

Introduction: Grad School Gothic

If this was a normal dissertation on Gothic fiction, I'd start with a witty, compelling hook to draw you in—probably some bold or surprising statement about the Gothic or a person associated with it. The hook would lead to an interesting anecdote I'd uncovered in my research... something about the quirky antiquarianism of Horace Walpole, maybe, or how Ann Radcliffe was thought by all of Victorian England to be a reclusive mad woman. You would be charmed by this new knowledge—a vivid image in your brain that illustrated the historical time and place I wanted to transport you to. But then, once I had you, my voice would suddenly become less conversational, more authoritative, and you'd find yourself buried alive in a formidable scholarly paragraph. It would almost certainly include some statement about the origins of “the Gothic,” like this one from David Punter:

Punter: The origins of Gothic are very difficult to, to pin down. Uh, it is conventionally said that Gothic really begins, or Gothic fiction really begins, with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in the 1760's. And that was indeed the first of the Gothic novels, very rapidly succeeded by the famous Gothic novels by Ann Radcliffe [...] all published in the 1780's and 1790's. So, that is the heyday of Gothic fiction [...] But, rather like the subjects of Gothic fiction who continually seem to have an afterlife, who refuse to lie down and be buried, then Gothic fiction keeps cropping up again throughout the nineteenth century.

Here is where I would tell you that, since the publication of his book *The Literature of Terror* in 1980, Punter has widely been credited with exhuming the Gothic from the critical crypt where literary giants like William Wordsworth wished it would “lie down and be buried.” I would say that critics have historically maligned the Gothic for being too over-the-top,¹ too provocative of base emotions,² too black and white in its portrayals of good vs. evil.³ (Those dings, by the way, indicate

¹ In his “Preface” to the 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* – now widely considered to be the manifesto for early Romanticism – Wordsworth implicitly contrasts his new brand of poetry with the Gothic, claiming that “the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants” (99).

² See, for instance, “The Terrorist System of Novel Writing,” *The Monthly Magazine*, August 1797, 102-104.

³ See, for instance, Leslie Fiedler's chapter on the Gothic in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960).

the presence of footnotes... citations or extra commentary that can be found by the more scholarly inclined on the podcast website.)

In a normal introduction to a normal Gothic dissertation, here I would position myself among the more generous critics such as Punter and say that there's actually some pretty nuanced social commentary going on in this body of literature, and that the novels' typical settings—foreboding medieval castles or spooky monasteries—speak volumes about the targets of their criticism.

Punter: Castles being a residue of a feudal or aristocratic past, and monasteries or convents representing in some way Catholic religion and some kind of opposition to what seemed in British culture as the comparative clarity of the Protestant religion [...] At a social level, they mean the persistence of a past which we'd wished in our desire for modernity to be long-since dead. But that power still seems to go on.⁴

Once held rigidly in place by the unquestioning obedience of the lower orders, these societal institutions and their corresponding edifices are symbolically falling apart in Gothic texts as new, more democratic ideas threaten to topple their authority. When the heroine becomes trapped in one of these crumbling castles or convents, we see the worst of that institution—its corruption, its desperate attempts to cling to power at any cost—made evident in the psychological terrors she is subjected to while trapped inside.

Punter: Because what they turn out to be, once you are inside them, is labyrinths. It is impossible to find one's way around them. There is always darkness, there is always the threat of falling through a trap door or finding one's self in a lower level... These are scenarios, unlike the conventional house, in which there are no real maps. You can never tell exactly how to get out [...] so these are scenarios of imprisonment.

⁴ Chris Baldick (1992) and Jerrold Hogle (2002) also promote Punter's interpretation of the Gothic as a genre concerned with the machinations of a societal institution losing grasp of its cultural authority.

In other words, the place in which the heroine finds herself trapped *also* looks very much like an externalization of her own mind under the influence of the institution's manipulation—confused, perilous, and darkened with self-doubt.

In a normal Gothic dissertation, this is where I would make some astute observation about the genre's social commentary and then state my intervention—something like, “For decades now, scholars have studied the Gothic in its original context—the late 18th and early 19th century—but I argue that the genre is a useful tool for illuminating problematic power moves made by outmoded institutions in *any* context.” I would then define the *scope* of my dissertation by stating that I plan to examine one modern institution in particular that many consider to be losing cultural power—the academic humanities. I'd then lend authority to that claim by bringing in the voices of noted commentators like former MLA president Sidonie Smith:

Smith: In these times, everything seems to be lined up against the humanities. Our enrollments are shrinking, as are our majors. Our funding is decreasing as a result of corporatized assessment and value settling. Our mode of scholarly communication is in unsettling transition. Our fields are becoming feminized with a large proportion of contingent faculty. The humanities threatens to become, as last year's MLA president Russell Berman noted, ‘a service provider within the academy.’⁵ (37:20–37:51)

If this was a normal Gothic dissertation, I might bring in the work of sociologists or historians here to trace the roots of the modern American academy back to the European medieval university—an institution with strong ties to both the Catholic church and feudal aristocracy. I might suggest that, considering these historical ties, it seems only natural that academia could be a third target of the Gothic's criticism.

