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by

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"The grin of the skull beneath the skin:" [1]

Reassessing the Power of Comic Characters in Gothic Literature

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Neither representative of aesthetic flaws or mere comic relief, comic characters within Gothic narratives challenge and redefine the genre in ways that open up, rather than confuse, critical avenues. Comic characters in the Gothic texts of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and Clara Reeve establish the comic as a serious and legitimate part of the Gothic aesthetic. Comic characters continue to appear in all forms of the Gothic, including its parodies, well into the nineteenth-century, suggesting that these characters endure as necessary and vital elements within the evolving Gothic genre. As the genre evolves, the characters evolve as well, progressing from fool to humorist and then wit. This evolution reflects a shift in comic agency and the changing theories of humor between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The comic character's creation of humor, in a literary genre whose sole claim to fame often seems to be the development of terror, creates an axis which reveals much about the Gothic author's aesthetic concerns. In the context of insightful cultural readings delineated by recent Gothic scholars, I demonstrate how a formal reading of Gothic convention can establish not just cultural legitimacy for the genre, but also aesthetic legitimacy by reassessing the ways in which comic characters' humorous wordplay deliberately disrupts readers' expectations about the emotionally charged tenor of the conventional Gothic narrative.

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[1] See p. 198 in Victor Sage's "Gothic Laughter: Farce and Horror in Five Texts."

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Introduction

The notion that the Gothic is difficult to define as a literary genre has become so commonplace as to be clichéd.[1] While Gothic texts seem to deliberately follow set conventions, to the point of being formulaic, scholars have continually focused on those texts which go beyond mere formula in an effort to legitimize the Gothic aesthetic. As Diane Long Hoeveler puts it, "Providing a satisfactory explanation for the popular gothic's fixation on formula has always been one of the main challenges facing its critics" (6). In this paradigm, the critic fails to question the perception that formula is a challenge to overcome and rather turns to those texts which seemingly negate formula, defining the genre through incoherence rather than cohesion. My dissertation questions the accuracy of these definitions by reconsidering part of the Gothic formula as an important and unifying aspect of the genre. In the present study, I seek to legitimize the Gothic aesthetically, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick does, by looking closer at what seems to be a superfluous convention, especially in the Gothic: the comic character and his or her humorous effect on the text.

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[1] For the purposes of this dissertation, the Gothic will be treated as a genre in and of itself (as opposed to a mode which is subsumed by the genre of the novel or the romance), at least in terms of the texts produced in its "heyday" between 1764-1800. While the texts I discuss are prose, not all of them are novels. And many texts identified as Gothic over the years are dramas, poems, or a mixture of forms. One only has to peruse Ann Radcliffe's work, the defining body of literature labeled Gothic, to note that she includes poetry in her novels. Other authors that are labeled as Gothic (and usually solely as Gothic such as Matthew Lewis) wrote plays as well as novels. The Gothic, then, serves as a more unifying label than the novel or the romance. By the nineteenth-century, the distinctiveness of the Gothic will be subsumed and transformed through adaptation into the Victorian novels of Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens, thus becoming a mode. As Carol Margaret Davison notes, following the theories of John Frow, genres which rely on form and implication to garner "complicity" from readers usually turn into modes as time goes on (17).

In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick manages to develop a meaningful aesthetic by which to define the Gothic through an analysis of convention, asserting that Ann Radcliffe's use of the black veil symbolizes a crucial aspect of all Gothic texts: a play with surfaces. She claims the Gothic is "the conventional genre par excellence" because it draws attention to the use of convention as a superficial device for generating meaning. Character is, for Sedgwick, one such superficial construction which may, and typically does, reveal deeper social and cultural meanings "along such axes as generation, sex, and class" (166). In the end, Sedgwick's work remains to most the cornerstone of the defense of the Gothic as a genre because it does not deny its reliance on formula but probes the deliberateness of the formula and the effects motivating its use. Her work also stands as testament that any critical look at Gothic conventions must ultimately ground itself in character and effect. Much as the veil led Sedgwick to a deeper knowledge of the Gothic axes concerning gender and class, so too does the comic character's creation of humor, in a literary genre whose sole claim to fame seems to be the development of terror, create an axis which reveals much about the Gothic author's aesthetic concerns. In returning to form and convention, though, I do not seek to ignore or invalidate the excellent cultural readings already well-delineated by recent Gothic scholars, which I will discuss in a moment; rather, I seek to show how a formal reading of Gothic convention can establish aesthetic, and not just cultural, legitimacy for the genre.

The one feature upon which most critics can agree is that the Gothic is meant to create a certain emotional effect, terror, making it a precursor to the horror genre. This

argument once again defines the genre, not by its aesthetic form, but rather by its

emotional resonance with its audience. As E. J. Clery outlines, the Gothic, through its

use of the supernatural, "takes effect through an appeal to the emotions. The meaning of

the text is inseparable from its affect, its impact on the reader, [. . .]" (*The Rise of*

Supernatural Fiction 70). As in the case of the Gothic's formulaic devices, defining the

genre through emotion seems to mark it as a popular form rather than an artistic,

aesthetically driven form. The emotional effect that is often produced, then, becomes yet

another criticism leveled at the genre from its very inception.[2] David H. Richter

acknowledges that the emotional content of the genre is a powerful component of its

popularity and that it would be a mistake for critics to deny or degrade that power,

especially in the face of the "legion" of critics attacking the genre for being "*too*

effective" in emotionally investing the reader in its narrative (96). The effectiveness of

the reader's emotional investment is noted, too, in the way literary critics discuss Gothic

texts as "addictive" and holding "pathological pleasures" which have "extraordinary

powers [. . .] over the sensibilities of his or her readers" (Clery "Against Gothic" 41).[3]

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[2] The reviews of Radcliffe's and Matthew Lewis's works by Samuel Taylor Coleridge have often been cited as the definitive source of contemporary critical reception of the genre. While Coleridge admires and enjoys the works, Radcliffe's tediousness and Lewis's debauchery become the main disclaimers to the Gothic. It should be noted, however, that the Gothic was not the only form at which such criticisms were leveled. The novel came under attack for its popularity and its effect on its readers as well. See John Tinnon Taylor, who links critical disapproval of the novel to a concern about the moral influence the form exerted over young women as well, which seems to suggest that the criticisms leveled at Gothic literature stem not from a deficiency in the genre but from a fear of the corrupting influence of newly emerging genres.

[3] Many of the scholars cited in this introduction, including Richter, Hoeveler, Donna Heiland, and Gary K. Wolfe, list the Gothic's emotional power as a cohesive generic element. Marshall Brown also discusses the rise of a new form actually occasioned "a new kind of emotion" (22). George E. Haggerty explains that the sensational aspect of the Gothic may be linked to the struggle to define its aesthetic: "The charge of sensationalism is understandable in works which were struggling even within themselves to find a legitimate fictional means of expanding the nature of literary response" ("Fact and Fancy in the Gothic Novel" 381).

Such strong critical language is a powerful reminder that the Gothic genre is contested for its effects on its readers, not solely for its aesthetic proclivities.

For many, the emotion conveyed is singular: the Gothic produces terror. The terror created must be raised to such a high pitch, according to Richter, that it drives the overly developed and formulaic plot(s) of Gothic texts because to let the emotion wane creates an "anticlimax," which in turn diverts the audience's expectations from terror and toward comedy (90). Richter views the achievement of a different emotional affect, humor, as negative, as a sign of the Gothic's failure. However, Gary K. Wolfe notes that in horror, a genre which "emerged from the shadow of the Gothic," the "fear, terror, and similar emotions" produced do not limit its "narrative complexity;" rather, one must confront the fact that the genre does not produce "a single effect—or affect—and it might be argued that such a single-minded approach to sensation almost catastrophically narrowed the range in the field, leading toward self-parody" (151-2). A genre becomes stale, or formulaic, and therefore open to the derision of laughter and parody, when it fails to achieve a complexity of effect among its readers. Instead of viewing the comic as anticlimactic, as Richter suggests, I argue, like Wolfe, that the humorous response occasioned through comic characters plays a crucial role in the development of the Gothic because it creates a complexity of effect that is fundamentally necessary to sustain the Gothic aesthetic. The "disjunction" between terror and the ridiculous in the Gothic marks a deliberate "shift in sensibility" from empirical to affective aesthetic concerns (Haggerty "Fact and Fancy" 380). Shifting from terror to humor then is not an aesthetic flaw, but rather a deliberate authorial means by which an aesthetic concern for emotional

resonance can be achieved. The Gothic achieves complexity, and therefore generic

resilience, in the interplay between the emotional effects of terror and humor achieved

through the protagonists' and villains' engagement with comic characters.

Emotional effect has been used to justify other aesthetic elements of the Gothic,

even by its arguable progenitor. For Horace Walpole, the reader's emotional response to

the text legitimizes the Gothic's aesthetic propensity for the supernatural, a conventional

feature paradoxically deemed by its contemporaries as a flaw of the genre, as noted in the

second preface to *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). The use of the supernatural as a literary

technique was widely regarded in late eighteenth-century England to be pandering to

popular (and therefore low) superstitions. But according to Walpole's prefaces, the

"emotional response, authentically displayed and effectively contagious," to the

supernatural "carries over to legitimate [the supernatural's] cause" (Clery *Rise* 46). For

Clery, the Gothic and its emotional effect marks a cultural shift between viewing the

supernatural as part of the lower-class superstitions (and thus open to derision in post-

Enlightenment England) and the "literary" supernatural, in which the story-teller

becomes poetic and the supernatural becomes a legitimate aesthetic device, used by

enlightened readers to transcend reason for a time (*Rise* 4-5). In other words, if the

reader achieves a balance between emotional investment and emotional distance when

interacting with the supernatural, then ghosts and other supernatural manifestations

become part of a legitimate, aesthetic technique and not mere pandering to simple

superstition. But does the Gothic author achieve emotional distance in his/her reader, and

if so, how? Those questions and their inconsistent answers have prompted the criticisms

leveled at the genre since its creation. For many contemporary reviewers of the Gothic,

the texts encouraged too much emotional investment, thus influencing the reader to feel

unhealthy or immoral sensations, or to neglect other duties in favor of reading for

pleasure. Carol Margaret Davison notes that the critical reaction to the Gothic is a

particularly gendered issue; as the readership of such novels were seemingly large

numbers of women, the Gothic became "vilified" for its "macabre subject matter, reputed

immorality and exceptional popularity" (2). The Gothic has been, and will be, defined by

its effect, whether subversive or not, on its readers. Therefore, it becomes crucial to

understand the genre's emotional effect in its entirety and whether or not distance is

achieved and Gothic aesthetics are consequently rendered legitimate.

The second part of the above question is the main concern of this present study. I

argue that a balanced emotional effect is achieved for and in the reader, and it is achieved

through the authors' inclusion of comic characters who prompt a humorous response and

therefore mitigate the sensations of terror enough for the reader to reflect critically on the

text. It is not a matter of simple relief (comic or otherwise), however. Initially comic

characters in the Gothic are comic butts, servants and villains who are ridiculed primarily

because of their social status and their superstitions. The first two chapters of this

dissertation explore the emergence of comic characters as a convention within the Gothic

texts that define the genre: Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Ann Radcliffe's *The

Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1778). In

Chapter One, I trace how Walpole and Radcliffe, utilizing the cultural rhetoric

established by a reverence for Shakespeare, model their texts on the bard's use of fools in

tragic plays. By deliberately aligning the newly emerging genre with Shakespeare, they

establish legitimacy for their aesthetic technique. Anticipating extreme reader responses

to the Gothic, these authors ease the reader's terror while at the same time heightening

suspense through delay by introducing loquacious comic servants into their texts. These

servants provide a pivotal hindrance to the narrative's villains and also to the reader's

potentially excessive emotional response to the Gothic supernatural. Chapter Two builds

on the first and interrogates how Clara Reeve's revisions of Walpole's comic servants

into comic villains transform the aesthetic and cultural rhetoric of the comic character.

This chapter also refines the arguments concerning Radcliffe's use of the comic butt.

Radcliffe employs the models set by both Walpole's comic servants and Reeve's comic

villains to achieve an aesthetic mastery of the Gothic genre in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

However, both the comic servant and the comic villain achieve humor at their own

expense; their inability to use and understand sophisticated language marks them as

inferior, making them easy targets of the reader's mockery and amusement. Their

foolishness suggests that early Gothic texts follow eighteenth-century theories of humor,

which argue that humor stems from feelings of superiority to what is found ridiculous, as

suggested by Henry Fielding and Thomas Hobbes.[4] Moreover, the comic character

evolves as it enters the Gothic texts of the nineteenth century and becomes an active and

intelligent surveyor of Gothic supernaturalism, an evolution that suggests that comic

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[4] The four theories to explain humor are outlined by John Morreall in his Introduction to *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. The Superiority Theory followed by Thomas Hobbes argues that humor stems from our belief in our own superiority to another. The Incongruity Theory identified with Immanuel Kant notes that humor relies on some sort of discrepancy, whether that discrepancy comes from our own perception, reality or a simple incongruity between words and actions. The Relief Theory argues that laughter is necessary to vent and relieve emotional stress. The Play Theory is perhaps the most simplistic; we find humor in what amuses us.

characters themselves reflect the shift from viewing the supernatural as foolish superstition to viewing the supernatural as an aesthetic choice that is noted by Clery as a defining transition for the Gothic genre overall.

So far we have discussed the superficial, the supernatural and emotional resonance as conventions of the Gothic. Other defining conventions of the Gothic are usually categorized in terms of character-types and settings. For most critics, Gothic texts seem to be filled with persecuted heroines and enigmatic villains, sublime landscapes and mysterious "labyrinths." David Punter and Glennis Byron insist that most Gothic texts feature a castle or set of catacombs, which must be a labyrinth, a "site of secrets" that also must be a "site of domesticity" (259-60). As Sedgwick and Punter and Byron have made clear, though, a discussion of the conventional in the Gothic cannot help but fall into a search for meaning that lies beyond the conventional, past the flawed aesthetic of formula to a cultural rhetoric. As indicated at the beginning of the introduction, an aesthetic reading of conventions is not popular in current literary scholarship on the Gothic, which is why historical and cultural readings have dominated since the 1990's. David H. Richter argues that the critical school which focuses on "the nexus" of conventions attached to the Gothic, like that of Sedgwick, "arrives at a set of histories that (however adequate in themselves) cannot add up to a history of the Gothic as a whole" (4). Critics such as Richter seek to define the genre (when they consider it a genre at all)[5] by its historical context and the cultural discourses it performs. Gary K. Wolfe argues that the problem with all fantastic genres, the Gothic included, is that "it

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[5] Richter, among others, concludes that the Gothic is a mode, a subspecies as it were, in the history of the novel.

would be difficult for any critical approach based largely on narrative formula to accommodate the genres of the fantastic, which are more readily described as collective worldviews rather than patterns of repetitive action" (23). These "worldviews" include political propaganda (paradoxically both conservative and liberal) and postcolonial, psychological, sentimental, and sexual issues. For example, Toni Wein argues that the Gothic is a "nationalist discourse" in which the themes of alienation and identity formation merge so that by the end the reader experiences "a reaffirmation of authentic cultural values culled from the depths of a presumed communal past" (4). Starting with Ellen Moers and continuing with such authors as Susan Wolstenholme, Deborah D. Rogers, and Donna Heiland, feminist scholars have tried to resurrect the Gothic as a genre open to women writers and their potential domestic subversion, concerned with women's struggles against patriarchal control, and thus providing a crucial textual space for the exploration of feminist and gendered identities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But by far one of the "easiest" ways critics have defined the genre, like so many other notoriously difficult literary groupings, is by choosing a determinate time frame and a particular historical moment to categorize its cultural discourse. For instance, in her recent attempt to develop some coherence for the Gothic, Diane Long Hoeveler links the genre to "the cultural work of secularization" occurring during 1780-1820. She writes that, as with Romanticism (another literary grouping difficult to define), Gothicism is a "distinctly modern, secular" form which "evolved out of appropriating earlier and more dramatic genres, like sentimentalism, thereby ensuring their popularity and audience familiarity, but at the same time propagating a newer,

modern consciousness that advocated imaginative pluralism or […] ambivalent secularization, that is, intellectual openness to a variety of contradictory belief systems" (*Gothic Riffs: Secularizing the Uncanny in the European Imaginary* 12-3). The consensus of the cultural critics of the Gothic is that it sprung into being at the same time as major revolutions, including the French Revolution and the collateral cultural revolutions in middle-class manners and ideas of individualism, and that it therefore embodies that revolutionary spirit in its "pluralism." Thus, she argues, neglecting to consider formula seriously in definitions of the genre is justified by the cultural rhetoric of the time. Cultural theorists of the Gothic basically assert that the Gothic is difficult to define *for a reason*. Such critical work attempts to justify the Gothic's perceived inadequacies by asserting that an identifiably formulaic genre nevertheless refuses, by deliberate design, to follow the rules. The instability of its narrative formulas almost *becomes* the genre standard, the consistent convention all critics agree upon.[6]

The present study reclaims an aesthetic appreciation of the Gothic beyond the historical and cultural biases of recent scholarship. In asserting textual authority over cultural discourse, I aim to rescue the genre from the notion that it fails to achieve generic structure, and that it is as wildly out of control as Elizabeth Napier claims in *The Failure of Gothic*. Napier opines that the numerous and often conflicting critical discussions of the Gothic are a result of the "instability and cross-purposes" within the Gothic form itself (4). Unable to realize and sustain unity, Gothic texts consequently produce "stylistic disjunctions" which then become the "hallmarks of Gothic narrative" (72). For

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[6] Richter also calls the Gothic "radically incoherent" and argues that a history of the Gothic must rely on formulations not built upon its form (102). He also goes on to claim its disunity is why postmodern audiences valorize the Gothic.

Napier, the Gothic fails because it does not realize its disjunction and therefore fails to

achieve deeper intellectual engagement with such disjunctions. However, her work itself

lacks a unifying argument. Time and again, her analyses of the texts contradict her

arguments. For instance, she points to the comic specifically as a signpost of these texts'

failure to achieve aesthetic maturation; in Walpole's text, the comic servants fail in their

ability to merge the tragic and the comic in the ways they do in Shakespeare, despite

Walpole's claims to the contrary in his preface. Yet Napier argues that Walpole must

have known that his work was not a match to Shakespeare (85), and so the Gothic's

penchant toward "self-satire" (67) actually becomes an intentional mockery of Walpole's

readers (98), and so part of his aesthetic agenda! In fact, she is so eager to claim the

comic as a generic deficiency to support her assertion of the Gothic's incoherence as a

genre that she does the reverse and offers up some of the most solid evidence for the

arguments I make here when she claims that Walpole's appeals to the Shakespearean

tradition are "not merely the self-protective gesture of the uncertain novelist; it reveals

Walpole's awareness of the strong comic elements [. . .], elements that are present in

'most examples of the genre'" (69). By Napier's own assertion, and despite her claims

that Gothic texts by Walpole and Radcliffe utilize the comic as mere relief and nothing

more, she establishes the presence and the operation of the comic as a distinct formal

convention of the genre, a convention that unifies texts rather than simply disrupts the

aesthetic within individual texts.

Other critics have discussed the comic in barely veiled condemnation but have

also asserted that it has become a convention "bequeath[ed] to subsequent Gothic

authors" (Duncan 32). The fact that few critics acknowledge the role of the comic figure

in the Gothic at all suggests the disconcerting power these figures have in the narratives.

Many have dismissed the comic as simple relief, as Claudia Johnson notes,[7] or as a

failure of the Gothic to achieve coherence, as argued by Napier, and/or as a failure to

achieve terror, as argued by Richter. These critics note the presence of the comic in the

Gothic, but only in passing or in derision, as in James Foster's discussion of Ann

Radcliffe: "Although she admitted brief scenes of so-called comic relief, usually having

to do with chattering servants, she strove to remain the rest of the time in the enchanted

realms of dignity and sublimity" (266). Half a century after its appearance, Foster's

dismissal of the comic in favor of studying the aesthetics of the sublime in the Gothic has

prevailed. Such dismissals may be grounded in a deeper cultural prejudice. In discussing

humorous portrayals of the Holocaust, John Morreall, a leading philosopher of humor

studies, argues that Western civilization tends to downplay or reject comedy within

tragedy as "mere 'comic relief'" but, Morreall points out, "the ancient Greeks,

Shakespeare, and other dramatists took their comedy more seriously than that. They

realized that comedy is not 'time out' from the real world; rather it provides another

perspective on that world. And that other perspective is no less valuable than the tragic

perspective" (*Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* 119).

In fact, the aesthetic merging of the comic with the tragic and/or melancholic was

widely promoted by theorists of the eighteenth century. The prime example is Edmund

Burke's treatise *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) which argues that the sublime

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[7] Johnson argues that the servants in Ann Radcliffe are neglected when discussed only as comic relief, like the stories of women in the critical discussion of the novel are neglected (109-12).

merges pleasure and pain, an idea that becomes so centrally linked to human experience after the eighteenth century that Samuel Davey in 1879 could write that "the sublime and the ridiculous are closely blended [. . .] that, like pleasure and pain, one seems to spring from the other, [. . .]" ("Wit and Humour" 95). The notion of the sublime is, of course, a well-known aesthetic precept of the Gothic genre. But critics have often failed to value the merging of pleasure and pain as motivation for the Gothic's use of the comic. Moreover, Walpole's claim that he modeled Shakespeare is not as ludicrous as some, like Napier, would have us believe. It too speaks to an aesthetic appreciation for the fusion of pleasure and pain, a fusion realized in the interplay between the comic and the tragic. Shakespeare establishes a literary tradition and a national heritage which valued the comic as a necessary means of achieving mental resolve against the tragic. Stuart Tave argues that by the late eighteenth century, the comic in English drama "had a function that went beyond the conventional instruction of ridicule, and beyond mere amusement [to become] a vital national bulwark against the ever awaiting terrors of lunacy, melancholy, spleen" (187). I believe the comic characters in early Gothic texts play a contributing role in this nationalistic enterprise. The comic deliberately steps in and interacts with the greater sublime moments of the supernatural in Gothic texts, with the comic character often presenting an alternative to the distress occasioned by such events in other characters. In fact, by the time the Gothic had become too prolific in the beginning of the nineteenth century to remain aesthetically pleasing or fresh, the Gothic parodies of Thomas Love Peacock and Jane Austen began to utilize the figure of the

amiable humorist to target directly the excessive emotions of melancholy and fear produced by earlier Gothic texts.

The Gothic's use of the comic as a palliative is supported by more general theories of humor as well. Morreall argues that humor "developed as a check to excessive emotionality" in the earliest human cultures so that rationality could develop and hinder us from being consumed by our basic emotional instincts (*Philosophy* 222). Humor allows us to achieve higher order cognitive abilities and therefore be able to appreciate aesthetic concerns: "To be able to create humor, [writers] need to cultivate imagination so as to be able to view things from unusual perspectives and create incongruous fictions" (Morreall *Philosophy* 203). That humor opens up the cognitive ability to appreciate incongruity is supported by critics who value comedy in the Gothic genre: "Horror, in some sense, oppresses; comedy liberates. Horror turns the screw; comedy releases it" (Carroll 147). Nöel Carroll only mentions Walpole's text as a "horror-comedy" in passing, and like most Gothic scholars, fails to analyze the generic implications and possibilities of such a label in Walpole's text. However, the sentiment in his assessment is clear. The comic allows for an alleviation of negative emotions that goes beyond simple relief. Such alleviation allows for a greater intellectual appreciation and critical engagement with those emotions.

Out of the stigma of its connotations with madness and mannered affectation in the early eighteenth-century, humor emerges a means of achieving variety in discourse which sustains national and individual enterprise, seen in the novels of Henry Fielding (Tave 96-8). All of the characters discussed in my dissertation achieve humor in the

"varied *play with the boundaries of speech types,* languages and belief systems" (author's emphasis 308); therefore these characters add to the *heteroglossia* presented by their narratives; their discourses become socially significant rather than individually or psychologically significant (Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination* 333). Walter Nash writes that humor "is an occurrence in a social play. It characterizes the interaction of persons in situations in cultures, and our responses to it must be understood in that broad context, [. . .]" (12). Anthropologically speaking, "humor [. . .] responds to the communitarian need for an accommodation of a culture's conflicting or evolving ideologies" (Bryant 27). While this may seem to call for a cultural (rather than a formalist) reading of humor, it implies that comic characters are relational to the greater social significances of the Gothic text already delineated by cultural theorists rather than as mere throwaways. After all, by identifying cultural ideologies at the heart of their humor, these characters achieve aesthetic validation.

As M.M. Bakhtin has argued in *The Dialogic Imagination*, the novel comes from "popular laughter;" it is born of the need to create familiarity and commonality with its readership rather than critical distance (21), which may be why many critics find the Gothic novel so troubling. It is popular literature, not necessarily high art, and literary critics typically dismiss the popular. However, there has been a recent movement to value the popular and to reevaluate the critical stance on popular genres. Gary K. Wolfe, drawing on John Clute's encyclopedic method of defining fantasy, argues for "a reclamation of authority from the last theorist to the first reader" in order to reevaluate the fantastic genres: "Instead of drawing his [Clute's] concepts from a palimpsest of

successive generations of interpretations and positioning of source texts, he draws them from his own readerly apprehensions of the texts themselves. The scaffolding of his approach is the read book, not the mastered theory" (Wolfe 210). Wolfe is correct in noting too that this approach is risky "daredevilry," since it positions the reader as the authority on the text, not the critic or theorist. However, the reader represents an open-minded approach to literature; critics, especially of the Gothic, only engage texts which conform to their arguments rather than pursuing the aesthetic experience as a whole and seeing connections between the differing texts within the Gothic genre. As George Levine succinctly puts it, theory cannot work unless it is "based firmly in a detailed consideration of what novelists actually did" (7). Like Levine and Patricia Meyer Spacks, by turning back to the texts, I seek to "celebrate the act and process of reading" (Spacks 4-5), which actively insists then on giving "attention to developing conventions" (Spacks 27). I seek to engage with the reader's emotional responses to the texts, to give authority to the way the text is felt, while regarding apparent deficiency as not necessarily aesthetically challenging, but instead as aesthetically intriguing.

Jacqueline Howard argues that since those who define the Gothic by its conventions have difficulty recognizing its "historical variability and change," a Bakhtinian reading focused on multiple discourses present in the Gothic allows for acknowledgement and acceptance of "the disparate discursive structures" of the Gothic (*Reading Gothic Fiction: A Bakhtinian Approach* 2). Like the novel, the Gothic seemingly has "no canon" but rather achieves its canon through its ability to be "historically active" (Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination* 3). What is intriguing about

Bakhtin's arguments is that he supports such arguments not with historical readings; rather, he achieves a realization of plural discourses through a discussion of common character types, including the fool, and generic interplay, namely between the novel and parody. The Gothic is especially open to parody, as already discussed, because of its formulaic nature. However, when viewed through a Bakhtinian lens, Gothic parody becomes valorized as a sign of the Gothic's aesthetic heteroglossia. I will consider Bakhtin's theories in greater detail in Chapter Four. For now, it is enough to note that Bakhtin's formalism, besides framing the Gothic's use of the carnivalesque,[8] validates the notion of multiple discourses in the Gothic, and validates as well the comic as a necessary device in forming those multiple discourses. As Sedgwick informs my critical preoccupation with character and effect, Bakhtin informs my focus on the comic as a primary aesthetic concern of the Gothic.

Throughout the dissertation, the term "comic" will be used as a unifying descriptor to describe characters who are fools, wits, and humorists, while the term "humor" will be applied only to the emotional effect that such characters are meant to achieve. While humor and comedy can be used as specific genres or modes, "humor" as I use the term here refers to the emotional effect produced by the convention of the comic character within the genre of the Gothic. While the more specific labels of fool, wit, and humorist will be used in the chapters which deal with each type, the term "comic" will be applied whenever necessary to provide consistency to the discussion. It should be noted, however, that unifying the types under one label does not negate the aesthetic changes the

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[8] See Terry Castle's discussion of the carnivalesque in the Gothic in *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny.*

characters undergo as the eighteenth-century Gothic tradition gives way to parody in the early nineteenth century and a revival of the Gothic emerges as a mode in novels of the Victorian era. The comic butt becomes the comic agent as we move from the eighteenth century into the nineteenth century. The shift in agency correlates with a shift in class status, from servants to aristocrats to middle-class intellectuals, which suggests that the comic collaborates with, rather than mocks, the cultural ideologies espoused within the Gothic which valorizes the middle-class.

My chapters approach the Gothic as a fluid genre, then, particularly attuned to the changing cultural responses to it. What is deemed humorous at any moment is particularly tuned to what a culture values at that moment. Laughter and humor often signify feelings of superiority. Comic characters thus become markers of what the author and the reader may both find to be inferior or culturally irrelevant. Comic characters are especially symbolic, laid flat in their representations deliberately, to expose the underlying ridiculousness of the now seemingly outdated social codes they embody. Elizabeth Kraft sees the comic character in eighteenth-century fiction as the embodiment of "the unpriviledged, unauthoritative, eminently revisable narrative" which reflects the reader's worldview rather than an ideal, and so "they decenter us, they call our importance into question, they challenge our privilege [. . .]" (Preface xi). In a genre which seems to strive for unpredictability, the character who furthers that feeling for the reader becomes central to the project, and it is the comic character who "decenters" the terror of the Gothic by introducing amusement. Perhaps the most convincing critical engagement of social and cultural significance of the comic within the tragic comes from

a scholar of melodrama, a genre closely aligned with the Gothic in its stigma of

pandering to the popular audience and the emotional effect. J. S. Bratton is quick to note

that melodrama enlisted humor in response to perceived audience needs. She cites a

nineteenth-century theater manager who took for granted the idea that the serious should

be tempered with moments of "comic relief" because the audience needed such relief in

order to assess the meaning derived from the serious (Introduction 23). To some degree,

these concerns are a matter of pace for the theater manager, but Bratton is quick to note

that citing Shakespeare as their influence invested such a move with both authority and

aesthetic complexity. Conventions of mixing the comic and the serious in melodrama,

and the aesthetic repetition of such conventions (what other critics deem as pandering to

the popular), for Bratton becomes a means by which playwrights "pre-empt free and

conscious engagement with ethical and political problems," but also awaken the

audience, "rather than to lull their mental responses" (Introduction 7) which is what many

imply from their derision of conventional techniques. The contradictions between the

serious and the comic in melodrama "read as deliberate mediations, the means whereby a

consensus is tacitly negotiated, and ideological and hegemonic work is done" (Bratton

"The Contending Discourses of Melodrama" 39).

It is through characters' interactions with other characters and with the reader,

then, and through the reader's identification with or alienation from characters, that the

Gothic's defining emotional effect is achieved. Sedgwick relies on character analysis to

establish the conventions of the Gothic because character is for her the ultimate

representation of surface, of the layer which appears to the world: "In the Gothic view,

therefore, individual identity, including sexual identity, is social and relational rather than

original or private" (142). It becomes crucial to understanding the Gothic, then, to

explore its characters in terms of their social relationships and how they encounter the

idea of superficiality in order to achieve their meaning. The characters I discuss achieve

humor through their superficial use of language, or, in the later chapters in which the

characters become agents of the comic, through their ability verbally to identify

superficiality in others. Bakhtin argues that it is specifically through language that humor

in the novel is achieved, and I extend such arguments to postulate that it is through

language, or the ability to command or bumble language, which differentiates the comic

character from the other characters of the Gothic. Character analysis may seem to be a

rather simplistic critical approach, because many literary theorists seek "to loosen the

grip of fiction on our weakling selves. Theorists have long fashioned themselves as

crusaders against the pleasures and dangers of literary absorption, reacting suspiciously to

the ordinary pleasures people take in fictional characters, [. . .]" (Vermeule 15-16), a

critique which uncannily reflects the critical discussion of the Gothic as a lesser art

because of its reader's supposed inability to detach emotionally from the narrative.

However, character is an essential presence in the achievement of the comic: "From the

classical comic mask to George Meredith's satyrlike 'comic spirit,' the idea of comedy

seems always to take on human shape" (Shershow 3). The laughter garnered *at* comic

characters in eighteenth-century Gothic, or *by* witty and humorist characters in the

nineteenth-century, is aesthetically achieved in social engagement with an intellectual

and cultural network of ideology, character speech, and reader response rather than in

isolation, textual or otherwise. For example, when the comic butt becomes the comic agent in the nineteenth-century texts I discuss in Chapters Three and Four, these characters are able to command language, to the point where the author achieves the ironic narrative interiority essential to the Victorian novel. While eighteenth-century Gothic authors are concerned with establishing a "canon" and therefore align themselves with traditional theories of humor and the comic in literature, later manifestations of the Gothic in the nineteenth century reposition reader response to the Gothic by redefining comic characters as models of emotional detachment, as humorists rather than as fools.

The witty protagonists of Chapter Three command humor rather than incite it; they note the irony and incongruities around them, thus following the incongruity theory of humor. George Levine argues that in the Victorian era, realist authors were intimately bound to the forms of comedy, and therefore romance, despite their need to resist "the patterning conventions of romance" (21). While early critics such as Walter Houghton believe Victorians rejected humor because of their desire for earnestness, later scholars of Victorian novels have argued that humor in the Victorian era could become a way for Victorians to explore their culture, and as such, humor could "make visible or unmask almost invisible relationships between rule and violation" (Wagner-Lawlor xv). Julian Wolfeys argues, "Comic discourse and performance brings down the defences of the psyche" in Victorian Gothic (53). Feminist critics such as Robin Jones and Regina Barreca claim laughter and wit as a sign of empowerment and critical negotiation in the Victorian novels of Charlotte Brontë in particular. As Brontë is a crucial link between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic manifestations, I closely examine the use of

wit in her novels *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853) and how it functions as part of the Gothic tradition Brontë is engaging, and not just as a means of empowering the lead female character, as Jones and Barreca have argued. As Gothicism transforms and melds with realism in the Victorian novels of Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens, we find more play, a flexing beyond the conventional. In such fictions, the comic character transforms from the butt to the comic agent, able to achieve humor through the witty manipulation of language. The witty protagonists of these novels no longer achieve humor at their own expense but rather through their ironic engagement with the reader in the psychological interiority of the realist novel. Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe, and Ebenezer Scrooge all use their wit to deflect the impact of Gothic supernaturalism in their narratives. The witty protagonists' engagement with Gothic supernaturalism is where the moral codification of the novel occurs and therefore the Victorian transformation of the comic character within the Gothic tradition allows for a greater understanding of Victorian cultural concerns with moral development.

In particular, Scrooge's moral development away from wit to a more amiable sense of humor becomes the concern of Chapter Four. Following the dictates of Gothic parodies of the early nineteenth century, rather than the Gothic tradition established by Walpole and Radcliffe, Dickens must transform the crotchety and witty Scrooge to a philanthropic humorist. The Gothic parodies of Thomas Love Peacock and Jane Austen signal the transformation of the now overly formulaic Gothic genre into a more versatile mode for the Victorian era, as discussed earlier in terms of fantastic genres' aesthetic elasticity. Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) and Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1816)

rely on active comic agents rather than on comic butts, signaling an aesthetic shift in distance. The amiable humorist, a cultural figure who emerged at the same time as these parodies according to Stuart Tave, is able to mock Gothic excess from a safe distance rather than directly engage with it. In fact, the humorist is deliberately set in conflict with the reader of Gothic texts within the narrative in order for the author to effectively contrast the correct reaction to the excessive emotional response which has always been seen as a detriment of the Gothic's aesthetic.

Only two major[9] critical studies to date have given serious consideration of the comic within the Gothic. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnick's study *Gothic and the Comic Turn* argues that "the comic turn" is an "intrinsic" part of the Gothic genre rather than a corruption of it (4). However, they focus their discussion on twentieth-century manifestations of the comic in works that play within the Gothic mode but would not necessarily be considered part of a Gothic genre. They seem disinclined to deal with the progenitors of the Gothic because those texts do not seem as aesthetically complex as modern and post-modern works. The other work is Paul Lewis' *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature*. Humor is "one of three primary responses to incongruity," according to Lewis, and one of the others is fear (x). It seems natural, then, to pair humor with a genre which relies on fear. The Gothic, as already noted, has had a long history of being labeled incongruous, and humor also stems from the discrepancy between what is real and what is perceived, thus creating incongruity. Both also play on power and judgment (Lewis 13); what we find humorous is often

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[9] "Major" studies mean book-length, sustained arguments that focus on the comic as the critical impetus of the project.

viewed as inferior to ourselves and what we find fearful makes us feel inferior. The Gothic is particularly concerned with issues of power and dominance, which the comic characters sometimes subvert and sometimes reinforce: "by delineating what is incongruous in an amusing way, [they] can serve to confirm or to overthrow accepted approaches to experience" (Lewis 14). Lewis also goes on to study how humor and fear engage one another. He writes, "In the Gothic, humor can ultimately serve to dismiss fear, to wallow in it or to hold the mind open for a full range of emotional and intellectual responses" (153). I argue that this last point becomes the prime responsibility of the comic characters I discuss. They serve as reminders that fear is not the sole response to the incongruous world presented in the Gothic, and they therefore open the reader to a more profound response to the Gothic's cultural arguments.

While Lewis does make excellent arguments about canonical Gothic authors such as Radcliffe and Poe, ultimately his discussion is guided by an interdisciplinary approach which deliberately regards humor as a separate discipline rather than as an aesthetic element of the Gothic text itself. I therefore align myself more with Victor Sage who views the comic as "a central feature of the Gothic tradition" (203). Sage discusses the element of farce in early Gothic, and laughter in late nineteenth manifestations of the genre, and argues that comic servants in Radcliffe are responsible for the aesthetic shift away from the sixteenth century setting of *The Italian* to "the reported action of an eighteenth-century English farce, in which conventionally mistaken identity is the dynamo, not only of plot, but also of comic effect" (192). The farce, as he calls it, allows Radcliffe to "change the analogy, into another emotional key" which then "becomes in

the context of the Gothic a metaphor for epistemological doubt and theological unease in

the presence of death" (193). Sage purposes his reading to validate his concern with

laughter in later Gothic texts such as Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* and Stoker's *Dracula*. His

work does not study the earlier tradition in great detail. By the time *Dracula* was written,

the use of comic characters was a customary part of the Gothic tradition, as central to the

earlier texts of Walpole and Radcliffe as it is to the later revival of Le Fanu and Stoker.

While Sage chooses to study how laughter informs the Gothic, my study extends the

discussion beyond laughter to comic language and to characters who achieve humor in

the reader and who do not necessarily manifest their own sense of humor through

laughter.

