Defiant Damsels: Gothic Space and Female Agency in Emmeline, The Mysteries of Udolpho, and Secresy

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Defiant Damsels: Gothic Space and Female Agency in Emmeline, The Mysteries of Udolpho, and Secresy

In 1797, an anonymous column titled “Terrorist Novel Writing” appeared in The Spirit of the Public Journals. Although the article claims to deplore the popularity of gothic romances in general, it devotes considerable attention to how the behavior of gothic heroines teaches female readers skills ill-suited to their domestic roles. The author asks: “Can a young lady be taught nothing more necessary in life, than to sleep in a dungeon with venomous reptiles, walk through a ward with assassins, and carry bloody daggers in their [sic] pockets, instead of pin-cushions and needle-books?” Further, the language suggests that these heroines, through responding actively to threatening situations, model a manly sense of agency. They are not “carried” through a ward of assassins; they “walk . . . with assassins.” They are not threatened by weapons, but pack their own “bloody daggers in their pockets.” Cultural commentators expressing concern over gothic writings’ influence on a young female audience is nothing new. One is struck, however, by this author’s particular fear—that these romances will foster strength and activity in female readers—because his notion contradicts contemporary criticism’s dominant reading of gothic settings as places in which female characters generally lack agency.

Over the past twenty years, feminist criticism has developed a reading of gothic space as an allegory of domestic imprisonment. In book-length studies of the gothic, Kate Ferguson Ellis, Eugenia DeLamotte, and Maggie Kilgour have argued that gothic space symbolizes patriarchal power and mirrors the subjugation women faced in their
Paul Morrison has even coined the term “domestic carceral” to describe these gothic spaces’ uncanny resemblance to “a fully recognizable picture of eighteenth-century domestic life.” In a survey of over fifty women-authored texts from the 1790s, William Stafford concludes that “castles are standard places where women are imprisoned, and ‘gothic’ is almost invariably a pejorative term.” This discursive strain of women’s gothic serving as an exposé of patriarchy has also become the standard interpretation offered in various “companion” texts intended for non-specialist and student use. For example the “Female Gothic” entry in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* states that, “[i]n the female tradition, the male transgressor becomes the villain whose authoritative reach as patriarch, abbot or despot seeks to entrap the heroine, usurp the great house, and threatens death or rape.” In an extreme variation of this interpretation, Diane Hoeveler argues that authors actively stage this victimization to mount a passive-aggressive campaign against patriarchy. In short, gothic spaces signify entrapment and gothic narratives depict female suffering to unmask or to baffle the workings of misogynist power structures.

While this set of assumptions has produced important readings of gothic romances as proto-feminist explorations of women’s subjugation, it only tells a partial story of how women authors used gothic space. The specter that “Terrorist Novel Writing” raises of the dagger-wielding action-heroine indicates that enough gothic texts representing an active model of female agency existed in 1797 to provoke the author’s reaction in the popular press. Examining a broad swath of women’s gothic writing suggests that these authors use the allegorical potential of gothic space to engage in a more complex exploration of domestic politics than a univocal critique of patriarchy.
argue that the castles, moats, and subterranean passages represented in gothic fiction have a fluid signification for women authors in the late eighteenth century. While authors do sometimes portray these spaces as threatening, they also depict gothic settings in which female characters exhibit mastery and find economic enfranchisement. This subset of hearty heroines knows gothic spaces well and is not afraid to exploit that knowledge to circumvent often craven and feminized persecutors. By examining architectural descriptions of gothic space, this article challenges the domestic imprisonment reading on its own terms and provides the most demonstrable evidence of female agency by analyzing the heroines’ physical actions.

Understanding women authors’ diverse use of gothic space gains urgency when one considers that the domestic imprisonment reading has influenced feminist work on gothic texts well-beyond the period in the late eighteenth century it seeks to describe. In a work theorizing the abuse of female characters in twentieth-century narrative, Helene Meyers reveals this critical legacy: “Feminist work on such touchstone gothic texts as *Mysteries of Udolpho, Maria, Jane Eyre,* and *Rebecca* clarifies that, from its inception, the Gothic romance has meditated upon the potential for female victimization.”

