

## Chapter One:

### Emotional Invalidation and the Education of Emily St. Aubert

After she's been carried off for unknown reasons to Udolpho—an ancient and foreboding castle set high in the mountains of northeast Italy—Emily St. Aubert looks around her room. It's a lonely space, filled with dark, heavy furniture, located far apart from her aunt, uncle, and their handful of servants in a remote part of the castle that chills her with something “more than fear” (Radcliffe 234). Looking past the room's contents, she discovers something disturbing in the architecture itself.

**Cass (narrator):** To call off her attention from subjects that pressed heavily on her spirits, she rose and again examined her room and its furniture. As she walked round it, she passed a door, that was not quite shut, and, perceiving, that it was not the one, through which she entered, she brought the light forward to discover whither it led. She opened it, and, going forward, had nearly fallen down a steep, narrow staircase that wound from it, between two stone walls (Radcliffe 235; part 2, 37:09–37:24)

She discovers that her room contains a secret passageway. Like anyone would be, Emily is curious where it leads and whom she might find on the other side, but it's also very dark, and she's alone, so she's afraid to go into it. *Also* like anyone would be.

**Cass (narrator):** Closing the door, therefore, she endeavoured to fasten it, but, upon further examination, perceived, that it had no bolts on the chamber side, though it had two on the other. By placing a heavy chair against it, she in some measure remedied the defect; yet she was still alarmed at the thought of sleeping in this remote room alone, with a door opening she knew not whither, and which could not be perfectly fastened on the inside (Radcliffe 235; part 2, 37:38–38:02)

This scene takes place in the second volume of Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, a novel published in England in 1794 that's widely considered to be an archetypal example of the Gothic genre. The story begins in the picturesque French countryside of the late sixteenth century, and in the first volume and a half, readers have already seen the genteel and sensitive Emily witness the death of first her mother, then her father; fall in love and become engaged to the worthy Valancourt;

and come under the guardianship of a paternal aunt, the self-absorbed Madame Cheron who forcefully breaks Emily's engagement and steals her wedding plans for herself, entering into an ill-advised match with an enigmatic and unfeeling Italian named Montoni. Emily and her aunt are then whisked away to Venice by this mysterious signor, where Emily is nearly forced to marry a loathsome, wheedling casino owner named Count Morano. Still desperately in love with her long-lost Valancourt, Emily is spared from becoming the Countess Morano only by the unknown circumstances that have brought her, to Udolpho, in a hasty trip undertaken by dark of night and left unexplained by her uncle Montoni.

In the remote and vulnerable chamber her uncle has assigned to her, Emily drags more furniture over to barricade the mysterious door with the help of Annette, a charming, highly excitable maidservant, and then passes an anxious night in her new abode. The next morning, feeling invigorated by the sublime scenery she sees outside her window, Emily determines to explore the secret passageway. But when she returns to the door, she discovers something even more disturbing than before.

**Cass (narrator):** When she turned from the casement, her eyes glanced upon the door she had so carefully guarded, on the preceding night, and she now determined to examine whither it led; but, on advancing to remove the chairs, she perceived, that they were already moved a little way. Her surprise cannot be easily imagined, when, in the next minute, she perceived that the door was fastened.—She felt, as if she had seen an apparition. The door of the corridor was locked as she had left it, but this door, which could be secured only on the outside, must have been bolted, during the night. She became seriously uneasy at the thought of sleeping again in a chamber, thus liable to intrusion, so remote, too, as it was from the family, and she determined to mention the circumstance to Madame Montoni, and to request a change (Radcliffe 242; part 2, 56:17–57:05)

To change rooms is a reasonable request, one would think, since there's solid evidence that this chamber is unsafe, meaning her wellbeing—read: her *virginity*, that most valuable asset of middle-class women—could be compromised. Regardless, Madame Montoni, per usual, can't seem to muster any concern for her niece's circumstances, absorbed as she is with her own miserable

marriage. She brushes Emily off and refers her to her husband, who soon storms into the breakfast room seeming even more angry and unapproachable than usual.

**Cass (narrator):** Their breakfast passed in silence, till Emily ventured to request, that another apartment might be allotted to her, and related the circumstance that made her wish it.

**Cass (Montoni):** I have no time to attend to these idle whims, said Montoni. That chamber was prepared for you, and you must rest contented with it. It is not probable, that any person would take the trouble of going to that remote stair-case, for the purpose of fastening a door. If it was not fastened, when you entered the chamber, the wind, perhaps, shook the door and made the bolts slide. But I know not why I should undertake to account for so trifling an occurrence. (Radcliffe 243; part 2, 59:18–59:55)

*Maybe the wind shook the door and made the bolts slide.* This explanation is... *ludicrous*. And Emily knows it.

**Cass (narrator):** This explanation was by no means satisfactory to Emily, who had observed, that the bolts were rusted, and consequently could not be thus easily moved; but she forebore to say so, and repeated her request. (Radcliffe 243-244; part 2, 59:56–1:00:06)

Nevertheless, she persisted. And, as you might suspect, Montoni doesn't react well.

**Cass (Montoni):** If you will not release yourself from the slavery of these fears [...] at least forbear to torment others by the mention of them. Conquer such whims, and endeavor to strengthen your mind. No existence is more contemptible than that, which is embittered by fear. (Radcliffe 244; part 2, 1:00:07–1:00:30)

\*\*\*

Welcome back to *My Gothic Dissertation*. In this episode, we'll be talking about *emotional invalidation*—a type of interaction that not many people know by name, but that happens all the time. It's a concept that I'll use to break down exactly what's so frustrating about this scene between Emily St. Aubert and her uncle, Signor Montoni. I'll argue that emotional invalidation lies at the heart of what's so terrifying about the Gothic... *and* about grad school. Because after eight years as a grad student, I've noticed *plenty* of it occurring between students and faculty, where it seems to insidiously reinforce power imbalances that are detrimental to our discipline. It's a problem not only because it makes

people miserable and increases time to degree, but also because it discourages new insights and innovation, obstructing advances that could potentially make the academic humanities seem more, well, *human*. And relatable.

