

Women's Agency in Gothic Literature

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this thesis is to argue for and analyze the progression of women's agency in the first century of Gothic literature. Starting with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), there are stirrings of women's agency as female protagonists begin to challenge male authority and attempt to escape the entrapment of the patriarchal hierarchy. As we move from *Otranto* to Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), we can see the progression of women's agency as the heroine acquires social, financial, and romantic control through her strong moral disposition. Finally, a new level of agency appears in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), as the protagonist stands up to male authority and openly declares the idea that women should be treated equally with men. Women's agency continues to evolve in Gothic works of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as in Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), even if some limitations are still present. These works grant women more independent agency than ever before, but they also suggest that there are still constraints, even in the twenty-first century.

The Gothic novel is a complex genre that confronts audiences with a combination of traditional and modern values, dichotomies and paradigms that reflect and induce common cultural fears. It is a genre that serves as a gateway to the social unconscious as it exposes societal taboos and deep, unresolved fears through the use of the hyperbolic and sometimes the supernatural. After the publication of *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* by Horace Walpole in 1764, specific gothic themes and tropes, such as monstrous creatures and the haunting of the middle class by the aristocracy, begin to develop as regular patterns in fiction and theatre. Authors and readers have in these ways become enticed by the Gothic's "regressive and progressive nature" as it has dealt with the social unconscious of modern humanity and the extreme contradictions that have combined aristocratic and middle class ideologies (Hogle 7). At the beginning of its popularity, the Gothic novel appealed to the middle class, as it explicitly advanced modern concepts and criticized traditional values while still being haunted by the latter. It allowed readers to experience fear without actually being in the direct presence of danger and to explore the consequences of certain themes such as man tampering with nature, fears about sexuality, or the rise of technology. Within all of this, one of the most common and recurring topics in Gothic literature has been the characterization and role of women. Female writers and readers especially have become drawn to the creation and expression of Gothic works because the genre's Janus-faced nature (looking backwards and forwards) has exposed shared hardships, societal expectations, and problems of submission that beset women in Western culture. "[This] rise and popularity of Gothic fiction by women from this period onward [also] perhaps owed something to the fact that the fantastic allowed women writers and readers to go beyond a reality that was both oppressive and depressing" (Hogle 57). Female authors and readers of Gothic fiction have consequently immersed themselves in worlds that challenge the

power of the patriarchal hierarchy and offer hope to female protagonists who endure traditional domestic functions, yet also fulfill the fantasized role of the modern heroine as having more freedom and power. The Gothic genre therefore appeals to women because it has introduced some “escape from powerlessness, from meaninglessness, [and] from lack of identity” (Fleenor 67).

Gothic works and their fictitious heroines have even presented a new standard of the “feminine ideal” and intimated a new social framework that has encouraged women to question their current identity and social position in society. The resulting subgenre, the Female Gothic, has come to involve Gothic texts that elaborate on the female experience. The female protagonists in these texts are pressured to follow social norms and haunting traditions to become obedient wives, dedicated mothers, and slaves to male authority. Despite these traditional expectations, however, the heroines also reveal characteristics of independence and power, and in the process they gain a level of self-determination that allows them to exercise personal agency. I propose to examine three Gothic texts produced in different time periods: *The Castle of Otranto* by Walpole, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe (1794), and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë (1847). Because these culturally famous and influential Gothic texts appear at different points in time and because cultural senses of women have changed over that span of several decades, I want to show in these works how women’s agency changes and progresses across the first century of Gothic literature. Gradually, as these works progress from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, Gothic female protagonists challenge the patriarchal hierarchy, balance traditional and modern values, and establish a new identity by gaining financial, romantic, and social control in their daily lives. Such characters and fiction thereby set the stage for even greater states in female agency in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The problem of women's agency in the Gothic tale first appears in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which establishes the pattern of women trapped in a patriarchal hierarchy, all by way of the characters Hippolita, Isabella, and Matilda. The initial audiences of *The Castle of Otranto*, which ranged from aristocratic to middle class, often shared the traditional belief in maintaining a patriarchal society through arranged marriages in order to preserve kinship, power, and property. As Lawrence Stone points out, "[The] authoritarian control by parents over the marriages of their children inevitably lasted longest in the richest and most aristocratic circles, where the property, power and status stakes were highest" (Stone 184). However, Horace Walpole challenges this cultural norm by including moments or images that represent the ideas of the rising middle class overpowering the assumptions of the older aristocracy. At the beginning of *Otranto*, the female protagonists are portrayed as traditional women who are submissive to male authority, valued for their fertility, and exchangeable like property. Hippolita, the wife of Prince Manfred, is first introduced to the reader before her son's wedding as "an amiable lady, [who] did sometimes venture to represent the danger of marrying their only son so early, considering his great youth, and greater infirmities; but she never received any other answer than reflections on her own sterility, who had given him but one heir" (Walpole 73). Immediately, Hippolita's expected feminine role as a fruitful mother is established with the emphasis on her sterility. She is explicitly criticized for having one sickly son who could jeopardize the persistence of her husband's reign at his untimely death. Her entrapment in her role as a devoted, fertile wife and mother in this patriarchal world continues even after the unexpected death of her son, Conrad. Shaken by his son's death, Prince Manfred disdains Hippolita because she can no longer fulfill her expected role as a woman and produce an heir. Manfred is unsympathetic to his wife's obedience and adoration and decides to divorce Hippolita

and marry his late son's bride-to-be, Isabella, in order to ensure the reign of his line: "I tell you, said Manfred imperiously; Hippolita is no longer my wife; I divorce her from this hour. Too long has she cursed me by her unfruitfulness: my fate depends on having sons, - and this night I trust will give a new date to my hopes" (Walpole 80).