⁵ This quotation comes from Smith's “Big Thinking” lecture at the 2012 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Waterloo. It represents arguments that were later published in her 2015 *Manifesto for the Humanities*.

If this was a normal Gothic dissertation, I would have thus laid out the beginnings of my “critical framework,” and the average reader might be lost or bored by now. But this isn’t a normal Gothic dissertation.

Katie: Is everybody buckled?

Will: I am.

Jay: I am.

My Gothic dissertation is more like a Gothic *novel*⁶—a multi-volume one that tells the story of protagonists struggling against traditional forces cleaving desperately to life in the modern world—“threaten[ing],” as Gothic scholar Chris Baldick tells us, “to fix [their] dead hand[s] upon us” (xxi).⁷ As in the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, the protagonists in this Gothic novel are on an educational journey,⁸ and the traditional forces they work against are outdated modes of doctoral training like the dissertation itself. Only, unlike a novel—which is fiction—this story takes place in real life.

⁶ In this dissertation, I employ intertextuality as a method for literary criticism. Intertextuality was first defined by Julie Kristeva in *Desire in Language* as “the transposition of one or more *systems of signs* onto another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciate and denotative position” (15). More broadly, it can be understood as the shaping of the meaning of one text by means of another text. In my work, I conceive of intertextuality as a *weaving together* of two strands that mutually inform one another: a reading of Gothic fiction and a report on the lived conditions of doctoral training in the humanities. In the former strand, I argue that Gothic fiction—and in particular, fiction that fits within the tradition of the Female Gothic—is concerned with themes of education and pedagogy that have been overlooked by previous critics. In the latter strand, I report on recent research from the sociology of higher education to show the “Gothic” side of doctoral training, incorporating first-person accounts from personal interviews in the style of literary journalism made popular by Ira Glass. (For more on the methodology of literary journalism, particularly in the medium of radio, see Jessica Abel’s *Out on the Wire* [2015] and John Biewen/Alexa Dilworth’s *Reality Radio* [2017].) Here I deem this intertextual dissertation “more like a novel” because, as Jack Hart attests in *StoryCraft* (2011), Glassian literary journalism shares many techniques with novelistic storytelling, including “scene setting, characterization, and plotting” (6). Intertextuality is itself a novelistic device—one that is akin to the way of reading Rita Felski deems “recognition” in *Uses of Literature* (2008), thus making it method of reader response literary criticism as well.

⁷ In *Literature of Terror*, Punter asserts that “Gothic stood for the old-fashioned as opposed to the modern [...] Gothic was the archaic [...] that which was prior to, or opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilized values and a well-regulated society” (5). In my argument, the “civilized values” and “well-regulated society” that the Grad School Gothic resists are the democratizing principles of intersectional feminist pedagogy.

⁸ Although there has never been a major study to examine the educational aspects of the Female Gothic, a few of the field’s prominent critics have alluded to the need for one. As Eugenia DeLamotte puts it in *Perils of the Night* (1990), it is ‘not surprising’ that in the Female Gothic ‘education tends to play an important role’, because the ‘enlightened mind’ and ‘eloquence’ are the heroine’s ‘chief weapon[s] against tyranny’ (52). In “From *Emile* to *Frankenstein*: The Education of Monsters” (1991), Alan Richardson has also noted the ‘thematization of pedagogy’ in the Gothic, in ‘its opposition of

GPS: Proceed about three miles to US 61.

In the novels of Ann Radcliffe and her imitators—a tradition known since the 1970's as the “Female Gothic”⁹—the heroine starts her life in some idyllic, provincial place that's far removed from the hustle and bustle of big city life.

Jay: Wait, we're in Natchez?

Katie: Yeah. We're about to go—we're on the outskirts of Natchez. We're about to go kinda downtown. Where some of the older stuff is.

For four-year-old me, Natchez was that place. Propped on the bluffs of the Mississippi River, two hours from Jackson and three from New Orleans, it's right out of the pages of its *own* kind of Gothic novel... the *Southern Gothic*. But that's a story for another time.

