

## **How and why has the Gothic been of importance in writing by and for women?**

The Gothic genre arose with the publication of Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* in 1764, and achieved instantly a high popularity. It was particularly associated with female writers and readers (Markman 2003: 48). The Gothic novels of the first wave consist often of a formulaic plot around a hidden crime that feature stereotypical characters in a medieval setting and draw on supernatural occurrences (Markman 2003: 1-16). Within these tensions of gothic horror, female writers and readers started to explore their private fears and desires. On the one hand, many Gothic texts written by women draw on female fears of male oppression and betrayal. On the other hand, these texts picture female desires in exploring the themes of identity and sexuality, and feature heroines that are models of resistance.

This essay will examine the importance of Gothic fiction as a space of freedom for women during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In looking at Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* and Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, I will particularly focus on the construction of female identity, the theme of female oppression as well as the function of the Gothic heroine. In the first part, I will examine the significance of Gothic fiction for the female reader. After that I will highlight the opportunities within this genre for the female author. The aim of this essay is to provide evidence that suggests that the significance of the Gothic genre lies in the texts' function to serve as a "reflective distortion of social reality" (Meyers 2001: 17) with an aim to question and test out 18<sup>th</sup> century boundaries and limits.

Gothic texts crossed social boundaries in exploring "new extremes of feeling, through the representation of scenes and events well beyond the normal range of experience" (Clery 2000: 13). These new emotions are often linked to the texts' exploration of female fears and desires that were regarded as inappropriate in 18<sup>th</sup> century society. Within the privacy of reading, women found a space, which offered

the possibility to experience personal anxieties and desires in a psychological but also physical way. This sensation of bodily distress appealed to many female readers and was an important aspect that contributed to satisfy their reader expectations.

The theme of imprisonment, either in physical or psychological form, is often used to fulfil these expectations. While Radcliffe pictures Adeline's and Theodore's physical imprisonment in *The Romance of the Forest*, Austen focuses on the psychological forms of imprisonment. Isabella in *Northanger Abbey* resembles the numerous unmarried women who are imprisoned within the pressures of the 18<sup>th</sup> century marriage market. In preferring Frederick Tilney to Catherine's brother, Isabella acts within conventional female behaviour patterns to escape the fate of restricted financial means. According to Fitzgerald (2004: 13) Isabella's fascination with property resulted from the contemporary understanding that property meant power and liberty. Yet, Frederick is just another example of a Gothic villain who is not interested in Isabella but only wants "to gratify his vanity of dominion by breaking a preexisting engagement" (Johnson 2004: 323). In this way, suffering and the depiction of women as the victim of a villain is of high importance in Gothic texts. As several critics have argued, this suffering resembles contemporary "women's fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body" (Smith a. Wallace 2004: 1).

Whereas this victimization of women appealed to the fears of the female readership, the representation of the female victim who is able to escape into the public world appealed to their desires. Travelling can be seen as an expression of the female desire to penetrate the public sphere. Catherine travels from her family home to Bath, visits Northanger Abbey and travels on her own back to her parents. In *The Romance of the Forest*, travelling is even more extensive. Adeline escapes from the Abbey near Lyon to Savoy and after that accompanies LaLuc in a journey through

Piedmont and Nice, along the Mediterranean coast of France. This extensive travelling symbolizes the wish to test and try out boundaries between the private and the public. In addition, it appealed to many female readers of the lower and middle classes for whom travelling was not easily achievable.

Furthermore, the reading of Gothic texts provided an escape route from the strict drawing room manners of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In identifying with the heroine of a text, women could escape into imagination where their concerns became the centre of a story (Wallace 2004: 61). Suddenly female readers saw their own personal fears and desires mirrored within the pleasures and sufferings of the heroine. The obstacles for Adeline and Theodore to come together in romantic love, for instance, reflects the difficulties of contemporary young women who were mostly married according to the wishes of their parents and not their own preferences (Smith a. Wallace 2004: 5). In this way, Gothic fiction with its romantic subplots offered contemporary female readers “the potential for female creativity and the subversion of conventional gender roles” (Carson 1998: 259).