Manfred, in other words, is more concerned with continuing the power of the patriarchy than with the welfare of the women involved. His command is law, and throughout the entire story he strives to secure his reign and control of the castle of Otranto. His patriarchal authority is also apparent when he demands Isabella's presence, and "she obeyed trembling" (Walpole 79). As with Hippolita, Isabella mostly reflects the role of a traditional, obedient woman because she is initially submissive to Manfred's demand. Anxious because of the death of his only son, Manfred is desperate to produce an heir and commands Isabella to be his wife. He proclaims, "Instead of a sickly boy, you shall have a husband in the prime of his age, who will know how to value your beauties, and who may expect a numerous offspring" (Walpole 80). This specific demand reveals the division between men and women in the cultural context of the novel. Men solely value women's physical attributes, such as their appearance and ability to bear children. The women are culturally expected to serve as objects or property and can be exchanged among men to sustain the family bloodline. However, despite the expectation that Isabella will submit to Manfred's demands, her character shifts and begins to show a power of agency when she declines his offer and she cries upon seeing the plumes on the giant helmet, "Look my lord! See heaven declares against your impious intentions" (Walpole 81). Still, even though Isabella is standing up to Manfred, she gives most of her agency to God when she references heaven. This suggestion of divine power, at the same time, encourages her rebellion and sparks the "maiden in

flight” trope of the Gothic in general. It also stimulates other female characters in the novel to try and escape the entrapment of the patriarch.

A third female character, Matilda, gains personal agency in Otranto even more. She goes so far as to challenge the patriarch by releasing the young and attractive Theodore from prison, negotiating to present her proposed marriage to Frederic herself, and following her feelings of love more than her father’s dictates. Throughout the novel, Manfred is consumed by his efforts to find Isabella and imprison a peasant named Theodore, who has helped her flee from the castle. Matilda witnesses the trial of Theodore and becomes attracted to him due to his passionate pleas and resemblance to Alfonso, the original prince of Otranto, whose portrait still hangs there. She finds that “his person was noble, handsome and commanding, even in that situation: but his countenance soon engrossed her whole care. Heavens! Bianca, said the princess softly, do I dream? Or is not that youth the exact resemblance of Alfonso’s picture in the gallery” (Walpole 108). Motivated by her distress over Isabella’s departure, her father’s brutish commands, and attraction for Theodore, Matilda takes initiative and decides to free the little-known stranger from his captivity. She forcefully confronts Theodore and exhibits her agency when she states, “Young man, she said, though filial duty and womanly modesty condemn the step I am taking, yet holy charity, surmounting all other ties, justifies this act. Fly; the doors of thy prison are open: my father and his domestics are absent; but they may soon return: begone in safety; and may the angels of heaven direct thy course” (Walpole 124). Matilda has progressed from a submissive woman to a woman of agency during her action to free Theodore. She acknowledges the fact that her father would “condemn” her actions, but she chooses to challenge his authority anyway. This scene also demonstrates swapped gender roles in Walpole’s novel. Traditionally, it is the man that rescues the damsel in distress; however, in this scene, Matilda fulfills the role as

rescuer and serves as Theodore's "protectress." Matilda's power and agency are complemented by Theodore's response to her efforts. Rather than scolding her rebellion, Theodore is gracious and "entreated her permission to swear himself eternally her knight" (Walpole 126).

Matilda's agency continues to progress in the novel as she challenges Manfred's demand that she marry Isabella's father, Frederic. Prince Manfred and Frederic attempt to exchange Isabella and Matilda, like property, as potential brides. Surpassing Isabella, however, Matilda fights for her independence because she is in love with Theodore. When Matilda discovers the arranged marriage, Matilda says to her mother, "Will you leave me a prey to Frederic? I will follow you to the convent" (Walpole 143). This statement reflects Matilda's greater agency because she would rather remain solitary than marry a man that she does not love. Additionally, Matilda's use of the word "prey," as though she were a hunted animal, further accentuates her distaste for the power and control of the patriarchy. However, despite Matilda's pleas, Hippolita remains obedient to her husband's rule and declines her daughter's radical proposition.

Indeed, despite Isabella and Matilda's effort toward agency, the patriarchal hierarchy and haunting aristocracy ultimately trap and control the female protagonists in *The Castle of Otranto*. Impassioned by love, Matilda continues to defy her father and privately meets with Theodore. Manfred, however, discovers the meeting and fatally stabs Matilda, thinking she is Isabella. This action exhibits Manfred's power and the interchangeability of women as exchanged property in the novel, seeing as Isabella and Matilda have nearly been exchanged like goods between the male protagonists. Matilda's accidental death represents women's interchangeability because Manfred cannot distinguish one woman from the other when he stabs her. Additionally, Matilda's submission to and entrapment by the patriarch reappears in her last moments of life: "Matilda, resigning herself patiently to her fate, acknowledged with looks of grateful love the

zeal of Theodore. Yet oft as her faintness would permit her speech its way, she begged the assistants to comfort her father” (Walpole 159). As Matilda begins to die, she reveals to the reader that she accepts her fate as a submissive woman. Although she does love Theodore, in her last moments she realizes she will never be with him. She therefore becomes paternally-oriented once again when she begs the assistants to comfort her father despite his offenses. Once Matilda dies, Theodore, a direct descendent of Alfonso, reluctantly assumes the throne. Isabella, however, willingly remains and agrees to marry Theodore, therefore maintaining the aristocratic patriarchy despite the fact the he still loves Matilda. Isabella’s willingness to marry Theodore still emphasizes women’s interchangeability and how men can still use one woman to think of another. Matilda’s death in *Otranto*, in the end, ensures women’s entrapment to the patriarchal hierarchy. Her character shows the most initiative and assertion of women’s agency, but all of that is finally thwarted when her untimely death emphasizes the restriction that existed for women and power in this time period. *The Castle of Otranto*, which, at least, launches the Gothic’s interest in the entrapment of women ultimately, portrays only the beginning stage of women’s search for agency in the long history of Gothic fiction. As we see with Isabella and Matilda, there are moments of agency and power against the male authority, but this final distribution of roles in the first Gothic novel suggests that traditional values and patriarchal control can easily be reinforced and are difficult to destroy.

In Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily St. Aubert experiences the same patriarchal entrapment when Montoni holds her captive; however, through her sensibility and more assertion of her agency, little by little she attains social and monetary power greater than any a woman enjoys in Walpole’s novel. Emily first acquires some agency and independence, first of all, through the instruction and upbringing of her parents. As a daughter of a French

aristocrat, Emily experiences a charmed and educational childhood at her home at the family estate in southern France called La Vallée. Her father, Monsieur St. Aubert, encourages his daughter to have a sensible disposition so that she can be self-sufficient and emotionally prepared for the real world. He tells her, “I would not annihilate your feelings, my child, I would only teach you to command them; for whatever may be the evils resulting from a too susceptible heart, nothing can be hoped from an insensible one; that, on the other hand, is all vice – vice, of which the deformity is not softened, or the effect consoled for, by any semblance or possibility of good” (Radcliffe 20). Emily’s instilled levelheadedness compliments her appeal as a woman because she balances sensibility and an unwavering morality. This combination in Emily’s character reemphasizes Horace Walpole’s basic design of the Gothic heroine because “[a] gothic heroine’s courage and defiant demeanor are always carefully softened by her kindness and ‘becoming reserved’ (Radway 149). Her sensible disposition encompasses both traditional and modern female characteristics, which ultimately enhances her allure. We see as much when Valancourt, her male counterpart, views Emily St. Aubert for the first time. “He saw a frank and generous nature, full of ardor, highly susceptible of whatever is grand and beautiful, but impetuous, wild, and somewhat romantic” (Radcliffe 41). The adjectives used to describe Emily reveal a dichotomy but one that promotes her agency because she is both a sensible and a passionate woman.

To be sure, Emily also demonstrates her compliance to male authority much of the time. Even though her father encourages her independence, as a dutiful daughter she is also expected to respect his decisions and obey his commands. Following Monsieur St. Aubert’s death, she remembers that he has commanded Emily to destroy his mysterious papers. As an obedient daughter and “re-animated with a sense of her duty, she completed the triumph of integrity over

temptation, more forcible than any she had ever known, and consigned the papers to the flames” (Radcliffe 103). This simple action emphasizes Emily’s sense of responsibility and obedience, because, even though her father is no longer alive, his influence is still present. Emily’s compliance is also evident with her relationship with Valancourt. Emily already has power over Valancourt because he comes from a family with little wealth, but she accepts his affection, not only because she loves him, but because her father approves of him too. However, after the death of Monsieur St. Aubert, Emily is forced to live with and obey the wishes of her aunt Madame Cheron. Once Madame Cheron discovers the relationship between her and Valancourt, she influences Emily to refuse Valancourt due to his inadequate social position. She points out, “That his fortune is very small, and that he is chiefly dependent on an elder brother and on the profession he has chosen! He should have concealed these circumstances, at least, if he expected to succeed with me. Had he the presumption to suppose I would marry my niece to a person such as he describes himself!” (Radcliffe 131). Controlled by social expectations and aunt’s opinion, Emily demonstrates her obedience when she initially refuses Valancourt: “With a candor, that proved how truly she esteemed and loved him, and which endeared her to him, if possible, more than ever, she told Valancourt all her reasons for rejecting his proposals” (Radcliffe 155). Even though Emily is in love with Valancourt, she follows the upper middle-class dictates not to run off with a man she hardly knows. As Emily’s character develops and becomes troubled over her superior’s demands, however, her obedience falters and she gains agency when she defies male authority.

Indeed, Emily St. Aubert begins to show agency in the novel when she refuses Montoni and Count Morano’s commands. At first, Radcliffe shows the power and wealth men receive after a marriage. Madame Cheron becomes entranced with a powerful and manipulative man

named Montoni. They decide to marry and, through their union, “Montoni now took possession of the chateau and the command of its inhabitants, with the ease of a man, who had long considered it to be his own” (Radcliffe 142). Radcliffe openly emphasizes the instant power and control Montoni has, not only over his wife, but also her possessions. The taking of all a women’s property by the husband is all too common, even in Radcliffe’s time. This control continues to be seen when Montoni holds Madame Montoni and Emily captive at Udolpho. Recalling the interchangeability between Isabella and Matilda seen in *The Castle of Otranto*, Emily and Madame Montoni are treated like property that can be claimed and exchanged among men. That problem is emphasized when Montoni commands Emily to marry Count Morano: “On the following day, Montoni, in a short conversation, which he held with Emily, informed her, that he would no longer be trifled with, and that, since her marriage with the Count would be so highly advantageous to her, that folly only could object to it, and folly of such extent as was incapable of conviction, it should be celebrated without further delay, and, if that was necessary, without her consent” (Radcliffe 216). Montoni’s claim that it would be a “folly” to disobey him reflects his assumption that she is a woman and he doesn’t need her consent. However, rather than following her expected role as an obedient woman, Emily shows real agency when she first refuses Montoni and Count Morano of her own accord: “I must certainly mistake you, sir,” said Emily; ‘my answers on the subject have been uniform; it is unworthy of you to accuse me of caprice. If you have condescended to be my agent, it is an honor I did not solicit. I myself have constantly assured Count Morano, and you also, sir that I never can accept the honor he offers me, and I now repeat the declaration” (Radcliffe 199). Emily’s refusal and use of the word “declaration,” to make it entirely her own, show the reader her agency as she makes quite clear that she will never be forced into a marriage with Count Morano.

