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CHARLOTTE SMITH'S SUBVERSIVE GOTHIC

Katherine Ellis

In a pioneering essay on the seven "horrid novels" that Isabella Thorp recommends to Catherine Moreland in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Michael Sadleir remarks that the Gothic novel of the late eighteenth century was "as much an expression of a deep subversive impulse as [was] the French Revolution."¹ This is nowhere more evident than in the novels of Charlotte Smith, a contemporary of Ann Radcliffe and an outspoken partisan of the Republic. This partisanship is least ambiguous in her most polemical novel, *Desmond*, published the same year as Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). But in all her work, as in her life (she left a spendthrift husband and wrote to support herself and her children) Charlotte Smith protested against arbitrary tyranny, particularly when its victims were members of her own sex.

Desmond is not a Gothic novel from beginning to end, but like several of Smith's novels, it uses situations and settings that were becoming recognizable features of a developing pattern, initiated by Walpole and standardized by Ann Radcliffe. These interpolated Gothicisms do for the plot of their respective novels what the Gothic novel in general did for the overall development of the genre: they provide a particular kind of space in which can be acted out certain "subversive impulses" which, in a realistic setting, would have violated the strict rules of decorum that the eighteenth-century novel, struggling to attain respectability, had increasingly embraced.

What I would like to suggest is that the "deep subversive impulse" for which the Gothic provides a kind of cover is directed against no less an institution than the bourgeois family itself. This applies differently depending on whether the story is told from the point of view of a male exile from that bourgeois Eden, the home, or from the point of view of a female who has been involuntarily (and temporarily) abducted from that same Eden. But where the protagonist is a beautiful girl struggling to avoid a marriage that is being imposed on her by a father (or by one who usurps the "right" of a father to do so), a heroine who is bent on preserving the integrity of her well-educated heart, which she values above life itself, then the target of the "subversive impulse" can be most readily seen.

The bourgeois family reproduces itself by controlling the next generation. It accomplishes this principally through two channels: sexual repression and the demand for unquestioned obedience. The progressive desexualization of the eighteenth-century heroine can easily be traced from the heroines of Defoe and his female contemporaries, Eliza Haywood and Mary de la Riviere Manely, through Pamela and Clarissa and down to Evelina, for whom even the minimally assertive act of saying "no" to a fop at a

dance is a breach of decorum that gets her into all sorts of trouble. This development parallels the increasing hegemony of bourgeois values, particularly with respect to the wives and daughters of the newly prosperous merchant class, who are now sequestered in the home, removed from the realms of production and politics.

But early capitalism brings with it tremendous economic instability. Fortunes are as suddenly lost as made, and the concerned bourgeois parent looked to marriage, preferably to a family whose fortunes were less precarious than his own, as a way of securing not only his children's futures but his own. Charlotte Smith's father married her off at the age of fifteen, for just these reasons, to the dissolute second son of a director of the East India Company, and though he meant well, he still condemned his daughter to what she felt to be a lifetime of misery. Yet alongside the practical considerations that made a daughter a valuable commodity, there was taking place a "genteel revolution" whereby women of the middle class, sheltered from the world outside the home, were taking over the domain of "the heart." Thus the issue of choosing a marriage partner brought into conflict two essential aspects of bourgeois ideology: the absolute authority of the father as head of the family and the equally absolute purity of the female heart.

In the Gothic novel, right is always on the side of the child, not the parent. Even Ann Radcliffe, conservative as she is in other respects, throws the whole weight of her plots behind the assertion that "a choice which involves the happiness or misery of your whole life, ought to be decided only by yourself."² But this is not seen as an attack on the patriarchal order because the father is a member of the aristocracy (of Italy, preferably), and this means that the rebelling child is, in effect, striking a blow for the bourgeoisie.

So the heroine, with the blessings of the author and the class she represents, escapes from her father's castle, or from the monastery to which he has confined her for disobeying him. Moreover, in most instances, she leaves with the aid of the young man to whom she has given her heart. Normally two unmarried people were not permitted to wander about in "the world" without a chaperone. But partly because of the circumstances from which they escape, and partly because of the terrors with which that world is filled, the heroine is allowed not only to be with him but to clasp his hand, fall "lifeless" into his arms, and be carried about in this state. Surrounded by ruins, banditti, or haunted passageways, the heroine and her love can experience a great deal of physical contact, even while she is in the process of demonstrating the purity that is still requisite of a heroine. The rules of the drawing room have been swept away by terror.

