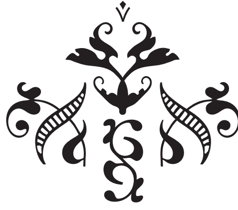

Catherine's Real and Imagined Fears: What Happens to Female Bodies in Gothic Castles

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When Catherine departs for her six weeks' residence in Bath, instead of "cautions against the violence of such noblemen and baronets" who "delight in forcing young ladies away to some remote farm-house," Mrs. Morland reminds her daughter to wrap herself "very warm about the throat" at night (18). This humorous juxtaposition of the real and imagined dangers that might befall a young lady is emblematic of the concerns of *Northanger Abbey.* The novel self-consciously plays with and crosses the boundaries between the fictive and the actual, the literary and the historical, and, in doing so, questions what is proper and improper education and conduct for young women. As the work employs the genres of sentimental fiction, the Gothic, and the *Bildungsroman*, it is profoundly interested in women—in the way the female body is surveilled, is held in place, is displayed in society, and is contained by physical, social, or psychological forces. Reacting to the novels of her contemporaries, Austen mocks their exaggerations, yet at the same time reminds her readers of the volatility of patriarchal power and the vulnerability of the female body.

In this essay, I will look at some of Catherine Morland's real and imagined fears in order to situate them in the literary and historical context of the decade of the 1790s. In particular, I focus on the ways in which female bodies become the site of the culture's anxieties about

the changing social, economic, political, and familial order during the decade after the French Revolution. Following the works of Marilyn Butler and Claudia Johnson, I argue that Jane Austen was intensely aware of the gendered political debates of the period, the so-called war of ideas that was raging between the conservatives and the radicals, the Jacobins and the anti-Jacobins. As a number of critics have already pointed out the obvious intertextual references to a work such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which does seem to be one of the most obvious targets of Austen's parody, I will refer to a number of lesser-known works by female authors of the time. Novels such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791), written at the beginning of the decade, and Mary Robinson's *The False Friend* (1799) and Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), published toward the close of the century, are all novels of education that use Gothic conventions to highlight the unstable and liminal position of women in patriarchal society.

One notices a change, however subtle, by the end of the eighteenth century. Compared to the novels published at the beginning of the decade, the later ones are darker in tone and reveal a stronger sense of urgency about women's condition. The excesses and bloodshed in France created a feeling of disenchantment among the radicals in England, and an overreaction to all things philosophical and revolutionary on the part of the conservatives. Commenced in the middle of the decade, Austen's novel situates itself rather squarely in the midst of these charged debates. While in *Northanger Abbey*, there is no overt reference to events in France, it is nevertheless a text that contributes to the controversy of the time. Austen does not refer directly to the above books by author or title, but they were current and popular in the 1790s. More likely than not, they would have been part of the literary repertoire of an avid reader such as Jane Austen, who would have reflected on some of the factious issues raised in the other Gothic novels.

What are some of the things that happen to female bodies in these Gothic or pseudo-Gothic novels? Demonstrating her familiarity with the conventions, the narrator mentions many of the stock scenes of the genre in passing. Catherine's journey to Bath, for instance, is accomplished "with suitable quietness and uneventful safety. Neither robbers nor tempests befriended them, nor one lucky overturn to

introduce them to the hero" (19). Later, when Catherine meets Captain Tilney, the narrator reassures her readers that he presents no threat to her: "*He* cannot be the instigator of the three villains in horsemen's great coats, by whom she will hereafter be forced into a traveling-chaise and four, which will drive off with incredible speed" (131). These passages refer to dangers heroines encounter while traveling, or to the possibility of being abducted by Gothic villains. Kidnapping and abduction occurred frequently in Gothic novels, and did so in all of the four novels I cited. These scenes function in the same way as newspaper accounts of rape do in our society today. In Sharon Marcus's words, they create "an identity politics which defines women by our violability" (387). Abduction or rape "is one of culture's many modes of feminizing women" (391). In *The Romance of the Forest*, young Adeline is taken against her will to the decadent palace of the Marquis de Montalt. Here amidst sumptuous opulence, enchanting music, and "fruits, ices, and liquors," the Marquis attempts to "solicit her love" (156, 159). After persuading the Marquis to postpone his amorous intentions until the next day, Adeline escapes by jumping out of a window and is rescued by the man who later becomes her lover and husband.