In her country idyll, the Gothic heroine is typically raised by doting caregivers who nurture her gifts and cherish her talents. *My* caregivers—the Mingees—are the reason for *this* trip, which I took about a month after my Prospectus defense with my parents, sister and two nephews (who you just heard). My nephews still seem a bit confused about this.

Will: Who are the Mingees?

Katie: The Mingees were our old neighbors when I was growing up. And we were very, very close with them [...] we're going to see them and meet them tomorrow. They're very special to us. They're not real family, but they're like family.

Until we moved from Natchez to Birmingham when I was four, my family lived in a tiny house on Roselawn Drive next to Bob and Barbara Ann Mingee and their three young adult daughters,

naïve heroines and knowing villains, who often (like Montoni) assume a paternal position, suggesting that the line between pedagogy and tyranny is an uncomfortably fine and unstable one' (148).

⁹ The Female Gothic is a sub-strain of the Gothic first theorized by Ellen Moers in a 1974 article for the *New York Review of Books*. While she defines it as “the work that women writers have done in a literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called ‘the Gothic,’” other feminist scholars have expanded on that definition. See Robert Miles' introduction to the special edition of *Women's Writing* devoted to the Female Gothic (1994), Gary Kelly's introduction to *Varieties of the Female Gothic* (2002), and Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace's introduction to the special issue of *Gothic Studies* devoted to the Female Gothic (2004).

Esther, Susan, and Peggy Ann. The middle daughter—“Suzie”—was the nurturer of my young talents. My doting caregiver. She was fresh out of college—a brand new first-grade teacher—but I didn’t know that at the time. To me, she was just a kind person who I always wanted to be around. All these years later, when I visit her in Natchez, she’s still that way.

Susan: Well, I don’t know if you remember or not – and it really wasn’t put on the door for you, it was more for Katie and you inherited it – but my daddy – when y’all would come knocking on the back door at daylight on Saturday mornings (laughs) to come in the – you were ready...

Anna: Sorry – sorry about that, by the way.

Susan: No, it was hilarious. I mean, that’s why y’all are family to us [...] But, Bob ended up putting a spool from a – a wooden spool from Bop Ed’s thread – and he attached it to the lower part of the screen door, because when you were coming, the handle was too high for you to reach [...] And, um, many many Saturday mornings we would be, um, you would come over early, and we’d still be in bed reading, and you would want your own book. And it didn’t matter that it was a picture book. It would be *any* book that you wanted. And you would pick up your own Harlequin romance and just lay right there and read just like a grown-up would read.

I should say that back in those days I couldn’t *actually* read the Harlequin romances... I was just *pretending* to read them with no idea what kind of swash-buckling was going down on those pages.

But later, when I would come back for week-long summer visits, Suzie got me reading for *real*. And she also got me writing.

Susan: When we were together, you and I, in the summer, and you needed something to do, it was like, “Okay! Let’s read this book! Now, draw a picture to go with it!” And then as you, um, aged, you, um, went through those different levels of development with your writing. And I think that’s when you and I started writing stories. Of course, you weren’t *writing* them, you were *telling* them. And you, you came up with all kinds of stories. Um, as you have been reminded, in this visit together, you would even pick up Kentucky Fried Chicken coupons and make up stories about the coupons. So, you always have had the imagination – you just needed some help right at first, writing down your thoughts. And, then you would illustrate those.

One of those stories—*Cinnamon Alone I*—became the basis for my personal statement... one of the documents I submitted when applying for grad school in English. I referred to *Cinnamon Alone I* to

demonstrate to admissions committees my life-long devotion to reading and writing, and it worked. Among other things, it got me accepted to my Master's program and, later, it got me here—to the Ph.D. I'd venture to say that nearly everyone else in grad school has a Suzie, too.

Susan: There's nothing better for a child than for somebody to take time with them and to nurture something that they're good at. And, um, make them feel good about themselves. And, you know, and these days and times especially, not too many children get a lot of one-on-one time with one adult who they love and who loves them. And so, that's—that's our special thing together. (crying)

Besides providing fodder for my personal statement, Suzie's attention did something else—something important. It instilled in me a belief that I was good at something. Because of Suzie's influence, this, to me, is how teachers are supposed to be. And, as it turns out, I'm not alone in that opinion. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, world-renowned feminist scholar and professor bell hooks advocates for something she calls “engaged pedagogy”:

hooks: To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin (13; 28:30 – 28:44).

hooks argues that caring for the “souls” of students, or treating them as individuals—whole, unique people—is the first necessary condition for training free thinkers. This holistic arrangement is transgressive, she argues, because it defies the typical power dynamics that position teachers as monolithic, omnipotent knowers and students as blank, passive learners. The Gothic heroine typically starts her life under the care of such an engaged pedagogue, developing a baseline of trust and mutual respect for the authority figures around her.¹⁰ She learns, above all, the importance of living her life in a moral way, always being thoughtful and considerate of others.

