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**The Intersectional Gothic: Women and Other(ed) Interlopers in
Wuthering Heights, *Frankenstein*, and *The Woman in White***

Gothic literature in England emerged and gained in popularity in the changing world of the late 18th and 19th centuries, a period characterized by shifting social, political, and economic realities—from the Industrial and French Revolutions to ongoing and increasingly unpopular colonial exploits (e.g., Arata 622; Greene) and the movement toward (mostly white) women’s empowerment. Situated in this context, the Gothic novel acts as “a vivid indicator of the deep cultural tensions . . . of [these] increasingly ‘modern’ times” (Hogle 221), providing a window into the complex of cultural fears and anxieties produced by the growing instability of the status quo. Playing on these fears and anxieties, the horrors of Gothic fiction could be read as “metaphors that imply how much a culture . . . sensed itself to be under attack” (Botting 38).

One *foundational* fear explored and exploited in Gothic literature is the looming threat of the “Other” (Meyers 448)—frequently characterized by xenophobic projections of the avenging “dark races” (Meyer 484), and their claustrophobic mirror images: British women struggling against (or—*worse!*—succumbing to) the insistent oppressions of domesticity. This dual “Otherness,” with its oppositional focus on both the foreign and the domestic, may appear difficult to reconcile, but such are the intricacies of the Gothic genre. When considered in terms of the hegemonic Briton of the time—a white, English-speaking, heterosexual, able-bodied, bourgeois, and thus privileged and entitled male—it becomes apparent that those who deviate from this norm, whether by foreignness or femaleness, must by definition be Other, and thus

both feared and reviled—as hegemony itself is maintained by perpetuating power imbalances and quashing challenges to the status quo. As Edward W. Said has said, “[t]he power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging . . . constitutes one of the main connections between [culture and imperialism]” (xiii). Still, the treatment of the Other in Gothic literature is often contradictory: for example, Helene Meyers asserts that misogyny is “illuminated, . . . critiqued, and subverted”—but also, crucially, “reinforced . . . by and through Gothic literary traditions” (448, emphasis added). Gynocentric fears exposed in Gothic literature are themselves (at least) dual, comprising both longstanding societal fears of women “getting out of hand” (Keuls 328) and *escaping* the trappings of the domestic sphere, and women’s own fears of being inescapably consigned to domesticity (Smith and Wallace). For, while one function of the Gothic novel may be to “warn against the dangers of individual will unmoored from social structures and traditional roles” (Eisner, par. 24), many Gothic novelists in Georgian and Victorian-era England sought to undermine the prevailing patriarchal, racist, and imperialist norms of the time—albeit with various levels of effectiveness. As Stephen D. Arata points out, stories of “[r]everse colonization . . . contain the potential for powerful critiques of imperialist ideologies, even if that potential usually remains unrealized” (623). In this paper, I examine and compare the focus on Otherness in three Gothic novels: Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*—as representative of female-authored texts of the period—and male author Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*. This examination explores the ways in which Gothic novelists of the time sought to subvert (and occasionally reinforced) British imperialism and patriarchal oppression through their work, and compare the cultural fears and anxieties embedded and expressed in the two novels written by women to those in the novel written by a man.

A note on the intersection between Foreignness and Femaleness

From the unstated yet ubiquitous patriarchal perspective of white male hegemony in Georgian and Victorian England, the continued oppression of “foreigners” (e.g., immigrants and colonized, principally non-white peoples) and females—among others—was required to maintain dominance.¹ Therefore, upward mobility in either group could be seen as a threat to the established social order. Although for organizational purposes I have attempted to separate themes of foreignness and femaleness in this paper, the two are intrinsically linked. Brontë in particular conflates the status of white Englishwomen with that of foreigners in her depiction of the profound bond between Catherine and Heathcliff, as when Catherine says, “[H]e’s more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same” (Brontë and Peterson 86). Meyer demonstrates that this “yoking” of Catherine to Heathcliff “is central to *Wuthering Heights*” (485), and is based largely on their shared experience of and resistance to the constraints imposed on them by Britain’s racist, imperialist, and patriarchal social order.

Because this paper focuses on such “intersections,” the practice of *intersectionality* bears mention here. Intersectionality is an important, although controversial and variously conceptualized, framework for feminist and gender analysis (e.g., Keating; Mann; Puar); one key feature of intersectionality (or intersectionality theory) is its consideration of the *compounding* nature of different forms of oppression—what Susan Archer Mann has described as “the simultaneous and intersecting or co-determinative forces of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism” (59). The conflation of the categories of “female” and “foreign” as discussed in this paper does not constitute an intersectional analysis in this contemporary

¹ I do not suggest that this has changed substantially in the intervening years.

sense; however, it may signal the incipient stirrings of intersectional thought among Gothic authors such as Brontë.