A similarly fortuitous ending to a kidnapping incident occurs toward the end of Inchbald's *A Simple Story*. Here, Lord Margrave, who has been unsuccessfully courting the young Matilda, arranges for two of his servants to frighten the young woman out of her home by a false alarm of fire. Matilda is then carried off to Lord Margrave's house, which "was situated in the lonely part of a well-known forest, not more than twenty miles distant from London" (326). Lord Margrave's design was "to plead, to argue, to implore, nay even to threaten, long before he put his threats in force;—and…he reconciled—as most bad men can—what he had done, not only to the laws of humanity, but to the laws of honour" (325). Beauty in distress arouses Lord Margrave's desire, as Matilda's "distracted face, disheveled hair, and the whole of her forlorn appearance" made him unable to "resist the desire of fulfilling all her dreadful expectations" (328). This horror, however, is not carried out. The kidnapping becomes the means by which the author is able to effect a scene of reconciliation between Matilda and her estranged father, who had vowed not to have any dealings with her because of the infidelity of her mother some two decades ago. In both Radcliffe's and Inchald's early novels published in

the first half of the decade, the criticism of patriarchal power is subsumed by the conventions of the comic ending. Abusive conduct from aristocrats is anticipated by both heroines, but not fulfilled, and the girls emerge relatively unscathed. Women are reminded of their defenseless positions through these representations, but the heroines themselves experience no real harm. In Adeline's case, she becomes somewhat stronger and wiser because of the incident.

What is troubling about both of these scenes, however, is that the heroine can only escape from the clutches of the lecher by putting herself into the protection of another man, in Radcliffe's case, a lover, in Inchbald's case, a father figure. Both resolutions, which work to the good of the heroines, nevertheless reveal the precarious situation of the eighteenth-century woman. Female delicacy and propriety necessitated a male protector, and this protection is shown to be somewhat arbitrarily given. Austen mocks these kidnapping scenes by her allusions to what could have happened to Catherine. However, in *Northanger Abbey*, she shows her awareness of the unreliable and potentially haphazard nature of male protection.

Catherine's ride to Blaize Castle can be read as a reworking of one of these abduction scenes. First of all, we remember that it is only through deception and lying that John Thorpe convinces Catherine to get into his carriage. Once Catherine sees the Tilneys walking down the street, she tells Thorpe to stop. He "only lashed his horse into a brisker trot" and even with repeated entreaties, he "only laughed, smacked his whip, encouraged his horse, made odd noises, and drove on" (87). Catherine, though "angry and vexed," was "obliged to give up the point and submit" (87). While this incident is not comparable to the dangers of the kidnapped heroines in Radcliffe and Inchbald, through it Austen highlights the potential cruelty of a patriarchal figure like Thorpe. While Thorpe has no intention of seducing Catherine at this point, his wielding of the whip, his glee at her helplessness, his control of the situation reveal Austen's recognition of the ease with which a comic social encounter could turn into a kind of Gothic horror. Notwithstanding Butler's view that Austen's politics were those of a "conservative Christian moralist of the 1790s" (*Jane Austen*, 164), it is through little vignettes like this one that Austen demonstrates her sensitivity to and understanding of the concerns raised by radical writers of her time. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary

Wollstonecraft had complained about the fact that women were "educated for dependence," had "to act according to the will of another fallible being, and submit, right or wrong to power" (48). Against her will, Catherine does submit to the power of the whip-wielding Thorpe.

