

PATRICIA MEYER SPACKS

Novel Beginnings

EXPERIMENTS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
ENGLISH FICTION

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS NEW HAVEN & LONDON

Secresy is in no sense a “novel of manners,” nor is *Emmeline*. Both novels, however, call attention to the kind of importance assigned to manners in eighteenth-century fiction. After Austen, the “novel of manners” would continue to flourish, but increasingly it would be considered a relatively frivolous mode, not concerned with serious matters. The true novel of manners in the eighteenth century, represented by such works as *Evelina*, was very serious indeed—and so were the other novels that relied on manners as points of reference.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gothic Fiction

THE GOTHIC NOVEL—A FORM, unlike the novel of manners, with little ostensible connection to ordinary life—originated in a dream. Such, at any rate, was the claim of Horace Walpole, who dreamed, he said, of a giant helmet and forthwith composed *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). This short work (110 pages in the World’s Classics edition) is generally thought to have initiated a genre that continues to flourish, although frequently in debased form; that draws even now on material reminiscent of dreams; and that still attracts large audiences—as it did from the beginning. First published pseudonymously, the novel went through eleven editions in English by the end of the eighteenth century. Walpole acknowledged it, at least by his widely recognized initials, in the second edition, to which he prefaced an explanation of his intentions. His book, he suggested, “was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success” (7). By the “modern” romance, he means the evolving genre of the novel, which typically attempted verisimilitude in its representation of character. Walpole wanted, his statement implies, to combine supernatural improbabilities with plausibilities of human nature. His followers, who greatly elaborated the Gothic form, pursued similar purposes.

For all its brevity, *The Castle of Otranto* adumbrated crucial elements

of the Gothic mode. The combination of the supernatural with the psychologically believable, although central to much Gothic, is only the beginning. Perhaps equally important—at any rate, omnipresent in later Gothic novels—was the stress on troubled family relationships. The father figure in Walpole's novel attempts to marry, and apparently first to rape, the woman who has been engaged to his dead son; he subsequently murders (accidentally) his daughter. In later works, too, hints of incest and unnatural murders would abound. Walpole set his fiction in a castle. Subsequent experiments in Gothic would likewise often locate their action in castles (usually castles with secret or subterranean passages). Like Walpole's novel, later Gothic fiction would typically concentrate on the plight of young women, usually pursued by predatory men. And many subsequent Gothic works, like Walpole's, relied heavily on servant characters for comic relief that often depended on their extraordinary verbosity.

Most significant for the Gothic mode was its establishment of a special atmosphere. Eighteenth-century commentators would refer to that atmosphere as "terror," but more crucial still was a pervasive sense of uncertainty, not only about what would happen but about what had already happened. Something is out of joint in Gothic fiction, and one cannot always readily discern precisely what. Although most Gothic novels, like eighteenth-century novels of other varieties, end in marriage, the search for an appropriate mate or the effort to secure the one chosen does not organize their plots. Instead, the narrative problem at least tacitly established is how to alleviate anxiety that typically exceeds its announced causes. In *The Castle of Otranto*, the central anxiety, experienced by Manfred, the father-figure, stems from a misappropriated inheritance, but that fact emerges only late in the novel. In Ann Radcliffe's novels, the heroine often announces her anxiety over every tiny obstacle, but she does not really know what is wrong. "What is wrong" frequently turns out to involve family structures, but it may implicate larger spheres as well.

Critical exegesis of Gothic fiction has emphasized the psychological, especially the sexual (all those dark passages . . .), but the form's efflorescence in the troubled late years of eighteenth-century England may tempt one also toward political interpretations. The uneasiness presumably experienced by characters and reader alike perhaps reflects that of a nation recently defeated by its own colonies, torn by political dissension, and frightened and fascinated by revolutionary developments across the

Channel, where before the century ended a king would be guillotined. Walpole evokes ancient political conflicts in resolving his plot; Radcliffe, in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, alludes to vague political problems in Italy and gets rid of her villain by state execution for political reasons; Sophia Lee makes politics central to her plot in *The Recess*. Even without such direct references, though, disharmonious families may be thought to echo disharmonious countries.

A final characteristic of most, though not all, Gothic is its invocation of supernatural forces. Walpole appears to take them for granted in all their preposterousness, employing for the sake of plot convenience such figures as a talking skeleton and a walking portrait; Radcliffe subjects her characters to harrowing appearances, although she explains them all away in the end; in M. G. Lewis's *The Monk*, the supernatural is lurid and horrifying; in William Beckford's *Vathek*, some aspects of the supernatural teeter on the edge of comedy, despite their horror. Always, though, supernatural appearances provide correlatives for emotional distress, underlining uncertainty and suggesting cosmic disturbance behind it.

Despite its fairly rudimentary plot development, *The Castle of Otranto* demonstrates how confusion and foreboding can generate narrative drive. The novel begins with the inexplicable happening of Walpole's dream: a giant helmet falls from nowhere, killing Manfred's son Conrad on the verge of his marriage. Manfred reacts unpredictably to this catastrophe, evincing little grief but much activity. The reader at the outset may feel undisturbed by the father's lack of grief, though, the narrator having offered scant reason to mourn the death of a young man characterized as sickly, homely, and "of no promising disposition" (15), not even an object of devotion for his own fiancée, the beautiful and virtuous Isabella.

The novel's opening pages provide an incomprehensible prophecy and the death-dealing helmet as precipitants of action. Thereafter, things happen at tumultuous speed. Manfred takes his son's death as license to pursue Isabella. He will divorce his compliant wife, he explains to the girl; Isabella will, he assumes, bear him sons to preserve the family line. When she shows no eagerness to fulfill this assignment, Manfred pursues her through the castle's dark recesses, foiled by the intervention of a fortuitously present young man. Although she escapes, the young man—apparently a peasant of remarkable presence and courage—suffers imprisonment and threatened death at Manfred's hands.

Spectacular moments abound: the walking portrait, the speaking skeleton, the apparition of a giant hand. But much of the plot emphasizes individual characters' conflicts about duty. Manfred's wife, Hippolita, provides the most egregious example, explaining that women have no right to make choices: "Heaven, our fathers, and our husbands, must decide for us." "Have patience," she continues, addressing her sorely beset daughter Matilda and the beleaguered Isabella; "until you hear what Manfred and Frederic have determined" (88). From her point of view, the perception of duty sounds like a simple matter: a woman does what the man in her life commands. But even Hippolita suffers conflicts. What should a woman do when "heaven" and her husband make opposed demands? Manfred orders her to divorce him; the priest tells her such divorce would be a sin.

Isabella and Matilda also face duty's difficulties. Both love the same man, the helpful peasant. Manfred's commands in every instance conflict with their feelings. Manfred himself feels the tug of duty, shaken by the priest's injunctions and by his sense of responsibility for ancient wrongs. His submission to passion rather than duty leads him to murder his daughter—for which he atones by yielding his estate and his sovereignty and retiring to a monastery. (The guiltless Hippolita also ends in religious retirement.)

So a novel that presents itself as mere entertainment ("A Gothic Story," as Walpole designates it) carries moral overtones. Yet it would be hard to say just what moral it inculcates. The language of duty and the rendered conflicts of duty and passion call attention to parental, marital, and filial responsibility, yet the recommendation of such virtues assumes no prominence in the narrative. Theodore, the brave young peasant, appears to wear his virtues of courage, steadfastness, and honesty mainly as sex appeal. A conventional moral vision governs the novel's explicit utterances, but its plot punishes the innocent (Conrad, Matilda, Hippolita) without comment on the injustice involved, and allows Manfred, despite his guilty intentions and his rash murder of Matilda, to live. Moreover, the narrator hints at a certain disrespect for romantic love, that verity of fiction, in an ending marked by tone and action that surprisingly foretell the resolution of *Mansfield Park*. All the survivors think it convenient that Theodore should marry Isabella: a tidy resolution to chaos. But, the narrator tells us, "Theodore's grief [for Matilda] was too fresh to admit the thought of another love; and it was not till after frequent discourses with

Isabella, of his dear Matilda, that he was persuaded he could know no happiness but in the society of one with whom he could forever indulge the melancholy that had taken possession of his soul" (110). Suddenly romantic love seems almost a joke, so inevitable as to be uninteresting, and so does the melancholy that has characterized Manfred and that will mark many a later Gothic hero/villain.