¹⁰ To use the examples that will be cited later in this dissertation: although they may have their flaws, Radcliffe's M. St. Aubert, Shelley's Alphonse Frankenstein, and Brontë's Mrs. Bretton *do* display special regard for their charges' individuality and overall wellbeing early in their lives.

Emily St. Aubert: O my dear father! [...] how exactly you describe what I have felt so often, and which I thought nobody had felt but myself! (Radcliffe 15; 40:57–41:10).

This would explain why, from the outset of these novels, the heroine is clearly presented to readers as someone with “subjective merit.” According to Gary Kelly, Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Alberta and editor of the scholarly collection *Varieties of the Female Gothic*, that “subjective merit” is the heroine’s sense of self-worth that comes from her “sensibility,” or fine feeling (xx).¹¹ Ellen Ledoux, author of the book *Social Reform in Gothic Writing*, concurs with Kelly’s reading of the Female Gothic heroine:

Ledoux: She will be very sensitive. She will be artistic, she will be intelligent, and most importantly she will be beautiful. [...] Um, and she loves poetry, she loves looking at the landscape, she plays the lute. ‘Kay? So, which is like, it’s a feminine ideal of the late 18th, early 19th century.

All of her sensitivity and moral goodness make her someone that readers are supposed to *root for*—a curious, kind, and talented, though admittedly naïve person. (She *has* been reared in rustic isolation, after all.) And though the novels sometimes make it seem like their protagonists were *born* with these admirable traits, I would argue that it’s also often the case that they *learned* them under the care of attentive teachers. They were given a safe place to *feel*—something they’ll soon learn is rare.

Because, as I mentioned, these heroines often grow up sheltered. Naïve. And this trait comes back to haunt them when they face their next typical plot development:

Ledoux: There will be some precipitating event—some rising action—um, that she’ll be expelled from this home. And she’ll have to either go on the road, or she’ll be abducted in some way.

¹¹ Eugenia Delamotte discusses a similar archetypal characteristic of the Female Gothic heroine in her 1990 study *Perils of the Night*. She deems it the heroine’s “conscious worth” (34).

Or, in *this* Gothic novel, she'll go to grad school. Sure, she's not expelled or abducted... in this story, she goes of her own volition. But often, what she finds when she gets there isn't quite what she expected—especially compared with her earlier, more nurturing educational environment.¹²

Suzie: I'm so proud of you!

In the original Female Gothic, part of this precipitating event often involves her becoming *orphaned*. Which, in the most basic sense, means she's irreparably severed from those who cared for her in their early life—a common, if socially constructed consequence of the Grad School Gothic too.¹³ Family members and friends from before grad school often don't share the same frame of reference to understand your work...

Anna: So you were excited to talk to me today but you also told me that you were “freaking out.”

Susan: I was.

Anna: So, what were you so nervous about?

...and can often feel, like society more broadly, the distancing awe and intimidation that the Ivory Tower casts in its shadow.

Susan: Well, I couldn't imagine anything that I would have to say that could help you with your, with your, um, dissertation [...] I couldn't imagine. [...] You're going to be our first Ph.D. in the family, girl!

¹² In “PhD Candidate Expectations: Exploring Mismatch with Experience” (2014), Holbrook et. al. conducted interviews with over one hundred Australian Ph.D. candidates and found that the majority experienced a negative mismatch between their expectations and their experiences of doctoral study (342). A significant number reported their experiences of supervision as one of the factors for their negative mismatch: “when candidate satisfaction with supervision is examined in relation to comments about mismatch, it is evident that they are strongly indicative of low satisfaction – a finding that supports previous re- search that emphasizes the importance of supervision in student experience” (342).

¹³ Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, and Hubbard offer a sweeping review of factors influencing the doctoral experience in “The PhD Experience” (2018). Among those discussed include the frequent occurrence of Ph.D. candidates becoming isolated from their old friends and family members, resulting in social isolation and mental health struggles (372). In a 2007 article for the *Journal of Research Practice*, for example, Carlos Andres Trujillo writes about the “lonely path” of doctoral studies (par. 2).