If the comic is as vital to the genre as I claim, what about Gothic texts which do

not feature the comic? For example, Sophia Lee's *The Recess* is usually cited among the

lineage of the Gothic,[10] but it never achieves a comic moment or has a comic character to

counterbalance the anxiety produced by the villain or the terror felt by its heroines. My

answer is that *The Recess*, and others which do not mark the comic interlude or character

as a generic prerequisite to the Gothic genre, are not part of the Gothic genre.[11] They

may utilize the Gothic as one of many modes they sample in their texts, as in the case of

Lee's novel which combines the Gothic with the historical romance, but her text becomes

overwhelmingly historical, subsuming the Gothic. Lee's text fails to achieve full Gothic

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[10] Donna Heiland especially valorizes *The Recess* as a "stunning accomplishment" in the Female Gothic for its political, but not patriarchal, focus (20).

[11] See Marshall Brown's assessment that reading *The Recess* as a Gothic text actually diminishes "its accomplishment as a historical novel" (3). James Watt notes that the contemporary reviews of *The Recess* cite, significantly, its inability to provide a easing of the "calamity and ill fortune" of the narrative as one of its deficiencies as a romance, "leaving readers troubled by the lack of any" sort of amusement to help the reader recover from the emotional strain (108) in *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict, 1764-1832*.

status because it only utilizes the Gothic convention of persecuted heroines in a cave or catacomb at the beginning of the novel and fails to sustain that as the narrative motivation, thereby denying the Gothic plot in favor of historical intrigues. My arguments apply to those texts which have defined and dominated the discussion of the Gothic: Walpole, Radcliffe, Reeve, and later Le Fanu and Stoker. While I choose to narrow my focus to these authors, my arguments apply to William Beckford's and Matthew Lewis's work and the German Gothic works of Goethe and Hoffman as well. For sake of clarity and brevity, I have focused on British texts (although I do not deny the important influence of the Germans on British Gothicism) and those texts which seek to elicit terror (a more intellectual response) than horror or bodily disgust (as in the case of Matthew Lewis). Alongside the division of terror and horror, the Gothic can be separated in two modes: the mode concerned with the persecuted heroine as the protagonist and the mode concerned with the villain as the protagonist (Richter 94). While each mode engages with the comic on some level, I am mainly concerned with the former mode because it relies on audience sympathy to achieve the traditional emotional effect of terror, rather than titillation, and audience sympathy plays a significant role in the achievement of humor. It really goes to the heart of my arguments that so many of the texts in the Gothic do have comic elements, and while I cannot discuss them all in this present study, studying the comic as a serious conventional element of the Gothic should lead to other fruitful studies of a wide range of texts.

It should be noted that most of the characters discussed here (up to Chapter Four, which discusses parody and therefore has reason not to conform to the precepts laid out

by the texts discussed in the first three chapters) are women. While I do not want only to study the comic through a gendered reading of the Gothic, I engage feminist readings as needed, especially in Chapter Three's discussion of Charlotte Brontë because feminist and gender scholars have done valuable work in considering how inferiority and ridicule operate in the Gothic. Elizabeth Kraft notes that it was a prevailing eighteenth-century idea that "satirical stereotypes" play out as women gossiping; the stereotypes "may emphasize talk—uncontrolled, silly, gossipy talk [. . .]—and although even nonsatirical works may stress the importance of the feminine presence in polite circles for keeping conversation [. . .], the period pretty thoroughly denied voice to women" and so "the talk of women was not talk of significance or even signification" (90). The comic trend of the period in which the Gothic arose was to regard women's language, and by extension their ideas, as worthy of laughter or ridicule, but rarely as serious. And at first glance, the Gothic's use of comic women does seem to support such an idea. The women featured in Chapter One and Two are comic butts, unable to communicate effectively, and as such, they achieve humor at their own expense. However, treating humor as a deliberate aesthetic effect within the genre empowers these figures and their words. Women make humor "collaborative" (Crawford 24) and therefore engage the audience in the reception of the comic. Employment of female comic characters shakes up the propensity to see humor as an individually psychological phenomenon. The interplay between the comic and the Gothic complicates the stereotypical; these figures achieve new meanings when discussed in terms of genre as well as gender.

All of which illustrates my main premise for this study: returning to the aesthetic form and its effect does not contradict cultural readings of the Gothic but rather expands the limitations of those readings to generate a stronger, more comprehensive picture of the Gothic genre, beyond the limits of specific historical periods, the incoherence of generic diversity, and conflicting cultural ideologies. Marshall Brown has noted that the idea of play is part of the "greatness of the gothic [sic];" it is not simply that the Gothic concerns itself with terror but that it plays with and imagines the possibilities of terror (14). So too does introducing a study of the comic within the Gothic play with the possibilities of emotional effect and reader responses to the genre. I am inspired to remember the spirit of play, and to fully appreciate amusement as a valid response to literature, and I invite my readers to join in the liberating operation of such play.

Chapter One
A Fool's Errand: The Comic Servant's Role in the Formation of the Gothic

While comic characters are usually dismissed because they run so contrary to

what psychological or New Historicist critics would like to believe about Gothicism,

namely that the genre places an overwhelming emphasis on terror and cultural critiques

of outdated social institutions, comic characters in fact reveal a great deal about how

Gothic authors formed their genre based on the example of Shakespeare and were

critically conscious about its reception. But before I turn to originators of the convention,

I wish to introduce the comic character exhibited in these texts, the comic fool, by

looking at its nineteenth-century parallel first. An examination of Sheridan Le Fanu's

"Carmilla" (1872) will help to illuminate the fool's errand in Gothic literature.

"Carmilla," which signals a return of the Gothic at the end of the nineteenth century, was

my introduction to the comic potential inherent within a Gothic text. Because it shares

certain tropes with the texts that established the Gothic genre, Horace Walpole's *The

Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe's novels, in particular *The Mysteries of

Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797), "Carmilla" offers a fitting place to begin a

discussion of the "coherence" of Gothic conventions, even though it was written nearly a

century later. The story's gothic suspense hinges upon the mysterious nature of the title

character, who turns out to be a vampire and therefore a supernatural threat to the

narrator, a young woman named Laura. "Carmilla" is set in "traditional vampire

territory" (Tracy xx), but Laura, and the text, insists upon the main characters' genteel

manners and "English nationality": "Though she has never been there, she thinks of

England as 'home'. Her father, also English, has retired from the Austrian service. They

speak English together, read Shakespeare to keep up the language, and drink tea in the

English manner" (Tracy xx). Laura and her father live in a castle, isolated from civilized

society, but are able to maintain the affectation of a British national identity. These

tropes remind a knowledgeable reader of Ann Radcliffe's novels, which feature isolated

daughters and fathers emulating the bourgeois English lifestyle. Le Fanu's resurrection

of this convention nearly a century later suggests a remarkable generic continuity

between Gothic texts which critics have usually suggested does not exist. Elizabeth

Napier's critical work proclaims in its very title the "failure" of Gothicism to unite its

apparent incongruities across texts and tropes and argues that the genre "is formally and

stylistically marked by disequilibrium" (4). She argues that such incongruity, "stylistic

disjunctions" (72) as she calls them, pollutes the secondary criticism concerning Gothic

texts as well, therefore hindering any possibility of recognizing or appreciating

psychological or aesthetic depth within the genre. Napier's arguments are countered by

critics such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Jochen Achilles, who contend that there is a

demonstrable coherence of conventions across Gothic texts. Achilles specifically

discusses Le Fanu as an author who is both aware of and deliberate in his use of Gothic

"clichés" and argues that while they may seem "to stamp him as an imitator and as the

representative of an outdated genre," in actuality, "Le Fanu reorganizes the stock devices

of [G]othic fiction in such a manner that they yield deep psychological insights" (150).

    As with other Gothic stock devices, Le Fanu employs the comic fool in just such

an obvious and aesthetically disruptive way, which then calls attention to the figure's

deeper significance. In a scene which regularly elicits reader curiosity but which is

seldom remarked on by critical overviews of the text, Laura and Carmilla's encounter

with a travelling entertainer, Le Fanu goes to great length to paint the "hunchback" as a

rustic clown, a natural fool; he wears "buff, black, and scarlet", a motley of colors and

leather straps (Le Fanu 267) and bears the required deformity of a "natural" fool.[1] It is

clear that he travels for purposes of entertainment, for he carries a magic lantern, two

compilations of dreadful monsters (a salamander and a mandrake), a fiddle, foils, masks,

and charms against the supernatural (Le Fanu 268). When Laura and Carmilla move to

purchase charms against the "oupire" [vampire], he notices Carmilla's rather long fang of

a tooth and offers to round it for her. His acknowledgement of the fang illustrates his

ability to see her as a vampire, although he does not directly warn against the threat. In

fact, he seems unaware that the fang is supernatural; therefore, he adheres to the

condition of a natural fool, in that he must be "an unconsciously transgressive social

deviant who innocently flouted customary rules and thus unwittingly turned the world

upside down, [. . .]" (Hornback 151). The clown in Le Fanu's text behaves contrary to

the manners of the age, as suggested by Carmilla herself when she angrily withdraws

after his affront. He has crossed the boundary of etiquette, but in doing so, he also

crosses a boundary beyond what is strictly human. Therefore he emerges as a fool figure

in the tradition of Shakespeare's fools; his deformity and his connection to the world of

play mask a true power, a wisdom that allows the reader to recognize Carmilla's true

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[1] See Robert Hornback's *The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare*. Hornback distinguishes the artificial fool from the natural one by the artificial one's ability to pretend and recognize his satiric role. See also Enid Welsford's *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, where she identifies the artificial fool as a courtly occupation and the natural fool as marked by physical or mental deformity. Sandra Billington distinguishes between the fool who is wise and capable of enacting comedy and the true clown, a Jack Pudding, who is the butt of comedy.

nature. The appearance of the fool here is incongruous in terms of the overall trajectory of fear and mystery into which the story wishes to draw the reader. Much like with what happens in reaction to the Porter scene in *Macbeth*,[2] readers are confused by the clown's rambling speeches and the seemingly pointless delay of the Gothic narrative. However, perceptive readers recognize that Carmilla's anger at this juncture marks not only the clown's transgression but her own as well. It signifies her fear that he is in fact revealing too much of her true nature. The scene ends with the clown's apology and with mindless wordplay, which might suggest to some that the comic figure is only a delay, a brief respite from the terrible implications of the story, except that he does in fact introduce the truth of Carmilla's connection to the vampire, a fact which cannot fail to impress itself upon the reader. In other words, the comic character in Le Fanu's story introduces the supernatural into the mind of the reader, adding to the Gothic terror while still remaining comic.

The wise clown in Le Fanu's text demonstrates considerable knowledge, and therefore power, over Carmilla's true character, which can be seen as the power of the comic to fend off Gothic terrors rather than enhance it. In this sense, he produces "comic relief" for the reader; however, I am wary of marking the comic solely as relief because doing so seems synonymous in critical studies with a refusal to take the comic seriously. As Bakhtin laments, because fools are "fully understandable," they are easily taken for granted, so much so that "they do not seem to create any problems at all" (*Dialogic* 160). When critics acknowledge the comic within Gothic texts, they often dismiss it as a

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[2] Linda Anderson discusses Macbeth's Porter as a critical conundrum in the play because it so clearly departs from Macbeth's tragic trajectory. She attempts to settle the confusion by asserting the scene as comic relief *and* as a reflection of the overall themes of villainy within the play (77-78).

marked convention, an aesthetic failure because the comic "straddles—usually

unsuccessfully, because it fails to confront the significance of its own position—two

essentially juxtaposed ways of narrating and characterizing" (Napier 72). While negative

in its spirit, Napier's arguments nevertheless recognize that there are two ways in which

the comic usually appears in Gothic texts: as narrative irony or as a comic character, and

that the appearance of the comic in Gothic texts relies on incongruity for its humorous

effect. As I have already discussed in the introduction, both horror and comedy—

considered as genres—employ incongruity as a means to achieve the respective

emotional responses, terror and humor. Therefore, Napier's arguments concerning

incongruity actually reinforce my arguments in this chapter. I am proposing that the

incongruous introduction of humor is a defining convention of the Gothic genre.[3]

     The fact that "relief" is typically used as a term of dismissal, a byline to suggest a

momentary release and little else worthy of critical scrutiny, indicates how little we

typically value humor itself within literary studies. As John Morreall, the champion of

the study of humor as a worthy intellectual pursuit, especially in philosophy, suggests in

his discussion of humor found in accounts of the Holocaust, the West's cultural prejudice

against humor, which dismisses it as inferior to tragic concerns and emotions, routinely

leads to humor being "discounted as mere 'comic relief'." However, in the quote cited in

the introduction, Morreall is quick to counter with the literary precedents of the ancient

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[3] There are, of course, critical and aesthetic stances which blend terror and humor, which can be applied to the Gothic genre but are not specifically defined as criticism to the genre itself. Most famous, perhaps, is Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Such arguments also appear late into the nineteenth century, at the same moment as the reoccurrence of the Gothic, as illustrated by the quote given in the introduction from Samuel Davey in his essay "Wit and Humour."

Greeks and Shakespeare who viewed comedy as a serious concern, which introduces

humanity to another way of perceiving the world (*Comic Relief* 119). If we as literary

critics make an effort, as I shall do throughout this dissertation, to scrutinize our own

fundamental, acquired prejudices toward humor and the comic, we will find this matter of

"relief" to be much more critically provocative than most seem to expect. The comic

figures of literature provide a necessary commentary within their texts which invites

readers to reflect on the main points of view offered within the narratives. In the instance

of Le Fanu's travelling rustic, his comic reversal of social custom adds to the suspense of

the narrative, rather than relieving it. By letting the reader in on the mystery while

keeping Laura innocent and unaware, Le Fanu leads us to begin to fear for the heroine's

safety. Since the fool is typically marked by his or her inability to be silent, his or her

verbosity usually produces in the reader a greater awareness of the presence of the

supernatural, which in turn makes the comic figure not one of relief, but rather a creator

of greater suspense.

Le Fanu's clown is not a servant to the main characters, as are the other characters

I will discuss in this chapter, but he does provide a service, in his rustic way. That

service is not to entertain as his accouterment implies; in fact, the immediate reaction to

his babble is anger on the part of Carmilla rather than laughter or amusement. He does,

however, both inform and amuse the reader. Following the standards set by

Shakespeare's comic figures within the tragedies of *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and

Juliet*, his presence serves to impart truth to the readers, making us aware of Carmilla's

unnaturalness. Le Fanu is here tapping into the literary tradition Morreall pointed out, the

dramatic blending of comedy and tragedy. The introduction of the comic fool into his

story indicates Le Fanu's recognition that the comic is a necessary convention of the

Gothicism that he and others inherited from the formative texts of Horace Walpole and

Ann Radcliffe, and which he deemed to be worthy and necessary in his revival of the

Gothic in the late nineteenth century; in order for "Carmilla" to be made Gothic, Le Fanu

too would need to include a comic character as other Gothic authors had done before

him.[4]

I turn next to the founders, arguably, of the Gothic genre, Horace Walpole and

Ann Radcliffe, to explore further the complicated formative function of comic characters

within their texts. The inclusion of comic servants who play the fool in Walpole's and

Radcliffe's texts signals their participation in the ongoing development of a particularly

"English" literary tradition at the end of the eighteenth century. As many critics have

already demonstrated, Shakespeare exerted a tremendous influence on both Walpole and

Radcliffe.[5] The fact that Shakespeare did blend comedy and tragedy is of course a

critical commonplace; as Louis Cazamian and Chris Holcomb argue, Shakespeare's

clowns' melding of melancholy and humor embody a deliberate social critique of class.[6]

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[4] Alison Milbank makes such a connection between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic when she refers to Le Fanu as writing within the "female" Gothic tradition and as "the most Radcliffean writer" of the Victorian period (174).

[5] See Clery's Introduction to *The Castle of Otranto*, particularly page xiv, and her article "Against Gothic." See also Jerrold E. Hogle's essay "The Ghost of the Counterfeit in the Genesis of the Gothic" for a discussion of Walpole's use of *Hamlet*. J.M.S. Tompkins writes that women novelists of the eighteenth century, including Ann Radcliffe, turned to Shakespeare to give them "their sense of their own worth" as authors and as women (145). Hoeveler also claims Radcliffe was a "devoted reader of Shakespeare" (120) in *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës.* See also Mary A. Waters' Introduction to *British Women Writers of the Romantic Period: An Anthology of their Literary Criticism* in which she notes female authors' penchant for citing literary authorities as a contributing factor in England's movement toward a national literary identity.

[6] Cazamian connects the humorous with a need to provide balance while Chris Holcomb argues, "Jests that ostensibly target the foolishness of servants, for instance, might be taken as warranting those servants'

Less positive than modern critics in their critique of Shakespeare's blending of two

genres, literary reviewers up until the late eighteenth century, notably Samuel Johnson,

harped on his apparent inability to follow rules of form in "mingl[ing] tragedy, comedy,

and farce" and considered him "low" (Noyes 16), a critique that rings familiar to those

who know the contemporary reaction to Gothic texts. Given that response, it seems

obvious why those writing in the Romantic era, a time of generic transformation, would

seek out Shakespeare as a model to perform what E.J. Clery calls "genre hybridism"

("Against Gothic" 41). In the following discussion, I will explore how the early gothic

works of Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe employ Shakespearean fools as comic

servants *because* it is a familiar humorous trope but also, as Linda Anderson argues about

Shakespeare,[7] because comic servants reify certain cultural arguments which the texts

seek to critique, operating as blank spaces upon which their cultures write.[8]

By marking these servants as part of the literary tradition of comic fools and rustic

clowns, I am aware that I set myself against the New Historicist's agenda of studying

servants as servants rather than as literary characters, an agenda summed up by Judith

Weil who writes of Shakespeare's servants: "If we assume that their actions are always

secondary, or brief extensions of traditional roles as vices, fools, officials, and

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inferior positions and thus affirming the traditional system of paternalism and deference [. . .]. Or those same jests could be about servants who role-play—that is, who work the system to their own advantage by manipulating the outward signs of deference" (105) and thus hinting that humor leads to a Marxist critique.

[7] "While Shakespeare is not immune to the uses of servants as signifiers of status or as comic relief, he often represents them as acting in ways we might expect from persons with an acknowledged position in society—conscious of their own abilities, capable of independent thought and action, and even occasionally rebellious against their station in life" (Anderson 24).

[8] See David Robb's Introduction in *Clowns, Fools, and Picaros: Popular Forms in Theatre, Fiction, and Film* in which he asserts that the "figure of the clown mutates" across art forms and cultures, "but it is always there—as far as any society *needs* or allows it to be there—providing the foil for the shortcomings of dominant discourse or the absurdities of human behaviour" (1).

companions, we will miss the full significance of their interventions, whether these turn out to be creative or disastrous" (10). And there are those who argue for the same cultural evaluation of Gothic characters. Clery insists that Walpole's concerns with genre stems from the impulse against "neo-classical insistence on decorum" that shaped much of the literary criticism of his time (Introduction xiii) and that by tying his work to Shakespeare, Walpole also succumbs to the emerging cult of Shakespeare to justify his new techniques as part of the creation of a national literary identity and legacy: "Accordingly, Walpole's fanciful tale takes on the appearance of a nationalist enterprise; and breaking the rules of literary decorum by including a few phantoms, or mixing comedy and tragedy, becomes almost a patriotic duty" (Clery Introduction xiv). Clery privileges Walpole's impulses as part of a cultural and literary movement toward individuality which of course would achieve its greatest prominence with Romanticism. However, to see these characters only as lower-class servants, or only as historically important figures, places undue importance on their social status rather than on their literary function. Given the fictional nature of the texts under scrutiny here, I situate my arguments specifically as analyses of literary characters, and while I do not wish to dismiss the implications of these characters' class, I regard such implications as a function of genre considerations more than of socio-economic cultural critique. I am determined to look closely at *Otranto* through close readings of its comic characters and Walpole's own words concerning the text, because, as Ruth Bienstock Anolik argues, Walpole's text "concretized the conventions that inform the Gothic" (25)[9] and those conventions include the "genre hybridism" of merging the comic with the terrible.

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[9] Elizabeth Napier also argues Walpole's overt commentary on his merging of the two genres "reveals [his]

Otranto is, fortunately, a text that provides a wealth of authorial commentary

which speaks to genre and character. The prefaces for the first and second editions

indicate what audience Walpole envisioned for his manuscript and what concerns he had

about that audience's emotional response to his work. The emotional response to the text

is, for Paul Lewis, what explains the critical "disdain" with which Walpole's "excessive

supernaturalism, or his comic servants, or his clanking plotline" is treated: "a common

basis of criticism is a discomfort with the emotional tone of the book, [. . .]" (116-7).

Critical confusion concerning the text cites the emotional tone as a major issue; it is

unclear whether the text is meant to "produce: terror, pity, or even laughter" (Clery

Introduction xx). However, when viewed through Walpole's prefaces, the folly of the

comic servants Jaquez and Diego and the maidservant Bianca places *Otranto* firmly

within a national tradition that merges humor with terror, comic with tragic, a tradition

which, for Walpole, was established by Shakespeare, thus "shelter[ing his] daring under

the cannon of the brightest genius this country, at least, has produced" (Preface to the

Second Edition 14). Walpole's invocation of Shakespeare has been noted, not just as an

act of discovery or influence, but an act of creation as well; Gothic Shakespeare is "the

*present*ing of Shakespeare the allows the specters of the *present*ed past to burst through

the 'Enlightened', yet limited, decorum of literature" of the neoclassical era (Craig 45).[10]

As such, Shakespeare becomes "one of the main mediating forces through which the

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awareness of the strong comic elements […], elements that are present in most examples of the genre" (69).
[10] Steven Craig's essay appears in the collection *Gothic Shakespeares*, which provides a wealth of critical discussion on Shakespeare's connections to Gothic literature.

'Gothic' experience passes" (Drakakis 8).[11] Asserting influence while still claiming the

Gothic genre as "new" may seem contradictory, as noted by Elizabeth Napier (78);

however, when studied through a lens of eighteenth-century literary critique which

commented on the fantastic and excessive nature of the text, Walpole's claims reveal a

deliberate rhetorical move intended to establish legitimacy for a form which, by the time

of the Second Edition, has undergone some serious attacks upon its authority. Walpole's

earliest critics note that the comic characters as a critical junction within the text that

must be commented on and resolved by the author; therefore, Walpole seems driven by

actual or imagined reader response as much as by a national literary impulse.[12] In the

preface to the first edition, Walpole establishes servants, in particular Bianca as "not as

serious" representations that are meant to be humorous in their "naïveté and simplicity"

(Preface to the First Edition 6-7), laughable Quixotic figures, which, as I will show,

actually serve to heighten the Gothic effect by contrast, just as Walpole claims. The

hybrid nature of Walpole's text largely resolves the discrepancies in tone and integrates

the comic, and therefore laughter, as an acceptable and even a necessary part of the

Gothic.

     In the preface to the second edition, Walpole comments on the incongruity of

"excit[ing] smiles" in a text that supposedly is driven by terror and thrills:

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[11] Drakakis' introduction to *Gothic Shakespeares* notes that the use of Shakespeare varies in sophistication from writer to writer, and he focuses his discussion to Radcliffe's and other's use of Shakespearean quotes as epigraphs to their chapters.

[12] George E. Haggerty references the critical responses to Walpole's text and comments: "The charge of sensationalism is understandable in works which were struggling even within themselves to find a legitimate fictional means of expanding the nature of literary response" (381) in his article "Fact and Fancy in the Gothic Novel."

The simplicity of their behavior, almost tending to excite smiles, which at

first seem not consonant to the serious cast of the work, appeared to me

not only not improper, but was marked designedly in that manner. My

rule was nature. However grave, important, or even melancholy, the

sensations of princes and heroes may be, they do not stamp the same

affections on their domestics: at least the latter do not, or should not be

made to express their passions in the same dignified tone. In my humble

opinion, the contrast between the sublime of the one, and the *naïveté* of

the other, sets the pathetic of the former in a stronger light. 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. But I had higher authority

than my own opinion for this conduct. That great master of nature,

Shakespeare, was the model I copied. (10-11)

As Clery writes, Walpole's preface is in tune with "the addictive, pathological pleasures

of fiction, and the extraordinary powers wielded by the novelist over the sensibilities of

his or her readers" ("Against Gothic" 41). While the quoted passage does display a

deliberate classism in that it suggests that lowly domestics cannot feel as grand emotions

as their masters, thus making humor tantamount to the ridiculous,[13] the passage clearly

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[13] Comic characters of "lowly" rank feature prominently in eighteenth-century comic theory. See Henry
Fielding in his Preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742), in which he argues the burlesque and the ridiculous rely
on "Characters [. . .] of inferior rank, and consequently of inferior manners," (50), and in their inversion of
the social order deserve to be mocked. However, comic characters may come from inferior rank, but are

regards the comedy initiated by such ridiculousness as a necessary part of the text, a mode of delay which adds to, rather than detracts from, the overall achievement of terror which is to become the hallmark of the Gothic genre. And here, once again, Walpole references Shakespeare as his model, and thereby claims legitimacy for such narrative incongruities. Consequently, Walpole's servants act every bit as complexly as Shakespearean comic fools do, becoming the harbingers of the supernatural, a source of intellectual frustration for the main antagonist of the text, as well as a means of critical contemplation for the readers.

Despite Walpole's careful justifications for their existence, critics such as E. J. Clery and Paul Lewis nevertheless dismiss the servants as ineffectual relief, "comic deflation" (Clery Introduction xix) of Gothic fear. However, if we view these characters in terms of the roles as fools, they become meaningful and highly relevant. Bakhtin argues that fools in literature cannot be taken literally (and therefore dismissed as foolish or ineffectual) "because they are not what they seem. [. . .] their existence is a reflection of some other's mode of being—and even then, not a direct reflection. They are life's maskers; their being coincides with their role, and outside this role they simply do not exist [sic]" (*Dialogic* 159). Having their existence reduced to their literary role does not mean that they lack any depth. In fact, Bakhtin argues the role allows for great freedoms not usually given to flat characters: "They grant the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right to not be taken literally, not 'to be oneself' [. . .]" (*Dialogic* 162). These characters are

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usually painted in a natural way and so are not ridiculous, but provide a "more wholesome Physic for the Mind, and conduce better to purge away Spleen, Melancholy and ill Affections," (51).

rarely "pointless," (Linda Anderson's word); they signify social rebellion in their contrast

to other characters' actions and serve as emotional gauges for the audience to judge such

actions.[14]

The encounters with foolish servants in *Otranto* are usually paired with the

readers' encounters with the supernatural, which further indicates that their comedy

specifically engages Gothic terror rather than resists or deflates it. The first occurrence of

the supernatural in the text is the infamous appearance and retribution of the giant helmet.

It is here that we first encounter Manfred's Gothic tyranny as he unjustly blames the hero

Theodore, disguised as a peasant, for its appearance. Manfred's tyranny is provoked

because of a curse which declares that once the former master of Otranto grows too big

for his household, the line and reign of Manfred will no longer continue. It is crucial to

understand that Manfred's behavior here is specifically aroused by the absurdities of the

peasants around him. When the mob[15] returns with news that the helmet from Alfonso's

statue is missing, ignorant of its import for Manfred, he becomes "frantic; and, as if he

sought a subject on which to vent the tempest within him, he rushed again on the young

peasant, crying, Villain! monster! sorcerer!" (21). The mob at once picks up the chant

and seconds this absurd line of reasoning, whose absurdity Walpole's narrator is quick to

point out, given that the crowd "never reflect[s] how enormous the disproportion was

between the marble helmet that had been in the church, and that of the steel before their

eyes; not how impossible it was for a youth, seemingly not twenty, to wield a piece of

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[14] See Bruce Robbins on nineteenth-century realism's use of servants in his book *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below*.
[15] Readers of the Gothic will recognize the fear of the mob from the most notable example of its fury in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*. While *Otranto*'s mob mentality lacks the rebellious violence found in Lewis's text, the potential for the mob to act irrationally is demonstrated here.

armour of so prodigious a weight" (21). The mob's follies are what bring Manfred to

himself; their foolishness also allows the reader to reflect on the absurdity of the situation

while at the same time recognizing the danger inherent in allowing Manfred to rule. The

mob stands as a "voice of disagreement by agreeing with the king so profusely that he

sees the absurdity of his ideas for himself" (Otto 130), much as the court fool functioned

during the Renaissance. The mob is not simply there for relief; they represent the

complex connection between comic absurdity and Gothic tyranny and function, as Linda

Anderson writes of Shakespeare's servants, as "a way of complicating the conventional,

simple concept that all subjects owe obedience to the monarch under all circumstances"

(181). Manfred's position as ruler becomes secondary to his position as usurper in the

Gothic narrative; therefore he must become an ineffectual villain in order to succumb to

the dictates of Romance. The comic interludes with his servants provide an ideal way for

Walpole to introduce Manfred's ineffectuality, "for perhaps nothing is funnier than the

impotence of the powerful" (Richter 92).

Walpole's comic servants are a part of the British literary and cultural tradition

which links servants with superstitions about the supernatural. Bruce Robbins remarks

that this tradition reflects how an increasingly capitalist society deals with the loss of

community benevolence toward the lower-classes; the servants can, through spreading

supernatural tales, in effect haunt their employers (182).[16] This connection between

servants and superstitions becomes so pervasive that in the nineteenth century, Charles

Dickens and Sigmund Freud both reference their nurses' ghost stories as reasons for

[16] See also Jean Fernandez's *Victorian Servants, Class, and the Politics of Literacy.*

psychological disturbances in later life.[17] Servants occupy marginal spaces within the

homes, never fully becoming a part of the family structure but never fully separating

from the domestic sphere, so that their identification with the strange appears as a natural

correlation with their status as Other within the home. However, their *comic* potential

stems from their inability to articulate their experiences with the supernatural, and

therefore, it is their bumbling, rather than their superstitions, which garners them the

power to confuse and frustrate those of higher rank in *Otranto*.

Their verbal "incomprehension" is precisely what marks them as "polemic" for

Bakhtin. The servants' "stupidity [. . .] interacts dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty

pseudo intelligence) with which it polemicizes and whose mask it tears away" (Bakhtin

403). Manfred becomes ineffectual in discourse with "menials [who] endlessly frustrat[e

his] design through their incompetence" (Richter 92). When Manfred is at the height of

his fury at the escape of Isabella, whom he wishes to marry to produce an heir despite

already being married to Hippolyta, the servants whom he had sent to search for Isabella,

Jaquez and Diego, enter the scene in states of great terror. Their rambling incoherence

provides a momentary delay which hinders Manfred's search for Isabella; it also provides

a moment of diversion for the reader: "The first that arrived replied, Oh, my lord! I am

glad that we have found you.—Found me! said Manfred; have you found the princess?

We thought we had, my lord, said the fellow looking terrified—but—But what? cried the

prince: has she escaped?—Jacques and I, my lord—Yes, I and Diego, interrupted the

second, who came up in still greater consternation—" (33). Their rambling is actually a

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[17] Dickens' 1860 "Nurse's Stories" is quoted time and again: "If we all knew our own minds [. . .] I suspect that we should find our nurses responsible for most of the dark corners we are forced to go back to, against our wills" (qtd. in Fernandez 6). Freud references his nurse in his discussion of the uncanny.

function of their fear at a supernatural occurrence, indicating that, while they may be

"blockheads and fools" (33-36), they still have important knowledge which Manfred

should consider if he is wise: "Manfred, who hitherto had treated the terror of his servants

as an idle panic, was struck at this new circumstance. He recollected the apparition of the

portrait, and the sudden closing of the door at the end of the gallery—his voice faltered,

and he asked with disorder, what is in the great chamber?" (34) to which Jaquez and

Diego reply (after another half a page of rambling) that Diego has seen a giant's "foot

and part of his leg, and they are as large as the helmet below in the court" (35). The

appearance of another large body part should cause Manfred concern, given the prophetic

curse, and so the servants' inability to narrate their story concisely provides enough

distraction (34) that Manfred is kept from his pursuit of Isabella. In this way the

servants' comic interlude undercuts Manfred's malevolence and foils his plots.

While the "long-winded, digressive delivery of a message to an impatient

interlocutor" can be read as a matter of conventional comic relief, a "set piece that goes

back as far as the tragedies of Sophocles" but is also notable in the Porter scene in

Macbeth (Robbins 70), Jaquez and Diego's speech brings into startling light the power of

the servants' discourse and their identification as a class, the insistence on "we" in the

scene being noted by Bruce Robbins as a sign of their formation of class identity, as a

very substantial means of thwarting aristocratic ambition: "it does not seem coincidental

that this 'we' should serve as the obstruction to Manfred's overwhelming egotism"

(Robbins 71). The comic servant within *Otranto* serves as much more than entertaining

relief; the rebellion that lies under the surface of their obedience reveals that, like Edgar's

and others' rebellious behavior as servants' in *King Lear*, "the indignities servants often suffer as characters are balanced by the potency of their sway over the discourse" of the text (Sedgwick 167).[18] The fools become harbingers of wisdom through their oral superstitions, wisdom which the main characters fail to acknowledge but which the reader knows should be acknowledged, much as in "Carmilla."

The servant's connection to wordplay and loquacity becomes, for Robbins, one of the most notable conventions of the nineteenth-century realist novel, but this convention is stressed heavily in the Gothic novel half a century earlier. While the portraits may not be "a flattering portrait of the class," their "dialogue provides their most extended opportunity to articulate their concerns—" (Robbins 64). In the previous scene, Jaquez and Diego's bumbling narration does allow them to articulate their fear and in reaction to the supernatural event Jaquez and Diego refuse to return to the gallery. While their "extraordinary verbosity" (Spacks 192) marks their fear as comic, it also, as Patricia Meyer Spacks argues, "indirectly contribute[s] to the reader's uneasiness" (195). As the interlude with Jaquez and Diego suggests, the comic servant, as a contrast to the villain in *Otranto,* engages and tests the cultural rhetoric which derides supernatural superstitions as symptomatic of a lowly rank and intelligence, but as Spacks makes clear, the comic servant also engages with the reader's emotional response, and it is to this function that I now turn.

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[18] For connections to Shakespeare's treatment of fools and servants, see Richard Strier's "Faithful Servants: Shakespeare's Praise of Disobedience." David Schalkwyk also makes an impressive argument that the unreliable servant in Shakespeare's plays (and I believe we can call Jaquez and Diego unreliable, however unintentionally) as a player on the stage is "able to assume the gestures of obedience and compliance while undermining the master from within" (14) in the Introduction to his book, *Shakespeare, Love and Service.*

The heroine Matilda's maidservant Bianca at times delays or distracts Manfred;
like Jaquez and Diego, Walpole portrays her "idle babbling humour" and the rambling
language as a means to "divert melancholy, and enliven the solitude in which [Manfred]
keeps" Otranto (Walpole 42). Her loquacity, inherited from the foolish servants of
Shakespeare's stage, will become the defining characteristic of the comic servant later
imitated by Radcliffe.[19] The reasons for her verbal diatribes range from a compulsion to
gossip about the love affairs of her mistress and Isabella and Manfred's unconscionable
behavior toward both (40-46) to premature ejaculations of horror which serve as a
misdirection of Manfred at crucial moments (55-100). Such loquacity tends to be
unconscious, an innate trait which reminds the reader of the verbal nature of Renaissance
fools. The mental "deformation" which fools were meant to enact in the Renaissance
often leads to a correlation between their verbal "subversion" and their "incompetence"
(Ran 27).[20] While Bianca's verbosity may seem derisory when considered in these terms,
by studying it in terms of its function in the narrative I find that the comic servant's
loquacity becomes highly important, as Walpole makes explicit in his preface to the first
edition of *Otranto*: "the art of the author is very observable in his conduct of the
subalterns. They discover many passages essential to the story, which could not well be
brought to light but by their *naïveté* and simplicity: in particular, the womanish terror and
foibles of Bianca, in the last chapter, conduce essentially towards advancing the

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[19] Clery establishes Bianca's influence on Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis in her introduction to *Otranto*
(xix). The verbal loquacity of servants in Shakespeare's plays is discussed by Linda Anderson and David
Evett. Evett connects their loquacity to their masters' fears that their servants will "reveal the household
secrets" (45), which, in Gothic novels, is exactly what they do.
[20] Faye Ran lists these as some of the archetypal characteristics of fools in her essay "Modern Tragicomedy
and the Fool."

catastrophe" (6-7). Bianca's comic verbosity serves as an authorial means of enacting the downfall of Manfred through delay, but also as a means of enhancing supernatural apprehension on the reader's part.

Bianca's loquacity often is contrasted to Matilda's more rational engagement with the supernatural. The higher class Matilda argues, "If they are spirits in pain, we may ease their sufferings by questioning them. They can mean no hurt to us, for we have not injured them—" whereas Bianca blatantly "would not speak to a ghost for the world" (42). Matilda would engage the supernatural in conversation, a decidedly un-Gothic rational response. And the text does seem to support Matilda's inclinations as the supernatural noise turns out to be Theodore, thus establishing Bianca's fears as foolish. Walpole's readers have more in common with Matilda and her rational sensibilities, and yet Bianca's terror serves as a reminder that the supernatural in this story is very real. Matilda's rationality might serve her well in the reader's world outside of the narrative, but in terms of the Gothic, Bianca's anxieties are more potent for the reader.

Bianca's interlude with Matilda here does point to Bianca's foolishness, but about love, not Gothic superstitions. The scene mimics scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* in which Juliet's Nurse comically advises Juliet how to navigate her love affairs.[21] Using Juliet's Nurse as a model, Walpole has Bianca express comparable concerns about romance and marriage. Bianca infers that Theodore's melancholy stems from his unrequited love for Isabella. Her insistence on talking to him and her rebuttal to Matilda that she would have asked questions of him "more to the purpose" (45) indicates that she values her verbosity

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[21] The Nurse's verbal puns are directed toward Paris in 1.3.60-95 and facilitates comic delay in Act 2, Scenes 4 and 5. Citations refer the version of *Romeo and Juliet* given in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

and, as her verbal pun indicates, knows how to use comedy to make her point. She feels

confident enough to disagree with Matilda, indicating a friendship, and servants in

Shakespeare "are frequently privy to their masters' and mistresses' secrets and are often

depicted as their most intimate friends" (Anderson 40). In fact, the maidservant's

interference "in the romantic life of her mistress, [becomes] a cliché" by the eighteenth

century, so much in fact as to "become a complaint in literature on 'the servant problem'"

because it warrants the belief that the maid oftentimes acts as "a sexual facilitator"

(Straub 84), as evidenced in Daniel Defoe's use of the convention in *Roxana* (1724).