The effect on the reader is to create something like cognitive dissonance, a disparity between what one expects and what is affirmed as actually the case. In this way too, Walpole's early Gothic novel reiterates its sense of uneasiness, that atmosphere it so richly utilizes to establish its force.

The talkative servants who inhabit much Gothic fiction, firmly rooted in the commonplace, indirectly contribute to the reader's uneasiness. They frequently feel fear, even terror; they are more likely to flee than to resist menace. They usually prove more superstitious than their masters. Bianca, Matilda's servant, immediately interprets groans she hears as emanating from the ghost of a dead astrologer who once tutored Conrad and whose spirit, she believes, is conversing with that of his newly dead pupil. Matilda suggests that they say a prayer and then speak to the ghosts; Bianca replies that she would not speak to a ghost for the world. She readily understands Theodore, when they encounter this flesh-and-blood source of the groans, as pining away for love. Indeed, she appears to believe love the root of most human maladies.

Such trivial details matter little in the action of *The Castle of Otranto*; they seem like mild jokes. Walpole himself, however, called attention to the importance of the servants' role. In the preface to the first edition, where he posed as translator of an ancient Italian manuscript, he suggests that "the art of the author is very observable in his conduct of the subalterns," because the servants through their naïveté and simplicity both reveal and help effect action (4). In the preface to the second edition, speaking in his own voice, Walpole argues more fully the case for his domestics, claiming the precedent of Shakespeare for the mixture of tones created by the presence of members of the lower orders in the company of more dignified characters. He speaks of the servants' effect on readers, first suggesting that these domestics "might almost tend to excite smiles." Then he mentions the suspense servants can create. "The very impatience which a reader feels, while delayed by the coarse pleasantries of vulgar actors

from arriving at the knowledge of the important catastrophe he expects, perhaps heightens, certainly proves that he has been artfully interested in, the depending event" (8).

As Radcliffe would demonstrate more fully than Walpole, the talkativeness of servants often intolerably postpones important revelations, to an extent that may produce impatience rather than suspense in the reader (the servant's fictional interlocutor typically suffers from both emotions). It lengthens narratives: Walpole's small volume would have been yet more slender without Bianca. But one may feel tempted to seek more serious explanations for the omnipresence of domestics—and to find elucidation in the social facts of the class system. Servants, as Walpole suggests in his first preface, have less serious, less "sublime" reactions than their masters do. And they talk much more, usually less to the purpose. They respond less courageously to crisis. (Some exceptions to this generalization occur in Radcliffe's novels.) The supernatural—real and apparent alike: Radcliffe, as I have said, explained away her supernatural appearances—tests the social order. When forces beyond the natural challenge human nature, the differences that emerge between masters and servants justify social inequality by moral inequality.

The fictional roles of domestics in Gothic fiction, then, despite their role in creating suspense, also deliberately counterbalance the sense of uneasiness so carefully established. The servants' roots in the commonplace, their insistent return to the everyday, even the banality of their superstitions, remind the reader of an ordinary world that continues despite all horrors allied to an imagined other world. They talk too much, a fact linked to their comparative lack of moral discrimination and discipline. Their volubility calls attention to differences between those of high and low rank—differences redounding to the advantage of the high. (Theodore, the noble and attractive peasant in Walpole's novel, turns out to be of elevated rank by birth.) If moral superiority accompanies social superiority, it justifies the social system that creates unbridgeable gaps between the ranks. Thus the existing human order, as rendered in such novels as *The Castle of Otranto*, rests on solid logic. Within the fictional world, this order functions securely even as ghosts and skeletons and massive armor suggest disorder. The servants in this sense provide a ground of stability. Readers should not find themselves too uneasy, after all. Romance may be frustrated, the innocent may die, but the social hierarchy remains.

The servants in their talkativeness also provide, as Walpole hinted in his preface, a kind of emotional relief. Gothic fiction trafficked heavily, or attempted to, in the sublime. Not long before *The Castle of Otranto*, the young Edmund Burke had published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), articulating the eighteenth-century implications of a cloudy critical term. The sublime, he explained, was associated with the vast, the powerful, the terrible, and the obscure. A thunderstorm could be sublime, or a rugged mountain. God himself—vast, hidden, omnipotent, terrifying—epitomized sublimity. Because the sublime by definition (Burke's definition, but also the interpretations of earlier critics) aroused powerful emotion, some imaginative writers hastened to evoke it. Supernatural appearances easily lent themselves to the engendering of terror and awe, stereotypical responses to the sublime. In the dénouement of *The Castle of Otranto*, Walpole might be writing with Burke open on his lap, so systematically does he draw on the established vocabulary of sublimity as he describes the novel's final supernatural appearances: "The walls of the castle behind Manfred were thrown down with a mighty force, and the form of Alfonso, dilated to an immense magnitude, appeared in the center of the ruins. Behold in Theodore, the true heir of Alfonso! said the vision: and having pronounced those words, accompanied by a clap of thunder, it ascended solemnly towards heaven, where the clouds parting asunder, the form of saint Nicholas was seen; and receiving Alfonso's shade, they were soon wrapt from mortal eyes in a blaze of glory" (108).

But Gothic novelists often attempted to create sublime effects through character as well as through the supernatural. Manfred emerges as a rather rudimentary rendition of the sublime character, his "sublimity" inherent in his power (absolute within his realm) but also in his reticence. The obscurity characteristic of the sublime (we cannot discern the full contours of the mountain; we cannot see God) may operate within the human realm. That atmosphere of uncertainty so typical in Gothic issues partly from obscurity's operations. In *The Castle of Otranto*, the confusion and anxiety afflicting many of the characters emanate largely from Manfred's refusal to divulge what he knows. His intentions as well as his knowledge remain unrevealed. As a man of few words—many of them peremptory orders—he draws on the power of the sublime in his self-representation. Bianca, with her unstoppable flow of language, contrasts sharply with him,

offering the relief of transparency to the tension of obscurity, the relief of the humdrum to the tension of the sublime.

Like novels of sensibility, Gothic fiction not infrequently reminds its readers of the inadequacy of language to intense feeling. "Words cannot paint the horror of the princess's situation," Walpole writes (26). Readers, engaged in reading words, are yet invited to imagine "the horror" without language, as in the fiction of sensibility they are in effect urged to evoke the feelings of characters by direct recourse to their own emotional capacity. This connection to sentimental fiction is by no means accidental. Indeed, one might think of the Gothic as a direct offshoot of sensibility. In *The Castle of Otranto* and its successors, as in *The Man of Feeling*, the goal is to arouse the reader's emotion by narrating the characters' emotional experience. The painful happenings that afflict Isabella or Matilda generate painful feelings in those who encounter them on the page, arousing some version of that sympathy that makes the foundation of sensibility. Moreover, the possession of highly developed emotional capacity marks moral discrimination. Only those who feel deeply, in the logic of these novels, can judge rightly. Thus readers who find their emotions harrowed by the extravagant and often terrifying mishaps that afflict the characters may silently enjoy their affinity to the innocent and virtuous.

Yet the relation between sublimity and sensibility presents real complications. In a general sense, the sublime is associated with the passions, powerful feelings like rage, envy, and lust; sensibility draws usually on gentler and milder emotions—sympathy, above all, and what we call empathy; at its strongest, perhaps shame. Gothic novels typically attempt sublimity, yet rely heavily on sensibility. The tense relation between the two generates much of this fiction's force.

