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Monsters Without to Monsters Within: The Transformation of the Supernatural from English to American Gothic Fiction

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**MONSTERS WITHOUT TO MONSTERS WITHIN: THE TRANSFORMATION
OF THE SUPERNATURAL FROM ENGLISH TO AMERICAN GOTHIC FICTION**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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INTRODUCTION: FROM 5TH-CENTURY CE BARBARIANS TO WALPOLE

Because works of Gothic fiction were often disregarded as sensationalist and unsophisticated, I wanted to explore the ways in which they actually drew attention to real societal issues and fears. Personally drawn to the eerie nature of Gothic texts ever since I was introduced to them through the works of the American “Dark Romantics” back in high school, I began this project interested in finding out what made these stories so appealing and in examining the historical and social contexts that gave rise to these stories. In particular, I wanted to illustrate how the context in which authors were writing specifically influenced the way they portrayed the supernatural in their narratives, and how the differences in their portrayals speak to the authors’ distinct aims and the issues that they address. Noting how the supernatural began as an external force in the English Gothic and then gradually became internalized in the American Gothic, peculiarly within female bodies, I decided to focus mainly on the relationship between the supernatural and the female characters in the texts I examine.

In the first and second chapters, I start logically with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, the first Gothic novel. I demonstrate that because patriarchy was such a dominant force in society, the novel is largely concerned with male inheritance and that the supernatural functions exclusively to re-establish rightful lineage within the patriarchy. I introduce the Female Gothic in the third chapter, and looking specifically at Ann Radcliffe’s novel, *The Italian*, I discuss the ways in which the Female Gothic endeavored to give voice and agency to women within the patriarchal system. Next, I jump to the American Gothic in order to examine how the Gothic took shape within the unique context of the developing nation. In this section, I begin with Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland: or, The Transformation: An American Tale*, not only because it is generally regarded as the first American Gothic novel, but also because I was

intrigued by the fact that Brown establishes in the title of his novel that it is a distinctly “American Tale.” In the two chapters on Brown and *Wieland*, I illustrate Brown’s concern with nationhood and his anxiety about the American project of democracy. In his novel, the ostensibly supernatural events are attributed to a foreigner, shifting the blame for the horrific outcomes from the self to the Other. Finally, in the last chapter, I look at the manifestation of the supernatural in the female body in Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories, “The Birth-mark” and “Ligeia” respectively. In the two sub-sections, I analyze how male anxieties surrounding the maintenance of their authority were, similar to the displacement of responsibility to the foreign Other in *Wieland*, projected onto the Other that is the female body. Through this historical exploration of the transformation of the supernatural, I argue that the supernatural became internalized in the American Gothic because it reflected national anxieties: although freed from the external threat of the patriarchal English government, Americans of the young republic still faced the dangers of individualism and the failure of the endeavor to establish their own government.

In examining the historical context of Gothic fiction, it is first necessary that I briefly trace the historical trajectory of the term “Gothic”. The term originally referred to the Gothic people in the fifth century CE who were viewed as barbarians by the Romans and who were largely responsible for the fall of the Roman Empire. Because they were tied to the death of the classical pagan world, they eventually became associated with the rise of the Catholic Christian church. This then led to the use of the term to describe medieval architecture and culture. Nick Groom asserts in his book, *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction*, the destruction during the English Reformation in the sixteenth century of such architecture (including English

monasteries), with which the Gothic had come to be associated, would in turn come to influence the Gothic imagination:

The dissolution of the monasteries revolutionized land ownership and had huge and irrevocable social effects, but also created an aesthetic of ruin. Decapitated images in stone and glass, mutilated and abandoned buildings, and inscrutable fragmentary remains testified to the violence of the dissolution, but were also now embedded in the landscape and the imagination in new ways. (Groom 28)

Eventually, the term, as it referred to the Gothic people, would re-emerge in discourse between the mid-seventeenth century and early eighteenth century about cultural and national identity, especially in light of the English Civil War crisis, the Glorious Revolution, and the 1707 Act of Union that joined the Kingdom of England and the Kingdom of Scotland into Great Britain.

Groom states that during this period the Gothic developed into three primary strands:

a political theory central to Whig interests, a burgeoning interest in mediaeval manners and their influence on national identity, and a cultural aesthetic that associated decay, nostalgia, melancholy mortality, and death with the ancient Northern past. (Groom)

By the 1760s, these distinct strands were synthesized in scholarship and criticism on fiction, including the works of Edmund Spenser (particularly *The Faerie Queen*) and Shakespeare, that investigated the influence of medieval romance within these works and examined the function of their Gothic elements. Finally, in 1764, Horace Walpole emerged as the first to apply the term “Gothic” to his own work.

I. HORACE WALPOLE, INSPIRED BY A GIGANTIC HAND IN ARMOUR

Horace Walpole, who published *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764, was born in London, the third son of British Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole. Walpole’s father provided him with a

secure income that allowed Walpole to pursue various projects, such as construction of his “own monument to the eighteenth-century Gothic revival” in Twickenham, London (Groom). Having an affinity for Gothic architecture, Walpole built a villa called Strawberry Hill that was modeled after Gothic castles. It is within this “little Gothic castle” that Walpole supposedly had a dream that inspired him to write *The Castle of Otranto* (Groom 69):

I waked one morning in the beginning of last June from a dream, of which all I could recover was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story) and that on the uppermost bannister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour. (Walpole)

The inspiration of the story by a dream seems to parallel the fact that his characters’ actions are driven by a prophecy; Groom argues that the idea of dreams or prophecies driving human action is one of Walpole’s innovations. Groom asserts that another of Walpole’s innovations is the novel’s supernaturalism, which manifests in the narrative as enormous pieces of armor, such as the “gigantic hand in armour” Walpole claims to have seen in his dream. Groom explains how Walpole’s innovations distinguished his texts from previous narratives that incorporated Gothic elements:

Walpole’s primary innovation was not in developing the elements already introduced by [Thomas] Leland [*in Longsword, Earl of Salisbury: An Historical Romance*] by making the castles, crypts, secret passages, dynastic plots, mediaeval Catholic ritual, and latent violence ever more elaborate and labyrinthine: it was in the book’s supernaturalism - the manifestation of a frightful (or farcical) colossus - and in allowing dreams to direct the action. (Groom 71)

Thus, while the setting of a Gothic castle may not be new, it is Walpole's use of prophecies and the supernatural within this context that is innovative. Additionally, although he did borrow certain devices from Shakespeare, Walpole was the first to apply the term "Gothic" to his work, and was different from past writers in that he applied the devices of writers such as Shakespeare to the present, "but in a style adjusted to contemporary tastes" (Clery xv). Indeed, the full title of the novel, *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*, signified the start of a new genre. Moreover, Walpole explicitly states in his preface to the second edition of his novel that his aim was to blend "the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern," the former being the romance that was all "imagination and improbability" while the latter was concerned with mirroring the natural. This is also evidence of his innovation since it demonstrates that Walpole wanted to combine these two separate kinds of romances in order to create something new altogether. He explains his motives:

Desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations, [the author] wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions. (Walpole)

In other words, Walpole wanted to juxtapose the supernatural with the human to explore how normal, everyday humans would respond in the event of "extraordinary," supernatural occurrences. While this may be Walpole's explicit and general aim, I want to argue that his personal background and the social context in which he was writing specifically influenced the focus on the issue of patriarchal lineage in the novel.

With a family that consisted of a few politicians, and largely involved in politics himself as a member of Parliament, Walpole felt that “politics could never be merely a question of party allegiance; it was a matter of blood, of dynasty,” and he “took great pride in the achievements of his family” (Clery xxvii). In terms of the larger historical and social context in which Walpole was writing, there had been successive revolutions, such as the English Civil War between 1642-1651, the English Revolution from 1649-1660, and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that threatened the stability of the English monarchy. Meanwhile, social upheaval occurred with the rise of a middle class that increasingly challenged the authority of the ruling aristocracy. Moreover, when “Walpole published [*The Castle of Otranto*] in the mid-1760s, he was writing at the end of nearly a century of debates about whether human society was intrinsically patriarchal or whether it was in fact the result of a social contract among its members” (Heiland 8). Walpole’s personal life seen in light of these issues of governmental power, social hierarchy, and inheritance, suggests that the concern with patriarchal lineage in *The Castle of Otranto* reflected Walpole’s contemplation about the stability of his own position in society. I will argue that because of his involvement in politics – a space that excluded women, who were being increasingly confined to the home – and the fact that the “matter of blood, of dynasty” was largely a male concern, Walpole focuses the novel on a male character and depicts his female characters as chiefly objects with little agency that only exist to serve the aims of the men. He then uses the supernatural as a force within the narrative that reaffirms patriarchal lineage.

Donna Heiland argues in her book, *Gothic & Gender: An Introduction*, that “gothic novels are always stories of transgression,” including those “across national boundaries, social boundaries, sexual boundaries, the boundaries of one’s own identity” (Heiland 3). Applying her concept to *The Castle of Otranto*, I argue that because the novel is primarily concerned with

landownership, only males are allowed to contest their position and the boundaries within a patriarchal society, while the women are excluded from this discourse of transgression.

II. PATRIARCHAL ANXIETIES IN *THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO*

Supernatural elements and the anxiety over landownership are powerful forces that drive the plot of *The Castle of Otranto*. By the end of the novel, the ultimate power of the supernatural, associated with the Christian God, rectifies an unlawful inheritance. Manfred, the main character and the prince of Otranto, is punished for questioning divine authority and trying to change his fate. Within this power struggle, the focus is predominantly on a man's attempt to retain his title and estate, while the women are relegated to commodified objects, given little agency, and are only useful in so far as they can be exchanged like commodities to ensure a man's claim to his land.

In the patriarchal society established immediately at the beginning of the novel, the sole concern of the patriarch, Manfred, is his title, while women are largely disregarded and passive figures. The first sentence in the novel introduces Manfred by his title, the "prince of Otranto," which is inextricably tied to his estate, the castle of Otranto, in addition to his tenants and subjects (*Otranto* 17). The issue of inheritance is also immediately brought to light since the rest of the sentence talks about his progeny. In the discussion of his two children, there is a stark contrast between the description of the daughter and son: while Matilda is "a most beautiful virgin," Conrad is a "homely youth, sickly, and of no promising disposition" (*Otranto* 17). The fact that Matilda is described in terms of her virginity – a status which can change – while Conrad is described solely in terms of his inherent characteristics, suggests that Matilda is specifically valuable because of her sexual purity, which can be used as a bargaining chip to advance her father's political aims, as we see later in the novel. Nevertheless, it is clear that

Conrad is much more valuable to Manfred, because, despite the discrepancy between the two siblings that favors Matilda, Manfred views Conrad as his “darling” but “never showed any symptoms of affection to Matilda” (*Otranto* 17). Thus, Manfred only values his son so much because of Conrad’s gender and the fact that he ensures Manfred’s claim to his estate.

In addition, the fact that Matilda is described as “aged eighteen,” while Conrad is “three years younger,” may allude to the notion that even though Matilda is the firstborn, she is disregarded as a result of her gender because property is inherited by the eldest son, as ordained by primogeniture (*Otranto* 17). In contrast, the female who does matter to Manfred is Isabella:

Manfred had contracted a marriage for his son with the marquis of Vincenza’s daughter, Isabella; and she had already been delivered by her guardians into the hands of Manfred, that he might celebrate the wedding as soon as Conrad’s infirm state of health would permit. (*Otranto* 17)

It is clear that Isabella is only significant because of her ability to ensure Manfred’s claim to his estate. The word “contracted” and the fact that Isabella is “delivered by her guardians into the hands of Manfred” as a passive object with no agency of her own, suggest that she is a mere commodity being exchanged between two patriarchs.

