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From Deficient to Radical: Criticising the Female Guardian in the Gothic Parody

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The long eighteenth century in English literature must be regarded as a veritable treasure trove of literary developments – starting from the 'birth' of the novel in the first half of the century to the literary excesses of the Gothic novel in the 1790s via the melancholic Graveyard School of Poetry. This century, with its vibrant literature and, predominantly, its political upheavals, was one of the recurring areas of Christoph Houswitschka's interest, ranging from his in-depth study of the 1794 London Treason Trials (his habilitation monograph) to his varied contributions to the LAPASEC conferences on the eighteenth century (see Frédéric Ogée's contribution in this volume). My own PhD dissertation, which examines genre and reception in the Gothic parody using the example of Gothic parody heroines, then, also had Christoph repeatedly return to the long eighteenth century. It is thus only apt that my contribution in his memorial volume should cover a topic we often (and animatedly) discussed.

Gothic Heroines and Female Guardians

When the Gothic parody appeared as a literary reaction to the Gothic novel, it deviated quite significantly from the subtle subversion of its hypogenre, especially in its representation of the central female character. Instead of presenting self-reliant heroines in the female Gothic tradition who have to withstand anxiety and oppression, the parody heroine mostly becomes her own worst enemy by often engaging in novel-induced delusions that dictate their improper and partly potentially dangerous behaviour. In parading their deviant conduct, the parody heroines illustrate what contemporary critics of the novel feared reading would do particularly to women, whose reading habits allegedly differed significantly from men's because of their innate inability to judge based on reason (Williams 38). (Excessive) reading would only exacerbate this deficiency of women further because novels would "tend to give the mind a degree of weakness, which renders it unable to resist the slightest impulse of libidinous passions" and moreover "books . . . often pollute the heart in the recesses of the closet, inflame the passions at a distance from temptation, and teach all the malignity of vice in solitude", as Anglican priest Vicesimus Knox states (qtd. in Williams 32). In short, young women were believed to be voracious and even compulsive readers (34) whose reading habits caused their moral deterioration. Especially reading romances, in particular those romances we today call Gothic novels/romances, was regarded as detrimental and the Gothic novel was attacked for its "corruption of young female readers" (Münderlein 107). Seeing that the Gothic novel held the

highest market share of narrative literature in the 1790s and thus had indeed "flooded" the market, as contemporary critics of the novel claimed it had (see Miles), the alleged threat of reading women must have been ubiquitous – that is, ubiquitous in the well-off white middle to upper-middle class. Consequently, to avoid social repercussions caused by voracious women readers, a means of control was called for, anything that would alleviate the alleged radicalism of novel-reading women.

But did the novel really live up to its bad reputation and the demand for social control it entailed? Are the contents of a novel really as detrimental as James Fordyce claims in his sermon "On Female Virtue" (1766), addressing women reading virtually any other novels but those of Samuel Richardson:

> there seem to me to be very few, in the style of Novel, that you can read with advantage. – What shall we say of certain books, which we are assured (for we have not read them) are in their nature so shameful, in their tendency so pestiferous, and contain such rank treason against the royalty of Virtue, such horrible violation of all decorum, that she who can bear to peruse them must in her soul be a prostitute, let her reputation in life be what it will. (Fordyce 176)

In his attempt to protect women's virtue, Fordyce, besides failing to even read the material he tears apart with much vitriol, also misses the point. Not only Richardson's novels, but the sentimental novel in general propagated many of the ideas of the so called "Cult of True Womanhood" that was beginning to replace the socio-cultural image of women in the eighteenth century (see LeGates). Notably, "the image of the disorderly woman is replaced by the image of the chaste maiden and obedient wife, popularized in the sentimental novels particularly" (23). More so, as Marlene LeGates shows that especially "in the sentimental novels, the ideals of familial affection, marital fidelity, and female chastity were celebrated" (24). Novels, thus, were not the corrupters of innocent maidens Fordyce and others make them out to be (as has been shown throughout Gothic Studies countless times by now). The problem rather lay elsewhere, namely in the desire to exert control over women, which was heavily undermined by women's contribution to the literary market: "for women, to write and publish at all was by definition a transgressive and potentially liberating act, a penetration of the forbidden public sphere, and the virulence with which fiction was attacked as a corrupting 'female' genre is telling evidence of its disruptive potential" (Jones 12). The solution to this dilemma again – paradoxically – lay with the female writers: in order to avert criticism and pull the carpet from under the critics' attacks, (female) novelists would have to reject idle pursuits and instead produce texts that conformed to conduct book ideals to both invalidate social anxieties against reading women and counteract the presumed necessity for control.