But let's back up and start at the beginning.

The concept of emotional invalidation was first theorized by Marsha Linehan, a researcher and practitioner of clinical psychology who's been highly regarded in her field since the early 1990's. Linehan is probably best known for her work with chronically suicidal patients and, later, with Borderline Personality Disorder—a condition defined, among other things, by a patient's extreme difficulty regulating her emotions (Linehan 11). And I say "her" here purposefully, because as Linehan notes in the encyclopedic manual she wrote about treating the condition, most of the patients who meet the criteria for Borderline Personality Disorder are women (Linehan 4). One possible factor that Linehan found that could lead someone to suffer from this disorder is growing up in a chronically emotionally invalidating environment—or, an environment where their emotions and private experiences are often trivialized, marginalized, or punished (Linehan 14). Exactly like what you just heard happen to Emily St. Aubert. But to first understand what it means for emotions to be invalidated, it would help to understand a little bit more about emotions themselves—at least, the theory of emotions upon which Linehan's ideas are based.

Linehan subscribes to the philosophy of mindfulness that was brought into medical and psychological discourse in the United States by Jon Kabat-Zinn back in the late 1970's. The philosophy borrows much from Buddhism—and specifically, from the writings and practices of the well-known Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hahn. And, for anyone who's ever been taught they shouldn't cry or get angry, this philosophy carries some pretty revolutionary ideas. Here's Marsha Linehan giving an overview on a YouTube channel called "Borderline Notes":

**Linehan:** If you look at an evolutionary point of view, why do we have emotions, okay? So what's the function of them, okay? The first function of emotions is that they motivate behaviors needed to solve common problems in evolution, essentially. That's what it is. So they motivate the behavior. Okay. Second, emotions communicate. They communicate to others. Okay? And the third thing they do, is they communicate to yourself, which they say to you, "Check this out." In a sense, they're a rapid-fire system. ("Function" 0:00–0:37)

For example, Linehan says, emotions like fear tell us how to react quickly when something dangerous is coming towards us. Or how to efficiently motivate the vulnerable—like children—to run in a similar situation of danger.

**Linehan:** And you know right away. You're motivated highly to get those kids off—out of there. So they live. However, you go down and you say, (calmly) "Okay, children, I think we should run." Okay, that's not communicating an emotion, and you're unlikely to get them to run. What gets them to run is when you say, "RUN!!!" So, it is an automatic communication system. ("Function" 0:58–1:21)

In other words, emotions have a *purpose*. It may not always be as clear-cut as trying to prevent you from succumbing to imminent death, but nevertheless, the theory of mindfulness is based on the idea that, no matter how small or insignificant, emotions have an important function. They carry information. And they should *not* be ignored—not by ourselves, and certainly not by our caregivers.

**Linehan:** If you've got an emotion that when you go to communicate it, no one listens to you, or you get invalidated, you have to ask yourself what would you do. What you do, if you think it's important, is you escalate. But the other person, if they don't agree with you, when you escalate, what they do is they also escalate their invalidation. So you end up in these situations where emotions start going up, mainly because they're not getting validated. ("Function" 1:40–2:05)

Emotions don't just *go away* when ignored, says Linehan. In fact, attempting to ignore emotions only makes them *intensify*. This is what happens with emotional invalidation. To learn more about this, I contacted Dr. Meredith Elzy. Dr. Elzy, who gave me permission to call her Meredith, is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of South Carolina Aiken. She wrote her dissertation on emotional invalidation at the University of South Florida, and she's since published several articles and focused her research, teaching, and clinical work on the subject.

**Meredith:** I generally describe it as when someone has an emotional experience—either external or internal—and they receive messages from someone else that those emotions are incorrect or unimportant. Um, and that can be done through a variety of different behaviors, um, both overt and covert behaviors but the bottom line is it has to be, another person does something to make that person feel that their emotions are unimportant or, or incorrect.

What emotional invalidation looks like in practice, Meredith says, probably sounds pretty familiar to... just about everyone.

**Meredith:** I think the best example, um, are things like, “Come on, suck it up.” Or, um, it’s, “What are you so upset about? It’s just (blank).” Ya know, fill in the blank. Or, um, “I don’t really know why you feel that way; that’s not really that big of a deal. You need to get over it.” Um, those are some pretty common examples that we say—people say regularly.

Or perhaps...

**Cass (Montoni):** I have no time to attend to these idle whims [...] that chamber was prepared for you, and you must rest contented with it.

Emily shares a private experience—her observation about the door, and her logical deduction that someone must have been near her while she was sleeping—only to be met with a trivializing response. Her well-founded fears are explained away with an entirely unfeasible explanation about the freaking *wind*. It’s a textbook example of emotional invalidation, and Emily’s response—pressing her claim and becoming more convinced that she’s unsafe—also follows what Linehan would predict. But then:

**Cass (Montoni):** If you will not release yourself from the slavery of these fears [...] at least forbear to torment others by the mention of them. [...] No existence is more contemptible than that, which is embittered by fear.

Montoni responds, as expected, by escalating his invalidation, now adding anger and condescension to punish her. To shame her out of believing herself.

If these types of interactions are rare, or if the person on the receiving end doesn’t perceive anything problematic or hurtful, says Meredith, emotional invalidation can be mostly benign. But when someone is trapped in an environment that is “chronically invalidating”—when they’re told

again and again that their emotional experiences are wrong or don't matter, then serious problems can occur.

**Meredith:** When somebody is chronically emotionally invalidated, they don't learn to trust their own emotions. So, and this is, again, when we look at it from a developmental perspective. To me, the most damaging piece of emotionally invalidating behaviors, chronically, is they never form a sense of self or a strong identity. Because emotionally, they don't trust their own internal experiences.

“They never form a sense of self or a strong identity, because emotionally, they don't trust their own internal experiences.”