This role can be viewed as a socially rebellious one; Mark Thornton Burnett argues that

the woman servant may "scrutinize the institutional structures through which a woman's

worth is validated" (141), which Bianca does in critiquing the medieval system which

relegates women by presenting only two options: marriage or the nunnery. Burnett also

asserts that "the confidences" shared between maid and mistress often hold "a wealth of

ideological constructions" and are usually used by the servant as a way to "secure a

greater economic advantage" (146), an idea which proves to be comic fodder in *Otranto*

when Manfred questions Bianca about Isabella's love life, and the suspected rivalry of

Theodore, and bribes her with a jewel. Bianca's gossipy nature enables her to gain

economically through this interaction, but, more significantly for my arguments, her

verbosity serves as a hindrance to Manfred's plans, rather than as a source of confidence:

> Well, your highness has such a way, said Bianca—to be sure—but can
>
> your highness keep a secret? If it should ever come out of your lips—It
>
> shall not, it shall not, cried Manfred. Nay, but swear, your highness—by

my halidame, if it should ever be known that I said it—Why, truth is truth,

I do not think my lady Isabella ever much affectioned my young lord, your

son: yet he was a sweet youth as one should see. I am sure if I had been a

princess—But bless me! I must attend my lady Matilda; she will marvel

what is become of me.—" (101)

Walpole turns the stereotype of the babbling servant as betrayer of secrets on its head by

having Bianca's comic loquacity actually keep her lady's confidences, even while

revealing Manfred's villainy. Bianca's role as a fool is established early in the text, so

the reader knows that Manfred's entreaties for gossip will only lead to a fruitless and

misguided conversation. The jewel in question also plays a role in Manfred's

frustrations. He is unable to obtain Isabella's father's permission to marry her when

Bianca loquaciously betrays his use of the bribe to elicit information (103). When she

confuses the subject of his inquiry from Isabella to Matilda, and from Theodore to

Frederic, as well as misreads Manfred's purposes for his inquiry as an imputation against

her reputation as a lady's maid (100-1), Bianca manages to delay Manfred from spying

on Isabella and learning her feelings about Theodore. So while Bianca delays and

defuses terror for the reader by amusingly frustrating the villain, she also becomes

Walpole's agent in intensifying Manfred's desperation, bringing about his downfall. This

particular interlude turns the Gothic narrative's concern away from the supernatural to its

concern with women's struggles against the Gothic tyranny of forced marriage. In doing

so, it redeems Bianca's foolishness in such matters and reconfigures the comic servant as

a potent force which thwarts the Gothic villain.

While the servants I have discussed so far have not the wit to note their foolishness, within the Gothic narrative, it matters not that the servants recognize their meaningfulness. It falls to the reader to recognize the comic and cultural implications of such behavior. While the eighteenth-century novel imitates the comic stage's "equation of the people with theatrical functionality" (Robbins 48), making their servants' direct their audience from the stage, I contend that the novel also shifts the reflective consciousness inherent to stage fools to the readers, thus making sure that the fool's absurdity still calls for reflection on the main narrative despite the comic servants' inability to comment on it. As Robbins argues, "If the servant can no longer address the audience directly [as in medieval and Renaissance plays], he or she can at least, rather than simply addressing other characters, comment on their words" and therefore the novel's conventional use of servants includes "verbal equivocation, wordplay, and bumbling" (58). The Gothic novel is no exception to these novelistic changes. In fact, it may be one of the initiators of such change.

At the end of the novella, when Bianca interrupts Manfred's conversation with Frederic, Isabella's father, she becomes the harbinger of the supernatural again, terrifyingly reporting another apparition of a giant hand. However, through her agency, Frederic can rationally consider what these supernatural manifestations mean and can flush out Manfred's true character. While Manfred still tries to dismiss the supernatural in the story as "fooleries" and condemns Bianca as "a silly wench" (103), Frederic reads her terror as "natural" and therefore divines the serious implications behind the supernatural events occurring at Otranto. A believer in supernatural omens, Frederic

"gathered enough from Bianca's discourse to persuade him that heaven declared itself

against Manfred" (105), and so forbids the match with Isabella, which means that

Bianca's verbal outbursts allow for divine justice to be enacted upon Manfred.

Manfred's and Frederic's responses are set in direct contrast here, and it becomes clear

that we are not to read Bianca as Manfred does. Rather, Frederic's response invites

readers to consider Bianca's comic bumbling as a powerful assertion of Bakhtin's "right

to parody," her rebellion against the tyranny of not just the villain but the tyranny of the

terror produced by Gothic narratives as well.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

If *The Castle of Otranto* established the conventions the Gothic genre, Ann

Radcliffe's works cemented the Gothic novel's popular status on the literary scene: "[. . .]

Radcliffe's fluid narrative style, her more realistic fictional world, and [her heroine's]

interiority [establishes] a Gothic mood of pervasive fear into which readers were drawn"

(Howard Introduction xi). Her popularity made the Gothic novel a marketable

commodity well into the nineteenth century.[22] Radcliffe too claimed an inheritance from

Shakespeare, an inheritance which included comic servants. While Radcliffe follows

Walpole's lead in giving her servants a comic loquacity that creates delays or aids in the

Gothic narrative's introduction of the supernatural, she differs from Walpole in making

her servants capable of threatening not only the Gothic machinations of the villain but the

sensibilities of the victimized heroine as well. Kristina Straub argues that in the

eighteenth century, stories of "bad" servants akin to the foolish ones I am discussing here

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[22] See Ian Duncan, who argues that Scott and the canonical authors of the nineteenth century were heavily influenced by Radcliffe's "cultural position" as author of a commodity (35), which can be packaged, sold, and, more to my point, replicated.

circulated through domestic handbooks, pamphlets, and even novels and were used as a

way for all classes to "make sense of, and even to resolve [class tensions], as part of a

larger, shared 'social' problem" (2). Radcliffe does not valorize servants' gossip as

Walpole does. Rather, she explores more fully the dangerous implications and

psychological trauma servants' superstitions can introduce into the domestic space.

As with Walpole, critics typically identify servants in Radcliffe's Gothic novels as

simple comic relief, unworthy of critical reflection. As Claudia Johnson asserts, the

function of comic servants is a topic which "criticism of the novel has never

condescended to unravel" (112). When critics do mention the comic in Radcliffe, they

reference the influence of Walpole and Shakespeare (Tompkins 256-8)[23] or discuss it as

an aesthetic detraction from the overall Gothic effect of the work, suggesting that the

reader's responses to such comic moments and characters make the whole genre farcical

(Cottom 67).[24] As I have been arguing here, I place greater aesthetic importance on this

function, and so I read Radcliffe's use of the comic servant in her novels as inherently

complex. Radcliffe's servants connect "the comic element" and "the solemn and the

tragic" (Davey 246) which informs Shakespeare's clown figures, of whom Samuel Davey

writes that while tragedy seems neglected in such figures' "playful banter," their "lively

badinage is a relief to the mind, and the brief bye-play of [their] humor helps us to pause

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[23] See also Angela Wright's "In search of Arden: Ann Radcliffe's William Shakespeare," which acknowledges Radcliffe's servants function like Walpole's as a "tribute" to Shakespeare, but she instead wishes to focus on the influence of Shakespeare on Radcliffe's landscapes and poetry, ultimately dismissing the comic servants as a "comparatively light approach to the supernatural" (115).

[24] Susan Wolstenholme also reads the staged, comic scenes in Radcliffe as a diminishment of the "father" genre drama into farce (19). Critical prejudices are also revealed by critics who mention but refuse to discuss the comic's aesthetic value; for example, James Foster dismisses comic relief as a secondary artistic concern when he connects it to "chattering servants" and writes that Radcliffe "strove to remain the rest of the time in the enchanted realms of dignity and sublimity" (266), of course thus arguing that the comic is neither dignified nor sublime in the contrast.

and take breath, so that we are not carried away by the storm of passion [. . .]" ("The

Fools, Jesters, and Comic Characters in Shakespeare" 238). By re-envisioning relief as a

significant contribution to how readers are intended emotionally and intellectually to

respond to a literary work, we further complicate the role of the comic within a text.

Radcliffe is concerned with manipulating reader reaction, as Tompkins notes: "The

function of Mrs. Radcliffe's books was to exercise and recreate, in the first place, the

mind of the writer and secondly that of the reader" (249), thus demonstrating a critical

acknowledgement that the concerns of the author are clearly focused on the reader's

emotional experience. For both the heroines and the readers of Radcliffe's novels, comic

servants create dramatic and aesthetic distance, so that while they may experience the

emotional tension of the Gothic plot, they can still appreciate the aesthetic experience and

not become overwhelmed by excessive terror. By using the comic servant as relief in this

way, Radcliffe answers the charge that Gothic texts are excessive, while at the same time

she fulfills the real world psychological goals of humor, as seen by John Morreall: "[. . .]

humor serves as a buffer against stress, and [sic] people with a good sense of humor go

through fewer and less pronounced emotional swings" (*Comic Relief* 68). Morreall

argues that the comic should not be undervalued because of its "lower" aesthetic value

compared to the tragic; rather, it should be assessed for its human value, its ability to

promote "mental flexibility" with "disengaged, spontaneous responses," and "adaptive,

more rational thought and action" (*Comic Relief* 78-9). Radcliffe's servants do just that

for her heroines, at least at first, by relieving them of fear and thus freeing them rationally

to assess, for a moment, their own reactions to the narrative's Gothic supernaturalism.

Like Walpole, Radcliffe resurrects the popular stereotype of the gossipy and

loquacious servant who undermines the master by betraying his (or her) secrets. The

maidservants in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) routinely gossip uncontrollably to their

mistresses. Theresa, the old family servant left behind at La Vallée, the St. Aubert's

home, is the first instance of the comic maidservant in *Udolpho*. She often offers advice

which Emily calls "ill-judged" (94) because it oversteps class boundaries; however, her

advice does provide momentary relief to the grief excited by St. Aubert's death. There is

also considerable wisdom in her speeches. For example, when Emily returns to England

at the end of the narrative and wrestles with the emotional struggle to forgive Valancourt,

her lover, for his indiscretions, Theresa, at the end of a paragraph-long diatribe, advises:

"'Learning, to be sure, is a fine thing, but, if it teaches folks no better than that; why I had

rather be without it; if it would teach them to be happier, I would say something to it,

then it would be learning and wisdom too.'" (598). Although she functions here as a

surrogate parent, Theresa still is often dismissed as loquacious at such moments: "Age

and long services had given Theresa a privilege to talk, but Emily now endeavoured to

check her loquacity, and, though she felt the justness of some of her remarks, did not

choose to explain the circumstances, that had determined her conduct toward Valancourt"

(598). Diane Long Hoeveler has claimed that the comic in Radcliffe emphasizes the

distinction between female and male Gothic. Hoeveler believes that Theresa's speech

proves that "socially and economically weak positions could actually be the basis of their

[the Other's] strength" (Hoeveler *Gothic Feminism* 19) and that there is meaning to be

found "in the entire network of cultural discourses that swirl around the heroine, a sort of

black hole of meaning herself, oblivious almost all the time of the social, political,

religious, and economic issues pulsating in all directions around her" (Hoeveler *Gothic*

Feminism 55), even if those discourses are essentially foolish. Such an interpretation

claims legitimate power for the seemingly absurd servant figures in Gothic texts because

they often overstep cultural boundaries to offer advice and assistance to the heroine.

Theresa speaks from a privileged position, even though Emily seeks to undermine any

such position by regarding Theresa as comic and gossipy. Consequently, Emily is faced

with truths and wisdom which she cannot ignore completely, as the happy resolution with

Valancourt testifies. Exemplifying that model of foolish wisdom found in Shakespeare

and Walpole, Theresa's comic, conventional loquacity serves as more than relief; it

testifies to a greater cultural argument concerning who has the privilege to speak and

what impact humor may have on an overall assessment of human nature itself.[25]

However, a maidservant's loquaciousness can instigate a dangerous erosion of the

heroine's more rational sensibilities in Radcliffe, and so the comic servant can become a

conduit for Gothic anxieties which penetrate the heroine's psyche. Emily's aunt's

attendant in Italy, Annette, poses such a threat. Annette is described, and then shown, as

"talkative" (162); she cannot be "silenced thus easily" (269). Annette's talkativeness

reveals "lowly" superstitions and, like in *Otranto*, introduces supernatural machinations

into the narrative. When the travelling party reaches the castle Udolpho in Italy, Annette

remarks (rather long-windedly):

[25] Claudia Johnson also asserts that "servants provide more than comic relief" in Radcliffe by their ability
to produce history in their own way, through their oral traditions (109).

'What a wild lonely place this is, ma'am! I shall be quite frightened to

live in it. How often, and often I have wished myself in France again! I

little thought, when I came with my lady to see the world, that I should

ever be shut up in such a place as this; or I would never have left my own

country! This way, ma'amselle, down this turning. I can almost believe

in giants again, and such like, for this is just like one of their castles; and,

some night or other, I suppose I shall see fairies too, hopping about in that

great old hall, that looks more like a church, with its huge pillars, than any

thing else.' (220)

Of course, a giant haunting a castle immediately invokes *Otranto*. Annette's outburst

elicits a smile and gentle teasing from Emily, who reflects that this interlude allows her to

gladly "escape from more serious thought" (220). Here, Annette's words do produce

relief. They ease Emily's mind from the threat that their recent move highlights, but

Radcliffe also intimates that such a discussion has more serious ramifications; Annette

remarks that while fairies may not be a source of fear, ghosts certainly are, and she has

often felt a presence brush past her as she has walked (220). Quick to dismiss such

"fancies," Emily cannot dismiss the influence of such Gothic superstitions upon her own

mind, especially when they lead the women astray and into a room with a mysterious

picture hidden by a veil. Thus, the first of many mysteries of Udolpho is introduced by

servants' superstitious chatter. Emily many times is able to laugh away Annette's

rambling stories, and even manages to create her own comic jokes in response, such as

when she answers Annette's fears about sleeping in a certain chamber and her insistence

that she would rather sleep on the cannon of the east rampart, by responding, "'And what objection have you to that cannon, more than to any of the rest?' [. . .] 'the best would be rather a hard bed'" (241). But she is unable to be dismissive at all times. The introduction of the supernatural, even when accompanied with a comic character meant to incite relief against it, still affects an emotional mindset open to superstitions. In Radcliffe, foolish servants are no longer only a way to frustrate the aristocratic villain; they may also become threats against their more virtuous mistresses. As much as they highlight the absurdity of superstitious beliefs and relieve the heroine's terror, they also frequently instigate it.

As already mentioned, the connection between the servants' propensity toward oral narration and the supernatural relies on popular stereotypes of servants, and the widespread worry that such tales could infect the young that were under the servants' care. Jean Fernandez notes that servants at this time were connected to a strong oral tradition, which usually meant that they liked to tell ghost stories; servants' discourses were often associated with the "fantastic and the gothic" which marked them as dangerous and threatening to the more serious-minded bourgeois "self-made individual," (6). Annette's power to influence Emily's apprehension of the Gothic elements within the text is demonstrated in one particular example in Chapter V of the second volume. Annette has encountered local superstitions about the mysterious first wife who used to live at Udolpho which indict Montoni, Emily's new uncle, as a villain. While recounting these local legends to Emily, Annette continually thinks she hears mysterious noises and sees the lamp light turn blue (225). Emily dismisses such fears as ridiculous, and so does

the reader, who is well aware by now that Annette's fears are just another way to interrupt and therefore delay the narrative line. Emily echoes the readers' skepticism by ridiculing Annette and answering her fears in a way that recalls Matilda in *Otranto*: "But what reason had they to conclude it was a spirit, unless they had approached, and spoken to it?" (227). Here, Emily's remarking on the comic nature of Annette's concerns allows for a rational response to meeting the supernatural: confront the source of fear and anxiety. According to Brian McCuskey, this ability to engage the supernatural on rational grounds, as uncanny rather than scary, becomes a mark of "intellectual sophistication" as the nineteenth century progresses (434); therefore Emily's approach to the supernatural constitutes a "privileged" one that allows for a mastery of fear that is "provoked by servants but denied to them" (428).[26] Clearly, McCuskey has in mind class stereotypes which we may carry over to our critical conceptions of the supernatural and uncanny; however, the scene also turns away from the rational and deflates just such class privileging.

When Annette reaches the conclusion of her story, which features the wife's disappearance and the claim that she is a spirit that haunts the castle, fear creeps over Emily, especially after Annette identifies specific closed areas of the castle which are said to be haunted by mysterious groans. Annette again interrupts the narrative to report that she has heard a noise. Now, instead of ridiculing Annette, Emily, "infected with her own terrors" (227) and "deeply impressed by the chief circumstance of Annette's relation" (228), gives in to her fears and is "unwilling to be left alone, in the present state of her

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[26] See also John Garrett's *Gothic Strains and Bourgeois Sentiments in the Novels of Mrs. Ann Radcliffe and her Imitators.*

spirits; but, to avoid offending Madame Montoni [her aunt], and betraying her own

weakness, she struggled to overcome the illusions of fear, and dismissed Annette for the

night" (228). The word "infected" indicates that, for Radcliffe, the comic servant's

supernatural tales have the power of contagion to sway the heroine away from reason and

make her succumb to superstition. This idea of contamination informs Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick's conclusion that the "garrulity" of the servants in Gothic texts is a function of

their "metonymy" and "spread" (167).[27] Emily's fears are not so easily dismissed as

comic; as the heroine, Emily is a sympathetic character who we know has genuine

sources of anxiety. What is first seen as comic relief therefore turns into a contamination

that operates as a reconfirmation of Gothic fears.

Claudia Johnson dismisses the power of the servant's superstitious tale as a source

of influence in the narrative when she argues that "'superstitious' tales (the adjective is

always a pejorative in Radcliffe) [are] believed only by credulous servants, paranoid

maidens, and (for a time) spellbound readers" (97). Napier also argues that inscribing the

"distinctions between the spirit world as apprehended by servants and that explained by

persons of sensibility" is Radcliffe's way of protecting her own authorial authority:

> [. . .] she can at once curb her own imaginative flights (dampening them
>
> through comic deflation, as she often does by allowing serving maids to
>
> exhibit ludicrous degrees of fear) and suggest that spirits may be real. For,
>
> in associating himself with the oppressed and sensitive maiden (as

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[27] This idea of feelings as contagious is not limited to Gothic texts in the eighteenth century. Adela Pinch
argues the device reflects the time period's "tendency to characterize feelings as transpersonal, as
autonomous entities that do not always belong to individuals but rather wander extravagantly from one
person to another" (3).

opposed to the merely superstitious servant), the reader will realize that

receptivity to supernatural powers is a mark not of ignorance but of

emotional refinement. (66)

While Radcliffe's rational explanations, and I would argue, her use of servants as

mouthpieces to introduce the supernatural, indicate that she was aware of the "vulgarity"

associated with "a supernatural plot" and so had "to be prepared to negotiate" in order to

publish her tales (Shapira 455), the fact that the heroine's sensibilities are influenced by

the servant shows that Johnson, Napier and others are too dismissive of the servant as an

oral storyteller of supernatural fancies; time and again, the comic characters and the

moments they incite reflect an authorial concern that the text not stray too far into excess

but that it instead achieve a level of complexity in the interplay between ridiculous

suggestion and genuine fear. Terry Castle vindicates the power of the superstitious

imagination because "according to the novel's romantic myth," being haunted by ghosts

"display[s] one's power of sympathetic imagination; the cruel and dull have no such

hallucinations" (123). Low characters gain narrative power through their ghost stories

which create a sympathetic connection with the heroine. After all, if Radcliffe is

following the Shakespearean model, comic maids often display "mutuality and

familiarity" with their mistresses, operating as community rather than opposition, and

these relationships in Shakespeare are "strikingly marked by an element of sheer fun that

appears only sporadically in male-male relationships" (Evett 160), which explains why

Radcliffe's heroines always seem to be smiling at their maidservants. This is, of course,

a positive reading of this affective relationship. There are many critics who, when

operating outside of the Marxist impulse for class division, see the relationship between

the heroine and her maid in both Radcliffe and Shakespeare as a positive one which can

serve as a means of achieving greater textual complexity. Hoeveler reads Annette as

textually reclaiming, for Emily, "the folk sources of wisdom and gossip that the

patriarchy has suppressed or marginalized" (*Gothic Feminism* 96); both the servant and

the heroine gain from sharing their superstitious beliefs. Annette's discourses also

illustrate that while servants might gossip about their masters' secrets, as she does when

she reveals the mysterious nature of Montoni's first wife's disappearance, doing so

establishes a degree of loyalty in her relationship with Emily, as Bianca's ramblings do in

Otranto.

Linda Anderson discusses the tension between serving mistress over master in her

analysis of Shakespeare's plays as "important far beyond individual characters: the

choices made by the women trapped in such conflicts of service are often integral to the

action of their plays" (193). Therefore, the mistress/maid relationship which Radcliffe

appreciated from Shakespeare has real significance for the Gothic plot. In the above

example, Theresa's wisdom allows Emily to reconsider Valancourt as a romantic suitor,

thus precipitating the happy ending of marriage required by Romance. Annette also

seeks to comment on Emily's love life, and as with Juliet's Nurse and Bianca, her advice

is misguided and therefore comic to both the reader and to Emily. When she misreads

Emily's apprehension about the welfare of Count Morano, who was run through after

invading Emily's room, as a romantic interest (269), she elicits a smile from Emily and

thus fulfills the role of providing comic relief in this case. However, the discussion also

leads Annette to confess that Emily's aunt has been slandering her reputation in the

negotiations for marriage conducted by Montoni to Morano (270). While such

knowledge empowers the heroine, it also reinforces her fears of forced sexual persecution

and manipulation and thereby heightens the suspense of the Gothic narrative. It is

significant that the plot that Morano hatches to kidnap Emily can only be accomplished

because "the thoughtless prattle of Annette" has given them "the most probable means of

decoying Emily" (335). Annette's verbosity does much more than influence the heroine

here; it becomes a real Gothic threat to Emily's virginity.

The threatening implications of the comic servant's verbosity are reinforced in the

parallel narrative of Blanche and her servant Dorothée. Dorothée is able to give Emily a

great deal of information about the late Marchioness; her storytelling, while serving as a

long-winded delay from the main action of the story, actually imparts valuable

knowledge and ends up sustaining the Gothic mystery of the text as a whole by revealing

that mysterious music is related to the spirit's appearance (493-498). The complex nature

of the comic servant is seen in this example. Dorothée supplies Emily with valuable

background information but also instigates greater anxieties and superstitions, both

solving and prolonging the mysteries surrounding Udolpho. Using servants' stories to

propel the plot forward occurs more conventionally in Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797),

when the servant Beatrice confounds the hero by mistakenly reporting that the heroine

Ellena had died, when in actuality it is her aunt who has died (52-5).[28]

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[28] This scene replicates the ensuing confusion introduced by Bianca's misdiagnosis of Matilda's death in *Otranto*.

Radcliffe's multiple replications of Walpole's loquacious comic servants in two

of her novels illustrates that by the end of the eighteenth century, the comic character had

been established as a fixed convention which supplements, rather than contradicts, the

construction of terror within the Gothic plot. For instance, it is another servant, one who

is treated comically by the other characters, who nevertheless instigates one of the greater

mysteries of *Udolpho* and, at the same time, provides the means for the explanatory

resolution which is the signature of a Radcliffean Gothic plot. Ludovico, Annette's

Italian lover, volunteers to stay in the apartment which is supposedly haunted, according

to the servants of the chateau at which Emily stays once she befriends Blanche and Count

de Villefort. Ludovico's offer is met with a smile by Villefort (513). Coupled with his

continued ironic response and Annette's laments concerning Ludovico's safety, it

becomes obvious that Villefort considers the event and the superstitions that occasioned it

as ridiculous, and so this seems to be a scene meant for comic release after the building

up of tensions occasioned by the adventures in Udolpho. However, despite Radcliffe's

framing of the scene as absurd, Ludovico does disappear from the room, indicating that

Villefort's ridicule is actually the genuinely foolish perspective. Discussing *The Italian*,

Victor Sage brings up Radcliffe's deliberate use of farce, and his arguments are

applicable to *Udolpho* as well: "This almost total isolation of the characters is signaled as

a source of unease for the reader, while at the same time it is being produced by the

comic machinery of farce. Mrs. Radcliffe has used the structure of farce, but transposed

it, to change the analogy, into another emotional key. [The farce] becomes in the context

of the Gothic a metaphor for epistemological doubt and theological unease in the

presence of death" (193). The fact that the supernatural does seem to occur, despite its

deliberate mocking, suggests that, like Walpole, Radcliffe is working toward greater

complexities than simply relief. While Sage ties such complexity to religious overtones,

I see it as a function of the genre's hybridism and of the exploration of authorial control

over readers' emotional responses. But in Radcliffean Gothic, the supernatural is

ultimately explained, although such explanations are delayed extensively. Thus, in this

instance, Ludovico is discovered among a band of thieves who were the actual source of

the "hauntings" of the apartment. While the explanation apparently explodes the

servants' superstitious beliefs, the attentive reader of Radcliffe learns that too much

emphasis on the comic nature of the superstitions can be just as detrimental as excessive

belief. The servant becomes, as in nineteenth-century texts like *Wuthering Heights*, a

"conductor, mentor, and guide to the gothic regions of the hidden" (Fernandez 62),

exposing serious threats.

　　In fact, one of the ways in which Radcliffe distinguishes her use of the comic

servant from Walpole's is by making her comic servants' foolish knowledge and

loquaciousness a means of heightening the Gothic threats to the heroine, rather than

having them operate solely to delay the villain. I have already examined the influence

Annette's superstitions have on Emily and the role her loquaciousness plays in the

disastrous efforts of Count Morano to kidnap Emily. This pattern of influence is

reiterated when Annette's fear of being imprisoned in a room by Ludovico for her own

safety, during the commotion after Emily's aunt's removal to the east turret by her

tyrannical husband, is treated comically by Emily and therefore may be taken as a comic

interlude by the reader because it comes at a time loaded with Gothic anxiety concerning

the fate of Emily's aunt.[29] Annette's fears alleviate Emily's own distress for a moment,

as Emily can "scarcely forbear smiling at the heterogeneous distresses of Annette, though

she sincerely pitied them" (303). The interlude allows Emily to gather the courage to

continue seeking her aunt, and the subsequent search actually provokes a greater Gothic

tension within the narrative. Again, Annette's fears exert a harmful influence on Emily's

sensibilities as, on the next page, she succumbs to the "melancholy fancy" that the turret

she is searching contains "a dreadful truth" and is "a place of death" (304). Readers are

then treated to a suspenseful build-up as Emily follows a trail of blood which she can

only imagine is her aunt's. Annette's supernatural fears encourage Emily to succumb to

her own fears concerning her aunt's premature demise: "her imagination was inflamed,

while her judgment was not enlightened, and the terrors of superstition again pervaded

her mind" (350). The comic servant becomes a threat, therefore, to the heroine's own

rationality; no longer operating as the rational woman who can smile on Annette's ghost

stories, Emily now imagines that she is in one herself. For Scott Paul Gordon, Emily's

superstitious fears reconfirm the overarching theme of Quixotism in *Udolpho*. Rather

than dealing with the sort of comic servant who, like Sancho Panza, serves as a foil to the

protagonist's delusions, Gordon argues, Radcliffe's protagonist never learns because she

has no foils to the Quixotic position: "The novel may ridicule Emily's superstition, but it

does not establish as its alternative a clear-sighted perception of the 'real,' of objects as

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[29] And so the interlude with Annette becomes a type of interruption which Napier comments on: "Ann Radcliffe (paradoxically) uses interruption to attenuate, not to shorten the narrative, often withholding information for chapters at a time, prolonging a lingering (and sometimes nearly forgotten) sense of mystery and dread" (56).

they 'really are'" (149). For Gordon, the point of the novel is to assert that perception is interpretation always, and flawed interpretation at that. Such a reading of course would insist that the comic servants' foolish perceptions are just as credible and valid as the heroine's, even when mocked, because they influence the heroine to perceive the world in the same skewed way.

Therefore, by her deliberate authorial choices, Radcliffe rescues the comic servant from the criticisms that have been aimed at Walpole's characters, namely that their conventionality disrupts the narrative flow. Radcliffe makes her servants part of an overall aesthetic strategy intent on combining the comic and Gothic terror to establish a balanced emotional tone. While characters are sometimes foolish in Radcliffe, they are almost always merry. By extending the servants' comic potential to the creation of a rustic, festive atmosphere throughout the text, Radcliffe insists that the lower-classes actively participate in the creation of her aesthetic complexity, a participation in "community" which is seemingly denied to them in Walpole's formulaic representation that focuses solely on the servant in relation to his or her aristocratic masters and mistresses. Radcliffe's merry peasants fill the comic green world which, for a time, suspends real life tensions (Henkle 54), and so function to provide an easing of Gothic anxiety like her comic servants. Radcliffe thus modifies eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, as Daniel Cottom argues, by creating a more democratic demarcation of lower-class sensibility as sympathetic and natural, even if she cannot fully reverse the notion that Emily, the middle-class heroine, has a more refined sensibility than her servants (Cottom 27-29).

Part of the aesthetic experience that Radcliffe constructs for her readers involves her use of festive peasantry to enhance the heroine's experience of the landscape and her travels. The presence of merry peasants in the novel's Gothic landscapes has been critically discussed as important to the atmospheric sublimity which becomes a distinguishing characteristic of Radcliffean Gothic. For Cottom, Radcliffe's characters are indistinguishable from the landscape itself, what he terms "character through cartography" (35). Her peasants are actually detrimental to Radcliffe's more liberal attitudes toward the lower-classes as represented in the above discussion of her maid servants because by connecting the lower-class to the landscape, Cottom argues, they "can be included within the demands of this art only as objects or as the voices of nature, not in terms of their own consciousness" (41). Many other commentators likewise criticize Radcliffe's treatment of peasants as secondary and second-class; Diego Saglia, for example, writes that Ellena's encounters with the lower-classes in *The Italian* "offers the English characters the possibility to occupy a hegemonic position entirely constructed at the expense of the alien object and through a sustained negotiation with it" (26). And Diane Long Hoeveler regards the idealized peasant as a backwards glance to "an earlier rural existence" which reveals Radcliffe's "flawed heritage of sensibility as a civilizing principle," (87-88). There is little question that the peasants of *Udolpho* enhance the aesthetic sensibility of the heroine in the scene; however, what these critics fail to note is how the text explicitly connects the peasants to a comic vitality, ignoring the comic mode for more serious, "cultural" concerns. The lower class's connection to "animation and festivity," to the comic rather than the Gothic mode, elucidates their subversive power.

Like their servant counterparts, rustic peasants' creation of a comic and merry

atmosphere allows for a greater discourse on their role within a hierarchal society, that,

while it does not fully overcome class prejudice, at least begins to show the lower-classes

in a more democratic light, especially since the merry atmosphere is presented in direct

contrast to the amusements of an upper-class Parisian society, deemed sinful in its excess.

When the Count de Villefort is travelling through the mountains on the way to

France in *Udolpho*, he is presented a scene of mountaineers and peasants dancing, in the

midst of the sublime landscape, and stops to admire them; Radcliffe takes this moment to

compare

> this with the scenes of such gaiety as he had witnessed at Paris, where
>
> false taste painted the features, and, while it vainly tried to supply the
>
> glow of nature, concealed the charms of animation—where affectation so
>
> often distorted the air, and vice perverted the manners—sighed to think,
>
> that natural graces and innocent pleasures flourished in the wilds of
>
> solitude, while they drooped amidst the concourse of polished society.
>
> (562)

While the peasants are truly "joyous," the jaded Parisians only mock gaiety through

affectation. Commenting on their different approaches to amusement, Radcliffe uses the

comic to clearly delineate and distinguish the pleasanter peasants from the vulgar

aristocracy. Radcliffe is aligning herself with the eighteenth-century beliefs against

affectation, which Henry Fielding had so clearly connected with class prejudice and

servitude in *Joseph Andrews* (1742). As in Fielding, the peasant and lower-class servants

in Radcliffe's novels are honest in their merriment; the upper-class only "act" merry because they are incapable of displaying a true comic sensibility. The exceptions to the rule are the male heads-of-house, St. Aubert and Count de Villefort, who represent the middle-class sensibility that chooses to abandon aristocratic vanity and privileges instead the merry scenes of the country. They display critical discrimination and discernment from which the reader may learn to appreciate the peasants' honest comic spirit.   The heroine often does not have enough experience to judge, and therefore can only enjoy the merriment as part of the local atmosphere and landscape, as when Emily remarks: "the tasteful simplicity of the peasant girls, who watched the rural treasures [fruit and flowers at the market on the Italian riverbank], rendered them gay and striking objects. [. . .], and now and then the passing chorus of peasants [. . .] heightened the animation and festivity of the scene" (203). This seems to articulate the perspective from which Cottom argues when he critiques Radcliffe's use of the peasant class. However, as I have shown, in Radcliffe's novels, not all middle-class characters respond in this way. The older men who have experienced the world's false amusements can truly appreciate how aesthetically better the peasants' comic spirit is, and so *Udolpho* is not as prejudiced as it seems to some.

In another scene which invokes no class prejudice, St. Aubert's encounters with the peasantry allow him to hear the story of La Voisin, his kind host for the night and a welcome "friend" of similar, not lower, sensibility (*Udolpho* 67). It is through the sympathetic identification between St. Aubert and La Voisin that the reader can become aware of the humanity and the equality of those who occupy a lower station in life. It is

clear throughout the scene that La Voisin is intelligent, espousing a belief in the afterlife championed by St. Aubert, and he is aware of the emotional impact such talk has upon Emily, and in all these matters he exhibits refined manners and sensibilities (66-67). What is remarkable is that La Voisin belongs completely to that green world of peasants, demonstrated all the more strongly in his ability to narrate a local ghost story concerning the haunted chateau in the woods. In the character of La Voisin, Radcliffe displays all the conventions of the comic servant, and yet he is not treated as a fool; he is shown to be as wise and sensible as St. Aubert. Once again, Radcliffe's generic complexity is displayed in her creation of the merry peasantry who are scattered throughout her narrative.

Radcliffe's use of the festive world, like her use of the comic servant, imitates Shakespearean comedy, most notably in the conclusion of her last published and perhaps most refined novel, *The Italian* (1797). I have already discussed the maid servant's proclivity to incite Gothic drama in this novel, and it is to *The Italian's* use of the comedic marriage plot, and the comic servant's role in the final scene's "rustic good humour" (495),[30] to which I now turn. Radcliffe proves more egalitarian in her gender definitions than many critics, most notably Hoeveler, have so far noticed in their discussions of Radcliffe's heroines, but by turning to the servants we can see this egalitarianism play out to a greater degree with the creation of Paulo in *The Italian*. Paulo is evidence that maid servants are not the only ones who possess the power to redeem the Gothic narrative through comic means. Paulo's most important appearance

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[30] From a contemporary review of *The Italian* published in *The Monthly Mirror* given in the Penguin Edition of *The Italian*.

occurs at the end of the novel, when the hero Vivaldi and heroine Ellena are finally joined in marriage, fulfilling the comedic requirements of Romance. Fittingly enough, Radcliffe opens the scene with an epigraph from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which invokes the idea of a servant's unwavering loyalty, clearly prefiguring the role of the comic servant as one worthy to note for the reader's edification. When Paulo appears, he is so overjoyed at the safe return of his master that he occasions a great deal of "mischief" by knocking over the gentlemen's snuff boxes in his comic enthusiasm (468). His entrance provides a moment of levity upon the resolution of the hero Vivaldi's terrifying experience with the Italian Inquisition. Because he babbles and bumbles, he does appear to be the comic relief of the moment.

However, as with all the characters I have discussed, his is a more complex role than it at first appears to be. He also introduces the comedic resolution of marriage into the text; Paulo's comic spirit allows him the freedom to express gaiety and to shout at the union, which the upper-classes' sense of decorum would not permit (474). The party that follows, held in the "fairy-land" of green gardens (475), presents Paulo with the opportunity to fulfill his comic potential to the utmost as "master of the revels" (476). The fool figure returns, crowned in comedic glory, to offer us nothing short of a manifesto on how to be merry: "I wish that all those, who on this night are not merry enough to speak before they think, may ever after be grave enough to think before they speak! [. . .] O! giorno felice! O! giorno felice! repeated Paulo, as he bounded forward to mingle in the dance, and 'O! giorno felice!'[31] was again shouted in chorus by his joyful companions" (478). Hoeveler remarks that in Paulo's speech, "Once again the servant

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[31] O! happy day!

functions as the voice of the redeemed as he provides the heavy-handed moral of the novel: [. . .]" (*Gothic Feminism* 121), a moral which Christine Berthin believes is an promotion of "the triumph of the rational over superstition and passion" because Paulo advocates "thinking before speaking" (65). By closing the novel with a merry fool, though, Radcliffe significantly places a great deal of importance on the comic rather than the Gothic. The moral of her tale is not one of terror, but of how to rebound from it. I do not see this closing scene in such pejorative terms as Claudia Johnson does when she says that "Paulo's bravado of ecstatic inanity" might be seen as "a variation on Radcliffe's own celebration of a happy and well-ordered world at expense of her plot's own meanings" and reads the scene as "the buffoonery of disclaimer" (136-7). I see the comic as a vital part of the Gothic genre overall and so I contend that dismissing it as subterfuge neglects the implication that the comic spirit is a worthy voice with which to end the narrative. A contemporary reviewer of Radcliffe claims that Paulo can be "too much a philosopher for a servant either of England or of Italy" (501).[32] Such an evaluation only strengthens my conviction that Radcliffe's servants' ability to be comic allows them a freedom from class, and national, prejudices. In redeeming the comic narratives of servants, I am claiming that there is more complexity than has usually been acknowledged in the Gothic's use of conventional characters, as well as in its authors' attempts to merge the comic with the Gothic. That the characters I have discussed resist clear-cut critical definitions, that "[i]n almost every case, classifications and sequences founder at one point or another over the servant's apparently irreducible inconsistency" leads me to believe that "the indeterminacy of servant characterization [. . .] or relativism

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[32] From *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* given in the Penguin Edition of *The Italian*.

is precisely the point" (Robbins 36). After all, conventional does not mean

uncomplicated.