Furthermore, Manfred’s anxiety over the possession of his land is evident in his “impatience for this ceremonial [which] was remarked by his family and neighbors” (*Otranto* 17). The narrator goes on to state that:

[Manfred’s] tenants and subjects (...) attributed this hasty wedding to the prince’s dread of seeing accomplished an ancient prophecy, which was said to have pronounced, *That the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it.* (*Otranto* 17)

Although it is not clear at first to the characters exactly what the prophecy means, especially when it mentions “the real owner (...) [being] grown too large to inhabit [Otranto],” it is the fact that it mentions the “castle and lordship of Otranto (...) [passing] from the present family” that plagues Manfred. It is this prophecy about Manfred’s precarious ownership of Otranto and the supernatural occurrences (which represent the fulfillment of the part of the prophecy that talks of the real owner being grown too large through the gigantic pieces of armor) that take place as a result of it that drive Manfred’s desperate actions.

When the first of these supernatural events – the death of Conrad when he is crushed beneath “an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers” - occurs, Manfred is transfixed by the scene:

He fixed his eyes on what he wished in vain to believe a vision; and seemed less attentive to his loss, than buried in meditation on the stupendous object that had occasioned it. He touched, he examined the fatal casque; nor could even the bleeding mangled remains of the young prince divert the eyes of Manfred from the portent before him. (*Otranto* 19)

The fact that the helmet is “an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being” signifies that it is an extraordinary object and thereby marks it as supernatural.

Additionally, the “proportionable quantity of black feathers” indicates that it is a dark omen.

Taken together, this supernatural event takes predominance over all other things because it represents to Manfred the threat of losing his estate: not only does the giant helmet seem to allude to the part of the prophecy that talks of the “real owner [being] grown too large to inhabit” Otranto, but the fact that his son has been killed by the helmet means that Manfred has lost his

one and only heir. However, despite the fact that just two pages before, Conrad had been described as Manfred's "darling," "nor could even the bleeding mangle remains of the young prince divert the eyes of Manfred from the portent before him"; Manfred easily forgets his son in his panic about what the helmet signifies. Now that his son is dead, Conrad is useless to him and thus forgotten, just as Matilda has been disregarded since her birth, and Manfred moves quickly on to contemplate the next move to secure his claim to Otranto. Indeed, "the first sounds that dropped from Manfred's lips were, Take care of the lady Isabella," indicating that in the short moments after witnessing his son's dead body, he has already decided on an alternative course of action - to marry Isabella himself (*Otranto* 19). Because his current wife, Hippolita, cannot bear him another child, a marriage to and a male child with Isabella would enable Manfred to pass entitlement to Otranto to his heir.

The supernatural both literally and metaphorically overwhelms the humans – just as the helmet has crushed and buried Conrad's existence, Manfred's senses and thoughts are overwhelmed by the "stupendous object," and he is "buried in meditation" over it. However, despite this and subsequent demonstrations of the power of the supernatural over humans, Manfred, so driven by his desire to maintain his claim to his property, continuously refuses to accept the portents that signify the inevitable fulfillment of the prophecy. Meanwhile, it is clear that everyone else has accepted the supremacy of divine power. A passage later in the novel, in which the friar Jerome tries to exhort Manfred to stop pursuing Isabella, explicitly establishes a hierarchy in which God is the supreme sovereign. Despite the fact that Manfred asserts to Jerome, "I am sovereign here [at Otranto]," Jerome replies, "I know my duty, and am the minister of a mightier prince than Manfred. Harken to him who speaks through my organs" (*Otranto* 48). This hierarchy also reinforces the women's debasement since they are placed at the

lowest rung. At the top of the hierarchy is God; then Manfred, who is the sovereign of Otranto; then Jerome, who calls Manfred “[m]y lord” and highness. At very bottom is Hippolita, Manfred’s wife, who submits to Manfred. For example, even though her “countenance declared her astonishment, and impatience to know where this would end: her silence more strongly spoke her observance of Manfred,” demonstrating that she curbs and silences her own desires in deference to Manfred (*Otranto* 48). Additionally, Manfred makes a clear separation between the symbolic public and domestic spaces, which mark a division between the separate masculine and feminine realms of agency and power, when he states that “the secret affairs of [his] state (...) are not within a woman’s province” (*Otranto* 48). This further reduces the women’s agency while reinforcing their silence since they have no place within the patriarchal lineage aside from their ability to produce heirs. As a result, both the hierarchal system and the division of public and domestic space establish boundaries that the women cannot cross.

In contrast to the women’s inability to contest their place within this society, the passage reveals Manfred’s attempts to surpass his position within the established hierarchy. He asserts to Jerome, “I pay due reverence to your holy profession; but I am sovereign here, and will allow no meddling priest to interfere in the affairs of my domestic.” (*Otranto* 48) Here, Manfred not only asserts his power over “the affairs of [his] domestic,” establishing his power over the women in his household (in particular relation to his plans to marry Isabella), but he also contests the power of God, who is sovereign over all. Even though Manfred acknowledges that Jerome is a servant of God, he disregards the power that Jerome exercises through his “holy profession” by calling Jerome a “meddling priest.” Instead, Manfred states that he himself is the sovereign of Otranto and therefore anyone on its premises must answer to him. Additionally, as the sovereign, he has the right to control both his domestic and public space, regulating who can enter each: while he

prevents Hippolita from entering “the secret affairs of [his] state,” he prevents Jerome from “[interfering] in the affairs of [his] domestic.”

Nevertheless, Jerome reminds Manfred of his place in the hierarchy, and several times in the novel, he urges Manfred to submit himself to the church and cease to pursue his plans to stop the prophecy from coming true. The friar associates the supernatural portents with God’s displeasure with Manfred’s actions, cautioning Manfred, “[L]earn to respect the holy character I wear: heaven will not be trifled with.” (*Otranto* 60) That “heaven will not be trifled with” is a warning that God’s will shall ultimately prevail. However, Manfred still refuses to heed the warning. At the end of the novel the prophecy does come true, and Manfred not only loses his claim to Otranto because the true prince is revealed, but he also accidentally kills his own daughter. These events illustrate not only that Manfred’s efforts are futile, but also that his obsession with his land makes him reckless, causing his plans to backfire on him. Thus, the supernatural, by which God exerts power in the narrative, ultimately triumphs, and Manfred is punished for trying to assume the power of God and change his fate.

Manfred’s obsession with trying to change the prophecy and retain his title of prince of Otranto at whatever cost causes him to regard the women as mere objects that he uses to advance his own aims, and drives him to desperate actions. The transgression that occurs within this novel is Manfred’s attempt to assume the power of God by changing his fate in order to maintain an unlawful stake to a land, which instigates a series of supernatural events that warn him against pursuing his plans. The supernatural is therefore a force that reinstates the relative position between God and man, and rights an illegitimate inheritance. As a result, the conflict is confined to one between two patriarchs over land inheritance. Heiland argues that the “conflict in *Otranto* is not over whether this form of patriarchy should exist, but over how corruption in such a

patriarchy can be rooted out” (Heiland 9). In this world, the women are unquestioningly obedient to their patriarch (Manfred’s wife even agrees to his request for a divorce so that he can marry Isabella), and their place within this patriarchal system is immutable.

Therefore, in this Gothic narrative, the supernatural only intervenes when there are human efforts to defy fate and establish a corrupt patriarchal lineage. Meanwhile, because, as Heiland maintains, “conflict in *Otranto* is not over whether this form of patriarchy should exist,” the women’s status at the bottom of the hierarchy is maintained. Such an ending would make sense to a man like Walpole, who himself participated in and was benefitted by a patriarchal society. It is only in later works of Gothic fiction, such as those by Ann Radcliffe, that the supernatural is shaped in such a way as to give female characters some power and agency to defy a male-dominated society.

III. THE FEMALE GOTHIC: ANN RADCLIFFE

Born in London in the same year that *The Castle of Otranto* was published in 1764 and publishing her own works during the late eighteenth century, Ann Radcliffe has been regarded as the founder of a branch of the Gothic that has become known as the Female Gothic. Radcliffe and other female writers “[seized] an opportunity to register their concerns, both gender-based and otherwise” by “[redirecting] the Gothic’s lens to the figure of the persecuted heroine” (Davison 85, 84). Notably, the Female Gothic arose during the Industrial and French Revolutions in response to the social, religious, and economic upheaval. Societal disruption was also evident in the middle class’s renovation of the domestic sphere, which was becoming increasingly restricted, restraining women from participating in the marketplace. In this world, women were themselves commoditized and legally subsumed under their husbands. Furthermore, they were viewed as irrational beings that should be controlled by men. It was in such an environment that

Radcliffe and other women Gothic writers were able to appeal to a wide readership, especially by focusing on the female experience – their distinct fears and desires – and speaking to women’s anxieties about the shrinking domestic sphere and institutions that ignored their concerns.

Through their representations of women, these novels initiated a discourse among both readers and writers about women’s relationship to socially constructed roles and domestic ideals.

Radcliffe’s *The Italian*, published in 1797, is an example of this ongoing discourse in that it was written in response to Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796), which itself had been influenced by Radcliffe’s other novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Radcliffe distinguished her novel as “terror Gothic” in contrast to Lewis’ “horror Gothic”: “While the former was characterized as ‘feminine’ and intended to expand the soul by bringing it into contact with sublime objects of terror, the latter was said to be more ‘masculine’ in its nature, as it focused on encounters with gruesomely detailed mortality” (Davison 90). Indeed, while Lewis’ *The Monk* contained explicit supernatural horrors, such as demons and bleeding nuns, the supernatural elements in Radcliffe’s novel are associated with the sublime, particularly nature, and the obscure and unknown. Furthermore, in *The Italian*, what at first appear to be supernatural figures and events are later accounted for by rational explanations. As a result, Radcliffe’s characters ultimately find themselves combatting terrors in an otherwise rational world. Davison states, “While the Gothic is a literature of trauma, the Female Gothic is doubly so, for it fixes its narrative lens on so-called ‘normal’ feminine development” (Davison 94). Thus, in a sense, Radcliffe’s novels are even more terrifying because, as opposed to fictive horrors, the source of terror is grounded in reality and speaks to women’s real fears and anxieties surrounding not only personal violence, but also the dominating patriarchy that governs their lives.

IV. DICHOTOMIES WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE WORLD OF THE ITALIAN

While there are not actual supernatural forces that terrorize the characters, such as in *The Castle of Otranto*, Radcliffe's heroine is subjected to more realistic terrors that speak to larger anxieties about a women's journey to marriage. In her book, *Gothic Literature 1764-1824*, Carol Davison quotes Eugenia C. DeLamotte: "The 'fear of power' embodied in Gothic romance is a fear not only of supernatural powers but also of social forces so vast and impersonal that they seem to have supernatural strength" (Davison 92). I argue that Radcliffe dramatizes women's real anxieties concerning marriage and the "social forces so vast and impersonal" that would subsequently cause them to be subsumed under the patriarchy and relegated to the domestic sphere. The issue of marriage in the novel seems interestingly tied to Radcliffe's personal life, as Diane Hoeveler notes in her book, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës*: "It is surely somewhat peculiar that Radcliffe wrote her four major novels all within the first ten years of her marriage, and then never wrote anything for publication again" (Hoeveler 120). Especially as a female writer in the eighteenth century, Radcliffe no doubt had qualms about being restricted to performing domestic roles as a wife. I propose that in *The Italian*, Radcliffe disrupts dichotomies, such as those between the male and female spheres, in order to advocate for female freedom and power within the patriarchy.