Even Madame Montoni gains an element of agency – at least for a time – when she resists signing over all of her settlements and estates. When Montoni traps Emily and his wife in Udolpho, he enforces his power by emotionally and physically abusing the latter in order to gain her land and wealth. At first, Emily views Madame Montoni weeping in her room, even though her aunt is at this point resistant to his demands. She explains that to Emily: “And is it not enough,” interrupted Madame Montoni, “that he has treated me with neglect, with cruelty, because I refused to relinquish my settlements, and, instead of being frightened by his menaces, resolutely defied him, and upbraided him with his shameful conduct? But I bore all meekly, – you know, niece, I never uttered a word of complaint, till now” (Radcliffe 281). This explanation reveals Madame Montoni trying to be a woman of agency. Rather than continuing to act “meek” and “complaint” to her husband’s demands, Madame Montoni actively decides to protest his conduct and stand by her refusal. However, Montoni’s patriarchal power does not dwindle; instead it persists with a vengeance. Angered by his wife’s defiance, Montoni “confined [Madame Montoni] entirely to her own apartment, and did not scruple to threaten her with much greater severity, should she persevere in a refusal” (Radcliffe 296). This confinement and violence symbolize the patriarchal control Montoni enforces over his wife because she is physically restricted and legally subject to his power. Despite his manipulative efforts, to be sure, Madame Montoni resists Montoni’s commands, causing him to resort to one last threat: “You shall be removed, this night,” said he, “to the east turret: there, perhaps, you may understand the danger of offending a man, who has unlimited power over you” (Radcliffe 305). Within this statement, Madame Montoni is referred to as an object or property that can be “removed.” This removal not only consists of physically moving to a new location; it also leads to her death. As

with Matilda in *The Castle of Otranto*, Madame Montoni reveals stirrings of women's agency, but is ultimately restricted by the power of the patriarch.

After the death of Madame Montoni, however, Emily herself transitions more into a woman of agency: she defies Montoni, gains control of her family and friend's estates, and actively reconnects with Valancourt. Once Madame Montoni is gone, Emily remembers that all of "the contested estates in France would devolve to her, if Madame Montoni died, without consigning them to her husband, and the former obstinate perseverance of her aunt made it too probable, that she had, to the last withheld them" (Radcliffe 341). Emily becomes aware of her new power and realizes that Montoni will have difficulty enforcing his authority over her. Right away Montoni demands Emily's compliance in turning over all her newly acquired estates to him. He exerts his control when he commands, "I cannot believe you will oppose, where you know you cannot conquer, or, indeed, that you would wish to conquer, or be avaricious of any property, when you have not justice on your side" (Radcliffe 380). Two aspects of Montoni's speech that reveal his patriarchal power appear in his use of the word "conquer" and "justice." As a woman, Emily is expected to not have the ability to overcome, or conquer, a man's power. It would be considered "unjust" within such a belief system. However, motivated by her imprisonment, her aunt's death, and her acquired estate, Emily refuses Montoni and assertively states, "'You may find, perhaps, Signor,' said Emily, with mild dignity, 'that the strength of my mind is equal to the justice of my cause; and that I can endure with fortitude, when it is in resistance of oppression'" (Radcliffe 381). Here she asserts a valuing of her own nature that gives her dignity, strength, justice, fortitude, and resistance. Rather than submitting to him and fearing Montoni's threats, Emily demonstrates her agency by challenging his authority. Montoni continues to try to manipulate Emily into signing the papers, but her position does not falter, and

ultimately, instead, she responds to his commands with, “‘Never, sir’ replied Emily; ‘that request would have proved to me the injustice of your claim, had I even been ignorant of my right’” (Radcliffe 394).

As Montoni becomes more persistent and violent with his advances, Emily successfully escapes the castle and is eventually blessed with more property and wealth. Her ability to escape Udolpho gives Emily agency because, rather than remaining trapped and potentially murdered, like Madame Montoni, she becomes a free and more independent woman. Although she does need the help of a man (Monsieur Du Pont) to achieve the escape itself, Emily returns to her aunt’s estate, which is now under her possession once her aunt has died. Later, she also encounters and befriends a sick nun in a convent ostensibly named “Sister Agnes”: In “the dying nun [Emily] discovered Signora Laurentini, who, instead of having been murdered by Montoni, was, as it now seemed, herself guilty of some dreadful crime, excited both horror and surprise in a high degree” (654). Signora Laurentini, the original heiress of the house of Udolpho, was similarly threatened by Montoni to obtain her wealth in the distant past. Her character parallels Emily’s because she too has escaped Montoni’s patriarchal control. However, she also contrasts with Emily because her excessive degree of agency, in Radcliffe’s view, has made her destructive and has estranged her previous love, the Marquis de Villeroi, from his wife. Overwhelmed with guilt, Signora Laurentini gives up her agency by leaving her property in Udolpho and hides away in a monastery. Signora Laurentini may have avoided Montoni’s wrath in the end, but her guilt and confinement in the monastery reveal that too much agency in Radcliffe’s view leads to destructive consequences, and as “Sister Agnes,” Laurentini reverts back into a submissive, constrained woman in society. Emily is shocked to learn the truth of Sister Agnes; however, “a few days following that, on which Signora Laurentini died, her will

was opened at the monastery, in the presence of the superiors and Mons. Bonnac, when it was found, that one third of her personal property was bequeathed to the nearest surviving relative of the late Marchionness de Villeroi, and that Emily was that person” (Radcliffe 654). At this point in the novel Emily has acquired control over her family’s estate, but also over her previous prison, the castle at Udolpho. This shift from prisoner to proprietor emphasizes Emily’s change in power. She is now a wealthy woman – with more authority because of that – rather than a prisoner within the patriarchal hierarchy.

A final display of Emily’s power appears in her reconnection with Valancourt. Valancourt returns to Emily and begs for her affection, yet she has discovered he has lost a majority of his wealth to gambling. Emily now stands above Valancourt in status, wealth, and moral uprightness and can once again reject his proposals. Yet, Emily is no longer influenced by her aunt’s opinion or Montoni’s wrath, and so, she chooses to forgive Valancourt and accept his proposal because she now dictates her own actions and loves him entirely on her own, more or less as an equal. Emily considers Valancourt’s mistakes and lower social position, but ultimately she values her happiness and chooses to marry Valancourt out of love rather than for property or wealth.