Meyers commencing her list with *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) is significant. Through a desire to uncover women’s voices protesting patriarchal abuse, criticism has relied disproportionately on Ann Radcliffe’s narratives to inform feminist readings of gothic space. For example, in her book on the Victorian gothic, Alison Milbank uses examples from only three Radcliffe works to craft a definition of the “female Gothic,” which Milbank argues is characterized by “a period of imprisonment in which the heroine finds herself under the authority of a male tyrant.” This dependence on Radcliffe has
simplified our understanding of women authors’ domestic politics and allowed only secondary consideration to texts in which the gloomy castle signifies more than patriarchal exploitation.

Rather than suggesting that the gothic romance is a genre of empowerment, I argue that the gothic provided an imaginative venue in which multiple domestic scenarios could be imagined. These readings build on tantalizingly brief gestures in early work by Margaret Doody and Jane Spencer that suggest the potential for gothic space to be protective of women and to be terrifying for both sexes. My study is also indebted to the enormous effort feminist scholars have made to create modern editions of a wider variety of gothic novels, which makes accessible the diversity of material needed to re-think how women authors deployed gothic space. From a historical viewpoint, these texts’ commercial and/or critical success in their own day suggests that no unified female authorial voice existed regarding the domestic politics of gothic space and the description of a castle did not signify de facto to readers that the heroine was about to be bullied into submission or stripped of her property.

Because of Udolpho’s centrality to the development of the domestic imprisonment reading, my discussion examines how two texts pre- and post-dating Radcliffe’s 1794 masterwork—Charlotte Smith’s Emmeline (1788) and Eliza Fenwick’s Secresy (1795)—deploy similar gothic motifs to effect disparate gender politics. Emmeline and Secresy show that the empowerment model persisted over time and adapted to changing political conditions. In Emmeline, a novel both critically praised and widely-read, Smith represents the castle as the particular patrimony of the female protagonist in contrast to Radcliffe’s well-documented use of Udolpho to signify both aristocratic decadence and
female oppression. Secresy, as a post-Revolutionary text admired by radical publications like the Analytical Review, presents a heroine who combines physical strength with a republican fervor that allows her to defy the obstacles presented by the castle’s aristocratic, masculinist space. I do not argue, however, that Smith’s or Fenwick’s narratives are more representative of women’s ideological deployment of gothic space than Radcliffe’s. Instead, by showing how three women authors with a peer relationship employ the same gothic interiors to depict both female victimization and empowerment, my discussion expands our understanding of what those symbolically loaded spaces signified to both female authors and readers.

Charlotte Smith’s Emmeline provides a robust example of how the gothic castle can be a protective fortress or a symbol of matrilineal bonds. While little extended discussion exists on Emmeline, recent scholarship assumes that the novel’s gothic space signifies the heroine’s dispossession. Typical of the Romantic novel, Emmeline chronicles the eponymous heroine’s development into womanhood through a Byzantine series of romantic and financial trials. Of most particular interest for re-thinking feminist uses of gothic space are the novel’s first six chapters that detail Emmeline’s experience in Mowbray Castle. Smith describes Emmeline’s childhood in the castle as nurturing and domestic. Once Emmeline reaches sexual maturity, Smith’s use of gothic space anticipates Radcliffe’s, as most of Emmeline’s trials at the castle concern potential sexual violation by her cousin, Lord Delamere. A key difference exists, however, in how Smith views gothic space as a site of sexual contest: in Mowbray Castle, Emmeline has the advantage.
Emmeline participates in an alliance with the castle, using its idiosyncratic nature to escape attempted rape in multiple instances. She is not terrified of moving down dark hallways, and she perceives these spaces as under her control. Emmeline’s sexual persecution begins once Delamere and his hunting party arrive. Delamere’s lecherous French valet, Millefleur, discovers Emmeline and thinks she is a pretty grisette who will be an easy conquest. After Millefleur “seized her hand with an impertinent freedom” Emmeline “snatched it from him; and flying hastily back through those passages which all his courage did not suffice to make him attempt exploring again, she regained her turret, the door of which she instantly locked and bolted.”

Emmeline defies his expectations through her active resistance. Not only does she “snatch” away her hand, which indicates a quick and decisive movement, she “flies” unhesitatingly down a dark passage that excites enough fear in Millefleur to quell his erotic passion. Millefleur appears effete and Emmeline capable. Smith’s use of the phrase “regained her turret” implies Emmeline’s sense of ownership within overtly coded gothic structures that also connote phallic power. Rather than the locks and bolts imprisoning her, they protect her from unwanted advances.