In the novel, Radcliffe creates an imaginary world in which there is a strict dichotomy between good and evil – those who are virtuous always ultimately triumph over those who are wicked. A consequence of this system is that women in the novel can only escape from their status as weaker beings and triumph over evil if they remain innocent and virtuous. Virtue, then, is what grants women agency and power. To be sure, although the Marchesa is the one who orchestrates Ellena's capture, her plans are ultimately thwarted because she is a villainous character and therefore is prevented from succeeding in her aims by virtue of the good and evil

dichotomy. Meanwhile, Ellena is able to achieve a happy ending, but mainly as a result of happenstance and exterior forces, as opposed to her own actions. Bondhus notes this as well in his article, “Sublime Patriarchs and the Problems of the New Middle Class in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*”: the “fortuitous events owe much to chance and nothing to logical planning (...) Ellena’s escape from San Stefano would not have been possible if her mother, the kindly Sister Olivia, hadn’t been an inmate at that particular convent” (Bondhus 24). The female protagonists’ victory as a result of unconscious forces, as opposed to “logical planning,” is exemplified in the narrative by a passage describing the distinct outcomes of virtue and vice:

It may be worthy of observation, that the virtues of Olivia, exerted in a general cause, had thus led her unconsciously to the happiness of saving her daughter; while the vices of Schedoni had as unconsciously urged him nearly to destroy his niece, and had always been preventing, by the means they prompted him to employ, the success of his constant aim. (*The Italian* 384)

In this world, who succeeds in their aims is largely determined by their inherent nature – either good or bad – as opposed to targeted actions. The “virtues of Olivia, exerted in a general cause,” as opposed to the specific aim, for instance, of actively searching for her daughter, “had thus led her unconsciously to the happiness of saving her daughter.” The fact that Olivia was led “unconsciously” to saving Ellena supports the notion that she was able to succeed not through her own volition, but merely through happenstance. However, the unrealistic nature of the good and bad dichotomy and the notion that an individual’s fate is determined by one’s inherent morality suggests that Radcliffe actually uses the imaginary dichotomy to critique the unreasonableness of constructed dichotomies in reality, such as that between male and female,

domestic and public spheres. In fact, throughout the novel, Radcliffe complicates gender binaries that distinguish the irrational female from the rational male.

One example of Radcliffe's disruption of dichotomies can be found in the way that she subjects both Vivaldi and the Marchesa - whom Schedoni calls "weak and contemptible" because of her gender - to the negative consequences of possessing superstitious beliefs, which, as Davison notes, Radcliffe associates with "Britain's unenlightened, primitive, Catholic past" (Davison 93). Radcliffe's ridicule of Catholic superstition is evident in the novel in her linking of superstitious beliefs with lack of reason. This association is established in an earlier description of Vivaldi's thought process: "His understanding was sufficiently clear and strong to teach him to detect many errors of opinion, that prevailed around him, as well as to despise the common superstitions of his country" (*The Italian* 58). Superstitions are thus despised and associated with "errors of opinion." The Marchesa's superstitious fears cause her to falter in her will, which allows Schedoni to criticize her for falling victim to her emotions. Meanwhile, although it at first seems that Vivaldi is able to handle superstition better than the Marchesa, his susceptibility to superstition causes him to fall for Schedoni's deception.

At first, Radcliffe seems to play into the dichotomy between female emotionality and male rationality. In the earlier half of the novel, Vivaldi is portrayed as welcoming of superstitious explanations, in contrast to the Marchesa who experiences adverse emotions when she is confronted with superstitious fear. The narrator relates Vivaldi's contemplation of the supernatural:

He was awed by the circumstances which had attended the visitations of the monk (...) and his imagination, thus elevated by wonder and painful curiosity, was prepared for something above the reach of common conjecture, and beyond the accomplishment of

human agency. His understanding was sufficiently clear and strong to teach him to detect many errors of opinion, that prevailed around him, as well as to despise the common superstitions of his country, and, in the usual state of his mind, he probably would not have paused for a moment on the subject before him; but (...) he would, perhaps, have been somewhat disappointed, to have descended suddenly from the region of fearful sublimity, to which he had soared – the world of terrible shadows – to the earth, on which he daily walked, and to an explanation simply natural. (*The Italian* 58)

In Vivaldi's case, fear and superstition are ostensibly exalted. Instead of experiencing terror, Vivaldi's imagination is "elevated by wonder and painful curiosity" and his "passions were now interested and his fancy awakened" to such a degree that he would have been "somewhat disappointed, to have descended suddenly from the region of fearful sublimity, to which he had soared – the world of terrible shadows – to the earth, on which he daily walked, and to an explanation simply natural." His conjectures about the monk seem almost entertaining for Vivaldi. Even though he knows not to believe in superstitions, his "understanding (...) sufficiently clear and strong to teach him to detect many errors of opinion, that prevailed around him, as well as to despise the common superstitions of his country," Vivaldi becomes thrilled by the thought of supernatural occurrences that would bring excitement to the familiarity of his daily life by elevating him to "the world of terrible shadows." Thus, Vivaldi only lightly entertains the possibility of supernatural explanations.

On the other hand, the Marchesa suffers from her superstitious fears. Schedoni denigrates the Marchesa for being consumed by her womanly irrationality: he calls her "slave of her passions, the dupe of her senses," "victim of a sound," "weak and contemptible being" (*The Italian* 179). In Schedoni's eyes, the Marchesa is fickle and unable to carry out her plans with a

constancy of will. Her weakness is that her superstition causes her to “[shrink] from the act she had but an instant before believed meritorious” (*The Italian* 179). However, at the end of the novel, Schedoni also ridicules Vivaldi for his susceptibility to irrationality. Schedoni explains how he was able to use this susceptibility to his advantage: “I trusted more to the impression of awe, which the conduct and seeming foreknowledge of that stranger were adapted to inspire in a mind like your’s; and I thus endeavoured to avail myself of your prevailing weakness” (*The Italian* 397). Schedoni describes this “prevailing weakness” as a “susceptibility which renders [Vivaldi] especially liable to superstition” (*The Italian* 397). Indeed, despite having an “understanding (...) sufficiently clear and strong to teach him to detect many errors of opinion, that prevailed around him, as well as to despise the common superstitions of his country,” Vivaldi goes against his better judgment and chooses to entertain his superstitions, consequently falling into Schedoni’s trap.

In addition to portraying both the Marchesa and Vivaldi as victims of irrational beliefs, Radcliffe subverts superior male reason by giving her heroine, Ellena, a mind “capable of being highly elevated” that is, as a result, able to help her overcome her fears (*The Italian* 91). In contrast to the Marchesa and Vivaldi, Ellena’s highly elevated mind allows her to revere a supernaturalism that Radcliffe does condone: the power of God and the sublime. By being able to appreciate the stupendous works of God, Ellena is able to draw strength from sublimity. Evidence of this can be found in a passage describing her contemplation of nature. There is a comparison of size in terms of height/hierarchy throughout the passage, particularly between God and men, who are transformed from giants into fairies when compared to the sublime Deity. The fact that Ellena has a mind that is “capable of being highly elevated,” which echoes her physically elevated position in the turret overseeing the imaginary thousands of men “assembled

on the plains below,” distinguishes her from the rest of man (*The Italian* 91). She has the exclusive privilege of looking “beyond the awful veil which obscures the features of the Deity” and of “dwelling as with a present God in the midst of his sublime works” (*The Italian* 90). In this elevated state, “man, the giant who now held her in captivity, would shrink to the diminutiveness of a fairy” (*The Italian* 91). Bondhus posits that the heroines in Radcliffe’s novels are able to use what he calls the “Kantian sublime” – a “formulation of sublimity [that] is more concerned with the perceiving individual’s ability to draw empowerment from the spectacle” – as a source of strength and power (Bondhus 14). Bondhus asserts:

Although the sublime is (...) terrifying, and the viewer is in fact ‘overwhelmed’ by such an encounter, the Kantian configuration also causes her to experience ‘an intense self-presence’ and a ‘feeling of exaltation’. This ‘intense self-presence’ is, I maintain, characterized largely by an increased sense of *fortitude*, which allows the victimized heroine to maintain her identity in the face of the demoralizing trials that the Gothic villain and his cohorts impose upon her. (Bondhus 14)

Unlike the Marchesa who is subject to “terror” and “superstitious fears” because of her crimes and her guilty conscience, Ellena experiences a reverential awe/fear of God (*The Italian* 179). The “sense of *fortitude*” that Ellena derives from viewing God’s “sublime works” gives her a certain power over her enemies because having achieved a feeling of “intense self-presence” through her assessment of her relationship to God and God’s dominance over man, she garners the strength of mind to resist man’s attempt to “enchain her soul” (*The Italian* 91). Bondhus also maintains that the “sublime is not, however, the only hegemonic tool that Radcliffe’s heroines gain control over; the sublime is also connected to the cultural trend of sensibility” (Bondhus 15). He continues, “Sensibility, particularly when it is applied to literature, is typically

understood to be a privileging of emotionality; it is almost always connected to virtue and the pleasing feeling of having taken the morally correct action” (Bondhus 15). Thus, Radcliffe also turns emotionality, which is often contrasted with reason and rationality, into a positive quality that helps her heroine through her trials.

Along the lines of this transformation of a feminine weakness into strength, Hoeveler maintains that the Female Gothic enabled women to contest patriarchal strictures by using a “masquerade of femininity,” or staged weakness and submission, as a passive-aggressive strategy against the patriarch (Hoeveler 7). Hoeveler calls gothic feminism a version of “victim feminism,” “an ideology of female power through pretended and staged weakness” (Hoeveler 7). She explains, “Such an ideology positions women as innocent victims who deserve to be rewarded with the ancestral estate because they were unjustly persecuted by the corrupt patriarch” (Hoeveler 7). An example of this can be found in the scene in which Olivia urges Ellena to dissimulate her resistance to the abbess. Olivia states, “It is sufficient that you understand the consequence of open resistance to be terrible, and that you consent to avoid it,” insisting that the only way that Ellena can save herself from the “evils preparing” is by “[abandoning] at least the appearance of resistance” (*The Italian* 96). When Ellena is reluctant to comply with Olivia’s advice, Olivia replies, “If deceit is at any time excusable (...) it is when we practice it in self-defence” (*The Italian* 97). The notion of dissimulation and putting on an “appearance” or act calls to mind feminist critic Judith Butler’s essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” Butler argues that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 900). She continues, “I (...) understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting

that identity as a compelling illusion, and object of *belief*' (Butler 901). Butler maintains that gender is constructed through this "repetition of acts" that conform to established gender norms. Olivia's advice to Ellena to deceive her enemies by intentionally maintaining this "act" of feminine submissiveness suggests that Radcliffe is proposing ways in which gender binaries can be appropriated to give women power and agency.