\*\*\*

Over the years, several critics have pointed out that *The Mysteries of Udolpho* can be read as a kind of *bildungsroman*—a story of education, or the forming of a sense of self as Elzy would say—since the narrative primarily follows Emily St. Aubert's maturation from innocence to experience.<sup>1</sup> And in my reading, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is a story of education in which *emotional invalidation* gets in the way. Although of course Ann Radcliffe would never have used that term, that doesn't mean she hadn't witnessed or experienced the phenomenon herself.<sup>2</sup> Because I'm going to go out on a limb

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance, see Pierre Arnaud, “Emily ou de le'éducation: *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Bildungsroman féminin (*Bulletin de la Société d'Etudes Anglo-Américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles* 43 [Nov 1996]: 39-50), and Isabelle Naginski, “Consuelo and La Comtesse de Rudolstadt: From Gothic Novel to Novel of Initiation” in *The World of George Sand*, eds. Natalie Datlof, Jeanne Fuchs, David A. Powell (New York: Greenwood, 1991): 107-117. In “From *Emile* to *Frankenstein*: The Education of Monsters” (*European Romantic Review* 1.2 [1994]), Alan Richardson argues convincingly that the typical Gothic novel is essentially an education narrative. He points specifically to *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, claiming that its “thematization of pedagogy [...] helps bring out the element of social criticism implicit in its opposition of naïve heroines and knowing villains, who often (like Montoni) assume a paternal position, suggesting the line between pedagogy and tyranny is an uncomfortably fine and unstable one, particularly given the agenda for perpetuating male domination built into most of the period's programs for female education” (148). In *Mistress of Udolpho: The Life of Ann Radcliffe* (Leicester UP, 1999), Rictor Norton goes so far as to call Radcliffe's novels *Künstlerroman*, because their “central importance lay in the fact that their heroines are themselves literary creators, not passive women whose sole function is to be either educated or abused by men” (85).

<sup>2</sup> In *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress* (Manchester UP, 1995), Robert Miles characterizes Radcliffe as a sharp social critic with “a hard edge, one sharpened by the robust, liberal, critical energies of the dissenting ‘middle classes’ to which she belonged” (4). He also argues that Radcliffe's novels “belong within the category of the ‘aesthetically satisfying’ because they “make power visible in unexpected ways” (19).

here and say that women and other marginalized people in the Western world have been struggling to have their experiences believed since *well* before Radcliffe's time.

So, in my reading, this tale of chronic emotional invalidation—which is emblematic of the Gothic genre as a whole—details the psychological terror that comes from never having your perceptions or experiences believed by other people, especially authority figures—and, as a result, beginning to doubt them yourself. Here's why I see it that way: the entire narrative arc of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*—a nearly 700-page, four-volume novel—is the story (spoiler alert) of Emily St. Aubert's eventual marriage to her beloved Valancourt... a man she meets on *page 31* and who is kept from her for the next *640* pages or so. For nearly three full volumes—45 chapters—readers are infuriated with the knowledge that, if Emily had only accepted Valancourt's very first proposal, she could have avoided all of the repetitive and miserable suffering that fills the majority of the novel. But at the crucial moment, as I'll show, she *didn't trust herself*.

In my reading of *Udolpho*, the tale of invalidation all starts during Emily's *actual* education—the lessons imparted to her by her father, M. St. Aubert. Although Emily's childhood seems idyllic—full of long walks in shady groves and spontaneous bouts of poetry...

**Cass (Emily):** How pleasant is the green-wood's deep-matted shade / On a mid-summer's eve, when the fresh rain is o'er (Radcliffe 16; part 1 43:06–43:14)

...nevertheless, she's already being taught that her emotions are wrong and she shouldn't trust them. Her father, St. Aubert, is a thoughtful man, devoted to his family and wary of the materialism and “dissipation” of city life in Paris. Having chosen to reside in the isolated splendor of southern France, he oversees Emily's education very closely, because he realizes something about his daughter's disposition...

**Cass (narrator):** She had discovered in her early years uncommon delicacy of mind, warm affections, and ready benevolence; but with these was observable a degree of susceptibility too exquisite to admit of lasting peace. [...] He endeavoured, therefore, to strengthen her mind; to enure her to the habits of self-command, to teach her to reject the first impulse of



her feelings, and to look, with cool examination, upon the disappointments he sometimes threw in her way. (Radcliffe 5; part 1 12:08–12:22, 12:50–13:08)

In other words, St. Aubert recognizes that Emily is sensitive and intuitive. She feels acutely and has intense private experiences of emotion. So, he takes it upon himself to “throw disappointments in her way” to toughen her up. Never considering the possibility that her emotions may carry useful—even urgent—information and therefore serve a positive function in her life, he decides that her feelings make her weak, and that she needs to learn “self-command” to “reject” them and “strengthen her mind.” He uses the very same language Montoni will later echo...<sup>3</sup>

**Cass (Montoni):** Conquer such whims, and endeavor to strengthen your mind. (Radcliffe 244; part 2, 1:00:22–1:00:25)

And while he doesn’t have *contempt* for Emily for her fine feeling like Montoni does, St. Aubert nevertheless uses the same tactic of emotional invalidation against her because he’s decided it’s better for her. Emily lovingly obeys these injunctions because she adores her father, so when he delivers his final lesson to her from his death-bed:

**Cass (St. Aubert):** We become the *victims of our feelings*, unless we can in some degree *command* them [...] Beware, my love, I conjure you, of that self-delusion, which has been fatal to the peace of so many persons; beware of priding yourself on the gracefulness of sensibility; if you yield to this vanity, your happiness is lost for ever. (Radcliffe 79; part 1 3:43:24–3:43:27; 3:45:46–3:46:04)

...she unflinchingly promises to obey...

**Cass (Emily):** It will be almost my only consolation to fulfil your wishes. (Radcliffe 81; part 1 3:48:29 – 3:48:33)

---

<sup>3</sup> In *Literature, Education, and Romanticism* (Cambridge UP, 1994), Richardson makes a similar point: “The power/knowledge dynamic underlying the relation of Emily St. Aubert and her father is structurally cognate with that which facilitates Emily’s exploitation by the villain Montoni, who cruelly plays on this resemblance, taking on the voice of the father-instructor, when she balks at his designs” (204).