The term *Gothic*, as applied to a particular form of the novel, draws on two eighteenth-century senses of the word: "belonging to, or characteristic of, the Middle Ages" and "barbarous; rude; uncouth." Walpole did not explain his use of the term to describe his story, but his successor, Clara Reeve, did, specifying that her book, *The Old English Baron* (1778), "is the literary offspring of the Castle of Otranto" and that "it is distinguished by the appellation of a Gothic Story, being a picture of Gothic times and manners" (3). Although the time period of the events in some novels remains vague, and some actually set their action in the eighteenth century, specified times lie most often in the distant past. (To

remove the narrative further from contemporary Britain, its happenings usually occur on the Continent, especially in Italy, although France and Spain also make their appearances.) And the "sublime" characters of the novels are, by the standards of cultivated eighteenth-century English men and women, barbarous and uncouth. Sublimity as a quality of character appears to depend on *lack* of sensibility—lack of concern for the feelings of others, the concern institutionalized, as we saw in the last chapter, by the system of manners.

The character of Manfred in *The Castle of Otranto* exemplifies such lack of concern, although Manfred is not fully developed as a type of the sublime. Walpole's novel provides an outline version of the most familiar aspects of Gothic fiction that succeeded it, but the outline is by no means complete: subsequent novelists on occasion struck out in quite different directions. Even Clara Reeve, after announcing her intention to follow Walpole as model, confesses that she finds aspects of his novel silly. That is, she is inclined to laugh—as twenty-first-century readers may be too (and she knows other readers in her own time who feel the same way)—at some of the supernatural manifestations. A sword that requires a hundred men to lift it, a helmet so large that its fall forms a passageway in the vault beneath the surface it hits, the walking picture and the skeleton ghost: all these, Reeve says, "destroy the work of imagination, and, instead of attention, excite laughter" (5). Her own ghost, in *The Old English Baron*, is perfunctory. He appears only once, and only to reprehensible characters, although his groans are intermittently audible.

Writing less than fifteen years after Walpole, Reeve demonstrates a new imagining of Gothic possibilities. Perhaps more emphatically even than her alleged model, she dwells on family disorder, both hidden and manifest, and her insistence on reinforcing the class system appears to dictate many of her narrative choices. She doesn't bother with talkative servants, but she makes her protagonist a young man allegedly of peasant origin and acutely conscious of what he cannot do because he lacks the privileges of rank. Only the discovery of his high birth, which occurs well before the novel's end, allows him to pursue the path in life for which his chivalric virtue has equipped him.

That virtue provides the novel's most salient subject. Reeve does not linger on sublimity. Her stalking ghost offers a momentary appearance in the sublime mode, but her interest focuses, rather, on manifestations of

sensitivity, sympathy, and courage by her allegedly lowborn hero. *The Old English Baron* virtually functions as a conduct book for men. Like literal conduct books, it implicitly promises that those not born to aristocratic behavior can learn its rules and practice it successfully. Edmund, of course, needs no rules. His noble actions—more heroic, more compassionate, more gracious than those of his avowedly aristocratic contemporaries—occur, apparently, by virtue of his fine instincts. Such actions win him powerful patrons, wealth, and the status to which he is entitled by birth—but which, also, he has earned by highly principled behavior.

The novel exposes the conservative implications often latent in Gothic fiction. Although its subject is disorder, such fiction also expresses a corollary longing for order, which inheres in old ways and long traditions. *The Old English Baron* contains loyal, brave servants—but if they are born servants, servants they remain, and they wish to be nothing more. Members of the upper class experience the “inexpressible sensations” (126) of sensibility; members of the lower classes do not. The class hierarchy reflects and sustains a hierarchy of feeling and behavior. Order runs deeper than chaos: such is the message of all Gothic fiction. And awareness of this message reveals the importance of such fiction’s characteristic form, which circles back on itself to create a pattern of revelation more important than its pattern of action. Perhaps a better way to put the point would be to say that the pattern of action exists for the sake of revelation: what has happened in the past matters more than what happens in the present. Thus, the discovery of Edmund’s high birth and his father’s murder creates the instrumentality for restoring order. And all ghosts lie quiet once order is restored.

A more anomalous instance of Gothic is William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786), which abounds in occurrences of sublimity, most of them manifestations of supernatural malignance. Few of my generalizations about the Gothic mode apply to this perverse tale. Reeve focuses novelistic interest on virtue; Beckford concentrates instead on vice. Unlike Reeve and Walpole, he shows no interest in making his characters psychologically plausible. On the contrary, he creates monsters—a mother and a son—of immense power. The son, Vathek, is caliph of an unnamed Eastern realm. In the first paragraph, we learn of him that “when he was angry, one of his eyes became so terrible, that no person could bear to behold it; and the wretch upon whom it was fixed, instantly fell backward, and sometimes

expired” (1). And this is only the beginning. The tale continues to relate one instance after another of the caliph’s brutality and the self-absorption that generates it. His mother proves even more casually destructive than he. Their murderous activities reach such a pitch of excess that the narrative, deadpan in tone, frequently topples into a comic register.

At an early point in the story, for instance, Vathek and his mother light a fire at the top of a tower. The caliph’s citizens think that the tower is on fire and rush to his assistance, a hundred and forty “of the strongest and most resolute” successfully bursting through the doors and ascending the stairs. Carathis, the wicked mother, recommends sacrificing them. The fire and fumes overcome them as they reach the top: “It was a pity! for they beheld not the agreeable smile, with which the mutes and negresses adjusted the cord to their necks: these amiable personages rejoiced, however, no less at the scene. Never before had the ceremony of strangling been performed with so much facility. They all fell, without the least resistance or struggle: so that Vathek, in the space of a few moments, found himself surrounded by the dead bodies of the most faithful of his subjects; all which were thrown on the top of the pile” (34–35).

In the next sentence, these bodies are referred to as “carcasses.”

This scene of bloodshed is typical in its absence of struggle, its remoteness and unreality, and the uncomplicated pleasure of spectators and murderers alike. It invites the reader too to smile at its moral disjunctions—the agreeable facial expressions of mutes and negresses, the praise of the strangling as “ceremony.” Yet it provides sly reminders of other possible reactions, through allusion to the victims’ fidelity and through the jarring reference to them as carcasses, like the bodies of animals. Such diction heightens the scene’s dissonance. After the horrors of the twentieth century, of course, it is particularly difficult to read of mass slaughter—and scenes of mass slaughter abound here—without emotional response quite different from the mild amusement apparently solicited by the novel.

The original reviewers, generally approving, saw *Vathek* as a moral tale. Indeed, mother and son are punished for their evil deeds by consignment—self-consignment, really—to an elaborately described hell in which their hearts burn endlessly in their breasts and they find themselves utterly alienated from all others, including their companions in the nether regions. Yet the narrator manifestly takes pleasure in his hell as simply

one more locus of sadistic excess. Nominally, the infernal punishment of the sinners should restore order, in the familiar Gothic pattern. It can be read, however, as the reverse of restoration: as a sustaining of aesthetic and moral subversion, a continuing invitation to contemplate sadism simply as aesthetic spectacle.

Vathek is unusual among Gothic novels, possibly unique, in inviting no sympathy for the victims of “sublime” forces. As I have already suggested, it does not traffic in psychology; it does not pursue Walpole’s goal of uniting the resources of the nominally realistic novel with those of the fanciful romance. Beckford makes not the slightest gesture toward realism. His effects depend on an ironic sense of distance. He employs the general form of the Oriental tale, a familiar eighteenth-century mode, heightening it to extravagance and raising its moral stakes. The only remotely attractive figure he represents is a Peter Pan–like young boy who escapes Vathek’s malice and lives forever, forever infantile, on a cloud. Beckford implicitly challenges the reader to judge his characters but makes judgment difficult if not impossible within the novel’s terms.

Beckford’s Gothic perversities met an immediate dead end: no other novelist experimented with the same combination of Oriental tale and supernatural dread, albeit dread tinged with comedy. One other writer, Matthew Gregory Lewis (called “Monk” Lewis after the great success of his novel), provided his readers with sadistic rather than moral gratifications, publishing *The Monk* toward the century’s end (1795). I shall postpone consideration of his important fiction, though, and look first at yet another fictional experiment that briefly opened new territory for Gothic.