Dichotomy is a trope throughout the novel by which Radcliffe arguably critiques gender norms that create male and female as categories, each with set qualities and roles. Even the fact that Ellena must go through so many obstacles in order to reach the idealistic, happy ending with her marriage to Vivaldi implies an unrealistic dichotomy between life before and life after marriage for a woman. This hints at Radcliffe's anxiety about being subsumed under the patriarchy because, in reality, marriage is not the end goal after which life is free of problems. In the novel, Radcliffe not only sets up these unrealistic dichotomies as a critique of them, but she also illustrates ways to subvert the binary system by complicating dichotomies, such as when she equalizes the effect of superstition on both a male and female character, and when she gives Ellena the ability to break the conception that women are weak because of their emotionality. Furthermore, Radcliffe portrays in the narrative an example of what some critics have proposed to be "victim feminism," through which the female characters use a "masquerade of femininity" as a "passive-aggressive strategy against the patriarch" (Hoeveler 7). Thus, though limited by the patriarchal system under which she lives, Radcliffe proposes the possibilities of female resistance.

THE AMERICAN GOTHIC

The English Gothic writers previously discussed had a rich history from which to draw inspiration for their stories (Walpole, for example, wrote a narrative about a well-established

system of property inheritance, and drew inspiration for the setting of his story from old English castles). In contrast, post-revolutionary American writers, although heavily influenced by the English Gothic, had to work within a different historical and cultural context. Important issues that many writers attempted to think through included the question of what it meant to be an American in the newly-founded republic. Americans such as Benjamin Franklin, who advocated the Enlightenment ideals of progress and self-advancement through rationality and hard work, maintained a positive outlook on the prospects of Americans. Similarly, American transcendentalists, including Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau, who adopted the English Romantic faith in “the individual ego or selfhood,” believed in the goodness of both nature and humans (Savoy). In contrast to the beliefs of Enlightenment thinkers and transcendentalist writers, American Gothic writers – sometimes referred to as Gothic Romanticists or Dark Romanticists - including Irving, Poe, and Hawthorne, were skeptical about this strong faith in the inherent goodness of the individual, and instead explored the dark side of human nature and of Romantic ideals. Eric Savoy describes the American Gothic in his article, “The Rise of American Gothic”:

Its cultural role (...) has been entirely paradoxical: an optimistic country founded upon the Enlightenment principles of liberty and “the pursuit of happiness,” a country that supposedly repudiated the burden of history and its irrational claims, has produced a strain of literature that is haunted by an insistent, undead past and fascinated by the strange beauty of sorrow. (Savoy)

By “[repudiating] the burden of history,” Americans attempted to separate their lives in the newly-independent country from their past as English subjects. However, as reflected in American Gothic literature, which is “haunted by an insistent, undead past,” these Gothic writers

– in contrast to Franklin who believed in making progress in the new nation away from the past – believed that Americans were inextricably tied to their past, and thus would have to acknowledge their roots when defining “Americanness.”

The distinction that some Americans attempted to draw between past and present seemed to result in a dichotomy between American ideals of progress and the American nightmare – “the underside of ‘the American dream’” – of regression, stagnation, and revisitation of the past (Savoy). In complicating this ostensible dichotomy, Savoy asserts that dream and nightmare “actually interfuse and interact with each other” (Savoy). As a result, Gothic fiction presents narratives that examine how the past continually exerts its influence on the present. Savoy explains this interaction between past and present:

the past constantly inhabits the present, (...) progress generates an almost unbearable anxiety about its costs, and (...) an insatiable appetite for spectacles of grotesque violence is part of the texture of everyday reality. (Savoy)

This reinforces the notion that the American present and the American past, or “nightmare,” are inherently intertwined. Despite the American effort to define its own identity separate from that of England, Americans are still unable to transcend or escape their past, but must instead acknowledge and constantly negotiate its position in relation to history.

Tied to the notion of a present haunted by the past is the theme, revisited frequently in the Gothic, of the return of the past or of the repressed that threatened the national experiment and the idea of progress. Savoy quotes D.H. Lawrence, an English writer and critic of the early twentieth century, who mocks Benjamin Franklin:

The Perfectability of Man! Ah heaven, what a dreary theme! (...) The ideal self! Oh, but I have a strange and fugitive self shut out and howling like a wolf or a coyote under the

ideal windows. See his red eyes in the dark? This is the self who is coming into his own.

(Savoy)

Savoy states that it is the “sense of this ‘strange and fugitive self’ that has been repudiated by the enlightened and forward-looking American psyche,” but that allows for what constitutes Franklin’s “ideal self.” Savoy explains that “it is precisely this consignment or repudiation that enables the subject to emerge as a coherent national subject, a proper citizen of the republic, by contrast to that other” (Savoy). In other words, it is projecting everything that is undesirable, everything that hinders progress, onto the “strange and fugitive self,” or the “other,” that allows American to define what it means to achieve the “ideal self.” It is this rejected self - often manifesting as ghosts and figures of horror in Gothic narratives – that personifies the American nightmare that is explored extensively in the American Gothic.

I argue that this fear of the self, a byproduct of the effort to define “Americanness,” is one important aspect of the American Gothic that distinguishes it from the English Gothic. While the works of English Gothic writers, such as Walpole, Lewis, and Radcliffe, employ supernatural forces that are external and that affect both the male and female characters, the supernatural takes a different and more specific form in American Gothic fiction. One instance of this is found particularly in the works of Hawthorne and Poe, in which the supernatural often manifests within a female figure, rendering the female body an object of anxiety and fear. In this way, the “strange and fugitive self,” or the “other” is projected onto women, who themselves were often seen as “other” in contrast to men. By conflating the abstract “other” with the gendered “other,” American Gothic writers were able to give the abstract “other” a body in women, allowing them to explore fear of the “fugitive self” by comparing it to masculine fears about women. Furthermore, the female body would have been a particularly apt vehicle for examining these

fears; it was often a tangible object onto which society projected its fears and anxieties, since the female body was something that it could actually control and regulate.

I. CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN: REASON IN THE MIDST OF INSTABILITY

Charles Brockden Brown, generally known as the first American Gothic novelist, was born in Philadelphia in 1771. His father was a descendant of immigrants from England who fled the mother country to escape from persecutions under Charles II. Influenced by the English Gothic, by William Godwin (who had effectively used the novel form to express personal views about life), and also likely by his ancestors' experience as English immigrants, Brown used the Gothic novel to explore questions of American nationhood. In her article, "Gothic Roots: Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, American Identity, and American Literature," Renata R. Mautner Wasserman describes Brown's first major work, *Wieland: or, The Transformation: An American Tale*, published in 1798:

As is characteristic, then, of works of American national identity, *Wieland* probes the relation between the European complex of ideas by which the desire for independence from Europe justifies itself and the implementation of these ideas on American soil, yet it also questions the composition of a truly American population and the implications and, more importantly, even the possibility, of successfully transplanting such ideas and populations to American soil and minds. (Wasserman 201)

This "European complex of ideas" refers to Enlightenment values of reason and rationality. It is evident through Brown's novel that he is concerned about the outcome of putting such values into practice, especially with the Americans' desire to start with a clean slate after the overthrow of the political ideology of the English government. As Eric Savoy maintains in his article, "The Rise of American Gothic," *Wieland* "gestures frequently toward pervasive anxieties about the

individual's capacity for common sense and self-control within the unstable social order of the new American republic" (Savoy). In the novel, it becomes evident that Brown is at the same time supportive of the Americans' move away from the strictures of the British government, and wary about "the unstable social order of the new American republic," proposing that institutional structures are still necessary to maintain order in the new democratic government.

Writing his novel during a time when the influence of the English School of Terror was at its peak in America, Brown uses its technique of invoking "the incomprehensible and marvelous in order to stimulate interest" (Wiley 96). The mysterious and appalling events in the novel not only grab the reader's attention, but also dramatize societal anxieties such as those over foreign influences and otherness and the stability of the new republic. Although the supernatural in *Wieland* may appear to be external, like that of its English Gothic predecessors, since the male protagonist claims to hear superhuman voices that instruct him to commit horrifying deeds, it is ultimately attributed to internal factors – the protagonist's self-delusion. Thus, as characteristic of the American Gothic, *Wieland* posits a fear of the self, particularly a fear of what one may do when irrationally convicted of a certain way of thinking. In addition, the anxiety around the female body in the novel, an allegory for misgivings about the insulation of America from external threats, is taken up and made explicit by later American Gothic writers, such as Hawthorne and Poe, who also use the female body as a site to think about larger issues.

II. SCAPEGOATING THE OTHER IN *WIELAND*

Set in Philadelphia between the end of the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War, *Wieland* tells the story of the Wieland siblings, Clara and Theodore (known in the novel by his surname), who are descendants of German immigrants. While the Wieland siblings attempt to move away from their father's religiosity – his German-origin pietism – towards rationality, an

ideal upheld by Enlightenment thought, the failure of their endeavor is brought to light with the arrival of Carwin, an Englishman who has adopted Spanish religion and culture. Thinking about the Wieland siblings' move to escape their father's radical ideology as an allegory for the Americans' desire to break away from the political ideology of the paternal English government, I argue that Brown dramatizes the dangers of forming a new ideology after escaping from another. Because the story is set during a time when there was a great influx of immigrants, a theme that arises throughout the novel is the issue of otherness. While the father is viewed as other in the sense that the siblings reject his religious beliefs and try instead to adopt reason and common sense, Carwin also represents otherness in that he is a foreigner who intrudes on the Wielands' isolated retreat. That Clara tries to blame Carwin for the ruination of their lives can also be read in relation to how Americans tried to bolster the new republic by casting foreigners, or others, as a threat. The failure of the Wielands' project to insulate themselves from otherness criticizes hopes about creating an American national identity within a vacuum.

In the novel, Brown criticizes the otherness of German-origin pietism through the consequences of the Wielands' inability to escape from it. Although not as intensely religious as her brother, Clara, who takes great pride in the precision of her own judgment and common sense, nevertheless derives pleasure from thinking about the possibility of the existence of other "conscious beings" that surpass humans in their intellect (*Wieland* 52). This superstition is one of the factors that obstruct her common sense. After her first encounter with what she believes to be a divine being, Clara justifies her superstition by making a distinction between "apparitions and enchantments," which she associates with "ignorance and folly," and the "super-human," "sensible and intelligent existence" that she believes intervened to save her from what she believes to be murderers in her closet (*Wieland* 52). In this distinction, she sets up a hierarchy in

which the “airy minister” is the “superior power” because its “modes of activity and information surpass our own,” while the power that “apparitions and enchantments” have over people is inferior because belief in them arises from “ignorance and folly.” She emphasizes the superiority of the “airy minister” not only to “apparitions and enchantments,” but also to humans throughout the two paragraphs through words such as “super-human” and “surpass” in addition to the multiple uses of the word “superior.” The adjective “airy” also indicates loftiness, reinforcing the higher position of this superior being in relation to humans. Her exaltation of the superior being is also illustrated through the way in which she describes her reaction to thinking about the “superior beings”: “My heart was scarcely large enough to give admittance to so swelling a thought” (*Wieland* 52). The fact that her heart “was scarcely large enough” implies that humans are too small to understand the workings of higher beings.