She agrees to his philosophy of self-*command*—ironically imprisoning herself in an *internal* system of self-doubt that mirrors the *external* constraints Montoni will enforce upon her later in his fortress.

And it will come back to haunt her.

**Meredith:** When somebody is chronically emotionally invalidated, they don't learn to trust their own emotions. [...] They never form a sense of self or a strong identity. Because emotionally, they don't trust their own internal experiences.

\*\*\*

**Laura:** Um, for a long time, I thought it meant that I wasn't good enough? If I couldn't get him to work with me, then I wasn't good enough?

We're going to switch, now, to the real-life Grad School Gothic. This is Laura, a Ph.D. student in English, describing a painful, yet all too typical experience of invalidation in action.

After completing a Master's degree at a well renowned school on the east coast, Laura chose her Ph.D. program because the school housed a couple of professors whose interests aligned with hers. In particular, there was one who would fit Timothy Burke's description of an academic "star."

**Laura:** I had heard that they are "just brilliant." Incredibly dense, um, as far as their thoughts are dense and they take a while to suss out, but you know it's *worth it* [...] So, because of this brilliance or perceived brilliance, um, he's well connected. Um, what I was told by a faculty member in my Master's degree was that students who work with him get jobs. And... in a field that's so saturated [...] um, it's nice to have a stand-out person on your committee who's well-connected and can get you a job.

Things went well for Laura during the first three years that she worked with this "star." She took classes with him and earned his compliments on her work—a big deal, because as Laura says...

**Laura:** I heard that the person was incredibly hard to please. Um, that they were hard to read? Both literally read their writing in e-mails and interpersonal writing, and also hard to read physically. Body language, tone, things like that. [...] I had also heard from graduate students that this person either loves you or hates you. And he'll decide really quickly what side you fall on. And there's really no making it up if he hates you. So, I felt like I had a very short window to get into his good graces.

She managed to make it through that window, though, and it felt really good. She felt like she had accomplished something. Knowing she had “impressed” him even helped her overcome other obstacles, because they paled in comparison to achieving this person’s admiration. In her third year, he agreed to serve as the chair of her Comprehensive Exam, which she managed to prepare for in an impressive six months. After it was over, he told her she passed (quote) with “flying colors.”

But then, Laura says, the confusion began a few months later, when she sent him an early draft of her Prospectus (which, remember, is the dissertation permission slip).

**Laura:** He wrote me back and said that, um, he had “serious concerns” at that point, after advising my Comps, that he... would direct my dissertation. Um, he thought he wasn’t the best advisor. And I didn’t understand this. I remember I cried after I received the e-mail. Because I didn’t understand – it seemed like a very sudden shift. Like, for three years I had gotten, like, “Your work is excellent,” “You should publish,” “You passed with flying colors.” And then, as soon as I started doing my independent work on my Prospectus – just a few months, two or three months after I had passed my Comps successfully – he told me that [...] he had serious concerns about my ability to do independent research. For the dissertation. But he didn’t tell me why, and he didn’t explain where that was even coming from.

Maybe the wind shook the ideas in her brain and made them slide.

Like Emily St. Aubert, Laura had made an observation—in this case, an interesting connection, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, between developments in scientific theories of the human body and representations of bodies in the literature of the time. The connection was important, she argued, because the literature had helped the general population to absorb those new scientific ideas, and their understandings were sometimes used to justify racist and sexist beliefs. So if we can pinpoint the cause of some of those lasting misconceptions about the body, Laura conjectured, we could potentially better understand and combat historical causes of racism and sexism.

That was her perception. Her private experience or observation that she communicated to an authority figure, as Linehan and Elzy would say. And, again like Emily St. Aubert, there was a lot

at stake in this observation—namely, Laura’s progression toward the degree into which she had already invested so much of her time and energy... not to mention the contribution to social justice. However, when she went to communicate that high-stakes observation to an authority figure—someone who had the power to confirm or deny its validity, and therefore Laura’s progression in the program—it was unceremoniously rejected. Trivialized. This powerful person told her the connection she observed simply was not there. Her perception was all wrong. And beyond that, more importantly, *she* was all wrong. All of a sudden, he no longer considered her, personally, fit for academic work. All of the self-confidence Laura had built up began to crumble.

**Laura:** He told me that he had “serious concerns” about my ability to do independent research.

But to Laura, like to Emily, it was also a moment that felt a lot like this:

**Cass (Montoni):** The wind, perhaps, shook the door and made the bolts slide.

*Ludicrous.* After so much positive feedback, so much validation and affirmation of her abilities that she had witnessed with her own eyes, how was she suddenly no longer fit for academic work?

According to Dr. Isabelle Skakni, Senior Research Associate at Lancaster University and Head of Doctoral Training and Support at the University of Applied Arts in Switzerland, Laura’s advisor seems to subscribe to the common idea that graduate school is not so much an open and clear-cut process as an initiation into an elite group, clouded with ambiguity and the subjective wills of existing members. Skakni holds a bachelor’s degree in Career Guidance and Counseling, a Master’s in Educational Sciences, and a Ph.D. in Administration and Assessment in Education, and she’s conducted research on graduate programs in North America, the UK, and Switzerland. In her recent article titled “Doctoral studies as an initiatory trial,” she breaks down some common,

problematic conceptions of grad school that hinder rather than help people as they work towards the Ph.D. First, she says:

**Skakni:** Ph.D. students are expected to be autonomous. So, uh, which of course is not bad in itself, because it is your thesis, you're an adult, and you're in charge of your own progression. But, um, being autonomous can be defined in different ways? And in certain cases, it becomes like a good excuse to not help someone.

**Laura:** Like, to just jump ship because your student sends you a bad draft? (laughs) It seems like, uh, really unfair. Like, your job is to read my drafts. And help me.

Laura realized this herself—how *unhelpful* and even unfair it was that her advisor seemed to have decided that his job was no longer to advise—but she also knew there was little she could do. She thought maybe if she just kept trying, she could convince this professor that she and her project were worthy of his attention.

**Laura:** But then I thought, ya know, he said, “If you can send me something better, if you can start over, if you can impress me, I’ll reconsider.” So I sort of took that as my goal [...] To do something better. To write something better.