Sophia Lee’s *The Recess; or, A Tale of Other Times* (1783) explores imaginative possibilities in Elizabethan history. Unlike most Gothic fiction, *The Recess* does not rely on even the apparent supernatural. It does not, for the most part, locate the sublime in character. Its servants speak strictly to the point. Yet it develops the possibilities of what we might call “Gothic atmosphere” and demonstrates, without obvious models at its disposal, that the Gothic could serve serious purposes.

If Lee lacked models of “serious” Gothic, she had available to her by the final quarter of the eighteenth century many novelistic forbears working in other subgenres. *The Recess* draws on several of the modes we have investigated in previous chapters. It is in a loose sense—the sense of *Fanny Hill* or *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*—an epistolary novel,

constructed primarily as two long retrospective letters by two sisters, each writing to and for the other. Each of these letters, like some of the journal-letters of *Sidney Bidulph*, embeds short letters by others. *The Recess* relies heavily on the tradition of sensibility, constructing both its heroines as figures dominated and largely controlled by their emotional capacities. The novel follows the *Robinson Crusoe* model as a tale of adventure—adventure not consciously sought, often painful, but a primary fact of experience nonetheless, even for women of rank and wealth who would traditionally be cut off from daring action. Tracing the lives of two women from birth to death, it thus conforms to the model of fictional life history. Incorporating structures from all these subgenres, Lee succeeds in combining them under the aegis of Gothic, employing the tension of sensibility and sublimity to comment on the role of women in history.

For history is an important element in this novel, despite the fact that much of the “history” the book provides is fictional. That the action occurs in Elizabethan times serves more vital purposes than simple distancing. Lee’s story concerns imagined twin daughters of Mary, queen of Scots, by a secret marriage. Matilda and Ellinor, after childhoods passed together in ignorance of their lineage and in seclusion from the world, go different ways, separated by their choices of love object. Matilda bears a daughter by the man she loves, the earl of Leicester, whom she has married; Ellinor never achieves marriage to her beloved, the earl of Essex. Both women endure relentless suffering in multiple forms. Ellinor dies insane; Matilda is at the point of death at the novel’s end; Matilda’s daughter, her hope for regal reinstatement, is poisoned. No happy endings here. As for marriage, that conventional form of resolution: not only does it figure throughout the novel mainly as a device for achieving political ends; it does not guarantee happiness even when its participants deeply love each other.

Sublimity in this novel finds realization in history, history conceived as a concatenation of irresistible but incomprehensible forces. Obscure, terrible, all-powerful, unmindful of individuals, it possesses all the qualifications of the sublime. To be sure, there is no “it” there: “history” is an abstraction, a retrospective generalization, an unpredictable product of memory, myth, and desire. The reader, obviously, is in a different position from the characters in relation to history. Lee brilliantly exploits the difference by constantly reminding us that what we accept as truth depends on where we stand. Looking back from almost three centuries’

vantage point, even eighteenth-century readers would realize that what they see as history—and Elizabeth and James, Essex and Leicester, and many minor figures were all presences in history, all people they would have read about before—is for Matilda and Ellinor only a series of unfathomable happenings. We are all of course caught up in history; this novel insists on how little we can know what that means.

The main experience the sisters share, almost constantly, is the negative one of lacking all control. They may briefly feel that they control someone or something, but soon life forces them to realize that the feeling is illusionary. The recess of the title is an elaborate cavelike series of structures in which the little girls come to consciousness and grow to adolescence. They live with a woman whom they call “Mother,” but she tells them finally that she is not their mother. They know nothing of their parents, nothing of why they must live in such circumstances, nothing of any larger world. All children lack control, but for these girls, whose life follows an invariable daily routine and whose capacity for larger awareness is severely limited, the lack is heightened.

Eventually they escape their seclusion. Their surrogate mother dies; they accidentally encounter Leicester, in flight from would-be assassins, and shelter him in the Recess. Matilda falls instantly in love and marries him, then departs with him. The subsequent events defy summary, so numerous, so various, so confounding are they. Matilda finds herself at the mercy of forces she does not understand. She tries to operate by the well-established rules of female propriety, unfailingly loyal and submissive to her husband, but following or not following such rules appears not to have the slightest bearing on her fate. It does not matter whether she behaves well or ill. When she endeavors to calculate her advantage, her calculations seem not to matter either. Things happen at random. Leicester dies; a would-be lover—a coarse and brutal man—kidnaps her and carries her to Jamaica; she gives birth to her daughter; a slave revolt rescues her from near-rape; she spends many succeeding years in prison, along with the infant, who grows to the age of eight or nine, deprived of books but provided by her mother with moral education, before the two are released. And all this represents but one chapter in her tumultuous saga. One unforeseeable happening succeeds another. Many emanate in one way or another from Queen Elizabeth, a constant presence, on- or off-stage.

The queen is the novel’s villain, its most powerful character, dangerous because of her power and its erratic applications. Both sisters, who nominally compose the novel’s narrative through their letters, understand her in terms of their own preoccupations, as motivated by erotic impulse and vanity. They only weakly grasp national concerns, beyond the fate of their family as potential heirs to the throne. Understanding Elizabeth from their own perspectives, without sympathizing with her, they nonetheless convey the pathos of her situation as a woman alone, afraid to trust a man, not wishing to yield any power, but inexorably aging and losing both sexual and other kinds of personal force.

As this paradox of sympathetic revelation and hostile intent may suggest, *The Recess* is emphatically a female book. A large preponderance of eighteenth-century Gothic novels had female authors, and the fact is important in understanding their substance: they often focus attention on the plight of women. *The Recess* is unusual in its formal intricacy—not only multiple narrators, but multiple narrators with varying points of view on the same subjects—and it employs an immensely complicated plot. Throughout its elaborate developments, it emphasizes its concerns with the female situation. “Ah man, happy man!” Ellinor reflects; “How superior are you in the indulgence of nature! blest with scientific resources, with boldness, and an activity unknown to more persecuted woman; from your various disappointments in life ever spring forth some vigorous and blooming hope, insensibly staunching those wounds in the heart through which the vital powers of the feebler sex bleed helplessly away; and when relenting fortune grants your wishes, with unblighted powers of enjoyment you embrace the dear bought happiness; scarce conscious of the cold dew-drops your cheeks imbibe from those of her, permitted too late to participate in your fate” (213).

If such observations declare vividly the letter writer’s self-pity and prophetic sense of vulnerability, they also summarize sexual differences that the narrative stresses. These differences involve character as well as circumstance. Neither Ellinor nor anyone else in the novel reflects on the possible reasons why men prove more hopeful and more resilient than women, but the fact that males are permitted activity while “persecuted” women are doomed to confinement seems more than coincidental. Ellinor’s comments acquire additional poignancy by comparison with an earlier remark of hers, at a moment of crisis, to Lady Pembroke. “Born

for conflict," she says, "I seem only to exist by that mental action" (189). Mental action alone is customarily available to women, and "that mental action" destroys Ellinor.

Confinement and flight provide the traditional alternatives for the Gothic heroine. Lee's heroines spend much time in both situations, but their "mental action" in the condition of confinement supplies them with considerable resources for managing their flights. Bold in their imaginings, they likewise prove bold in executing them. Ellinor, despite her susceptibility to mental anguish, disguises herself as a man for one extended foray and purposefully risks life and chastity in pursuit of her lover. Matilda exhibits courage and ingenuity in desperate situations. Like other Gothic heroines, the sisters possess great powers of endurance, bearing the strain of massive uncertainty—about their own prospects and about the fates of those they love—as well as actual danger. In short, though doomed to those female destinies of confinement and flight, they never remain passive under restriction. As we first encounter them, young, mysteriously consigned to a more or less underground existence, they are already busy thinking, trying (although in vain) to make sense out of their circumstances. From the moment they accidentally encounter Leicester and scheme to rescue him, they do their best to circumvent restriction. Even when Matilda finds herself imprisoned for many years without recourse, she declines to consider herself helpless: she devotes herself to finding expedients to educate her daughter.