British Imperialism and Fear of Foreigners

Both Said (xii) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak remind readers that literature has played a central role in furthering the agendas of Western imperialism; Spivak emphasizes that

It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. (243)

Said's further point that "[n]ever was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native" (xii)—language remarkable for its invocation of gendered stereotypes of the "active" male versus the "passive" female—recalls the traditions of resistance that have been as much a feature of imperialist and patriarchal forms of oppression as the fallacy of white male supremacy on which these oppressions have relied. If literature has been a tool of imperialism, it has also contributed to its unmaking (and continues to do so).

Although "foreignness" is central to all of the novels considered in this paper, it is depicted differently in each. *Frankenstein* is set in Switzerland, though the tale is told in letters from Russia and the Arctic, and so it begins in foreignness. The novel's unnamed creature, while of local (Swiss) manufacture, is clearly foreign in origin, material, and design. The creature is *not of woman born*, but rather is stitched together from human and animal body parts in a laboratory. Victor describes its "unearthly ugliness . . . almost too horrible for human eyes" (Shelley and Smith 93), at once emphasizing multiple facets of the creature's Otherness: it is *unearthly* (hence foreign, alien), it is *not human* (hence inferior), and it is an *it* (hence unnatural).

In case those points were not sufficiently damning, Victor specifies that it is *horrible* and *ugly* as well. While this unnaturally occurring creature may not appear to be a typical representation of the colonized Other, Spivak discusses *Frankenstein* in terms of its engagement with imperialist discourse, and John Clement Ball argues persuasively for its treatment as an anti-imperialist text. Ball also sees *Frankenstein* as specifically anti-slavery, a reading supported by Harold L. Melchow's assertion that the creature embodies numerous stereotypes of Black Africans held at the time, such as a large and powerful body, white teeth and black lips, "repulsive features," and a penchant for vengeance and destruction (18-23). To Melchow's list I would add the creature's ambiguous level of humanity, as denying human status to those counted as "inferior"—including colonized peoples and women—was a routine strategy of British imperialism. Universally rejected and despised for its Otherness, the creature in Shelley's novel is completely marginalized, and so is ultimately driven by nothing but revenge. Yet if we accept that the creature is meant to represent an enslaved African,² we see that Shelley has imbued it [him] with a great capacity for love and intellectual development—subversive in that this ran counter to mainstream British thinking of the day. The tale of Safie's enslaved mother, "who, born in freedom, spurned the bondage to which she was now reduced" (Shelley and Smith 112), adds credence to the suggestion of an anti-slavery critique in *Frankenstein*.

Heathcliff, a more conventional exemplar of the colonial subject, is also rejected and despised for his Otherness, and is also first introduced as an "it" (Brontë and Peterson 51-2). Even Nelly Dean says at one point that she felt him unlike "a creature of [her] own species"

² This interpretation is distinct from, yet not completely unrelated to, readings of the creature as representative of Britain's emerging and exploited labouring class (e.g., McNally)—itself "a kind of domestic Other as a new social group that took shape during Shelley's period" (Mark McCutcheon, personal communication, August 16, 2017).

(150). Representing the amorphous Other—dark-skinned and potentially of African, Indian, Chinese, and/or “Gipsy” descent, Heathcliff too is marginalized and becomes intent on wreaking vengeance on his oppressors. As Arata explains, “In the marauding, invasive Other, British culture sees its own imperial practices mirrored back in monstrous forms” (623). Brontë, more direct than Shelley in her imperialist critique, exploits common anxieties about “reverse colonization” with the following line, spoken by Nelly to Heathcliff: “Who knows, but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen, each of them able to buy up, with one week’s income, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange together?” (Brontë and Peterson 67). As Meyer suggests, the idea that Heathcliff may be in such an exalted position—in social, political, *and* economic terms—and the possibility that he has spent time with the American army, “drawing blood from his foster country” (Brontë and Peterson 95), would also have evoked “mid-nineteenth-century political anxieties about loss of empire” (Meyer 495). These critiques of British imperialism are particularly potent, as they play not only on fears of reverse colonization, but also on colonial *guilt* (Arata 623). More specifically, these fears would have been linked to the suggestion that “dark-skinned people like Heathcliff might be able to take revenge for the subjugation they have suffered at British hands,” and to Brontë’s construction of Heathcliff as “the disconcerting representative of all the British colonies that, however subtly, may threaten to turn against the ‘parent state’” (Meyer 495-6).