Although women writers more often than not subtly circumvented such ideals (see Morrison's fascinating "How-To Guides for Romantic Women Writers"), they were not only not rejected outright (despite what Fordyce and Knox may want us to believe) by the literary scene of their own time. On the contrary, critic Vivien Jones even points out that contemporary appraisal did not simply denigrate women's literary pursuits (be that as readers or authors) but that women were particularly apt to chronicle certain human aspects in writing:

> Repeatedly in the texts [in Jones' anthology of eighteenth-century non-fiction texts] . . ., women's supposed special capacity for sympathy and feeling is assumed to make them peculiarly fitted for literary pursuits. Their influence on fiction particularly, both as readers and writers, has been seen as a major factor in the novel's emphasis on private experience generally, and, more specifically, in the development of the cult of sensibility. (Jones 11)

The Gothic novel, contemporaneous to the sentimental novel and thus very much influenced by this "cult of sensibility", shares these tendencies for overt virtue with the sentimental novel and presents female characters in keeping with conduct ideals – at least the Radcliffean School of Gothic or the 'female' Gothic novel. More so, the Radcliffean heroines also elude patriarchal control in that they are mostly orphaned and friendless and thus reliant on themselves. A case in point would be Ann Radcliffe's most famous heroine, Emily St Aubert in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, who "has internalized the sentimental morality of the novels of her age" (Durant 176). A young reader could thus do worse than partake in Emily's adventures in the Italian Apennines and imitate her flawless behaviour, or could she? While it is true that Emily can serve as a paragon for 'True Womanhood' and "genuinely believes in the codes of morality and decorum", she, too, nonetheless "successfully navigates and sometimes eludes" them (Rogers 543). In keeping with what Jones points out, Emily's transgression is subtle but it is there and Radcliffe is as much a part of women's subversion of the literary scene as Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Smith are, whose Gothic regularly "protested against arbitrary tyranny, particularly when its victims were members of her own sex" (Ellis 51)[1] – albeit more subtly so. Radcliffe's heroine(s) do just what Morrison claims real contemporary (literary) women did, namely: "while women recognized the duties and positioning traditionally dealt them, they subverted such constrictions" (Morrison 202) – and they got away with it. A Radcliffean heroine will always be rewarded with her hero by the end of the novel after she has successfully demonstrated her moral superiority over everyone else, withstood oppression and incarceration, and eventually fully matured from a girl into a woman. A Gothic heroine in Radcliffe's understanding is thus a young woman,

[1] For a fascinating (albeit brief) analysis of Charlotte Smith's subversive Gothic, see Ellis.

usually orphaned, who needs to assert herself in spite of adverse circumstances and – crucially so – without help or control.

Not so the Gothic parody heroine. Unlike her non-parodic sister, she is neither superior nor on her own; rather, she has read too many novels and is now unfit for polite society (although not a prostitute as Fordyce will have us believe) and thus in dire need of control. The heroines of the Gothic parody are quixotic figures or deluded reader figures, unable to demarcate reality from fiction (see Ivana; Münderlein; Ylivuori). They imitate their literary heroines literally instead of decoding their conventionalised behaviour and eventually end up becoming the laughing stock (or worse) of their own society. Reading novels in the Gothic parody, or rather reading wrongly or too much, is thus nearly as detrimental as the critics claim and the Gothic parody[2] thus makes it a point to re-educate the heroine.