By the late 1790s, the debates about authority, freedom, and the rights of women became more overt and intense. Radicals such as Robinson and Hays made use of the images and discourse of the French Revolution to argue for the improvement of female education, and to criticize tyrannical male power. They were themselves empowered by the examples of the reformers in England as well as the women of the new Republican. The Gothic genre, which tended to make use of instability, extravagance, the nightmarish qualities of the unconscious (Napier), proved to be an ideal form to illustrate the fears of middle-class women about their limited position and power in English society. Women's anxieties about the lack of control of their subjectivities, their bodies, their property could be explored in Gothic novels. In Robinson's *The False Friend*, for example, Gertrude, the heroine, is kidnapped not once but twice in the four volumes.

The first time, the villain Treville, modelled after Samuel Richardson's Lovelace, attempts to seduce Gertrude in the very chamber where her patroness or stepmother, has just expired. In this rather macabre sequence, Gertrude is given a bequest of £20,000 by the patroness before she dies, and is immediately harassed by Treville, who desires her body and her inheritance. As well as demonstrating the connection between economic and sexual vulnerability, the scene links maternal affection to horror and death. Gertrude is revulsed, "The bed on which [her stepmother] died, the chamber in which she closed the scene of mortal anguish, and the presence of the being whose unkindness had destroyed her, filled my mind with sensations so torturing that reason began to sicken, and I was yielding myself to the dominion of despair" (322). The body of the mother is used to render the body of the young girl monstrous to herself. However, this kidnapping does not end tragically, as Gertrude manages to seize a nearby pistol, fires at her assailant, and injures him on his right side.

The next time she is kidnapped, by the same man, she does not need to use a pistol. She bravely challenges him verbally instead, by saying: "cruelty and cowardice are invariably associates. You dare not carry insult farther; because you are aware that it will not pass unpun-

ished" (61). This time she is rescued by an admirer, Mr. Ashgrove, whose sister, ironically, does die a few pages later after being seduced and betrayed by the same villain. The number of abductions, seductions, and death scenes in *The False Friend* seems somewhat unreal and excessive, but they were, for Robinson, a way of highlighting the suffering and the dark, dreamlike quality of the lives of women who were at the mercy of abusive males. In Robinson's own life, the relationship between women and men was always precarious and unequal. She had been at one time a beautiful actress and the favored mistress of the Prince of Wales (later George IV), but afterwards was left impoverished and without a career. In her novels, her heroines often placed their trust in the wrong man. Gertrude says of Denmore, whom she idolizes: "Taught to consider you as the most perfect of created beings, I entertained no fear that evil could proceed from the source of such benevolence; I loved you, before I questioned my heart upon the subject.... I am the slave of my unconquerable passion" (79, 90). In the last few pages of the novel, however, Gertrude discovers that this man, Denmore, was her mother's lover, and that she is his illegitimate daughter. Unbeknownst to her, she has been in love with her father all this time. After this discovery, she dies, overwhelmed by the horror of it all.

A series of horrific events, including abduction, pursuit, and confinement, that result in a tragic end also occurs to the heroine of Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice*. Hays, who was a friend and admirer of Mary Wollstonecraft, had written a number of essays and tracts about the need for "degraded woman to assert her right to reason" (84). Like Wollstonecraft and Robinson, she, too, believed that women were far too dependent on men: "Young women without fortunes, if they do not chance to marry... have scarce any other resources than in servitude, or prostitution" (85). Her second novel, published at the end of the decade, illustrates the detrimental effects of this dependence. In contrast to the plain Catherine Morland, Hays's heroine, young Mary Raymond, seems initially to be destined to be a grand heroine. She is "tall, blooming, animated, [her] features were regular, [her] complexion a rich glowing brunette, [her] eyes vivacious and sparkling; dark chestnut hair shaded [her] face, and floated over [her] shoulders in luxuriant profusion; [her] figure was light and airy, [her] step firm, [her] aspect intelligent, and [her] mind inquisitive" (5). At ten years

of age, Mary "could ride the forest-horses without bridle or saddle; could leap a fence or surmount a gate with admirable dexterity; could climb the highest trees, wrestle with the children of the village, or mingle in the dance with grace and activity" (5). However, these qualities are no match for her struggle against the neighboring lord, Sir Peter Osborne, who is attracted to her and attempts to kiss her the very first time he sees her. Sir Peter is determined to have her, and upon the death of her guardian, arranges to have her abducted to his house in London. Here he promises that she will "suffer no other inconvenience or injury than a gentle restraint for a few days, to afford him an opportunity" of urging his suit (113).