Chapter Two
"You Slay Me!": Comic Villains in the Female Gothic[1]

As discussed in Chapter One, the inclusion of the comic within the Gothic creates

a great deal of disruption; on one level, comic characters disrupt the generic unity of the

text (mixing comedy with tragedy) and, on another level, they disrupt the unity of the

text's emotional effect (mixing humor with terror). While they cause incongruity within

their particular narratives, comic servants in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and

Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* actually establish a unity of conventional

characterization across the Gothic canon, thus setting the comic character as a

fundamental part of the genre. Walpole deliberately mixes the comic with the tragic,

invoking the great Shakespeare as justification, thus making the comic within the Gothic

thoroughly, aesthetically viable. Although Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1778),

first published as *The Champion of Virtue* (1777), differs from Walpole's more

sensational approach in its treatment of the supernatural as proof of lineage rather than

ancestral intrusion, the text does insist on following Walpole's example in its inclusion of

comic characters meant to infuse the Gothic plot with humor. While Reeve notes the

oddity of Walpole's juxtaposition in her preface, commenting that his text "excite[s]

laughter" (3), she also asserts that it is the text's excessive supernaturalism which causes

her derision, not the comic characters. For Reeve, laughter excited by the supernatural

mechanisms meant to produce terror is a sign of authorial intention and emotional effect

gone awry. Significantly, Reeve affirms that the purpose to merge the tragic with the

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[1] While Abby Coykendall disagrees with labeling Reeve as part of "female Gothic" because of her generic disparity with the Radcliffean tradition, I assert Reeve is part of the female Gothic in that she is a female author, and therefore align myself more with George E. Haggerty's assessment of Reeve in his book *Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later Eighteenth Century.*

comic is still a grand "plan" but that the Gothic effect of terror and the comic effect of

humor must be clearly articulated rather than merged transgressively. The supernatural

should only excite terror and awe and leave the inciting of laughter to the characters who

deserve to be the butts of the joke.

Many would argue Reeve's particular brand of Gothicism, while it reacts to

Walpole's tale, is not a part of the Walpolean mode, and that therefore *The Old English*

Baron fails to assimilate into the "proper" Gothic canon. Abby Coykendall argues that

the reason Reeve is critically neglected as a central part of the Gothic canon is that she is

"sandwiched" between greater writers of the genre, Walpole and Radcliffe; however,

Coykendall also asserts that her apparently imperfect "fit" within the genre should not

hinder her inclusion in it: "Reeve remains instrumental to the development of the Gothic

genre as a whole, regardless of how little appreciated she is as a Gothic novelist in her

own right. Reeve not only promotes and popularizes the emerging Gothic canon, but she

also initiates the still enduring research into its imaginary origins, research at times

almost as fantastic, nostalgic, and prolific as the genre itself" (444-5). While Coykendall

here seeks to valorize Reeve's Gothicism, she fails to see that Reeve's style actually can

be seen to work well within the evolving Gothic lineage of Walpole and later Radcliffe, if

one looks at the comic conventions, rather than just at the Gothic effects, her text

employs.

Reeve's apparent neglect of what critics define as the principal indicators of

conventional Gothicism—the supernatural as marvelous and terrifying, the persecuted

heroine—as well as her advocacy of "Enlightenment progress—a proclivity put into

question by Walpole and even further problematized by such novelists as Radcliffe, Sophia Lee, and Charlotte Smith—," are what seem to put her at such a disadvantage in the generic gene pool, "in stark contrast to those who eventually develop the genre that she so early seeks to commandeer" (Coykendall 480). Indeed, Reeve makes it clear in the preface to her work that her generic deviations are intentional. She values her work as a direct response to Walpole's more fantastic Gothic story, noting in her preface that her "Story is the literary offspring of the Castle of Otranto, written upon the same plan, with a design to unite the most attractive and interesting circumstances of the ancient Romance and modern Novel," (2), but it also constitutes an unmitigated rejection of Walpole's too "violent" machinations of the marvelous. She hopes her tale will take the reader "within the utmost *verge* of probability" rather than into excess as Walpole's does (3). Reeve's claim that Walpole's text is one of excess echoes the contemporary critical rejection of the genre as a whole as too excessive in its use of the supernatural and its emotional affect; Gothic texts produce excesses from which neither the narrative nor the reader can recover. Reeve therefore becomes the first literary critic of the genre even as she attempts to add to that genre. In her rejection of Walpole's excess, Reeve manages to modify the conventions of the genre to support her own ideologies concerning aesthetics and politics.

One such modification, among others, is her work, while set in the past, returns the Gothic to England, and her novel will remain one of the few which do so. Setting the text in England establishes a cultural familiarity most Gothic authors attempt to subvert by setting their works in the distant past and in foreign countries and propagating the idea

that their texts reproduce authentic manuscripts from those times and countries. Most

Gothic authors, in fact, neglect to fully inscribe such a distance in their characterization,

usually developing heroic characters who represent recognizable English, middle-class

ideals. Reeve negates such disparities by explicitly setting her text in England. The

change in setting also asserts that the Gothic plot of dispossession and the Gothic need

for supernatural occurrences raised against such dispossession is, at heart, not so foreign

a phenomenon as other authors of the genre seem to claim. Thus, she is suggesting that

ghostly possession of Gothic spaces is a direct effect of the dispossession of "true" heirs

while at the same time maintaining dispossession as the conventional Gothic impetus in

the narrative's plot. In other words, what is "Gothic" for her is separate from mere time

and place. As Stefan Andriopoulos notes, Reeve wants "to escape similar denunciations

and to avoid the 'redundancy' of the 'marvellous' (OEB, 4) [that] she herself condemns

in Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*," so she "restricts the supernatural and subjects it to a

gradual concealment [. . .]" (742). Reeve's ghosts, in other words, are concerned solely

with revealing the true heir of the Lovel estates, not with inciting terror in the hero's (and

therefore the reader's) breast. However, Andriopoulos goes on to note that there is a

distinct similarity between the texts that unite them generically as Gothic: "The narrative

interest of *The Old English Baron* is virtually identical to that of *The Castle of Otranto*:

both novels represent the restoration of genealogical equilibrium" (742-3). By focusing

her Gothic plot of dispossession specifically on English barons and English property

rights, she establishes a national cultural legitimacy for the supernatural occurrences her

text describes, without invoking Shakespeare.

Mirroring Reeve's less radical approach to the supernatural, Reeve's comic

villains are not as transgressive as Walpole's comic servants in their power to disrupt

Gothic terror with humor. In fact, Reeve's villains lack a certain spiritedness which

others have identified as the prerequisite of the canonical Gothic villain as established by

Walpole:

> Reeve inaugurates the now proverbial lineage of the Gothic genre—
>
> placing Walpole at its head and laying claim to the new literary
>
> pedigree—only to forsake the genealogy that she seems to sanction and
>
> fashion her work into exactly what Walpole means *Otranto* not to be: a
>
> plausible fiction. Swift generalizations about Gothic origins—even the
>
> most astute generalizations, such as "ambivalent self parody...
>
> characterizes the gothic from its genesis"—thus invariably come to a halt
>
> once applied to Reeve, the first to mythologize this genesis but also the
>
> first to rid the Gothic of its transgressive parody. (Coykendall 444)

In answer to Coykendall's (and others') claims that Reeve's text lacks the spiritedness of

Walpole's because she fails to achieve extravagant emotional effect, I argue that Reeve's

text follows the model set by Walpole in the inclusion of comic characters to be laughed

at, while at the same time insisting that the butt of ridicule, in accordance with her more

"plausible" sensibility, should be what all Gothic texts seek to shame: overreachers and

self-aggrandizers. Therefore, the comic butt should not be noble (in the sense of

character, not rank) servants but rather villainous aristocrats.[2] Margaret Ganz finds that

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[2] Reeve and later Radcliffe are not the only writers to use comic villains. Diane Long Hoeveler in *Gothic Riffs* notes that Matthew Gregory Lewis's drama *The Castle Spectre* features "an absurdly comic and

humor may connect "fools" to villains in Charles Dickens' works because in "humor not only fools and eccentrics, but some of the villains, can become concrete, memorable, plausible in their susceptibility to the cultivation of illusion" (92). As I will discuss in subsequent chapters, the use of comic characters in Gothicized texts carries well into the nineteenth century and into Dickens' works especially. Ganz believes that "the cultivation of illusion" is what marks characters as comic, and the villains of Reeve and Radcliffe achieve their comic status by cultivating their own illusions about their social circles, making the focus of their folly not the supernatural illusions of the foolish servant class but the illusion of status, a more probable illusion to couple with Reeve's more "probable" supernatural.

Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* follows the unjustly persecuted hero Edmund as he struggles to reconcile his innate nobility and valor with his rank as a peasant. His parents return as supernatural manifestations in order to intervene and establish Edmund's true lineage as heir of the Lovel estate. The main plot of Edmund's discovery of his heritage is paralleled by the framing narrative of Philip Harclay's return to England after campaigning in the Middle East. There are three villains in Reeve's text. Walter Lovel, who usurps Edmund's lands after killing Edmund's father and imprisoning his mother, rarely appears in the main narrative but poses the real threat by virtue of his past actions, as the narrative reveals. The villains who persecute Edmund directly,

---

superstitious priest, Father Philip, a bumbling, greedy, lecherous, and buffoonish man who functions throughout the play as a caricature of the ineffectual and flawed Catholic clergy" (125). While I am not concerned with Lewis's more horrific brand of Gothicism in this project, Hoeveler's assessment does support my argument that comic villains serve as markers of what should be deemed ridiculous in Gothic texts. For clarification of this idea, see the quote from Margaret Ganz that follows and the subsequent discussion.

Wenlock and Markham, are the nephews of Baron Fitz-Owen, who rents the lands from

his brother-in-law, Walter Lovel. This chapter will argue that the secondary nature of

these villains allows them to become comic, and that Reeve's transformation of comic

servants into villains suggests a shift in the Gothic convention which provides a

streamlined experience of the comic for her readers, rather than the complex reaction

achieved by the comic servants in Walpole's text.

     Coykendall contrasts Reeve to Radcliffe (and to Walpole by extension) because

she feels that comparing them reduces Reeve to a shadow of Radcliffe rather than an

author in her own right. Coykendall fails, however, to really empower Reeve in the

contrast, often noting her differences in pejorative terms (and thus reiterating other

critics' depreciation of Reeve's Gothicism):

> Despite the nod to the Gothic in its subtitle and preface, *The Old English*
> *Baron* remains more a travesty of Walpole's Gothic novel, and a pre-
> emptive strike against its imitators, than any kind of tribute to the genre as
> a whole. At odds with just about everything that sets *Otranto* apart from
> other novels (and, thus, in keeping with her familial logic, the Gothic from
> other genres), Reeve nonetheless tries to pass off her unseasonably
> didactic romance in the guise of a charmingly refurbished Walpolean
> antique, summoning the trendy name and far-away era of Walpole's
> "Gothic Story" but sanitizing the traits with which he distinguishes each.
> (451)

As is so often the case, difference is found to be a matter of absence rather than contrast. In the following discussion, I agree that while Reeve's text may be different, it is not "worse," and that her text exerts just as much influence on Ann Radcliffe as Walpole's. When Reeve transforms comic servants into comic villains, I argue, she raises a new way of approaching Gothicism and its emotional effect on readers that challenges Radcliffe to go beyond Walpole in the canonical text of the Gothic genre, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Perhaps Radcliffe's ability to fuse the distinct threads of the genre into an aesthetically sound whole is what marks her as the master of the genre.

     Reeve's villains are comic because they are the butts of Reeve's narrative jokes, and they are the butts of the joke because they are ineffectual in their abilities to *be* villains and their ability, or inability, to communicate sincerely or succinctly, much like how Walpole's and Radcliffe's comic servants are verbally ineffectual and so made ridiculous. Since the villains I discuss here as comic are not the primary villains of the text, they, like servants, serve as peripheral threats. This is an important distinction. If the primary villain of a Gothic text becomes ridiculous, it most certainly changes the emotional effect achieved at the hands of the charismatic yet terrifying tyrant so common to the Gothic genre. It transforms the Gothic into its parody because it works against the cultivation of terror, the genre's primary goal.[3] Reeve's comic villains are meant to incite a humorous effect for readers, a function which makes them "the figures that fulfill the author's end by rousing in us the intended reaction and make us share in the repaying

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[3] The comic villains I discuss here are not to be confused with the laughing villains of texts like William Beckford's *Vathek*. The comic villains I discuss here engender the *reader's* laughter through their ridiculous behavior. Laughing villains are not to be laughed at, maintaining their awesome power and even becoming more terrifying in the juxtaposition between their laughter and their actions. Therefore, unlike comic villains, laughing villains are given agency in their ability to laugh at others.

sight of unsuspecting absurdity" (Cazamian 208-9). While their function and the effect achieved are similar, the notable difference between Walpole's servants and Reeve's villains involves their rank and class. Why did the comic butt transform from the bumbling servant to the aristocratic villain in Reeve's text?

Humor has been known to have negative connotations so it should come as no surprise that villains might be associated with such a response. John Morreall argues that humor can instigate positive effects such as tolerance and communal bonding, but that it can just as easily be associated with harmful effects: irresponsibility toward civic duties, blocking compassion to those who suffer, and promoting prejudice (*Comic Relief* 102-5). As we will see, the villains I discuss here actually embody all three of these harmful effects, suggesting that civic irresponsibility and antipathy toward others become targets of ridicule in Gothic texts. As Paul Lewis asserts, "[…] we discover which characters are low by learning to laugh at them" and "when we laugh at a character, we must feel that his or her qualities are at the moment ridiculous" (33-35). The comic butt is meant not only to produce humorous affect but also to reveal what the author deems worthy of critique in their cultural moment. While my discussion in Chapter One revealed the hidden power given to comic servants who delay the Gothic plot and the reasons why readers therefore cannot simply dismiss them as low and ridiculous, my assessment of Reeve's comic villains is that they engender a more simplistic reading of comic characters as embodiments of what can and should be ridiculed. I believe this is because these characters are thoroughgoing villains, and as such are already pejorative. No one sympathizes with the villains, that is, until they become the protagonists rather than the

antagonists of Gothic texts. As my reading of Madame Cheron in Radcliffe's *Udolpho*

will reveal, being labeled a villain allows for the disdain necessary for comic butts to

achieve laughter at their expense. When Madame Montoni *née* Cheron becomes the

victim rather than the villain, she is no longer comic. The relaxation of sympathy which

accompanies the role of the villain takes away the emotional complexity achieved by

Walpole's servants and Radcliffe's villain turned victim. The difference between

Walpole's comic characters and Reeve's, then, is that Walpole's servants achieve an

effectual disruption of the narrative by producing humor while Reeve's villains and

Radcliffe's Madame Cheron (when the comic villain) achieve nothing more than laughter

at their expense.

The transformation of Walpole's comic servants into Reeve's comic villains also

indicates a political shift between Walpole's progressive Whig ideologies and Reeve's

more conservative views after the American Revolution,[4] as Gary Kelly argues:

> The political themes of *The Champion of Virtue: A Gothic Story* suggest
>
> the reasons for its continuing popularity during the nineteenth-century
>
> transformation of old Whig politics into reformist and liberal ones.
>
> Republished as *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story*, the work is a
>
> critique, not only literary but also ideological, of new Whig politics as
>
> represented particularly by the "founding" Gothic romance, *The Castle of*
>
> *Otranto* (dated 1765; published December 1764), and its author, Horace
>
> Walpole. (121)

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[4] As Toni Wein writes, *The Old English Baron* "thematizes the American Revolution and its aftermath" (74) in its depiction of proper and improper civil unrest.

Resistance to new political ideologies seems to be a conservative reaction very unlike

what critics like Coykendall consider to be part of the Gothic genre's agenda of resistance

to the old world order. However, by making the comic butt a villainous aristocrat, Reeve

undermines the ideology that the aristocracy alone embodies nobility. Therefore, her

Gothic story can be read as similar to other Gothic texts which embody a middle-class

assertion of power against feudal tyranny.

Reeve's humorous effect is achieved at the expense of the minor aristocratic

"villains," Wenlock and Markham. Wenlock and Markham serve as the villainous foils

against Edmund, as much as the primary Gothic villain Walter Lovel serves as the foil to

the previous generation, represented by Edmund's parents, Baron Fitz-Owen, and Philip

Harclay: "With almost as liminal a position in the rigorously hierarchical household as

Edmund, the Fitz-Owen kinsmen offer an exact but inverted composite of the protagonist

himself. Much like the fabled rivals, the black pot and kettle, Wenlock and Markham

protest vigilantly against the 'upstart' Edmund, while Edmund and his cohorts protest no

less vigilantly against them" (Coykendall 462). However, unlike the peevish Walter

Lovel, who manages to kill Edmund's parents and successfully take over Edmund's

estate, Wenlock and Markham are, for the most part, ineffectual in their villainy. They

are so ineffectual, in fact, that some critics ignore them all together, as Gary Kelly does

when he asserts that villains are "non-existent in Reeve," especially in comparison to

Walpole's Manfred, and that Reeve "replaces evildoers with benefactors" (122). And it

is their ineffectuality which marks them as comic butts as their villainous efforts become

the ultimate narrative joke.[5] As Toni Wein argues, despite their "paranoid discourse

about the intentions of Edmund to destabilize the harmony of the extended family,"

Reeve makes sure to "turn [sic] the accusation back upon his accusers" (75-6). While

Wenlock and Markham's plotting of revenge against Edmund is treated as a typical

Gothic threat for a time, their plotting ultimately backfires, negating the threat and

producing humor at their expense instead. The first instance of this reversal appears in

their plotting of Edmund's death in the wars in France. It is treated as a very serious

threat within the text until they are forced to engage in the skirmish with Edmund and

face "the horrors of a dark night, and wet roads" (25), reducing their perception of

discomfort as ridiculous in contrast to the Gothic plot Edmund endures. They are also

reduced to shame in their expedition, and their cohorts "were publickly reproved for their

backwardness" for abandoning Edmund to his fate in the skirmish (25). So not only do

they fail to kill Edmund by not aiding him in battle, but his gallantry reveals their own

cowardice. Reeve uses them as comic relief against their own villainy. Reeve's comic

villains are simpler, cleaner delineations of comic relief within a Gothic text, which

squares with the assessment of Reeve's Gothic story as a "corrective"[6] to Walpole's

Otranto. As shown in her preface, Reeve mainstreamed the Gothic, "trim[ming] her

imagination in accordance with critical standards of acceptability" (Clery *Rise* 84-86).

My own reading largely accords with other cultural critics' readings of *The Old English*

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[5] George E. Haggerty in *Unnatural Affections* argues that ineffectual villains in women's novels are a direct
result of the woman novelist's concern with challenging "the haven of domesticity" and the traditional
marriage plot (13). While he treats ineffectuality as a way for women to champion the more virtuous and
resourceful heroine, and therefore champion women in general, I do not see the ineffectual nature of these
villains as a matter of gender, as Radcliffe makes the comic villain a woman, Madame Cheron.
[6] E. J. Clery's term in *Rise*.

Baron, while suggesting, though, that understanding the role of comic characters in Gothic texts is integral to understanding the whole agenda of affective response that Gothic texts meant to achieve.

George E. Haggerty puts Reeve in the category of "female Gothic," a term made crucial to the discussion of the Gothic by feminist scholars such as Ellen Moers and Kate Ferguson Ellis, because she is a female author. He argues that Reeve's text is more concerned with "legal squabbles of a group of petty aristocrats" than with an investment in the supernatural which would come to define the genre (Haggerty *Unnatural Affections* 55), which suggests that the class of the comic butt in Reeve is a function of this focus on aristocratic concerns, because the villains and the heroes are from the same rank, even if, like in *Otranto*, the main protagonist Edmund is not revealed to be noble until the end. Haggerty goes on to note that the focus on the aristocracy means a focus on "male rivalry and the struggles for power amid this group of petty landowners" (*Unnatural Affections* 58). Patricia Meyer Spacks agrees with Haggerty's assessment; calling *The Old English Baron* "a conduct book for men" (200), she argues that when Reeve turns her protagonist into "a young man allegedly of peasant origin and acutely conscious of what he cannot do because he lacks the privileges of rank" (199), she upholds the class system which the newly formed middle-classes were challenging. However, as already noted, the aristocratic Wenlock and Markham can be seen as a middle-class challenge; by turning aristocratic men into comic butts, Reeve reinforces a Gothic plot which identifies within the ranks of the aristocracy certain traits which must be vilified and ridiculed, namely

overreaching personal interests that would take lands and reputations away from rightful

owners.

It could be argued that such a plot actually reinforces a conservative agenda

directed against the capitalistic, middle-class gentry of Reeve's time. Diane Long

Hoeveler connects Reeve to Walpole as examples of "conservative gothic"[7] and links the

rise of Gothic villains to the terror of the French Revolution (*Gothic Riffs* 80-1),

suggesting that Reeve's conservatism is why both her villains and her heroes come from

the old world, feudal aristocracy and that what her comic villains make ridiculous is the

hindrance of the natural hierarchy in trying to foil Edmund's claims to his legitimate

birth. Sue Chaplin argues that Reeve's text "maintained and justified" the feudal system

because "the moral economy" attached to the noble characters of Harclay and Edmund

upholds the aristocracy as intrinsically noble. But she also asserts that a nobility of rank

is matched by a nobility of character which is shown by Harclay and Edmund's

"solidarity with […] servants and peasants" (77). Noble aristocrats uphold the ideology

that nobility of character defies rank, thus validating a middle-class prerogative.

Solidarity translates into legitimization for the lower-classes' role in their society, but

more importantly, for their role in the story. Servants are taken seriously in Reeve's text.

They are made serious in their ability to command language; they are no longer

associated with disruptive comic verbosity displayed in Walpole's and Radcliffe's texts

as discussed in Chapter One.[8] This transformation heralds a more egalitarian view of the

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[7] A label also used by Donna Heiland in *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction*.
[8] Toni Wein also sees Reeve's servants as an "idealization" which "stands in marked distinction not only to Walpole's [. . .] but also to that of Radcliffe" (80-1).

lower-classes in Reeve's Gothic text, which elevates them by taking them seriously rather than dismissing them as superstitious fools.

Time and again, the narratives of servants and peasants hold important knowledge that is needed in the discovery of the truth in *The Old English Baron*. Upon Sir Philip Harclay's return to England, which precipitates the plot to restore Edmund to his rightful place, he must learn of the events he has missed in his crusades through encounters with peasants and servants. In fact, Harclay's very identity must be substantiated by "the testimony of some of the old servants of his family" (6). The lower-class ability to narrate convincingly manages to restore Harclay to his proper seat and status in Yorkshire. A peasant encountered on the road answers Harclay's questions about Lord Lovel and his estate and so, significantly, only a peasant provides meaning to "what all this silence means" upon Harclay's return (7). Furthermore, peasants can converse with their masters in *all* of the proper ways, through language and manners. They have sense and sensibility. John Wyatt, the peasant Harclay encounters, "seconds [his proper] words by the proper action" when assisting Harclay to dismount (8). While this is a servile gesture, Reeve quickly notes that Harclay eats with relish the same dishes as the peasant family; he demonstrates solidarity with the Wyatts by doing so. Wyatt not only hosts Harclay for a night, but he also provides Harclay with his son as a servant in England, thus showing patronage but also a noble demeanor in such actions. These servants are effectual in their tasks to aid the nobility, unlike Walpole's Bianca and Radcliffe's Annette. Gary Kelly too notes that the characterization of the servant class is distinctly different in *The Old English Baron* when compared to *Otranto*: "These differences are

reflected in other formal elements, especially characterization. Whereas *Otranto's* lower-class characters are loquacious, ignorant, vulgar, and unhelpful, *The Champion's* are loyal and dignified and help the hero regain what is his right" (122). The difference in class has not been eradicated, but it has been reduced to a non-issue. Therefore, the fact that servants in *The Old English Baron* are no longer humorous reinforces a more liberal agenda. If the lower-classes have the power and privilege of speech and all the sensibility it denotes, then they can no longer provide relief against the Gothic plot but rather they play decisive roles in the development of that plot, for readers and other characters alike. Their narratives and aid provide the nobility with power; they are to be taken seriously in contrast to the ineffectual comic villains who seek to undermine the noble Edmund's power. The idea of mutual obligation identifies the noble heroes and peasants and separates them from the comic, aristocratic villains: "the virtues of the 'peasantry' are contrasted favorably with the criminal, or merely ill-mannered, tendencies of the false 'nobility'" (Wein 80). Wenlock and Markham do not show "solidarity" with Edmund when they think he is a simple peasant; their true villainy, therefore, lies in their shirking of their obligation to those underneath them, and that is why they must be ridiculed rather than be taken seriously by the text.

The obligation of servants and peasants to uphold the rightful inheritance of the upper-classes through the power of their "testimony" will become the basis for Reeve's entire plot. No longer does lower-class verbosity disrupt the Gothic narrative, rather it allows the Gothic plot of Edmund's resurrection as rightful heir to come to fruition. The servants know about the ghosts of Edmund's parents, which allows for substantiation of

Edmund's visions of them. After the new Lord Lovel takes possession of the castle

gained by murder,

> the ghosts of Lord and Lady Lovel had been seen by several of the
>
> servants. Whoever went into this apartment were terrified by uncommon
>
> noises and strange appearances; at length this apartment was wholly shut
>
> up, and the servants were forbid to enter it, or to talk of any thing relating
>
> to it: However, the story did not stop here; it was whispered about, that the
>
> new Lord Lovel was so disturbed every night that he could not sleep in
>
> quiet; and, being at last tired of the place, he sold the Castle and estate of
>
> his ancestors, to his brother-in-law the Lord Fitz-Owen, (…). (29)

As in *Otranto*, the servants are closely linked to supernatural manifestations. Unlike in

Otranto, though, their beliefs in the supernatural do not excite much humor. The

servants' whispers maintain and advance the story, rather than disrupt it. Their

knowledge of the ghosts reinforces the power of the ghosts to drive out the usurper, rather

than marking the supernatural simply as "low" and superstitious nonsense. Changing the

servants' role in maintaining the power of the supernatural in the Gothic text also rewrites

the supernatural itself as more than mere spectacle, as it is in Walpole's text. The ghosts

are a very real presence, heard by the hero and servants, and manifested to the villains of

the text, Walter Lovel and Fitz-Owen's nephews Wenlock and Markham, but they do not

incite terror to anyone except those who should fear their presence. The true possessors

of the castle, Fitz-Owen (by payment), Edmund (by birthright), and the servants (by duty)

either have no interaction with the ghosts, as in the case of Fitz-Owen, or become

desensitized to their presence because they have no reason to fear what the ghosts represent.

In a rather matter-of-fact manner, their whispers also establish an explanation of inheritance and ownership which informs much of Reeve's Gothicism. The servants have knowledge of the Gothic machinations of the villains as well; once again, they gain power over their masters through their verbal skills and their ability to narrate and therefore to control their stories. The servants of Baron Fitz-Owen's household know about the ill-will of the Baron's nephews toward Edmund. When this is told to the reader, Reeve marks the servants as "close observers of the manners of their principals" (20). In many ways, this quote reinforces the middle-class fears that their servants' survey and subsequently gossip about their masters, as discussed in Chapter One.[9] Reeve illustrates here that the noble behavior of the upper-classes may have positive, or negative, effects on the behavior of their inferiors. However, it reads more as a warning to those in power to behave themselves rather than as any simple condemnation of the servants' voyeurism. The servants' sobriety and knowledge reinforces noble behavior by its clear alignment with Harclay's and Edmund's sensibilities and its clear contrast to the Gothic villainy of Wenlock and Markham. While there is a sense that such whispers do not have much effect (they do not, for instance, convey their knowledge of Wenlock and Markham's ill will to the Baron and so rescue Edmund), their knowledge will serve Edmund when he has made the journey from peasant to rightful heir on his own. As in

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[9] See Bruce Robbins' discussion of nineteenth-century fears about servants in *The Servant's Hand*, noted in Chapter One.

the instance of Sir Philip Harclay, they can provide testimonials to his legitimacy, properly serving rather than confronting their "superiors."

I will end my discussion of the power of servants and their discourse by analyzing just how integral servants are to the reconciliation of Edmund to his rightful place and estate. Roger the plowman and Joseph, the elderly servant who serves as one of the few connections between the murdered Lovel and the new owners, provide definitive, narrative proof that Edmund is the heir of the Lovels long before he has gained the power to do anything about it. Roger provides the explanation of how Edmund came to be born in mysterious circumstances, having seen his mother after her escape from the castle and reports of her death had been circulated by Walter Lovel. The narration is substantiated in turn by Joseph in his proclamation of Edmund's resemblance to his old master. While Joseph refers to Roger as "foolish" when Roger thinks that the Lady Lovel was a ghost because of her appearance after her supposed death, the whole narration is in no way treated comically by Reeve (44-45). Readers are meant to receive these stories as proof of Edmund's rights; the stories provide clear explanations and shift the plot from Gothic supernaturalism to a fight to reclaim Edmund's true rank and fortune.

Their stories are further reinforced by Edmund's foster mother Margery and her subsequent narrative of how Edmund came to live with her and her husband. Margery and Andrew are the only examples of the lower classes in Reeve's text which may come close to Walpole's comic servants. Margery is compelled to tell her story, rather than do so willingly, and as such her narration is fragmented, disjointed by exclamations and questions much like Bianca's speech in *Otranto*. In his introduction to the 2008 Oxford

edition of *The Old English Baron*, James Watt argues that Edmund's foster-parents "are

presented as comic, even buffoonish" (xxi). However, reading these peasants as comic

and ridiculous, given the overwhelming portrayals of the peasant class up to this point as

noble and serious, is too reductive. Margery is a peasant who bumbles, but her bumbling

is not necessarily providing a comic interlude as it might do in Walpole and Radcliffe.

Because her bumbling is motivated by real fears about her husband's violence and the

criminal penalties that might be incurred by the couple's actions, rather than by mere

supernatural superstitions, Margery's interlude produces no laughter on the part of the

reader. And it must be noted that, once again, a peasant's testimonial becomes important

to the narrative concerns with birthright. By associating Margery's account with the

other, serious narratives as powerful testimonies of Edmund's birth, Reeve redeems

Margery's speech. All of the servant and peasant testimonials will add up to the sum of

Edmund's childhood experience and the explanation of the breach between his

upbringing and his heritage. Therefore, Reeve redeems the lower-class from the comic

slum to which Walpole reduces them. In their stead, and in order to maintain some

generic unity with the earlier Gothic text, Reeve will make her villains the butt of her

comic interlude.

Like Walpole's verbose servants, and in contrast to Reeve's serious servants,

Wenlock and Markham use their words to create the conflict and enhance the threat

needed to sustain the Gothic plot, but since they are ultimately ineffective in achieving

the threat, their power to terrify is reduced to "farce" (Clery *Women's Gothic* 35).[10]

Wenlock and Markham, like the other men jealous of Edmund in the campaign in France, continually misconstrue Edmund's behavior, thus achieving their villainous aims not by outright attack but through misdirection and insinuation, through a use of language which is in direct contrast to the clear testimonials of the servants and peasants of the text. When Edmund "behaved with manly spirit, it was misconstrued into pride and arrogance; his generosity was impudence; his humility was hypocrisy" (27). Since the comic villains use language to muddle the truth, rather than to clarify it, Reeve's attempt does achieve some generic consistency with that of her predecessor, Walpole. Gary Kelly, while arguing that the text links itself to the older Whig politics concerned with the Gothic past for its medieval virtues "'characterized by originally Germanic independence, liberty, and virtue,'" also ends his discussion by asserting that, like Walpole, Reeve "addressed the revolutionary middle-class readership's interest in subjectivity that could be dangerously excessive but should be educated and disciplined into a sovereign subject—the basis for economic individualism, social independence, and political rights in the long process of modernization" (123). Kelly clearly correlates Reeve's agenda with a correction of the excessive claims leveled against Gothic texts and indicates that her text actually tries to pave a path between the older system and modern social constructs. Toni Wein also sees a homogenization of class in Reeve's ability "to naturalize and domesticate members of the aristocracy by subjecting them to the same problems and granting them the same virtues as the middle class" but she reads this

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[10] Clery also names Wenlock and Markham as "comic villains" (35) in her brief mention of their encounter with the supernatural I discuss in the next paragraph. While Clery names them, she fails to appreciate or discuss the significance of the label past the need to discuss it as a plot point.

phenomenon as a result of Reeve's aesthetic agenda rather than as part of a socio-political one: "the romance topos of disguised noble origins that Walpole imported into the Gothic novel heightened the illusion of access to the aristocracy, since readers could internalize that romantic view of themselves as inherently noble" (11). In this reading, the aristocratic villain would go against these homogenizing tendencies and subvert the idea that the middle class might be seen somehow as part of the nobility. Wenlock and Markham do subvert that tendency by denying Edmund his rightful place in their noble circle and constantly "pulling rank" to diminish his character rather than valorize his aspirations. However, making the aristocratic villains ineffectual in that diminishment and making Edmund just as noble as a peasant as he is when he regains his rank reinforces the egalitarian view that nobility is a sign of character, not rank.

Whether Reeve is read as conservative or not, almost all critics agree that there is a moral agenda attached to Reeve's aesthetic project. As Haggerty notes, Reeve's text is prompted by her resentment of Walpole's "disruption in narrative decorum" (55). To regain that decorum, J. M. S. Tompkins suggests that Reeve's supernaturalism "could be justified as an emphatic means of drawing attention to the moral" (217), and the moral of Reeve's text, for Tompkins, is "this homely and practical streak that differentiates *The Old English Baron* from any other Gothic story" (229-30). Tompkins' arguments show that when discussing Reeve's story, it is difficult to differentiate the moral from the aesthetic: one answers for the other. For Elizabeth Napier, the "juggling of the moral and the dramatic" done by Gothic authors is "particularly evident in Gothic novelists' attitudes toward their villains, who propel their plots and energize the ethical systems that

test the hero's and heroine's endurance" and so villains, in texts from Walpole to

Radcliffe, "uphold the moral structure […] because of their obvious one-dimensional

badness" (134). While I have indicated from the start that I read Napier's devaluation of

the Gothic as a genre as a serious critical misstep, I do find her arguments on this point to

be compelling. If the villains present the foil to the hero or heroine and thereby complete

the Gothic's "ethical system," then marking the villain as comic and therefore as

laughable also asserts a clear moral delineation between what should be valorized and

what should be critiqued through ridicule.

As discussed earlier, members of the lower-class in Reeve's work become not

only sober, but in very direct contrast to Walpole, also capable of the clear articulation

and civil testimony which gives great weight to their words. Significantly, Wenlock and

Markham's most comic moment, their encounter with the supernatural ghost of

Edmund's father, is also their most inarticulate moment, and it is the moment that is the

most similar to Walpole's comic interludes. This scene is, once again, a result of their

ineffectual villainy against Edmund, and it is their ineffectual nature that produces a

humorous response. The trial of the apartment is set by Wenlock and Markham.

Thinking that Edmund will prove his cowardice in his inability to remain in the haunted

apartment, Wenlock and Markham actually end up proving their own cowardice as a

result of the trial. Upon Edmund's disappearance from the haunted apartment, which

marks the beginning of his journey to reclaim his inheritance, an investigation is

launched, and Wenlock and Markham are asked to undergo their own test and stay in the

apartment. In response to Wenlock's fears that Edmund might wait for revenge in the

haunted apartment, Baron Fitz-Owen responds with a smile (and thus invites the reader to

view such fears as nonsensical, as if the reader's knowledge of Edmund's nature

throughout the narrative, and of his whereabouts in that moment, were not enough).

Father Oswald, a friend to Edmund, also smiles in response to Wenlock's insinuations,

and when Wenlock taunts him with the ghost, Father Oswald wittily rebuts Wenlock's

intimation of cowardice. Wenlock's objections begin a cascade that ends with a

challenge for Wenlock to back up his "wit" by completing the same trial they set for

Edmund to stay in the apartments (65). The villainous plot turns back upon its

instigators, and as a direct result, the instigators are marked as comic. Wenlock and

Markham's experiences in the apartment are much different from Edmund's experiences.

While Edmund prays in response to the moans, and then discovers his father's bloody

armor, Wenlock and Markham devolve into accusations and anger which prompts the

appearance of the actual ghost of Edmund's father: "a man in compleat armour entered

the room: He stood with one hand extended, pointing to the outward door; they took the

hint, and crawled away as fast as fear would let them; they staggered along the gallery,

and from thence to the Baron's apartment, where Wenlock sunk down in a swoon, and

Markham had just strength enough to knock at the door" (68). Edmund's response to the

supernatural is one of courage, and therefore he is rewarded with knowledge about his

birthright; Wenlock and Markham's response is one of terror, and therefore the

prototypical Gothic supernatural manifests itself in full form. The affect delineates the

power of the supernatural; courage will be met with truth while fear will be met with an

actual ghost. The moral here is clear and simple.

The humor of the situation is underscored by Wenlock and Markham's responses after the encounter. Wenlock actually swoons in response, marking him as foolish and even womanly. Thus, he becomes his own comic butt. In Reeve's streamlined version of the Gothic, the comic character represents what must be ridiculed and rejected, and it is so clear that the villains themselves can identify their comic natures, even if not entirely consciously. Markham refers to himself as a "fool and blockhead" for succumbing to Wenlock's "villainy" (84). Reeve's comic characters mastermind their own downfall into buffoonery. However, I believe therein lies the problem with Reeve's comic villains, for her humor is as "barely articulated" (Haggerty *Unnatural Affections* 58) as her minimalistic conception of the supernatural.

However, Wenlock and Markham's adventure with the ghost represents the most important illustration in *The Old English Baron* of my argument that the comic characters in Reeve's version of the Gothic represent a deliberate simplification and redefinition of Walpole's original plan. Wenlock and Markham's comic interlude directly echoes Walpole's interlude between the servants Jaquez and Diego, as noted by James Watt in his introduction to the text. Upon escaping the haunted chamber, they narrate what they saw much as Jaquez and Diego do, creating a fragmented narrative that demonstrates their emotional distress but also serves as a contrast to the heroic characters' and servants' calm and clear narration of supernatural events. Wenlock and Markham cause mass alarm and wake the entire household upon leaving the apartment: "prudence was quite overthrown here: Wenlock was half dead, and Markham half distracted; the family were alarmed" (69), much as Jaquez and Diego in *Otranto* disrupt the prudence of

Manfred. In this way, a knowledgeable reader of the genre, one who has encountered

Walpole's text, would react with humor at their distress because of the overt parallel.

Reeve achieves humor in this instance through the acknowledgement of influence. Watt

argues that achieving humor is a secondary concern in the scene: "the trembling reactions

of Markham and Wenlock serve to reflect their guilt at being involved in the plot against

Edmund" (xi). Once again, though, the aesthetic and moral concerns of Reeve's text are

conflated so that, ultimately, Reeve's text fails to achieve a true and completely comic

spirit anywhere in the text. By making the comic butt villainous, the initial humor

achieved quickly deflates into a reprimand against Gothic tyranny rather than a

celebration of a different emotional response. It takes on the seriousness of the rest of

Reeve's narrative, rather than serving as a sharp relief to it. When Radcliffe adopts

Reeve's use of the comic villain, she corrects this procedural misstep by merging

Walpole's idea that verbal incoherence marks the comic butt with Reeve's idea that the

those who serve their own self-interest in the upper-classes deserve to be the comic butt

as much as those from the lower-classes.