Smith strengthens the protective representation of gothic space when Emmeline employs the same strategy to escape Delamere’s midnight invasion of her bedroom and to expose him as her persecutor:

[Emmeline] then recollected, that as she knew the passages of the castle, which she was convinced neither Delamere nor his servant did, she might possibly escape . . . she ran lightly thro’ the passage, which was very long and dark. He pursued her. . . . A gust of wind blew out the candle: and Emmeline, gliding down
the steps, turned to the right, and opening a heavy nailed door . . . she let it fall after her. Delamere, now in total darkness, tried in vain to follow the sound. . . . He walked round the hall only to puzzle himself; for the door by which he had entered it, he could not regain. (72-3)

Delamere displays more courage than Millefleur and pursues Emmeline, but her knowledge of the obscure passages thwarts his plan and exposes his pursuit. Here, Smith reverses a gothic trope made famous by Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) where the extinguished candle increases the heroine’s terror. Instead, darkness acts as a cover for escape. Emmeline reaches Lord Montreville’s room before Delamere and tells him about the pursuit. Montreville’s desire to deny his son’s wrongdoing is preempted by Delamere and Millefleur “wearied with their fruitless attempts to escape” calling out for rescue from the dark passages. Delamere’s disoriented presence provides incontrovertible evidence in support of Emmeline’s complaint. Paradoxically, gothic architecture’s obscurity reveals her as the injured party. In Radcliffe’s novels, males are also sometimes disoriented in gothic space, but these characters are never coded as sexual predators. In *Udolpho*, Montoni’s unnamed bravos and Count Morano navigate the darkness easily, assaulting Emily in her room and the passages, while virtuous men, such as Du Pont, are imprisoned below.

Smith takes Emmeline’s feminine connection with gothic space further. Instead of being terrified, her heroine terrifies others. She is the “thing that goes bump in the night” that scares her would-be tormenter, Millefleur. Once again “bewildered among the long galleries and obscure passages of the castle” Millefleur’s “terror” increases as he attempts to retrace his steps. Just at this moment, Emmeline opens a door and Millefleur
“whose imagination was by this time filled with ideas of specters, flew back at her sudden appearance” (19). If a reader was unaware of the date, she might think that Smith was parodying, rather than pioneering, gothic convention—so strange does it seem for a man to shrink back in terror from a woman in a gothic castle.

The more familiar version of this tableau is Radcliffe’s description of Emily’s wanderings at Udolpho, which exchanges Smith’s female predator for a female victim. The narrator relates, “Emily began to fear, that she might again lose herself in the intricacies of the castle” and “though she was already perplexed by the numerous turnings, she feared to open one of the many doors that offered.”

These passages are remarkably similar, except for the characters’ different genders, yet the second image from Udolpho of the lost and terrified young woman has retained its force critically. Both readers’ and critics’ positive response to Emmeline suggests that the plucky heroine resonated with audiences as much as the persecuted one. The castle is not only a site of sexual contest, as many critics have noted; it is also a place in which authors explored two competing concepts of heroinism.

Radcliffe’s model inverts Smith’s and represents gothic architecture as the venue where men threaten sexual assault to extort property from women. Gothic architecture gives villains psychological leverage over their victims and provides a convenient place for committing crimes. In Udolpho, gothic obscurity cloaks wrongdoing, rather than exposes it. Emily suspects that a forced marriage or extortion will occur at Udolpho rather than Venice because “secrecy” is “necessary to the honour of Montoni” (224). The narrative implies that women are protected by a society willing to shame men who abuse women. Removed from the protection of that society within the impenetrable Udolpho,
Emily and Madame Montoni become subject to the will of the individual patriarch. As a result, Madame Montoni dies because of Montoni’s abuse, and Emily signs over her property to him because he refuses to protect her from rape until she does.

Critics have written extensively about Montoni’s ostensibly absolute control in Udolpho. Early psychoanalytic feminist critics emphasize the symbolism of Emily’s “double-doored” chamber and suggest that the heroine’s trials symbolize a confrontation with her sexuality. Later critics, drawing on historical and cultural evidence, argue that the sexual threat is not about self-discovery but rather the most obvious signifier of women’s physical vulnerability. However, reading Emmeline alongside Udolpho reveals that contemporary readers’ expectations about what gothic space signified were still in flux. Both novels employ almost exactly the same type of gothic imagery, but the authors use these descriptions for completely disparate rhetorical ends.