This "gentle restraint" by the lord who should have been her protector turns into a Gothic nightmare for Mary. After spending eight days in a chamber where the door was "locked…on the outside" (114), Mary attempts to go downstairs for help one evening when Sir Peter was entertaining a "large company of gentlemen" (115). After successfully escaping from her chamber, she inadvertently finds herself hiding in a "small dressing-closet," which, as it turns out unluckily, belongs to Sir Peter. Here, "deaf to [her] remonstrances, to [her] supplications,—regardless of [her] tears, [her] rage, [her] despair," she is surprised by Sir Peter, and "suffered a brutal violation" (116-17). Mary experiences rape—one of the worst fears of Gothic heroines. What Radcliffe's and Inchbald's heroines can only imagine with terror is enacted in Hays's novel. But what is admirable about Mary is that even after the humiliation of her body, she refuses to submit to Sir Peter. When he asks her to consider reparation, she replies, "What reparation canst thou, darest thou, to propose?—I demand my liberty this moment; I insist upon being suffered to depart. No one has a right to control me. I will appeal to the tribunal of my country; I will boldly claim the protection of its laws" (117). In her speech, words like "liberty," "right," "control," and the appeal to justice are key terms that would have been familiar to readers who followed the political debates of the revolutionary period. Hays employs these politically charged terms to link the plight of her heroine, and that of women in general, to that of the revolutionaries who also claimed "liberty" and equality as subjects. These radicals were attempting to discard the traditional image of woman as delicate and weak, and insisted instead on her mental and moral capabilities.

Austen's novel replays some of these matters, though in a comic manner. Unlike the heroines who suffer untimely and melodramatic ends, Austen's Catherine is "'not lodged apart from the rest of the family,'" does not find "'the remains of a broken lute,'" or a "'dagger'" and "'a few drops of blood,'" as Henry teasingly promises (158, 160). She is not locked in her chamber or raped by the lord of the mansion. However, General Tilney's treatment of her once he finds out that she is not the rich heiress he believed her to be is almost as barbaric and rude as that of the villains in Gothic novels. As her host, he is supposed to be her protector while she is staying at his house. In addition, as Claudia Johnson notes, the "General's superior position obligates him to consider the care of dependents, let alone invited guests, more conscientiously" (*Jane Austen*, 45). Catherine's villain "is not only a repressive father, but also a self-professed defender of national security" (35). While negating the surmises about Tilney as tyrant and murderer of his wife, which originated from Catherine's overactive and literal imagination, Austen nevertheless shows that aspects of the Gothic were present, even in such a civilized age and in England. The General's order of sending Catherine off without warning or explanation, unattended on "a journey of seventy miles by post" is, as Catherine thinks, "as incomprehensible as it was mortifying and grievous" (226). General Tilney might not be as reprehensible as Radcliffe's Montoni, but we agree with Catherine's parents, who note that "in forcing her on such a measure, General Tilney had acted neither honourably nor feelingly—neither as a gentleman nor a parent" (234).

The reasons for his actions are, in fact, not as different from those of the villains we have seen in other Gothic novels. General Tilney does not seduce Catherine because he desires her body, but because he covets what he believed she possesses. His actions proceed from greedy and mercenary motives similar to those of villanous characters, such as the Marquis de Montalt in *The Romance of the Forest* and Treville in *The False Friend*. Initially, he courts her and encourages Henry to do so because he mistakenly believes her to be the "future heiress of Fullerton" (245). Later when Thorpe corrects him by telling him that Catherine actually comes from a large family, "by no means respected in their own neighbourhood" and that they were "a forward, bragging, scheming race" (246), he commits the act that, as Austen notes, is almost as cruel as "murdering or shutting up his wife" (247). This

analogy, made by the author herself, reveals her awareness of the fragile boundaries between polite and atrocious conduct, between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. For a man like General Tilney, who was "accustomed on every ordinary occasion to give law in his family," opposition is intolerable (247). Contemporary readers who were, by then, sensitized to the corrupt and decaying tendencies of the upper class and aristocrats would make connections between General Tilney's actions as a domestic tyrant and his potential abuse of power in the national or political realm.

