

Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem
Bölcsészettudományi Kar

DOKTORI DISSZERTÁCIÓ

TAKÁCS RÉKA

GOTHIC CORPOREALITY: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BODY IN LATE
EIGHTEENTH – EARLY NINETEENTH – CENTURY ENGLISH FEMALE GOTHIC
FICTION

Doktori iskola: Irodalomtudományi Doktori Iskola
Doktori iskola vezetője: Dr. Kállay Géza PhD
Program: Modern angol és amerikai irodalom doktori program
Program vezetője: Dr. Ferencz Győző PhD

A bizottság tagjai és tudományos fokozatuk:

A bizottság elnöke: Dr. Kállay Géza PhD

Hivatalosan felkért bírálók:

Dr. Ruttkay Veronika PhD
Dr. Pellérdi Márta PhD

A bizottság további tagjai:

Dr. Péteri Éva PhD
Dr. Barcsák János PhD
Dr. Farkas Ákos PhD, Dr. Csikós Dóra PhD (póttagok)

Témavezető és tudományos fokozata: Dr. Péter Ágnes prof. emeritus

Budapest, 2014

Area and Objective of Research

My dissertation proposes to read female Gothic fiction published in the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth century; a period that saw the emergence of the female Gothic genre, possibly as the result of the French Revolution (see Clery). It is argued that, contrary to the entrenched critical view that in the period the body was neglected in female Gothic fiction to resurface only in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (see for instance Spacks, Hogle, Castle), corporeality did indeed play a very significant role in the texts of female Gothic writers. Indeed, they did not only incorporate the representation of the body into their writing but employed it in a subversive way so as to articulate their criticism of contemporary patriarchal ideology. I have been able to identify four distinct ways the female body is used for subversive purposes which I meant to illustrate by the analysis of four Gothic novels written by women in the period: Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria; or, the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or the Moor* (1806), and Mary Anne Radcliffe's *Manfroné, or the One-Handed Monk* (1809). We can see that the four women writers, though working within the framework and with the conventions of the same genre, approached the problem of the body from entirely different points of view.

Ever since Ellen Moers's influential *Literary Women* (1977), Radcliffe has been considered the originator of the genre of female Gothic. It is precisely because of the identification of female Gothic with Radcliffean Gothic that scholars have come to the conclusion that physicality disappeared from the genre. So far Radcliffe has always been discussed as a woman writer who, in accordance with the dictates of propriety and ladylike decorum, sought to avoid direct reference to the body. My intention was to challenge critical understanding concerning the bodilessness of Radcliffe's writing, and to show that *The Romance of the Forest* was a novel strongly based on the representation of physicality.

Mary Wollstonecraft is best known for her treatise about the rights of woman; she has always been considered as a subversive social critic with daring ideas concerning the education and social position of women in contemporary society, which she implemented in her own private life, in her sexual liaisons exposed in her husband, William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1798. *Maria; or, the Wrongs of Woman* is a novel saturated with physicality probably for two reasons: one is that it was written under the influence that the French Revolution had made on Wollstonecraft, and also because she was pregnant at the time of its writing. These

circumstances made their impact on the novel supposed to be the most autobiographical of all her books, in which she articulated her anxiety about maternity, especially fears and ambivalent emotions about her own maternal body.

Charlotte Dacre is similar to Wollstonecraft in the sense that she was also considered a provocative anomaly during her life: as daughter of a Jewish merchant, Catholic in her religion, having a swarthy complexion and related to a married man to whom she bore children before he would have divorced, she could have expected nothing but ostracism from contemporary critical forums. Nevertheless, her greatest offence was to voice her appreciation for the infamous Matthew ‘Monk’ Lewis to whom she dedicated her first novel and whose highly corrupting influence can be easily traced in Dacre’s writing. Dacre has not made her way into the literary canon; her novels have always been read as the licentious creations of the ‘female Monk’. Recent scholarship, however, has begun to read her novels for their own merit, and it is especially her representation of the body that has captured critical attention.