In the course of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* the character Emily St. Aubert transitions from being a prisoner to becoming a woman of social and financial power. Emily’s sensible disposition and childhood education stimulate her independence and agency in the novel, making her resistant to Count Morano, Montoni, and at times even Valancourt. This novel therefore reveals the stage of women working little by little to successfully escape patriarchal control. However, there are still some restrictions on female agency, as we see most in Madame Montoni and Signora Laurentini. Even though these characters do briefly defy

Montoni's power, their excessive agency helps condemn them to confinement and finally death. Their entrapment reveals to the reader that, at this point in time, not all women can escape the control of the patriarchy. Emily St. Aubert, however, though she is happily dependent on the teachings of her father, serves as the Gothic heroine in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and reveals a new degree of agency. Her modest, yet tenacious character shows that women have the ability to escape many forms of patriarchal control, become independent, and make their own choices.

We see a further progression in the level of agency when we move from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* fifty years later. This novel exhibits a far more evolved agency in a woman than the two preceding Gothic works due to the fact that the entire story is narrated from the heroine's perspective. This change in narrative voice accentuates the female protagonist's shift in power because the reader is now able to perceive her thoughts, opinions, and beliefs more directly – at least as her later self recalls them – as she fights for agency. The heroine, Jane Eyre, it turns out, acquires considerable agency through her determination and moral disposition. At the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to Jane being antagonized by her cousin John. At first, Jane ignores his offensive banter, but once he violently injures her, Jane retaliates with force. Jane's reaction to stop John's advances reveals her agency because, even though John is her superior, as the eldest son of her aunt, she does not tolerate his dictatorial behavior. Despite her efforts, Jane is immediately reprimanded by her aunt and taken to the red-room as punishment. Yet, Jane continues to assert her agency as the maids carry her away to the red-room: "I was conscious that a moment's mutiny had already rendered me liable to strange penalties, and, like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved, in my desperation, to go all lengths" (Brontë 9). Jane describes her reaction to John as a "moment's mutiny" to show she is unwilling to be controlled by her male cousin's authority. Additionally, like Matilda and Emily

before her, Jane is determined to “go all lengths” to escape subjugation. She is tired of living in a world where her opinion is tyrannically negated and her desires are secondary to everyone else’s, especially the eldest son’s. Despite Jane’s determination, however, her rebellious spirit is challenged when she is locked inside the red-room. As we saw with Madame Montoni in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Jane’s confinement exemplifies the control and power of the male patriarchy. Inside the red-room, Jane becomes overwhelmed with the feeling of oppression and has a mental breakdown: “My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of winds: something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down; I rushed to the door and shook the lock in desperate effort” (Brontë 14). Jane’s panic and desperation expose her aversion to subjugation, and her endurance as a woman of agency is tested. Frantically, she cries out to be released from confinement, but eventually she faints from fear and exhaustion. At the same time, Jane’s extreme physical response to the red-room foreshadows her determination to gain agency in order to escape the entrapment of the patriarchal hierarchy.

Jane Eyre’s agency continues to progress when she challenges Mrs. Reed for being cruel, unfair, and domineering in the service of primogeniture (inheritance through the son). Mrs. Reed despises Jane because her late husband, Mr. Reed, always adored Jane more than his own children. Mrs. Reed’s anger and jealousy lead her to viciously mistreat Jane with extensive punishments. At first, Jane endures her aunt’s cruel conduct in order to gain her affection: “However carefully I obeyed, however strenuously I strove to please her, my efforts were still repulsed and repaid by such sentences as above” (Brontë 8). At this stage, Jane suppresses her agency and obeys her aunt even though she has all of these objections against her. Her willingness to please Mrs. Reed show the reader that Jane is capable of fulfilling her expected

role as a dutiful, submissive woman. However, her aunt's cruelty ultimately motivates Jane to challenge these expectations and fight for her agency. For example, after her aunt insults her integrity, Jane asserts herself when she defends her character and declares her independence: "I am glad you are no relation of mine: I will never call you aunt again as long as I live" (Brontë 31). Jane's declaration demonstrates her ability to stand up for herself as an independent woman. As far as Jane knows at this point in the novel, the Reeds are her only family. Jane can continue being a part of the family and having home if she endures her aunt's oppression. However, because Jane is tired of being mistreated, she deliberately works to separate herself from her aunt's care, revealing to the reader that Jane has the power to be independent.

Jane transitions more into a woman of agency as she develops her personal stance to assert her agency against cruel and domineering authority. After the dispute with her aunt, Jane is sent off to Lowood School for girls. Mr. Brocklehurst, a cruel and overbearing man, oversees the school and inflicts his patriarchal control on the young female students. His mission, it appears, is to force the girls into submission so that they can fulfill their roles as obedient women in society. He views his position as his patriarchal duty and service to a very male God: "My mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel; and each of the young persons before us has a string of hair twisted in plaits which vanity itself might have woven: these, I repeat, must be cut off" (Brontë 56). Mr. Brocklehurst's decision to "mortify" the girls and to cut their hair exemplifies his patriarchal power. The action of cutting off a woman's hair symbolically represents taking away her freedom and individuality. His strict beliefs and regulations strive to oppress these students because, as we have seen with Manfred back in Walpole's *Otranto*, he recognizes these girls as interchangeable objects rather than women.

During her time at Lowood, Jane befriends a sickly girl named Helen. Even though Helen is deathly ill, her determination inspires Jane to develop an ideology that stands up to the controlling patriarchal hierarchy: “When we are struck at without reason, we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should – so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again” (Brontë 50). Helen advises Jane to “strike back” in order to motivate her to become a woman of agency. Her advice is crucial in Jane’s progression to power because it encourages her to stand up to those who abuse their authority. Additionally, these words from Helen, a terminally ill young girl, further display women’s agency because her fighting spirit suggests the idea that all women (whether young, sick, or strong) have the ability fight back against abusive male authority.