In other words, Lee uses plight as an arena of possibility, demonstrating the female capacity to think and act, as well as feel, within a context of proclaimed dependency and devotion. Although her heroines, as we have seen, may complain about their lot, on the whole they adapt to or manage to improve the situations in which they find themselves. As Ellinor rightly points out, they lack the opportunities available to men—but they make the most of the opportunities they have.

No one within the text appears to notice this fact, and the general failure to grasp female heroism is significant. The novel's formal structure, its pattern of interlocking letters, calls attention to the problem of point of view, most conspicuous in relation to assessment of Leicester's character. To Matilda, her lover and husband is the best of men. Ellinor has her doubts. She sees Leicester as engaged in political calculations, untrustworthy. Until his untimely death, Leicester behaves impeccably,

as far as we are told, to Matilda, but little evidence emerges about his motives or purposes. The opposed understandings of his nature simply exist side by side. Readers can take their choice, or can conclude that they lack evidence for evaluation. In any case, they have been forced to contemplate the possibility of radically opposed interpretations.

This matter of point of view returns us to the question of history. History as lived, the novel tells us, is confusion and incomprehensibility. If we have no evidence for Leicester's motives and purposes, neither do we know the intents of other actors in the drama. But we know their names, many of them, before we read the novel; and if we are readers of history, we have previously encountered interpretations of them. To an eighteenth-century audience, it would have been apparent that Lee drew heavily on popular history books of the period. If she invented a great deal in her fiction, she also recorded behavior and events that had been set down—in effect codified—by others.

Turning these declared facts into fictions, she invests them with mystery by interpreting and reinterpreting them as lived experience. Her intricate, moving narrative is calculated to arouse wonder and awe, to make one feel how momentous the course of a woman's life can turn out to be.

No subsequent eighteenth-century novelist followed her lead. Instead, the Gothic novel progressed along the course outlined for it by Walpole, although not without many elaborations and variations. *The Monk* marked its most lurid eighteenth-century development. Lewis, reacting to Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which will be discussed later in the chapter, differed from Radcliffe in relying heavily on the supernatural, and he employed sex as well as heightened violence as fictional substance. Like Walpole, he flirted with incest. Instead of a father inadvertently murdering his daughter, he provides a son accidentally murdering his mother. Like Beckford, he multiplies violent episodes to a degree that may make one suspect a sadistic sensibility. Like all his Gothic predecessors, he incorporates vignettes of more tender, more orthodox eighteenth-century sensibility. His plotting allows room for digression: he adds Gothic subplots to his primary story of a corrupted monk.

The monk's corruption comes about by supernatural means, but neither he nor the reader knows this important fact until the end. At the novel's opening, Ambrosio, admired and revered by all, preaches to enormous congregations and leaves his monastery only to preach. Within the

monastery, he finds himself increasingly fascinated by a young novice who is both physically attractive and devoted to him. The novice, it develops, is in fact a woman, whose face duplicates that of a painted Madonna that also fascinates Ambrosio. She seduces him physically, then leads him to responsibility for ever greater horrors, including rape and murder. It turns out at last that she is not a woman but a demon, dedicated from the outset to his destruction. That destruction duly occurs in physical as well as moral terms: after Ambrosio sells his soul to a devil, the monster seizes him and drops him from "a dreadful height" over cliffs and precipices to an agonizing and prolonged death.

At the novel's opening, Ambrosio appears as a sublime figure. Not yet corrupted, he has become legendary for his piety and severity. All of Madrid flocks to hear his weekly sermon at the cathedral. "There was a certain severity in his look and manner that inspired universal awe, and few could sustain the glance of his eye, at once fiery and penetrating" (20). If his ocular powers remind us of Vathek, he emerges as a less arbitrary, therefore more significant, presence. When he begins preaching, "his voice, at once distinct and deep, was fraught with all the terrors of the tempest. . . . Every hearer looked back upon his past offences, and trembled: the thunder seemed to roll, whose bolt was destined to crush him, and the abyss of eternal destruction to open before his feet!" (20–21). The tempest, thunder, lightning, hell: these signs of power, terror, and mystery associate themselves with the charismatic monk and declare his quasi-divine force.

The reader acquires an initial impression of Ambrosio partly from the perspective of Antonia, young, lovely, and innocent, ready, even eager, to be awed. In other words, the declaration of "sublimity" depends on an outside observer. The novelist who wishes to evoke the human sublime may not choose to give the sublime character much in the way of psychology, for introspection might dispel mystery and terror, those indispensable characteristics of the sublime. Lewis offers no subtle or exhaustive exploration of Ambrosio's mind, yet he brilliantly deconstructs the sublimity he evokes. The narrative focuses on a limited register of the monk's thoughts and feelings as he succumbs to his seductress, then finds himself involved in increasingly vile behavior. Lewis thus suggests the inherent fallacy of assigning any human being larger than lifesize stature.

In *The Monk*, the terror that Gothic novelists had systematically tried

to evoke becomes converted into horror: the horror of an old woman strangled; of an imprisoned mother clutching the corpse of her infant, which crawls with worms; of a woman trampled into mush by an enraged mob. The spurious grandeur of the diabolical, like Ambrosio's spurious moral magnitude, not only yields destruction; it generates sordid misery.

Sexuality is tainted: an effort to elope leaves the suitor sharing a carriage with the ghost of a nun, while his beloved ends up chained in the dungeon of a convent. Ambrosio lusts after Antonia and therefore rapes and murders her. The satiating gratification of lust generates only dissatisfaction. Indeed, dissatisfaction marks all Ambrosio's efforts. Although his self-seeking and malignant intentions prevent his ever becoming a sympathetic character, the reader is yet compelled to realize the pain he creates for himself by his efforts to fulfill his desires.

Lewis's novel gradually reveals a strong and rather unexpected sentimental strain. The sentimental note emerges mainly in the sympathy invoked for Ambrosio's various female victims: innocent Antonia, her canny and loving mother, and especially Agnes, the most vivid sufferer from clerical tyranny. Through Agnes, in particular, Lewis explicitly thematizes the tension between sublimity and sensibility.

Agnes, Raymond's beloved, has been consigned to a convent against her will. Pregnant with Raymond's child, although not yet married, she becomes the object of the prioress's wrath because of her sexual lapse. That prioress, not unlike Ambrosio, concerns herself mainly with her reputation; she worries, or says she worries, lest lack of severity disgrace her in the eyes of "Madrid's idol, . . . the very man on whom I most wanted to impress an idea of the strictness of my discipline" (199). That idol, of course, is Ambrosio, who, himself recently initiated into the joys of sex, feels inclined toward leniency for Agnes. Matilda, his devilish paramour, urges him instead to redouble his appearance of austerity, lest anyone suspect his own deviation from rectitude. As for Agnes, "she is unworthy to enjoy love's pleasures, who has not wit enough to conceal them" (199).

Ambrosio follows Matilda's advice, recognizing its perspicacity. But he is shocked by her "insensibility." Pity, he muses, "is a sentiment so natural, so appropriate to the female character, that it is scarcely a merit for a woman to possess it, but to be without it is a grievous crime" (200). He himself feels sincere pity for Agnes, but he resolutely suppresses it. He preserves the appearances of sanctity and severity that have contributed

to his high reputation; although he lusts after the women who confess to him, none of them suspects the fact.

Sublimity, as *The Monk* makes increasingly clear, is entirely a matter of appearance, although qualities of character contribute to appearance's successful construction. Such construction, in Ambrosio's case, depends partly on the suppression of pity, the denial of sensibility. Even after he rapes Antonia, the monk feels active pity for her; yet his concern for his own reputation proves stronger than any impulse toward compassion. Lewis arranges his narrative to emphasize that the monk's religious education has encouraged the nullification of many virtues—compassion and “noble frankness” are specified—and the “narrowing” of Ambrosio's native sentiments for the sake of his grand self-representation. The disjunction between real and apparent virtue does not amount to hypocrisy until the liaison with Matilda brings the monk to consciousness of his own base impulses, but the church has deliberately encouraged the potential for hypocrisy.