The heroine’s affective response to gothic space forms a second key difference between Smith’s and Radcliffe’s conceptions. In Smith, gothic space invokes feelings of belongingness for the heroine that suggest an aesthetic kinship with her ancestors. Emmeline’s untutored appreciation for gothic architecture functions as a class marker that suggests her “true identity” as an aristocratic Montreville rather than the orphan dependent she is assumed to be. When forced to leave Mowbray Castle, Emmeline’s reaction is despair:

*She saw nothing but the castle, of which she believed she was now taking an eternal adieu; and her looks were fixed on it, ’till the road winding down the hill on the other side, concealed it from her sight. Headly imputed her sadness to a*
very different cause than that of an early and long attachment to a particular spot.

(43)

The “different cause” Headly attributes to Emmeline’s mood is leaving Lord Delamere, whom Headly assumes Emmeline loves for his riches. Smith subverts expectations here, placing the house where the man would traditionally be as the site of all-consuming longing. In Emmeline, the gothic signifies a relationship with family history more stable than the caprices of romantic love.

Even before the narrative reveals her legitimacy, Emmeline’s feeling of “belongingness” creates a narrative expectation that the castle is legally hers. She demonstrates what Smith calls “native firmness” by her emotional connection to the gloomy ancestral seat in the same way that Emily displays her sensibility by responding to the beauty of La Vallée. Smith suggests that a penchant for gothic architecture is “in the blood.” Emmeline’s choosing the same bedroom as the late Mrs. Mowbray prompts the reader to speculate that Emmeline’s birth must be legitimate. Like her ancestor, she admires the room’s sublime view that boasts “a small but rapid river” with “pieces of rock that seemed to have been torn from the mountains by its violence, rush[ing] into the sea” (53). The room is isolated by a gloomy hallway, similar to Emily’s chamber in Udolpho, but Emmeline chooses sublimity over safety.

Smith suggests that Emmeline’s refined appreciation of the prospect and her taste for gothic architecture separate her from the other dependents in the house. Smith contrasts Emmeline’s response to the house with the “vulgar” housekeeper, who on arrival states, “Lord! why what a ramshakel ould place it is!” (53). The reader understands the housekeeper’s lack of aesthetic appreciation as a class indicator, because
she does not realize that the “ramshakel” house connotes the family’s historical importance.

While Smith, writing before the French Revolution, uses the gothic to reinforce ideas of aristocratic lineage, Radcliffe de-emphasizes Emily’s blood-ties to the ancestral castle and champions a more egalitarian aesthetic where the simplicity of her La Vallée connotes virtue. In *Udolpho*, a rejection of gothic forms demonstrates the heroine’s superior taste and moral authority. Emily has the same response to gothic architecture that the vulgar housekeeper in *Emmeline* does; Emily is just more poetic in describing the gothic’s terrifying effect. Emily’s aversion to the castle distances her from the castle’s previous owner, Laurentini, who proves to be a murderess. During one of Montoni’s revels, Emily takes notice of her surroundings and defines them as antithetical to her idea of home. While observing the hall’s “vaulted roof, enriched with fretwork,” “long colonnades,” and “gloomy grandeur,” Emily pines for “her dear native province, her pleasant home and the simplicity and goodness of the friends, whom she had lost” (312). Radcliffe links the specifics of gothic architecture with the condotierri’s disgusting display of uncontrolled appetite and criminality. While Emmeline feels punished to be exiled from a gothic space, in both instances where Emily arrives at Udolpho, she or the narrator states that the castle is a prison. “As the carriage-wheels rolled heavily under the portcullis, Emily’s heart sunk, and she seemed, as if she was going into her prison” (227). “‘Alas!’ said she to herself, ‘I am going again into my prison!’” (426). Radcliffe takes pains to disassociate Emily from this architecture and to show how it offends her sensibilities and increases her terror.
Mary Poovey and E.J. Clery have commented on how Emily’s return to her paternal estates, with a chastened Valancourt in tow, represents a partial triumph over the patriarchal repression and unchecked materialism Montoni and his castle symbolize.  