Jane’s new ideology is tested when Mr. Brocklehurst attempts to enforce his patriarchal power by humiliating Jane and insulting her character. When Jane accidentally drops her slate in front of Mr. Brocklehurst, he becomes furious and takes the opportunity to disgrace her and further demonstrate his authority. He orders Jane to stand on a stool while he insults her in front of the whole school: “You must be on your guard against her; you must shun her example: if necessary, avoid her company, exclude her from your sports, and shut her out from your converse” (58). Mr. Brocklehurst commands the school to “avoid” and “shun” Jane to further justify his phallic position and demonstrate the horrible consequences that can occur if a woman steps out of her place. As a man of God and representative of patriarchal control, he believes that women are subordinate to men and cannot exist as having independent agencies; therefore he tries to exile Jane because her independent, assertive behavior is not the expected social norm. At first, Jane is ashamed and embarrassed. She now fears that Mr. Brocklehurst’s speech has changed the opinions of her educators and peers. However, in a “moment’s mutiny,” a girl raises

her eyes to Jane, inspiring her to continue to assert her agency: “What an extraordinary sensation that ray sent through me! How the new feeling bore me up! It was as if a martyr, a hero, had passed a slave or victim, and imparted strength in the transit. I mastered the rising hysteria, lifted up my head, and took a firm stand on the stool” (Brontë 59). Mr. Brocklehurst has tried to suppress Jane’s spirit, but instead, Jane gains more determination and agency than ever. Her agency has evidently progressed because she no longer endures the punishment as a submissive slave, but as a heroine who inwardly refuses to be controlled by the patriarchal hierarchy.

Another character in Brontë’s novel, Miss Temple, also demonstrates agency, especially when she transitions from teacher to superintendent of Lowood School. Jane immediately admires Miss Temple because of her kindness and strong moral disposition. Miss Temple even challenges Mr. Brocklehurst’s authority: “Miss Temple had looked down when he first began to speak to her; but she now gazed straight before her, and her face, naturally pale as marble, appeared to be assuming also the coldness and fixity of that material” (Brontë 55). Miss Temple’s stern facial expression exposes her determination to resist Mr. Brocklehurst’s demands albeit silently. Her transition from looking down to firmly gazing straight ahead shows the reader she attempts to calmly resist his oppression. The act of looking down while a man speaks is a submissive and dutiful reaction. But because Miss Temple continues to look forward, she is subtly challenging Mr. Brocklehurst’s authority. Jane admires Miss Temple even more soon after because, while Mr. Brocklehurst is away, she attempts to be kind to the students at Lowood by providing nourishing meals and encouragement. Jane is inspired by Miss Temple and amends her own ideology by willingly obeying respectful and caring authority figures: “Miss Temple had always something of serenity in her air, of state in her mien, of refined propriety in her language, which precluded deviation into the ardent, the excited, the eager: something which

chastened the pleasure of those who looked on her and listened to her, by a controlling sense of awe” (Brontë 63). Miss Temple is characterized as woman who exercises control but with kindness and respect. After all, she presents herself with “serenity” and “refined propriety” which encourages Jane and the other students to willingly obey her authority. Her ability to demand respect through kindness rather than cruelty ultimately gives her more agency, because the children willingly accept her rule and she eventually transitions from a teacher to the superintendent of Lowood School. Her change in authority reveals to the reader that a woman can uphold a position of power. Indeed, Jane views Miss Temple as a role model who encourages the younger women to find her sense of self and fight for agency: “Miss Temple, through all changes, had thus far continued superintendent of the seminary: to her instruction I owed the best part of my acquirements; her friendship and society had been my own continual solace: she had stood me in the stead of mother, governess, and latterly, companion” (Brontë 73).

Motivated to follow Miss Temple’s example, Jane becomes an accomplished and more independent woman. Jane devotes all of her energy to be successful in her classes in order to gain more power and position in society: “In time I rose to be the first girl of the first class; then I was invested with the office of teacher; which I discharged with zeal for two years; but at the end of that time I altered” (Brontë 73). Jane’s academic success enhances her agency because her peers and superiors respect her achievement, and she progresses from student to teacher. Similar to Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, however, Jane also becomes more sensible and modest: “I had given in allegiance to duty and order; I was quiet; I believed I was content: to the eyes of others, usually even to my own, I appeared a disciplined and subdued character” (Brontë 73). As we saw with Emily, Jane’s new sense of discipline allows her to control her agency rather than excessively asserting her power and losing control like Signora Laurentini. Jane also acquires a

new sense self as a woman. She detests society's standard expectations for women and believes women should not be subordinate to men because, after all, they share the same experiences, emotions, and capacity for power: "Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to laying on the piano and embroidering bags" (Brontë 96). This is a direct statement unlike any before in Gothic fiction. Jane unabashedly says that women should have agency and should be equal to men in many ways. She emphasizes that, "women feel just as men feel" so as to compare women as intellectually equivalent to men, but also explains that if men were placed in the same social position as women are, they too would be seeking agency. Her use of words such as "restraint," and "stagnation" serves to demonstrate the restrictions that women continue to withstand throughout history. She criticizes the expectation that women are merely helpmates to men when she condescendingly refers to knitting stockings or embroidering bags. She mentions these typical female duties, however, to ultimately claim that women have the power to have independent agencies rather than just being dutiful housewives, mothers, or caregivers.

Jane continues to assert her agency in her relationship with the mysterious Mr. Rochester. While ending her years at Lowood, Jane advertises and is selected to become a governess for a French girl at an estate called Thornfield Hall. Jane's ability to advertise herself and obtain a job shows she is a more independent woman. During her stay at Thornfield she encounters the master of the house: Mr. Edward Rochester. Mr. Rochester is a dark, brooding, wealthy man who has traveled all across the world. Jane is immediately intrigued with Mr. Rochester and finds his

harsh features physically appealing: “Had he been a handsome, heroic-looking young gentleman, I should not have dared to stand thus questioning him against his will, and offering my services unasked” (Brontë 99). Mr. Rochester’s appearance comforts Jane because it reduces his power in her eyes. If he were more handsome, Jane would be more likely to feel more pressure to unwillingly obey his command. However, despite Mr. Rochester’s wealth, power, and brooding character, he is fascinated by Jane’s disposition: “The fact is once and for all, I don’t wish to treat you like an inferior: that is (correcting himself), I claim only such superiority as must result from twenty years’ difference in age and a century’s advance in experience” (Brontë 117). Rochester’s explanation shows the reader that he does not claim superiority over Jane because he is a man, but rather because he is a lot older and experienced than she is. Jane then feels that she can assert her agency enough to challenge his viewpoint: “I don’t think, sir, you have a right to command me merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience” (Brontë 118). Jane’s ability to challenge her master’s opinion exhibits her fight for equality. She chooses to agree with people based on their worth and character rather than their wealth or age.