It is evident that Clara is intent upon finding cause to believe that she has interacted with beings of such great power and high position. She uses phrases such as “unquestionably” and “scarcely can be denied” to reassure herself that her conjectures are well founded, instead of stemming from the ignorance that causes others to believe in “apparitions and enchantments” (*Wieland* 52). However, subtleties in the text suggest her self-delusion. For example, there is an interesting parallel between “that terror which is pleasing” and an “awe, the sweetest and most solemn” in the consecutive paragraphs (*Wieland* 52). Although Clara claims that she “was a stranger even to that terror which is pleasing,” she later states, “An awe, the sweetest, and most solemn that imagination can conceive, pervaded my whole frame” (*Wieland* 52). The awe that she experiences is, by definition, a mix of fear, or terror, and reverential respect, and is thus actually similar to the feeling of terror that she rejects. Therefore, the fact that she admits experiencing such awe may reveal that she is also a victim of the ignorance that she associates

with the “terror which is pleasing.” In fact, Clara discovers later that she is mistaken in her conjectures about the “airy minister” that inspires this awe when it is revealed that the supernatural voice that warns her about her endangerment was actually produced by Carwin.

Clara experiences a similar self-deception later when she meets Carwin. When she first lays eyes on Carwin, she describes him in abject terms. For example, though his shoulders are “broad and square,” the other parts of his body are “sunken,” “drooping,” and lanky, rendering his appearance awkward and disproportional (*Wieland* 57). This leads to Clara’s impression of him as lacking “that gracefulness and ease which distinguish a person with certain advantages of education from a clown” (*Wieland* 57). Because it is later revealed that Carwin is not only English, but has also assimilated Spanish culture by adopting its dress, language and customs, during his travels in Spain, the unfavorable light in which Clara first sees Carwin may be attributed to his foreignness. Indeed, Carwin’s Spanish assimilation is described as explicit in its manifestation:

His garb, aspect, and deportment, were wholly Spanish. A residence of three years in the country, indefatigable attention to the language, and a studious conformity with the customs of the people, had made him indistinguishable from a native... (*Wieland* 77)

Carwin’s odd embodiment of foreignness causes him to appear like a “rustic” “clown” to Clara (*Wieland* 57). In her book, *Romances of the Republic: Women, the Family, and Violence in the Literature of the Early American Nation*, Shirley Samuels notes the anti-alien sentiment in early America that gave rise to the Alien and Sedition Acts, which were passed the same year that *Wieland* was published; Samuels maintains that the acts were “a major late-eighteenth-century American attempt to maintain national insularity by promoting a sense of threat” (Samuel 44). The need to maintain a distinction between Americans and alien others in order to “maintain

national insularity” is arguably reflected in the way that Clara distinguishes between herself, “a person with certain advantages of education,” from Carwin the “clown”.

Nevertheless, despite this attempt to draw a rigid line between self and other, Clara reverses her opinions about Carwin when she is able to examine his features more closely – although she had first called him a “clown,” she then asserts that his features “served to betoken a mind of the highest order” (*Wieland* 61). She is particularly entranced by his eyes, which she describes as “lustrously black, and possessing, in the midst of haggardness, a radiance inexpressibly serene and potent” (*Wieland* 61). Additionally, it is significant that she describes beholding Carwin’s face as “among the most extraordinary incidents of [her] life” because it recalls how she characterizes her first encounter with the supernatural voice: “this incident was different from any that I had ever before known” (*Wieland* 61, 52). The similarity of these statements and Clara’s fascination with superior “conscious beings, beside ourselves” suggest that, enchanted by Carwin’s visage, Clara imposes on Carwin’s features what she wants to see in them. Unable to explain her sudden attraction to an alien, she tries to account for her enchantment by attributing it to super-human qualities in Carwin, such as “a radiance inexpressibly serene and potent,” likening him to the otherworldly, “sensible and intelligent” beings (*Wieland* 52). This association between Carwin’s character and the supernatural is further supported by the fact that the thought of the existence of “superior beings” and the contemplation of Carwin’s face have a similar overwhelming effect upon Clara: just as “an awe [of superior beings], the sweetest and most solemn that imagination can conceive, pervaded [her] whole frame,” Carwin’s face, “seen for a moment, continued for hours to occupy [her] fancy, to the exclusion of almost every other image” (*Wieland* 52, 61).

However, readers discover that Carwin is not exactly a man with “a mind of the highest order” when he reveals his penchant for trickery and deceit. As a result, the fact that Clara’s conjectures about both the voice she hears and Carwin’s character are mistaken implies that her desire to see evidence of divine power on earth clouds her judgment and reasoning. According to Lulu Rumsey Wiley in her book, *The Sources and Influence of the Novels of Charles Brockden Brown*, Clara’s delusion is an example of Brown’s effort to “expose the direful consequences resulting from the life of a man [Wieland] dominated to an inordinate degree by pious enthusiasm and some kind of superstition or self-delusion” (Wiley 103). Although to a lesser degree than her brother, Clara also falls prey to a kind of “superstition or self-delusion” as a result of her desire to associate herself with higher beings (*Wieland* 52). Samuels attributes this self-delusion to the Wielands’ lack of a formal education as a result of growing up without their parents. In the story, Clara recounts that her and her brother “were saved from the corruption and tyranny of colleges and boarding-schools” (*Wieland* 22). In addition, she states in regards to their spiritual upbringing, “Our education had been modeled by no religious standard. We were left to the guidance of our own understanding, and the casual impressions which society might make upon us” (*Wieland* 24). Samuels states that this sort of education is “in the style of the Enlightenment,” positing that “[o]ne purpose of the novel might be to question how successfully this style functions on American soil” (Samuels 48). The negative consequences in the novel of relying on “casual impressions” instead of on institutionalized education, then, indicate that Enlightenment-style education is nonviable and that education requires structure. Samuels asserts that the Wielands’ detrimental self-delusion speaks to larger contemporary anxieties about the structure of the American government by proposing the notion that “[w]ithout the formal institutions of education, religion, ‘benevolent societies,’ orphanages, or prisons, the new

republic would be susceptible to the chaos unleashed within the Wieland family” (Samuels 48). Clara’s rejection of “the corruption and tyranny of colleges and boarding-schools” is similar to the attitude that Americans held towards the patriarchal English government. However, in the new republic, such sentiments cannot be sustained if Americans are to build their own successful government. Instead, institutions are necessary to prevent chaos and give structure to the new republic. Thus, in the novel, Clara’s judgment suffers as a result of her unstructured education.

The Wieland siblings’ failed project of adopting and exercising the Enlightenment values of reason and common sense is particularly explicit in Clara’s brother, Wieland’s, case since he is compelled by his radical religious beliefs to murder his family. Unable to account for her brother’s horrific actions, Clara tries to blame Carwin for tricking her brother into believing that he was hearing God’s voice. However, as much as Clara wants to accuse Carwin for the tragedy, it actually is Wieland’s own pious delusions that are behind the atrocious acts. Similarly, Carwin is falsely blamed for arousing Clara’s passions and threatening her chastity. However, it is clear that Clara had been a victim of her passions before Carwin’s arrival in the sense that her feelings for Pleyel, a family friend, obscure her reason. She admits that when she is concerned about Pleyel’s safety, she is “tormented by phantoms of [her] own creation” (*Wieland* 95). She explains, “It was not always thus. I can ascertain the date when my mind became the victim of this imbecility; perhaps it was coeval with the inroad of a fatal passion” (*Wieland* 95). Nonetheless, although it is only Clara’s “fatal passion” for Pleyel that induces her to become a “victim of (...) imbecility,” Pleyel puts the blame on Carwin, believing that Carwin inspires an unhealthy passion in Clara that causes her to disregard her female honor and to take part in immoral sexual behavior. Once having viewed Clara as the ideal woman – “a being, after whom

sages may model their transcendent intelligence, and painters, their ideal beauty” – Pleyel is overcome with rage and disgust when he is deceived into thinking that she has an immoral relationship with Carwin, describing her voice as “more hideous than the shrieks of owls” (*Wieland* 152). Thus, there is an attempt throughout the book to blame Carwin, the intruder, for internal faults and the failure to live up to ideals.

The notion of protecting Clara’s body from the intrusion of an alien brings to mind Samuels’ discussion in her book about how pictorial representations of America as female figures “conflate national identities with women’s bodies” (Samuels 5). She continues, “These illustrations of the early American nation not only displace political violence onto sexual violence; they also code sexual violence in a way that both covers for the political/sexual threat and emphasizes its terrors” (Samuels 7). If Clara’s body is used to represent the American body, it is significant that Pleyel is fearful that Carwin, the foreigner, may be threatening Clara’s chastity, the ideal of femininity. Pleyel’s great anxiety over Clara’s relationship to Carwin, similar to the feeling of unsettlement that Clara experiences when she first sees Carwin, may also speak to the sentiment behind the Alien and Sedition Acts. Seen in this light, Carwin’s sexual threat represents the political threat that Americans believed foreigners posed to the ideals of the new republic. However, the fact that Pleyel’s accusations about Clara and Carwin’s relationship are mistaken suggests the fallibility not only of the American conception that aliens were a danger to the nation, but also of the act of displacing internal problems onto external actors. Samuels asserts:

Published while the fear of contagion by the alien was at its height, the novel both blames Carwin for introducing sexuality, disorder, and violence into the *Wieland* family, and explains that introduction as nothing more than an enhancement of sexual and familial

tensions already present. (...) Introduced as an external threat, the alien, Carwin, instead stands (in) for an internal one, the infidelity of religious and institutional beliefs that the novel at first appeared to celebrate. (Samuels 49)

Indeed, “the infidelity of religious and institutional beliefs,” which refer to the Wielands’ turn away from their father’s religious beliefs and their lack of a formal education, actually serve to encourage the siblings’ superstitions and self-delusions about their relationship with supernatural beings. Carwin’s actions only reveal and enhance the fallibility of the Wielands’ judgment. Although Pleyel, and especially Clara, want to place the blame on Carwin, it is ultimately their own mistaken beliefs that blind them to reality.

It is established early in the novel that Clara and Wieland attempt to replace their father’s German religious fanaticism with reason, transforming their father’s temple from its “ancient use” as a place of worship into a place of education and intellectual discussions. However, they ultimately fail to escape their father’s radical religious beliefs, and as a result, lose sight of reason at one point or another during the novel. Although the Wielands’ troubles appear to be instigated by Carwin’s arrival, the narrative suggests that it is the deleterious effects of being insulated from the rest of society and being “left to the guidance of [their] own understanding” in the absence of a formal education that plant the seeds for the chaos that ruins their lives. Samuels notes:

In *Wieland*, the family is initially presented as a retreat, or “sweet and tranquil asylum” (W, 193), from the intrusions of the outside world, but the distinction between home and world, radically personified by the figure of the intruding Carwin, gets blurred as the destruction seen to lurk without is discovered within. (Samuels 56)

As Samuels maintains, the consequences of the lack of structure in the Wielands' upbringing and their isolation from the rest of the community are an allegory for the dangers that threaten the new nation, and caution how America's leaders go about building the new republic. Particularly the story of Clara's character tempers American confidence in their own beliefs and ideals about democracy. As Wasserman states, although Clara "characterizes herself as rational and strong, she shows unaccountable failures of acuity and understanding" (Wasserman 206-7). Brown not only uses this contradiction as a "counter-narrative to any optimistic and coherent accounts of its beginnings that the nation craved and strove to produce," as Wasserman proposes, but he also cautions against displacing the failure to produce such "optimistic and coherent accounts" onto aliens, since doing so hides internal problems (Wasserman 208). The fact that at the end of *Wieland*, both Clara and her brother are unable to continue living in America (Clara leaves Philadelphia to live in France after her brother's suicide), signifies the difficulty and almost impossibility of smoothly adjusting to the uncertain social and cultural structure of a newly founded nation. Thus, the novel ultimately conveys a dark message about the American nation-building project and the success of democracy.