So. We're probably now about halfway through the first volume of our Gothic novel. The heroine has been swept away from the comforts of her nurturing educational idyll and transplanted, unaware, into a house of horrors. Because she's a woman living well before any kind of women's rights are in effect, her life—a.k.a., her future marriage plans—will be entirely dictated by her new guardian... the most imposing Gothic figure of all—the villain. The shadowy, gruff, and seemingly all-powerful lord of the castle. As her new “caregiver,” this villain *ought* to promote the heroine's quest to live a thoughtful, meaningful life, but that's often far from the case.

As Gary Kelly describes it in his study of the Female Gothic, the heroine will now be subjected to “menace by unknown forces, the machinations of individuals [...] with obscure or inscrutable motives, and/or persecution by mysterious institutions or secret organisations” (xx). A far cry from the engaged pedagogue she's grown used to, this new, monolithic authority figure holds the heroine hostage in his labyrinth-like house to use her in some secret, self-serving plot—marrying her off to a detestable count or robbing her of her inheritance and would-be dowry for his own personal gain. He keeps her isolated through neglect, surveilling her constantly with a network of spies to ensure she remains ignorant about his plans for her. If she does get too close to the truth, he will throw her off the path with elaborate mind games that make her doubt her perceptions and her sanity. While readers can clearly see that she's in danger, the heroine herself only senses it... and in the ensuing volumes we'll clutch our pearls as we witness her undergo trial after trial—an exhausting series of close calls from which she'll barely escape.

In the *Grad School* Gothic, things aren't quite as blatantly diabolical, but the heroine *does* find herself in a daunting new educational environment that Leonard Cassuto, author of the book *The Graduate School Mess*, calls “careless and shortsighted,” “teacher-centered,” and “neglectful” (13, 14,

16). And I'm not the only person to note the similarity between these pedagogically unsound school settings and the Gothic. Sherry Truffin, Associate Professor of English at Campbell University, identifies this trend in 20th century *American Gothic* novels in her 2008 book *The Schoolhouse Gothic*:

Truffin: Even though we like to think of American schools as meritocracies and vehicles for social advancement, they are quite likely to function in ways that replicate existing power hierarchies rather than challenging them.

This is why she wrote the book, says Truffin. She wanted to understand why teachers were cropping up as Gothic villains in all of these 20th century American novels.

Truffin: They're not Count Dracula, and they're not the Monk, and they're not – ya know (laughs). And yet I started to realize that there's a kinship there. There's the appearance of benevolence and the assumption of benevolence that actually can serve as a cover for something a lot darker.

Locked away in a dark, damp office in the dungeon of some campus building, the Grad School Gothic heroine will be subjected not to forced marriage, but dark “menaces” in other forms, including the exploitation of her labor mentioned earlier by Sidonie Smith and forcefully condemned by Kevin Birmingham:

Birmingham: If you are a tenured (or tenure-track) faculty member teaching in a humanities department with Ph.D. candidates, you are both the instrument and the direct beneficiary of exploitation. Your roles as teacher, adviser, and committee member generate, cultivate, and exploit young people's devotion to literature. This is the great shame of our profession.

As I'll discuss more in a later chapter, Birmingham's statement comes from a bold and provocative speech he gave right here on my own campus. But for now, I just want to point out that his comments gesture toward what many researchers of doctoral training have found to be the greatest “menace” of all to grad students (whether they mean to be or not): the Ph.D. advisor.¹⁴

¹⁴ In their recent, comprehensive review of the research on doctoral students' completion, achievement, and wellbeing, Sverdlik et. al (2018) note that there is “extensive literature linking dissatisfaction with supervision to doctoral student attrition,” however “faculty are often unaware of their potential role in student dropout” (370). See also Isabelle Skakni,

Livingstone: I don't know how you feel about your advisors, but they really become, like, these giants in your head. Ya know? These, like, arbiters of your *being*.

In the Grad School Gothic, the Ph.D. advisor—or, the graduate faculty member more generally—holds *enormous* power over the graduate student, and if they're not careful, they can end up looking a lot like the diabolical villain of yore. In their roles as teachers, mentors, and writers of the all-important letters of recommendation for jobs, doctoral advisors truly do seem—as Josephine Livingstone says here—like “arbiters of your *being*.”

Livingstone, who goes by “Jo,” earned her Ph.D. in English from NYU and now works as a staff writer for *The New Republic*... so when a story broke about an NYU graduate student, Nimrod Reitman, being abused by his Ph.D. advisor, the noted feminist scholar and Professor of German and Comparative Lit Avital Ronell, Jo was well positioned to write an article about it. The case represents the very worst of what can happen when Ph.D. advisors abuse their power—a real-life Grad School Gothic tale.