Smith’s happy ending for *Emmeline* includes a return to the ancestral castle; the reader leaves Emmeline at “Mowbray Castle, ever so peculiarly dear to Mrs. Godolphin, and where she was now blessed with her beloved husband and her charming friends.” Only in heaven, the narrator relates, “can [she] enjoy more perfect and lasting felicity” (476). Even after Emmeline marries, Smith depicts her greatest attachment being to a gothic home. Emmeline’s relationship with gothic space comes full circle by the narrative’s end: it nurtures her in childhood, protects her during her coming of age, and provides a home for the next generation, suggesting that the gothic castle can just as easily symbolize matriarchal, rather than patriarchal, power. Smith’s novel thus revolutionizes gothic space from a gender standpoint, but it reinscribes class hierarchies by perpetuating the same system of land-based wealth along female lines. In contrast, Emily’s alienation from Udolpho aligns her perspective with the middle-class reader who would also feel estranged from the ancient seat of power and its resident aristocrats.

Although a sustained reading of Smith’s use of gothic space after *Emmeline* is outside this argument’s scope, one should note that after the French Revolution erupts, Smith shifts her symbolic use of gothic architecture from exploring domestic politics to critiquing class issues. As Loraine Fletcher discusses, Smith uses gothic buildings to interrogate social hierarchy in *Desmond* (1792) and *The Old Manor House* (1793). Along with these later novels’ change of political emphasis comes a shift from female to male protagonists. As such, the female characters become less-nuanced, and the spirited
Emmeline gives way to the martyred Geraldine Verney in *Desmond*. Diana Bowstead suggests that “the domestic tyranny of which she [Geraldine] is victim has analogues in political tyranny in France.” Thus, *Desmond* uses the representation of Geraldine’s abusive marriage primarily as a foil for French politics. More disappointing than Geraldine is the milksop Monimia in *The Old Manor House* who is terrified in the gothic house and so passive about guarding her virtue that she hardly lives up to the status of “heroine.” As Judith Davis Miller, Loraine Fletcher, and Janina Nordius have observed, Smith reserves her progressive deployment of the eponymous “old manor house” to explore broader themes of corruption in war, trade, and inheritance law.

Despite Smith’s change of focus, other authors persisted in using this symbolically loaded space to challenge prevailing gender ideologies. Most notably, the heroine Sibella in Eliza Fenwick’s *Secresy* offers the reader a model of reason and physical robustness. Like *Emmeline*, *Secresy* has traditionally garnered little critical attention despite being well-received in its own day. Of late, however, feminist scholars have become increasingly interested in the novel’s radical depiction of female sexuality and manners. Aside from Terry Castle’s scathing review of the 1994 Broadview edition, recent criticism lauds *Secresy*’s dramatization of republican themes and complex narrative strategies, yet most authors take for granted that the setting of Valmont Castle symbolizes patriarchal power in the text. For example, in an essay that delineates Fenwick’s sophisticated use of genre, Julia Wright suggests that Sibella being “trapped in a forbidding castle by a wicked male relative” constitutes one of the novel’s “stock literary elements.” My reading of Valmont Castle suggests that Fenwick’s use of gothic space is also innovative and directly related to the novel’s thematic resistance to
hierarchy that Wright describes. The novel combines many elements common to its subgenre in unexpected ways, prompting the reader to question the symbolic meaning of architecture. In epistolary form, *Secresy* details Sibella’s trials as an uneducated orphan confined to Valmont Castle and separated from her childhood sweetheart, Clement, by her tyrannical uncle. While others have remarked on Sibella’s well-cultivated rational faculty, which causes her to reject her uncle’s despotism and sexually claim her lover, most ignore one of the novel’s most striking features: the heroine’s physical hardiness.24 Like *Emmeline*, *Secresy* emphasizes the heroine’s knowledge of and physical capability within gothic space. Although Sibella is immured behind the “frowning battlements” of Valmont Castle, Fenwick describes her as athletic, hardy, and even an otherworldly thing to be feared by her male persecutors.