The self-reliance of the heroine – that is, specifically the assumption of the capability of self-reliance in young women – in properly understanding and traversing the social and physical world must be regarded as one of the most fundamental differences between Gothic novel and Gothic parody. Gothic heroines are already paragons of propriety and can serve as models to be imitated for flawless behaviour, providing the reader is able to properly decode the (aesthetic) excesses of the Gothic mode and not merely imitate symbolic behaviour. This, however, is exactly what the parody heroines tend to do. They cultivate affected language, misunderstand the Gothic heroines' adventures as necessary steps on the way to matrimony instead of a metaphorical exertion of self-reliance under duress, dress inappropriately in alleged imitation of their literary role models, and – most prominently – they refute fatherly advice to their own disadvantage. To become normativised members of society, for women who would be under the control of male guardians, parody heroines need to be re-educated, usually by a male relative or love interest. Women play little to no part in this re-education. Like the Gothic heroine, the parody heroine usually has no mother to turn to as she is either orphaned or temporarily away from home; mothers tend to be conspicuously absent in both the Gothic novel and the Gothic parody. To make up for this (temporary) lack of a mother, both the Gothic novel and the Gothic parody often introduce a female character as a substitute, usually an older or even elderly relative or family retainer,[3] to chaperone the heroine. At least, that would be the general idea behind

[2] Specifically, one type of Gothic parodies, which I term "didactic" Gothic parodies (Münderlein 72-81), makes it a point to properly educate the heroine and to normativise her behaviour to conform to gendered social expectations.

[3] The Spanish and Portuguese word for female family retainer, "duenna", has sometimes been used to describe this type of character. However, in modern research the word is hardly to be found anymore. Hence, I will use the term "female guardian" – albeit not entirely legally

a female guardian figure. In both the Gothic novel and the Gothic parody, however, the female guardian fails in her task of chaperoning the heroine or serving as a proper psychological parent to them. Rather, female guardians tend to be egotistical, uninterested or simply incapable of fulfilling the role of motherly guardian and role model for proper adult femininity.

As such, the character of the inadequate female guardian becomes a potential locus for social criticism, but the targets of criticism differ between the Gothic novel and its derivative hypergenre, the parody. While, in the Gothic novel, criticising the adequacy of the female guardian leads to a valorisation of the heroine, the same method leads to a questioning of female homosociality in the Gothic parody. To show this, this chapter will now look briefly at the function of the deficient guardian in the Gothic novel before turning to case studies from three Gothic parodies. I claim that despite the similarity of the criticism directed at the female guardian, the Gothic novel retains its subtle subversion of patriarchal social order in continuing to defy the need for patriarchal control while the Gothic parody reinforces it and illustrates the detrimental effects of a lack of parental control.

In the Gothic novel, the absence of a mother figure and the deficiency of the usually elderly woman in her stead showcase the heroine's self-reliance and superiority as she prevails in the face of adversity even without a female guardian. Moreover, the dichotomy of the seemingly weak heroine who turns out to be the strongest and most durable character in the novel and the inadequate guardian who fails in her task of protecting and guiding her charge allows us to continue a subversive reading of the Gothic novel: because of the absence of any help or advice for young women outside their own families, the young women are forced to rely on their own strength and self-guidance. A notable example from the Gothic novel would be Mme Cheron (later Montoni) in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. She is the heroine Emily St Aubert's rather egocentric aunt and becomes her guardian upon the death of Emily's parents in the first third of the novel. She exhibits a clear dislike towards Emily from the beginning of their relationship until close to her death when she repents the destructive role she has played in Emily's life. Through her marriage to Montoni, Mme Cheron/Montoni links Montoni, the villain of the novel, to Emily's wealth, and he proceeds to imprison her and her aunt to make her sign over her fortune. Mme Montoni thus not only fails to protect Emily from her predatory husband, she also becomes his victim and pays the ultimate price for her deficient judgement in choosing a husband.

correct – to refer to a (distant) female relative (or in rare cases a family friend), usually middle-aged, who is charged with chaperoning the heroine for a longer period of time.