Nevertheless, she persisted. It’s to Laura’s credit that she had such resilience. That she decided to try to “write something better,” as she says here. It’s also part of the familiar pattern of invalidation Linehan lays out:

**Linehan:** If you’ve got an emotion that when you go to communicate it, no one listens to you, or you get invalidated, you have to ask yourself what would you do. What you do, if you think it’s important, is you escalate.

I’d like to pause here, because I know the skeptical listeners out there are probably saying, “But Linehan is talking about *emotion*, and what Laura was sharing was *not that*. Laura was sharing a literary interpretation, and her advisor was just doing his job, being a critical reader so she could shore up the weak parts of her argument.” Here’s Skakni again.

**Skakni:** For most people, writing is a very emotional task. Actually, the whole doctoral process is very emotional. And, you can feel... I mean, especially in writing, you can feel

overwhelmed by emotion while writing and it can concretely affect your writing and your productivity [...] In my research and in my environment [...] I heard many supervisors being like, *astonished* by the emotional struggles of their Ph.D. students. Which is very surprising, because *they* did a Ph.D. themselves! (laughs)

So, Skakni found in her research that—despite the faculty’s astonishment about this fact—writing is wrapped up in emotion. And indeed, so is the entire process of getting a Ph.D. In another recent article, Skakni studied the reasons and motivations behind people’s decisions to pursue doctoral education, and she found that, for many, the Ph.D. is a kind of “quest for the self.”<sup>4</sup> A *bildungsroman*, if you will. So naturally when their work towards the degree is invalidated, their emotions—and their identities—feel invalidated too.

Again I hear the voice of skeptics putting forth a counter-argument that goes something like this: it’s unfortunate that people feel so much emotional pain in the Ph.D. process, and I can certainly understand that it’s because they see the Ph.D. as some ultimate fulfillment of their self-actualization. But the Ph.D. has traditionally been a path to a *career*, and so a pursuit of self-actualization is actually the wrong reason to get a Ph.D. Here’s Skakni.

**Skakni:** Uh... what I say is, there – actually there are no good reason or bad reason to do a Ph.D. And actually, I think to a different degree everybody doing a Ph.D. experiences a kind of quest of the self.

Okay, sure, says the skeptic. Maybe it’s not up to me or the profession to decide what’s a valid or invalid reason to get a Ph.D. But if you choose to pursue a Ph.D. in a “quest for the self,” enter at your own peril. This is still a professional training program, and your emotional quest won’t fit well here. It takes a “thick skin” to get through grad school.

---

<sup>4</sup> According to Skakni’s research in “Reasons, motives, and motivations for completing a PhD: a typology of doctoral studies as a quest, (*Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 9.2 [2018]: 197-212), this is especially true for first-generation students who see the Ph.D. as a route to self-actualization or social mobility. She reports that they also tend to be highly vulnerable to criticism (206).

**Meredith:** I would say that's one of the most emotionally invalidating things you can say to somebody. (laughs)

Back to Meredith Elzy.

**Meredith:** We experience emotions in every context of our life. So, if we want to pretend like we enter a professional environment and we shut our emotions off? We can pretend all day long, but that's not the reality. So, if you're in an environment where you're told, "Emotions are not in here. This is not an emotional context," well then every emotion you feel... that's wrong! [...] So that sort of framework – having that kind of a, um, umbrella over that relationship or that environment – is in itself, very emotionally invalidating.

In other words, while skeptics think the emotional individual is wrong and needs to change to fit the system, there's a growing body of people out there who say no. The system needs to change to better accommodate the individuals in it.

**Meredith:** Your emotions are *so* your core.

Again, Meredith Elzy.

**Meredith:** If someone is saying to you, if someone is validating what you're experiencing, you glean from that that they care about you as a person. And... so, to me the crux, the core, why emotional validation is so important is because that's how we communicate to each other we care? And if you communicate to somebody that you care about them? They can decrease their vulnerability, they can be more real, they can be open. And from a learning perspective, that's when the magic happens. Right? If they're feeling guarded and closed because they can't trust you? Um, they don't think you care about them? They're not... they're not willing to open their minds to what you have to say and be vulnerable to be able to learn that and glean that. And... um, it's why as a teacher, um, when I'm in the classroom, the *most* important thing to me is my students feel comfortable with me, they feel like I care about them.

**Skakni:** What emerged from my analysis is... as you said, that doctoral studies can be seen as three different types of quests. [...] Those three quests to me are, to some extent, a proof that academia must change or is changing. And that an initiatory trial approach can't be relevant anymore.

So, skeptical listeners hopefully appeased, let's return to Laura's persistence. Things didn't just escalate this one time with this one draft. Over the next ten months, she would submit no fewer than *eight drafts* to this professor, hoping with each one to finally convince him that her perceptions

were valid, and that, once and for all, he should agree to be her dissertation advisor. And each time, the invalidation would escalate too, to the point where it began to feel like punishment.

**Laura:** I have sort of stamped in my brain the section of the e-mail that goes into all caps. And he's telling me, I think, if I recall correctly, everything I'm *not doing* correctly.

**Cass (Montoni):** If you will not release yourself from the slavery of these fears [...] at least forbear to torment others by the mention of them. No existence is more contemptible than that which is embittered by fear.

**Laura:** He was responding with intense anger, as if I had done something to provoke his anger? As if I was responsible for his anger? And... all I did was submit a document that I was supposed to submit. Um, after this whole like, these months of like, "impress me, impress me, impress me."

Laura was trapped in a chronic loop of invalidation, communicating her ideas again and again, each time trying to convey the validity of her observations—of her *self*—to a person who simply would not be convinced. And, as Linehan or Elzy would predict, Laura stopped trusting her own perceptions—both of herself and of others.

**Laura:** And the worst thing about that is, even though a few other professors who I deeply respect and admire told me that it *was* good enough, and it was a contribution and that they were excited about being on my project, I think the way that I, for sure, but also people around me had built him up? I felt like without his approval, like, they must just be being nice to me. Because he's not being nice to me. Like I felt, um, his invalidation of my work way outweighed the validation of [...] other professors.