Charlotte Smith's *Desmond* offers perhaps the simplest example in her novels of the way in which the Gothic breaks down barriers, resolves contradictions, and opens up the sphere of permissible action for the virtuous maiden and her gallant rescuer. Geraldine Verney is not quite a typical Gothic heroine inasmuch as she is already married, forced by her parents, as Charlotte Smith was, into a union with a dissolute spendthrift who is rarely around. The person who is

around, Desmond, is referred to at one point as “an English Werther.” But unlike his prototype, Desmond lasts for three volumes, and presides, along with Geraldine, at the last moments of a rival who gives them his blessing on his deathbed.

In this novel, Gothic “machinery” is introduced only for one incident in the final volume. Prior to this, Geraldine has preferred retirement and the simple life, and has been living in the country with her children under the watchful eye of the devoted Desmond. But his idyll comes to an end when she is summoned by her husband to meet him in France in the company of a well-known rake to whom he has, in effect, sold his wife in order to pay off some debts. Geraldine refuses, but this breach of wifely duty so enrages her mother as well as her husband that she decides to set off alone.

Naturally Desmond follows her at a distance, disguising himself as a monk when she settles down in a retired and melancholy convent outside Paris. But she leaves suddenly in response to a note telling her that her husband has been wounded fighting on the royalist side of the Revolution. The next day Desmond gets word of her departure and, suspecting a plot on the part of Verney to place his wife in the power of his dissolute creditor, rushes off and rescues Geraldine from banditti who have their headquarters in a castle nearby. “Present terror deprived me of reflection,” Geraldine observed later. But it also deprived her of the strength to escape without the physical support of Desmond.

Enduring an ordeal such as this, and observing Desmond in the role of a champion willing to risk his life for her, allows Geraldine to begin to acknowledge the feelings for Desmond that she has hitherto suppressed, but which the reader knows exist. There are not sexual feelings, however. Gratitude is the outer limit of feeling compatible with virtue at this stage of the “genteel revolution.” So her attention is diverted by a battery of external dangers in such a way that she can escape from the real danger that involves not simply the old pitfall of “yielding to passion” that had been the theme of the pre-Richardsonian novelists³ but the now forbidden one of feeling it at all. As she says in a letter to her sister:

We travelled on through the woods for some miles; . . . The road, rough and hardly passable, seemed leading us to the dark abode of desolation and despair; yet, when I saw, as I reclined my head against the side of the chaise, that Desmond was with me—as I found his arm sometimes supporting me—and heard his voice speaking of hope and comfort, I found that all local evils were unheeded, and that nothing had power to produce again the stupor from which I had so lately recovered, but the dread of seeing his life in danger.—My sister! if such a sentiment should be deemed culpable in a married woman, let the circumstances, under which it was felt, be at least considered before she is condemned.⁴

Terror, the production of which is the particular specialty of the Gothic novelist, here functions to remove the restrictions on feeling which, though presented as patently unjust, are not in the power of the heroine *qua* heroine to remove.

Geraldine is a heroine whose natural goodness is stifled by the dictates of filial and wifely duty enforced through sexual repression. In *Celestina*, written the year before *Desmond* and, like it, containing a Gothic interlude, another channel of parental control is undermined: in this case a mother’s dying command to her

son. Its heroine is more typical of the Gothic genre than Geraldine; Celestina is an orphan whose parentage is surrounded by mystery. She was left to be reared in a convent, where the nuns were "insensible to the perfection that won every other heart."⁵ Fortunately she captures the fancy of a Mrs. Willoughby, a widow with a son and a daughter "to whose education she devoted herself." She therefore adopts Celestina, and at the appropriate moment George Willoughby falls madly in love with his foster sister.

