

18. Gothic fiction

Ann Radcliffe

***The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794)**

The damsel in distress  63

The orphaned heroine Emily St. Aubert, the protagonist of The Mysteries of Udolpho, is led to the castle where she will be imprisoned by her evil guardian Count Montoni. The place is a gloomy medieval fortress in the remote Apennines.

Towards the close of day, the road wound into a¹ deep valley. Mountains, whose shaggy steeps² appeared to be inaccessible, almost surrounded it. To the east, a vista opened, that exhibited the Apennines in their darkest horrors; and the long perspective of retiring summits, rising over each other, their ridges³ clothed with pines, exhibited a stronger image of grandeur, than any
 5 that Emily had yet seen. The sun had just sunk below the top of the mountains she was descending, whose long shadow stretched athwart the valley⁴, but his sloping rays, shooting through⁵ an opening of the cliffs⁶, touched with a yellow gleam the summits of the forest, that hung upon the opposite steeps, and streamed⁷ in full splendour upon the towers and battlements of a castle, that spread its extensive ramparts along the brow of a precipice above.
 10 The splendour of these illumined objects was heightened by the contrasted shade, which involved the valley below.

‘There,’ said Montoni, speaking for the first time in several hours, ‘is Udolpho.’

Emily gazed with melancholy awe⁸ upon the castle, which she understood to be Montoni’s; for, though it was now lighted up by the setting sun, the gothic greatness of its features, and its
 15 mouldering⁹ walls of dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object. As she gazed, the light died away on its walls, leaving a melancholy purple tint, which spread deeper and deeper, as the thin vapour crept up¹⁰ the mountain, while the battlements¹¹ above were still tipped with splendour. [...]

When her spirits had overcome the first shock of her situation, she held up the lamp to
 20 examine, if the chamber afforded a possibility of an escape. It was a spacious room, whose walls, wainscoted with rough oak¹², shewed no casement¹³ but the grated one¹⁴, which Emily had left, and no other door than that, by which she had entered. The feeble rays of the lamp, however, did not allow her to see at once its full extent; she perceived no furniture, except, indeed, an iron chair, fastened in the centre of the chamber, immediately over which, depending on a chain
 25 from the ceiling, hung an iron ring. Having gazed upon these, for some time, with wonder and horror, she next observed iron bars below, made for the purpose of confining the feet, and on

1. **wound into a:** it. *si snodava in*

2. **shaggy steeps:** it. *incolti pendii*

3. **ridges:** it. *crinali*

4. **stretched athwart the valley:** it. *si allungava obliquamente attraverso la valle*

5. **shooting through:** it. *passando attraverso*

6. **cliffs:** it. *scarpate, pendii scoscesi*

7. **streamed:** it. *dilagava*

8. **melancholy awe:** it. *malinconica soggezione*

9. **mouldering:** it. *in rovina, che si stanno sgretolando*

10. **crept up:** it. *si diffondeva lentamente sulla*

11. **battlements:** it. *merli del castello*

12. **wainscoted with rough oak:** it. *rivestito di duro legno di quercia*

13. **casement:** it. *finestra*

14. **the grated one:** it. *quella munita di grata*

the arms of the chair were rings of the same metal. As she continued to survey them, she concluded, that they were instruments of torture, and it struck her, that some poor wretch¹⁵ had once been fastened in this chair, and had there been starved to death. She was chilled by the thought; but, what was her agony, when, in the next moment, it occurred to her, that her aunt might have been one of these victims, and that she herself might be the next! An acute pain seized her head, she was scarcely able to hold the lamp, and, looking round for support, was seating herself, unconsciously, in the iron chair itself; but suddenly perceiving where she was, she started from it in horror, and sprung towards a remote end of the room. Here again she looked round for a seat to sustain her, and perceived only a dark curtain, which, descending from the ceiling to the floor, was drawn along the whole side of the chamber. Ill as she was, the appearance of this curtain struck her, and she paused to gaze upon it, in wonder and apprehension. It seemed to conceal a recess of the chamber; she wished, yet dreaded, to lift it, and to discover what it veiled: twice she was withheld¹⁶ by a recollection of the terrible spectacle her daring hand had formerly unveiled in an apartment of the castle, till, suddenly conjecturing, that it concealed the body of her murdered aunt, she seized it, in a fit of desperation, and drew it aside. Beyond, appeared a corpse, stretched on a kind of low couch, which was crimsoned with human blood, as was the floor beneath. The features, deformed by death, were ghastly and horrible, and more than one livid wound appeared in the face. Emily, bending over the body, gazed, for a moment, with an eager, frenzied eye; but, in the next, the lamp dropped from her hand, and she fell senseless at the foot of the couch.