In addition, what Gothic novels tend to explore is the desiring female body. Not only are Gothic heroines desirable, they also, unconsciously or consciously, search for that which they cannot or are not permitted to have. A number of psychoanalytic critics have made the comparison between the Gothic castle and a woman's body. For example, Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes that "danger is palpably equated in these fictions with a specialized form of 'inner space.'" The "treacherous cave, tunnel, basement, secret room" have "overtly sexual implications" (209). Similarly, Norm Holland and Leona Sherman state that "the castle delineates a physical space that will accept many different projections of unconscious material" (219). Among the possible interpretations of the castle are: a maternal space, whether nurturing and/or sexual; an idealized past containing a family romance; and an inside that houses a secret, to be penetrated (226). What I want to discuss in the last part of my essay is not so much what happens to female bodies as what female bodies want to happen in these suggestive Gothic edifices. For there is a tendency among critics to see Gothic heroines as innocent, helpless, and passive, as creatures who react, rather than agents who act. While it is true that many of them arrive at the castle not of their own accord, but because they are kidnapped, or out of economic or social necessity, their actions, once inside the boundaries of the castle, reveal their desire for adventure, and their wish to experience what lies beyond their reach. I associate these tendencies with the general mood of the revolutionary period, which was a willingness to step out of tradition or to go beyond traditionally prescribed boundaries.

In *The Romance of the Forest*, despite her youth and delicacy, Adeline finds herself curious about and attracted to the figure of the Marquis. During one occasion, upon seeing the Marquis enter the abbey, she feels "an emotion, whose cause she did not trouble herself

to inquire for" (98). This emotion "made her instantly retreat from the window," only to lead "her thither again as hastily" (98). Later, she says that she disliked the Marquis's "general disposition" (130), but at one point, she finds her spirit sinking "into languor" when he takes leave of them and she is bereft of his "animated conversation" (100). What Adeline feels is both attraction to and repulsion for the Marquis. For her, he represents the out-of-the-ordinary, the worldly, and the decadent. He is, at first, slightly intimidating, but later becomes menacing, as he threatens her sexually. Critics tend to cast figures such as the Marquis de Montalt or Montoni from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* as the demon lover, one who represents "dangerous sexuality" for the young heroine (Wolff 208). However, what is interesting about these figures is that they have three similar characteristics. They are, more often than not, older than the heroine, usually about the age of her father; second, they come from the upper class or are aristocrats; and third, they are powerful figures of authority. This unequal relationship holds true for the protagonists in *The Romance of the Forest*, *A Simple Story*, and *The False Friend*.

Instead of seeing the attraction of these girls to the father figures as simply enacting "dramas of sexual initiation" (Wolff 216), I argue that what is happening in these works is a re-evaluation of the structures of the social order. Rather than simply a narrative about forbidden love, or love for the wrong man, what occurs is a more complex kind of oedipal love and loss. The girls desire the figure who represents stability, knowledge, wealth, power, and sexual experience. These traits usually also come with age. For women in the eighteenth century who could not possess property, who were not given much education, and who had little power, these qualities in a man were especially appealing. What the young women yearn for, but then have to turn away from, is the old order, which was based on the premise of a strong patriarchal figure and on female weakness and dependence. When these patriarchs turn out to be untrustworthy, the women have to rely instead on their own instincts and intelligence. As discussed in Marilyn Butler's essays, in political terms, it is the rejection of Edmund Burke's benevolent patriarch model for Tom Paine's more egalitarian new order. The heroes whom the heroines end up marrying, if they do marry, are frequently not titled, and have had to struggle in order to win the love of the women.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen replicates these conventions in the relationship of Catherine and the General. Catherine does not exactly find General Tilney sexually attractive. But, in *Northanger Abbey*, she seems inordinately curious about his love life. She wonders if his wife was "a very charming woman," if she was "handsome," if she was unhappy in marriage, if he was "an unkind husband," and if he "loved her" (180). As in the father figures of the other novels, he, too, proves to be an unworthy example of the benevolent patriarch, even if he does own an elegant house and has impeccable taste in food. In her own way, Catherine undergoes the same scenario as her Gothic counterparts. She, too, must learn that the father figures of the world fall short of the benevolent ideal. She, too, learns that wealth and power can corrupt, and can be abused, though not in the literal way she had imagined.