\*\*\*

Back to Emily and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. After her flawed emotional education, our heroine is already susceptible to being controlled by others and not trusting herself. Her father, well-meaning though he may be, doesn't *just* invalidate Emily's emotions... he preaches that she should do it to *herself*. And so, she does. And here we get to the crucial moment when she has the opportunity to side-step everything but doesn't.



A few weeks after her father has been buried and she's settling up some final affairs before submitting to the "care," if you can call it that, of Madame Cheron, Emily is surprised by a visitor...

**Cass (narrator):** She went to a window, that overhung the rivulet, and, leaning over it, with her eyes fixed on the current, was soon lost in melancholy reverie [...] In the next moment, a door opened, and a stranger appeared who stopped on perceiving Emily [...] 'Good God! Can it be—surely I am not mistaken—ma'amselle St. Aubert—is it not?' / 'It is indeed,' said Emily, who was confirmed in her first conjecture, for she now distinguished the countenance of Valancourt (Radcliffe 100; part 1 4:43:09–4:43:17, 4:43:57 – 4:44:01, 4:44:31 – 4:44:45)

Emily thus resumes her acquaintance with Valancourt, whom she and her father had met while traveling the countryside to ease their grief over the death of her mother. It's worth noting here, too, that while he was alive, St. Aubert *definitely* approved of the feelings he saw forming between Emily and Valancourt...

**Cass (St. Aubert):** This is a very promising young man; it is many years since I have been so much pleased with any person, on so short an acquaintance. (Radcliffe 57; part 1 2:35:32–2:35:42)

But despite her father's clear approval, when Valancourt makes a modest romantic advance towards Emily the day after their reunion—asking if he can begin a formal courtship because he is worried that he may never see her again when she goes to live with her aunt—Emily says no. Why?

**Cass (narrator):** She feared to trust the preference her heart acknowledged towards Valancourt and to give him any encouragement for hope on so short an acquaintance [...] Yet, though the thought of dismissing Valancourt was so very painful to her, that she could scarcely endure to pause upon it, the consciousness of this made her fear the partiality of her judgment, and hesitate still more to encourage that suit, for which her own heart too tenderly pleaded. (Radcliffe 106, 107; part 1 5:01:45–5:01:54, 5:02:15–5:02:33)

"Her own heart too tenderly pleaded." In other words, *because* she wants to marry Valancourt so much, she turns him *down*.

And pretty much *immediately* after Valancourt has finished pleading with her to let him see her again, just after Emily has exercised the *utmost* self-command in refusing him once and for all, Madame Cheron enters the narrative and the entire Gothic plot begins to fall into place.

**Cass (narrator/Madame Cheron):** At this moment an hasty footstep approached from behind the plane-tree, and, turning her eyes, Emily saw Madame Cheron. She felt a blush steal upon her cheek, and her frame trembled with the emotion of her mind; but she instantly rose to meet her visitor. ‘So niece,’ said Madame Cheron, casting a look of surprise and enquiry on Valancourt, ‘so niece, how do you do? But I need not ask, your looks tell me you have already recovered your loss. (Radcliffe 109; part 1 5:09:44–5:10:16)

Emily is immediately misjudged and accused of impropriety in this first meeting with her new caregiver, and, after Valancourt quickly excuses himself, Madame Cheron expresses her disapproval of him, too. Still, though, Emily has more chances. Valancourt doesn’t give up, and after a series of mishaps, Madame Cheron eventually changes her opinion when she learns that his aunt is one of the most rich and influential women in the region. Emily and Valancourt finally become engaged with the approval of Madame Cheron, only to have her make a total reversal when she marries Signor Montoni and goes along with the other plans he has for Emily... plans that will take her away from France and Valancourt.

But in a chance meeting with Valancourt on the night before her departure, Emily *again* has the chance to circumvent her impending suffering, but she doesn’t trust herself enough to follow her instincts. After Valancourt and Emily declare their undying love for one another and pledge to stay true during this “cruel separation,” he proposes *again*:

**Cass (Valancourt/narrator):** ‘Why should we confide the happiness of our whole lives to the will of people, who have no right to interrupt, and, except in giving you to me, have no power to promote it? O Emily! Venture to trust your own heart, venture to be mine for ever!’ (Radcliffe 154; part 1, 7:15:51–7:16:08)

“Venture to trust your own heart.” Even *he* recognizes that the problem is Emily’s inability to trust herself, though perhaps he doesn’t realize how difficult it is for her to overcome because he, as a

man, hasn't experienced the same kind of chronic invalidation she received during her "education." Surprising no one, Emily rejects him one last time and seals her fate—and his—for the next several hundred pages.

**Cass (narrator):** Duty, and good sense, however hard the conflict, at length, triumphed over affection and mournful presentiment [...] and she acted, perhaps, with somewhat more than female fortitude, when she resolved to endure a present, rather than provoke a distant misfortune. With a candour, that proved how truly she esteemed and loved him, and which endeared her to him, if possible, more than ever, she told Valancourt all her reasons for rejecting his proposals. (Radcliffe 155; part 1, 7:17:55–7:18:03; 7:18:25–7:18:36)

"Somewhat more than female fortitude." Gross.

Things continue to get drawn out for a few more pages—including Valancourt's very legitimate warning that Montoni may be up to no good in whisking her and her aunt off to Italy—but ultimately, they part ways. Readers—or, at least, *this* reader—watch the fall-out of Emily's self-doubt for the next few volumes with increasing frustration, especially since, through all her struggles—nearly forced marriages, exposure to the seediness and "dissipation" of Venetian life, imprisonment in a castle, the continual threat of rape—she continuously refers back to her love for Valancourt as the only chance for escape. A chance that she clearly had but forfeited, because she had been taught not to trust herself.