Jane’s agency is further emphasized when she heroically saves Mr. Rochester from a mysterious fire. Awakened by a loud, haunting laugh, Jane roams the halls to investigate. During her exploration, she smells smoke coming from the master’s room. Quickly, she rushes in and sees Mr. Rochester fast asleep, with his bed on fire. Jane immediately douses the flames and saves him from a horrible death. Jane’s response to save Mr. Rochester – as opposed to the man rescuing the helpless woman – shows she is a woman of agency. Rather than fainting in fear or running away, Jane reacts as Matilda when protecting Theodore in *Otranto* and heroically saves

Mr. Rochester. In this situation, Jane and Rochester swap traditional roles, and she demonstrates her agency by serving as his rescuer. Rochester responds positively to Jane's bravery, which suggests that, even though he is her superior in class, he willingly compliment her fight for agency: "You have saved my life: I have a pleasure in owing you so immense a debt. I cannot say more. Nothing else that has being would have been tolerable to me in the character of creditor for such an obligation: but you: it is different; - I feel your benefits no burden, Jane" (Brontë 133). Jane now has more agency than before because Mr. Rochester is indebted to her. Even though he serves officially as her master, he commends her qualities and sees her more as a partner than as property.

As Jane and Mr. Rochester develop a romantic relationship, Jane has a minor setback in agency when she feels insecure about her social and financial position. Mr. Rochester is a man of property and wealth, while Jane is a poor governess. Jane begins to acknowledge she is falling in love with Mr. Rochester and fears she will lose control of her feelings. She decides to draw a portrait of herself to remind her of her social rank: "To-morrow, place the glass before you, and draw in chalk your own picture, faithfully; without softening one defect: omit no harsh line, smooth way no displeasing irregularity; write under it, 'Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain'" (Brontë 141). Jane's portrait serves to limit her agency, confine herself to her social class, and be perceived as flawed and poor woman. Even though she has asserted her agency as a modest governess before, this moment, her love for Mr. Rochester causes her to see the disparity between social classes and question her agency as a woman. Her emotions cloud her once-powerful disposition, leaving her feeling alone and insecure. However, despite her moment of weakness, she realizes that, even though she does not possess the same power as Rochester, she can feel the same feelings: "For when I say that I am of his kind, I do not mean that I have

his force to influence, and his spell to attract; I mean only that I have certain tastes and feelings in common with him. I must then repeat continually that we are forever sundered; - and yet, while I breath and think I must love him” (Brontë 154).

Despite her doubts and insecurities, Jane continues to assert her agency against Mr. Rochester. Rumors begin to spread that Rochester is planning to marry the beautiful and rich Miss. Ingram. Jane becomes distressed and is convinced that Mr. Rochester will send her away and marry this woman so different than her. One day, Rochester invites Jane to take a walk with him. He explains he has found her a new situation in Ireland and asks if she will miss him and Thornfield. Insulted by his insensitivity, she disregards her insecurities and passionately defends her honor: “Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! – I have as much soul as you, – and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you” (Brontë 222). Jane’s assertion serves to remind Rochester that, even though she is a woman of lower status, she has feelings just like him. Her speech reflects back to her opinion on women’s equality. Women are not inherently subordinate to men; they have the same emotions and ability to assert their agency. Rochester is enthralled with Jane’s unrelenting spirit and immediately proposes: “‘My bride is here,’ he said, again drawing me to him, ‘because my equal is here, and my likeness. Jane, will you marry me?’” (Brontë 223). At this point in the novel, Rochester wants Jane to be his wife because he sees her as an equal even though she has no wealth, property or status. Once Jane realizes Mr. Rochester wants her for all she is, and as an equal, she happily accepts his proposal.

Although Mr. Rochester has displayed a great sense of equality with Jane, his understanding may have come from his unsavory history. Right before Jane and Rochester get

married, his first wife, Bertha Mason is discovered to be alive and trapped in Thornfield hall. As we saw with Signora Laurentini in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Bertha Mason represents the consequence of having too much agency. As a young man Rochester was forced to marry Bertha mainly for her wealth. However, little did Rochester know, Bertha was already a violent woman who exerted her power excessively: “Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family, - idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and drunkard! – as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before” (Brontë 257). Mr. Rochester confines Bertha in Thornfield hall to contain her mad, violent behavior, repeating the older confinement of women at the beginnings of Gothic fiction. Just like Signora Laurentini, the patriarchal hierarchy consequently entraps Bertha Mason for having too much agency. Eventually, because of her madness, Bertha burns down her prison at Thornfield and falls to her death, showing the reader that excessive agency can lead to nothing but destruction.

Bertha’s character serves as a parallel and double for Jane. For instance, Jane has also experienced confinement in the red-room for having too much agency. Her protests and pleas back then assert her power, but, like Bertha, she is characterized as having a fit or acting mad. Earlier in the novel, Jane tells Rochester she saw someone put on her veil: ‘Sir, it removed my veil from its gaunt head, rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them’ (Brontë 250). The reader comes to learn that the mysterious being was actually Bertha. The moment Bertha puts on the veil, she mirrors Jane, showing the reader that with too much agency, Jane is susceptible to becoming just as violent and destructive as Bertha and once again forced into submission.

Now faced with a choice between love and a comfortable life or maintaining her sense of self, Jane asserts her agency by leaving Thornfield and Mr. Rochester. Mr. Rochester knows he has upset Jane and attempts to make her stay through his affectionate pleas. Jane still loves Rochester, but she decides to ignore her feelings and refuses his offer because he lied about Bertha: “Up the blood rushed to his face; forth flashed the fire from his eyes; erect he sprang; he held his arms out; but I evaded the embrace, and at once quitted the room” (Brontë 281). Jane’s refusal to Rochester’s desperate pleas shows the reader her agency. Even though she still loves him, she leaves Thornfield because she doesn’t wish to pardon his deceit like a submissive woman. Furthermore, now that Jane knows that Bertha is alive, she rejects Mr. Rochester because she refuses to pass through life by his side as his mistress and a tool for his pleasure.