Reeve sought to redeem Romance as a form in asserting its aesthetic valorization

of the supernatural as a means of "poetic faith," meaning that her supernatural is

validated by the text as part of the aesthetic experience of the reader, the willful and

knowing suspension of disbelief, rather than the "rural faith" pronounced to support

Walpole's fantastic giant armor, and upheld by Gothic superstitions alone (Clery *Rise* 5).

Interestingly enough, this also explains why the comic butt is servile in Walpole's fiction

and aristocratic in Reeve's. Relying on superstition means Walpole has to critique those

who uphold such superstitions, the servants and rural peasants of vulgar understanding,

while Reeve critiques a "higher" political discourse in marking her villains as comic

butts. Tying the aesthetic to the historical agendas espoused earlier, Karen O'Brien

argues that *The Old English Baron* enacts Reeve's aesthetic theories espoused in Reeve's

The Progress of Romance. For Reeve, the concern with sensibility and manners should

be the main concerns of novelists:

> The historical vogue for manners provided novelists with a means of
>
> articulating the historicity of their own endeavors, allowing them to
>
> present their detailed depictions of social context as portraits of the times
>
> and yet giving them the advantage of the individual perspective. It was of
>
> considerable strategic value to novelists, struggling to establish the
>
> respectability of their genre, to be able to liken their work to the serious,
>
> exemplary business of history. If claims to moral exemplarity by way of
>
> the individual cautionary tale—the romantic adventuress who ends up
>
> ruined or exiled, the penitent whore, the reformed rake, the disobedient
>
> daughter, and so on—often rang hollow, the exemplary value of manners,
>
> accurately and sensitively portrayed, was rarely in doubt. Public anxiety
>
> about the pernicious moral influence of novels, especially upon female
>
> readers, may have been significantly allayed by the thought that they
>
> offered something of an education in the nature of manners past and
>
> present. (O'Brien 409)

Reeve's simple delineation between the nobility of Edmund and the comic buffoonery of

her villains Wenlock and Markham is evidence of the valorization of historical manners

that O'Brien discusses here. Reeve relied on such valorization to establish her Gothic

story as more legitimate, and more morally sound, than Walpole's. Thus, she answers the

objections to the Gothic genre that it promotes an excessive emotional affect in its

readers. O'Brien goes on to write:

> Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1778) was one of the very first
>
> novels to be set in the distant past (in this case, the English medieval past)
>
> and to attempt to make instructive use of historical manners. In her preface
>
> to the work Reeve struggled to define her own historical enterprise, stating
>
> that the work was designed "to unite the most attractive and interesting
>
> circumstances of the ancient Romance and modern Novel, at the same
>
> time it assumes a character and manner of its own, that it differs from
>
> both; it is distinguished by the appellation of a Gothic Story, being a
>
> picture of Gothic times and manners." She asserts that the psychological
>
> depth in her portrayal of character corresponds to that in modern novels,
>
> but that the historical setting entails an element of "romance"
>
> notwithstanding the historical verisimilitude of "Gothic times and
>
> manners." The use of the notion of "romance" here implies some
>
> hesitancy about the historical value of her work. (411)

Implicit in this evaluation is the suggestion that Reeve's merging of the moral and

aesthetic concerns is somehow a flaw that marks Reeve's text as Gothic experimentation

gone awry. Time and again critics dismiss Reeve as "serious," Donna Heiland regards

Reeve's text as "less laughable" than Walpole's (15), which is, of course, a result of

Reeve herself claiming her disdain for Walpole's supernaturalism in her prefatory remark

that his text "excite[s] laughter." The critics cited throughout this chapter who read

Reeve's text as primarily historical and political cannot help but read it as serious, which

is one clear reason why *The Old English Baron* is seen as an aesthetic oddity in the

Gothic genre. The apparently implicit failure of the text is connected to its seriousness,

its inability to make us laugh as much as Walpole's text does, or to make us feel as

sublimely irrational as Radcliffe's novels make us feel. James Foster remarks that

Reeve's "middle-class morality, interest in practical considerations, love of

sentimentality, and reluctance to let her imagination soar unchecked into the stratosphere

of the supernatural" all combine to detract from each other so that her Gothic fictions are

"no better than second class" in his estimation (202-6). It could be argued that in reading

The Old English Baron as a failure because of its seriousness, these critics, who neglect

the comic element of Gothic literature in their single-minded drive to legitimize the

genre, actually, and paradoxically, assert the comic element as a vital formal component

to the Gothic. In any case, these readings neglect the fact that Reeve does indeed employ

the comic moment, whether successfully or not, and therefore such readings are critically

mistaken because when considering such characters seriously one in fact discovers a

cohesive genre narrative that more conservative studies of the Gothic fail to recognize or

to credit.

The alternative model of comic characters (and their narrative and generic function) provided by Reeve appears in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* alongside characters who echo Walpole's comic servants, which suggests one reason why Radcliffe's text marks the apex of the Gothic genre. As E. J. Clery suggests, Reeve's "supernaturalism that was so easily reducible to naturalism raised goosebumps of apprehension by its blurring of the borders of reality" could only "culminate in Ann Radcliffe's more problematic device of the 'explained supernatural'" (*Rise* 89), although she later considers Radcliffe as "distinct" from Walpole and Reeve. Sue Chaplin also connects Radcliffe to Reeve through the convention of the explained supernatural; both authors need to explain away Gothic excess and instead focus on using the supernatural to interrogate the issues of legitimacy of ownership and authority (Chaplin 80, 101). While Reeve tackles such issues through male contentions for dominance, Radcliffe achieves a more subtle effect by focusing on the maternal, in a way that "subverts the authority of the legal and literary archive" (Chaplin 113) in *Udolpho*. This overall shift in gender is reflected in Radcliffe's use of the comic villain; it is a maternal villain who becomes comic in Radcliffe's *Udolpho* rather than the male aristocrats of Reeve's text. Many critics have focused on the absent mother in Gothic texts as a generic tradition established by Radcliffe. [11] The heroines of Radcliffe's novels and her imitators must battle tyrannical male villains without aid from their parents, and in some cases, they must battle the men for the mother's survival. Critical studies often fail to evaluate the maternal presences left in the wake of the biological mother's absence. In *Udolpho*, Emily is not left alone; instead she gains an aunt, Madame Cheron, who, at least, can be

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[11] See Ruth Bienstock Anolik and Deborah D. Rogers.

called ineffectual as a guardian, and, at worst, is the embodiment of evil stepmothers from earlier Romances and fairytales. Madame Cheron, before her marriage to the tyrannical villain Montoni (a distinction which becomes important later in my analysis), is the comic villain of Radcliffe's piece, adapted from the prototype of Reeve's ineffectual and vain aristocrats. Whereas Reeve ultimately fails to achieve a strong humorous reaction to her villains because of the minimalistic treatment of them, Radcliffe manages to revitalize the secondary villain as a comic character by aligning her behaviorally with the comic servants in the text.

The evil "stepmother" figure, with which Madame Cheron can be aligned, has rich archetypal significance within literary history, and especially so in the Gothic genre. In the duality between good mothers and evil stepmothers found in a range of literature, from fairytales to modern novels, there lies the basic binary which feminist scholars delineate as the patriarchal objectification and idealization of women: the angel versus the demon: "The tendency in Western culture to perceive and represent the figure of the woman as absolutely good or absolutely evil, as either virgin or whore, is pervasive and is reflected in the Gothic representation of women" (Anolik 29). Deborah D. Rogers labels this trend as "Matrophobic Gothic" and heralds Radcliffe as its creator (15). In the Matrophobic Gothic text, the daughter's psychological confusion about becoming like her mother, the conflict between identification and separation, fuels the Gothic writer's creativity and manifests in the fears of the text surrounding persecution by a male authority figure. Given all of the above, motherly figures assume a great significance within female Gothic plots and texts, which is why I find it intriguing that Radcliffe

would choose to ridicule a mother-figure as much as she does in her characterization of

Madame Cheron. If the Gothic treatment of mothers represents the oppression of women

in a patriarchal society or, at the very least, the realization of the threats which

accompany a loss of virtue in women, what does it mean then that Emily's aunt, who

becomes her surrogate mother after her father's death, is not to be taken seriously?

For many critics, including myself, the answer may lie within Madame Cheron's

comparison with Emily St. Aubert, her niece and the heroine of the novel. In analyzing

female characters in Radcliffe, according to Daniel Cottom, the reader must understand

that their "fineness of character is measured by how rude the world appears in contrast"

(54). Emily becomes the ideal virtuous heroine, in part, because her sublime subjectivity

contrasts so sharply with the comic servants' and her aunt's more ridiculous sensibilities.

As Claudia L. Johnson notes, in *Udolpho*, Emily stands in "pointed contrast both to other

women of the upper classes, who are always whining about their injuries, and to servants,

who are always telling 'stories' about them" (95). While Johnson sees the comparison as

creating a negative valuation of the upper- and lower-classes, it could also be reasonably

regarded as a sign of Radcliffe's overall democratic nature, which Cottom identifies as

part of her aesthetic theory (27), because both the upper- and lower-classes are seen as

vulgar. Because "what we laugh at," following Jean Paul Richter's theories, "is the petty,

the infinitesimal, when it is brought into contrast with our ideal of infinite sublimity"

(qtd. in Eastman *The Sense of Humor* 169), Madame Cheron's ridiculousness often

becomes apparent in direct contrast with Emily's virtue.[12] One of the first moments in

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[12] Emily's rationalism is also used as a measure by which to compare, and, in the comparison, disparage, the comic servant Annette's superstitions, as discussed in Chapter One. Using the ideal heroic character to

the narrative in which such a collision occurs is when Madame Cheron, under the guise

of parental concern, has taken it upon herself to dismiss the advances of Valancourt for

Emily: "'It is of very little consequence what opinion he may form of you' replied her

aunt, 'for I have put an end to the affair; but I believe he will not form a worse opinion of

me for my prudent conduct. I let him see, that I was not to be trifled with; and that I had

more delicacy, than to permit any clandestine correspondence to be carried on in my

house.'" Radcliffe goes on to note the effect this speech has on Emily: "Emily had

frequently heard Madame Cheron use the word delicacy, but she was now more than

usually perplexed to understand how she meant to apply it in this instance, in which her

whole conduct appeared to merit the very reverse of the term" (123). In this scenario,

Madame Cheron may simply be fulfilling her role as the typical Gothic mother, who must

serve as a "control" or "protector" of the heroine and by doing so effectively hinders the

marriage plot in Gothic novels (Anolik 28). However, in providing Emily's reaction to

Madame's speech, Radcliffe goes beyond that convention to establish Madame Cheron's

role, not as protector, but as ridiculous meddler. She does hinder Emily's romance with

Valancourt for a time, but the overall narrative will prove that Madame Cheron is highly

ineffectual as a guardian. Her comic nature, therefore, parallels the nature of the servants

discussed in Chapter One and Reeve's aristocratic men; they are made ridiculous in their

ineffectuality and in their inability to interpret the nuances of language.

    The scene becomes an indicator for how readers are to approach Madame Cheron:

as a character to ridicule. It also highlights the disparity between Emily's sensibility and

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establish the foolishness of the comic character becomes a common denominator between Radcliffe and
Reeve, as my discussion of Reeve's hero and her villains has shown.

Madame Cheron's, and it is significant that this disparity is shown through their use of

language and their comprehension of it. The interactions between Madame Cheron and

Emily highlight that "there are ultimately standards of suitable emotional response," and

while Radcliffe's portrayal of Madame Cheron might seem to "glorify and cultivate all

kinds of excessive feeling" (Pinch 111), it also brings into sharp relief the fact that

Emily's emotional response is one we should idealize and that Madame Cheron's

excessive, childish responses should be recognized for what they are. The only instance

of Madame as comic after her marriage occurs in a conversation with Emily where she

ironically rails against her tyrannical husband:

> '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;
>
> no! That such a disposition as mine should be so imposed upon! That I,
>
> whose only faults are too much kindness, too much generosity, should be
>
> chained for life to such a vile, deceitful, cruel monster!'
>
> Want of breath compelled Madame Montoni to stop. If any thing
>
> could have made Emily smile in these moments, it would have been this
>
> speech of her aunt, delivered in a voice very little below a scream, and
>
> with a vehemence of gesticulation and of countenance, that turned the
>
> whole into burlesque. (265-6)

The reader's response to Madame Montoni is filtered through Emily's more savvy perception. The scene proves Claudia Johnson's assessment that in Radcliffe, "Female complaint becomes burlesque" (106). What is remarkable is that Radcliffe manages to burlesque the very essence of the Gothic in the above speech. Madame Montoni rails against what readers expect from a conventional Gothic narrative: neglect and cruelty toward women at the hands of a tyrant. The humor of scene lies in the discord achieved between the reader's expectations of a Gothic plot and Madame Montoni's failure to realize she is in one. The difference lies in the level of rational sensibility. Emily cautions her against provoking Montoni, which readers of Gothic novels would know to be the most prudent course of action, but Madame Montoni reads such a response as Emily's inability to sympathize (267). The scene becomes another instance of Madame Montoni's "perverted understanding," as Emily sees it (267), of the social implications that hide behind the Gothicism of the text. Even as they reject Madame Montoni's childish response to the Gothic tyrant in this scene, readers become aware of the serious implications for women who make bad marital decisions based on status and wealth.

If we compare Madame Montoni's foolish decisions concerning matrimony to her Radcliffean counterpart, the Marchesa in *The Italian* (1797), we see that Madame Montoni's foolishness is what marks her as a villain. The Marchesa, in contrast, is a woman who fully embraces her villainy and formulates the murderous machinations against Vivaldi and Ellena, the heroes of the novel. The Marchesa fully embodies the archetypal myth of "the persecuting mother" which Raymond Hilliard defines as such:

> Driven by unbridled passions—an unrestrained sexuality or a lust for
> power or both—and therefore typically identified at the social or cultural
> level with a threat of chaos resulting from a breakdown of boundaries, the
> malign female typically irrupts into the action at a key nocturnal juncture
> in a narrative as a grotesque or carnivalesque figure associated with
> nightmares or with borderline states of consciousness [. . .] the figure is
> uncanny. [. . . But], the violence rebounds toward its original source; the
> plot ends with the figure of the good "mother" displacing her bad
> counterpart as a symbolically dominant presence in the world of the
> narrative, and functioning as a major moral exemplar, [. . .]. (18)

Madame Montoni is not sexual, but she does hold the illusion of status above all else, as is made clear in her reaction to Valancourt and her marriage to Montoni. She thirsts to achieve status through the only means available to her, marriage and motherhood. However, she is not as uncanny as Hilliard suggests the Marchesa is. She becomes a nightmarish figure in the novel by the end (which I will discuss shortly), but for the most part, Madame Cheron serves as a threat only in her inability to perceive implicit meanings and implications. That is why she becomes like the other maternal figures in *Udolpho*, who hold "no power, in the conventional social sense, over Montoni," but for Hilliard, they do hold a "mythically implied psychic" power which means that their "expulsion [. . .] from the world of a comic narrative is no more important than the rescue and survival of their idealized opposites" (57). Madame Montoni will be expelled from the narrative after her comic potential has been stripped away, and she becomes the

uncanny mother, haunting the text as a warning for Emily of the dangers of an imprudent

marriage.

Some may argue that Madame Cheron-Montoni is not necessarily villainous.

After all, she never threatens Emily in any way; the most harm she causes Emily is

dividing her from Valancourt. I would argue that her interference between Valancourt

and Emily already discussed signals a villainous intrusion and hindrance to the romantic

relationship, and it leaves Emily exposed and unprotected: "The power of overbearing

vulgarity to inflict suffering is a consideration that intrudes on all the comic scenes [with

Madame Cheron] and warps their mirth" (Tompkins 133). While Tompkins uses this as

justification for the argument that Madame Cheron is not comic, it does prove that her

actions lead to just as much suffering as those of the primary villain Montoni.

Ultimately, it is her marriage to Montoni, in fact, which creates the plot at the castle

Udolpho that is so central to the text and its Gothic aims. Madame Cheron provides the

impetus which allows the villain to gain power over the heroine, and so being comic

nevertheless makes her a threat to the heroine, if only a secondary one.

Her inability to understand the social significance of her actions is a sign that

Madame Cheron is incapable of understanding any meaning past the superficial, which is

why Madame Cheron is unable to interpret language, or to be understood fully by other

characters. Madame Cheron's inability both to comprehend and to interpret language

will cause her trouble, and more significantly for my argument, will cause moments of

laughter from both the characters surrounding her and the reader. In a conversation that

she has with Count Bauvillers and Signor Cavigni, upon arriving at Madame Clairval's

engagement which marks the beginning of Montoni's courtship of her and what will lead

to the Gothic plot at Udolpho, Madame Cheron is unable to comprehend the layers of

subtext in the conversation. This failure creates a gap between her superficiality and the

gentlemen's knowledge, a gap that Radcliffe exploits for comic effect, but also to

highlight the ridiculous ideologies behind Madame Cheron's actions:

> 'I have heard signor Montoni say,' rejoined Cavigni, 'that he never
>
> knew but one woman who deserved it.'
>
> 'Well!' exclaimed Madame Cheron, with a short laugh, and a smile
>
> of unutterable complacency, 'and who could she be?'
>
> 'O!' replied Cavigni, 'it is impossible to mistake her, for certainly
>
> there is not more than one woman in the world, who has both the merit to
>
> deserve compliment and the wit to refuse it. Most women reverse the case
>
> entirely.' He looked again at Emily, who blushed deeper than before for
>
> her aunt, and turned from him with displeasure.
>
> 'Well, signor!' said Madame Cheron, 'I protest you are a
>
> Frenchman; I never heard a foreigner say any thing half so gallant as that!'
>
> 'True, madam,' said the Count, who had been some time silent,
>
> and with a low bow, 'but the gallantry of the compliment had been utterly
>
> lost, but for the ingenuity that discovered the application.'
>
> Madame Cheron did not perceive the meaning of this too satirical
>
> sentence, and she, therefore, escaped the pain, which Emily felt on her
>
> account. (126-7)

As the party continues, Madame Cheron continues to mistake compliments slyly

addressed to Emily for flattery toward herself. This scene also culminates in her

confused realization that Valancourt is related to Madame Clairval, a realization that

highlights her inability to distinguish actual worth from perceived rank and status as a

guide to choosing marriage partners. That mistake and her inability to distinguish and

judge worth will have profound consequences for her and Emily, as she rashly chooses to

marry Montoni, the Gothic villain, at whose hands in Italy she perishes and Emily

undergoes the conventional persecution of a Gothic heroine. In this scene, Radcliffe

deliberately shows the reader the other characters' response to Madame's ridiculousness;

Cavigni, as a spectator of the scene, laughs into his napkin most of the night, and then

when Cavigni speaks to Valancourt about renewing his visits to Emily, embarrassing

them still further, Valancourt notes that "had he been only a spectator of the scene, he

would have smiled" (132). Both of these responses train the reader into also smiling and

laughing at Madame's social faux pas.

But there are serious implications to the above scene as well. Madame Cheron's

inability to interpret Cavigni's sly humor at her expense is a part of a larger and more

serious issue of her inability to negotiate the dangerous terrain of aristocratic social

circles. In demonstrating her ignorance in the above conversation, she leaves herself and

Emily vulnerable to attack from Montoni. Therefore, the ignorant and vain mother-figure

becomes evil in her inability to read the social threats leveled against women who are

alone in society, the evil stepmother figure who "promot[es] the deviant Gothic plot"

(Anolik 28). In her foolishness, she turns into the "Fatal Woman" that Mario Praz

discusses as the Gothic's female equivalent to the Byronic "Fatal Man", who comes into

being as the Gothic genre evolved to incorporate the more sensual aspects of French

literature to transform persecuted womanhood into something more depraved (190). Like

Reeve, Radcliffe ridicules the socially ambitious when they are morally corrupt; her

comic villain represents the social consciousness of an age in transition, when the middle-

class must legitimize their ascension by proving their nobility of character.

There is critical support for what I have argued here. J. M. S. Tompkins reads

Madame Cheron as a "potentially comic figure" but ultimately suggests that she fails to

achieve humor because "she bulks too large for mirth" (Tompkins 133). Aunts in

Radcliffe are comic, according to Claudia Johnson when she discusses Madame La Luc

in the novel *The Romance of the Forest* (1791). The maiden aunt "is made visible only to

be ridiculed—for her vanity [. . .] and for her unrelenting prosiness" which are

"weakness[es] common to the minds of women and servants" (Johnson 89). When she is

a maiden aunt at the beginning of the novel, Madame Cheron displays vanity and

prosiness, marks of comic servants. However, when she is no longer a maiden aunt, she

transforms from villain to victim, thus being expelled from the novel, which as Hilliard

suggests is the fate of all mother figures in the Gothic. When she becomes a victim of

Montoni's greed, she becomes the harbinger of doom for Emily, a model of the

persecuted woman that Emily must not become. The emotional affect surrounding

Madame Montoni changes in this moment; she is no longer comic but tragic. Because

she serves as a warning, in a way, she becomes a more effectual guardian in her

victimization. She can be read here as similar to a "*senex* figure" which, according to

Diane Long Hoeveler, in "the worlds of comedy and romance" can be "'laughed off the stage,'" but now "must be killed" in the world of the Gothic (*Gothic Riffs* 115).[13] While Hoeveler discusses this figure in terms of the Marchesa and Schedoni in *The Italian*, it does apply to Madame Montoni's move from a comic to a tragic figure. Through witnessing her victimization, Emily learns how to navigate the dangerous terrain of the Gothic novel.

It is apparent in my analysis of both Clara Reeve and Ann Radcliffe that George Haggerty's assertion is correct, that women Gothicists "share the tendency to use the conventions of Gothic fiction to add excitement to tales that are primarily historical [Reeve] (and sentimental [Radcliffe]) romances, committed more to the heroine's tears than to her terrors. [. . .] instructing her as to the foolishness of Gothic imaginings" (*Unnatural Affections* 55). Haggerty's comments highlight the importance of affective response in Gothic texts. The affective response to the heroine is pity; she serves as the tragic figure with whom readers must sympathize. In contrast, the villain elicits no sympathy, and that is what leaves the villain so open to comic treatment. While both heroines and primary villains can be associated with terror, one as a receptor and the other as a conduit, secondary villains serve as relief against the terror by serving as comic butts. However, these comic figures, like the servants discussed in Chapter One, do have the potential to represent the authors' concerns about their cultural moment, and they can therefore bring about more than mere relief in their ridiculousness. This need to use humor as a vehicle for social critique will continue into the nineteenth century. The

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[13] The parallel extends to Madame Cheron's earlier role as a hindrance to Emily and Valancourt's relationship as the *senex iratus* of ancient theatre is usually an old man who irrationally opposed the marriage of the young couple.

authors of novels which will absorb Gothicism into their multifaceted realism seem to consider the inclusion of comic characters to be a necessary and fundamental part of that absorption, but the inclusion and function of such characters will become more complex and will reflect the social transition from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth.

Chapter Three
Dark Wit: Witty Protagonists in the Victorian Gothic Mode

Oscar Wilde writes "Nothing spoils a romance so much as a sense of humor in the woman—or the want of it in a man" in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893).[1] While he, of course, alludes to humor in romantic relationships facetiously, applying his words to Romance as a genre might prove fruitful. By the beginning of the Victorian Age, Gothic Romance had been parodied and ridiculed to the point of no return. In order for the genre to survive, then, it had to adapt, transforming into a mode which could be absorbed into the dominant genre of the time: the realist novel. As David H. Richter argues, nineteenth-century authors reduced the Gothic genre to a mode, "accessible as a source, not merely of spare parts—[. . .] that could be borrowed and used at will, but also of emotional resonances that could be put to other ends" (125). Gothic conventions which promote a certain emotional effect, then, are integral reasons for the genre's absorption in Victorian novels. I argue that humor survived as much as terror in the Victorian transformation of the Gothic. Comic characters remain as part of the Gothic mode, but they transform from the butt of the joke to the comic agent, able to laugh with others rather than be laughed at themselves. The comic characters of the Victorian Gothic mode are witty protagonists, whose humor lies in their ability to master and manipulate language. Their engagement with the Gothic supernaturalism of their narratives leads to a collision between the terror inspired by conventional Gothic "clap-trap" and realism's need for psychological development and resolution. Eventually, the comic character's

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[1] From the First Act of *A Woman of No Importance* (1893).

wit and humor nullifies the Gothic terror, thus illustrating that humor can effectively end a Romantic interlude in a realist novel.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853) and Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) test this boundary between realism and Gothicism, and are labeled as "genre-defying"[2] as a result, echoing critical concerns about the coherence of the Gothic genre. Donna Heiland argues that the Brontës in particular bring the uncanny into the home and assert a domestication of Gothic conventions: "While the fantastic idiom of gothic and the realistic idiom of domestic fiction might at first glance seem opposed," literary criticism has established that the Brontës "indulged in a certain amount of 'Gothic clap trap' to signal not only their engagement with, but also their interrogation of, the gothic tradition" (115). Julian Wolfreys bases his *Victorian Hauntings* on the premise that the Gothic never fully died and that it persisted in haunting Victorian novels, although he qualifies such hauntings as mere specters of Gothicism, rather than "true" Gothic and claims that part of the ghostly nature of it is due to the form of its return: "in comic discourse" (10-11). According to Wolfreys, Victorian texts regard Gothic tropes with the same sense of "undecidability" inherent in comic forms (27).

One example of a Gothic convention reworked for its comic potential in Brontë's *Villette* is also one of the most famous cruxes of the novel. Ginevra and de Hamal's appropriation of the Gothic archetype of the phantom Nun to cover up their illicit love

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[2] Regina Barreca's term for *Villette*. She writes, "*Villette* is a particularly intriguing example of a genre-defying novel, in fact, because of the consideration of alternatives" ("Making Trouble: An Introduction" 4).

affair represents the most conspicuous vestige of Gothicism in the novel.[3] Most critics

see the haunting figure of the Nun as a sign of generic confusion; is it a mark of the

Gothic or of the mock Gothic? Alternatively, critics read the Nun as another sign of

Lucy's confusion as a narrator; is it a double or a mental projection of her psychological

debilitation? Robert B. Heilman writes in his essay, "Charlotte Brontë's New Gothic,"

that "the apparitions are explained as a product of Lucy's own psychic state, [. . .] In the

history of Gothic this is an important spot, for here we first see the shift from stock

explanations and responses to the inner human reality: fiction is slowly discovering the

psychic depths known to drama for centuries" (105). While Heilman sees the Nun as a

psychological manifestation, albeit a powerful one tied to an internal Gothicism, Athena

Vrettos argues the Gothic representation of the Nun in *Villette* suggests the "Victorian

interest in the paranormal—mesmerism, telepathy, hallucination" and its frequent link to

"the study of the nerves" (557). Christina Crosby, in her often cited article, "Charlotte

Brontë's Haunted Text," explores the doubling effect of the Nun's veiled character with

Lucy's veiled nature, concluding that "the nun 'is' nothing. It cannot be 'adequately'

defined. Neither man nor woman, it is a ghostly signifier" (709).[4] Only Regina Barreca

seems to note the fun of Brontë's "refusal to adhere to convention," observing that the

legend of the Nun is "the final comic piercing of the gothic cloud that hangs over the

novel" (*Untamed and Unabashed* 78). Whether it represents a new Gothic that focuses

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[3] The most well-known manifestation of this figure is The Bleeding Nun in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, "The ghostly nun is the most conventionally Gothic thing in *Villette*, and as such 'she' is subject, at the very end of the novel, to a Radcliffean deconstruction" (126).
[4] Sedgwick also argues that the veil in Gothic literature (and by implication those who wear the veil) "hides Nothing, or death, or in particular some cheat that means absence and substitution" (146). Of course, if it is death or a cheat, then it cannot be Nothing in its most literal sense.

on the haunts of the mind or an interest in the paranormal, the Nun does play an important textual role; it is not "nothing," just as Lucy is not "nothing" despite the critical dismissal of her character as unreliable or unstable. The Nun in *Villette* represents a juncture between the anxieties occasioned by a Gothic trope and the use of humor to deflate those anxieties; if read as a practical joke on Lucy and the entire school, the Nun marks the culmination of the intersection between the Gothic and comic in *Villette* and becomes the emblem of Lucy's release from Gothic terrors and persecution.

Brontë presents the Nun as a practical joke, a trick by which de Hamal can woo Ginevra and antagonize Lucy. Ginevra writes to Lucy upon her elopement with de Hamal, "Oh, and how did you like the nun as a bed-fellow? *I* dressed her up?—didn't I do well? Did you shriek when you saw her? *I* should have gone mad; but then you have such nerves!" (524). The latter statement, of course, seems to be an absurdly ironic statement given the nature of Lucy's illness in the text, yet such coarse humor was always the fare between Ginevra and Lucy; Lucy says as much when Ginevra returns married and Lucy "gave her only the crust and rind of my nature. No matter: she expected of me nothing better [. . .] my dry gibes pleased her well enough, and the more impassible and prosaic my mien, the more merrily she laughed" (526). The joke is cruel, but it reinforces the familial relationship Lucy shares with Ginevra. While the whole school might have seen Ginevra's lover dressed up as the Nun, Ginevra shares the true nature of the joke with Lucy only, which marks their bond as distinctive.

The humor behind the joke displaces the fear of the supernatural Nun, turning Gothic terror into comic fodder. Robyn Warhol also sees a certain amount of humor and

irony lurking beyond the veil of the Nun; she argues that "the Gothic occurrence is not

presented as wholly ridiculous: it is doubly represented as funny and not-funny, terrifying

and not terrifying" (866), and Susan Wolstenholme reads the incident as a "terrific

parody" as well as "a comic reversal" and revision of Gothic nightmares (68-9). The joke

comes at a crucial point in the narrative; Lucy has just returned from her hallucinatory

journey into a carnival world, a trope similar to the green world noted in discussions of

Radcliffean Gothic, which Bakhtin argues is a world that opens up new dialogues

"liberat[ed] from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times" (10) so that

"[a]ll that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all

suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile" (*Rabelais and His World* 38). What

Lucy encounters that night is certainly beyond real. On the night that a festival is held to

celebrate those who had fallen in a past war, Lucy ventures out in an opiate-induced haze

to wander the streets of Villette. Lucy is overcome with despair at the moment because

she has to face M. Paul's departure from the school for the West Indies. Therefore, it is

in a hallucinatory and emotionally vulnerable state, a state very much akin to the state of

revelry produced by carnival, that Lucy comes home and confronts the Gothic figure of

the Nun. T. G. A. Nelson argues that moments of carnival in comedies are usually

"accompanied by mockery, victimization, and practical jokes" (171).[5] Lucy does in fact

encounter mockery at the hands of Ginevra and victimization at the hands of Madame

Beck, who administers the opiate to Lucy in order to keep her from M. Paul that night.

The hallucinatory state in which Lucy confronts the Nun and rips the Gothic to shreds

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[5] Terry Castle comments that the episode of carnival found in eighteenth-century literature, but which I believe can apply to Brontë's text, "alters the literary artifact itself, which seldom retains its claim to didactic purity following the representation of this least purifying of diversions" (114).

furthers David Punter's and Glennis Byron's arguments that Gothic moments of

hallucination "reveal something about the possibilities and depths of human

misrecognition, something about the degree to which life is pursued 'in the light of' a

certain degree of untruth, of misunderstanding, [. . .]" (295). She confronts the Gothic

ghost and finds it a façade for the comic; Lucy therefore reveals the reader's, as well as

her own, misunderstanding of the Nun as a Gothic trope. The Nun then becomes

Brontë's practical joke on a reader who would invest such tropes with more power over

his or her fears than they deserve.

While most of the critics cited throughout this introductory discussion find the

Gothic mode in the Victorian novel to be a textual complication, at best, or a sign of

authorial confusion, at worst, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick empowers the nineteenth-century

novelists' choice to turn to Gothic conventions "for the most important thematic and

structural elements of the creation of fictive character" (168-9). The development of

character is important to Victorian authors, and the character who most often bridges the

divide between the Gothic and the Gothic mode is the comic character. While the Gothic

genre of the late eighteenth century utilized Shakespearean comic figures and followed a

comedic structure which ends in a marriage that promotes "harmony and reconciliation

rather than wit or hilarity" (Nelson 1), the Victorian transformation of comic characters

involves a shift away from comedy to an emphasis on the protagonist's wit to produce

humor. The witty protagonist becomes an active agent, generating humor to stave off

Gothic terror and anxiety on a psychological, rather than on just an emotional, level.

Wit, almost always, is defined by its relationship to humor. While wit is

intellectual, humor is emotional; while wit is cold and relies on antipathy, humor is

amiable and relies on sympathy.[6] According to Ronald Pearsall, however, wit is the

intellectual "complemen[t] rather than rival" to humor (7). He notes, and I agree, that

any difference in the two is a matter of agency; humor is the "receiver" while wit is the

"transmitter" (7). Most scholars note that within the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

the oscillation between humor and wit dominated the critical conversation concerning the

comic. Stuart Tave asserts that wit was viewed so negatively in the eighteenth century

that by its end, caustic wit had given way to a more amiable, communal sense of humor.

The figure of the "amiable humorist" that Tave asserts gained prominence during the

transition from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Tave does not look beyond the end of the eighteenth century, so his study does not

address the reappearance of wit after the sentimentalism associated with humor began to

seem excessive for the stoic Victorians. While at first Victorians valued humor as a tool

for showing moral approbation, over the course of the century (starting around the 1860s

according to Robert Bernard Martin) wit shed its initial associations with high French

culture and indecorous laughter to become the intellectual answer to the overly

sentimental pathos of humor. Martin asserts, "As a general pattern, it might be said that

comedy during the reign of Victoria changed from sentimental comedy to the comedy of

wit and paradox" (3). Amidst the question of "whether comedy and laughter were only

diversions, and disreputable ones at that, or whether they were to be treated as modes of

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[6] See Leigh Hunt and Samuel Davey in the nineteenth century, and Stuart Tave and Robert Bernard Martin in the twentieth. While they use humor here as a particular form of the comic, I assert that all forms of the comic produce humor as an effect.

intellectual investigation, whether they were ways of thinking or mere scornful ticklings"
(Martin 11), the Victorian era considered wit and irony as the intellectually appropriate
way to utilize the comic within human nature.[7]

Wit may be defined as the intellectual approach to humor, which notes social and
individual incongruity verbally, by a turn of phrase. Martin writes that Victorian wit "is
in part dependent upon the triumphant revelation of a discrepancy between the ideal and
the actual, and it is never safe to make that kind of revelation unless one is so confident
of the fundamental unity of the world as to be able to laugh at the apparent chinks in its
solidity" (4-5). This emphasis on intellectual wit as a solution to anxiety occasioned by a
confrontation with a world beyond realism (a Gothic world) reclaims wit away from its
more scornful implications, but it also identifies it as a means of verbal play. For the
purposes of this chapter, I define wit as Donald A. Bloom does: "statements that in
general or in context show significant insight, and are phrased in a particularly apt and
vivid way, [. . .]" (54), but add that these statements are meant to produce a humorous
response, however brief or slight. As Chapter One has argued, the comic characters of
early Gothic narratives relied on verbal loquaciousness to hinder the Gothic machinations
of their masters. As I now turn to later works which use the Gothic, I am forcibly struck
by the fact that using words as a means of achieving humor has also traversed the gulf
between eighteenth-century Gothic and Victorian novels.[8]

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[7] William Hazlitt noted that "wit is the exposing of [the ludicrous], by comparing and controlling it with
something else. [. . .] with is the product of art and fancy" (74) in "Lectures on the English Comic Writers"
(1885). Many Victorian thinkers saw wit as more intelligent, refined, and fanciful because of its penchant
for word play and imagination.
[8] There are those who argue that Victorian realist novels reject Romance completely. George Levine
argues as such, while stating that realism asserts itself through comedy, which moves away from the
'patterning conventions of romance" (21), thus establishing an aesthetic distance by ironically remarking

Wit also has a social function. For Pearsall, it can be "a social weapon" (2). For Carl Hill, "Wit takes the role of the invisible hand that harmonizes individual and social needs" (22), but it can also "act as the instrument of social discipline" (21) in the sense that all forms of humor can ridicule and attack difference. This point is particularly important to this chapter's exploration of witty protagonists. They use their wit to engage with the cultural ideologies that the Gothic confronts to produce psychological anxiety. Victorian novels which feature "moments of comic hysteria or relief" (Horner and Zlosnick 4) allow Gothic terrors, and the anxieties they produce, to become rehabilitative rather than disabling: "Comic Gothic turns, then, invite a conscious, self-reflexive engagement with the Gothic mode that sets up a different kind of contract between the reader and the text, offering a measure of detachment from scenes of pain and suffering that would be disturbing in a different Gothic context" (Horner and Zlosnick 13). In early Gothic texts, the comic characters were servants and villains, designed to achieve humor at their own expense. In the Victorian rejuvenation of Gothicism, however, the comic becomes empowered because it is the protagonist who must step in and achieve the comic distance needed for the reader to resist the anxieties produced by Gothic terror. Brontë's female protagonists achieve a solid sense of self in the face of Gothic upheaval and have the possibility to achieve social harmony and a happy resolution *because* they are witty. As Donald A. Bloom argues, their strength as characters stems from "a talent for these well-turned and amusing insights" which showcase their "wisdom and the

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on those conventions. However, as I read comedy and humor to be an integral part of Gothicism (a form of Romance), realism's break from Romance may not be as clear as Levine would have us believe.

power of [their] personality. By power I mean not dominance or authority over another, but freedom from such dominance over oneself—that is, independence—" (54).

The comic's significant role within the Gothic mode is shown in Jane's first introduction into Gothic anxiety in *Jane Eyre*: "a curious laugh—distinct, formal, mirthless" and later "tragic, as preternatural a laugh as any" (112). This is Jane's, and the reader's, famous introduction to the secret of Thornfield Hall, Bertha Mason Rochester. In Bertha, we have a Gothicized devil whose laugh ought to make Jane "superstitiously afraid" (112). Bertha's defining feature is her madness, a loss of her wits, signified by her laugh. Robin Jones reads Bertha's laughter, and laughter in general in *Jane Eyre*, to be "a response to a patriarchal construct […] an expression of self (specifically in regards to sexuality) and is a tool with which knowledge of women's experience is passed on, from woman to woman, [. . .]" (201-2). Jones reads laughter in Brontë's text as powerful, wrought with meaning and social significance to the women who employ it. She goes on to regard the open laughter of Bertha as open mockery of the patriarchal structures of marriage and womanhood which bind both her and Jane, especially in contrast to Jane's restraint. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also regard Bertha's laugh, even when misread as Grace Poole's, as an act which engages Jane's imagination and therefore connects the laughter with a deeper thrilling knowledge of the narrative (349-50). These critics would contend that the laughter here acts as a potential subversion within the text to the Gothic narrative of patriarchy and repression offered to women by Victorian society and so claim that there is positive power within it. However, Bertha's laughter is not a subversion of Gothicism but rather a part of the inherent Gothicism of the text which

must be overcome and thrust out of the narrative, and the heroine of *Jane Eyre* actually demonstrates a keen wit in her reaction to the laughter in the above scene,[9] which, while it is not laughter per se, conveys a sense of humor meant to guard her mental self against the Gothic threats embodied by Bertha's goblin-like laughter.