Livingstone: She forced a kind of intimacy between them with which he was not comfortable and she didn't realize that he was uncomfortable. Right? So, this intimacy extended to, um... staying the night together, demanding his attentions, making him answer phone calls... um, ya know, if he was at a party and couldn't answer a phone call she would get *angry* [...] And so, she clearly had a strong fear of abandonment?

Ronell imposed herself in every aspect of her advisee's life out of a supposed need to serve her emotional health. She stalked him, cornered and isolated him, played mind games by telling him he was “in denial” when he resisted her advances, and that her therapist agreed he should just go along with their intimate relationship (Reitman v. Ronell, 68-69). Hearing this, one might wonder why Reitman didn't report his advisor on the spot for such inappropriate behavior. One reason, as Sherry Truffin points out,

“Doctoral studies as an initiatory trial: expected and taken-for-granted practices that impede PhD students' progress” (2018).

Truffin: ...it's 'cause academia *is* a place of mystified power. Um, ya know, and that makes it—that creates conditions for abuse [...] Because... power *is* knowledge. Power is the power to create knowledge and be believed.

In academia, “power is the power to create knowledge and be believed.” Ronell held more of that power than Reitman... he was in *her* castle, her institution, where she was protected. And, as in the Gothic, the structure of that castle supports the abuse. Just on a pragmatic level: if your graduate advisor is abusing you, you simply don't have much recourse. There's no HR department overseeing those working relationships—only other faculty members who often have a vested interest in maintaining collegial relationships with their permanent peers over transient graduate students.

Another reason Reitman didn't come forward lies in the outsized role that Ph.D. advisors play in the pinnacle of their advisees' educational journeys – securing a job. As former Ph.D. turned writing consultant K.A. Amienne puts it in a *Chronicle of Higher Ed* article that went viral back in 2017 (just after the news about Harvey Weinstein broke), “Anytime you have a highly competitive system in which a single person has the power to make or break someone else's career – whether it's the crowded, greasy pole of Hollywood or a flooded Ph.D. pipeline – you will have abuse” (par. 6). Sure enough, according to Reitman's account, Ronell had all but promised him she would get him an academic job when he finished his Ph.D.

Livingstone: Um, so... he did not have the option to withdraw his affections because he, essentially, in the simplest terms, feared retaliation. Right? Um, which would be... her feeling upset and perhaps making his life much harder as a result.

To “marry” the job of their grad school dreams, in other words, the heroine needs to find a way to give her Gothic villain what he wants.

At this point in the Grad School Gothic novel, some readers will be rolling their eyes. “Hyperbole at its finest,” they may be saying. “The Ronell case is one extreme, isolated example of abuse that

cannot and should not be generalized to describe any kind of universal experience of grad school.”

Maybe so.

Maybe it’s true that the majority of graduate students haven’t experienced *sexual* abuse at the hands of their advisors, but maybe where there’s smoke there’s fire. Maybe, as Corey Robin said in an article for *The Chronicle of Higher Ed*, the Ronell-Reitman scandal tells us more about “[how] intense, [how] extreme, [how] abusive” the “pervasive imbalance of power in academe” really is than it does about sexual harassment (par. 18). As he says, that imbalance of power is “one that many graduate students have had to negotiate. And should not have to negotiate” (Robin par. 18).

Or maybe that response of the eye-rollers is, itself, part of what makes grad school feel so Gothic—the ease with which the experiences and identifications of the “persecuted heroine” are disregarded and trivialized. When she says to authority figures, “I see that kind of thing happening on a smaller scale all around *me, too*,” and those authority figures tell her she’s overreacting, or just plain wrong, it feels like the signature power move of the Gothic. Maybe that’s why so many of the Ivory Tower’s most powerless are beginning to assert their right to *say* “me too” in the astounding, if underrecognized, #MeToo movement in academia.¹⁵

Maybe the ones rolling their eyes should consider what or who it is they’re trying to protect.

¹⁵ A quick gloss on #MeToo discourse in academia: citing K.A. Amienne’s viral article ‘Abusers and Enablers in Faculty Culture’ (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nov. 2017), well-known Ph.D. advocate and author of *The Professor is In* Karen Kelsky created a Google Doc in December 2017 titled ‘A Crowdsourced Survey of Sexual Harassment in the Academy’, inviting readers to anonymously contribute. Within a month, nearly 2,000 respondents had shared their stories of abuse in academia. (<https://theprofessorisin.com/2017/12/01/a-crowdsourced-survey-of-sexual-harassment-in-the-academy/>). See also the *Chronicle of Higher Education*’s interactive feature titled ‘The Awakening: Women and Power in the Academy’. (<https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/the-awakening>).