III. MANIFESTATIONS OF THE SUPERNATURAL IN FEMALE BODIES

Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, both born at the beginning of the nineteenth century, were influenced by Brown's works. They take up Brown's project of exploring identity construction, but as opposed to overtly discussing issues American national identity, Hawthorne and Poe's short stories, "The Birth-mark" and "Ligeia" respectively, examine more specifically the construction of middle-class gender identity. In addition, while the supernatural in *Wieland* is revealed to be only a projection of the male protagonist's imagination as a result of his internal self-delusions, Hawthorne and Poe make the supernatural more explicit in their stories. Thinking

about femininity and masculinity as culturally produced categories, Hawthorne and Poe dramatize the ways in which men imposed their ideas of femininity onto women through illustrating the male protagonists' attempt to control the supernatural force embodied by their wives. Interestingly, while "The Birth-mark" is concerned with controlling the female body, "Ligeia" portrays a man's struggle to possess the female mind.

A. "THE BIRTH-MARK": A CRIMSON STAIN UPON THE SNOW

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birth-mark" is a more specific example of the way in which anxieties and fears, which are represented by the supernatural, are projected onto a female figure in the American Gothic. The story demonstrates the way in which men not only could control their own anxieties about their power and authority by controlling the female body, but could also justify their power over women by engendering a sense of self-disgust and self-fear in the women.

The narrative opens with Aylmer, "a man of science," and his marriage to his wife Georgiana ("The Birth-mark" 418). Shortly after, Aylmer points out the peculiar birth-mark on Georgiana's face, after which a detailed description of the mark is provided:

in the centre of Georgiana's left cheek, there was a singular mark, deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face. In the usual state of her complexion, - a healthy, though delicate bloom, - the mark wore a tint of deeper crimson, which imperfectly defined its shape amid the surrounding rosiness. When she blushed, it gradually became more indistinct, and finally vanished amid the triumphant rush of blood, that bathed the whole cheek with its brilliant glow. But, if any shifting emotion caused her to turn pale, there was the mark again, a crimson stain upon the snow, in what Aylmer sometimes deemed an almost fearful distinctness. ("The Birth-mark" 419)

That the birth-mark is “deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face” indicates that far from being a superficial mark, it is intertwined with Georgiana’s very “substance,” suggesting that it has a certain inextricability. In fact, it is revealed at the end of the story that it was “the bond by which an angelic spirit kept itself in union with a mortal frame” (“The Birth-mark” 429). The fact that the birth-mark serves as a bond for “an angelic spirit” not only marks it as something supernatural, but also suggests that it is what ties Georgiana’s soul to her “mortal frame.” As a result, when it is removed, the “mortal frame” perishes because it cannot exist without the bond. In addition, it is significant that the mark is red, relating it to the color of blood, which, in turn, is a sign of life. This reinforces the notion that the mark is tied to Georgiana’s life since “a healthy, though delicate bloom” indicates a healthy, living body. Indeed, it is “amid the triumphant rush of blood” that the mark blends into the surrounding redness of Georgiana’s face when she blushes, in contrast to the color of a pale, bloodless corpse. The birth-mark’s inextricability and its connection to life all point to the notion that it is an essential part of Georgiana.

The color red can also represent passion, thereby juxtaposing sexuality with health and life. This is supported by the fact that Georgiana’s blush is described as a “delicate bloom,” because “bloom” evokes the idea of ripening, which in turn could allude to sexual ripening, or maturity. “Delicate,” a very feminine term used to modify bloom, then points to a specifically feminine sexuality. Aylmer sees the red birth-mark, “this one defect [that grows] more and more intolerable,” as “the symbol of his wife’s liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death” (“The Birth-mark” 419, 420). The image of “a crimson stain upon the snow” reflects Aylmer’s thought of his otherwise perfect wife tainted by faults, since the word “stain” connotes something negative and undesirable that pollutes the white of the snow, a symbol of purity. Moreover, because he is

Georgiana's husband, her sexuality also implicates him. In her book, *The Animal Within: Masculinity and the Gothic*, Cyndy Hendershot discusses Aylmer's ambiguous feelings toward his wife:

As nineteenth-century male subject, Aylmer needs Georgiana in order to support his identity by serving as the feminine ideal who sustains him; as modern scientist, Aylmer is threatened by Georgiana, who potentially may rob him of his chastity and drag him down with her female nature. Aylmer and Georgiana's marriage engages this contradiction present in nineteenth-century American society. While ideologically the middle-class woman is raised to the status of angel in the house, an increasingly essentialized notion of femininity within science reveals a gap in middle-class hegemony, as the female body becomes coded as irrational and sexual. (Hendershot 88)

Consequently, the birth-mark is so "fearful" to Aylmer not only because it reminds him of his failure to preserve the "feminine ideal" in his wife, but also because it is a sign to everyone else of both Georgiana's sexuality and his own sexuality. Such an association causes him to be "[dragged] (...) down with [Georgiana's] female nature," which is coded as "irrational and sexual." Aylmer is similar to Pygmalion, whom he compares himself to, not only in the sense that he is trying to "[create] female life as he would like it to be," but also in that he is also "revolted by the many faults which nature has implanted in the female sex" (Pfister 30). However, just as the birth-mark is intertwined with Georgiana's "substance," her sexuality is an inextricable part of Georgiana as it is of all humans, a notion that incessantly plagues Aylmer and eventually drives him to pursue the futile project of removing the mark.

As a sign of the “irrational and sexual” Georgiana’s birth-mark is particularly abhorrent to Aylmer because of his fixation with perfection. This is revealed in a passage in which Georgiana reflects on his character:

Her heart exulted, while it trembled, at his honorable love, so pure and lofty that it would accept nothing less than perfection, nor miserably make itself contented with an earthlier nature than he had dreamed of. She felt how much more precious was such a sentiment, than that meaner kind which would have borne with the imperfection for her sake, and have been guilty of treason to holy love, by degrading its perfect idea to the level of the actual. And, with her whole spirit, she prayed, that, for a single moment, she might satisfy his highest and deepest conception. Longer than one moment, she well knew, it could not be; for his spirit was ever on the march – ever ascending – and each instant required something that was beyond the scope of the instant before. (“The Birth-mark” 427-28)

In the passage, she uses many words that connote transcendence, such as “honorable,” “pure,” “lofty,” “perfection,” “holy,” “perfect,” “highest,” “ever ascending,” and “beyond,” emphasizing Aylmer’s overwhelming obsession with embodying the definition of these terms (“The Birth-mark” 427-28). It is significant that Georgiana states that had Aylmer – whose “honorable love [was] so pure and lofty that it would accept nothing less than perfection” – “borne with the imperfection” that is human sexuality, he would be “guilty of treason to holy love.” Hendershot maintains, “Marriage threatens the chastity necessary for him successfully to conceive an idea transmitted by the divine” (Hendershot 88). Because Aylmer views sexuality as antagonistic to his feminine ideal, his conception of “holy love” is one that is void of sex. The language of transcendence indicates that such a love would transcend human limits. Nevertheless, because

Aylmer's "spirit was ever on the march – ever ascending – and each instant required something that was beyond the scope of the instant before," he insists on achieving the humanly impossible by purging Georgiana of her sexuality.

In the same passage, the language of transcendence is contrasted with the phrases, "earthlier nature," "meaner kind," "imperfection," "guilty of treason," "degrading," and "level of the actual" ("The Birth-mark" 427). It is significant to note that many of these words are also used to characterize Aylmer's servant, Aminidab, who states, "If [Georgiana] were my wife, I'd never part with that birth-mark." ("The Birth-mark" 422) There is an explicit distinction made between Aylmer and Aminidab:

With his vast strength, his shaggy hair, his smoky aspect, and the indescribable earthiness that incrustated him, he seemed to represent man's physical nature; while Aylmer's slender figure, and pale, intellectual face, were not less apt a type of the spiritual element. ("The Birth-mark" 422)

The fact that Aminidab, a character "incrusted" with an "indescribable earthiness," more than accepts Georgiana's birth-mark seems to align the mark with "man's physical nature." This underscores the notion that sexuality is an inextricable part of human nature, and that Aylmer, whose "slender figure, and pale, intellectual face, were not less apt a type of the spiritual element," tries to surpass the bounds of humanity by endeavoring to remove Georgiana's birth-mark, a physical reminder of human nature. Joel Pfister notes importantly in his book, *The Production of Personal Life: Class, Gender and the Psychological in Hawthorne's Fiction*: "Georgiana exhibits on her face not God's hand, or Nature's hand, but 'Mother' Nature's hand" (Pfister 30). Pfister also points out that it is significant that Hawthorne chooses to call this sign of "Mother' Nature's hand" a birth-mark since it connects Mother Nature with the human mother.

Pfister brings up Susan Gubar's argument that in the act of "[creating] female life as he would like it to be," Pygmalion "has evaded the humiliation, shared by many men, of acknowledging that it is *he* who is really created out of and from the *female* body" (Pfister 30). Georgiana's birth-mark, then, as a sign of both Mother Nature and maternal creation, reminds Aylmer that "it is *he* who is really created out of and from the *female* body," and thus causes him great perturbation. Consequently, Aylmer "pits his signifying prowess against Mother's reproductive monopoly to demonstrate that, by effacing her trademark, he can remodel 'her masterpiece' (...) as *his own* 'sculptured woman'" (Pfister 31). Aylmer uses his "signifying prowess," his knowledge of science, in order to harness God's power of creation to oppose that of Mother Nature. His endeavor to be like God is evident in Georgiana's description of him in the passage. The passage states that Georgiana's "heart exulted, while it trembled" at Aylmer's intense desire for perfection, revealing that she idolizes Aylmer, because her view of him parallels how a Christian would regard God with both love and fear. Because Aylmer cannot actually use God's power, he uses science, a human tool, in his efforts to transcend the "level of the actual," which of course ultimately proves a failure.

The way in which Aylmer assumes the power of God in his endeavor to control Georgiana's sexuality provides evidence for Pfister's claim that "The Birth-mark" "is not just about sexuality but about power and the construction of stereotypes that produce female sexuality as a flaw" (Pfister 47). It is this constructed stereotype to which Aylmer conforms when he tries to fit Georgiana into the mold of a perfect woman. Another instance of this, aside from his effort to remove her birth-mark, can be seen in the way he seems to envelop Georgiana in a feminized space:

Aylmer had converted those smoky, dingy, sombre rooms, where he had spent his brightest years in recondite pursuits, into a series of beautiful apartments, not unfit to be the secluded abode of a lovely woman. The walls were hung with gorgeous curtains, which imparted the combination of grandeur and grace (...) and as they fell from the ceiling to the floor, their rich and ponderous folds, concealing all angles and straight lines, appeared to shut in the scene from infinite space. (“The Birth-mark” 422-423)

This room is a physical manifestation of Aylmer’s hope to “draw a magic circle round [Georgiana], within which no evil might intrude” so that he may protect his wife from sin (“The Birth-mark” 423). Aylmer’s hope to draw a “magic circle,” a markedly *supernatural* element, reinforces the notion of Aylmer’s attempt to transcend the natural, suggesting that his conception of female purity is then *unnatural*. His efforts to make Georgiana conform to this conception is reflected in the way he decorates the room. The exclusion of “all angles and straight lines” by the “rich and ponderous folds” of the curtains reflects not only a physically effeminate environment since it resembles female genital organs, but also perhaps the softness and pliability of female will. The fact that Aylmer has Georgiana “shut in” this boudoir “from infinite space,” while he works amid the “severe and homely simplicity of [his] apartment, with its naked walls and brick pavement,” reveals that Aylmer draws a fine distinction between masculinity and femininity (“The Birth-mark” 426).