I wish I could say that by the end Emily learns to think for herself and ignore the voices of her neglectful, abusive caregivers. As the reader nears the end of the novel, they keep hoping that maybe, *finally* Emily will just run off with Valancourt and give up on trying to get the approval of yet another meddling and flawed guardian—this time, the Count de Villefort who takes Emily in after she finally escapes Udolpho. But no. The reader ends up disappointed. The Count has been keeping Emily and Valancourt apart, because polite society has been circulating all kinds of nasty rumors about him, things having taken a pretty tough turn for him, too, while Emily was holed up in Montoni's castle. Only after the Count learns third-hand from a series of men that those rumors

about Valancourt are mostly false does he finally give his blessing, and our heroine joyfully does what she had wanted to do all along. Marry Valancourt.

As it turns out, Emily St. Aubert isn't saved by learning to trust herself. At the end of the novel she remains deferential to the powerful men around her, trapped in the Gothic reality that her life is entirely out of her own control. This *is* 1794, after all. But maybe that feeling of frustration over her continued entrapment is, in the end, what we're supposed to walk away with as readers.<sup>5</sup>

\*\*\*

**Laura:** (crying) There's something about him that's so overwhelmingly patriarchal.

Back to Laura, our real-life Grad School Gothic heroine.

**Laura:** I've had to do a lot of work on how I respond to him. Because it's often, um, I often with him have a trauma response that I've had to other men in the past. So, in some way like, pleasing him academically, being on his good side, is sort of a way to hold that trauma, those responses, that fear at bay.

Laura, unlike Emily St. Aubert, eventually recognized how damaging it was for her to be trapped in this invalidating cycle. As so often happens in Ph.D. training—especially when academic “stars” are involved—she realized that she found herself working desperately not to further her own intellectual interests and abilities, but to figure out a way to please this one professor. To get his stamp of approval and, eventually, his signature on a letter of recommendation for jobs. And every time she thought she had reached her goal—convincing him to serve as her dissertation director—she found the target had been moved yet again, always just outside her reach.

---

<sup>5</sup> There is an ongoing debate among scholars whether Radcliffe's stance on gender politics—and the commentary on gender politics within the Gothic genre at large—is conservative or progressive. See, for instance, Charlie Bondhus “Sublime Patriarchs and the New Middle Class in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*” (*Gothic Studies* 12.1 [May 2010]:13–32); JoEllen DeLucia, “From the Female Gothic to a Feminist Theory of History: Ann Radcliffe and the Scottish Enlightenment” (*The Eighteenth Century* 50.1 [Spring 2009]: 101–115); Lauren Fitzgerald “Female Gothic and the Institutionalisation of Gothic Studies” (*Gothic Studies* 6.1 [May 2014]: 8–18); Diane Long Hoeveler, “The Construction of the Female Gothic Posture: Wollestonecraft's *Mary* and Gothic Feminism” (*Gothic Studies* 6.1 [May 2014]: 30–44).

**Laura:** So, multiple times he would... I would even use the word “threaten,” because I think he knew how much it meant to me to work with him? So he would hold our advisor-advisee relationship over my head and basically say, like, “Unless you impress me, I’m not going to advise you.” [...] That felt a lot like an abusive relationship. [...] I mean, I guess thinking about it now, *no wonder* it took me ten months to produce this Prospectus. Because... like, (crying) opening the Word document, um, became impossible. Because it became about, like, “Is he going to no longer work with me? Who is going to advise this? Am I valuable? Are my contributions valuable?” Um, and he’s made very clear that he thinks they are not. Because they do not impress him.

She even reached out for help, but... people just kept telling her to do whatever it took to keep him on her committee.

**Laura:** No one acknowledged that he could be in the wrong. Um, except one person who basically said, “What can I do about that? I can’t do anything about that. He’s a full professor. He is who he is.”(29:00) [...] Every institutional structure is meant to keep him in power.

Again, everyone expected Laura to change, not the system in which she found herself trapped. Even realizing this, though, she still pressed on for a while. But after months and months of being stalled out in this cycle of seeking his approval and being told again and again that her work wasn’t good enough, that she didn’t deserve his support—she finally made her escape. Well, sort of.

**Laura:** In the most recent e-mail [...] he told me basically that I couldn’t impress him, and he wanted to step down—which, for the record—he’s always made *my* responsibility. So he’ll always say, “If you want me to step down, I’m happy to step down.” [...] He says, “I’m sorry (comma) Laura (comma) that I cannot match your enthusiasm for the project.” And I think that’s so inappropriate. Like, I don’t need an apology. I don’t need an “I’m sorry,” I just need you to help me write the project that I want to write. [...] I don’t know. It seems manipulative or cruel or some way to absolve himself rather than actual... actually to... be sincere about his treatment of me and my work.

After receiving this e-mail, Laura broke the cycle. She never even responded—just walked away and asked someone else to be the head of her committee. Everything you’ve been hearing from her so far came from a conversation we had about a week before she held her Prospectus defense. *Finally*. And I’m happy to report that she went into the same crowded closet I had been in for my own Prospectus meeting, and she *passed*. Not only that, she passed on *her terms*.

**Laura:** I said, my first point, I said, “There are three major things I want to accomplish today, and the first one is that I need you guys to tell me where I’m doing my work well, and where I’m succeeding professionally. [...] And they actually went around the room and told me where I was succeeding. (laughing) [...] And I don’t think I would have had that confidence if he was in the room. (laughs)

You can hear the joy in Laura’s voice here, because asking for and receiving positive feedback was a major win. She said a female professor complimented her on how she took control of the meeting, too.

Once again I played the part of the skeptical listener and asked Laura if there was any way that her newfound confidence was due to that invalidating advisor. Maybe his influence had been good for her after all. And even further than that, maybe this had been part of his plan all along—to build her up by first breaking her down. Maybe it had all been some kind of master plot he had set in motion for her benefit.

**Laura:** The first adjective that comes to mind is “yucky.” (laughs) That’s in my critical vocabulary. Yucky. [...] It’s not necessary for you to destroy someone before you rebuild them. It’s not necessary for you to rebuild them! Like, I am a whole person. [...] So, if we’re talking about graduate school as this larger sort of, ya know, plot or something. Or larger narrative... like, there are structures we have to adhere to. There is the Prospectus—the Comps and the Prospectus and the dissertation—but how I negotiate those is my business.