Fenwick draws on contemporary feminist theories of education and broader republican politics in crafting her extraordinary heroine. Fenwick’s association with the London Corresponding Society and personal friendships with William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Holcroft, and Mary Hays gave her access to the current debates taking place among London’s radical intellectuals.25 As Isobel Grundy notes, despite being raised in isolation as part of an *Emile*-like experiment, Sibella cultivates her natural reason, directly challenging Rousseau’s ideas about educating women.26 With the help of her foster-brother Clement, Sibella overcomes her indifferent instruction—she profits by listening to Clement’s tutor—and carves out a happy childhood.

During this period Sibella describes the castle as a gothic Eden that provided a venue for the children to develop their innocent love. To her main correspondent, Caroline Ashburn, she writes: “need I tell you how we advanced from shyness to
familiarity, from familiarity to kindness, from kindness to love, all powerful, all potent! The castle then seemed to be no prison; the moat seemed no barrier.”

When Valmont announces to Clement that his continued financial support depends on his departing for a Grand Tour, Sibella urges Clement to remain. She argues that “We have world enough,” suggesting that their mutual isolation offers the possibility of fulfillment (58). Although Sibella’s sentiments are idealistic, they reveal that Clement’s materialism, not the restrictions of physical space, will preclude the continuation of their domestic bliss.

After Clement rejects Sibella’s vision, the castle takes on the attributes of a prison in line with a Radcliffean convention. Sibella remarks, “Imprisoned, during so many years, within the narrow boundary of this castle and its parks, the same objects eternally before me, I look with disgust from their perpetual round of succession” (75). Despite her sense of imprisonment, Sibella diverges markedly from Radcliffe’s heroines by describing her confinement as voluntary. Fenwick creates an important political twist on the imprisonment trope. Her heroine draws on republican discourse to characterize the restriction as against her inclination but not against her will. When a distant admirer, Murden, offers Sibella means for a “secret escape,” she replies:

No . . . I am not weak enough to descend to artifice. Did I think it right to go, I should go openly. Then might Mr. Valmont try his opposing strength. But he would find, I could leap, swim, or dive; and that moats and walls are feeble barriers to a determined will. (104)

Sibella’s assertion that she “should go openly” echoes Godwin’s ideas in *Political Justice* concerning the importance of sincerity, where morality compels one to act transparently regardless of anticipated retribution. Despite Valmont’s intimidation, Sibella is ready
to oppose him directly as dictated by her ethics. Her use of “right” in her many speeches, which argue for the supremacy of rational morality, suggests that she cannot find an adequate principle, including her discomfort, to quit her guardian. Reason and duty, not blind obedience, inform her actions.

Sibella also claims the ability to resist illegitimate power physically. Her willingness to show an athleticism rarely seen in Romantic heroines—to “leap, swim, or dive”—testifies to her confidence in her fitness to leave when she chooses. In a letter to Clement, she reiterates that her freedom is both mental and corporeal: “I must and shall find means to shew him [Valmont] he has no more power over my person than my mind. I will escape him, and fly to thee” (181). Rather than enlisting the aid of her lover, Sibella imagines her escape to be a solo effort, deviating from the heroines of Radcliffe’s three major works who all abscond with a champion’s assistance. In *The Romance of the Forest*, Adeline flees the Marquis’s chateau with Theodore’s aid. In *Udolpho*, Du Pont helps Emily pass “without interruption, the dreadful gates” of the castle (451). In *The Italian*, Ellena employs Vivaldi and a confederate to escape the San Stefano convent using secret passages.

Sibella’s mental fortitude complements her professed corporeal strength and presents an alternative model for how a heroine should respond to the supernatural. “Brave enough to lead an army in the field,” she refuses to entertain superstitious fancies (155). One of her suitors, Lord Filmar, even views her courage as diminishing her gender and class status and suitability for marriage. He writes that Sibella is:
a little too hardy of nerve for a Countess . . . she roams . . . in defiance of storm or
tempest, in the woods, nay even in the echoing galleries of the terrific castle, at
and after midnight. Some say she has conversed with apparitions. (207)
The village gossip suggesting that she wanders at night speaking with ghosts establishes
her as a sublime figure to be afraid of, not a maiden cowed by the suggestion of the
supernatural.