In addition, his containment of Georgiana in the boudoir, as implied by the phrase “shut in,” illustrates the way in which Aylmer attempts to confine her within his definition of femininity, which ostensibly dictates that women should be safely enveloped in a feminine space away from men so that their sexual purity is maintained. He seems to succeed in his endeavor to impose his definition on Georgiana to some extent, since Georgiana gradually adopts his idea of

the perfect female. After being exposed several times to Aylmer's disgust at her birth-mark, Georgiana also begins to shudder at the sight of it to the extent that "[n]ot even Aylmer now hated it so much as she" because it signifies her failure to be Aylmer's perfect woman ("The Birth-mark" 425). This demonstrates her internalization of Aylmer's conception of good and evil, which, in turn, develops into a fear of herself. The fact that Georgiana "[prays], that, for a single moment, she might satisfy his highest and deepest conception," reveals her hope to extricate this detested and inherent part of herself in order to conform to a male construction of femininity ("The Birth-mark" 427).

Aylmer's attempt to remove the "deeply interwoven" birth-mark from Georgiana's face suggests a desire to assert masculine power ("The Birth-mark" 419). The fact that Aylmer is a "man of science – an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy" is significant in that it connects his obsession with the effacement of the birth-mark with his desire for power ("The Birth-mark" 418). At the beginning of the novel, the narrator provides insight into Aylmer's background:

He had devoted himself (...) too unreservedly to scientific studies, ever to be weaned from them by any second passion. His love for his young wife might prove the stronger of the two; but it could only be by intertwining itself with his love of science, and uniting the strength of the latter to its own. ("The Birth-mark" 418)

This demonstrates that Aylmer's pursuits or passions are always tied to his "love of science," which, in this story, allows him to exercise a sort of supernatural power. For example, the narrative mentions a few of his scientific inventions that Georgiana describes as "magical," and that almost persuade her that "her husband possessed sway over the spiritual world" ("The Birth-mark" 423). Thus, Aylmer's project to remove the birth-mark is also largely driven by his desire

to prove his skills as a “man of science,” and to demonstrate that his projects and experiments can successfully equal the power of God. This is further supported by the fact that he endeavors to “redeem himself from materialism [or the use of human science] by his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite” (“The Birth-mark” 425). Moreover, because his love for Georgiana can only become stronger than his love of science by “intertwining itself with his love of science,” it is only through his incorporation of science into their lives that he can maintain his love for his wife by removing her birth-mark using scientific methods.

Aylmer is further spurred on in this endeavor by his past failures, which characterize a majority of his projects before the experiment on the birth-mark. This is revealed in his documentation of his previous experiments:

It was the sad confession, and continual exemplification, of the short-comings of the composite man – the spirit burthened with clay and working in matter – and of the despair that assails the higher nature, at finding itself so miserably thwarted by the earthly part. Perhaps every man of genius, in whatever sphere, might recognise the image of his own experience in Aylmer’s journal. (“The Birth-mark” 426)

Here, it is suggested that the “short-comings of the composite man – the spirit burthened with clay and working matter” which represent the limits of human capability – pose a source of anxiety for Aylmer in regards to his profession. Consequently, he projects his anxieties onto Georgiana, reframing the central issue as his wife’s sexuality, instead of his own incapacibilities. Furthermore, because his goal involves transcending the short-comings of human power, the success of the experiment would allow him to assume the power of God and overcome Mother Nature. Thus, “The Birth-mark” can be seen as a story about a man’s efforts to resolve his

anxieties about his professional skills and assert his power through the female body, something that men are more readily able to control and “fix,” as opposed to the limits of human capability.

Aylmer’s anxieties in “The Birth-mark” seem to represent general American anxieties about progress. Indeed, his spirit, described as “ever on the march – ever ascending – [so that] each instant required something that was beyond the scope of the instant before,” reflects the American obsession with progress and moving forward from its past (“The Birth-mark” 427-28). Additionally, Aylmer’s obsession with perfection reveals a desire to achieve that which only God is able to achieve. He then projects his fears about his own human sin and imperfections, which prevent him from transcending “the level of the actual,” onto his wife’s birth-mark, the removal of which would demonstrate his successful achievement of supernatural powers (“The Birth-mark” 427). The birth-mark is a supernatural element that represents Aylmer’s own fears that he attempts to combat through physically extricating it from Georgiana’s face. However, in the end, Georgiana’s death as a result of the experiment suggests the absurdity of the desire for incessant progress and transcendence. Furthermore, although similar to the supernatural forces in the English Gothic in that they exert ultimate power over the humans, here, the supernatural manifests within the body of a woman, rendering it an even more terrifying force since it is internal.

B. THE DIVINE ORBS OF “LIGEIA”

Similar to the male protagonist of Hawthorne’s “The Birth-mark,” Aylmer, who is fixated on proving himself as a scientist through controlling his wife’s body, the narrator in Poe’s short story, “Ligeia,” is also concerned with demonstrating his authority through his intellect – in this case, by conquering the mystery behind his wife’s eyes. As in “The Birth-mark,” the supernatural in Poe’s short story manifests in a female figure that is a source of both fascination

and fear. Through this ambiguity, Poe illustrates the anxiety around female figures that did not conform to nineteenth-century constructs of femininity.

In the story, the narrator is concerned with the obtainment of knowledge, which is discussed in connection with his wife, Ligeia, who is already dead at the beginning of the story. In his retrospective reflection on his wife, he talks about knowledge both when he expresses a desire to understand the “unfathomable meaning” of Ligeia’s eyes, and when he admires the greatness of Ligeia’s knowledge (“Ligeia” 646). It is important to note that it is only after her death that the narrator reflects on Ligeia’s “immense” knowledge and “infinite supremacy,” to which he resigned himself with “childlike confidence” (“Ligeia” 647). He states, “How singularly, how thrillingly, this one point in the nature of my wife has forced itself, at this late period, only, upon my attention!” (“Ligeia” 647) This suggests that the narrator could not explicitly admit that he had a “childlike” dependency on a woman while she was still alive because it would undermine his power and authority. In his article, “Poe and Nineteenth-Century Gender Constructions,” Leland S. Person argues:

Whereas True Women “were warned not to let their literary or intellectual pursuits take them away from God” (...) Ligeia possesses “immense” learning (...) Ligeia reverses the conventional power imbalance between husband and wife. Whereas a True Woman was supposed to be submissive and “completely dependent” upon her husband – “an empty vessel, without legal or emotional existence of her own” (...) – Ligeia remands the narrator to a feminine place within the domestic sphere. (Person 135)

Thus, the reason the narrator cannot speak of Ligeia’s superior knowledge until after she is dead is that, while living, “this one point in the nature of [his] wife” contributed to “[reversing] the conventional power imbalance between husband and wife,” and “[remanding] the narrator to a

feminine place within the domestic sphere.” This can be read as a subversion of the separate spheres ideology that drew a distinction between male and female roles. Instead of being “submissive and ‘completely dependent’ on her husband,” Ligeia is the one who guides the “childlike” narrator “through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation” (“Ligeia” 647). An acknowledgment of this reversed dependency would threaten the narrator’s authority.

Person continues:

Poe’s tales about women reveal (...) a sexual politics that may be mapped upon the nineteenth-century separate spheres model of gender differences. The death of a beautiful woman, Poe seemed to recognize, is not only the most poetical topic in the world; it is a logical outcome of woman’s separation and idealization. The Truest Woman, in effect, is a dead woman – an object, not a subject. (Person 138)

Because Ligeia was not a “True Woman” in life and could not be confined to her rightful role in the domestic sphere, it is only when she dies that she becomes a “True Woman” – “an object, not a subject.” It is only then that the narrator is able to admire her and discuss her as a “poetical topic.” To be sure, the narrator’s description of her focuses largely on her physical attributes, especially her eyes. Furthermore, like an object, she seems to be removed from a social and historical context since the narrator claims that he cannot “remember how, when, or even precisely where [he] first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia” and has “*never known* the paternal name” of Ligeia (“Ligeia” 644). Her name is only able to “bring before [his] eyes in fancy the image of her who is no more” (“Ligeia” 644). In discussing the narrator’s strange forgetfulness Elisabete Lopes calls attention to Freud’s theory about the “uncanny” in her article, “Unburying the Wife: A Reflection Upon the Female Uncanny in Poe’s ‘Ligeia’”:

Freud remarks that the “uncanny element is nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed.” In fact, this uncanny atmosphere can be translated into what Maurice Lévy calls the “anxieties of the threshold,” meaning that the uncanny always leads us to an assessment of boundaries and limits within the narrative. In this respect, Fred Botting considers the uncanny to be “a disruptive return of archaic desires and fears [that] disturbs the familiar, homely and secure sense of reality and normality,” thereby rendering “all boundaries uncertain (...) (Lopes 40)

The “uncanny element” is what the narrator represses about Ligeia’s past in order to distance the danger that her resistance of True Womanhood poses to him. However, the return of the repressed, or the “disruptive return of archaic desires and fears [that] disturbs the familiar, homely and secure sense of reality and normality,” plagues the narrator and manifests in his anxiety about Ligeia’s superior intellect and her disruption of the boundary between male and female spheres. These “anxieties of the threshold” are especially great for the narrator because they “[render] all boundaries uncertain” so that the possibility of disturbance of the “familiar, homely and secure sense reality” is not limited to separate spheres but is extended to other societal norms, such as male authority.

Even when he reflects on Ligeia after her death, the narrator tries to render Ligeia’s threat less potent by constituting her as a True Woman through his language. In particular, he associates her with the ethereal and otherworldly, thereby rendering her “an empty vessel, without legal or emotional existence of her own” because she is then removed from a grounded existence on earth (Person 135). This is especially evident in his description of her eyes, which he glorifies and associates with the spiritual/heavenly: “those divine orbs! they became to me

twin stars of Leda” (“Ligeia” 646). In addition to her eyes becoming “twin stars of Leda” to the narrator, their association with the celestial is supported by the fact that one of the definitions of “divine” is “partaking of the nature of God; characteristic of or consonant to deity; godlike; heavenly, celestial,” and that one definition of “orb” is “a celestial object” (*OED*). Thus, the narrator implies that Ligeia’s eyes possess a sort of otherworldliness. The narrator’s association of Ligeia with heavenly bodies can also be seen in the fact that he “[resigns himself], with a childlike confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation” (“Ligeia” 647). This indicates that Ligeia is an expert on things that transcend physical matter or the laws of nature, which also points to the way in which the narrator views her as transcendent and otherworldly. This belief is explicitly expressed when the narrator claims that “Ligeia’s beauty passed into [his] spirit, there dwelling as in a shrine,” giving the sense that the narrator worships Ligeia’s beauty (“Ligeia” 646).