15. **poor wretch:** *it. povero disgraziato*

16. **withheld:** *it. trattenuta*

Jane Austen

Northanger Abbey (1818)

Darkness invisible 64

The novel by Austen describes the unsophisticated Catherine Morland going to Bath for the season. In the spa town she meets the young clergyman Henry Tilney and, in a visit to his mansion (the Abbey of the title) she lets her imagination run wild and sees the Abbey as the setting of a Gothic novel. Eventually, she learns to distinguish between Gothic fantasies and real life. The novel parodies the Gothic conventions of the period, mainly Ann Radcliffe, by highlighting the contrast between a typical Gothic heroine and Catherine. But it also deals with Austen's favourite theme of a young, naive woman entering the meanders of the adult world. Unfortunately for the imaginative heroine, the passage into adulthood takes place without violence, tragedies, secrets unveiled, villains to resist or passions to censor. The book is therefore a coming-of-age story where the protagonist is initiated into adulthood through experience and disillusionment. She loses a false sense of security and her preconceptions so as to reach maturity.

‘... you must be so fond of the abbey! After being used to such a home as the abbey, an ordinary parsonage-house must be very disagreeable.’

He smiled, and said, ‘You have formed a very favourable idea of the abbey.’

‘To be sure, I have. Is not it a fine old place, just like what one reads about?’

5 ‘And are you prepared to encounter all the horrors that a building such as ‘what one reads about’ may produce? Have you a stout heart? Nerves fit for sliding panels and tapestry?’

‘Oh! yes – I do not think I should be easily frightened, because there would be so many people in the house – and besides, it has never been uninhabited and left deserted for

10 years, and then the family come back to it unawares, without giving any notice, as generally happens.’

‘No, certainly. We shall not have to explore our way into a hall dimly lighted by the expiring embers¹ of a wood fire – nor be obliged to spread our beds on the floor of a room without windows, doors, or furniture. But you must be aware that when a young

15 lady is (by whatever means) introduced into a dwelling of this kind, she is always lodged apart from the rest of the family. While they snugly² repair to their own end of the house, she is formally conducted by Dorothy, the ancient housekeeper, up a different staircase, and along many gloomy passages, into an apartment never used since some cousin or kin died in it about twenty years before.

20 Can you stand such a ceremony as this? Will not your mind misgive you when you find yourself in this gloomy chamber – too lofty³ and extensive for you, with only the feeble rays of a single lamp to take in its size – its walls hung with tapestry exhibiting figures as large as life, and the bed, of dark green stuff or purple velvet, presenting even a funereal appearance? Will not your heart sink within you?’ ‘Oh! But this will not

25 happen to me, I am sure.’ [...]

1. **embers:** it. *braci*

2. **snugly:** it. *al riparo, al caldo*

3. **lofty:** high

‘Nothing further to alarm perhaps may occur the first night. After surmounting your unconquerable horror of the bed, you will retire to rest, and get a few hours’ unquiet slumber⁴. But on the second, or at farthest the third night after your arrival, you will probably have a violent storm. Peals of thunder so loud as to seem to shake the

30 edifice to its foundation will roll round the neighbouring mountains – and during the frightful gusts of wind which accompany it, you will probably think you discern (for your lamp is not extinguished) one part of the hanging more violently agitated than the rest. Unable of course to repress your curiosity in so favourable a moment for indulging it, you will instantly arise, and throwing your dressing-gown around

35 you, proceed to examine this mystery. After a very short search, you will discover a division in the tapestry so artfully constructed as to defy the minutest inspection, and on opening it, a door will immediately appear – which door, being only secured by massy bars and a padlock⁵, you will, after a few efforts, succeed in opening – and, with your lamp in your hand, will pass through it into a small vaulted room.’

40 ‘No, indeed; I should be too much frightened to do any such thing.’ ‘What! Not when Dorothy has given you to understand that there is a secret subterraneous communication between your apartment and the chapel of St. Anthony, scarcely two miles off? Could you shrink from so simple an adventure? No, no, you will proceed into this small vaulted room, and through this into several others, without perceiving

45 anything very remarkable in either. In one perhaps there may be a dagger, in another a few drops of blood, and in a third the remains of some instrument of torture; but there being nothing in all this out of the common way, and your lamp being nearly exhausted, you will return towards your own apartment. In repassing through the small vaulted room, however,

50 your eyes will be attracted towards a large, old-fashioned cabinet of ebony and gold, which, though narrowly examining the furniture before, you had passed unnoticed. Impelled by an irresistible presentiment, you will eagerly advance to it, unlock its folding doors, and search into every drawer – but for some time without discovering anything of importance – perhaps nothing but a considerable hoard of diamonds. At

55 last, however, by touching a secret spring, an inner compartment will open – a roll of paper appears – you seize it – it contains many sheets of manuscript – you hasten with the precious treasure into your own chamber, but scarcely have you been able to decipher “Oh! Thou – whomsoever thou mayst be, into whose hands these memoirs of the wretched Matilda⁶ may fall” – when your lamp suddenly expires in the socket,

60 and leaves you in total darkness.’
 ‘Oh! No, no – do not say so. Well, go on.’

4. **slumber**: sleep

5. **padlock**: small lock

6. **Matilda**: name for a typical Gothic heroine

Epilogue

The parodic tone is made evident by the profusion of minute details in the speech. When Catherine eventually does what is described above in her room at the Abbey, she will be disappointed because, rather than finding a ‘precious treasure’, the parchment she finds in a mysterious drawer is nothing but a laundry list...