Laughter also appears in *Villette*, near the beginning of the novel during Lucy's trip to Brussells, a point which the above critics have also noted. The newlywed bride Lucy observes on the ship seems to laugh, as Lucy comments, from "the mere frenzy of despair" (58). Again, open laughter seems to embody pessimistic confrontation with Victorian social mores of marriage rather than positive mental effects; Barreca writes that "the laughter of this mis-married wife is a discharge of emotion rather than a sign of pleasure" (*Untamed and Unabashed* 69). As the scene develops, Lucy meets Ginevra Fanshawe, a relationship which will define Lucy's narrative in many ways, as we will see, but more importantly, the scene relies on a great deal of play between Lucy and Ginevra. Lucy smiles several times at Ginevra's youth and insipidness (59-61), which supports the critical beliefs that Lucy Snowe, like Jane Eyre before her, stifles her own laughter.[10] Laughter in Brontë's novels is reserved for those who cannot hold onto their sense of self; it is an act of despair rather than of humor. Verbal wit is valorized instead. The fact that Ginevra becomes an ally and friend because she responds more to Lucy's "caustic wit" [11] than anything else indicates that the novel regards humorous wordplay as

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[9] Jane calls herself a "fool" for entertaining even the thought of fear when she hears Bertha's unnatural laughter, especially when it is contrasted so forcibly with Grace Poole's solid appearance (112). The tone of the passage is ironic and detached, a witty moment of self-depreciation from Jane the older narrator.
[10] Barreca comments that Lucy "hides her laughter" (*Untamed and Unabashed* 69); Robin Jones writes that Jane learns to stifle laughter because it is deemed an improper means of expression in its aggressiveness, a potential act of anarchy, which is why Bertha laughs and not Jane (202).
[11] See pages 63, 94, and 96 in *Villette*.

the proper recourse for women to gain a sense of community as well as a consistent sense

of self.[12]

Lucy's first teaching experience also shows that the rallying quality of her wit

allows her to form communal bonds. Her wit earns her a permanent position with

Madame Beck and her students, who share an affinity with witty perverseness that Lucy

manipulates to her advantage. When confronted by the ill-behaved students, Lucy learns

that, with "some sarcasm, flavoured with contemptuous bitterness," she might "get

command over this wild herd and bring them into training" (88). Lucy then proceeds to

tear up a prominent student's composition and lock another in a closet, earning "a

smile—not a laugh" from her students as their "pens travelled peacefully over the pages,

and the remainder of the lesson passed in order and industry" (89). Lucy tames her

students on the first day with her actions, making comic butts of her students, and their

act of approbation is a smile, not a laugh, because laughter would be derisive rather than

respectful. This scene demonstrates that Lucy's wit is a mental defense against the

anxieties produced by being a social outcast. Barreca writes that Jane Eyre and Lucy

Snowe use their wit in a combination of self-defense and mutiny; it "evolves into an

essential strategy for survival" (*Untamed and Unabashed* 61). By using such values for

her gain, Lucy manipulates a sense of others and her own character to a given situation, a

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[12] Brontë's rejection of laughter seems to be particularly tied to gender issues; as my discussion in Chapter Four will reveal, Dickens regards laughter as a sign of redemption for his male protagonist. In fact, Brontë's rejection of laughter in favor of intellectual wit supports Robin Jones' view that since "[w]omen have been a butt of jokes for centuries," and viewed as "nurturers" rather than aggressors, "[l]aughter in women is unexpected because the incongruous or the marginal aren't expected to laugh at the dominating force" (202).

feat that denotes strength of will and mental resolve as well as a challenge to many critical definitions of her character.

Villette is critically regarded an unstable narrative told by an unreliable narrator, open to Gothic elements which disrupt the realism of the text. Critics assert, in fact, that it is Lucy's psychological neuroses which produce the Gothic elements of the narrative. Such an assessment validates Brontë's aesthetic choice to include the Gothic; Brontë uses the Gothic to produce psychological complexity and realism. Athena Vrettos succinctly writes that *Villette* "merges nervous sensibility and narrative sensibility by confronting the reader with the hysteric first person narrator—Lucy Snowe—and by tracing how hysteria informs her acts of narration and, alternately, how narration expresses and embodies her hysteria" (552). While Vrettos seeks to explore what she considers Lucy's mental instability in terms of emerging Victorian psychological theories, Beverly Forsyth and Christina Crosby explore Lucy's psychological problems as indicators of an overall problem of narrative instability within the text. Forsyth in particular regards Lucy's psychological issues as a necessary part of her identity as she declares, "Unless the reader is willing to look into the face of pain, there is no way to know the real Lucy Snowe" (17). She labels Lucy as a sadomasochist, a voyeur, and an exhibitionist, but she sees Lucy's identity as necessarily prescribed by those roles. Crosby, on the other hand, reads Lucy's identity as imaginary at best and at worst confusedly de-centered. She cites the gender inversions within the text as indicative of the de-centered, non-linear nature of womanhood. And in the seminal work on madness in Victorian novels, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,* Gilbert

and Gubar read the mental instability of characters such as Lucy Snowe as a tool by which Victorian woman authors may "come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be" (78). Most of these critics tie Lucy's disruptive psychologies to the Gothic disruptions within the realist narrative; since she narrates her story, any psychological instability influences the narrative and creates the Gothic elements. In fact, Diane Long Hoeveler goes so far as to argue that Lucy's unreliability as a narrator stems from her shame at being "a female gothic heroine caught in a gothic novel" (*Gothic Feminism* 222).

Other critics, however, read Lucy as capable of great intellectual power, usually *because* she is psychologically different than other characters in her narrative. Nina Auerbach reads *Villette's* protagonist as heroic because Lucy is "a being chosen and set apart, ineffably distinguished by her 'difference from us'" (128). Robyn R. Warhol argues that the issue of "doubleness" in Brontë's texts shows that "Victorian women novelists [. . .] are actively engaged in rewriting [gender codes]" and that such rewriting productively uses binary oppositions such as "masculinity and femininity" and "realism and romance" (858). The critical confusion about how to classify these texts' genre is, according to Warhol, missing the real point. Rewriting genre empowers a rewriting of gender. Even Forsyth regards Lucy's psychological issues as "a powerful aggressive weapon" to control herself (18). Part of that mental weapon is Lucy's wit. If the book is read with the heroine's comic potential in mind, identifying her as a hysteric assumes a new level of appreciation, rather than deprecation, as the "hysteric, the paradigmatic rebel

against reality-testing, [is] a central figure for the discussion of women and comedy" because "she is emblematic of the way women have been misread, and, by implication, the way in which women's comedy has been misread" (Barreca *Untamed and Unabashed* 31-2). Traditionally fictional women are not meant to be funny because humor implies aggression, but the hysteric is aggressive in her emotional resonance so therefore in order to fully appreciate Lucy Snowe, the critic must appreciate her sense of humor. While Regina Barreca has seen the value of wit in Brontë's texts, claiming that *Villette* in particular "yield[s] surprisingly rich results" when read for its comedy (*Untamed and Unabashed* 22), she does not extend her discussion to how Lucy's wit particularly engages with the Gothicism of the text and how it presents a way to stabilize not only Lucy's mental character but the narrative as well.

As defined earlier, wit is a product of a capacity to revel in disparity while at the same time upholding a firm sense of unity, "harmoniz[ing] individual and social needs" (Hill 22), so that wit becomes not only a mental weapon but a "social weapon" (Pearsall 2) as well. Lucy's wit engages social discourse in the clearest way when it encounters the constraints of her gender, which allows for an assertion of self as well as a critique of social mores. For instance, during Madame Beck's fête, Lucy dons the role of the gentleman fop and scathingly uses the gender reversal to put the ill-tempered Parisian St. Pierre in her place: "I could not help turning upon her and saying, that if she were not a lady and I a gentleman, I should feel disposed to call her out" (154). Gender switching is, of course, a traditional comedic method of achieving humor. Lucy recognizes the comic potential of the moment and uses it to her advantage, to assert her mental strength against

her ill-tempered colleague. Not only does she show an aesthetic appreciation for the role reversal, highlighting Brontë's empowerment of an "artistic imagination" (Brantlinger 116), she uses the gender inversion to rail assertively against a foreign threat. While feminist critics may well read her empowerment here as problematic (her forceful assertion, after all, happens under the guise of a man), it nevertheless shows strength of character. The ensuing play "serves an emancipatory function [. . .] a moment of possible transformation when the writer [or the speaker as I read it here] forces her speech to break out of old representations of the feminine and to posit something new" (Yaeger 36). On stage, Lucy commands, and she does so through comedy: "What I felt that night, and what I did, I no more expected to feel and do, than to be lifted in a trance to the seventh heaven. Cold, reluctant, apprehensive, I had accepted a part to please another: ere long, warming, becoming interested, taking courage, I acted to please myself" (156). Not only does Lucy find social empowerment in her role, she also learns to experience delight and appreciate her comic identity. Susan Wolstenholme writes that "[c]hoosing this comic role immediately liberates Lucy to indulge the wit she displays in the text far more to the reader than to the characters in the novel" (71). While Wolstenholme is making a feminist point about Lucy achieving subjectivity as a woman, her arguments empower Lucy's comic nature.

While the gender reversal empowers Lucy's comic vitality, her wit engages the discrepancies inherent Victorian gender roles and courtship rituals most directly in her tutelage of Ginevra and little Paulina Home. She demonstrates the "tendentious nature"

of her wit in "setting up cultural, class, and gender boundaries" (Hill 9) to point out

Ginevra's misconceptions about such things:

> 'Ginevra, have you seriously done with Dr. Bretton: Do you want him to
> give you up?'
>
> 'Oh! you know he *can't* do that: but wasn't he mad?'
>
> 'Quite mad,' I assented; 'as mad as a March hare.'
>
> 'Well, and how *ever* did you get him home?'
>
> 'How *ever*, indeed! Have you no pity on his poor mother and me? Fancy
> us, holding him tight down in the carriage, and he raving between us, fit to drive
> everybody delirious. The very coachman went wrong, somehow, and we lost our
> way.' (263)

Here, Lucy plays upon Ginevra's preconceived ideas about the emotional effect her

behavior produced, which appears to mock Ginevra's naïveté about her lover's nature. In

the subsequent conversation, however, Lucy's wit indulges in a full-length parody of the

night's events, which actually fuels Ginevra's misconceptions rather than deflates them:

> '[. . .] you will be able to conceive Dr. Graham Bretton rejecting his
> supper in the first instance—the chicken, the sweet-bread prepared for his
> refreshment, left on the table untouched. Then—but it is of no use dwelling at
> length on harrowing details. Suffice it to say, that never, in the most stormy fits
> and moments of his infancy, had his mother such work to tuck the sheets about
> him as she had that might.'
>
> 'He wouldn't lie still?'

'He wouldn't lie still: there it was. The sheets might be tucked in, but the
thing was to keep them tucked in.'

'And what did he say?'

'Say! Can't you imagine him demanding his divine Ginevra,
anathematizing that demon, De Hamal—raving about golden locks, blue eyes,
white arms, glittering bracelets?'

'No, did he? He saw the bracelet?' (264)

After she abruptly dismisses a pouting Ginevra, Lucy remarks that she found "pleasure in thinking of the contrast between the reality and my description—to remember Dr. John enjoying the drive home, eating his supper with relish, and retiring to rest with Christian composure" (264). Here, clearly, Lucy's wit is a source of pleasure and resistance, a means for her to note the discrepancies in the world around her.[13] While Ginevra's voice is the product of social norms which sanctions the marriage market as the only source of fun allowed to a young woman, Lucy's comic voice seeks a reasonable empowerment of women's intellectual reflection with such frivolousness.

As Lucy's wit thrives on noting discrepancies between others' perceptions of the world and the way the world actually is, it can make her confident about the *unity* of her world, according to Robert Martin's definition. When Lucy discourses with little Paulina Home upon the eve of Polly leaving Lucy's godmother's house in Chapter Three, Lucy's wit is quick to show Paulina that there are ideals outlined by society to which many in the world try to adhere:

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[13] In this way, *Villette* fulfills Walter Nash's theories that "To live with the witty it is not enough to be literate; one must also be socially competent" (76).

[T]he small voice asked, - 'Do you like Graham, Miss Snowe?' [. . .]

'I told you I like him a little. Where is the use of caring for him so very

much: he is full of faults.'

'Is he?'

'All boys are.'

'More than girls?'

'Very likely. Wise people say it is folly to think anybody perfect; and as

to likes and dislikes, we should be friendly to all, and worship none.'

'Are you a wise person?'

'I mean to try to be so. Go to sleep.' (37-38)

This passage establishes that Lucy possesses a clear notion of the way of the world, a

constant ideal that she sees others trying to assert but failing to achieve. The retort that

"all boys are [full of faults]" plays into a disparity inherent in gender roles of the

Victorian era; the man must be changed by the perfect "angel" of the house. Yet, the

witty tone of the response ensures that the reader will not take such generalizations as

seriously as Polly Home does. The reader knows not all men are full of faults and so

Lucy uses a fixed "truism" of the world around her to make a witty discourse about social

roles. Gilbert and Gubar argue that Brontë and other women writers use their female

narrators, who are in effect doubles of themselves, to explore "their own keen sense of

the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be" (78). The

above passage demonstrates how Lucy wittily exploits the unreliability of the world

around her, which is notably different than being unreliable herself, as many critics

believe.

Lucy repeatedly employs her wit as a way to challenge the stability of the

Victorian gender norms placed upon her, but it is important to note that doing so actually

challenges the traditional Gothic threats of patriarchy over the frail female. While many

critics debate the feminist manifesto of this text, just like they do for *Jane Eyre*,[14] the

focus of my discussion is not whether Lucy is feminist (and that by using her wit she is

empowering her gender), but rather that her wit empowers her to challenge traditional

sources of Gothic anxiety, one of which is submission to a patriarchal tyrant. While the

realist novel softens the sexually perverse tyrant of early Gothic into the "tyrant-husband"

as part of the secularization of the genre (Hoeveler *Gothic Riffs* 13), the romantic figure is

still a source of tyranny, and therefore a source of Gothic anxiety, for Brontë's heroines.[15]

Lucy's wit blatantly attacks the now tempered tyranny of romantic love throughout the

novel. Regina Barreca writes that the heroine's wit "protect[s her] as much from the

sweetly suffocating sentimentality as from stern condemnation; [her] humor is as

effective against that which would threaten [her] autonomy as it is against that which

would threaten [her] virtue" (*Untamed and Unabashed* 79). For instance, backstage after

Madame's fête play, Ginevra discusses her two lovers, clearly preferring the foppish De

Hamal because she supposes that he would be fancied by any woman, a supposition

which she hopes Lucy will corroborate. However, Lucy's response is sarcastic: "Oh!

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[14] Hoeveler writes that Jane Eyre knows the power of narrative, but her words are ineffective, and therefore her passive behavior undercuts any feminist potential in her character (*Gothic Feminism* 211-2).
[15] Richter reads Brontë's leading men as one of the few moments in which the Gothic mode promotes generic coherence in the realist novel. They "recombine[e] the hero and the villain, the threat and the reward" (106).

heavens, what bliss […] but do not be inhuman, Miss Fanshawe: to put such thoughts

into my head is like showing poor outcast Cain a glimpse of Paradise" (162). To

Ginevra's question of whether she likes him, Lucy lists items which she does not like:

"As I like sweets, and jams, and comfits, and conservatory flowers" (162). The sarcasm

is lost on Ginevra, but not on the reader. Lucy tropes the romantic love Ginevra wants as

like sweets and flowers, fashionable but fleeting. Lucy in this moment rejects the ideal of

romantic love for the reality of her situation, sentimentality for autonomy.

The conclusion of the novel, in which the Romance is resolved usually through

marriage, is the clearest moment where Lucy's witty independence trumps the tyranny of

marriage. Brontë asserts that the cure to the anxiety produced by the Gothic trope of the

supernatural Nun who haunts the school lies in the happiness to be found within Lucy's

connections to the Brettons, M. Paul, and within her wit. The Brettons, a particularly

witty family, delight in teasing one another and provide Lucy with a home for a time. In

their home, she learns that wit solidifies communal bonds:

'Is it you, Graham? said his mother, hiding a glad smile and speaking

curtly.

"Who else would it be, mama?' demanded the Unpunctual, possessing

himself irreverently of the abdicated throne.

'Don't you deserve cold tea, for being late?'

'I shall not get my deserts, for the urn sings cheerily.' (195)

John mercilessly teases his mother in return:

       'Hushaby, mama! Sleep again. You look the picture of innocence in your

slumbers.'

       'My slumbers, John Graham! What are you talking about? You know I

never *do* sleep by day; it is the slightest doze possible.'

       'Exactly! A seraph's gentle lapse—a fairy's dream. Mama, under such

circumstances, you always remind me of Titania.'

       'That is because you, yourself, are so like Bottom.' (208)

Lucy comments that "their words were not very fond, but their mutual looks atoned for

verbal deficiencies. At least, the best treasure of Mrs. Bretton's life was certainly

casketed in her son's bosom; her dearest pulse throbbed in his heart" (208-9). Brontë

clearly uses the Brettons' relationship as a model for a balanced and stable family to

contrast to the wreckage of Lucy's own Gothic narrative of orphaned disinheritance. The

fact that the Brettons' community relies on witty wordplay illustrates that Brontë

valorizes wit as an appropriate catalyst for Lucy to gain personal strength of mind.

       Because the Brettons allow her to hope for possibility of change, Lucy rarely

gives in to the despair which is the hallmark of other Gothic heroines. John [Graham]

Bretton's teasing of Lucy during her stay with them establishes her as part of the family,

places her in a sisterly role, but that also makes her an unlikely and improper candidate

for his affections. John's familial relationships are tinged with teasing and humor which

his romantic relationships lack. Ginevra often comments that John as a lover is "always

preaching" and "coddling and admonishing" (163). Since John does not tease his lovers,

"Miss Fanshawe, with her usual ripeness of judgment, pronounced Dr. Bretton a serious,

impassioned man, too grave and to impressible" (288). Lucy, of course, has seen him in

a different light in the light-hearted revelries of his home. Neglecting to tease Ginevra,

John loses her love to the charming and quite comic fop de Hamal, but because he teases

Lucy too much, John cannot love Lucy. However, the positive associations of wit with

love and family are firmly entrenched by the time Lucy returns to school, thus ensuring

she finds an equitable match in her romantic relationship with M. Paul.

She turns to M. Paul because he is her "Imaginary Other, the mirror image with

whom she identifies" (Crosby 712). The witty wordplay that defines their relationship

actually indicates that this romance values Lucy's autonomy, rather than tyrannizes over

her; their relationship is a partnership which promotes a resolution to Lucy's

psychological development that many critics fail to note. Robert Bledsoe feels that

Lucy's psychological instability is meant to hinder reader sympathy, and her

independence at the end of the narrative is not a sign of maturity because she "can never

establish a constructive, reciprocally loving relationship with another human" (215).

Bledsoe discounts Lucy's relationship with M. Paul because she never marries him, a

critical error in my opinion. When given proper consideration, Lucy and M. Paul seem

well-matched in their capacity for witty wordplay and genial humor. In one of their first

witty encounters, M. Paul reprimands Lucy for viewing a painting of Cleopatra in an art

gallery and advises her to peruse more morally appropriate subjects, namely dull, gray

paintings of dull, gray women. In this particular scene, Brontë is challenging

Catholicism, especially in relation to its strict censures on women, and M. Paul becomes

the representative Catholic voice. However, it also reveals that when M. Paul challenges

Lucy, she discovers her strong, witty self:

> Beginning now to perceive his drift, I had a certain pleasure in keeping
> cool, and working him up.

> 'Astounding insular audacity!' cried the Professor. 'Singulières femmes
> que ces Anglaises!'[16]

> 'What is the matter, monsieur?'

> 'Matter! How dare you, a young person, sit coolly down, with the self-
> possession of a garcon, and look at that picture?'

> 'It is a very ugly picture, but I cannot at all see why I should not look at
> it.' (225)

He prescribes instead a more "acceptable" set of paintings of ladies for a young woman,

which Lucy describes as "grim and gray as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts. What

women to live with! insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities!" (226).

Not only does Lucy enjoy goading him with her wit, but the pictures he recommends are

described in Gothic terms, and her response implies that passion and humor, not Gothic

trappings, should form the essence of a woman. Lucy's wit undercuts M. Paul's

authority as a scholar, a Catholic, and a man and places her own judgments and aesthetic

tastes on equal footing with his, illustrating "the female writer's refusal to allow for the

high seriousness demanded by the gentleman scholar" (Barreca *Untamed and Unabashed*

77).

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[16] "These English women are remarkable!"

The fact that such a refusal is met with M. Paul's admiration (rather than oppression) of Lucy indicates Brontë is dismissing patriarchal tyranny as a romantic construct in favor of a more secular companionate love, as Hoeveler argues in *Gothic Riffs*. For instance, when M. Paul chastises Lucy for her lack of gift on his fête day, they both angrily but wittily catalogue the defects of the other. To his complaints against Englishwomen Lucy retorts "Vive l'Angleterre, l'Histoire et les Héros! A bas la France, la Fiction et les Faquins!"[17] (379). To which M. Paul responds by becoming "good-humoured" (379). He clearly enjoys her wit as a match to his own. He responds positively to Lucy's passion, and in doing so, becomes the only character who, as Maureen Peeck argues, "look[s] in to [Lucy's] soul and perceive[s] her fully as she was—a whole human being" (228). Perhaps because of this, M. Paul becomes the reason Lucy is able to mature and see herself as a complete and stable person. Feminist critics respond to Lucy's ending positively, because her independence can be read as a feminist revolt against societal and narrative structures that would enforce a happy ending through marriage and Lucy's "knowing her capacity to love and inspire love" (Peeck 228). Feminists such as Gilbert and Gubar argue that Lucy's independence frees her from her need to repress her happiness; Heilman and Vrettos claim that her nervous disorder dissipates as sexual desire is achieved. She no longer represses but instead recognizes her emotions as her relationship with M. Paul is realized. Vrettos asserts that reading Lucy's solitary life at the end of the novel as a cure indicates a critical need for narrative closure: "One must, it appears, cure the heroine in order to end the text" (576). Vrettos

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[17] "Long live England, History and Heroes! Down with France, Fiction and Fops!"

and others like her seem almost startled to make the claim that the ending is curative,

despite its darker elements.

Some of the critics listed above view Lucy's cure, and the happiness Lucy enjoys

at the end of the text, ambiguously since M. Paul is supposedly lost to her forever while

her enemies triumph in their long, well-lived lives. Such a reading fails, yet again, to

note the complete text and Lucy's pervasive wittiness. When John Bretton pronounces

that "[h]appiness is the cure—a cheerful mind the preventive" (278) to Lucy's mental

anxieties occasioned by the Nun's Gothic "haunting" of the school, Lucy responds, at the

time, with her usual ironic wit as she informs the reader, "No mockery in this world ever

sounds to me so hollow as that of being told to *cultivate* happiness. What does such

advice mean? Happiness is not a potato, to be planted in mould, and tilled with manure"

(278). Yet, by burying her relationship with John, who cannot enjoy her wit, and by

turning to M. Paul who "amuses" Lucy with a wit of his own (237), Lucy very clearly

cultivates happiness and, therefore, the cure to Gothic anxiety. Through her

establishment among a family, with daily correspondence with the Brettons and the de

Hamals as well as M. Paul, Lucy, while she could not achieve a happy marriage, does

achieve a happy three years (543); a happiness obtained, by her words, through a "genial

flame":

> The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself, in any
>
> endowment, any power of mine, as in a new state of circumstances, a
>
> wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart. [. . .] I had been left a legacy;
>
> such a thought for the present, such a hope for the future, such a motive

for a persevering, a laborious, an enterprising, a patient and a brave

course—I *could* not flag. Few things shook me now; few things had

importance to vex, intimidate, or depress me: most things pleased—mere

trifles had a charm. (544)

Lucy's deployment of wit, first to ward off potentially negative forces in her solitary life,

and then to create a niche for herself amidst those who value such witty perverseness,

creates a narrative that is very much at odds with the imbalanced and imperfect one many

critics are all too willing to read into a sometimes dark and complicated text. Contrary to

Bledsoe's assessment, Brontë's *Villette* ultimately becomes a *bildungsroman*, and a

successful one at that. Lucy's wit, "[b]ecause it contributes to both maturity and to

maturation," allows *Villette* to join the "convincing literary treatments of growth or

enlightenment" (Lewis 75) which rely on humor. Self-empowered by her witty words,

Lucy can assert that she has a fixed, "staid manner of my own which ere now had been as

good to me as cloak and hood of hodden gray; since under its favour I had been enabled

to achieve with impunity, and even approbation, deeds that if attempted with an excited

and unsettled air, would in some minds have stamped me as a dreamer and zealot" (49).

Lucy finds a regenerative power in her new vocation and in her new familial

relationships, which indicates that the "heroine who is both witty and tender" also "has

the courage, if need be, to go her own way, though she will certainly gather some

company along the way" (Galligan 116). Nina Auerbach reads Lucy's "spinster" status

at the end of *Villette* as empowering and asserts that the figure of the old maid gains

"distinction as one of God's elect by revealing her superiority to an ordinary woman, her

married sister" (131). In contrast to Ginevra, the representative of wives who are "loveless investors of themselves on the marriage market" according to Auerbach, Lucy represents the old maids who "are secret and passionate emotional gamblers, willing to forfeit security for the solitary intensity of hopeless love" (Auerbach 131). Lucy's ability to risk happiness is enough to cure her; whether her happiness or cure lasts after M. Paul's death cannot be ascertained, but I read the ending as Auerbach does: as powerfully hopeful. The ending does reveal that Lucy chooses to hold onto her wit as she ends, not with a narrative of her own life, but with the narration of her enemies' lives. Ironically, and Lucy herself cannot fail to note the irony in terms of Romance, they live long and well rather than being traditionally chastised for their treatment of the heroine. Again, *Villette* seems to be the very embodiment of Oscar Wilde's assertion that a woman's sense of humor seems to hinder the realization of Romance. Auerbach asserts that a happy ending for Lucy, which means assimilation into Victorian norms of domesticity and family, would only "deny her splendid identity" (144). Lucy's wit remains a constant part of her character and thus divulges a more stable narrative of self than literary critics usually grant her. Faced with a life that reads as a Gothic narrative, complete with being orphaned and confrontations with the foreign and strange, Brontë's Lucy Snowe uses her wit to rewrite that Gothic narrative, dispelling her dark past and achieving harmony in the end, despite upsetting the Romance.

Another Victorian text which employs the Gothic as a mode which helps codify its realist concerns with moral development is Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens' engagement with Gothic supernaturalism is more direct than Brontë's. Many

critics have no trouble placing *A Christmas Carol* in the Gothic canon because of the

predominant role the supernatural plays in the text. The ghosts, particularly Marley and

the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, embody the uncanny for Scrooge. Julia Briggs

distinguishes the early visitation by Marley by its comic potential: "The ghost of old

Marley clanking its chains is deliberately stereotypical, quaintly comic, whereas the

spectres of want and ignorance were as terrible then as they are today" (126), but the

distinction lies not in the ghostly manifestations themselves but in Scrooge's reaction to

them. Being far more familiar with Marley, Scrooge wittily attempts to dispel the anxiety

produced by his spiritual apparition. When he confronts the darker implications of his

miserly behavior, though, when want and ignorance are revealed, his wit fails him and he

reacts with proper terror. The comparison highlights that Scrooge's wit fails to suspend

his terror completely when faced with the true horrors of want and ignorance. Dickens'

witty protagonist must transform into an amiable humorist in order to banish those

phantoms, a point which will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

      Within the first moments of encountering Marley's spirit, Scrooge reacts with a

wry sense of terror. After seeing Marley's face in his door knocker, the narrator remarks

that Scrooge, while "startled," cannot help but pause before closing the door and "look

cautiously behind it first, as if he half-expected to be terrified with the sight of Marley's

pig-tail sticking out into the hall" (16). The narrator here is being capricious,

undermining the supposedly serious nature of the scene. The image of a pig-tail sticking

out of a door, as if the supernatural were bound to our perception of how the world

works, holds more humor than terror. And when Scrooge reacts with the same

capriciousness to Marley's emergence as a fully defined ghost, we as readers are prepared

to note the humor to be found in the situation. Dickens even has Scrooge make a

deprecating joke about Marley; when Marley appears, the focal point becomes his

transparent body, to which the narrator remarks, "Scrooge had often heard it said that

Marley had no bowels, but he had never believed it until now" (20). Remembering a

sarcastic remark about Marley's intractable nature is a strange reaction to a ghostly

encounter.[18] However, as I have already demonstrated, a retreat into wit is a mental

defense against the anxiety occasioned by Gothic tropes. Scrooge distracts himself from

his terror and anxiety by amusing himself (and the reader) with jokes about Marley's

appearance. James R. Kincaid remarks that using humor in such a way indicates "that

Dickens often asks us to laugh at the very subjects he is, in other parts of the novel,

asking us to sympathize or be angry with: death, loneliness, improvidence, rigidity,

spontaneous cruelty [. . .]" (7). Like Briggs, Kincaid divides the essential emotional

component of Dickens' uses of the Gothic. In one instance, he may treat horrible acts

and ideologies with fear, the next with humor. These critics imply an essential divide

between the earlier treatment of the supernatural and the later experiences. I too argue

that there is an essential divide in the text, but it lies in how Scrooge approaches such

events, which dictates how readers are to engage them.

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[18] Julian Wolfreys notes that in Dickens, wit itself can be uncanny because of its ability to disrupt the
familiar usages of language to produce its humor (35). He also notes the connection between the comic and
the Gothic, which lies in the "process of material effects it produces in the complication of reading; as with
the gothic, the comic relies on the haunting installation of undecidability" (27). Therefore the comic opens
up a potential interpretation seemingly incongruent with the events of the text; in doing so, it affects a shift
in how readers perceive the narrative.

As with Lucy Snowe, Scrooge's wit engages a discrepancy between social conventions and reality. When Scrooge asks Marley to sit down, "Scrooge asked the question, because he didn't know whether a ghost so transparent might find himself in a condition to take a chair; and felt that in the event of its being impossible, it might involve the necessity of an embarrassing explanation. But the Ghost sat down on the opposite side of the fireplace, as if he were quite used to it" (21). The social conventions of the Victorian age, here, become fodder for Dickens' comic touch. Scrooge's preoccupation with the niceties is a preoccupation with the materiality of Marley, and so it distracts him from thinking about the much more disturbing notion of Marley's spectral nature. The focus on materiality becomes absurd when Scrooge attributes the ghost's appearance to indigestion. His witty remark that there seems to be "more of gravy than of grave about" Marley is Dickens' indication that Scrooge's wit is a psychological rationalization meant to ward off his anxiety in encountering the supernatural: "Scrooge was not much in the habit of cracking jokes, nor did he feel, in his heart, by any means waggish then. The truth is, that he tried to be smart, as a means of distracting his own attention, and keeping down his terror; for the spectre's voice disturbed the very marrow in his bones" (22). Just as Lucy Snowe's wit defends against her persecution as an outsider in *Villette*, Scrooge's "smartness" defends against the irrational terror of encountering a ghost. It operates like all forms of humor which, as Max Eastman argues, "is often the last weapon in the hands of those who are menaced by a truth" ("The Definition of Wit" 45).

However, that is where the similarities between our witty heroines and Scrooge end. While readers admire the wit of Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, readers can only shake their head in derisive amusement at Scrooge's foolishness. That his wit makes him less attractive is made all the more evident in his reaction to Marley's news about the other ghosts' visitations:

> "You will be haunted," resumed the Ghost, "by Three Spirits."
>
> Scrooge's countenance fell almost as low as the Ghost's had done.
>
> "Is that the chance and hope you mentioned, Jacob?" he demanded, in a faltering voice.
>
> "It is."
>
> "I—I think I'd rather not," said Scrooge.
>
> "Without their visits," said the Ghost, "you cannot hope to shun the path I tread. Expect the first tomorrow, when the bell tolls one."
>
> "Couldn't I take 'em all at once, and have it over, Jacob?" hinted Scrooge.

(27)

Here Scrooge acts like a petulant child, whining about the possibility of being visited by more ghosts. The reader notes the humor of his reaction but also begins to recognize that his wit is problematic as it hinders his ability to internalize Marley's warning and become aware of the truth. The first instance of the Gothic supernatural as a transformative power in the text coincides with the first moment we see Scrooge's wit fail. When Scrooge's wit becomes distasteful, it becomes part of the serious moral at the heart of his encounters with the supernatural; it performs as all forms of humor in Dickens does and

"becomes part of [Dickens'] meaning" (Lane, Jr. 11). Roger B. Henkle observes that when characters employ the comic in Dickens' later novels, they are "moribund, or in the throes of garish decline. Instead of engaging in the heroic self-assertions of the lower classes, they act out the grotesque contortions of the middle class" (148). This is most clearly demonstrated in Scrooge's scathing rebuttal to the philanthropic appeal for the poor, when Scrooge heartlessly cites the prisons, the workhouses, the Poor Laws, all of which represent the Victorian middle-class solutions to poverty. Scrooge uncharitably, and therefore unheroically, uses his wit to deflect the needs of the poor back upon themselves: "'If they would rather die,' said Scrooge, 'they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population" (11). While some critics, most notably G. K. Chesterton, read even this form of his humor as positive, noting a "heartiness in his inhospitable sentiments" (Chesterton "The Pickwick Papers" 124), his wit here embodies the worst qualities found in the eighteenth-century criticism of wit as "negative, analytical, and destructive" (Martin 30). While Scrooge consistently produces humor throughout his story, his humorous technique changes as the narrative progresses. Since his wit represents the most negative aspects of his inability to give, it must be laid aside in later encounters with the Gothic because those encounters are meant to terrify Scrooge into repentance and shape him into a hero.

When the hauntingly grotesque figures of want and ignorance appear, we recognize a character that has undergone a powerful transformation in the way he approaches his terror. In this moment, Scrooge's witty dismissal of the poor, his references to the prisons and workhouses, are uncannily thrust back toward him by the

Spirit of Christmas Present. The scene heralds in the last of the spirits, the Ghost of

Christmas Yet to Come, and the most traditionally Gothic moments of the text. Scrooge

can no longer stave off his terror through his wit because he must succumb to it in order

to recognize the truth and save himself. In the end, the Gothic supernaturalism of

Dickens' text is necessary for character growth and therefore cannot be nullified by

Scrooge's wit. So when, after his visitations, he transforms into an amiable humorist: "It

is as if Dickens, recognizing the unintentionally humorous aspect of gothic narrative,

turns to the comedic mode in order to fashion a strength from an aesthetic weakness"

(Wolfreys 51).

The Victorian texts I have discussed here employ the Gothic only to turn it back

on itself in comic mockery rather than grant it any power. While the Gothic still haunts

these texts, providing Brontë and Dickens with ample material with which to occasion

anxiety, it has lost its power to terrify. It is in the spirit of mockery and play that Brontë

and Dickens introduce their spirits; readers familiar with the Gothic recognize that

Victorian ghosts had long been devoid of the awful power with which earlier Gothic

tyrants were invested. Part of what occasions such a transition for reader is the

emergence of Gothic parodies in the early nineteenth century, to which I now turn.

Chapter Four
"Humor Me": The Amiable Humorist in Gothic Parody

Humor and wit seem to haunt one another. When one seems to die in the

prevailing cultural discourse, its shadow remains within the comparison to the other, until

it is eventually resurrected by force of the contrast. This haunting sounds much like

Julian Wolfreys' arguments concerning Gothicism; for him, Gothic tropes continue to

haunt texts well past the usually demarcated era of Gothic Romance (1764-1820), despite

critical assumptions to the contrary. The subject of this chapter is the amiable humorist, a

figure which emerges earlier than the nineteenth-century wit discussed in Chapter Three.

I am aware that this chapter works against a chronological treatment of the comic within

the Gothic; however, critics agree that there is no certain chronological development of

humor in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The prevailing theories of the age

oscillate between valorizing humor and denigrating wit, and vice versa. Therefore, I have

decided to end my discussion of comic characters with the figure of the amiable

humorist, which emerges in Gothic parodies of 1818, and which becomes another model

for Dickens in *A Christmas Carol*.

Another reason for backtracking here is that parody is a genre belonging to the

development of the novel and set apart from it at the same time, as M. M. Bakhtin argues

in *The Dialogic Imagination*, which means that any treatment of parody must be set apart

from the genre it parodies. Bakhtin regards parody as "an intentional dialogized hybrid"

which means "that the languages that are crossed in it relate to each other as do rejoinders

in dialogue; there is an argument between languages, an argument between styles of

language. But it is not a dialogue in the narrative sense, nor in the abstract sense; rather it

is a dialogue between points of view, each with its own concrete language [. . .]"
(*Dialogic* 76). Bakhtin's definition asserts, first, that the humor produced in parodies is a
verbal one, and therefore this chapter's discussion, like the other three chapters, will
focus on how humor is produced through verbal incongruity. Second, the verbal
incongruity of parodies relies on the dialogue, the interplay, between two opposing
viewpoints. Gothic parodies introduce this dialogue through comic characters whose
point of view directly engage with, and provide a contrast to, the character who espouses
the traditionally Gothic sensibility, and therefore parody's use of the comic is more
deliberate and obvious than it has been in previous chapter's discussions. Parodies of the
Gothic also do not set out to produce anxiety in the same way as other Gothic texts, but
they do provide a rather valuable service to the Gothic scholar interested in delineating
Gothic conventions. Parody "depend[s], of course, precisely on an accepted canon of
conventions" (Napier Preface x), which means that it establishes the conventions of the
genre as it mocks them. The inclusion of a comic character within Gothic parodies, then,
suggests that such characters are conventional and play an important role in the overall
Gothic aesthetic.