Moreover, in addition to rendering Ligeia less of a threat by removing her from the world and casting her as otherworldly, the narrator also endeavors to assert his own authority and intellect. As Person points out, even when the narrator is praising Ligeia’s qualities, he seems to be more intent on articulating his own self-reflection:

Even though the narrator emphasizes his fascination with the “expression” of her eyes, he seems far more interested, narcissistically, in the feelings and thoughts they cause in him than he does in anything they might truly express about her. In a lengthy paragraph he describes the “circle of analogies” – a list of the many other “existences in the material world” that have produced the same feeling as Ligeia’s eyes. The list, (...) a Hallmark card list of verse ideas. This “circle of analogies,” moreover, does not express Ligeia’s subjectivity; the expression of her eyes instead is made equivalent to the feelings and

meaning evoked in the narrator. Ligeia becomes a kind of hypertext – with each body part (and especially her eyes) linked to some classical or mythological site (Person 145)

If the narrator’s attempt to describe the feeling he derives from seeing the expression of Ligeia’s eyes results in a “Hallmark card list of verse ideas” and if “Ligeia becomes a kind of hypertext – with each body part (...) linked to some classical or mythological site,” then it seems that the narrator is trying to “narcissistically” demonstrate the extent of his own knowledge through his reflection on Ligeia. Seen in this light, his desire to understand the meaning behind Ligeia’s eyes could stem from a need to prove his own intellect, which had been overshadowed by Ligeia while she was still alive. Indeed, the narrator is strangely fixated on her eyes. He repeatedly describes the incomprehensibility of the “secret of their expression,” using words such as “vast,” “profound,” and “unfathomable” to describe the “meaning of their glance,” and compares the profoundness of her eyes to “the well of Democritus” (“Ligeia” 646). The fact that the “full knowledge of the secret of [the] expression” of Ligeia’s eyes is inaccessible to the narrator reinforces the inferiority of his intelligence in comparison to that of Ligeia and is in line with his resignation with a “childlike confidence” to Ligeia’s “infinite supremacy” in knowledge while she was alive (“Ligeia” 646, 647). The narrator’s urge to obtain this knowledge is illustrated through the multiple interjections that he makes throughout his scrutiny of Ligeia’s eyes.

“[P]ossessed with a passion to discover” the secret behind her eyes, he asks with a certain vehemence, “What *was* it?” (“Ligeia” 646) In fact, his “passion to discover” is so strong that it occupies not only his mind, but also his soul: “Not for a moment was the unfathomable meaning of their glance, by day or by night, absent from my soul” (“Ligeia” 646). His urgency is accounted for by the notion that conquering this “unfathomable meaning” would validate the astuteness of the narrator’s intellect and thus reinstate his authority.

Another reason the narrator is so obsessed with Ligeia's eyes is that he seems to believe that the secret to her unusual willpower lies within them. He asserts that the sentiment that her eyes inspire in him is the same as the one he feels when he thinks about a quote from religious philosopher Joseph Glanvill: "And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigour? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will" ("Ligeia" 646). It is clear that the narrator is preoccupied with this conception of the will not only because this quote appears before the start of the narrative and is mentioned twice within the story by the narrator, but also because he describes several times his awe of Ligeia's unique force of will, which stems from her passionate nature. He states that he sees "some remote connexion between this passage (...) and a portion of the character of Ligeia," that is, her volition:

An *intensity* in thought, action, or speech was possibly, in her, a result, or at least an index, of that gigantic volition (...) Of all women whom I have ever known, she, the outwardly calm, the ever placid Ligeia, was the most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion. And of such passion I could form no estimate, save by the miraculous expansion of those eyes which at once so delighted and appalled me, by the almost magical melody, modulation, distinctness and placidity of her very low voice, and by the fierce energy (...) of the words which she uttered. ("Ligeia" 647)

The fact that the narrator can measure Ligeia's "stern passion" only by "the miraculous expansion of those eyes" supports the notion that solving the mystery behind Ligeia's eyes would mean obtaining the secret to her "gigantic volition." Because, according to the Glanvill passage, "Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the

weakness of his feeble will,” Ligeia is able to conquer death because of her strong will. One of the narrator’s anxieties, then, is that if he himself is unable to conquer death, it will be evident that he succumbed to death “through the weakness of his feeble will,” and that he is, as a result, inferior to his wife. This is troubling for the narrator because, like Ligeia’s superior intellect, the strength of her will has the effect of “[reversing] the conventional power imbalance between husband and wife” (Person 135). That the description of Ligeia’s “very low voice” gives her a certain masculine quality further supports the notion that her strong passion goes against societal expectations of female nature.

It is significant that the narrator admits that he is both “delighted and appalled” by the manifestation of Ligeia’s passion in her eyes because he vacillates between the two sentiments throughout the story. For example, he still longs for Ligeia despite her unfeminine qualities and the anxiety that she inspires in him. He states, “She died – and I, crushed into the very dust with sorrow” (“Ligeia” 648). He even admits, “Without Ligeia I was but a child groping benighted” (“Ligeia” 647). Even when he finds a new wife, “the fair-haired and blue-eyed lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine” – essentially Ligeia’s foil – he is unsatisfied (“Ligeia” 649). More than unsatisfied, in fact, he asserts:

I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man. My memory flew back, (oh, with what intensity of regret!) to Ligeia, the beloved, the beautiful, the entombed. I revelled in recollections of her purity, of her wisdom, of her lofty, her ethereal nature, of her passionate, her idolatrous love. (“Ligeia” 650)

The fact that the narrator loathes Rowena with such an intense hatred is almost startling since he gives little explanation for this hatred except for his comparison of Rowena with Ligeia. Here, again, Ligeia is portrayed as the antithesis of the “True Woman” that Person describes as the

submissive, conventional nineteenth-century wife – instead of dedicating herself to God, she is “passionate,” possesses an “idolatrous love” for her husband, and displays a “more than womanly abandonment to (...) love” (“Ligeia” 648). Meanwhile, although the narrator says little about Rowena’s qualities, it is clear that she is the opposite of Ligeia – that is, an actual, earthly embodiment of the “True Woman.” If Ligeia had a “lofty” and “ethereal nature,” then the narrator must have seen Rowena as comparatively mundane and inferior, resulting in his frustration. Person draws attention to another significant contrast between the two women when he discusses the fact that Ligeia takes over Rowena’s body at the end of the story:

Ligeia is notable for her force of will and, arguably, her ability to overcome death and the narrator’s murderous designs. She wills herself back to life - significantly, by displacing the much more conventional Rowena, whose utter passivity fulfills a common nineteenth-century stereotype of “invalid” womanhood. (Person 136)

This contrast illustrates that Rowena is weak in comparison to Ligeia because she does not have the willpower to resist death as Ligeia does in her ability to ultimately overcome the “dark shadow” (“Ligeia 648). I argue that the narrator shuns Rowena for her “utter passivity” and “‘invalid’ womanhood” because she does not provide the answer to the mystery behind Ligeia’s “force of will.” The narrator’s hatred of Rowena may also be due to the fact that Rowena passivity reminds the narrator of his own feeble will, as supported by critic J. Gerald Kennedy’s argument that the “pattern of violence against women throughout Poe’s fiction repeatedly betrays the male protagonist’s outrage at his own helplessness and insufficiency” (Peeples 221). Jack and June Davis propose in their article, “Poe’s Ethereal Ligeia,” that because the narrator desperately wants to escape death, evident from his obsession with the Glanvill quote, he needs to obtain this information from Ligeia – whose potential to conquer death is evinced by the “fierceness of

resistance with which [she] wrestled with the dark shadow” – as opposed to the weak Rowena (“Ligeia” 648). The Davis article posits, “[Ligeia’s] encounter with death should verify whether she has sufficient will to conquer death and return with the forbidden knowledge” (Davis 173). I maintain, alternatively, that as opposed to a fear of death, the narrator feels threatened by the strength of Ligeia’s will in contrast to his own because it undermines his power. As a result, he desperately wants to find the answer to Ligeia’s unusual volition so that he may be able to obtain it for himself and restore the power distribution between him and his wife.

Poe’s depiction of the conflict between the narrator’s adoration of Ligeia’s qualities and “infinite supremacy” and his anxiety about the threat of these qualities to his own authority seems to speak to emerging disruptions to traditional gender constructs with the rise of the “new woman,” who were breaking out of the mold of the “True Woman” (Person 136). Within the story, the issue at stake is whether men could have intelligent and willful women as wives without threatening their authority. The narrator clearly wants to possess Ligeia, not only enshrining her beauty within his heart, but also attempting to triumph over her intelligence by conquering the mystery behind her eyes. However, the ambiguous response that he exhibits at the end of the story when Ligeia comes back to life suggests that he struggles between wanting to possess Ligeia and the secret of her willpower, and being overwhelmed by her superior intellect and strong volition. Susan Sencindiver maintains in her article, “Sexing or Specularising the Doppelganger: A Recourse to Poe’s ‘Ligeia,’” “[Ligeia’s eyes] are ‘the source but also the failure for his analytic abilities’: they proffer the promise of acquiring a ‘wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden,’ and without their medial function he is unable to gain insight” (Sencindiver 69). Poe arguably meant this to be a reflection of society’s own ambiguous response to the emergence of such strong women who threatened male authority. Person supports

this notion in his claim that “Ligeia” “sets out the difficulties of understanding what man’s relation to the ‘new woman’ could be and uses the conventions of gothic horror to explore the woman’s new power” (Person 136). Similar to Hawthorne in his use of “gothic horror,” Poe projects male anxieties onto a supernatural female figure to think through larger anxieties about societal change in the developing nation that disrupted established boundaries. However, in contrast to “The Birth-mark,” in which the wife is victimized by the husband’s obsession with conquering the power of female creation through attempting to control the female body, Poe’s wife figure is even more frightening and troubling for the husband because her will and intellect ultimately triumph over his, “thereby rendering [all] boundaries uncertain” (Lopes 40).

CONCLUSION

Through my exploration of the English and American Gothic I have concluded that the supernatural in the English works are largely external because authors were writing under the long-established, dominating force of patriarchy. Consequently, the female characters in *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Italian* have limited agency within the system. In contrast, the Americans’ overthrow of the patriarchal English government opens up the possibility for radical changes and boundary disruptions. However, this also creates great anxiety because of the fear of the failure of the independent self. Both Brown and Hawthorne contemplate this anxiety about the shortcomings of individualism in their narratives. However, while Brown thinks broadly about the possible failure of democracy and the ability to define American identity in *Wieland*, Hawthorne presents Aylmer’s obsession with using science to successfully control the female body to address anxieties not only about progress and the boundary between science and religion, but also about gender. Pfister states:

The psychological imagining of the “self” that Hawthorne both produces and contests (...) [o]n the one hand, (...) promotes a more privatized sense of self integral to the middle-class ideology of individualism. On the other hand, it problematizes sentimental assumptions about the middle-class home as the source of emotional warmth and well-being. (Pfister 8)

Poe’s narrative, “Ligeia,” adds to this discourse on the ambiguous effects of individualism by calling forth the idea of the “uncanny,” which also “problematizes sentimental assumptions about the middle-class home as the source of emotional warmth and well-being” by disrupting familiar and established norms. “Ligeia” makes the anxiety about gender roles and gender boundaries in “The Birth-mark” more explicit through the portrayal of a husband who is both fascinated and appalled by his wife, whose defiance of gender norms threatens his authority and place in society. Although in different ways, Brown, Hawthorne, and Poe address in their narratives how the societal upheaval that came with the many changes that were taking place with the growth and expansion of the young republic caused the disturbance of different boundaries that had not been quite as possible under the well-established English patriarchy.

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