Chronologically the last woman writer the dissertation engages with is a fairly unknown author; whose identity is still debated in scholarly circles. The only extensive study dealing with Mary Anne Radcliffe is an essay that posits four possible candidates for the name, whereas her oeuvre has not, so far, triggered any serious critical attention. *Manfroné, or the One-Handed Monk*, however, was quite popular at the time of its publication and it offers valuable insights into the representation of corporeality at the end of the period discussed.

Thesis outline

By offering a feminist reading of female Gothic fiction published in the 1790s and 1800s, I am arguing that women writers consciously incorporated physicality into their writing to articulate female anxiety about patriarchal strategies of oppressing women.

The dissertation is divided into four main chapters preceded by one that explains the genealogy of the term ‘female Gothic’; places the topic of the dissertation into a wider scope of scholarship; and establishes its place in the critical tradition.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to Ann Radcliffe’s second novel, *The Romance of the Forest*, in which, I argue, she articulates her rejection of male hegemony in terms of her heroine’s physicality. Radcliffe has rarely been associated with subversive ideas; in contrast, her name and writing have always been equated with feminine propriety so much so that Yael Shapira has coined the term “delicate Gothic” to describe her mode of writing. The fact that she married a radical journalist has not been enough to associate Radcliffe with radical ideas: she has remained an

elusive writer withdrawn from public life, hence her reputation as a proper lady-writer. Despite her reputation, however, in my view she was deeply conscious of the various means of male oppression. The first part of the chapter deals with the means by which the female body is exposed to objectification. Radcliffe represents the convent as a patriarchal structure that seeks to shrink and cover the female body and also to distort the heroine's vision of reality. In the second part the other means of oppression is addressed: the reduction of the female body to an object of male sexual fantasy. Descriptions of Adeline's body and clothing when she is exposed to male glances function as markers of another kind of imprisonment; that of feminine sensibility. Radcliffe's response to the said male machinations is her outlining the heroine's re-discovery of her natural body: she depicts nature as a 'good mother' that affiliates the orphaned heroine and whose influence engenders the masculinisation of the overtly feminine body. The heroine's rediscovery of the maternal body in nature projects her wish to recover the body of her lost mother. Feminist Gothic scholarship has long insisted on the Gothic hero's or heroine's dread of the devouring Gothic mother whose presence would obstruct their development towards a mature identity. In the last part of Chapter 2 I am challenging this notion and arguing that the heroine's completion of the process of maturation necessitates her recovery of the maternal.

Chapter 3 also focuses on the issue of maternity and Mary Wollstonecraft's response to her own maternal body she writes into her Gothic novel, *Maria; or, the Wrongs of Woman*. As *Maria* is regarded as the most autobiographical of all Wollstonecraft's literary pieces, I read the novel as the 'hideous progeny' of a pregnant writer and also as a text that articulates that writer's anxieties and fears concerning her maternal body. The issue of maternity is inevitably entangled with the influential event of the French Revolution: no other British woman writer was influenced by the revolutionary events to such a great extent as Wollstonecraft was. She went to France during the time of the Revolution, and this visit proved to be quite reformatory with regards to her previous notions about sexuality and the female body in general.

The chapter begins with the reconsideration of the genre of *Maria* which Mellor claims to be a realistic novel; however, more recent scholarship (Kilgour, Heller, Heiland) discusses it as a Gothic novel. The next sections discuss the representation of the female body during the French Revolution which put maternity and breast feeding into the focus of attention, and advertising the emergence of a masculine woman. The chapter thematizes the bifurcation of the assessment of maternity as an essentially empowering female experience and also as a confining one since it virtually cancelled female heterosexuality. I found the discussion of