In dealing with domestic matters, such as love and marriage, Gothic fiction is also concerned with sexuality and sexual fears (Todd 2006: 38). Todd (2006: 38) argues that female sexual anxieties are symbolised with the “creation of frightening spaces and winding passages”. According to Ellis (2001: 258) the ruins of the abbey in *The Romance of the Forest* can be seen as a metaphor for women’s lives under patriarchy. Spencer (1989: 194) supports this argument and points out that the contemporary female reader saw in these mysterious settings symbols for her own trap of marriage and womanhood. Furthermore, it is interesting to point out that Austen, in presenting Northanger Abbey as a modernized home, explicitly shows that these fears are not restricted to mysterious settings of a medieval past, but are of

contemporary significance. As Markman (2003: 69) suggests, for Austen the true terrors lie in the domestic tranquillity and fashionable modernity.

These fears, terrors and anxieties are often closely linked to the lack of sexual education for women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Not only Adeline, but also Catherine are “searching for the absent mother” with whom they might discuss female sexual anxieties (Clery 2000: 2). Unfortunately, Adeline’s and Catherine’s substitute mothers, such as LaMotte’s wife or Mrs Allen, are too dependent on their husbands to be of any help to them (Ellis 2001: 261). It is Mr Allen who brings up that “it has an odd appearance, if young ladies are frequently driven about in them [open carriages] by young men, to whom they are not even related” (Austen 2004: 71). Mrs Allen is merely agreeing with her husband’s accusation of Catherine’s improper behaviour. This leaves Catherine disappointed in Mrs Allen “...but I always hoped you [Mrs Allen] would tell me, if you thought I was doing wrong” (Austen 2004: 71).

This representation of female subordination within a patriarchal society in Gothic fiction is a notion that appealed frequently to the personal experiences of 18<sup>th</sup> century women. According to Clery (2002: 2), the female Gothic writing has often been seen as “parables of patriarchy involving the heroine’s danger from wicked father figures”. Throughout the text, Adeline has to deal with a succession of unpleasant and untrustworthy father figures, until she gets to know LaLuc. LaLuc represents the modern man of feeling because he is not a dominating male personality, but rather a feminine character similar to his son Theodore (Markman 2003: 62). As a consequence patriarchy “appears both the cause and the solutions” of Adeline’s difficulties (Markman 2003: 52).

Nevertheless, another aspect that appealed to the female readership is Austen’s and Radcliff’s exploration of the construction of identity within their

characters. Although Gothic fiction often draws on the notion of the Doppelgänger, which undermines the very logic of identity (Bennett a. Royle 2004: 39), Radcliffe's and Austen's heroines' attempt to establish their own identities in the course of the texts. According to Spencer (1989: 193), the travels and adventures of Adeline and Catherine serve as journeys "into the self, or investigations of possible selves". Yet, it has to be pointed out that Adeline does not start to develop her own identity until she knows and understands her family history. In addition, Catherine's improvement of her personality depends primarily on the influence of Henry. As Todd (2006: 39) emphasizes, it is Henry's encouragement "that draws out what is in Catherine".

In this sense, the worst horror for the heroine is that she cannot escape "the limitation of her identity" (Massé 1990: 682). Massé (1990: 688-689) argues that the identities of the heroines are chiefly defined by their suffering because it is the only action they can perform. The suffering of Adeline, in the form of imprisonment, can be seen as an explicit consequence that resulted from her wish to follow the conventions to be a good and virtuous girl. Catherine, in addition, is "wholly dependent upon the good will and guidance of superiors" (Johnson 2004: 322). As a consequence, both characters do not develop strong personalities but passively accept conventions and confirm the "model of feminine virtue and propriety" (Markman 2003: 50). Hence, for Massé (1990: 688) Gothic fiction is in general "a repetition and exploration of the traumatic denial of identity" which is common for women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet, McCracken (1998: 150) argues that Gothic fiction explores the limits of identity and formulates new ways of "being despite the norms and conventions". In the 18<sup>th</sup> century women were seen as "the society's most corruptible" (Markman 2003:55). Therefore contemporary critics regarded Gothic as being able to ruin women for domestic contentment because they might learn to expect more from their lives than they were likely to get (Todd 2006: 37). In the safe space of their

imagination, the female reader could test out what it meant to be a woman, develop a new sense of one's self and even slip into subversive identities. Therefore, the reading of Gothic texts stimulated women's creative imagination, which is an important aspect in the process of the development of a personal identity. In 1798 E.A. states that "the female part of mankind...is just emerging from infancy" (207) and women should therefore read all Gothic novels they could get hold of until they have "acquired sense enough to see their worthlessness" (210).