The most unambiguously sublime figure in this novel is the fiend who lures and dashes Ambrosio to his destruction. He comes attended with an extravagant paraphernalia of thunder, lightning, and whirlwinds, his form enveloped in darkness, his hair composed of living snakes, his “enormous sable wings” images of terror. “Fury glared in his eyes, which might have struck the bravest heart with terror” (369). This elaborately described presence in effect solidifies the book's association between sublimity and evil. Sensibility, the virtue denied by sublimity, operates on a human scale; sublimity claims more. Lewis's novel attempts to have it both ways: on the one hand, it repeatedly invites the reader to sympathetic response; on the other, it offers the titillation—the factitious terror—of the sublime.

For some readers, *The Monk* generates a kind of moral uneasiness comparable to that created by *Vathek*. Here, too, one may suspect rather too much pleasure in lovingly detailed sadism. If Lewis invites sympathy for Ambrosio's female victims, his lavish accounts of their suffering (particularly Agnes's agony during and after her infant's death and Antonia's brutal and prolonged torment in the catacombs of the nunnery) suggests an almost pornographic delight in the spectacle of male-inflicted anguish. For all its power—indeed, because of its power—*The Monk* demonstrates the moral ambiguity often implicit in the project of Gothic.

Ann Radcliffe, probably the most popular Gothic novelist of the late

eighteenth century, appears to have felt conscious of the danger in such ambiguity. Perhaps her most compelling novel, *The Italian* (1796), offers a deliberate rewriting of *The Monk*. Radcliffe retains many elements of Lewis's work, including the opening scene in a cathedral where a young man sees for the first time the beautiful woman to whom he will devote himself. Here too we find the monk famed for austerity and virtue and discover the discrepancy between his apparent and actual nature. Here too are hints of unnatural family relations. The Inquisition becomes a powerful presence in Radcliffe's novel, as at the conclusion of Lewis's. The text supplies a proud and wicked prioress, as well as a nunnery equipped with dungeons and with the threat of perpetual imprisonment. But no actual murder occurs—at any rate, no murder of the virtuous characters during the time of the novel's action—and certainly no incest, nor are there literal supernatural interventions, despite many appearances that encourage characters and readers to believe in supernatural presences.

Radcliffe's redaction of her famous predecessor makes the polemical point that suggestion can carry more power than description. By her heavy reliance on a rhetoric of suggestion, Radcliffe staked out new ground for the Gothic. She also accorded the relation of sublimity and sensibility a conspicuous place in her narrative, using indirect means here too to make a significant point.

Like all Radcliffe's heroines, Ellena displays a large quotient of sensibility. She reacts with feeling to every small event; she perhaps exceeds all other Gothic heroines in her frequent outbursts of anxiety; she is drawn by sympathy especially to other women. Her lover, Vivaldi, at least equals her in his subservience to the impulses of sensibility. Anxiety of Ellena's sort does not mark him (although he proves subject to extraordinarily ready doubt about whether his beloved really loves him back), but he shows great capacity for sympathetic identification, and his most conspicuous characteristic is a labile imagination, ready to conjure up false explanations and, in particular, to accept temporarily inexplicable appearances as the product of supernatural forces. As more unmixed novels of sensibility consistently demonstrate, imagination and sensibility go hand in hand since only imaginative capacity enables the kind of emotional identification essential to the response of sensibility.

Here as in Lewis's fiction, sublimity characterizes evil rather than good characters. The monk Schedoni, extraordinarily tall, impenetrable,

and severe, epitomizes the erotically tinged but essentially malignant figures who appear in all Radcliffe's fiction. He has the aspect of the sublime; Vivaldi does not. At the novel's conclusion, Schedoni, inevitably, dies, unflinching and unrevealing to the last. (In this respect he deviates sharply from Ambrosio, who pledges himself to the devil in a paroxysm of fear and proves a craven figure at the end.) Vivaldi and Ellena marry, but not before Vivaldi has been chastised for his imagination. Schedoni explains that he has taken advantage of the young man's "prevailing weakness" for his own purposes. That weakness, he elucidates, is "a susceptibility which renders you especially liable to superstition." "The ardour of your imagination," he adds, "was apparent, and what ardent imagination ever was contented to trust to plain reasoning, or to the evidence of the senses?" (397).

Both Vivaldi and Ellena, however, have a tougher side, which exists not in opposition to but in consequential relation with their ready sensibility. Like Sophia Lee's heroines, Ellena endures adversity not merely with stoicism but with active resistance. She uses her wits to fathom and foil her enemies. Thus, confined in an isolated house, alone with a murderous man, she figures out that he plans to poison her and refrains from drinking the milk he supplies. At the mercy of the wicked prioress, who offers her the choice of instant marriage (to a man she has never seen) or immediate consecration as a nun, she repeatedly and determinedly refuses either. Vivaldi likewise resists, insisting on his own innocence in the face of the Inquisition's manipulation and accusation and preserving his capacity for sympathy even in a tormented situation that might excuse self-absorption.

The relation between the capability to resist and to sympathize is never spelled out. It becomes apparent partly by means of Radcliffe's invocations of the natural world. One can easily mock the set pieces of mountain grandeur or pastoral beauty, clearly indebted as they are to eighteenth-century paintings (Radcliffe never went to the Continent, although she locates the action of her novels in France and Italy), but those set pieces serve important purposes. They spell out in visual and psychological terms the contrast between the sublime and the beautiful and suggest the opposed forms of power the two concepts embody.

Eighteenth-century painters, like poets and novelists, had utilized the aesthetic possibilities of Burke's key terms. Radcliffe's reliance on paintings, therefore, would have reinforced her tendency to rely on aesthetic

dichotomies. Each of her novels employs oppositions between "sublime" and "beautiful" natural scenes that underline the related human contrasts. The technique is particularly conspicuous in *The Italian*, in which the heroine, abducted, taken on a long carriage trip through the Alps, then confined in an Italian nunnery, gains both comfort and courage from the contemplation of sublime landscape, which calls to her mind the power of God—power that can, she realizes, overthrow the tyrants who keep her captive. Looking out from a turret window at the mountain landscape, Ellena affirms in herself the strength of resistance. She possesses the capacity, the narrator explains, to have her mind "highly elevated . . . by scenes of nature. . . . Hither she could come, and her soul, refreshed by the views [the turret] afforded, would acquire strength to bear her, with equanimity, thro' the persecutions that might await her" (90). Women, in Burke's figuration, have nothing to do with the sublime. Radcliffe manages, without compromising her protagonist's "femininity" (softness, fearfulness, concern with propriety, yearning for relationship), to connect Ellena with the sublime by allowing her to appropriate the internal power it connotes.

The beautiful, in this novel, associates itself often with the domestic—at the level both of scenery and of psychology. "How sweetly the banks and undulating plains repose at the feet of the mountains," Ellena observes; "what an image of beauty and elegance they oppose to the awful grandeur that overlooks and guards them!" (158). She goes on to specify images of cultivation and control in those plains. In the novel's final pages, after Ellena and Vivaldi have married and returned to Ellena's paternal estate, Radcliffe allows herself detailed description of the natural scene, with stress on the blooming flowers it contains, to carry the message that the two young people, who have been agitated victims of the human sublimity embodied in Schedoni, now can repose in the beautiful.

If Ellena has an affinity for the sublime, she also manifests a stereotypically female desire for dependency. Her sustained resistance to the terrifying Schedoni draws on that dependency: she appeals to him as "Father" (he is, after all, a monk), and after she believes him to be identified as her literal father, she insistently dramatizes her need for him. Such tactics do not notably soften Schedoni, although they occasionally appear to disturb him. They help define Ellena as belonging to the realm of "beauty" herself, despite her responsiveness to the sublime.