Wollstonecraft's writings that preceded *Maria* necessary so that we could get a picture of her attitude towards the body, hence I decided to analyse certain passages of *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The analyzed passages explain Wollstonecraft's rejection of the Burkean ideal of femininity and all forms of subjection engendered by the physical exposure of the female body. I also argue that Wollstonecraft's visit to France during the Revolution changed her attitude towards sexuality to a great extent: while her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* promotes reasonable love between sexes, it is her passionate relationship with Gilbert Imlay and consequent pregnancy and disappointment that inform her last unfinished novel. Following a careful consideration of Wollstonecraft's oeuvre culminating in *Maria*, I claim that she found maternity an essentially burdening experience that she intended to get rid of. Textual evidences show that she would have preferred to choose sexual liberty rather than being fettered by the weight of pregnancy and motherhood which she considered as the result of male practices to further enslave woman.

Chapter 4 focuses on the mutability of bodies which is the central topic of Charlotte Dacre's novel, *Zofloya, or the Moor*. The chapter begins with an outline of Dacre's career as a writer and as a woman precisely because she employed the same physical strategy in her life as her anti-heroine, Victoria does in the novel discussed. Dacre, I argue, realized the deceptiveness of bodily surfaces and she pointedly made use of that deceptiveness to make her body and her character's body seem proper. The second section of the chapter compares the two juxtaposing females, the asexual Lilla and the 'oversexual' Victoria with the intention to show how limiting contemporary women found the patriarchal image of the feminine ideal embodied by the "alabaster-skinned" and "baby-faced" Lilla. My claim is that Victoria's murdering Lilla constitutes Dacre's rejection of that haunting image, and also that the mutability of Victoria's body marks how thoroughly that image had been internalized by women. The mutability of the body provides both Dacre and Victoria with a means to survive in a society that estimates character on the basis of appearances. I also attempt to show – following the footsteps of Adriana Craciun, the first scholar to address the issue of physicality in Dacre's *Zofloya* – to what extent Victoria's body is transgressive measured by contemporary standards. Finally, I turn to another prominent body in the novel; that of the slave, Zofloya who is the only character in whose presence Victoria's attempts to manipulate her own or other people's bodies remain inefficient, and whose towering masculinity and pointed Otherness affect the transformation of Victoria's monstrous body into a submissive feminine body.

The final chapter engages with the problematics of the dead female body as it appears in Mary Anne Radcliffe's *Manfroné, or the One-Handed Monk*. The novel features an almost unnatural fixation on the dead female body which functions as a keepsake to hinder the hero in his participating in competitive male heterosexuality. It is the only female Gothic novel amongst those discussed in this dissertation that does not reject the objectification of the female body; but uses it as a tool to transform and, most importantly, effeminate male bodies. The text of *Manfroné* is overburdened with body parts that function as phallic symbols, be it the capital hand of the title or the penetrating eyes of male characters, and Radcliffe seems to seek to counteract the power of these phallic parts by overemphasizing the passivity and femininity of the female body. It does not mean, however, that Mary Anne Radcliffe would have been unconscious of the potential threat of women's objectification and its leading to their inevitable victimization since the text appears to be very sensitive to male practices of oppression: I interpret death-like femininity in *Manfroné* as a response to the 'cult of the dead woman' that held its sway among male artists in the nineteenth century, and compare Radcliffe's treatment of male-female relationships to that of the male artist and the dead subject of his work. It seems that Radcliffe was familiar with and influenced by male Gothic writing of the late eighteenth-century, this is probably the source of the misogynistic elements incorporated into the novel. However, what counts as weakness in female characters of male Gothic art (not only literature but also painting, see Fuseli's *The Nightmare*) is highlighted as the strength of Mary Anne Radcliffe's heroine. The chapter concludes with a reference to the parallel between *Manfroné* and *Frankenstein*, which suggests that early nineteenth-century women Gothicists shared the concern of marginalized femininity and aggressively expanding masculinity.