In *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen plays with this contemporary notion of danger for the female reader. Austen uses the naïve heroine Catherine to parody the contemporary female reader of Gothic fiction. For Catherine the reading of Radcliffe's *Udolpho* is not only an exciting activity but comes close to true experience (Todd 2006: 38). This can be seen in Catherine's suspicions about Henry's parents. She imagines General Tilney as the archetypal Gothic villain, who has murdered his wife and is suppressing his daughter Eleanor. Therefore, the reading of Gothic fiction has inflamed Catherine's imagination, which has resulted in absurd delusions (Kirkham 1997: 87).

Yet, although Henry reprimands Catherine in exclaiming, "Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians" (Austen 2004: 136), Catherine is not entirely wrong. General Tilney has invited Catherine only because he believes her to be an heiress and wants to secure her dowry for his son. He cruelly turns her out when he finds out the truth. Hence, General Tilney is a social villain and Catherine's "apprehension that General Tilney is an oppressive domestic tyrant is absolutely correct" (Norton 2006: 264). As a consequence, Catherine's reading of Gothic fiction has introduced a sense of suspicion and distrust, which taught her that a hidden secret might be found beneath formidable surfaces (Johnson 2004: 316). It can be argued that Austen has started

off a social education process for Catherine and also the reader. A similar didactic purpose can also be found in *The Romance of the Forest* where Adeline learns over the course of the story to control her emotions and to rely on her rationality instead. This didactic purpose of novels is particularly associated with female authors and can be seen as an aspect that appealed to the interests and reading habits of 18<sup>th</sup> century female readers (Spencer 1998: 215).

Having considered the main causes for the attraction of Gothic writing for female reader, I will now examine the possibilities within Gothic fiction for the female author. Austen's representation of Catherine as a naïve and ignorant character does highlight the lack of female education but it also contributes to the construction of female stereotypes. Thus, it is of significance to assess to which extent a Gothic text reinforces gender differences or questions gender role stereotypes (Benett a. Royle 2004: 153). Apart from Catherine also Radcliffe's Adeline is an uneducated and emotional character. At various points throughout the novel, Adeline reacts with her body and faints (341), trembles (154), weeps (79) or feels anxiety and terror (41). In addition, Adeline's several excursions into the forest where she recites poetry, stress the heroines' sensibility and virtue (Todd 1989: 269). This representation of female behaviour is often regarded as a consequence of the new sentimental domestic construction of femininity, which has emerged during the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century (Markman 2003: 54). Thus, Radcliffe offers with Adeline a "thorough examination of the contemporary construction of gender" (Markman 2003: 51).

Nevertheless, Clery (2000: 71) argues, that Adeline, although following the type of the Gothic heroine, "actively rebels against confinement, and claims her right to life, liberty, and the free play of imagination". Especially in the later scenes, after her escape from the Marquis, she shows strength and persistence. She can be regarded as a subversive character that is willing to break with propriety as a means

of self-preservation (Clery 2000: 71). As a consequence Radcliffe does establish a stereotypical female character with Adeline but she undermines this stereotype in the course of the text. It is not the hero Theodore who rescues Adeline, but Adeline in contrast rescues Theodore from his death sentence in making a vital statement at the trial.

However, another issue to consider in this context is Miles' (2001:45) argument that female authors of Gothic fiction are "primarily interested in rights, for their class, for their sex, and often both together". In representing the contemporary patriarchal society female authors attempted to highlight the confinement of women by patriarchal figures. In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry's response to Radcliffe's *Udolpho* is presented as superior because he understands Gothic fiction as a form of imagination and not like Catherine as an imitation of reality (Kirkham 1997: 90). Therefore, *Northanger Abbey* is an example of a "fairly unmediated representation of world 'as it is', if not as 'it ought to be'" (Johnson 2004: 309). Radcliffe, in contrast, deals in *The Romance of the Forest* with "the possible but improbable, facing fears in an ultimately decorous because oblique and displaced way" (Todd 1989: 256). Although Radcliffe's text can be read as subversive in some ways it also reaffirms "the merits of the familiar values and customs of English society" (Chard 1998: xxiv).

