

Enlightenment and Its Shadows: Witchcraft, Devilry and the Cult of the Feminine in the Gothic Fiction Written in the Late Eighteenth Century England

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Abstract:

The gothic novels written in late eighteenth are replete with the representations of witchcraft, devilry, sorcery and supernatural events. Ann Radcliffe, Clara Reeve and other writers, who wrote in their tradition, tried to represent “explained supernatural” in their novels. Though they showed many supernatural incidents in their novels, they rationalized it at the end with the help of reason and logic. These writers belonged to the tradition of the rational feminists of the eighteenth century who worked under the rubric of enlightenment values of reason and logic. But in the other mode of writings popularized by M.G. Lewis, Charlotte Dacre and others, no such attempts were made to rationalize the supernatural events represented in their novels. The central female characters in their novels are shown as blood thirsty, demonic, murderous and dangerous. They practise sorcery and witchcraft. They are almost equated with Devil. They violate the norms of the patriarchal order and are consequently punished for it. The present paper attempts to show that in this later group of novels, demonization of the women actually refers to their romantic transgressive spirit. Though the moralizing tone of the novels often tended to hide their subversive nature, their utter rejection of enlightenment values and sobriety aligned them with the alternative tradition that silently flowed alongside mainstream enlightenment culture and upheld the irrational, anarchic but creative, fertile and organic principle of femininity that symbolized wholeness and connectedness with nature.

Key words: Enlightenment, Gothic, Devilry, subversive, transgressive, feminine.

“Some secret truths from learned pride conceal'd
To maids alone and children are reveal'd
What tho' no credit doubting wits may give?
The fair and innocent shall still believe.”

Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*

Pope wrote those lines, as it is generally known, to mock the women of the eighteenth aristocratic society for their superstitious nature. But the lines can be taken as potentially subversive to point out the limitation of the Enlightenment values as well as the learned proponents of them. “Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity” (Kant 2). This is how Immanuel Kant defined a great European phenomenon that took place in Europe in the period from 1680 to late eighteenth century. But he referred to enlightenment not as a period but as a process. This process, according to Kant, involved making “public use of reason” (Ibid., 4). He stressed on the free use of reason against all sorts of preconceived notions or ideas propagated by the authority. Thus “reason” at its centre surrounded by the ideas of freedom, progress and science formed the basic ideals of European enlightenment. It was an optimistic period marked by belief in reason, progress and secularism. This coincided with the scientific revolution led by Isaac Newton. It was assumed that man could unravel and explain every mystery and miracle in the universe which was running on a well-balanced and well-regulated order. This scientific view of the universe as a perfect mechanism governed by a well-ordered law closely aligned itself with Latitudinarianism, a rational version of Christianity purged of all superstitions and mysteries. David Hume in *Of Miracle* defined miracle as “a violation of the laws of nature”

(Hume 120). A seemingly miracle may actually arise from human ignorance. He regarded Christian religion as founded upon faith not on reason. So a reasonable man can hardly believe it. He says:

Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: and whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience. (Ibid., 138)

Shelley in his *Essay on the Devil and Devils* said that “The wisest of the ancient philosophers accounted for the existence without introducing the Devil. The Devil was clearly a Chaldaean invention, for we first hear of him after the return of the Jews from their second Assyrian captivity” (Shelley N. Pag.) Voltaire, another proponent of enlightenment rationalism, came down heavily upon the belief in magic and superstition. He considered magic as “the secret of doing what nature cannot do. It is an impossible thing” (Ankarloo 219). He regarded superstition as the most dangerous thing next to plague to destroy the mankind: “Superstition is, immediately after the plague, the most horrible flail which can inflict mankind” (Ibid., 220). Locke in *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) and Toland in *Christianity not Mysterious* tried to filter Christianity with eyes of reason and present a rational version of Christianity. Thomas Woolston in *On the Miracles of our Saviour* (1728) rejected all the miraculous parts of the Bible. Though he tried to show in his book that “the literal History of many of the Miracles of Jesus, as recorded by the Evangelists, does imply Absurdities, Improbabilities, and Incredibilities” (Woolston 4), he ensured his faith to his Lord by saying: “...this I do, not for the Service of Infidelity, which has no Place in my Heart, but for the Honour of the Holy Jesus” (Ibid., 3). Conyers