Jane transitions more into a woman of agency when she finds her own way to her long lost relatives and receives money from her uncle’s will. Once Jane leaves Thornfield, she continues to demonstrate her independence and agency when she crosses the Moors on her own and finds her way to a house occupied by a stern minister name St. John Rivers and his sisters: “And how impossible did it appear to touch the inmates of this house with concern on my behalf; to make them believe in the truth of my wants and woes – to induce them to vouchsafe a rest for my wanderings” (Brontë 294). Jane’s agency is demonstrated in her travels to St. John’s home because as a woman with no status, money, or family, it is nearly impossible for her to find a new situation. However, despite Jane’s current desperate state, her agency appears when she independently finds the house – possibly with divine help – and advocates for herself by knocking on the door. St. John and his sisters welcome Jane into their home and provide her with food and shelter. Jane becomes settled with her new friends and begins to gain more of her own initiative by teaching at school and learning various languages. However, one day, St. John

receives a letter informing him that Jane needs to be found because her Uncle, John Eyre, has died and left 20,000 pounds in her name. At this point in the novel, again with some providential help, Jane has gained even more agency because she is now an independent, wealthy woman. After the news of Jane's new wealth, St. John also reveals that he and his sisters are Jane's distant cousins. Jane is ecstatic to learn she has more relatives and decides, on her own, to share her wealth: "Twenty thousand pounds shared equally would be five thousand each, enough and to spare: justice would be done, - mutual happiness secured. Now the wealth did not weigh on me: now it was not a mere bequest of coin, -it was a legacy of life, hope, enjoyment" (Brontë 340). Jane's decision to share her wealth, an extension of Emily's final generosity in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, shows the reader she is limiting her financial power so that she does not have an excess of agency. Her generosity and modest disposition allows Jane to be a woman of agency in moderation.

Once Jane becomes an independent woman and hears Thornfield has been destroyed, she returns to Mr. Rochester with the once patrimonial Gothic estate now in ruins. After Bertha has set Thornfield on fire and fallen to her death, Mr. Rochester has been left crippled and blind from the destruction. Jane decides to return to Rochester both because Bertha is gone and because she worries about his state of being. She finds him at a house called Ferndean being taken care of by two servants. Rochester is no longer the harsh, strong man he once was, but crippled and broken: "But in his countenance I saw a change: that looked desperate and brooding – that reminded me of some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird, dangerous to approach in his sullen woe" (Brontë 379). Jane pities Rochester's new physical state and rushes to his side to let him know she has returned. However, at this point in the novel Jane has not returned as poor governess, but as an independent woman: "I told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own

mistress” (383). Just like we saw with Emily and Valancourt, Jane now stands above Rochester in health and wealth. She is her own master and continues to exert her agency by *choosing* to marry Rochester. Her agency continues to progress with her marriage to Rochester because, as a loving wife, she willingly agrees to take care of her husband: “Mr. Rochester continued blind the first two years of our union: perhaps it was that circumstance that drew us so very near – that knit us so very close! For I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand” (Brontë 397). During this time, Jane evolves into far more than a spouse. She becomes his eyes, his caregiver, and his livelihood; although she admittedly is his “right hand” and thus slightly subordinate, her agency is transformed into part of a partnership, and something like a matriarchy starts to be born.

It thus should not be surprising that this process of change does not stop with *Jane Eyre*. In the wake of *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and *Jane Eyre*, it turns out, women’s agency continues to increase in Gothic works in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier (1938), for example, the female protagonist reemphasizes the ideology that women can successfully gain and maintain agency if they exercise their power with control: “In assimilating the ‘disembodied spirit’ of Maxim’s first wife, the narrator comes to embody aspects of Rebecca’s power and confidence” (Horner 126). However, there are still some limits; even though the narrator takes on some of Rebecca’s ability to be powerful and manipulative, she ultimately gains agency by preserving her husband’s secret and serving his interests in doing so (See Horner 99-127). We see much more agency more recently in the Gothic television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). Buffy Summers is a teenager who is chosen by fate to be “the slayer” and so to fight vampires and demons that emerge from the “Hellmouth” below her high school. Her agency drastically supersedes the previous Gothic heroines because as the vampire slayer she has special powers to fend off her

enemies: “Buffy’s embodied strength, power, and assertiveness destabilize the traditional masculinized power of the vampire character in the horror genre, in effect policing those who prey upon the feminized” (Owen 24). Buffy exhibits many feminist qualities for a gothic woman, yet her agency is still somewhat limited by the fact that she is not entirely supernatural and needs supernatural aid that is essentially masculine. This limitation implies that women cannot be supernatural and that only men have that capability, regardless of her powers and bravery. Throughout Gothic literature, it is customary for the female characters to be positioned as secondary to their male counterparts. When Gothic literature rose to popularity in the 18th century, typically speaking, the author was male, as in the case of Horace Walpole. This contradiction, of a man writing about the plight of a Gothic woman, allowed for the male ideals of women to become socially desirable. As female readers began to gain agency of their own, writers such as Ann Radcliffe and Charlotte Brontë gave a female voice to Gothic literature. They began to write their own stories about romance, betrayal, and the supernatural. Juliann Fleenor writes that, “A woman has the right to physical, emotional, and intellectual autonomy both before and after marriage; a woman has the right to be imperfect... and still command respect as a human being” (Fleenor 105). These are the values that emerge more and more between Walpole and Brontë and even more thereafter, with fewer, (but some) limitations. In this way, the ideals for women in Gothic literature have gained greater currency in today’s society, as an historical representation of the great distance women have come to achieve more agency across the past two hundred years.

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