In *The Woman in White*, Collins takes a different approach, centring his depictions of the foreign Other not on the “dark races” oppressed by British imperialism, but on an “Orientalized” view of southern continental Europeans—more specifically, Italians. Although Collins has been described as a “committed Italophile” (Ohashi 3), his Italian characters, Professor Pesca and Count Fosco, nonetheless adhere to racialized stereotypes of Italians as passionate, queer, and

degenerate (Ohashi 6-7). Fosco, in particular, also exhibits certain stereotypes associated at that time with “the Oriental,” as theorized by Said—he is sly and mysterious, and apparently possessed of mesmeric powers; he is also puzzling (Collins 226), impenetrable (313), furtive (565), and cunning (584). In the earlier stages of the novel, Collins chronicles Pesca’s idiosyncrasies in a humourous way, presenting him as an excitable, harmless, and “eccentric little foreigner” with a “warm Southern nature” (52-4). This latter designation helps to establish the north-south divide between the two Italian characters, which aligns perfectly with racist and imperialist beliefs about northern and southern peoples more generally: Fosco is from the “advanced north” of Italy, while Pesca hails from the “underdeveloped south” (Ohashi 7). Although they are both deeply *foreign*, Pesca is initially portrayed as something of a buffoon, while Fosco is dignified and stately in his inscrutability.

Fosco is also a more threatening presence: though he is tall and fat, he moves silently (Collins 242); this, coupled with the “extraordinary [mesmeric] power of his eyes” and the “surprising” fluidity of his English (242), suggests that he could move among the British undetected, and without giving himself away as “foreign.” This frightening premise is at the heart of the “reverse colonization narrative” of *The Woman in White* (Nayder 1), and implies that the cherished pinnacle of British identity is not so difficult to achieve, to impersonate, or to *infiltrate*, as one might expect. Fosco is Homi Bhabha’s colonial “mimic man”³ (128)—his “displacing gaze” a threat to England’s “reforming, civilizing mission” (127)—gone too far. For, as Bhabha explains, the colonized (or foreign) subject is intended to become “*almost the same* [as the colonizer], *but not quite*” (126). According to Nayder, “Count Fosco, an aristocratic

³ The gendered nature of Bhabha’s theorization is unfortunate, but its alliterative appeal must have been difficult to resist.

invader, threatens to colonize the English. Portraying Fosco as a grotesque mirror image of his hosts, Collins subtly criticizes Britain's imperial ideology" (1). Fosco's colonizing power is evident in Marian's observation that "[h]e looks like a man who could tame anything" (Collins 240). The Count amply demonstrates this ability, transforming his wife, once a "wayward Englishwoman" (240) into "a civil, silent, unobtrusive woman" (239); exerting an unexplained attraction over Marian (240); training his pet canaries, white mice, and a "vicious and treacherous" cockatoo to behave as he wishes (242-3); and staring down a "savage" bloodhound with a speech that might have been meant for every British imperialist to hear:

You big dogs are all cowards You would kill a poor cat, you infernal coward. You would fly at a starving beggar. . . . [A]nything that is afraid of your big body and your wicked white teeth You could throttle me at this moment, you mean, miserable bully; and you daren't so much as look me in the face, because I'm not afraid of you.
(244)

As for the clownish Pesca, the discovery of his ties to a dangerous underground organization called "the Brotherhood" evokes a similar British imperialist anxiety—equally salient in the current political climate—that *the foreigner in our midst could be a threat*: "Leave the refugee alone! Laugh at him, distrust him, open your eyes in wonder at that secret self which smolders in him . . ." (Collins 569). Collins's "Italian subplot" also acts as an understated censure of Austrian imperialism in Italy (Nayder 2). That Italy lags behind Britain in terms of socio-political progress is suggested by Pesca's impassioned speech about the Brotherhood and *Il Risorgimento*—the revolutionary movement toward Italian unification, liberty, and independence (Chapman): "It is not for you to say—you Englishmen, who have conquered your freedom so long ago" (Collins 569). Thus "[c]omparing Pesca and his countrymen to the English in an

earlier stage of development . . . Collins suggests that they will evolve into Englishmen” (Nayder 3). Ironically, this arrogant and deterministic suggestion of Italian inferiority to Britain is at the heart of Collins’s challenge to the Austrian subjugation of Italy. Collins’s imperialist critique is further weakened by his British character Walter Hartright’s armed odyssey into the “wild primeval forest” of Honduras (Collins 223). By emphasizing the dangers of this journey and the primitiveness of the inhabitants of Central America, Collins draws a distinction between the Italians and the Hondurans, “underscor[ing] the illegitimacy of an empire in which the colonized are themselves embryonic colonists . . . and justif[ying] the existence of another” (Nayder 3). This mixed messaging recalls Arata’s point, introduced earlier, that not all stories of reverse colonization achieve their full potential (623).