Like *Emmeline*, the narrative highlights Sibella’s fortitude by contrasting it to the
male characters’ pusillanimity. However, Fenwick takes her depiction of male cowardice
further, extending it beyond servants to the aristocratic characters. When actually
acquainted with the castle, Filmar remarks: “Miss Valmont, I dare say, feels no horror in
listening to such sounds, nor tracing these murmuring galleries, lonely staircases, &c. I
should not exist six months in this castle” (229). When he attempts to abduct her, his
plan is foiled by a mysterious figure’s appearance, which so frightens his male servants
that they “howl” and eventually faint. Filmar himself admits to “drops of cold dew”
standing on his forehead and a sense of “fearful awe” after seeing the supposed
apparition—a response generally associated with heroines, not their persecutors.

Sibella, when confronted with the very same figure seventeen pages later,
responds with hyper-rationality. She questions the supposed “apparition” and finding its
answers inadequate, rejects the idea that it is supernatural. As Julia Wright notes,
Sibella’s unwillingness to “behave like the heroine of a romance” confounds her
interlocutor. Sibella creates a new model for how heroines can respond to the
supernatural by investigating a seemingly otherworldly phenomenon right away. This
aspect of her character has important thematic and stylistic consequences. Her direct
response to the threatening event underscores her commitment to sincerity and dispels any suggestion that she is “paranoid” or “nervous.” Stylistically, it precludes Fenwick from employing the “explained supernatural” method upon which Radcliffe’s creation of suspense depends. Since the novel’s theme lauds transparency, neither the reader nor the character is permitted to make false assumptions about material events. In Radcliffe’s work, the heroine’s propensity to see the marvelous in the quotidian is essential to the plot, but these false assumptions work to trivialize the heroine’s fearful response. For example, when Emily uses her “timid hand” to lift the famed “black veil” in Udolpho, her immediate response to the frightening scene is to “dro[p] senseless on the floor,” rather than to investigate (249). Emily’s inability to bear up under these conditions causes her to make a grave error. The narrator remarks, “Had she dared to look again, her delusion and her fears would have vanished together, and she would have perceived that the figure before her was not human, but formed of wax” (662). Words like “delusion” underscore Emily’s foolishness in assuming Montoni murdered Laurentini when a cursory investigation would prove otherwise. The distraction of the “murdered Laurentini” precludes Emily from focusing on actual threats, namely Montoni’s attempts to extort property from her and her aunt. It also suggests that perhaps Emily misperceives or overreacts to these real threats, undercutting the force of Radcliffe’s critique of patriarchy.

As E.J. Clery and Claudia Johnson note, Emily displays masculine resolve when disputing her property with Montoni; however, on closer analysis, her speeches only pay lip service to bravery and rationality. For example, just after valiantly refusing to sign away her property to Montoni, Emily is unable to “support herself” and cannot get up
from her chair (395). As Johnson notes, when Montoni and his lackeys are forcing the door, Emily claims to be “not frightened in the least” and admonishes her aunt to “be calm.” Yet, Madame Montoni rejoins that Emily “can scarcely support” herself—a claim validated by Emily’s subsequent fainting spell (316-17). When escaping Udolpho, the “trembling” Emily, “sinking under anxiety,” can only make it “while Du Pont support[s] her” (449-51). Radcliffe’s constant reference to Emily’s inability to “support” her own weight underscores her frailty and dependence on others for deliverance.

Sibella’s republicanism is not just talk; she enacts her stated principles in asserting her “natural rights” when Valmont becomes abusive after learning she is pregnant with Clement’s child. In a sense, the narrative calls Sibella’s bluff regarding her professed physical prowess. When Valmont strikes her, Sibella acts decisively to protect herself. Filmar relates that while being chased, she “flew to the other side of the park, where the wall not being very perfect she climbed it rapidly, and in sight of her pursuers threw herself headlong into the moat. She was taken up unhurt” (281). This passage testifies to Sibella’s physical courage. She can run, climb, and dive, but the phrase “she was taken up unhurt” is disturbingly ambiguous. One wonders if she was “taken up” because she could not swim, as she earlier had boasted, or was “taken up” by force. Either way, the incident shows physical limitations and Valmont’s power over her person.