With the example of Mme Montoni, we can show that her initial dislike of her niece and eventual failure to protect her from Montoni do not affect Emily's ultimate happiness permanently. On the contrary, although Emily experiences imprisonment and the dread of an arranged marriage or even rape while in Montoni's 'care', she remains steadfast and refuses to sign the papers relinquishing her legal right to her father's inheritance to Montoni. Her aunt's actions thus put her into a position in which she can for the first time try her mettle and, despite her anxiety, she passes this test with flying colours. Emily remains the paragon of feminine propriety throughout the novel and at the same time proves herself to be strong and self-reliant. As a figure of identification for the reader, Emily becomes a paragon of female strength in opposing patriarchal demands (she takes the decision to forgive her lover Valancourt his gambling habit and marry him, which surpasses the power of the negative given to women upon marriage). As such, she shows that women can be autonomous and firm without male guidance.

The opposite seems to hold true for the Gothic parody. Here, the deficient female guardian does not entice the heroine to rely on herself but rather puts her in harm's way for several reasons and to different degrees of severity. In the following, the inadequate female guardian figures of Sarah Green's *Romance Readers and Romance Writers* (1810), Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine* (1813), and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817) will be taken into account to show how the female guardian in the Gothic parody helps establish male guidance as not only normative, but desirable.

Lady Isabella Emerson in Sarah Green's *Romance Readers and Romance Writers*

The first case study, Lady Isabella Emerson in Green's *Romance Readers and Romance Writers*, is the one character in this small sample with the severest effect on the heroine. Technically, Lady Isabella is no female guardian figure – she is not related to the heroine, too young and does not serve as a guardian in any legal sense to her young friend, Margaret Marsham. Rather, she becomes Margaret's close friend and fashionable role model and as such resembles Isabella Thorpe from *Northanger Abbey*, with whom she shares more than just a name. Still, given that Margaret has grown up in a small circle of friends and family, again similar to Austen's heroine in *Northanger Abbey*, Lady Isabella possesses all the social and worldly knowledge she needs to present herself as far superior to Margaret. Moreover, she cultivates the friendship of the seriously deluded Margaret, who fashions herself an oppressed Gothic heroine, to play with her and gloat over Margaret's stupidity. Their connection is formed over a shared habit of reading, but more so because of Margaret's lack of companionship, which is entirely due to

her quixotic behaviour.[4] When Lady Isabella is introduced in chapter three, the narrator shows that although she shares Margaret's delight in reading, her reading material is a lot more dangerous and thus a bad match for her overall mischievous and satirical disposition:

> Lady Isabella Emerson was . . . a great votary of fashion, but detested play, except that kind of play which a love of satire afforded her; and which the modern *quiz* and daily *hoax* were calculated to give to her mischievous abilities.
>
> Like Margaritta [Margaret's adopted name], she was very fond of modern publications, but her studies were of a different kind, and all consisted of false systems: the deluding sophistry of some freethinking German authors, with whose language she was well acquainted, and whose dangerous and delusive principles she imbibed; from whose fascinating descriptions she found vice stripped of its hideous appearance, and wearing an angel's form; while for her lighter reading she perused the loose sentiments contained in the French novels of *Faublas; Le Fils naturel*, and all the dangerous works of Diderot, and other revolutionary writers. The effects of such studies on a mind like that of Lady Isabella's may well be conceived; marriage she held in utter contempt, openly expatiated on the folly of all the outward ceremonies of religion, and was a very pretty female atheist. (Green, vol. 1, 16)

The narrator makes it abundantly clear that Isabella is not fit to be a role model for Margaret from the beginning, but due to her novel-induced delusions, Margaret nonetheless is very much in awe of the fashionable lady and follows her directions to the dot.

Like Isabella Thorpe, Lady Isabella wants a sidekick, not an actual friend, and the relationship she creates with Margaret is both hierarchical and self-serving with herself as the beneficiary and Margaret the subservient inferior. For Isabella, the friendship with Margaret serves two purposes: "[she] not only looked upon her as fair game for her satiric talents, but her ladyship's *penchant* for the elegant Harrington encreasing [sic] daily, she had imbibed some soft romantic sentiments with the passion of love, which made her find a *confidante* an absolute requisite" (vol. 1, 22). Possessed of fashionable beauty and a prepossessing appearance, Lady Isabella easily captures Margaret by simply flattering her: "'My sweet interesting girl . . . how happy am I to see you! . . . oh! my love,' added she, lowering her voice, 'I have much to impart to a congenial soul like yours!'" (vol. 1, 23).