Middleton in *A Free Enquiry into the Miraculous Powers* (1749) denied the existence of witchcraft and miracles in a disguised manner. He remarked:

...the case of witchcraft affords the most effectual proof of the truth of what I am advancing, There is not in all history any one miraculous fact, so authentically attested as the existence of witches. All Christian nations whatsoever have consented in the belief of them and provided capital laws against them: in consequence of which, many hundreds of both Sexes have suffered a cruel death. In our own country, great numbers have been condemned to die, at different times, after a public trial, by the most eminent Judges of the Kingdom. (Middleton 221)

But he observed that men's skepticism and reasoning triumphed over all these superstitions. So he added that "the belief of witches is now utterly extinct, and quietly buried without involving history in it's ruin, or leaving even the least disgrace or censure upon it" (Ibid., 223). Latitudinarianism presented an image of a well-ordered and well-designed universe governed by a supreme creator. Thus science aligned with religion used the weapon of reason to triumph over what were "unreason" – all sorts of miracles, magic and everything outside the Latitudinarian law of the universe. Witchcraft, devilry and sorcery were being viewed with the eyes of disbelief and mockery by elite intellectuals of eighteenth century England. In a debate proposed in the Temple Patrick Society and fully discussed by its members in 1788 in England, it was concluded:

How weak does the power of witches and evil spirits appear, when we consider that the hairs on our heads are numbered, and that heaven superintends and directs all actions and events. Under the influence of this delightful thought, the faith of witchcraft is entirely demolished, the thing itself appears a wild chimera. Awake, asleep, at home, abroad, I am surrounded still with God. (Temple Patrick Society 22)

Thus the members of Temple Patrick Society refuted the possibilities of all sorts of miracles in a universe ruled and governed by God. If a miracle occurs, there is none but God behind it. Besides these, numerous books, pamphlets and treatises were written by different intellectuals guided as well as inspired by reason and rationalism of enlightenment to condemn the false-belief in magic, witchcraft and superstition and illuminate human mind with the light of reason.

The most crucial attempt to erase witchcraft and devilry from official record was taken by the government in 1736 when English parliament issued a statute that denied the existence of any supernatural power of the witches or sorcerers but permitted legal prosecution against those who pretended to have such power. So witch-hunting and witch-trials gradually declined and came to an end at last. The last court conviction was the case of Jane Wenham in Hertfordshire in 1712. She was exempted and the case against her was dismissed as the trial judge Sir John Powell “rejected the usefulness as proof of witchcraft of a number of bent pins said to have been vomited” (Ankarloo 195). This official decriminalization of witches appears to be a result of the intellectual movement during enlightenment. But Brian P. Levac refutes this theory arguing that decline in witchcraft prosecution was a result of the continuous reluctance of the English judges to convict the suspected witches due to their utter disbelief and this event preceded the intellectual movement of the enlightenment. He says, “The responsibility for the end of witch-hunting lies mainly with the judges, inquisitors and magistrate who controlled the operation of judicial machinery in the very secular and ecclesiastical court of Europe in the late seventeenth century and eighteenth century” (Ibid., 33). Whether the judicial system or the intellectual movement contributed more to the decline in witch-hunt and witch-prosecution is a matter of debate. But it can be safely concluded that both interdependently contributed to the gradual decline of

witchcraft belief and witch-prosecution in England. Belief in Witchcraft and black-magic were almost swept away from the town and found its shelter in the nook corners of village and countryside where the light of reason was yet to come.