Fenwick continues to explore physical strength’s role in dominance with Sibella’s subsequent escape attempts. At first, Sibella’s failure to overcome the castle’s barriers seems to temper her enthusiasm about testing her physical limits. In a series of departures from her principles, which the novel suggests create her tragic end, Sibella does consent
to a clandestine escape with Murden. She forgoes her powerful claim to a radical ideal of sincerity, but she does not abandon her desire to exert physical strength. When relating their plan to Caroline, Murden remarks that Sibella “enquired if she must swim across the moat; and said she was sure she could swim;—for she knew why she had failed before” (322). She never explains her failure, but the inquiry demonstrates her persistent willingness to exert herself and to study how to improve her method.

However progressive Sibella’s manly sense of agency is, the narrative’s conclusion suggests that she struggles in vain. When she finally does confront Clement and realizes he has abandoned her for a rich widow, Sibella goes mad, delivers a stillborn child, and dies like a proper fallen woman. Provocatively, she expresses a desire to return to the very castle she tried so hard to escape. “‘Take me to the castle!’ at length she exclaimed. . . . ‘Bid Mr. Valmont provide a dungeon where I can die. I will not go into the wood! Oh, no! nor to my chamber!’” (346). Her desire could be read in multiple ways, each affecting the narrative’s representation of female submission. Most obviously, Sibella’s desire can be interpreted as an internalization of Valmont’s oppression. Finding her idealistic views exploded, she accepts the role her oppressor has defined for her. Far more interesting is the possibility that her desire to go to a dungeon—rather than places she associates with pleasure: the wood and her chamber—can be read as a recognition that she has transgressed her own moral code to eschew artifice. Caroline’s final letter to Valmont, which serves as the moral kernel of the novel, logically traces Sibella’s tragic end back to specific clandestine actions. Sibella’s desire to enter the dungeon voluntarily can be viewed as a self-inflicted punishment for failing to adhere to her own republican principles. Fenwick’s “dungeon” then is not reserved for
the fallen woman but the woman who fails to oppose her oppressor “openly” as Sibella had claimed was the ethical course of action.

Whether the narrative punishes Sibella for her naiveté or she punishes herself for falling short of her own ideals is unclear. As Julia Wright notes, all the characters at the novel’s tragic end are effectually silenced by either death or ceasing to write. However, by already establishing Sibella as a character who is unafraid of stomping around “murmuring galleries” and “lonely staircases” at midnight, the narrative undercuts the dungeon’s symbolic menace. That she expresses a desire to enter the space voluntarily suggests that she is a bit of a masochist, but certainly not a passive victim.

The ways in which Secresy troubles the dungeon’s signification speaks to this discussion’s central argument: these narrative spaces take on complex and fluid meanings that vary widely from text to text and within an individual text itself. Returning to the article “Terrorist Novel Writing” that began this discussion, “to sleep in a dungeon with venomous reptiles” was one of the manly skills the author feared novels like Secresy might teach. Did the young ladies the author is so worried about interpret this dungeon-sleeping as a sign of heroic fortitude, a perverse display of masochism, or an uncanny representation of domestic entrapment? This article argues that symbolically rich gothic spaces allowed readers to entertain all three possibilities simultaneously either as transgressive fantasies or veiled truths about women’s place in the home. Emmeline, The Mysteries of Udolpho, and Secresy reveal that heroines displayed a wide range of behaviors—from the hyper-feminine faints of Emily to the manly leaps of Sibella—to which readers responded with enthusiasm. Our critical response should mirror readers’
ideological flexibility when analyzing a genre that has played a seminal role in feminist criticism and the formation of a female canon.


For example, A.A. Markley argues that “particularly in *Emmeline*” Smith “had experimented with using Gothic elements to symbolize the subjugation of women.” A.A. Markley, “Charlotte Smith, the Godwin Circle, and the Proliferation of Speakers in *The Young Philosopher*,” *Charlotte Smith in British Romanticism*, ed. Jacqueline Labbe (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008) 87-100 (89). See also, Cynthia Klekar, “The Obligations of Form: Social Practice in Charlotte Smith’s *Emmeline*,” *Philological...*
Quarterly 86:3 (2007): 269-89 and Loraine Fletcher, introduction to Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle, by Charlotte Smith (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2003) 23.

12 Charlotte Smith, Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle, ed. Loraine Fletcher (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2003) 57.


20 For a synopsis of *Secresy*’s contemporary reviews see Isobel Grundy, introduction to *Secresy*, by Eliza Fenwick (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1998) 7-31.


26 Grundy, 25-29.


29 Wright, 163.


31 Wright, 171.