

from the initial commitment to plausibility and to reason, take the shape of the writers' most potent imaginations and desires.

The simplicity of the structure, Walton's tale enfolding Frankenstein's, which, in turn, enfolds that of the monster, implies a clarity and firmness of moral ordering which is not present in the actual texture of the novel. Walton would seem the ultimate judge of the experience, as the outsider: yet he explicitly accepts Frankenstein's judgment of it, and largely exculpates him. The monster's own defense and explanation, lodged in the center of the story, is, however, by far the most convincing—though it is also a special—reading, and Frankenstein himself confesses that he has failed in his responsibility to his creature. In the end, however, we are not left with a judgment but with Walton's strangely uncolored report of the monster's last speech and last action. If anyone, the monster has the last word: and that word expresses a longing for self-destruction, for the pleasure which will come in the agony of self-immolation, and for an ultimate peace in extinction.

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## ELLEN MOERS

### Female Gothic: The Monster's Mother†

What I mean by 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. But what I mean—or anyone else means—by “the Gothic” is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear. In Gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare. Not, that is, to reach down into the depths of the soul and purge it with pity and terror (as we say tragedy does), but to get to the body itself, its glands, epidermis, muscles, and circulatory system, quickly arousing and quickly allaying the physical reactions to fear.

Certainly the earliest tributes to the power of Gothic writers tended to emphasize the physiological. Jane Austen has Henry Tilney say, in *Northanger Abbey*, that he could not put down Mrs. Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*: “I remember finishing it in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time.” For Hazlitt Ann Radcliffe had mastered “the art of freezing the blood”: “harrowing up the soul with imaginary horrors, and making the flesh creep and the nerves thrill.” Mary Shelley

† From the *New York Review of Books*. Reprinted with permission. Later incorporated in somewhat different form in Moers's *Literary Women* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976).

said she intended *Frankenstein* to be the kind of ghost story that would “curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart.” Why such claims? Presumably because readers enjoyed these sensations. For example, in Joanna Baillie's verse play on the theme of addiction to artificial fear, the heroine prevails upon a handmaiden, against the best advice, to tell a horror story:

... Tell it, I pray thee.  
And let me cowering stand, and be my touch  
The valley's ice: there is a pleasure in it.  
Yea, when the cold blood shoots through every vein;  
When every pore upon my shrunken skin  
A knotted knoll becomes, and to mine ears  
Strange inward sounds awake, and to mine eyes  
Rush stranger tears, there is a joy in fear.<sup>1</sup>

At the time when literary Gothic was born, religious fears were on the wane, giving way to that vague paranoia of the modern spirit for which Gothic mechanisms seem to have provided welcome therapy. Walter Scott compared reading Mrs. Radcliffe to taking drugs, dangerous when habitual “but of most blessed power in those moments of pain and languor, when the whole head is sore, and the whole heart sick. If those who rail indiscriminately at this species of composition, were to consider the quantity of actual pleasure which it produces, and the much greater proportion of real sorrow and distress which it alleviates, their philanthropy ought to moderate their critical pride, or religious intolerance.” A grateful public rewarded Mrs. Radcliffe, according to her most recent biographer,<sup>2</sup> by making her the most popular and best paid English novelist of the eighteenth century. Her pre-eminence among the “Terrorists,” as they were called, was hardly challenged in her own day, and modern readers of *Udolpho* and *The Italian* continue to hail her as mistress of the pure Gothic form.

The secrets of Mrs. Radcliffe's power over the reader seem to be her incantatory prose style, her artful stretching of suspense over long periods of novelistic time, her pictorial and musical imagination which verges on the surreal. But the reasons for her own manipulation of that power remain mysterious, and there is no sign that any more will ever be known of her life and personality than the sparse facts we now have. She was married, childless, shy, sensitive to criticism of her respectability as woman and author, and addicted to travel—an addiction she

1. *Orta: A Tragedy*, published in 1812 in the third volume of *Plays On the Passions*, was one of the works read and reread by Mary and Percy Byssie Shelley in their early years together. Its author, an earnestly moral and wistfully melodramatic Scottish spinster, was then famous and hyperbolically praised, especially in Scotland, as a Shakespeare *rediviva*.  
2. E. B. Murray, *Ann Radcliffe* (Twayne, 1972).

Reprinted in *Norton Critical Edition of Frankenstein*, Ed. J. Paul Hunter, NY: W.W. Norton, 1996.

was able to satisfy more through reading and imagining than through experience.

Ann Radcliffe's novels suggest that, for her, Gothic was a device to set maidens on distant and exciting journeys without offending the proprieties. In the power of villains, her heroines are forced to scurry up the top of pasteboard Alps and penetrate bandit-infested forests. They can scuttle miles along castle corridors, descend into dungeons, and explore secret chambers without a chaperone, because the Gothic castle, however ruined, is an indoor and therefore freely female space. In Mrs. Radcliffe's hands the Gothic novel became a feminine substitute for the picaresque, where heroines could enjoy all the adventures and alarms that masculine heroes had long experienced, far from home, in fiction.

She also made the Gothic novel into a make-believe puberty rite for young women. Her heroines are always good daughters, her villains bad, cruel, painfully attractive father figures, for which her lovers are at last accepted as palely satisfactory substitutes, but only after paternal trials and tortures are visited upon the heroine. When satirizing the form, Jane Austen wisely refrained from tampering with this essential feature of Mrs. Radcliffe's Gothic: the father in *Northanger Abbey* is one of Austen's nastiest.

As early as the 1790s, then, Ann Radcliffe firmly set the Gothic in one of the ways it would go ever after: a novel in which the central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine. But what are we to make of the next major turning of the Gothic tradition that a woman brought about a generation later? Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in 1818, made over the Gothic novel into what today we call science fiction. *Frankenstein* brought a new sophistication to literary terror, and it did so without a heroine, without even an important female victim. Paradoxically, however, no other Gothic work by a woman writer, perhaps no other literary work of any kind by a woman, better repays examination in the light of the sex of its author. For *Frankenstein* is a birth myth, and one that was lodged in the novelist's imagination, I am convinced, by the fact that she was herself a mother.