Patriarchal Oppression: Gendered Anxieties, Female Fears, and Fear of the Female

In addition to markers of identity such as race, culture, and colour, Othering in Gothic literature is often based on gender. Meyers points out that “[t]he othering of women and, by extension, the feminine is often explored in Gothic texts”—and often in conflicting ways (448). For example, Gothic texts may engage with and interrogate societal fears *of* women, but may also validate such fears. The “Female Gothic,” referring principally to Gothic narratives written *by* women, explores another facet of gendered anxiety expressed frequently in Gothic novels: women’s own fears, including the fear of “entrapment within the domestic and within the female body” (Smith and Wallace 1).

One might expect this theme of *female entrapment* to be more roundly emphasized in the works of female authors; however, Shelley, Brontë, and Collins all demonstrate, with varying levels of subtlety, the horrors of such entrapment, which may also be seen as a response to broader cultural fears *of* women. In *Frankenstein*, young Victor rhapsodizes about his happy

home and the lovingly cloying atmosphere it provides (Smith 319-21); this must be especially so for Victor's adopted sister and future wife, Elizabeth, who is said to haunt that abode like a "shrine-dedicated lamp" (Shelley and Smith 45)—a description reeking of anything but agency. Characters frequently express the tedium of domesticity, as in Elizabeth's letter to Victor where she observes that "[l]ittle alteration, except the growth of our dear children, has taken place since you left us. The blue lake, and snow-clad mountains, they never change" (66). She goes on to claim—none too convincingly—that she finds amusement in her "trifling occupations" in their "placid home" (66).

Shelley also expresses anxieties about entrapment with respect to women's lack of agency in choosing where to live, and with whom. Women in the Frankenstein family seem all to be "foreign" at some point, procured and folded into the household like items of trade. First the young and destitute Caroline is "rescued" through marriage to Victor Frankenstein's father, a man then already in "the decline of life," according to Victor himself (Shelley and Smith 40). Caroline subsequently takes on the role of procuring further females: with her husband's permission, she "prevailed on [Elizabeth's] rustic guardians to yield their charge to her" so that Elizabeth "became the inmate" of the Frankenstein household (43). Years later, Caroline "prevailed on" another guardian—this time Justine Moritz's mother—to give her daughter over to the Frankensteins (66). In her new household, Justine "learned the duties of a servant," whether or not this was to her liking; although, as Elizabeth helpfully points out, a servant in Geneva is not "so poor nor so despised" as a servant in France or England (66). Thus these three women are all "rescued" from relative poverty or poor family circumstances, and expected to demonstrate nothing but gratitude—and some level of servitude—for the opportunity to grow up wealthy in the bosom of their saviour(s) Frankenstein. All die for the privilege. Caroline's

recruited “daughters” both die under particularly horrible circumstances, and, either directly or indirectly, at the hands of the being created by Caroline’s son.

Brontë and Collins similarly demonstrate that growing up wealthy is hardly a guarantee of health or safety for a young woman. Both invoke inheritance and marriage property laws that set women at a disadvantage. In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine Earnshaw is a study in female entrapment, growing as she does from a “wild, hatless little savage” (Brontë and Peterson 63) into a “‘savage’ free child trapped within her adult ladyhood” (Meyer 485). The “cumbersome clothes” of this ladyhood, “which hamper [Catherine’s] movement and her emotions” (486), symbolize her entrapment: upon her return from a two-week sojourn at Thrushcross Grange, Catherine is unable even to untie her own hat for fear of “disarrang[ing her] curls” (64). Her domestic entrapment eventually becomes fatal, exacerbated as it is by her marriage to the kindly but insipid Edward Linton, her ensuing pregnancy, and her inability ever to reconcile the two sides of her nature. Shortly before Catherine’s death, she says, “[T]he thing that irks me most is this shattered prison, after all. I’m tired, tired of being enclosed here. I’m wearying to escape into that glorious world” (150)—the wild world of the moors that she and Heathcliff shared, before she aspired to live up to society’s expectations and become a “lady,” with tragic results.