Now back to our imperiled heroine. As if the villain wasn't enough to deal with, there's often another, even greater threat haunting her in every corner of the castle—*literally*.

Punter: Gothic has always been to do with ghosts and phantoms, with that which comes back, that which cannot be laid to rest.

As David Punter points out here, there's another defining feature of the trials and tribulations the Gothic heroine must undergo, and that's the relation between the present and the past:

Punter: The notion of inheritance has always been interesting in Gothic, because there's always the possibility of a very troubled inheritance [...] One term that is often used to think about these things in Gothic fiction is the old Biblical notion of "the sins of the fathers." The way in which things which your forefathers may have done, and about which you may know about or not know about, may be revisited upon you. So that your quest, in the Gothic novel, is sometimes to find out, what is it that's been done in the past which means that I have to suffer like this in the present?

Another reason the abuse between Ronell and Reitman is so indicative of the broader power dynamics of doctoral advising is that it *does* deal with a powerful past that haunts us in the present. What we've inherited in the modern academic humanities, according to Timothy Burke, is something he calls the "academic star system":

Burke: "The academic star system of the 1980's and 1990's in the humanities created a group of people who believed they were better than everyone else and a group of people who were invested in believing the stars were better than everyone else. This has done lasting damage to the humanities."

Burke is a Professor of History at Swarthmore, and after the Ronell/Reitman scandal broke, he went on a bit of a tare about it on Twitter—part of which you just heard. Back when humanities departments were more flush with university cash, he says, they could—and did—actively court fashionable intellectuals to join their ranks... in particular, people who were responsible for importing the radical and provocative European theory that would change the way scholars thought, read, and studied texts in the American humanities. Once these "stars" were recruited to such prestigious positions, Burke says, they were given a lot of leeway.

Burke: And they're becoming, kind of, um, almost cultishly successful figures within a set of academic disciplines in the American system *because* in a way they have those connections. They're bringing something new. [...] You get more money, you get autonomy on a scale that other people don't get, um, you get freedom from some forms of responsibility, all in the name of the thought that you're thinking deep thoughts that no one else is thinking. And that you have work to do that you need to be free to do. And at the same time, a kind of heedlessness about what the "little people" think.

So how is this power of the past making us suffer in the present? For one thing, many of the stars from the 80's and 90's *do* still exist in our academic universe, despite the general downturn in the humanities' influence. Judging by her CV, Ronell would certainly seem to fit the bill. And because graduate students are well aware of this powerful constellation of stars, they're afraid to speak out when abuses *do* occur. Here's Jo again:

Livingstone: So I had heard, um... that's funny, nothing ever seems like a *rumor* when you hear it at the time. But I had heard people talking about Avital in my time at NYU [...] I had heard that she was this, like, person with very intense emotional relationships to her students that... asked a lot.

Although the NYU sexual harassment case didn't become public knowledge until August of 2018, Ronell's abuses of power were already an open secret among grad students. Whenever Jo would express any kind of disappointment to her friends and colleagues about her own advisor, she says,

Livingstone: People were saying, like, "Yeah, but, you could have... someone who was forcing their way into your life like Avital Ronell." So, that's how I heard about it. Kind of organically.

Although grad students at NYU *knew*, in other words, nobody wanted to speak out against such a renowned professor... and for good reason. Another vestige of that power of the past that makes grad students suffer in the present? Turns out there were *plenty* of other stars ready to rush to Ronell's defense.

Livingstone: An open letter was circulated amongst really the highest echelons of scholarship in the humanities—especially in critical theory. It received over a hundred signatures.

Signatures from the *biggest* stars of feminist scholarship, no less... chief among them Judith Butler, the incoming president of the Modern Language Association. The letter, which was addressed to the president and provost of NYU, spoke out against Reitman, claiming that he was on a (quote) “malicious campaign” against Ronell (Butler par. 1) But not only did these outspoken feminists *not* believe the accuser—the basic feminist protocol in a situation like this—they also went on to use many of the same moves used by defenders of Harvey Weinstein: Ronell is talented and accomplished, they said (Butler par. 2). She holds an important position at a top institution (Butler par. 2). They knew her personally and could vouch that she just wouldn’t *do* that (Butler par. 3). And finally, if you fire her, there will be retaliation (Butler par. 3).

Punter: What is it that’s been done in the past which means that I have to suffer like this in the present?

Livingstone: “The Ronell cheerleaders [...] are almost universally intellectuals who once upon a time considered themselves cultural outsiders. Queer theorists, post-colonial scholars, feminist thinkers. They act as if they are a politicized coalition defending a vulnerable person without the awareness that they are now the tenured, the published, the well-off, the powerful. Precisely the demographic that #MeToo proposes to investigate.”