As her alleged friend and role model, Lady Isabella is able to impart her radical social ideas, in particular on sexuality without marriage, to an eager Margaret. Lady Isabella advocates for sensual liberty and more or less panders Margaret to the predator Sefton, who shares Lady Isabella's ideas on free love:

[4] Although Margaret has a sister, Mary, Green's novel juxtaposes these two characters as 'wise' and 'foolish virgins' in the conduct book tradition (see Newton) with Mary being the ideal wise virgin and Margaret the flawed, lazy and reprehensible foolish virgin.

> "*Married*!" echoed Sir Charles, "how I do hate that odious word! Oh! my beloved, my angelic Margaret, I love you with that refined ardour that assures me I shall love you for ever! And I could not bear the idea of being obliged to love you because a priest muttered over a few vows, which vows are poor indeed, to those my heart would make to the charms of your mind and person!" (vol. 3, 15-16)

Eventually, these radical views ruin both herself and Margaret as they end up pregnant and unmarried and attempt to drown themselves. It takes a male educator, Margaret's father, to save the two women, and the novel closes with Margaret being exiled to Wales.

I am reading Lady Isabella here as an example of an inadequate guardian; yet it is entirely possible to read her as an example of the effects of detrimental fashion, thus criticising contemporary conviviality culture. Green's novel is very moralistic and she depicts Isabella as dangerous and potentially malicious, so there is little room for interpretation in this novel as to who is to blame: the bad friend and the amoral lover and their radicalism. Margaret's development is reminiscent of medieval allegorical plays, such as John Skelton's *Magnificence* or the anonymously written *Castle of Perseverance*. She is responsible for her own failure because she failed to listen to her father's good advice to outgrow her follies in time, and instead fell for Lady Isabella's and Sefton's bad advice to follow desires even she herself is wary of. After all, Margaret's repressed moral compass still works and she would much more have preferred married happiness had her Gothic delusions not overridden her judgement and cast the ugly Sefton as the hero of her lived romance, despite his visual and moral inappropriateness. What makes this interesting in the context of this paper is again the negativity with which female homosociality is depicted. The closest female bond in the novel, that between Margaret and Isabella, is the one that turns into a catastrophe for both women while Margaret's sister, Mary, in contrast, concentrates her development on both her father's advice and her husband's well-being and is ultimately rewarded for it.

Biddy, the Governess in E.S. Barrett's *The Heroine*

Unlike the other two guardians or role models discussed here, Biddy, the governess in *The Heroine*, does not have an active part in the narrative. When the novel starts, she has just been fired by the heroine's father, Mr Wilkinson, for kissing the Butler in the pantry (L1)[5]. Still, despite her physical absence from the plot itself, Biddy fulfils a vital function: throughout this epistolary novel, Biddy serves as the sympathetic addressee for the main character Cherry's letters as Cherry sets out to discover her 'true parentage' on a quest to become a heroine. Letter 1

[5] Since this is an epistolary novel, I quote the letters not the pages and indicate them as such (L1). This example thus refers to letter 1.

already gives us most information on Biddy and her relationship to Cherry. As a "motherless" young woman "at the sensitive age of fifteen", Cherry regards Biddy as the "guardian of [her] youth" and is desolate when she is forced to leave the household: "Motherless, am I to be bereft of my more than mother" (L1).

While Cherry does not provide any more detail about the bond they share or about Biddy's influence on her in her formative years, we can assume that their relationship must at least be regarded as partly responsible for Cherry's eccentricity and her delusions. Cherry's nostalgic description of Biddy in the beginning of the first letter paints the governess as yet another female victim of uncontrolled reading coupled with lacking common sense: "No more, at breakfast, find your melancholy features shrouded in an umbrageous cap, a novel in one hand, a cup in the other, and tears springing from your eyes, at the tale too tender, or at the tea too hot? Must I no longer wander with you through painted meadows, and by purling rivulets?" (L1). Given this invocation of novels and their effect on Biddy and judging by Cherry's overwrought and thus parodic writing style, which imitates contemporary romances, and her reference to a novel in letter 3, it stands to reason that novels, specifically romance novels, have played a significant part in Cherry's upbringing as overseen by Biddy. Moreover, Mr Wilkinson blames books, particularly "your romances" (L1) for the situation in the pantry and accordingly burns all of them.