With her emphasis on the capacity for responsiveness in her male and female protagonist alike, Radcliffe in effect glorifies the feminine “beautiful” in character, even as she delineates one of the most effective sublime characters of any eighteenth-century Gothic novel. Unlike most of his “sublime” predecessors in Gothic fiction, Schedoni is assigned more than a rudimentary emotional life. He possesses recurrently explored interior experience as well as an impressive exterior. The narrator investigates his motivation and the nature and causes of his self-construction as amoral plotter, focusing frequently on his scorn for those who allow conscience or morality to impede them. A towering figure physically, he also towers as an imaginative presence, partly because of his ambiguous role in Ellena’s family. Implicitly commenting on Lewis’s Ambrosio, he suggests Radcliffe’s conviction that family dramas hold more power than do incursions of the supernatural.

Walpole, as we have seen, began the Gothic genre with a tale of family disorder, and his successors followed his cue. Not until Radcliffe, however, did a Gothic novelist perceive the possibility of making hidden intricacies of family life the source of all important disturbance in a narrative. The ambiguity of Ellena’s parentage turns out to create much of the suspense in *The Italian*—not because the girl does *not* know who her father is, but because she thinks she *does*. The ostensible revelation of paternity teases the reader with a natural order that feels like disorder, setting up a disturbance that is not alleviated until the novel’s end.

Such a novel as *The Italian* implicitly comments on the well-established and perhaps unduly facile convention of eighteenth-century fiction that has sons in particular discover their true parentage and thus solve all their problems. From Tom Jones to Humphry Clinker (and beyond), fictional heroes, after many vicissitudes, discover that social stability and financial security after all belong to them by the generosity of parents, even parents who have fathered them illegitimately. Radcliffe suggests that the discovery of a father may only intensify a child’s difficulties. Moreover, she ponders the possibilities of jealousy, rivalry, and other family tensions extending far beyond the parent-child dyad. In *The Italian* both Ellena’s family and her lover’s create difficulties. Vivaldi’s mother, driven by family ambition as well as, the text hints, even darker motives, plots with Schedoni to effect Ellena’s murder; defeminized (Schedoni taunts her for thinking like a woman), she is finally virtually dehumanized.

Radcliffe’s novels characteristically explore versions of the family map in order to create the mystery and horror that mark the Gothic mode. Her refusal to allow supernatural explanations of even the most startling phenomena underlines her insistence that natural accounts offer not only more plausible but more compelling principles of exegesis—principles likely to strike a chord in the reader. To investigate one more case in point, we might contemplate *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), perhaps her best-known novel, partly because of its lavish displays of apparently otherworldly manifestations, which are ultimately explained away.

The immense, sprawling story, more than six times the length of Walpole’s, focuses on the vicissitudes of a young woman named Emily. Orphaned—like most Gothic heroines—early in the narrative, Emily finds herself under the guardianship of a disagreeable aunt who marries a powerful, brooding Italian nobleman named Montoni, possessor of the castle of Udolpho in the Appenines, to which he takes, and where he persecutes, the two women. Montoni’s only interest, the text tells us explicitly, is power. His threats when the young woman dares to cross him claim the unimaginable magnitude of his power. He cannot forgive the slightest defiance, nor can he be moved by any appeal to sympathy, an emotion that he fails to comprehend. Emily fears and dislikes him, yet he emerges as a far more compelling figure than, for example, his henchman Morano, whom Montoni intends as Emily’s husband.

Montoni is consistently associated with the passions: “His soul was little susceptible of light pleasures. He delighted in the energies of the passions; the difficulties and tempests of life, which wreck the happiness of others, roused and strengthened all the powers of his mind, and offered him the highest enjoyments, of which his nature was capable. Without some object of strong interest, life was to him little more than a sleep” (182). This characterization evokes the ambivalence typically marking Radcliffe’s accounts of “sublime” men. On the one hand, Montoni delights in “energies”—an important positive term in this period—and cultivates powers of mind, while repudiating merely “light pleasures.” On the other, the phrase “of which his nature was capable” implies reservations about that nature: other natures would have higher capabilities. And this passage immediately precedes the revelation that Montoni spends much of his time gambling: such is the most immediate “object of strong interest.” A powerful figure, then, but one who misuses his capacities; a man

associated with the “tempests of life,” the tempest being a conventional figure for the sublime; a man to be feared, but also, perhaps, to be reluctantly admired. Such contradictory responses are constantly solicited for Montoni, as also for Schedoni, whose gigantic presence invites awe even for his physical nature and whose tumultuous internal conflicts help to make him commanding.

Emily, in contrast, is by instinct all sensibility, a fact that causes her parents worry. After her mother’s death, and again when his own death impends, her father elaborately warns her about the importance of strengthening her mind against the potential ravages of feeling. Happiness, he explains, “arises in a state of peace, not of tumult.” (Montoni, in other words, will never find it: he prefers satisfactions far removed from happiness. Emily, though, wants and finally achieves happiness.) “It is,” Emily’s father continues, “of a temperate and uniform nature, and can no more exist in a heart, that is continually alive to minute circumstances, than in one that is dead to feeling. You see, my dear, that, though I would guard you against the dangers of sensibility, I am not an advocate for apathy” (80).

Emily remembers this advice, and other sequences like it, repeatedly during her harrowing ordeal at Udolpho and after her escape from the castle. By remembering it, she indeed proves able to fortify her mind. She behaves with strength, courage, and consistency, in these respects outdoing her lover, Valancourt, whose own great sensibility helps make him susceptible to corruption. The narrator waxes rhapsodic as she reports the final great happiness of the young couple, restored “to the beloved landscapes of their native country,—to the securest felicity of this life, that of aspiring to moral and labouring for intellectual improvement—to the pleasures of enlightened society, and to the exercise of . . . benevolence” (672). With the pleasures of society and of benevolence, the pair has achieved the opportunity to make the best possible use of controlled sensibility. Montoni, off-stage, is executed.

For purposes of plot, obviously, Emily and Montoni need each other: persecutor and persecuted, tyrant and resister. But their mutual dependence goes beyond plot. Burke’s exposition of the sublime and the beautiful makes the sublime essentially masculine in its nature, associated with power, terror, and obscurity; the beautiful is feminine, associated with gentleness, openness, and soft curves. Although the two qualities exist independently of each other, Burke makes it clear that human aesthetic

desires demand both, the “gentleness” of the beautiful a necessary relief from the terror of the sublime. The design of Radcliffe’s novels—and, perhaps less self-consciously, of much other Gothic fiction—depends on constructing ways of implicating the two forms of power.

Hence the great importance of sensibility as a component of Gothic characterization. Even in works like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, in which admirable characters deplore sensibility’s power, the presence of this emotional capacity not only differentiates the survivors from the victims of treachery, terror, or justice. It also provides a sign of individuality. Although sensibility’s responses may seem stereotypical to postmodern readers, they declare the interior life, the personal responses of separate beings. Emily and Valancourt belong together partly—perhaps mainly—because both possess the same kind of emotional capability, which differentiates them from such as Montoni and the woman he marries. Sensibility guarantees suffering—guarantees, indeed, suffering often in apparent excess of its causes—but it also guarantees human superiority. Those who can live in a Gothic world, a world marked by the eruption of unanticipated horrors, while still maintaining their emotional responsiveness deserve to survive and *will* survive: every Gothic plot says so.

Not even the considerable variety of fictional arrangements already discussed in this chapter exhausts the eighteenth-century possibilities of Gothic. A final subspecies of Gothic spins variations on domestic themes, focusing attention on heroines who, unlike Radcliffe’s, essentially never leave home. Outstanding examples of the mode include Charlotte Smith’s *The Old Manor House* (1793) and Eliza Fenwick’s *Secresy; or, The Ruin on the Rock* (1795). Both typify the domestic Gothic in eschewing the supernatural in order to emphasize the more routine horrors of families out of joint. Both adapt the conventional Gothic situation of an orphaned girl confined to a sinister castle (the “old manor house,” an ancient mansion, is a castle in all but name), although the presiding tyrant in Charlotte Smith’s novel is a woman rather than a man. Both writers, unlike Radcliffe, make overt reference to social and political actualities. In *The Old Manor House*, the heroine’s beloved fights as a British soldier in the American Revolution, explicitly raising questions about a situation in which rich old men bring about conflict and send poor young men to die in it. *Secresy* concerns itself centrally with prevailing attitudes toward women and their proper social functioning.