Methodology

Some of the selected narratives have already been discussed by Gothic scholarship; however, the majority of these studies remain painfully generalizing in their conclusions, which spurred my attempt to engage with these texts as closely as possible in order to come up with something other than the futile repetition of Gothic conventions.

The major method of analysis I use is close reading. The reason for privileging close reading lies in the social circumstances of the writers themselves: as women's writing at the time was not supposed to openly engage with issues of corporeality, female Gothicists had to recourse to very subtle means to represent the body in their fiction. The choice of certain

words and the intertextual resonances of phrases are taken into careful consideration. Furthermore, another method I applied in the formulation of my theses was comparative analysis. Although the subject of the dissertation is the female Gothic novel, male Gothic novels and their conventions had to be taken into consideration in order to highlight the essential differences between the two modes of writing, and, more importantly, because they are shaped by the very conventions that female Gothic writers responded to.

Moreover, I did not limit my focus on fiction for comparison. My idea was to create an appropriately extensive cultural context in which the specific aspects of corporeality in female Gothic can be defined. Consequently all types of writing, poems, conduct books, newspapers, letters are quoted as well as works of art discussed as expressing the mind of the time parallel with or contrary to the ideas of women Gothicists in connection with the representation of the body.

Apart from cultural studies, feminist literary theory significantly informs the analysis of all the narratives discussed. As the dissertation takes the body, more specifically the female body, as its focal point, it observes issues that feminist literary theory has also been concerned with; and as such, the ideas of feminist scholars like Kristeva, Butler, Cixous or Irigaray with regards to maternity and patriarchal views on femininity need to be considered. It has to be admitted that a feminist reading of literary texts will necessarily be restrictive since it addresses issues of femininity from a limited perspective. Such a perspective would sometimes result in 'radical' readings, especially of canonical texts; however, the method of close reading and the careful selection of secondary literature to support the argument hopefully yielded convincing interpretations.

I hope my research will contribute to the reconsideration of the genre of the female Gothic novel, which has sometimes been dismissed as reactionary literature penned by bored middle-class women and including nothing but parroting the conventions established by male writers like Horace Walpole or Matthew Lewis. The analysis of the selected narratives has, hopefully, substantiated my hypothesis that female Gothic writers sought to articulate their anxiety about issues of gender, social status, maternity and sexuality in a society where their natural voices were silenced and their imagination curbed. Furthermore, they did so by relying on the source most forbidden to them; their own bodies. Every single chapter in the dissertation begins with an overview of the particular woman writer's life and career not just as a writer but also as a woman in order to substantiate my firm belief that these women Gothicists incorporated their personal struggles and anxieties into their texts, and vice versa; they wrote their stories on their bodies.

Findings

The Romance of the Forest thematizes the heroine's rejection of the artificially constructed, limited body formulated by patriarchy and takes issue with the daughter's problematic choice between recovering the paternal or the maternal body. I have found that the heroine prefers her naturally androgynous body to the shrunken, distorted and discoloured body men imagined her to abide in; and she also recognizes that the naturally strong and healthy body, as well as an unimpaired vision of reality is only available for her if she chooses to side with her maternal heritage since pursuing/perusing the father's heritage (the fragmented manuscript that details the disintegration of her father's body) would inevitably result in the disintegration of her own body, projected by the paternal mirror that shows her body bleeding and disfigured.

Maria; or, the Wrongs of Woman is Wollstonecraft's rendering of her experiencing her maternal body thoroughly transformed by the masculinised body of the French Liberty. Although the majority of Wollstonecraft scholarship argues for her being hostile to the sexualized female body, her last unfinished novel focuses on the 'heroine's' rejection of the maternal body in favour of liberated sexuality. She incorporated into *Maria* her dissatisfaction with the maternal body that excludes active sexuality which Wollstonecraft clearly associates with the active use of imagination and the only possible way for women to achieve autonomy. Wollstonecraft promotes the suppression of the maternal body precisely because patriarchal society employs it as the very means of doing away with female sexuality.