The Gothic genre offered the opportunity for the female author to deal with such ambiguities but also to explore the hidden and concealed fears of women. In using metaphors, such as violence, the authors could explore the passions and desires that had been repressed by 18<sup>th</sup> century etiquette. In *The Romance of the Forest*, Radcliffe horrifies her readers at one point by suggesting that the Marquis fosters the seduction, if not rape, of his own daughter (Miles 2002: 52). Here Radcliffe, appeals to the very horror of incestuous rape within the own private home. Thus Radcliffe unmask the private home itself as an unsafe and dangerous place,



as does Austen with General Tilney's regime in *Northanger Abbey*. Consequently the homely becomes unhomely, which refers to Freud's notion of the uncanny (Freud: 1996: 320).

Another important aspect to consider in relation with the attraction of the Gothic genre is the authors' wish to undermine the assumption that texts written by women are merely a disposable entertainment and not enduring works of art (Clery 2000: 58). Clery (2000: 56-57) argues that the borrowing of female authors is a means to succeed in bolstering the credentials "as a writer to be taken seriously with powers that aspired towards the standards set by the great national poets". It can be argued that by borrowing, female authors of Gothic fiction acknowledge their debt to other authors, such as Shakespeare, but also aim to bring their fiction into relation with the literary tradition. As a consequence, the originality of Gothic fiction is highly ambiguous. Nevertheless, the new combination of the borrowed material creates a certain unique order that can be interpreted as a rebellion against classical ideals, unity and order. Radcliffe, for instance, "succeeded in shaking the assumption that original genius was the monopoly of men" (Clery 2000: 68) because in contrast to her male counterparts, she attempts to explain the supernatural effects of her texts.

Despite the fact that the "effectiveness of the horror story depends upon the reader's inability to rationalise the source of the terror" (McCracken 1998: 128), Radcliffe shifts her focus from the supernatural events to dreams (Miles 2001: 50). Adeline has prophetic dreams in which she hears her fathers' voice that warns her from coming dangers (Radcliffe 1999: 128-137). Radcliffe uses dreams as the manifestations of the unconscious to blur the boundaries between the supernatural and the real. Also Austen undermines the existence of supernatural occurrences in *Northanger Abbey* in ridiculing Catherine's and the readers' expectation (Todd 2006: 45). Catherine's finding of the washing list instead of a secret manuscript is one of

Austen's examples to undermine expectations. In addition, the very use of a Gothic title creates expectations in the reader, which are not fulfilled.

Hence, in a sense, Austen and Radcliffe play with the Walpolean tradition of Gothic writing. Although, both authors use the "frightening male space of the castle or monastery" (Todd 1989: 229), they present it as a metaphor for the sexual as well as social threat of the father or husband figure. In addition the heroine in distress can be regarded as a symbol for the "struggle to maintain her voice, as a female writer" (Miles 2001: 45). With this possibility of symbolic expression, Gothic fiction offered an artistic freedom for the female author that is linked to substantial power. Thus, with their Gothic fiction female writers were able to participate "in the social, political, and philosophical discourses of the late eighteenth century" (Carson 1998: 271).

In conclusion, Gothic fiction of the 18<sup>th</sup> century has to be seen in relation to the culture of which they were part (Kirkham 1997: 12). Although female Gothic authors had to write under "unfavourable conditions of restraint, concealment and self-censorship" (Smith and Wallace 2004: 3), they managed to address the dissatisfied position of women and their problematic situation within the patriarchal society. In representing the "moral nature of woman and *her* role in society" (Kirkham 1997: 23) Austen and Radcliffe investigate femininity, female identity and gender roles within the patriarchal reality of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In doing so they address the hidden fears and repressed desires of the contemporary female readership.

In this way, literature, as "one of a society's instruments of self-awareness" (Calvino 2004: 114) manages to give "voice to social and political struggles" (Carson 1998: 271); or as Norton (2006: 279) puts it, the Gothic genre has a subversive and political nature. As a consequence, the Gothic genre has been of importance for the female reader and author because it offers the opportunity to "address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the

most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural” from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards throughout the history of our culture (Hogle 2002: 4).

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