Hence, while we do not get Biddy's perspective on Cherry's adventures, we can conclude that their shared love for novels has led to Cherry's delusions, visible in her linguistic eccentricity and, of course, her adventures. Even if it cannot be proven that Biddy is the instigator of Cherry's quixotism, she is at least a co-conspirator – and has to bear the consequences for herself after her dismissal.

Cherry is thus a victim of detrimental influence (in the form of an inadequate governess and the wrong reading material), which leads her to not only repudiate her father's guidance but actively reject it and misread her father as her oppressor, just as Margaret Marsham does in Green's novel. She is thus misguided and suffers from improper female guardianship which, over the course of the novel, leads her into danger. Biddy the governess is certainly morally questionable both for kissing the butler and for allowing her charge to lose touch with reality to a degree that causes Cherry to abandon her home in search of her allegedly true parentage on her quest to become a heroine. Cherry has prepared herself for this task under Biddy's tutelage and with the help of their shared reading habit: "prepared as I am, too, by a five years' course of novels (and you can bear witness that I have read little else), to embody and ensoul [sic] those enchanting reveries, which I am accustomed to indulge in bed and bower" (L1). As such, Biddy must be regarded as an unfit guardian, morally deficient, too much engaged in the wrong literature and oblivious to the dangerous path Cherry has taken.

Like Margaret, by the end of the novel, Cherry needs to be re-educated into normativity to abandon her erroneous ways and detrimental literature and submit herself to male control by a male educator, in this case her future husband Robert Stuart. Her re-education also concludes her communication with Biddy and the last letter also signifies the dissolution of the bond these two women have shared. Left to themselves, Biddy's lack of propriety and, potentially, judgement has ruined her own life – she loses her post and her reputation – and nearly that of her charge. The novel fulfils the demand for a responsible person with a male character, Stuart, who must set Cherry to rights; the homosociality of the women and their judgement without the corrective impact of a man is thus criticised once more in this Gothic parody.

Mrs Allen in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

The least offensive and problematic but still inadequate guardian in this group can be found in *Northanger Abbey*. Initially, Mrs Allen is introduced as a typical female guardian figure and in keeping with the novel's overall parodic treatment of Gothic stock elements:

> It is now expedient to give some description of Mrs. Allen, that the reader may be able to judge in what manner her actions will hereafter tend to promote the general distress of the work, and how she will, probably, contribute to reduce poor Catherine to all the desperate wretchedness of which a last volume is capable—whether by her imprudence, vulgarity, or jealousy—whether by intercepting her letters, ruining her character, or turning her out of doors. (Austen 9)

In contrast to this parodic introduction, Mrs Allen proves to be as regular a person as Catherine does after her similarly parodic introduction in chapter 1. Instead of "reduc[ing] poor Catherine to all the desperate wretchedness" (9), Mrs Allen turns out to be "a gentlewoman, [possessed of] a great deal of quiet, inactive good temper, and a trifling turn of mind" (9); a woman "of that numerous class of females, whose society can raise no other emotion than surprise at there being any men in the world who could like them well enough to marry them. She had neither beauty, genius, accomplishment, nor manner" (9). While the narrator claims that her love for dress, really her only distinguishing feature, makes her "admirably fitted to introduce a young lady into public" (9), there is otherwise little to recommend her for the role of Catherine's female guardian, especially because she is presented as somewhat inconsiderate and self-centred. As such, she causes Catherine some degree of distress, but her failure lies not in malice but in carelessness.