As we near the end of this first volume of the Grad School Gothic, the truth of the heroine’s situation has begun to dawn on her. Despite her isolation, she’s found a way to attain this knowledge by making allies of a sympathetic servant or two—or, in the modern world, a growing body of her grad school comrades emboldened to speak out on social media by movements like #MeToo. Through her narrow window, she can see the castle ramparts tumbling down slowly—stone by stone—and yet, the fortress still stands, seemingly held together by the sheer will of its towering overlord.

Or maybe it’s held together by what, in *The Schoolhouse Gothic*, Sherry Truffin refers to as “epistemic violence”:

Truffin: There's a kind of violence in the way that we know or the way that we choose to know. Um... or that way that we, more generally, define.

To define is to create boundaries around what something *is* and what it *isn't*. To *know* something is true is to *deny* the truth of something else. Thus, says Truffin, our entire way of knowing—the foundation of Western epistemology upon which the Grad School Gothic is built—is itself *violent*.

Truffin: Because, if we define scholarship as knowledge creation, as it's typically understood – but you also think of teaching as the construction of the educated student, or the process of creating the educated mind, it's also sort of... doing violence to that mind by how we define and circumscribe and limit...

Creating and disseminating knowledge involves privileging certain ideas or experiences and denying others... When we decide what “counts” as knowledge, then, we tell certain people that we believe them and certain others that we *don't*. This argument about the insidious relationship between knowledge and power is derived from the work of highly influential philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault. Normally we think that knowledge *gives* one power.

Truffin: And Foucault said, “No no no no.” Well, he – I mean, he didn't say that wasn't *true*, but he said um, “Power gives you Knowledge.” Because... power *is* knowledge. [...] He's really saying in a sense that the teacher invents the student. Ya know? The teacher defines the student and invents the student and creates the student. Um, and... uh... and so you can see that in and of itself as a kind of violence.

In this way, Truffin's notion of epistemic violence is similar to what higher ed advocate Beth Godbee has referred to as “epistemic injustice”—or, denying someone their fundamental right to experiential knowledge (597, 594). Rather than recognizing that their students already possess valid and valuable knowledge that they *do not*—much of which is gleaned from their unique life experiences—epistemically violent or unjust teachers decide that they and their academic equals are the only ones who have the right to think they *know* anything. In some cases, maybe it's yet another vestige of the “academic star system” that refuses to lie down and be buried. In others, though, it's purely accidental.

Truffin: Being a college professor is... ya know, about becoming certified as an expert in your field. It's not – ya know, you don't really learn how to teach.

Researchers of the doctoral training process have concluded the same thing—that often, the so-called “violence” occurs out of pedagogical ignorance, the product of Ph.D. advisors *themselves* being trained to be scholars, not teachers.¹⁶ As bell hooks says, academics are often the *opposite* of engaged pedagogues:

hooks: During my twenty years of teaching, I have witnessed a grave sense of dis-ease among professors (irrespective of their politics) when students want us to see them as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge (15; 31:52–32:14).

Even though they almost always mean well, Ph.D. advisors often don't recognize how much power they have over their advisees' self-esteem and future careers,¹⁷ and thus how much their roles as teachers and mentors matter. But, as Leonard Cassuto says,

Cassuto: We've got to do things differently because we're wrecking people's lives. And it's just unacceptable. (15:15–15:20)

So here we are at the end of the first volume of *My Gothic Dissertation*. A heroine with “subjective merit” has entered a Ph.D. program full of passion and trust in the benevolence of the system. Primed by her early caregiver, she still considers herself to be on a quest for a meaningful life, but now she's separated from that mentor and unaware that she's been swept into a system of epistemic violence set up—consciously or not—by an academic discipline desperate to replicate itself. Often,

¹⁶ See, for instance, Isabelle Skakni, “Doctoral Studies as Initiatory Trial” (2018).

¹⁷ A recent study published in *Nature Biotechnology* (March 2018) reports that, compared to the general public, graduate students are six times more likely to experience depression and anxiety than the general public. The researchers deem their findings evidence for a “mental health crisis” in graduate education and go on to state that “it is alarming” how much graduate students' mental health relies on the stability of their relationships with faculty advisers and mentors (283).

her ideas must change to fit the existing version of what counts as knowledge... not the other way around.

In the next volumes, we'll follow the hair-raising trials and tribulations she faces during her entrapment... but what kind of Gothic novel would this be if this volume didn't end with some suspense?

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.

Next time on *My Gothic Dissertation*.

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