Maybe what it all comes down to is this: this Ph.D. is *Laura’s* quest. It’s her story—her narrative—her plot. So for someone to act the part of M. St. Aubert or Montoni—the patriarch who knows best, telling the heroine that she’s not really seeing what she’s seeing, feeling what she’s feeling—that’s pretty “yucky.” And disempowering. The exact opposite of what someone on a quest needs from an advisor. Laura finally realized this and escaped...but not entirely unscathed.

**Laura:** People keep saying, like, “How do you feel?” And I feel good, but I have this weird lingering guilt! That I... that I didn’t tell him that I had a meeting... (pause) (crying) And like maybe, like maybe I got through by the skin of my teeth? Like maybe it’s still not good enough? (pause) Like, if he read it now, would he think it’s still not good enough? He did read it! He read the draft. [...] And even one professor who I knew to be *so* difficult, he said, “These revisions are excellent.” Like, “You’ve obviously done so much work.” [...] And that was *huge*. Coming from him. [...] Um, but even when *he* said that, I thought like, “Why?”

(crying) “*Why?* Won’t this other person just get behind my work?” And why am I so concerned about this still? Like, why does it matter? Ugh!

Maybe, like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, what we’re supposed to walk away from *this* story with is a similar frustration that, despite our heroine’s happy ending, the system that threatened to destroy her happiness is still intact. And it still haunts her.

\*\*\*

Thanks for listening to *My Gothic Dissertation*. In the next episode, we’ll move on to another Gothic hero—Victor Frankenstein—whose narrative takes place around the time Radcliffe wrote *Udolpho*... only in the deep Gothic recesses of a German university. Like Emily, and Laura, he also struggles for validation from the patriarchal authority figures in his life, but he chooses to defy their attempts to shame him, pressing forward with an innovative creation that will grow to mythic proportions.

Next time on *My Gothic Dissertation*.

### Works Cited

- Addinsell, Richard. "Main & End Title Music from *Gaslight* (1940)." Conducted by Muir Mathieson. *YouTube*, uploaded by James Stuart, 30 July 2016.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOSYPipi0qc&t=25s>
- Arnaud, Pierre. "Emily ou de le'éducation: *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Bildungsroman féminin." *Bulletin de la Société d'Etudes Anglo-Américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles* 43 (Nov 1996): 39-50.
- Ben Ezra, Adam. "Awesome Upright Bass Solo." *YouTube*, uploaded by BassTheWorld.com. 5 July 2012. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyUZh\\_Cbw6Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyUZh_Cbw6Q)
- Bondhus, Charlie. "Sublime Patriarchs and the New Middle Class in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*." *Gothic Studies* 12.1 (May 2010): 13-32.
- Cobert, Robert. "A Darkness at Collinwood." Performed by the Robert Cobert Orchestra. *The Original Music From Dark Shadows*. Studio City: Dan Curtis Productions, Inc., 1999. *YouTube*, uploaded by recordobscura, 16 January 2010.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXPytvEcg1w&list=PLD9A2F99FDCB0B033&index=4>
- Cobert, Robert. "Opening Theme: Dark Shadows/Collinwood." Performed by the Robert Cobert Orchestra. *The Original Music From Dark Shadows*. Studio City: Dan Curtis Productions, Inc., 1999. *YouTube*, uploaded by recordobscura, 16 January 2010.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqo-bLgmbSU&list=PLD9A2F99FDCB0B033>
- Cobert, Robert. "The Secret Room." Performed by the Robert Cobert Orchestra. *The Original Music From Dark Shadows*. Studio City: Dan Curtis Productions, Inc., 1999. *YouTube*, uploaded by recordobscura, 16 January 2010.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbEmIhNaTVk&list=PLD9A2F99FDCB0B033&index=10>
- DeLucia, JoEllen. "From the Female Gothic to a Feminist Theory of History: Ann Radcliffe and the Scottish Enlightenment." *The Eighteenth Century* 50.1 (Spring 2009): 101-115.
- Elzy, Meredith. Personal Interview. 23 October 2018.
- Fitzgerald, Lauren. "Female Gothic and the Institutionalisation of Gothic Studies." *Gothic Studies* 6.1 (May 2004): 8 – 18.
- Hoeverler, Diane Long. "The Construction of the Female Gothic Posture: Wollstonecraft's *Mary* and Gothic Feminism." *Gothic Studies* 6.1 (May 2004): 30-44.
- Laura. Personal Interview. 2 December 2018.
- Laura. Personal Interview. 13 December 2018.



- Linehan, Marsha. *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder*. New York: Guilford, 1993.
- Linehan, Marsha. "The Function of Emotions." *YouTube*, uploaded by Borderline Notes, 14 April 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tR-O12A78hw>
- Miles, Robert. *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995.
- Naginski, Isabelle. "Consuelo and La Comtesse de Rudolstadt: From Gothic Novel to Novel of Initiation." *The World of George Sand*. Eds. Natalie Datlof, Jeanne Fuchs, David A. Powell (New York: Greenwood, 1991): 107-117.
- Norton, Rictor. *Mistress of Udolpho: The Life of Ann Radcliffe*. London: Leicester University Press, 1999.
- Radcliffe, Ann. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Narrated by Karen Cass, Naxos AudioBooks, 2016. Audiobook.
- Radcliffe, Ann. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. 1794. Ed. Terry Castle. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Richardson, Alan. "From *Emile* to *Frankenstein*: The Education of Monsters." *European Romantic Review* 1.2 (1991): 147-162.
- Richardson, Alan. *Literature, Education, and Romanticism*. Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 8. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Skakni, Isabelle. "Doctoral studies as an initiatory trial: expected and taken-for-granted practices that impede PhD students' progress." *Teaching in Higher Education* 23.8 (2018): 1- 18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1449742>
- Skakni, Isabelle. Personal interview. 6 December 2018.
- Skakni, Isabelle. "Reasons, motives, and motivations for completing a PhD: a typology of doctoral studies as a quest." *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 9.2 (2018): 197-212. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-D-18-00004>