Dickens' texts certainly employ Gothic tropes outside the prescribed era, and I
believe his texts are also sites where wit and humor both resist and respond to each other
and to the remains of anxiety that permeate the nineteenth-century acquisition of the
Gothic mode. As I have stipulated in the last chapter, Scrooge as a wit in *A Christmas
Carol* is not as powerful or as effective in staving off his Gothic terror as Brontë's witty
women. While the women of Brontë's novels combat anxiety aroused by Gothicized

"supernatural" manifestations by deploying their wit (and earning the admiration of their readers as they do so), in *A Christmas Carol*, Gothic hauntings are not as much a cause of terror for the reader as they are for Scrooge; they are, instead, a vehicle for social retribution directed against Scrooge's ill-humored and parsimonious character. Scrooge's wit does not create reader sympathy for the miserly old man, and as a result, his wit is overwhelmed by the narrative's Gothic supernaturalism. Scrooge's wit *must* fail simply because what it defends against is a cause of satisfaction, and not anxiety, for the reader. He is not a hero, at least not at the point in his story when he is confronted by the Gothic; therefore, the Gothic must transform him into a hero. Scrooge's transformation from miser to philanthropist has long been a source of critical note, and the *effectiveness* of such a transformation has been a source of critical contention for just as long.[1] My reading focuses not so much on Scrooge's charity but on the fact that Scrooge does not simply become a benevolent hero, he becomes a *humorous* one. Scrooge the wit transforms into Scrooge the amiable humorist at the end of *A Christmas Carol*. The amiable humorist, Stuart Tave argues, emerged in the eighteenth century as a response to the negative cultural assertions that wit "is often discordant, malicious, or vindictive: it can disrupt harmony rather than promoting it" (Nelson 2); wit is "an expression of unfounded pride" (Nelson 5) in the eighteenth century. Reading Scrooge as a humorous character, who operates in reaction to the Gothic supernaturalism of Dickens' narrative,

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[1] Edmund Wilson, in his well-known essay "The Two Scrooges" (1941), was the first to view Scrooge's change with a healthy dose of pessimism, and subsequent critics have been all too willing to continue the charge. Such a reaction undoubtedly stems from the unrealistic nature of his transformation; however, if we view *A Christmas Carol* as a Gothic text, which falls under the genre of Romance and not Realism, the ending of the story does not read as problematic. Furthermore, I believe Wilson and others do a great disservice to Dickens' moral message by undercutting its effects in the quest to study form over content.

allows readers to believe his transformation is both natural and effective. Later in this chapter, my discussion will turn from Dickens to the Gothic parodies that emerged at the same time as the amiable humorist. These parodies utilize the figure of the humorist as a solution to Gothic melancholy and anxiety. If humorous characters are an established feature of Gothic texts, as I hope I have demonstrated in previous chapters, then Gothic parodies must also employ a humorous character in order to imitate the genre effectively, but in doing so, they necessarily transform the narrative function of such a character.

Stuart Tave's seminal work in British humor, *The Amiable Humorist*, asserts that the eighteenth century marks the demise of slashing wit and harsher forms of humor generally. However, as we have already seen, Charlotte Brontë uses wit positively in her novels in the nineteenth century, which would mean that Tave's assertion that humor largely and permanently replaces wit in the eighteenth is not quite accurate. In fact, other humor studies, such as Robert Martin's *The Triumph of Wit: A Study of Victorian Comic Theory* (1974) have complicated the finite boundary Tave established in 1960. I believe the discrepancy between Tave's and Martin's assertions stems from the fact that there is no coherent timeline in the development of the genre of humor, no set linear trajectory, much as there is not a clear end to the development of Gothicism. Nevertheless, there is a critical consensus that in the *fin-de-siècle* of the eighteenth century a more amiable and benign sense of English humor arose because, as Tave claims, readers want, in humorous literary characters, "persons of cheerful, amiable oddities and foibles whom one would

choose as companions in real life. The function of comedy is not moral punishment but liberal love and joyous delight [. . .]" (138).[2]

While my arguments here will discuss how the humorist effects change amongst their fellow characters and within the text, I am very much aware that these lessons hold particular resonance for the readers, and that authors employ this character type to comment on, and even propose a solution to, particular problems they see in the cultural climate around them. In previous chapters, I asserted that the deployment of comic characters at critical junctures within Gothic texts provides a way for Gothic to reclaim itself from criticism that the genre promotes excessive sublimity and terror and is therefore a lesser art. Like in the nineteenth-century Gothic mode, the comic character in Gothic parodies, the humorist, demonstrates comic agency, deploying humor rather than being the subject of the joke, and therefore functions as a powerful solution (rather than as fleeting comic relief) for the anxiety and melancholy Gothicism inspires in its readers.

Critics have long noted that Dickens himself is the quintessential and "greatest" humorist of the nineteenth century.[3] Lauriat Lane Jr. regards Dickens as highly as Shakespeare, noting that Dickens, like Shakespeare, "creat[es] characters of wit, vivacity, earthiness, gusto, above all unforgettability, that embody and appeal to certain basic human needs and desires and at the same time charm us toward moral sympathy and awareness" (18). The humor produced by the humorist is not defined by his intellectual wit, but by his moral sympathy toward the foibles of humanity, as Tave has noted. Gregg

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[2] These arguments are similar to what many critics assert concerning the division between Juvenalian and Horatian satire in the classical period.

[3] See Margaret Ganz, who references the humorist in *The Pickwick Papers*, and indeed deems Dickens' earlier works the best in terms of humor.

Camfield argues that this sense of humor arose in tandem with sentimentality: "Humor, as opposed to wit or satire, was given an honored place in the sentimentalist's view of the human [. . .] mind first because the exercise of any sensibility, including the sense of humor, was held to be ennobling and second, at the very least, because humor was perceived as a health-giving tonic to balance life's serious pursuits" (29). It seems only natural, then, that the characters Dickens creates in order to highlight moral change and transformation within his culture would be humorists.

Scrooge certainly fulfills the definition of the amiable humorist at the end of *A Christmas Carol*. He regains a sense of playfulness which allows his humor a full, benevolent and beneficial outlet. Just as he is awakened from his musings on "the lonely darkness over an unknown abyss, whose depths were secrets as profound as Death [. . .]" (a Gothic musing if there ever was one) by the laughter of his nephew (80), Scrooge awakens from his final nightmarish visitation in laughter. He laughingly skips through his house, and as Dickens' narrator comments, "for a man who had been out of practice for so many years, it was a splendid laugh, a most illustrious laugh, the father of a long, long line of brilliant laughs!" (117). In the final chapter of *A Christmas Carol*, in fact, Scrooge's laughter and good humor is mentioned sixteen times. While I have previously discussed laughter as the antithesis of the comic character's intellectual wit in Chapter Three, here is it transformed into a sign of general merriment and goodwill, which aligns Dickens' comic character more with the humor theories at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which regarded "frank laughter" as "a sign of an open and universal humanity, and [. . .] a large, wise, and sympathetic heart" (Tave 43-44). Therefore, Scrooge's

employment of laughter not only heralds, but is in fact one of the first signs of, his

transformation.

By noting Scrooge's affinity for laughter, Dickens asserts that laughter is not only

synonymous with maliciousness and misrule but can be, instead, a vehicle for

establishing communal harmony. T. G. A. Nelson discusses a similar transformation

when he writes, that in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, "The

devil's laughter came first; its target was the angel's world of total order and meaning.

The angel countered the devil's invention with a new laughter, [. . .]. The archetypal

image of angelic laughter and rejoicing is that of losing oneself in a festive group [. . .]"

(176).[4] Scrooge's laughter corresponds with a need to reconnect to his community, a

need to rejoin the "festive group." His jolly behavior makes him aware of his own

humanity but also aware of how he can benefit others, how he can acknowledge others'

humanity as well. Such humor is irresistible: "[. . .] Scrooge regarded every one [in the

streets] with a delighted smile. He looked so irresistibly pleasant, in a word, that three or

four good-humored fellows said, 'Good morning, sir! A merry Christmas to you!'"

(120). Because he is transformed into a good-humored man, he is welcomed into the

community of "good-humored fellows." His humor is more "tolerable" than his earlier

wit, and so Scrooge's vice, his miserliness, which had alienated him from his community

within the narrative and from readers, disappears. Edgar Johnson writes that *A Christmas

Carol* ends with a "sense of brotherhood" which, for Dickens, "can be broadened to a

deeper and more active concern for the welfare of all mankind. It is in this light that

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[4] Peter K. Garrett also asserts that Dickens' supernatural mechanisms bring his "protagonists out of cold isolation into community" (150) in *Gothic Reflections: Narrative Force in Nineteenth-Century Fiction.*

Dickens sees the Spirit of Christmas" (271). Edgar Johnson indicates that Dickens'

intention for *A Christmas Carol* was to inspire charity in his readers. He sees Scrooge's

transformation as a particularly moral one for readers.

V.S. Pritchett regards Dickens' use of laughter as highly significant, both in terms

of redemption for his characters and in terms of genre. He writes that in Dickens, "[t]he

art of the comic is to correct vice by laughter, because laughter is living. [. . .] And in

laughter, the character was, as it were, reborn in a more tolerable dimension" (318-9).

Pritchett goes on to note that there is "movement, in Dickens' work, away from the

fantasy and the gothic to the realistic form of humor" (321). While Pritchett's addresses

the entire span of Dickens' literary career, I find his arguments most applicable to my

study of *A Christmas Carol*. In Scrooge's transformation into a man who laughs, we see

Scrooge no longer confront the dark and supernatural of Gothicism; rather, he walks out

into the bright daylight of the London streets, a sign that he has been reclaimed by his

community, and by Dickensian realism.

Scrooge's relationship with Bob Cratchit at the end of the story conjoins

Scrooge's charitable nature with his recovered sense of humor. While before his

transformation he did not suffer even the small sign of joviality from his clerk, Scrooge

after his transformation not only reciprocates Bob's jovial spirit but does so by deploying

humor as well as charity. When he plans to send the Christmas turkey to Bob Cratchit's

home, he frames it as a practical joke: "'I'll send it to Bob Cratchit's!' whispered

Scrooge, rubbing his hands and splitting with a laugh. 'He shan't know who sends it. It's

twice the size of Tiny Tim. Joe Miller[5] never made such a joke as sending it to Bob's

will be!'" (119). Here, Scrooge is demonstrating his good-humor in making sport at

Bob's astonishment, but the humor is benevolent; it stems from the true joy produced by

doing a charitable deed. Not many critics have attempted to study this part of Scrooge's

character. One of the only critical arguments concerning practical jokes in Dickens

tackles Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop;* James R. Kincaid argues that because it is the

fiendish Quilp who uses practical jokes, Dickens denies them power and characterizes

them as childish and vicious (96). My own assessment of Scrooge's practical jokes

refutes Kincaid's view that Dickens uses practical jokes as a sign of viciousness. It is

quite obvious in Scrooge's behavior at the end of the narrative that practical jokes can

serve as a way for the humorist to reform the world around him, to demonstrate his

benevolent humanity. And the fact that Scrooge performs not one but two practical jokes

on Bob Cratchit suggests that this is no passing whim of Dickens.

Scrooge continues to joke with Bob Cratchit in the office the next day when he

insists on acting his usual, miserly self and thus plays a practical joke on Bob in the

process (124-125). Scrooge's two practical jokes, the prize turkey and his deceptive

crotchetiness in the office the morning after Christmas, demonstrate a sense of humor

which does not stem from his own selfish preservation. The jokes demonstrate a need to

make amends, to work toward communal harmony. Donald Fanger sees charity as a vital

function of the humorist within society; the humorist must fulfill "a serious social

responsibility" (133). By joking with Cratchit, Scrooge succeeds in providing for

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[5] Refers to comedic actor Joe Miller (1684-1739) who inspired a joke book called *Joe Miller's Jests*. By the time Dickens writes this, the jokes from that book had become as well-known as to be a cultural cliché.

Cratchit and his family as well as establishing a new communal bond with them. By merging with his charity, his humor provides a solution to the fears aroused by the Gothic visitation of Death. Scrooge fulfills his responsibilities toward Cratchit and toward his nephew and reenters the domestic sphere, thus negating the powerful vision of a terrible and lonely demise.[6]

Scrooge's jokes thus counteract the Gothic visions of his death by ensuring that his death will not come to pass as he has seen it foretold. While Scrooge's derisive wit may be ineffectual against the anxieties produced by the text's Gothic supernaturalism, his sense of humor at the end allows him to recover from his supernatural visitations and become a good man. If the Gothic is meant to identify disjunction, and subvert harmony, Scrooge's realization of charity reinforces community and so negates Gothic disjunction (and negates his Gothic terror as well). Scrooge no longer has to fear his death at the end of *A Christmas Carol*. The benefit of Dickens' Gothicism, then, is that it can terrify a character into good behavior, good humor, and toward a Christian redemption, a profound moral for Dickens' audience.

Not all critics read the transformations within Dickens' works as positively as I do. While almost all of the early twentieth-century critics of Dickens emphasize transformation as a key element of Dickens' texts,[7] there is little agreement about how

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[6] Nina Auerbach argues that because Scrooge is a Victorian bachelor, in contrast to the old maid's solitary, "Odyssean" journey which occurs with Lucy Snowe, as discussed in Chapter Three, he achieves a "modestly domestic salvation", and therefore it is only natural that Scrooge "is redeemed not into awe but to jollity" (143). She argues that Scrooge's redemption and good-humor is a function of Victorians' gendered attitudes and thus proves that single male bachelors can be redeemed but old maids cannot. Such an argument at least takes into account Scrooge's humor in his transformation; however, she neglects to consider the implications of humor as a reaction to Gothicized elements within the text, as I do.
[7] See Jack Lindsay who places italicized emphasis on Dickens' "*notion of transformation and on all images or characters that seem to embody the transformative processes*" (238). See also G.K. Chesteron's

effective those transformations are. The most notable argument to this effect is summed

up by G. K. Chesterton who claimed, concerning *The Pickwick Papers*, that "whenever

he tried to describe change in a character, he made a mess of it, [. . .]" (114). My reading

of Scrooge counters this assessment by recognizing a powerful transformation from witty

curmudgeon to amiable humorist. Some may argue that since Scrooge does display a

sense of humor even early on, the transformation may not seem all that significant;

however, the power of his transformation rests not with Scrooge's attainment of a sense

of humor but rather with his identification with a comic mode that allows for moral

growth and redemption. More contemporary critics would probably disagree with me

here. They question, not Scrooge's merry transformation, but Dickens' use of such

humorous transformations for social benefit. Roger B. Henkle argues that Dickens did

not "*use* comedy primarily to overturn or undermine the fundamental institutions or the

basic ideologies of English middle-class society" (author's emphasis 183) and writes that

the endings of his works "swiftly bottled and corked" any humor within the text (18).

Margaret Ganz also notes that when Dickens turns humanitarian in his works, "the power

of his humor" weakens (125). As these critics view it, the cultural and social impact of

Dickens' works comes at the cost of any humor within them. This view is entirely

contradicted by Scrooge's transformation. As demonstrated earlier, his penchant for

practical jokes directly affects the Cratchits in positive ways and reinforces his

benevolence, which directly contradicts the power of the list of "solutions" to those in

need he gives at the beginning of the story. The prisons, the workhouses, the Poor Laws

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"Dickens and Christmas" (1906) and Paul Lewis' *Comic Effects*. Edmund Wilson also pairs transformation
to a sense of duality within Dickens' narrative.

(10) are all institutions in which most of Dickens' culture invested great faith. By making miserly Scrooge the voice of such institutions, Dickens undermines their rhetorical effectiveness because readers are deliberately set up to see the flaw within Victorian sensibilities of charity. In fact, if we note in the beginning that the feeling of charity and goodwill emanate from a jolly character, Scrooge's nephew, and is resounded by Bob Cratchit, a sympathetic character, Scrooge's transformation into good humor at the end, and therefore into charity toward the community, does not seem out of place but rather another product of the seemingly natural affiliation between good-humor and goodwill. Scrooge the *humorist* sees past the social institutions he had cited earlier and effects real change by providing food and worthy compensation to Bob Cratchit. His humor and charity negates the Gothic horrors of death and poverty, for Tiny Tim, the Cratchits, and himself, in a very powerful way.

My reading also answers the charge spelled out by Edmund Wilson, in his definitive essay "The Two Scrooges," that Scrooge's transformation seems too abrupt and tidy to be genuine. Wilson calls Scrooge "manic-depressive" and views his merriment at the end of the narrator as just a manic phase he will soon outgrow (64). Wilson fails to see Scrooge as a character in a fictional text. Wilson's arguments are based on reading Dickens' works as synonymous with Dickens himself and therein lies their flaw. There is nothing in the *text* to indicate that Scrooge's transformation is only momentary; in fact, Dickens goes to great lengths to pronounce Scrooge a changed man for "good":

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to

Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father. [. . .] Some people laughed

to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he

was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at

which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing

that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they

should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms.

His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

He had no further intercourse with Spirits, but lived upon the Total

Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he

knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.

[. . .] (125-6)

The passage ends in a pun of the narrator's; it is vital that we understand that the humor

of this moment dispels any darker recollections we may have concerning the ghosts.

Scrooge's Gothic encounters were indeed at an end, permanently. Dickens' words

soundly answer Wilson's objections that Scrooge could not possibly maintain his

transformation. By forgetting this text's affinity with Gothicism, a mode of Romance,

Wilson's more psychological readings forget to look to the text itself for support. In this

passage Dickens also employs two connotations of laughter, one in the spirit of malice

and ridicule, and one in the sense of joyous expression. While Scrooge is aware that

those who laugh at him do so because they find him ridiculous, he is also aware that

laughter is a better response than other, darker ways of expressing ridicule. Therefore,

laughter, even when it may not stem from benevolence, still is an answer to darker emotions.

Scrooge's turn from ridiculing wit to a more generous sense of humor becomes a part of a general cultural transition between wit and humor; so the humorist is hardly a unique or new figure in British culture at the time Dickens is writing. The humorist permeates the transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a space occupied by the Gothic as well. We would then expect the humorist to appear as one of the comic characters of Gothic texts, but we do not in fact see the humorist, as a fully developed character type, occupy conventional Gothic narratives of the eighteenth century, perhaps because these authors tried to emulate Shakespeare rather than the values of their own cultural moment. Instead, the humorist gains prominence as England turns from Gothic romance to Gothic parody. I wish to turn now to two of the most well-known of Gothic's parodies, Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and Thomas Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) to consider why the English humorist appears in texts which mockingly adopt Gothic tropes. In much the same way as Dickens dismisses the Gothicized horrors of want and ignorance when he transforms Scrooge, Gothic parodies of the early nineteenth century use the good-natured humorist to dismiss the reading public's preoccupation with an emotional and intellectual malaise that seemingly manifested itself in their equal preoccupation with the Gothic.

Parody lends itself to changing cultural mindsets, as noted by many critical studies of the genre.[8] Bakhtin argues parody is a "permanent corrective" to "the one-

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[8] See David Roberts' Introduction to Parody's Pretexts in *Comic Relations: Studies in the Comic, Satire, and Parody* and Marilyn Gaull's "Romantic Humour: Horse of Knowledge and the Learned Pig."

sided seriousness of the lofty direct word" (*Dialogic* 55). Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnick write that parody is a comic turn which "allows for a fresh perspective on a changing world, one of accommodation rather than terrified apprehension" (12).[9] Marilyn Gaull asserts that parody as a form "comes of age as a major comic expression" (52) in the Romantic era because the era had seen a decrease in humor through other outlets and so popular culture (and those works that inform popular culture as parody, and the Gothic, do) became the conduit for humorous analysis of the Romantic age. She writes that "the spirit of comedy [. . .] was at variance with the spirit of the age, that it was another victim of an authoritarian government, of an economic and intellectual depression, of the various reigns of terror accompanying the revolutions in politics, taste, and behavior that transformed the entire culture in the opening decades of the 19th [sic] century" (44). It is suggestive to me that Gaull sees parody as a popular culture art form that particularly comes into focus against the cultural angst she so clearly delineates in the above passage. In the Gothic parodies which I will examine in the rest of this chapter, what the authors chose to "parody" and ridicule in the Gothic genre is the attitude of melancholy and malaise which, as Gaull suggests, seems to permeate the age and also the readers of Gothic romance.

As a means of regulating feelings inspired by the Romantic era, the good-humored characters in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Thomas Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* preach good-humor as a means of achieving resilience in the face of Gothic anxiety and melancholy which challenge the main protagonists of their narratives.

[9] Horner and Zlosnick arrange their study around the idea of "the comic turn," noting the Gothic and grotesque's propensity to create language that turns the reader from horror to humor; their arguments mostly concern modern texts while I study the progenitors of the Gothic as a genre.

The humorist as a character in parodic narratives serves as a viable alternative to protagonists who have invested too much, psychologically and emotionally, in Gothic texts.[10] Many critical studies have noted that parody lends itself to "rereading" other texts and that it is inspired mainly by imitation, whether that be, as David Roberts writes, for "tribute" or "ridicule."[11] In fact, as Steven E. Jones aptly notes, often parody can be placed "beside" or "against" the text it mocks, thus providing a paradoxical space in which the act of revision requires at least a nod of recognition at the inspirational, and popular, quality of the text chosen as a subject of mockery. Linda Hutcheon, in her oft-cited and acclaimed study, argues that the paradoxical space of parody relies heavily on irony, what she calls "ironic inversion," but that it does not always come "at the expense of the parodied text" (6). If the critical consensus I have illustrated here is correct, parody as a humorous form works within the structures of the texts it sets out to mimic and/or mock as well as provides a newer form beyond the conventions of those texts in order to realize the problematic, incongruous nature of the parodied texts. Therefore parody, like the other forms of the comic I have considered in the previous chapters, functions much as Gothic literature does in that it relies on incongruity and paradox in order to assert its critical agenda.

Other critics have separated aesthetic links between the Gothic genre and parody, even if they have not recognized them in such terms. For instance, Walter Nash sees parody, especially when it references "social institutions," as not functioning within

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[10] The valuing of good humor to banish the melancholy that Gothic texts inspire is also seen in nineteenth-century Germany. Perhaps as a response to Goethe's Werter, E. T. A. Hoffman's *The Sand-Man* includes a character, Clara, who preaches good-humor as a means to banish the protagonist's Romantic malaise.
[11] See David Roberts and Steven E. Jones.

realism because while parodic texts may be "truthful" in their representations of

humanity and society, "*realistic* is seldom the word for their style and narrative method.

At their funniest, their wisest, their most revelatory, they transcend realism and require us

to acquiesce in the laws of the surreal" (102). Andrew H. Miller claims that parody,

much like Gothic literature, gives women writers a "powerful habit of discourse" because

in parody, marginalized groups can "ape" a language that "they did not design

themselves" (Miller 47).[12] It is only natural, then, that Gothic literature fall "prey" to

parody at a time, the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the marginalized

women authors of Gothicism could no longer profitably invest as much in a literary form

which was slowly becoming ridiculous in its conventionality. The parodies which this

chapter will discuss do not dismiss Gothicism completely (a fact which agrees with the

definitions of parody that argue "imitation" does not mean "ridicule"); Gothic parodies

try to assert humor as a remedy to unnatural *reactions* to Gothic texts, not to the genre

itself. By including a comic character within their parodies, Austen and Peacock

demonstrate that comic characters were already a trope within Gothic narratives, and

therefore their parodies, rather than ridiculing the genre, propose that the reader of Gothic

romance needs to be aware of the humorous responses available in such texts and not

succumb to the "black bile"[13] too often emphasized by the Gothic works being put out in

the decades after Ann Radcliffe's success in the genre. Hutcheon acknowledges this

impulse to focus on reader responses within parody when she writes, "There is a long

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[12] Horner and Zlosnick also argue that the comic turns in Gothic literature are sources of empowerment for women writers.

[13] Peacock's term, used in a letter to Percy Shelley, May 30, 1818. From "Letters" in the Halliford Edition of *The Works*.

tradition in parodic literature of placing readers in tricky positions and forcing them to make their own way. The rules, if the author is playing fair, are usually in the text itself" (92). She continues, "Readers are active co-creators of the parodic text in a more explicit and perhaps more complex way than reader-response critics argue that they are in the reading of all texts" (93). Following Hutcheon's axiom, I wish to study the "rules" that Austen and Peacock's careful crafting of characters have given readers of Gothic literature, rather than simply looking at the more satiric, cultural focus which has dominated critical commentary on these texts because, to borrow George Levine's words, "No theory of the novel [and, I assert, novelistic parody] can stand that is not based firmly in a detailed consideration of what novelists actually did" (7).

Northanger Abbey inhabits an awkward place within the Austen canon. It does not have the assertive wit of *Pride and Prejudice* or the sophistication of *Persuasion*, and there does not seem to be much consequence to the heroine's decisions, at least in the beginning, as illustrated by the parodic introduction of the heroine Catherine Morland, perhaps because "consequences" implies a seriousness which parody resists. And it is awkward, in part, because its publication history is awkward. Composed at the beginning of Austen's career, and allowed to sit "upon the Shelve"[14] until her death and then published posthumously in 1818, the novel reveals an authoress coming to terms with her individual style and with the novel as a genre in which she will find success. As such, critics have noted that it fits within multiple genres, namely parody and the

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[14] Austen writes this in an 1817 letter quoted in Alfred Mac Adam's Introduction to *Northanger Abbey*.

bildungsroman tradition,[15] but it never resolves the tension between being a novel and parodying other novels: the Gothic and the sentimental in particular. Most of the critical discourse on *Northanger Abbey* concerns this disparity between the genres of Gothic novels and Gothic parody, a disparity most evident in the confusing space presented between Henry Tilney's gothic parody played out before he and Catherine arrive at the abbey and Catherine's novelistic adventures at the abbey. This disparity also accounts for the critical concern with the lack of unity between the two volumes. Frank Kearful notes that "the fiction presented seems purely (i.e., structurally) satiric and at other times purely novelistic, with the result that our expectations are made to work at cross-purposes" (514). He reads such confusion as the actual and deliberate purpose of Austen's text; she intended the whole book to work at "cross-purposes." In *Gothic Feminism*, Hoeveler argues that Austen cannot fully bury the Gothic and that such structural lack of unity marks a confirmation of Gothicism, much against Austen's purpose to parody it, and therefore an assertion of female authorial power. Hutcheon agrees with Hoeveler that Austen's treatment of the Gothic does not dismiss it but rather "reinvest[s] the 'female gothic' with authority derived from the interaction of parody and satire: the true cause of women's confinement is shown not to be walls of financial dependency but miseducation—" (79). These critical considerations differ based on their reading of authorial intent, but they nevertheless read the structural incongruities

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[15] Susan Fraiman applies the *bildungsroman* to women's novels and reads *Northanger Abbey* as a critical juncture in the development of the genre outside of the traditional, male-centered apprenticeship narrative because it focuses on fulfilling the heroine's journey through marriage, in direct opposition to individual, intellectual work. Tara Wallace posits parody as the priviledged critical discourse concerning this text, but she argues there are limits to parody's effectiveness in *Northanger Abbey*. The critics who study *Northanger Abbey* as parody are numerous: see (among others) Linda Hutcheon, George Levine, Paul Lewis, Jan Fergus, Julian Wolfreys, Diane Long Hoeveler in *Gothic Feminism*, and Mark Loveridge.

positively as signs of critical skill, rather than as evidence of authorial ineptitude. They

place great faith in the fact that Austen, even a young Austen, knows what she is doing as

an author. And in asserting Austen as an authority in her authorship, they help establish

my argument that Austen's use of Henry is deliberate, and that the critical readings of

Henry which demean him should realize his deliberate purpose within the novel rather

than judging him by his condemnation of Catherine. I aim to resolve certain critical

hesitations about the role of the Gothic and the role of the mentor,[16] who induces the

necessary education of the heroine that marks the text as a *bildungsroman*, in *Northanger
Abbey*.

Catherine Morland's fascination with Gothic stories marks her as the heroine of

Austen's parody who must learn that Gothic fantasy does not apply in real life; in fact,

Catherine's preoccupations with the Gothic cause her to be ignorant of the true dangers

that lie in the social machinations of General Tilney and the Thorpes. Significantly,

Catherine's growth as a character, and therefore much of the humorous irony of the

novel, relies solely upon her realization of the folly that lies behind her Gothic sensibility.

By reading Henry Tilney's education of Catherine Morland as the machinations of a

humorist in direct confrontation with Gothicism, I merge the two critical paths usually

taken when studying *Northanger Abbey* and assert that Catherine's education relies on

Gothic parody but also relies on the humorist as a necessary figure to that education and

to parody itself.

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[16] Eleanor Wikborg calls Henry Tilney a mentor in her study of the mentor figure in *The Lover as Father Figure in Eighteenth-Century Women's Literature.* Henry Tilney performs the same role as Mr. Knightley in *Emma* (1815), who is called a humorist, incorrectly, by Mrs. Elton.

Seeing the parallel between humor and education is not new; Paul Lewis insists on it when he writes, "Because it contributes to both maturity and to maturation, humor frequently arises in convincing literary treatments of growth or enlightenment" (75). Jan Fergus's study, *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel,* claims that because we view Austen herself as a humorist, we cannot also view her as a didact (1-3), and later Fergus argues that *Northanger Abbey* is more comic than didactic (7). As with Dickens, critics associate the role of humorist with the author, and I argue that the humorist becomes an important character within her novel itself, as a way for Austen to instruct not only Catherine but her readers as well. As Fergus asserts, Austen's lessons were not meant solely for her characters: "Austen educates her readers' judgments and sympathies. She intends to instruct and to refine the emotions along with the perceptions and the moral sense" (3). My assertion that Gothic parody is used to instruct readers and insulate them against the emotions raised by Gothic texts follows along the lines of Fergus's theories, but I deviate from her arguments in that I read *Northanger Abbey* as using humor as a means for education, rather than separating humor from Austen's didacticism. In this way, I address Susan Fraiman's claim that "in an Austen novel judgment, information, and knowledge rate higher than ease and liveliness" (81). In Henry Tilney, I argue, we find both, and the fact that we as readers actually prefer Henry's liveliness to his (often incorrect) judgment and knowledge indicates how much Austen preferred the humorist's method over a means of a more didactic enlightenment.

Of the characters I discuss in this chapter, Henry is the most difficult one to view positively. Most readers approach Henry as, at best, pedantic and, at worse, patronizing

in his treatment of Catherine. While I do agree to a certain extent that Henry is not

always shown as a positive figure in his teasing and rebuking of Catherine, I insist that he

is nevertheless meant to be a voice of positive influence against Catherine's irrational

attachment to Gothic conventions. The fact that Henry is not perfect does not detract

significantly from his character. In fact, as Fergus likes to argue, Austen's education of

her readers relies on doing away with "the perfect characters who became the convention

of didacticism" in order to explore "more complex and, sometimes, more unconventional

responses" so that she "exercises and challenges" the average reader's "responses" (5).

Through Henry Tilney, Austen clearly distinguishes the line that separates reality from

the terror produced by Gothic texts as drawn in terms of a good sense of humor, and

therefore, Austen's parody insists on the "triumph of humor over fear" (Lewis 119).

Henry operates as the humorist in many situations, both in Bath (in the "novel of

manners" which comprises the first volume of *Northanger Abbey*) and at the Abbey (in

the Gothic parody section). According to Tave, after the works of Henry Fielding, the

humorist becomes synonymous with a naturalness that is often shown in direct contrast to

more studied forms of human behavior or social affect (98). Henry is introduced to

readers and Catherine alike as a playful character, one who is willing to act a fool in order

to achieve a smile and rapport with Catherine; by "forming his features into a set smile,

and affectedly softening his voice" (20), he begins to address Catherine on the particulars

of her stay in Bath, thus mocking the social conventions of elegant conversations to be

held in the pump-rooms. The social critique inherent to his humor here might seem to

indicate that Henry is a wit, as defined in Chapter Three, rather than a humorist, and in

fact, Eleanor Wikborg in her study of the mentor figure in eighteenth-century women's

literature calls Henry's sense of humor witty. While the wit and the humorist both rely

on wordplay to critique the world around them, there is a difference in the playfulness

and demeanor of the address. No one would describe the witty Lucy Snowe of *Villette* as

cheerful, and in contrast, Henry always seems to be laughing at his own humor. His

humor in this situation is playful and social rather than intellectual. It also indicates he is

an individual who may operate outside of social norms and who is aware of his

"singularities," another characteristic of Tave's amiable humorist (171).[17] Henry's

playfulness baffles Catherine. Catherine is unsure whether or not she should laugh at him

but seems pleased at his behavior. Her inability to join Henry in this humorous exchange

marks her as naïve but also as one who takes herself and life a bit too seriously. Her

seriousness and naïveté lead her to unwarranted presumptions about Northanger Abbey

and its Gothicism, which I will discuss later.

Not all read the above exchange as positive.[18] Tara Wallace asserts that while

"Austen begins by allowing the reader to feel that Henry speaks for her," Henry's

character is actually the site of Austen's great "struggle and instability" in reader

responses' to her parody (262). She reads Catherine's hesitation to laugh as a signal to

readers that we, too, are not supposed to join in but, instead, are to wonder about the

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[17] Tave also connects the humorist figure to the picturesque, and interestingly enough, in Austen's novel, one of the key conversations in which Henry instructs and teases Catherine concerns the picturesque.

[18] This seems a symptom of reading Henry's character in general as negative. Jan Fergus asserts Henry as superior in wit to Catherine but incapable of educating her in any way past conventionality (14), but my discussion proves that his education is actually in humor and so Fergus's next statement that all Henry can do is "make jokes" is entirely the point. Diane Long Hoeveler reads Henry as effeminate and another subject of parody in his relation to the "man of feeling" who is the hero of Radcliffe's novels (*Gothic Feminism* 133-4) rather than as an "authority" in the parody, as I assert. And Jacqueline Howard agrees with Hoeveler that Henry is "satirized" (172) as part of the text's overall "recurrent exposure of masculine vanity and assumed authority" (178).

validity of his mode of discourse: "Austen, in this brief dialogue, shakes the reader's confidence in the narrator's stance; the commitment to parodic discourse is undermined by the awareness that readers may not automatically share the cynicism of the parodist" (263). The problem with this reading is the assertion that the reader has a cynical perspective formed by the beginning of the novel. If we view Austen as writing this novel to instruct not only her heroine but also her reader, it is therefore reasonable to assume that she views her reader in much the same lines as Catherine, as in need of that sense of humor which Henry embodies. The fact that the reader does not "automatically" identify with Henry is entirely the point; the reader must be educated into viewing the world through the humorist's perspective, in much the same way as Catherine.

Henry is Catherine's mentor *because* he can practice good-humor effortlessly. It is also his good-humor that allows him to read Gothic novels, enjoy them, and yet not take them as seriously as Catherine does. Henry is not seduced and overwhelmed by the terror of Gothicism because he finds it pleasurable, approaching novels with the same good-humor he demonstrates in the Bath pump-room: "'The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure. 'The Mysteries of Udolpho,' when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again;--I remember finishing it in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time'" (99-100). This conversation between Henry, his sister Eleanor, and Catherine goes on to highlight Henry's teasing of Catherine and mocking of those gentlemen who would deny their pleasure in novel reading. As Henry makes clear, novel reading is not a bad habit; the critique of Gothic

novels, rather, lies in "the habits of mind" with which some readers approach them

(Butler 173). The idea that the Gothic inspires pleasure over terror lies at the heart of my

arguments here. Austen makes it clear that the folly of Gothicism lies not in its

entertainment value or even in the terror it produces, but rather in the audience's inability

to distinguish the good fun in the thrill of terror.[19] Her parody specifically labels Gothic

terror as inconsequential in the real world and so Henry's tutelage of Catherine must

insist on her acquiring the ability to view Gothicism with a sense of humor (and therefore

with a sense of detachment).

The trip to the Abbey and the subsequent Gothic parody that makes up the second

volume of *Northanger Abbey* most strongly highlight the disparity between Henry's view

of the Gothic and Catherine's. On the way to the Abbey, Henry outlines what he suspects

Catherine's expectations for the Abbey will be, given his knowledge of her as a reader of

Gothic romances. His list consists of many Gothic conventions, all of which Henry treats

lightly. Whether such teasing is malicious or not, I argue that his teasing is instructive

because by treating them lightly, he manages to make Catherine detach herself from her

romantic imaginings (if only for a brief moment):

> But Henry was too much amused by the interest he had raised, to be able
>
> to carry it farther; he could no longer command solemnity either of subject
>
> and voice, and was obliged to entreat her to use her own fancy in the

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[19] Many critics have noted the implications of Austen's parody for her readers and therefore support my assertions that parody works on readers' responses as well as the heroine's. As already discussed, Hutcheon posits parody as establishing a cultural "need to look again at the interactive powers involved in the production and reception of texts" (86). Gaull notes there are levels to Austen's parody: first, as ridiculing Gothic romance itself for misrepresenting human behavior, second, ridiculing readers of Gothic romance, and third, ridiculing the world which limits intellectual and moral development of readers (57). George Levine indicates the danger of misreading which Austen shows with Catherine is a danger that her audience might also succumb to: the danger of "taking the improbable as a guide to life" (37).

perusal of Matilda's [a common name for a Gothic heroine] woes.

Catherine, recollecting herself, grew ashamed of her eagerness, and began

earnestly to assure him that her attention had been fixed without the

smallest apprehension of really meeting with what he related (150).

It is crucial to note that when Henry's list of conventions devolves completely into

parody, when he can no longer put up a serious front and the true humor of the situation

appears, Catherine's excitement at his list also wanes with her recognition that his list is a

mock one. Henry's humor allows him to connect with Catherine's interests but also

allows her an opportunity to see Gothicism being treated irreverently. While she is

incapable, at that moment, of responding to Henry and the Gothic with the same sense of

good humor, the incident provides a first lesson, an initiation in mocking the Gothic, that

is only problematic to readers because Catherine, the heroine with whom we are to

sympathize, fails to appreciate it. Many readers also view this scene as problematic

because the list of conventions that Henry mocks here frames Catherine's actual

encounters in the Abbey. It seems as if Henry's humor might have instigated Catherine's

misreading of the events in volume two as Gothic and therefore to have caused

Catherine's unjust reading of General Tilney, for which Henry will rebuke her, thus

making his rebuke unjust. Wallace asserts as much in her reading of Henry as a failed

parodist and instructor (269). However, I argue that his humor here has made Catherine

aware of the absurdity of anything remotely Gothic happening, as she herself notes, and

that her own misreading later indicates that the failure stems not from Henry's pedagogy

but from Catherine's inability to detach fully from the intense emotions aroused by

Gothic narratives *despite* this early warning, not because of it.