But for reasons never explained, this ideal mother wishes her son to marry for money and save the family estate from the ruin his father's extravagance has caused, and she exacts from her son on her deathbed a promise that he will not marry Celestina. The spouse she has in mind is Miss Fitz-Hayman, daughter of her cousin, Lord Castlenorth. But Lady Castlenorth discovers George's preference, and spreads the rumor that Celestina is Mrs. Willoughby's daughter by her son's tutor. On hearing this George rushes off, at the end of the first volume, on the day he was to marry Celestina, and spends the remaining three volumes searching for proof that Celestina is not his sister. Meanwhile Celestina's worthiness is demonstrated by the fact that, though he can never bring himself to tell his beloved what is wrong, and though rumors keep flying that he is engaged to Miss Fitz-Hayman, she foresakes all others and cleaves to his memory.

The proof George seeks is encapsulated in the Gothic section of the novel, ushered in by his decision to go to the Alps, where "his utmost hope was, to obtain, by change of place, so much tranquility of mind, as to allow him to feel some satisfaction in the variety of scenes it offered."⁶ There he hears of a castle where lives a Count de Bellegarde, surrounded by rumors that the castle has been haunted "ever since the death of my lord's sister, whose heart, they say, was broken by her father's ill usage."⁷ This clue is enough to alert any Gothic reader: that sister, a victim of parental tyranny, is Celestina's mother. And once this injustice is uncovered, an unstated higher law bids him marry his beloved and forget his mother's command. Perhaps he felt that Celestina's aristocratic lineage would have made her change her mind, but nothing is said about it.

As the Count tells it, he and his brother and sister, Genevieve, were left motherless at an early age, whereupon their father took them to his Gothic retreat in the mountains. It is interesting that when women retire from the world to rear their children they are doing something "natural," but when men do the same thing the chances are that they are Gothic villains, perverting everything natural in the tie between parents and children. His father was turned into a tyrant, the Count explains, by "the gloomy solitude in which he lived, the power of life and death which he possessed in his domain, and the proneness of his mind to superstition, which was encouraged by the monks of a neighbouring convent."⁸ Finally the brothers determined "the break the fetters which [they] did not think even parental authority had a right to impose."⁹

They flee into the army, and when the Count returns with an English friend named Ormond he finds his sister being pursued by a Jesuit "who entertained

her with conversation which she could not misunderstand." Ormond falls in love with her, the Count with her female companion, Jacquolina, and they escape the double tyranny of parent and church to a double wedding ceremony, only to be betrayed by a "treacherous monk." Both women are by this time pregnant. Jacquolina's mother takes her daughter's child and Jacquolina is forced by the Count's father into a convent, from which the Count is planning to rescue her, since the Revolution has abolished convents. Genevieve's child was taken by a kind woman friend to the Pyrenees, and then to Jacquolina's convent, the circumstances of her birth shrouded in mystery. A small miniature in a locket, without which no Gothic novel is complete, reveals the identity of the child to be Celestina, thus freeing her to marry George.

In this novel, Gothicism allows Charlotte Smith to be unequivocal in her opposition to parental tyranny. The convention of the maiden in flight, still an identifying feature of a Gothic novel, became, in the hands of the early female Gothicists, a symbol through which they could portray, in a covert fashion, the imprisonment that is the underside of economic dependence. Sweeping away (temporarily) all social conventions, a heavy dose of Gothic atmosphere could open the way for action that springs from natural goodness. And in the triumph of children over parents the reader is shown the triumph of pure feeling (i.e., prelapsarian spontaneity) over the confining prejudices and institutions that fallen man has created. To the extent that the Gothic novel attacks the aristocracy and the church, it echos the sentiments of the French Revolution. But insofar as it shakes, however surreptitiously, the very core institution of bourgeois society, the family, its subversive reverberations are not yet stilled.

NOTES

¹Michael Sadleir, "The Northanger Novels: A Footnote to Jane Austen," *The English Association Pamphlet no. 68* (November 1927), p. 4.

²Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), vol. 1, p. 144.

³See John Richetti, *The Popular Novel Before Richardson* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969).

⁴Charlotte Smith, *Desmond*, 3 vols. (London, 1792), vol. 3, pp. 289-90.

⁵Charlotte Smith, *Celestina*, 4 vols. (London, 1791), vol. 1, p. 3.

⁶*Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 189.

⁷*Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 218.

⁸*Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 238.

⁹*Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 240.