Zofloya, or the Moor represents the stable, never-changing body of woman as an enemy to passionate womanhood. Victoria's stabbing Lilla is not only an act of "killing the angel in the house" as promoted by Virginia Woolf, but also the articulation of androgynous womanhood's deepest wish to penetrate that pristine body of ideal femininity that men intend women to reduce to. Victoria's shape-shifting between vampire and submissive angel signals the possibility of extending and transgressing the boundaries of body and gender. The novel warns us that bodily signifiers of identity can be manipulated to conform to a selected ideal, and as such Dacre deliberately exploits the kind of "victim feminism" Hoeverler outlines in *Gothic Feminism*. Victoria's ultimate transgression is that she embraces the deformed body: her own natural body as well as that masculine aspect of her body that is channelled into the body of the moor.

Manfroné, or the One-Handed Monk takes issue with the hyper-passive female body only as long as it affects the de-masculinisation of the male body. I would like to emphasize

that unlike the other three narratives, *Manfroné* does not present an alternative corporeality to the one prescribed by patriarchal incentives; instead, it promotes the obliteration of gender differences which results in the withdrawal of the feminised man from revenge, the dictates of blood which constitutes the culmination of male physicality. In other words, Mary Anne Radcliffe did not adumbrate the possibility of enhancing female physicality as the means of subverting male hegemony; instead, she chose to represent the reduction of male corporeal power to harmonize gender relations.

It is also worth remarking on an interesting bifurcation within the female Gothic discussed. The two eighteenth-century texts by Ann Radcliffe and Mary Wollstonecraft seem to promote a return to the natural signification of the female body and a straightforward rejection of the application of deceptive bodily surfaces. As I have shown, Radcliffe's heroine refuses to put on the veil that would cover and curb her natural body as well her natural desires, and she also strives to avoid being reduced to an eroticized display object. She engenders others' recovery of their true 'colour' and hence represents both bodily and mental health discovered through maternal nature. Wollstonecraft seems equally suspicious of the "well-wrought" veils of patriarchy: discarding the artificial graces attributed to fashionable women of the time, she insists, at least in *Maria*, on the vindication of bodily desires liberated from the limiting experience of maternity. Syndy Conger claims that the madhouse Maria is confined in is, in reality, the "prison-house of sensibility"; a male construct that holds her heroines in captivity (Conger 178)¹. The fact that Maria and Jemima, both literally and metaphorically, break out of it, signals that Wollstonecraft no longer grants it the power to "bastille" women (Conger 178).

On the contrary, Dacre's and Mary Anne Radcliffe's texts appear to have internalized the language of sensibility and their heroines apparently accept the bodily image forged by patriarchy, though they use that culturally normative feminine body to their own advantage. Dacre's heroine, Victoria consciously manipulates corporeal surfaces so that they would fit the male ideal of passive and innocent beauty but she only does so in order to satisfy her increasing sexual appetite. Mary Anne Radcliffe does not represent a transgressive or ambitious heroine of such scale in *Manfroné*; instead she relies on her heroine's natural passivity to eradicate aggressive physicality in her male companion.

¹ Conger, Syndy McMillen. *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility*. London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1994.

Publications related to the topic of dissertation

Tóth, Réka. "The Plight of the Gothic Heroine: Female Development and Relationships in Eighteenth-Century Female Gothic Fiction". *EGER JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES* 10: pp. 21-37. (2010).

Tóth, Réka. "The Cry from the W/Tomb: Gender Roles and Aspects of Psychological Domination in Edgar Allan Poe's *Berenice*". *AngolPark* (2011).

Tóth, Réka. „Hol keressük a testet?: A test a tizennyolcadik századi női gótikában”. In: Frank Tibor és Károly Krisztina (szerk.) *Az angol tudománya: 125 éves az egyetemi angol szak*. Budapest: ELTE - Eötvös Kiadó, 2014. pp. 106-112.