Predominantly, Mrs Allen fails to behave properly in polite society and is thus unable to spot any misbehaviour in Catherine. After making them late for their first ball in Bath because "Mrs. Allen was so long in dressing that they did not

enter the ballroom till late" (9), she also proves to be a rather useless guardian in not effecting an introduction for Catherine. Instead, she only bemoans the fact that they know nobody and thus Catherine has nobody to dance with (10). Besides not being able to provide an acquaintance for Catherine to dance with, there is also no party to sit with during tea, so to be able to sit down and save her gown, Mrs Allen impolitely forces them into another party, leaving Catherine embarrassed. Her main point of concern remains her dress, however:

> Mrs. Allen congratulated herself, as soon as they were seated, on having preserved her gown from injury. "It would have been very shocking to have it torn," said she, "would not it? It is such a delicate muslin." . . . "How uncomfortable it is," whispered Catherine, . . . The gentlemen and ladies at this table look as if they wondered why we came here—we seem forcing ourselves into their party." (10)

Mrs Allen also neglects her duties as a guardian while chaperoning Catherine in her encounters with both Mr Tilney and Mr Thorpe. Upon meeting Mr Tilney, Catherine animatedly chatters with him until she is interrupted by Mrs Allen asking her to remove a pin from her sleeve. Oblivious to Catherine's good luck in having found a possibly good match for herself and thus allowing her to converse with Mr Tilney some more, Mrs Allen takes over the conversation with Mr Tilney and discusses first fabrics and then the merits of Bath with him. While this presents Mrs Allen as silly and inconsiderate, it has the opposite effect for Tilney: he is able to distinguish himself as well versed in feminine matters and he "was polite enough to seem interested in what she said; and she kept him on the subject of muslins till the dancing recommenced" (16). To the reader, Tilney's animation in talking muslins with Mrs Allen can either be read as him subtly mocking her and thus exposing his ironic disposition, or as him being entirely serious and indeed interested in feminine topics. In either case, it shows him off positively in comparison with Mrs Allen and thus, implicitly, as the better guardian for Catherine, foreshadowing the ending of the novel and Tilney's eventual position as Catherine's educator in worldly matters.

Mrs Allen's worst function in the novel, however, is to broker the acquaintance of Catherine and Isabella and John Thorpe, children of Mrs Allen's old school friend. Since most of Catherine's distress can be ascribed to the Thorpe siblings, Mrs Allen plays a crucial role in allowing them into her young charge's life. Especially John Thorpe takes much liberty with Catherine and her reputation as he drives out with her without a chaperone. With two young men in Catherine's life, a guardian's job would have been to carefully guide and monitor her and make sure she would not do anything improper. Yet when Mr Thorpe bursts in to take Catherine out in an open carriage, Catherine looks in vain for Mrs Allen's guidance: "'Well, ma'am, what do you say to it? Can you spare me for an hour or two? Shall I go?' 'Do just as you please, my dear,' replied Mrs. Allen, with the most

placid indifference. Catherine took the advice, and ran off to get ready" (41). Unlike Catherine, Mrs Allen seems unconcerned about the potential impropriety of such an outing, which is mainly due to her lack of interest in anyone but herself. This breach of etiquette – driving out unchaperoned with a man – causes Catherine some distress later on in the novel as her behaviour is misinterpreted by John Thorpe: he takes her eagerness to drive out as an eagerness to see him, a misunderstanding a reasonable guardian could easily have prevented, and soon after proposes to her.

Catherine fails to see the social repercussions her conduct might have, both on her reputation and on her relationships, yet she herself can hardly be blamed for her misbehaviour. Instead, she is in need of feminine guidance to help her manoeuvre the treacherous waters of the season in Bath without making too much of a blunder. Mrs Allen, who should be aware of the social rules during the season, distinguishes herself mainly through her inactivity, which can be read as a form of egotistical inconsideration. Her lack of prudence and empathy towards her young friend make her unfit to be a female guardian, even for a short time. Instead of providing good advice and support for Catherine, she allows her to get herself into potentially detrimental situations or fails to recognise a fortunate situation for what it is. Like in Green and Barrett, the heroine needs a proper guardian to supplant the inadequate female guardian; while away from home, this function is eventually fulfilled by Henry Tilney, although he equally fails to recognise the effect he has on Catherine and plays with her imagination on the drive to Northanger, causing her to perceive his home as a Gothic locus by stirring her novel-fuelled imagination. Yet Tilney does not remain the only proper guardian Catherine has: by the end of the novel, Catherine comes back home and reunites with her mother, her actual female guardian; yet her stay in Bath and her adventures at Northanger and with the Tilneys have changed her so much that her mother can no longer be the same guardian to her as she used to be:

> [Catherine's] loss of spirits was a yet greater alteration. . . . For two days Mrs. Morland allowed it to pass even without a hint; but when a third night's rest had neither restored her cheerfulness, improved her in useful activity, nor given her a greater inclination for needlework, she could no longer refrain from the gentle reproof of, "My dear Catherine, I am afraid you are growing quite a fine lady. . . . Your head runs too much upon Bath; but there is a time for everything—a time for balls and plays, and a time for work. . . . I hope, my Catherine, you are not getting out of humour with home because it is not so grand as Northanger. (249-50)

While Mrs Morland does not know about Catherine's attachment to Tilney and misreads her pining for him as pining for the grander life at Northanger, Catherine's unresponsiveness to her mother's ministrations show that she has started to leave the world of her mother behind. Right after the end of this exchange be-

tween mother and daughter, Henry Tilney comes to visit and the narrator juxtaposes Catherine's dejected behaviour in her mother's presence (and his absence) with her nervous animation upon seeing him. Tilney has by then replaced Mrs Morland as the new guiding figure for Catherine. Catherine thus leaves behind motherly guidance, Mrs Allen's inadequate guardianship, and Isabella's worldly influence – and thus all three homosocial bonds she has been cultivating – in favour of a heteronormative relationship with a male educator who informs her of his father's motives for sending her away and John Thorpe's deceit that caused her reputation to be distorted. He thus fills the blanks and, flippantly speaking, tells her what's what – in this scene quite literally.

Conclusion

The female guardian in the Gothic parody does not provide the stability and guidance a young woman should be able to expect from her. On the contrary, she is either inadequate, corrupted or downright dangerous. Her effect on the heroine depends on whether she is deliberately corrupt (Lady Isabella) or potentially as quixotic as her charge (Biddy the governess) or simply inadequate (Mrs Allen), but there is one unifying effect: her inadequacy strengthens the normativising influence of the male educators on the heroine. Moreover, her effect also depends on the gullibility or, conversely, inner strength of the heroine. In the first case explored in this chapter, a corrupt person is coupled with a deluded heroine, which leads directly into a catastrophe for both women. In the second case, the guardian has failed in her task to correct the aberrant behaviour of her charge and allowed her to develop novel-induced delusions, which eventually lead her to her quixotic quest. Biddy passes on her own penchant for romances and thus negatively affects Cherry's ideas of the world and her place in it by regarding it as a romance to be acted out. In the third case, the most realistic scenario, an inconsiderate but kind guardian is coupled with a naïve and sheltered heroine. Mrs Allen does not cause danger outright, but fails to guide Catherine in her decisions and, what is more, does not spot Catherine's naivety and her budding Gothic delusions to keep her from them. Even when turned to for help, she is too uninterested to consider the consequences Catherine's actions might have for her.

All these women have in common that they are (temporarily) assuming the role of the motherly guardian in the absence (or temporary absence) of the heroine's real mother. They fail in their tasks or deliberately use their position to corrupt their young charges so that eventually the heroines must be saved by a male character, their father and/or future husband, that is, they must be placed under male control. Hence, instead of depicting a strong bond of homosociality between women, the Gothic parody criticises the lack of judgement women left to themselves exhibit. The parody does continue the criticism of the inadequate guardian

figure of the Gothic novel, but it discards the subtle social criticism of not providing any guidance for young women without familial attachments. Instead, the parody adds a wholescale criticism of women's sensibility, often induced by novel-reading that needs to be corrected by a male educator. Unlike in the Gothic novel, where the abandoned heroine develops her strength, women left to themselves are regarded as deluded, inadequate or simply too naïve to uphold the propriety their sex demands from them.

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