Finally, what convinces me that Gothic heroines are bodies who desire, as well as are desired, is their willingness to transgress boundaries. Both Adeline, from *The Romance of the Forest*, and Catherine, from *Northanger Abbey*, are filled with expectancy. They want the world of the abbey to contain more than what meets the eye. They believe that their fates are destined for something far more extraordinary and exciting than simply to be a domestic woman. When Adeline discovers a secret door behind the tapestry that leads to a dark chamber, she determines "to pursue the inquiry." She thinks: "A mystery seems to hang over these chambers,... which it is, perhaps, my lot to develope" (115). Similarly, Austen's heroine resolves to explore "the forbidden door alone" (192), feeling confident "of somewhere drawing forth, in the shape of some fragmented journal" "proofs of the General's cruelty," which might "yet have escaped discovery" (193). Both girls hope to make some momentous discovery and are prepared to take risks and face dangers. They act like heroes rather than helpless heroines of a romance. Adeline's attitude has led Claudia Johnson to describe her as an "equivocal being," one who "behaves like a pretty good man, at least when her 'glowing charms' aren't in the way" (*Equivocal Beings*, 78).

Such character traits link Adeline and Catherine to a radical feminist like Hays, who had expressed dissatisfaction with the circumscribed existence of women in late-eighteenth-century England. In her first novel, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), Hays's heroine complains that women are "amused with every passing trifle; gratified by the

insipid routine of heartless, mindless, intercourse; fully occupied, alternately, by domestic employment, or the childish vanity of varying external ornaments" (85). She notes that men and women have unequal opportunities for exercising their understandings: "While men pursue interest, honor, pleasure, as accords with their several dispositions, women, who have too much delicacy, sense, and spirit, to degrade themselves by the vilest of all interchanges, remain insulated beings, and must be content tamely to look on, without taking any part in the great, though often absurd and tragical, drama of life" (85). Adeline's and Catherine's desire to explore the dark recesses of the castle, to find out what secrets the castle contains, can be seen as a reaction to the sense of being "insulated," and having to be passive spectators of the "drama of life," as Hays calls it. They refuse to comply with the proper conduct expected of them by embarking on their forbidden explorations. Both Radcliffe and Austen, however, do not overtly endorse their heroines' sense of adventure, and the happy endings of both novels seem to negate whatever criticism of the *status quo* the middle of the narratives might raise.

In conclusion, Austen's witty rendition of what happens to female bodies in Gothic castles demonstrates her familiarity with the more radical and political Gothic novels of her time. Her use of the conventions exploited by her contemporaries reveals her understanding, if not sympathy, for the concerns raised by such women as Wollstonecraft, Hays, and Robinson. If we take *Northanger Abbey* to be a parody of Gothic novels, we have to remember that, as well as being critical of the genre, Austen is also showing her affinity to it. Linda Hutcheon reminds us that "*para* in Greek can also mean 'beside,' and therefore there is a suggestion of an accord or intimacy instead of contrast" in the word *parody* (32). Austen's text incorporates the background texts by using repetition and irony. But as Hutcheon points out, "this irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive" (32). Such constructive criticism is what Austen attempts with her textual body.

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