Unhappy domesticity is the fate of most women in *Wuthering Heights*, particularly those who marry—for Catherine and Isabella, wildly so. Hindley’s wife Frances may not be unhappy in her domestic life, but she does not live long to enjoy it. Nelly is perhaps neither happy nor unhappy, but simply abides. Catherine the younger, forced into a miserable marriage and widowhood, is the only one who achieves a degree of empowerment and a “happy ending,” whether or not it is intended satirically, as Meyer suggests (500-2). The younger Catherine takes the lead in initiating her relationship with Hareton and teaches him to read; while some suggest

this represents the “emasculatation” of Hareton (Gose 1), perhaps it represents instead a degree of egalitarianism, previously lacking. Perhaps claims of emasculatation reflect (even contemporary) male fears (and possibly broader societal fears) that emasculatation is the natural result of any movement toward women’s empowerment.

Interestingly, the male-authored novel *The Woman in White* is at least as deeply concerned with issues of gender and female entrapment as are Shelley’s and Brontë’s novels. Collins explores gender norms and the transgression thereof through both male and female characters, and explores issues of entrapment through most of his female characters. What clearer emblem could there be than *the woman in white* herself, Anne Catherick, unjustly imprisoned in a lunatic asylum? Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe are ensconced in a life of domesticity when we first meet them, with little occupation other than drawing lessons. Madame Fosco has little more, having been so “tamed” by her husband that she “sits for hours together without saying a word, frozen up in the strangest manner in herself” (239). Laura Fairlie endures the further indignities of entrapment within a loveless, abusive marriage, followed by entrapment within the asylum—and the identity—previously inhabited by Anne Catherick. Anne Catherick, after her death, is temporarily entrapped in a tomb bearing another woman’s name, and her mother is entrapped, friendless, within the small town in which she lost her reputation, her husband, and her daughter, though she seems most concerned with the first of these. Mrs. Vesey is entrapped in a sad no-woman’s land, in a stereotype of the older woman who has become irrelevant to those around her. Marian, perhaps the most interesting gender study in the novel, may be seen as the woman the least at risk of entrapment—possibly owing to her many “male” characteristics; however, if her goal was to marry a man (a common enough goal for a woman at

the time), one might suppose that she felt trapped within her “own dear, dark, clever, gipsy-face” (Collins 236), which Hartright himself describes as “ugly” (74).

Although Marian is a British citizen, she is Othered by her “ugly” physical appearance, the swarthinness of her complexion, which suggests foreignness, and her preponderance of traditionally male traits, such as her *almost* moustache, her “masculine mouth and jaw” (74), and her assertive, straightforward, and competent manner. Throughout the novel, Marian ascribes a variety of unflattering and undermining qualities to women, none of which she exhibits herself—such as being “flighty” and “inattentive” (77); further, she claims not to “think much of [her] own sex” (75). She is the site of considerable female agency—she acts (if not always successfully) to protect her sister from the early attentions of Walter Hartright, the self-indulgent indifference of the disturbingly (to Walter) effeminate Frederick Fairlie, the cruelty of Sir Percival Glyde, and the manipulations of Count Fosco; Marian also effects almost single-handedly Laura’s rescue from the asylum. In addition, Marian gains the respect and admiration of both Hartright and Fosco, and her recorded narrative comprises much of the evidence used to re-establish her sister’s identity. However, Marian is limited to domestic spheres throughout the novel, and is content to follow her sister from household to household; it is Walter Hartright whose indefatigable and odyssean efforts finally save Laura and return her stolen identity to her. Thus, although gender is queried in the text, traditional gender roles, including the active, manly, heroic male, are maintained.

Almost the same, but not quite

As explored in this paper, the Gothic novels *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Woman in White* all interrogate constructions of the Other, critiquing British imperialism through narratives of reverse colonization, and exploring cultural anxieties around gender and other

markers of identity. Interestingly, the novels by women exploit fears of the colonized Other wreaking vengeance on the colonizer largely through violence, while Collins's tale of reverse colonization involves a less obvious and more insidious form of colonization through infiltration, assimilation, and possibly mesmerism. Collins also exhibits a different level of critique, justifying imperial exploits in Central America on the basis of the inhabitants' "primitiveness" (on which the stirrings of imperialism are frequently based, whether targeting the foreign Other or the domestic, typically female, incarnation).

With respect to gendered anxieties and the subversion of patriarchy, all three texts also engage in the exploration of the cultural fear of women, women's resulting entrapment in the domestic sphere, and the dangers the domestic sphere (including marriage) could pose for women. While Shelley's key female characters die, and die horribly, without transgressing their prescribed gender roles, both Brontë and Collins offer some form of "happy ending." At the close of *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë challenges notions of female domesticity by allowing young Catherine to assume a degree of agency. In *The Woman in White*, however, despite its engagement with unconventional gender identities, it is the heroic male character of Walter Hartright who re-enacts and reinscribes traditional gender roles by rescuing his vulnerable wife and her sister.

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