    Catherine's Gothic concerns in the second volume of the text—about the abbey

itself, about the mysterious trunk and cabinet holding a manuscript in her room, about the

midnight storm, and about the fate of Henry's mother—all operate within conventions of

the Gothic genre. However, they are treated in such a way that, because the reader is

guided by Henry's amusing mockery rather than by Catherine's genuine anxiety,

Catherine's responses seem absurd. Thus readers can achieve detachment from their own

anxiety when encountering them. Austen therefore negates, or at least reduces, any

anxiety on the part of the reader. We are very much aware of Catherine's anxiety on such

points; hence, Austen creates the perfect moment of disparity in which humor can reside.

The following is one such scene that highlights Austen's realization of humor through

ironic deflation of Gothic terror:

> Her fearful curiosity was every moment growing greater; and seizing, with
>
> trembling hands, the hasp of the lock she resolved at all hazards to satisfy
>
> herself at least as to its contents. With difficulty, for something seemed to
>
> resist her efforts, she raised the lid a few inches; but at that moment a
>
> sudden knocking at the door of the room made her, starting, quit her hold,
>
> and the lid closed with alarming violence. This ill-timed intruder was
>
> Miss Tilney's maid, sent by her mistress to be of use to Miss Morland; and
>
> though Catherine immediately dismissed her, it recalled her to the sense of
>
> what she ought to be doing, and forced her, in spite of her anxious desire

to penetrate this mystery, to proceed in her dressing without further delay.

Her progress was not quick, for her thoughts and her eyes were still bent

on the object so well calculated to interest and alarm; and though she

dared not waste a moment upon a second attempt, she could not remain

many paces from the chest. At length, however, having slipped one arm

into her gown, her toilet seemed so nearly finished, that the impatience of

her curiosity might safely be indulged. One moment surely might be

spared; and, so desperate should be the exertion of her strength, that,

unless secured by supernatural means, the lid in one moment should be

thrown back. With this spirit she sprang forward, and her confidence did

not deceive her. Her resolute effort threw back the lid, and gave to her

astonished eyes the view of a white cotton counterpane, properly folded,

reposing at one end of the chest in undisputed possession! (154-5)

Ironically, not only is the trunk disclosing nothing more than common domestic articles,

Catherine's anxious preoccupation with the trunk delays her toilet, which in turn causes

the reader to be aware that Catherine should be more anxious about delay in General

Tilney's domestic discipline than about mysterious trunks. Her encounters with Gothic

tropes are trials for Catherine to overcome, and so they follow conventional plot

developments of true Gothic novels, but they also hinder her learning about how to

negotiate the actual society into which she has been thrust, and so become an essential

part of parody.

Because Catherine keeps anticipating Gothic events, even after her encounters

lead to nothing, Henry must step in and make sure Catherine learns how to dispel the

Gothic and with it her anxieties. He does so in all seriousness, but it is crucial to

understanding his character, as I define it, that he never loses his good-humor while doing

so. In Catherine's final (and most serious) confrontation with Gothicism at the abbey, she

tries to explore Henry and Eleanor's mother's room in order to discover whether her

death was suspiciously caused by General Tilney, who is supposed, by Catherine, to be

the Gothic patriarchal villain, "a Montoni" (176).[20] When she is caught by Henry, he

delivers this speech once he surmises Catherine's thoughts:

> 'If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I
>
> have hardly words to—Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature
>
> of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging
>
> from? Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult
>
> your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own
>
> observation of what is passing around you—Does our education prepare
>
> us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be
>
> perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and
>
> literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by
>
> a neighbourhood of voluntary spies and where roads and newspapers lay
>
> every thing open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been
>
> admitting?' (186)

---

[20] The villain of Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

Such a speech clearly both educates and delineates the difference between Gothic novels

and reality. Gothic novels are set in foreign countries which are filled with vile Catholic

monks and old world superstitions. His answer seems the very essence of reason, and as

Tave has noted, the humor of the humorist serves as "the champion of reason. [. . .] the

national shield, the mark and defense of a free nation [. . .]" (101). This speech is not

particularly humorous, but Henry is; the fact that he is the one who gives this speech here

demarcates his humor as particularly imbuing the sentiments of the age which Tave has

laid out. Henry does show his own naïveté in assuming that there are no possibilities for

wife-murder in England, as many critics have noted,[21] but he is still effective in deflating

Catherine's romantic delusions and focusing her more toward historical "realisms." The

problems inherent in the beliefs espoused in this speech do not exclude Henry from being

a mentor, nor do they exclude him from being a humorist. The amiable humorist is "not

uncomplicated," according to Tave: "If he is free of the bondage of current fashion and

social stereotyping, he is also a prisoner of his own rigidity" (166).

Catherine, from that moment, learns to be ashamed of her Gothicism and "visions

of romance" (187). Henry's speech shames her, and many critics argue that Henry's

treatment of Catherine here is harsh in its reassertion of patriarchal mastery over an

imaginative woman, as argued by Claudia L. Johnson and Diane Long Hoeveler,[22] and

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[21] Kearful asks whether we are supposed to answer Henry's questions with "'Yes, it *can* happen here'"
(524) and thus delineates the perplexity that most readers note about this speech. Casie Hermansson argues
Henry's defense refers to 'political Gothic' rather than the moral, and mannered, realism which is Austen's
focus, which accounts for why Henry's speech starkly contrasts with the General's atrocious behavior
(352).
[22] Johnson writes that Henry's speech demonstrates "misplaced confidence" in "national community,
religious affiliation, ideological apparatuses, and accepted methods of surveillance" because such things
still do not hinder his father from committing a terrible social crime. Instead, "[t]hey only silence women's
protest (Mrs. Tilney never complained) and incriminate their challenge (Henry scolds Catherine for

that the speech is therefore a reassertion of values which Gothic novels try to vilify and

that it thus upholds all the power which Gothic texts resist (Lewis 119).[23] Such

arguments confront the social and cultural implications of Henry's speech, but they

neglect to consider them within the terms of the novel itself. If *Northanger Abbey* is read

as a parody which seeks to refute the anxiety occasioned by Gothic romances, this speech

is a necessary function of Catherine's, and the reader's, education. Henry makes it clear

that while he must dismiss such ideas because of the serious repercussions they have on

Catherine's perception of reality, he wants to do so with all possible tenderness. His

calling her "Dear" and "Dearest" speaks to a wish to soften, not to punish. Soon after the

incident, his behavior indicates he has no ill will or anger toward Catherine at all: "the

only difference in his behaviour to her, was that he paid her rather more attention than

usual. Catherine had never wanted comfort more, and he looked as if he were aware of

it" (187). Henry once again asserts himself as an amiable, good-humored man in his

insistence on education without harsh treatment. He also resumes teasing her as he did

when they first met. Such behavior speaks not to a patriarchal insistence upon control but

rather to a necessary lesson, for gentleman or lady as Henry once said, in the dangers of

merging fact and fiction.

While I disagree with critical assessments of Henry's tone and purpose in his final

speech to Catherine, there is validity in the assertion that Henry's speech is misguided in

its assessment of British society. Does the flawed nature of his perception thus negate his

---

harboring suspicions)" (116). Hoeveler notes that the speech is problematic because it is skewed by
Henry's gender and position in society and that his list does not apply to those, like Catherine, who are not
"upper-class, educated, and employed [men]" (*Gothic Feminism* 141).
[23] Lewis's discussion pertains to another Gothic parody by a male author, Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The
Heroine* (1813), but it is applicable to *Northanger Abbey* as well.

lesson to Catherine? Perhaps. However, if we read the speech in terms of Henry's

character as a humorist, in the mode of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, a humorist must have a

"comic defect [. . .] the same thing makes them admirable and absurd" (Tave 149) and so

his innocence (i.e., naïveté about the possibility of wife-murder in England and the

positive nature of neighborhood spies) marks him as "human." The speech's skewed

perspective actually becomes a function of, rather than a problem with, Austen's parody

and novelistic style. Austen did not write perfect characters; she wished in her works to

challenge readers' ideals with her more realistic narratives. Given Tave's definition,

even her humorist, who must instruct the character who is susceptible to Gothic anxiety,

must be flawed and must also learn a lesson. Henry's speech shows too much confidence

in the world around him, which his father's and brother's behavior undercuts.

　　　His speech also seems uncharacteristically serious. The lack of humor in it points

to the disparity inherent in his views. It is necessary for Henry to return to his good-

humor after giving such a speech, as noted above, because that is the solution he proposes

for Catherine and so he, too, must learn not to take himself so seriously, much in the

same way Darcy at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* has to learn to laugh at himself

through his marriage to the witty Elizabeth.[24] His subsequent behavior, returning to

Fullerton to apologize humbly for his father's behavior and to ask for Catherine's hand in

marriage, shows that he too is capable of growth, and therefore is a suitable match to

Catherine. While Austen's narrator dominates the last few pages of resolution, and we

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[24] My assertion that Henry must also learn his lesson is supported by Mark Loveridge in "*Northanger Abbey*: Or, Nature and Probability."

never hear Henry's humor again,[25] Austen does remark that it is through the General

learning to be good-humored, by the wealthy match made by Eleanor, that the couple can

be married: "The circumstance which chiefly availed was the marriage of his daughter

with a man of fortune and consequence, which took place in the course of the summer—

an accession of dignity that threw him into a fit of good humour, from which he did not

recover till after Eleanor had obtained his forgiveness of Henry, and his permission for

him 'to be a fool if he liked it!'" (234). Austen's text consistently demonstrates then that

good-humor is the solution to the emotional conflicts occasioned by Gothic conventions

(which include the General's parental tyranny) and emphasizes lessons for all the

characters, not just Catherine, in order to instruct the readers that all perception is flawed,

and that we must be careful in our judgments.

Horner and Zlosnick argue that parody's comic turn "allows for a fresh

perspective on a changing world, one of accommodation rather than terrified

apprehension" (12). Henry's tutelage gives Catherine her "fresh perspective." She can

now meet new trials, including even General Tilney casting her out of his house without

conveyance, with a sense of resolve rather than terror. She is "sensible only of

resentment" (214) in the face of General Tilney's behavior, and on the return journey,

which in a Gothic world would be perilously filled with banditti and robbers to threaten

the heroine, Catherine is "too wretched to be fearful. The journey in itself held no terrors

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[25] Levine argues that the resolution of the novel is dominated by the author's voice because it "speaks with an authority superior to that of any individual consciousness within her narrative—even that of, say, Henry Tilney—because it can read any text with authority [. . .]" (68). Such an argument, on the surface, seems to disagree with my assertion of Henry as a solution to Catherine's Gothic anxiety; however, I find that it actually augments my own arguments because it holds up Henry as the other authority within the text. The superiority of the authorial voice does not necessarily undercut Henry's role because, as I see it, Henry too must learn his lessons in order for him to be a genuine humorist and to support the author's own viewpoints about the flawed mask of conventionality.

for her; and she began it without dreading its length, or feeling its solitariness" (216).

Austen has effectively eradicated Catherine's Gothic anxiety and in doing so has made

her a more stalwart woman. While Catherine is still upset by the General's ungracious

treatment, and incapable of seeing it with humor, she at least can bear it. In a sense,

Catherine's awakening is, rather than a cruel reversal of Gothic's anti-patriarchal values

as some critics assert, a female writer's way of liberating female readers from intellectual

censorship imposed on them by men. If Gothic sensibility can be overcome and its

influence negated, then females may read such novels with impunity. Austen has

nullified her contemporaries' critical lamentations about the power of fiction on female

readers' minds.

Austen's parody does not dismiss Gothic novels as an art form. Rather it provides

a means for Gothicism's recovery from stereotypical criticisms by asserting that well-

trained readers, readers who follow the ways of the newly-emerging humorist, can enjoy

such works because they approach them as entertainment, rather than as sources of

anxiety and misapprehension.[26] Marilyn Gaull posits Austen in relation to her own time

and the assertion of parody as a "remedy," a remedy Gaull notes is stated by Mr. Hilary,

the representative voice (she argues) of the author, in Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare*

Abbey. The goal of parody, according to Mr. Hilary, is "'To reconcile man as he is to the

world as it is,'" and Gaull goes on to assert that this remedy gives "the idea that man is

basically accommodated to his environment, adapted to his world, and capable of

productive relationships with his fellow man" (57). It is to *Nightmare Abbey*, published

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[26] And thus my argument answers Marilyn Butler's critical claim that Austen does not "define positively
what kind of regular mental process it is that will keep Catherine sensible" (177).

the same year as Austen's novel,[27] and to the humorous Mr. Hilary, which I now turn. In Peacock's parody, the threat of Gothicism once again lies in its readers' inability to recognize their anxiety as problematic. In order to combat the melancholy inspired by Gothicism, Peacock creates Mr. Hilary, the essence of the English humorist.

Most critical studies of Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* have, rightly and with great flare, focused on the cultural, political, and social implications of his parody and characters. So many critics have noted that Scythrop is a characterization of Percy Shelley, Mr. Flosky of Samuel Coleridge, and Mr. Cypress of Lord Byron that it has become *too* commonplace perhaps. The argument has even warranted an extensive encyclopedic reference work, *The Characters in the Novels of Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866)*, in which Claude A. Prance breaks down exactly "who's who" in Peacock's works; so it hardly seems necessary to devote much time to such an analysis here. Instead, I wish to address those critics who insist on studying his works solely for the ideas and ideologies espoused within them and who neglect the study of his characters *as* characters within a literary text, and more specifically, within a Gothic parody. In fact, some of the most compelling contemporary critical studies of Peacock have sought to align him more with social satire than literary parody. Marilyn Butler paved the way for such arguments in *Peacock Displayed: A Satirist in his Context* and reads *Nightmare Abbey* to be less concerned with presenting Scythrop as Shelley than with exploring, and critiquing, the influence of Mr. Flosky, and therefore the German philosophies espoused by Coleridge, on Scythrop. She argues that the characters within *Nightmare Abbey* are

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[27] And, interestingly enough, the same year Gothic novels received a critical jolt, forgive the pun, with the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

not portrayals of real life "personalities" but rather representations of "types" and so the text becomes "a comedy of ideas rather than of character" (17). Butler's insistence on studying Peacock's text as culturally valuable neglects to consider character to the point that she argues Peacock "does not deal in character at all" (19). Gary Dyer, Roger B. Henkle, and Thomas Schmid all agree with reading Peacock as a satirist first and foremost and therefore as primarily a social critic. Dyer addresses Peacock's proclivity to focus on public arguments rather than on private, character-driven actions, while Henkle differs, but only slightly, to argue that Peacock is mostly concerned with ideas and therefore is intellectual rather than social in his satire. Schmid makes the most effort to distinguish his arguments from among the pack as he reads the satire in *Nightmare Abbey* as a *failure* because it reaffirms rather than challenges boundaries, and, like all satire in the Romantic age, he claims, it becomes an "inadequate response to the moral and social questions" that "cannot effect change because it rhetorically entrenches itself in a necessary superior position over its object" (11). This critical proclivity to study Peacock in terms of cultural context and to neglect the world within the text itself is troubling to my own consideration of close character analysis in Peacock. If such assertions were true, Peacock would have presented his characters as ideological abstractions (much in the vein of Shelley) rather than presenting them as he does, with names and identities (even scantily developed as they are). I do not disagree that Peacock's work has cultural, social, political, and intellectual implications; however, viewing his work entirely within a cultural framework favors viewing Peacock solely as a social critic and neglects Peacock the writer. Even Butler, in a somewhat contradictory

manner, notes, "A great satire is more than great criticism. It is an art-object on its own, which in form and manner supersedes the system of life or thought it assails" (*Peacock Displayed* 138). And it is my wish to study the "art-object" itself because, as Butler succinctly argues, it does transcend the age in which it was written and therefore can be studied outside of its cultural context.

In viewing Peacock as a writer, then, my arguments emphasize his text and therefore involve reading *Nightmare Abbey* as a parody rather than as a satire. Linda Hutcheon notes that there is a critical penchant to merge the two genres, but she clearly defines parody as a form of humor in which "another work of art or, more generally, another form of coded discourse" is the target and goes on to say that parody can satirize "the reception or even the creation of certain kinds of art" (16). By viewing Peacock's text in such a way, as a parody which is particularly interested in the reception of a certain type of art—the Gothic romance—I contend that while cultural context is necessary (after all, parody references a text outside of itself and so is inherently defined by cultural context), it is not the sole focus of the genre. By studying how characters actually function within Peacock's parody, we can gain more insight into the social intentions of such a work than we can by only looking beyond it. In particular, I am interested in how the humorist works on the others' Gothic melancholy within the text in order to propose a solution to the general intellectual malaise of Peacock's age.

Gothicism is introduced in the text by Mr. Glowry, but it is his son who most especially imbues and champions Gothic melancholy. Scythrop Glowry "had a strong tendency to the love of mystery" (71). While his father is absent because of a lawsuit,

Scythrop falls into solitude, spending "whole mornings in his study, immersed in gloomy reverie, stalking about the room in his nightcap, which he pulled over his eyes like a cowl," all the while reading *The Sorrows of Werter* and *Horrid Mysteries*,[28] which make him dream of "venerable eleutherarchs and ghastly confederates holding midnight conventions in subterranean caves" (14-15). While not significant for its ties to Gothicism which the reference to *Horrid Mysteries* evokes, Scythrop's interest in *Werter* importantly references German sentimentalism; Peacock calls Werter "a puling driveller" (21) and a symptom of the age's lack of "intellectual exertion" ("The Four Ages of Poetry" 22). While it is sentimental rather than overtly Gothic, *Werter* romanticizes a level of excessive emotion that is similar to Gothicism's penchant for excessive terror and was critically regarded in its time as just as much a negative influence on its audience as Gothic texts; therefore the connection between the two texts on Scythrop's reading list is the readers' reception of such works and the perception that both were detrimental to the emotional judgment of its readers. And *Werter* does contribute to Scythrop's *Gothic* melancholy, despite its sentimentalism; the suicide scene at the end of Goethe's novella will provide the dangerous consequence to Scythrop's excessive morbidity, as I will discuss in a moment.

Werter's influence is prefaced by Scythrop's romantic entanglements. The conflict that arises because of the character Stella's arrival (namely Scythrop's courtship of two women) at the same time engenders a comic reversal of the sentimental romance plot of *Werter*. Stella, a.k.a. Celinda Toobad, appears in his tower, occasioning a need to hide the dark-haired maiden from pursuers, much as in a Gothic plot, and Stella also gets

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[28] The same collection of Gothic stories references by Austen in *Northanger Abbey*.

conflated with the supernatural as the "mermaid" Mr. Asterias sees rising from the sea.

When Scythrop loses both women to fellows from his father's intellectual circle because

of his own inability to choose between them, the comic reversal allows the most complete

parody of *Werter* to commence; vexed in love, Scythrop decides to commit suicide. Here

Peacock transforms the tragic pathos of Werter into the indecisive petulance of Scythrop:

> The day after Mr. Glowry's departure was one of incessant rain, and
>
> Scythrop repented of the promise he had given [to kill himself]. The next
>
> day was one of bright sunshine: he sat on the terrace, read a tragedy by
>
> Sophocles, and was not sorry, when Raven announced dinner, to find
>
> himself alive. On the third evening, the wind blew, and the rain beat, and
>
> the owl flapped against his windows; and he put a new flint in his pistol.
>
> On the fourth day, the sun shone again; and he locked the pistol up in a
>
> drawer, where he left it undisturbed, till the morning of the eventful
>
> Thursday [. . .]. (141)

While we as readers do not take his threats of suicide seriously, especially since he

himself is so anxious about delaying it, it is clear that his melancholic mindset has serious

repercussions. His overwhelming need for mystery allows him to disregard his father's

choice in Miss Toobad, who turns out to be Stella/Celinda and a well-made match, but

also it allows him to continue an affair with Stella while he is wooing his orphaned

cousin, Marionetta, a serious social *faux pas*. As happens with Catherine Morland,

Scythrop's fascination with Gothicism impairs his ability to operate within social

customs. His Gothicism causes him to lose both women and any prospect of a happy

marriage and therefore hinders any chance of escape from his father's and the Abbey's pervading gloom. Peacock's Gothic parody, while humorous, recognizes and gives weight to the very real problems inherent in having too fine a Gothic sensibility.

Scythrop learns his gloom from his texts but also from his father, who is himself given over to melancholy and insists on being surrounded by the gloomy and the dark in his circle of acquaintances and servants; such an influence marks Scythrop as susceptible to the influence of what he reads, like Catherine Morland, and hinders Scythrop's ability to make realistic choices. However, the influence of his father does not stretch outside of the text to the readers of Peacock's parody because the comic confounds the gloom that the Glowrys like to maintain at Nightmare Abbey. Peacock humorously twists Glowry's preoccupation with choosing servants "by one of two criterions,--a long face, or a dismal name. His butler was Raven; his steward was Crow; his valet was Skellet" (8) and by thwarting his aims when he hires a Diggory Deathshead only to find "a round ruddy face, and a pair of laughing eyes. Deathshead was always grinning,--not a ghastly smile, but the grin of a comic mask; and disturbed the echoes of the hall with so much unhallowed laughter, that Mr. Glowry gave him discharge" (8). Much in the same way that Austen undercuts the reader's anxiety when Catherine is faced with her Gothic adventures in Northanger Abbey, Peacock's assertion of the comic spirit of Deathshead, which lives on in the children he leaves behind at the abbey, over the pervasive melancholic gloom establishes a distance for the reader that effectively negates the influences that plague Scythrop. In this way, the comic figure of Deathshead allows the reader to learn from Scythrop's mis-education rather than invest in his proclivities.

While we laugh at the problems Scythrop faces, we do laugh at him and not with him. I find it extremely difficult to sympathize with his folly and feel that justice is well served when both women reject him. Schmid views Scythrop as the "purest example of a Quixotic and a humorous character" and as the most sympathetic character in the novel because he "is the novel's least complacent one" (125-6). Reading Scythrop as Quixote would indicate an awareness of the humorous potential within Peacock's characters; however, Schmid identifies the wrong character as the humorist. Scythrop is incapable of the detachment required to actively produce humor. While he meets the shallow and naïve conditions of being a Quixotic character, he fails to engender goodwill or sympathy. My view is that the character whom we are to emulate as a model of humorous goodwill and a solution to Scythrop's excessive melancholy is the one who above all persists in his good-humor: Mr. Hilary.

Critical studies of Mr. Hilary do not give him enough credit within the narrative. Marilyn Butler goes so far as to argue that Mr. Hilary is a "stilted character" who is "inadequate" and "un-funny" (*Peacock Displayed* 132). In fact, both Butler and Schmid undervalue any power Hilary demonstrates in the text and rather pessimistically argue that no "argument by Mr. Hilary does much to change anyone's mind" within the text (Butler 134). Schmid refuses to see Peacock's story as successful in negating any of the feelings on which he has chosen to comment, and thus Mr. Hilary is rendered powerless. To the contrary, I believe Mr. Hilary does stand, in his oppositional placement to the rest of the cast, as a solution to melancholy, albeit rather subtly. This is made especially clear, I will argue, in Scythrop's abortive attempt at suicide. And in the conclusion of my

discussion of Mr. Hilary, I will show that the critics I have mentioned above seem to refute paradoxically their own arguments against Mr. Hilary's effectiveness.

Mr. Hilary represents the jovial state of mind which is the solution to the melancholy that nearly takes over Nightmare Abbey and Scythrop, and that is, by extension, Peacock's solution to the general malaise and morbidity that he believes dominates his intellectual era. While I am here engaging in a close reading Peacock's text over a broad cultural reading, I am aware that his characters are reacting to specific cultural attitudes in *Nightmare Abbey*. In "The Four Ages of Poetry," Peacock clearly depreciates the poetic value of his current age, calling it the age of Brass and concluding that the Romantic poet "lives in the days that are past. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations, are all with barbarous manners, obsolete customs, and exploded superstitions. The march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backward. The brighter the light diffused around him by the progress of reason, the thicker is the darkness of antiquated barbarism, in which he buries himself like a mole, [. . .]" (291). These lines recall the image of Scythrop, buried in his tower, hoping for seven signs that his own illuminating manuscripts will be read and admired. But in more general terms, Peacock indicates that the purpose of *Nightmare Abbey* is to engage the morose melancholy which gripped his age directly in battle. He writes Shelley on May 30, 1818: "I have almost finished *Nightmare Abbey*. I think it necessary to 'make a stand' against the 'encroachments' of black bile. The fourth canto of *Childe Harold* is really too bad. I cannot consent to be *auditor tantum* of this systematical 'poisoning' of the 'mind' of the 'reading public'" (193). And in response to Shelley's further inquiry, he notes on

September 15, 1818: "the object of *Nightmare Abbey*, [. . .] was merely to bring to a sort

of philosophical focus to a few of the morbidities of modern literature, and to let in a little

daylight on its atrabilarious complexion" ("Letters" 204). Mr. Hilary, as one who

employs humor, stands in stark contrast to all of the other characters who delight in those

"morbidities of modern literature." Mr. Hilary is markedly the only one of the company

who laughs. Mr. Glowry tells Mr. Hilary at one point, "'you are a happy man, and in all

your afflictions you can console yourself with a joke, let it be ever so bad, provided you

crack it yourself. I should be very happy to laugh with you, if it would give you any

satisfaction; but, really, at present, my heart is so sad, that I find it impossible to levy a

contribution on my muscles'" (86-7). He is the crack of daylight that exposes the

Abbey's gloomy interiority to scrutiny.

Mr. Hilary meets the definition of a humorist in his detachment from the negative

influence of the Gothic atmosphere of Nightmare Abbey, his ability to laugh, and his

philosophy. Louis Cazamian, in his discussion of Shakespeare's fools, writes, "humorists

among the characters must be, as such, no part of the action itself; for inevitable

detachment is their lot, and they look on things from the outside" (258). I want to turn

briefly here to a discussion of a parody of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*,

D.M. Moir's "The Rime of the Auncient Waggonere" (1819), in order to show how vital

detachment is for the humorist. Published one year after Peacock's work, Moir's text

challenges the sublime and Gothic within Coleridge's poem by making the Ancient a

clownish figure of ridicule rather than a prophetic figure. The Waggonere speaks in

archaic tongues and yet is hopelessly lower-class, and therefore incapable of achieving

any intellectual reflection from his listener. Rather he comes off as foolish intruder, of whom the wedding guest longs to be rid. Steven E. Jones comments on this work in his discussion of how satire functions within Romanticism and notes, in comparison to Coleridge's original text, "a narrative of increasing mystery and wonder," readers face "an all-too mundane story of quotidian rough behavior. In the same way, the whole parody demystifies with a vengenance (by caricature and domestication) the exotic, 'wild' atmosphere and machinery of the 1817 original, reducing the sublime to the ridiculous—" (56). For the purposes of my discussion here, the compelling part of parody in the text lies in the juxtaposition between the narrative and the authorial commentary held in the margins of the text. Parodying Coleridge's own need to provide metacommentary on his poem (introduced in the 1816 version), the Waggonere is nearly incoherent and so the commentary in the margins provides a necessary guide for readers. However, the comments rather slyly remark that the Waggonere's story is of no consequence. Therefore, the commentary provides the humor and becomes the humorist of the text. The commentator's detachment negates any terror that readers will otherwise find in confronting this figure. Of course, the commentator is quite literally detached, outside, from the poem as he operates in the margins, rather than as a narrator, but he still is an active member of the narrative.

Mr. Hilary serves this function in Peacock's parody. Peacock draws a clear division between Mr. Hilary's world and the environs of Nightmare Abbey. While Mr. Glowry would have Nightmare Abbey be filled with melancholy and gloom, Mr. Hilary, presented as "a very cheerful and elastic gentleman," entertains "the gayest of the gay" at

his residence in London (4). When Mr. Hilary visits his brother-in-law Mr. Glowry,

compelled by "family interests," he, "on these occasions found few conductors for his

exuberant gaiety," and so Mr. Hilary "became like a double-charged electric jar, which

often exploded in some burst of outrageous merriment to the signal discomposure of Mr.

Glowry's nerves" (9). In the collision between the two worlds, Peacock asserts Hilary as

the unshakeable and detached spectator while Glowry is the one affected by Hilary's

intrusions. Gothicism cannot hold in the face of a natural, good-humor:

> Persons of feeble, nervous, melancholy temperament, exhausted by fever, by
>
> labour, or by spare diet, will readily conjure up, in the magic ring of their own
>
> phantasy, specters, gorgons, chimaeras, and all the objects of their hatred and
>
> their love. We are most of us like Don Quixote, to whom a windmill was a
>
> giant, and Dulcinea a magnificent princess: all more or less the dupes of our
>
> own imagination, though we do not all go so far as to see ghosts, or to fancy
>
> ourselves pipkins and teapots. (120)

Hilary clearly draws a line between those whose temperaments make the supernatural

real, and those who are able to distinguish clearly between fantasy and reality. Hilary's

humor places him in the latter category.

Butler's earlier arguments, which label Hilary as "un-funny," seem odd

considering that Mr. Hilary provides many necessary moments of detachment in which

we, as readers, can laugh at the characters surrounding him. While Mr. Listless may

muster wit and his servant Fatout may inspire readers' laughter in his mummery, Hilary

is the only character who appreciates the absurdity of and the humor within the

company's persistent commitment to Gothicism and melancholy. In one of the most

humorous moments of the text, Mr. Toobad is frightened by the appearance of one of the

servants, seemingly a ghost, after a lengthy discussion about apparitions. He jumps from

the window into the moat and has to be fished out by Mr. Asterias with a net. While all

other characters are alarmed both at the sight of the "ghost" (and Scythrop significantly

"lost in amazement" at the proceedings), Mr. Hilary "saw, at one view, all the

circumstances of the adventure, and burst into an immoderate fit of laughter; on

recovering from which, he said to Mr. Asterias [the character preoccupied with catching

mermaids], 'You have caught an odd fish, indeed.' Mr. Toobad was highly exasperated

at this unseasonable pleasantry; but Mr. Hilary softened his anger, by producing a knife,

and cutting the Gordian knot of his reticular envelopment" (122). In this humorous

portrayal of a supernatural revelation that usually occurs in a Gothic text, Peacock

presents Mr. Hilary as the only one who finds it funny and, therefore, as the only one

acute enough in his good-humored detachment to recognize the entertaining quality of

Gothic tropes. Additionally, he is the only one who acts in the scene, charitably helping

Mr. Toobad out of the net. All others are concerned with fleeing the ghost, too

preoccupied with their Gothicism to assist in the rescue. Scythrop, the only one who

rushes with Hilary to help Toobad out of the moat, can only stand around in amazement,

his inactivity being yet another consequence of his Gothic disposition. This reminds me

of Scrooge's active benevolence; Hilary as the humorist must fulfill "a serious social

responsibility" (Fanger 133) as well. As it is Hilary who helps Mr. Toobad out from

Asterias's net after Toobad invests too much in Gothic superstitions, the scene indicates

that it is Hilary's detachment from the superstitions which infect the group that we as

readers are to note as correct in its productivity and in its assertion of humor as an answer

to Gothic anxiety.

Thanks to Henry Fielding, the humorist in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

as Tave asserts, becomes the "friend" of his creator, the means of expressing his good-

nature (141). By extension, Hilary, as the resident humorist, becomes Peacock's

expression of mankind's better nature, a solution to Nightmare Abbey's, and his own

era's, malaise. That Peacock identifies this malaise as troublesome is evident in his

characters' references to "the worst of all [evils], which, [. . .] are those which are

comprehended in the inexhaustible varieties of *ennui*: spleen, chagrin, vapours, blue

devils, time-killing, discontent, misanthropy, and all their interminable train of

fretfulness, querulousness, suspicions, jealousies, and fears, which have alike infected

society, and the literature of society; [. . .]" (65). Of course, all of the characters, except

Hilary, in Nightmare Abbey at the time could find their representative feeling in the list

given above. Mr. Hilary is the exception because he espouses ideas which confront and

deny the power of the "evils" listed above. He argues:

> A happy disposition derives pleasure from both [society and solitude], a
>
> discontented temper from neither, but is always busy in detecting
>
> deficiencies, and feeding dissatisfaction with comparisons. The one
>
> gathers all the flowers, the other all the nettles, in its path. The one has the
>
> faculty of enjoying every thing, the other of enjoying nothing. The one
>
> realizes all the pleasure of the present good; the other converts it into pain,

by pining after something better, which is only better because it is not

present, and which, if it were present, would not be enjoyed. [. . .] these

cankers of society complain of human nature and society, when they have

wilfully debarred themselves from all the good they contain, and done

their utmost to blight their own happiness and that of all around them.

Misanthropy is sometimes the product of disappointed benevolence; but it

is more frequently the offspring of overweening and mortified vanity,

quarrelling with the world for not being better treated that it deserves.

(69-70)

The negative repercussions of the ideologies that Glowry and his comrades adopt are

illustrated here. They operate within "false and mischievous ravings" (108), as Hilary

later calls them, and sever themselves from the moment and the benefits of society.

These ideologies allow men to believe in ideals while dismissing the real, a dangerous

belief system (especially given the French political upheavals at the turn of the century)

which has been shown to be a consequence of reading too many Gothic novels in

Austen's parody. While Peacock does not deliberately call out Gothic literature in this

passage, it is evident he calls out the type of feelings believed to be engendered by Gothic

texts.

Hilary is by no means frivolous in his humor. He presents a lucid solution to such

ideologies as is espoused by the Gothic and melancholic characters of Glowry and

Scythrop:

> To reconcile man as he is to the world as it is, to preserve and improve all
>
> that is good, and destroy or alleviate all that is evil, in physical and moral
>
> nature—have been the hope and aim of the greatest teachers and
>
> ornaments of our species. I will say, too, that the highest wisdom and the
>
> highest genius have been invariably accompanied with cheerfulness. We
>
> have sufficient proofs on record that Shakspeare and Socrates were the
>
> most festive of companions. But now the little wisdom and genius we
>
> have seem to be entering into a conspiracy against cheerfulness. (109-10)

For Peacock, the ability to see the world "as it is" negates the horrible implications of

romance, which idealizes or vilifies to an extreme and thus cannot operate within real,

social customs, as Catherine's and Scythrop's behaviors suggest. As Gaull asserts, the

popular humor of the Romantic period "becomes increasingly allied with the authentic,

the genuine, and the commonplace rather than the fantastic, the fanciful, and contrived

vulgarity" (49). It is not farfetched to read Peacock as having a message behind his

humor; this is, of course, what so many of the critics whom I have noted have been drawn

to in their urge to discuss Peacock as a satirist and/or a cultural critic. And Peacock

himself establishes that successful writers of humor (he lists Cervantes, Rabelais, Swift,

Voltaire, and Fielding) use humor to a greater purpose because, as he puts it, "works of

mere amusement, that teach nothing, may have an accidental and transient success, but

cannot of course have influence on their own times, and will certainly not pass to

posterity" ("An Essay on Fashionable Literature" 275). The humorist becomes not only a

moral necessity, but an aesthetic one as well.   For once the poet sinks intellectually to the

level of the reading public, as he asserts in "The Four Ages of Poetry," the poet loses

power over the intellect. By refusing to succumb to the general attitude sweeping

Nightmare Abbey, Hilary remains intellectually superior to the other characters and

becomes Peacock's triumph over those readers who invest too much in Gothicism.

To conclude, I wish to discuss one more instance in which the positive influence

of Hilary is recorded. Hilary performs a song with Reverend Larynx after he displays the

philosophies already discussed, and it "was so well executed by the spirit and science of

Mr. Hilary, [. . .] that the whole party, in spite of themselves, caught the contagion, and

joined in chorus at the conclusion, each raising a bumper to his lips: [. . .]" (113). He

transforms the intellectual and morose gathering into a cheerful drinking party; he is able

to influence the group into cheerfulness "in spite of themselves," which proves the

humorist has a considerable amount of power within the narrative. Schmid agrees that

Peacock makes the gloomy or pedantic be transformed by "a cheerfully irreverent comic

spirit" (2) despite his earlier comment concerning Peacock's failure to propose any real

solution. While it may not seem like Hilary has a striking effect on Scythrop or his father

by the end, especially since he leaves after the incident with Celinda and Marionetta and

doesn't hinder Scythrop in the peak of his melancholic spirit from committing suicide,

there is evidence that Hilary has presented other options for Scythrop. And perhaps that

is the point. For, as Lewis points out, "[i]n the Gothic, humor can ultimately serve to

dismiss fear, to wallow in it or *to hold the mind open for a full range of emotional and*

intellectual responses" (emphasis added 153). Peacock dismisses Gothic supernaturalism

through moments of slapstick humor like the incident with Mr. Toobad discussed earlier,

but Scythrop is ultimately unable to be as dismissive. Therefore, Hilary's sense of humor

serves as Scythrop's awakening to a new way of perceiving the world, an alternative to

his father's influence; and it could be argued that Scythrop's inability to shoot himself at

the end of *Nightmare Abbey*, and therefore to fulfill the Romantic legacy left by Werter,

is an emerging recognition of the power of Hilary's "daylight" on his life. As Schmid

argues, "[h]umor can, in other words, give birth to heroes, to the stuff of high art; or more

accurately, it produces *anti*-heroes, who embody alternative ideologies to those of high

art" (2). So Hilary is Scythrop's antagonist, the anti-hero who fully embraces humor and

introduces that alternative into *Nightmare Abbey*. Even Butler, who earlier had argued

that Hilary makes no impression, asserts that Peacock held "that art also ought to be

comic" (*Peacock Displayed* 304). In creating Mr. Hilary, Peacock's own art reifies this

conviction.

   The humorist returns in the revival of Gothic literature at the end of the nineteenth

century. The Gothicism of Le Fanu's "Carmilla" and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is less easy

to dismiss. The supernatural returns as real forces of evil, and therefore the combatants,

the vampire hunters Baron Vordenburg and Abraham Van Helsing, need to have a strong

sense of humor to maintain their fortitude. Baron Vordenburg in "Carmilla" is described

as "one of the strangest looking men" the narrator had ever seen, and his strangeness

seems to be caused, in part, by "a perpetual smile" which plays across his face (313).

Van Helsing in *Dracula* has an "all-embracing sympathy" (122) which makes him

amiable, and "a strong [sic] humorous side" (131) which denotes him as a humorist.

When Van Helsing erupts in a fit of laughter after the burial of Lucy, an act Seward

deems as hysterics, he comments that the reaction is not a sign of insanity, rather "King

Laugh he come like sunshine, and he ease off the strain again; and we bear to go on with

our labour, what it may be" (187). His humor operates as relief, giving him the power to

resist negative emotions which would cripple him, and he certainly needs a firm mental

resolve to do what he must against the vampiric Lucy and Dracula. Significantly, those

who fight literal Gothic monsters in the late nineteenth century are invested with the same

powers of the humorist in early Gothic parodies, namely, the ability to smile into the face

of terror.

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