Both novels adapt the familiar Gothic structure to new ends. The heroine remains in vaguely sinister confinement, where a tyrant appears to hold all the power. Her lover has freedom to wander the world. (In *The Old Manor House*, however, the lover leaves reluctantly and endures hardship in his “freedom.” In *Secresy*, the lover proves himself reprehensible—although the confined girl remains unaware of this fact—when he encounters the temptations of “the world.”) The tyrant’s power is ultimately overcome and family secrets are revealed.

The “new ends” arguably possess greater importance than the Gothic machinery that effects them. *Secresy*, in particular, with its intricate plot and tragic resolution, demonstrates intense social concerns and an enlarged sense of human relations. It translates the idea of the sublime into a new register. Its confined heroine, Sibella, conforms in few respects to the female figure characteristic of Gothic. Her guardian uncle, who believes that women require no education, should not cultivate reason, and need learn only to submit, has incarcerated her in his castle, attended by two uncommunicative servants (one of whom is literally deaf and dumb). She can roam the grounds, which are secured by a moat, but she can go no farther. Although her situation affords her little physical freedom, she powerfully asserts her mental liberty. She receives an “accidental” education, profiting from the lessons of the boy who for some years shares her captivity, and she makes the most of it. But Sibella is more significantly a child of nature, unafraid of storm or darkness, figuring life out for herself. Her companion, Clement, whom she comes to love, understands from early childhood the uses of slyness and concealment. Sibella, in contrast, espouses openness. She knows nothing of the world’s laws and customs, her unworldliness the source of her strength and weakness.

Despite her self-cultivated rationality, Sibella upholds absolutely the law of feeling. Her devotion to an adventitious female friend (Caroline Ashburn sees her only once before initiating an epistolary relationship) matches her commitment to Clement. Caroline shares Sibella’s lofty ideals but accompanies them with worldly experience. She acts as mentor both to Sibella and to the virtuous but misguided Arthur Murden, who loves Sibella from afar. Even Caroline’s best efforts, however, cannot avert the disasters that befall Sibella and Arthur, ending their lives and allowing the corrupt Clement to survive, lovelessly married to Caroline’s wealthy mother.

The most crucial single event in the novel’s action is the contrasting “marriage” of Sibella and Clement. Sibella, in her innocence, believes that the sexual enactment of her love constitutes marriage. She knows nothing of the social forms customarily entailed in such physical commitment. At Clement’s insistence, they keep their union secret. From this secrecy, as well as from the novel’s many other concealments, tragedy ensues.

The plot holds many further complexities, but this much summary will indicate its ideological drive. Most Gothic fiction had supported a conservative agenda, enacting the restoration of hierarchical social order. *Secresy* restores no order. Its ending offers only the ambiguous hope of a single enlightened individual, Caroline, continuing to struggle in personal ways for convictions that no one around her shares. The novel does not endorse the class system: the characters within it who prove proudest of their lineage and rank are frivolous or malignantly misguided. The book reveals vivid consciousness of economic power and inequality, implicit condemnation of imperialist exploitation, fierce reprehension of social frivolity and of the social degradation of women. Such aspects of *Secresy* might suggest a political thrust, but its political recommendations remain latent. Instead of imagining political remedies for the evils she deplors, Fenwick evokes the possibility of individual enlightenment and action. She apparently sees that possibility as embodied mainly in women.

The two central female characters, Sibella and Caroline, possess striking “energy” and “vigor,” two words insistently recurrent throughout the text. The male characters appear passive, ineffectual, or both. Arthur engages in an elaborate charade involving various disguises and the exploitation of secret passages, but his maneuvers only enable him to see Sibella from time to time and occasionally to exchange a few words with her. Almost dead himself (he has contracted a fatal disease from hanging about in dank caves), he succeeds in rescuing Sibella from her immurement, only to lose track of her at an inn where they stop. Clement has no purpose in life beyond effecting his own pleasure. He follows always the path of least resistance. Sibella’s cruel uncle, Valmont, makes elaborate plans and plots—all of which come to naught. The impecunious young Lord Filmar, another elaborate plotter, finds his plots foiled and his economic survival dependent on Sibella’s posthumous bounty. No man among the novel’s characters achieves much of anything.

To be sure, no woman achieves much either, but the two admirable

women embody the principles of energy and openness that this fiction espouses as its only remote hope. In choosing to adapt the Gothic mode to her purposes, Fenwick committed herself to a story of individuals in distress. Her individuals, at least the noble females, function admirably but futilely. They give not the slightest credence to supernatural appearances, which in this narrative are altogether factitious, manufactured by Arthur Murden. Yet Sibella, at any rate, succumbs to the “something wrong” that even the false supernatural suggests. In this instance, the indicated discontents are ideological as well as familial, but the Gothic framework does not encourage ideological resolution. Fenwick’s rhetoric of suggestion, unlike Radcliffe’s, conveys social unease rather than stimulates terror.

Not even the strongest individual can resolve social discontents. Fenwick evokes a new version of the sublime, associated not with powerful men but with the lofty words of women. “I feel within the vivifying principle of intellectual life,” Sibella declares. “My expanding faculties are nurtured by the passing hours! and want but the beams of instruction, to ripen into power and energy” (74). Her claim of potential power becomes more concrete. When Arthur suggests the possibility of secret escape, Sibella announces, “Did I think it right to go, I should go openly. Then might Mr. Valmont try his opposing strength. But he would find, I could leap, swim, or dive; and that moats and walls are feeble barriers to a determined will” (104).

This is sublimity of the mind, and only of the mind. In the event, Sibella indeed dives into the moat—to be ignominiously removed from it by Valmont’s servants. Her power inheres solely in her imagining of it, which endures to the verge of death. Caroline likewise adopts an elevated tone, claiming aspirations that affect others. She writes to Murden, “I would first subdue the fermentation of your senses, teach you to esteem Sibella’s worth, pity her errors, and love her with infinite sincerity, but not so as to absorb your active virtues, to transform you from a man into a baby.—You are but two beings in the great brotherhood of mankind. . . . You must be dependent for your blessings on the great mass of mankind, as they in part also depend on you” (285). Caroline’s grand visions, however, prove no more efficacious than Sibella’s. The failure of all significant efforts by the two noble females creates a strong undertone of despair in Fenwick’s novel. Women, who seem the only hope for society, can do

nothing. Caroline survives, her will intact, but her actual power dubious. She remains quite alone.

Secresy marks the limits of the Gothic mode, dimly suggesting a desire to achieve something more than, different from, what the form allows. Its rich emotional texture, its subtle characterization, its economic awareness, and its tense plot mark its sophistication as a piece of fiction, and it is unquestionably a good read. In conjunction with the other novels this chapter has treated, it emphasizes the varied tonal and substantive resources of Gothic conventions. Fictional playfulness, sadistic fantasy, historical romance, investigation of the sublime or of the situation of women—the Gothic could develop all these and more. It did so by means of deceptively simple structures, which often appear to duplicate the episodic arrangements of adventure novels.

A deep logic in fact governs the configurations of Gothic fiction. The episodes that rapidly succeed one another are linked by a slow pattern of revelation that supports the action of *knowing* controlling most Gothic novels. Mystery envelops both past and present. It is rarely clear why things happen in the present or what has happened in the past, but the workings of the plot ultimately reveal reasons and facts to elucidate motives and events alike. The reader duplicates the characters’ processes of knowing, achieving clarity only toward the novel’s end. This advent of clarity corresponds to the restoration of order customarily signaled by marriage.

Gothic novels thus conveyed concerns more serious than generating some version of “terror” in their readers. Their assertion of logic in the face of confusion perhaps expressed the longings of a population facing great political confusion, but they could not fulfill all the needs of end-of-the-century novelists and their readers. The hints of *Secresy* would come to fruition in a new politicized fiction, the subject of the next chapter.