female sexuality and aggressivity. But in thus excluding a vital aspect of self, she is left on the margin both of identity, and of society. Thus, as in *Udolpho*

¹³See for example Robert Kiely, *The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972).

¹⁴*op. cit.*, p. 284.

and *Jane Eyre*, while the heroine ultimately moves into a space which she seemingly controls, that control is illusory, based as it is on social withdrawal and psychological repression. Emily returns to her childhood space with a chaste and chastened hero; Jane at Ferndean rules over an isolated domesticity as mother with a debilitated male. Both conclusions excise the Gothic terrors, idealizing the mother and the heroines as well. Yet beneath the pedestal lies an abyss; at the Gothic center of the novels, the dragon lady in the mirror still remains, waiting to be acknowledged.

In the more radical modern Gothic fictions, that figure emerges from the obscure background and dominates; typically, in modern Gothic, there is no escape. (I am not referring to those contemporary popular Gothic-romances which conform to the conventional paradigm, repeating its evasions in less interesting ways, but to those contemporary fictions that I find truly terrifying). In Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, for example, the heroine, recently freed from an ostensibly odious servitude by the death of her domineering invalid mother, joins a group interested in occult phenomena at Hill House. From the very beginning, the house itself is presented as the overt antagonist, specifically a maternal antagonist, a diseased presence "seeking whom it may devour" and singling out Eleanor as its destined inhabitant. Yet also from the very beginning, Jackson dislocates me in typical Gothic fashion by locating me in Eleanor's point of view, confusing outside and inside, reality and illusion, so that I cannot clearly discern the acts of the house — the supernatural — from Eleanor's own disordered acts — the natural. But whether the agency of the house is inside Eleanor's mind or outside, in either location it clearly functions as a powerful maternal image.

Eleanor's most intimate relationship in the group is with the androgynous Theodora, a lesbian who is perceived by Eleanor as alternately protective and tormenting. Their relationship recreates for me the terms of Eleanor's relation with her mother, the force of her longing and her hatred. Compelled ostensibly by the house to share the same bed, the same room, the same clothes as Theodora, Eleanor both fears and delights in their confusion of identity. Yet Theodora's lesbianism demonstrates

the adult implications of remaining bound within a mother-daughter relation — erotically bound, that is, to a woman. Whereas in the 18th century Gothic, the erotic bond between mother and daughter is displaced — the heroine explores the secret rooms of a *house* — in this post Freudian novel, the sexual overtones of Eleanor's ambivalent wish to remain at Hill House are allowed more direct expression. Whereas the 18th century Gothic ended with an idealized romance between hero and heroine, (and interestingly, the hero of the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, is named Theodore) here, the book's refrain, "journeys end in lovers meeting," points first toward Eleanor's desire to live with Theodora after they leave Hill House and then to the climax — in which mother and daughter are symbolically re-united.

After a series of supernatural occurrences which serve Eleanor as re-cognitions of her past, after seeing her name literally inscribed on the walls of the house, after being rejected by Theodora, who insists on their separate lives, Eleanor surrenders to the house, surrenders her illusory new autonomy to remain the child, dependent on the maternal, on Hill House as protector, lover and destroyer. Asked to leave by the group because of her unstable behavior, she crashes her car into a tree. By destroying herself physically, she escapes the carnal consequences of her desire, committing herself instead to the maternal space as one of the ghosts of Hill House, now forever incorporated into its powerful history. Yet to the very end, that submission is ambivalent: moments before her crash, she first exults: "I am really doing it, I am doing this all by myself, now, at last; this is me, I am really doing it by myself" and then thinks, "Why don't they stop me."

As Jackson's novel illustrates, the female Gothic depends as much upon longing and desire as upon fear and hatred. If it frequently indulges some of the more masochistic components of female fantasy, of a delight in dependence and submission, it also encourages an exploration of the limits of identity. Ultimately, however, in this essentially conservative genre — and for me this is the real Gothic horror — the heroine seems compelled either to resume a more quiescent, socially acceptable role, or to be destroyed.