Elite intellectuals of the enlightenment often associated the rustics and the female with the superstition and witchcraft and laughed at them. Women, it was believed, were more vulnerable to superstition and false imagination than men. The quotation from Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* in the epigraph of this essay testifies to the fact. Reason was mainly a domain of the male. Enlightenment is often considered by historians a male narrative written by the canonical male authors who denied women the capacity of rational thinking. Antoine-Leonard Thomas, a French poet and literary critic, in his book *Essai sur le caractere, les moeurs et l'esprit des femmes dans les différens siècles* (1772) commented on the philosophical differences between the nature of male and female mind. He "denied women the capacity for logical and philosophical reasoning and for action in political sphere" (Haakonssen 203). Women, he argued, excelled in the sphere of religion and domestic and moral virtues. His views closely echoed the views of others philosophers like Rousseau and Bentham who eulogising women in the sphere of morality, sensibility and religion pointed out their weakness in intellectual sphere. Dr John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), a popular book on female conduct in late eighteenth century, considered that natural goodness, delicacy and softness of women's heart enabled them to preserve the basic human virtues. Gregory advised his daughters to keep faith in religion and not to be entrapped in reasoning that would plunge them into chaos:

Religion is rather a matter of sentiment than reasoning. The important and interesting articles of faith are sufficiently plain. Fix your attention on thee, and do not meddle with controversy. If you get into that, you plunge into a chaos, from

which you will never be able to extricate yourselves... Avoid all books, and all conversation that tend to shake your faith on those great points of religion which should serve to regulate your conduct, and on which your hopes of future and eternal happiness depend. (Gregory 15)

Michèle Cohen in her essay *'To think, to compare, to combine, to methodise': Girls' Education in Enlightenment Britain* shows how the patriarchal assumption about female nature contributed to the formation of two different education systems for men and women in eighteenth century England: public and private. "Public schooling", according to the dominant patriarchal assumption, "alone provided the discipline that fostered virtue and manliness while domestic instruction, indulgent and lacking in discipline, promoted idleness and vice, both signifiers of effeminacy" (Knott 227). Thus women for whom the domestic education was recommended came to symbolize the irregularity, indiscipline and irrationality in contrast to the masculine reason.

But this interpretation of enlightenment as a masculine phenomenon has been regarded as one-sided and rejected by the recent historians who have rewritten the history of enlightenment incorporating the role of women as active participants. John Robertson in his essay *Women and Enlightenment: A "Historiographical Conclusion* remarked, "As late as the 1980s, a negative view of the Enlightenment's significance for women was common" (Ibid., 692). But in a more recent approach to enlightenment, Robertson added, "Women have benefited as much as any from the new pluralism, both as the objects of Enlightenment thought and as active participants in the movement" (Ibid., 693). Barbara Taylor and other contributors in the book *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* have tried to show that how the different feminist figures of eighteenth century ranging from Mary Astell (1666-1731) to Bluestocking Society of mid-eighteenth century succeeded by

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) focused on women's intellectual ability and rational qualities and demanded equal rights of women in intellectual, educational and political sphere. Platonic-Christian doctrine of "sexless-soul" helped the feminists of this time to assert the equality of men and women in spiritual and mental level despite their outward physical disparity. This idea was backed by the doctrine of Cartesian mind-body dualism that distinguished mind and body as two separate and independent mechanisms. Poulain de la Barre (1647-1725) influenced by Cartesian theory made his famous comment "the mind has no sex" (Ibid., 353). These led the feminist figures of this time to uphold the view that both men and women were equally endowed with reason and rational qualities. Though this Cartesian theory appeared helpful to feminists of the eighteenth century to substantiate the equality of men and women in metaphysical and spiritual level, it was problematic in the sense that "the neutral spirit has its earthly existence only within a sexually differentiated body, with all the consequences for the disparagement of women that have followed from that" (Ibid., 710). Kate Soper remarked that "the encouragement it gave to women to seek emancipation in celibacy and the life of the intellect at the expense of emotional and sexual fulfilment has also proved painful" (Ibid., 710)

Mary Astell, the earliest feminist of eighteenth century, believed that truth was accessible to women by reason and a woman was as rational as a man to reach the truth by exercising her faculty of reason. A woman deserved proper and same education like man. In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), she advised her contemporary women to focus more on the improvement of the self instead of making themselves the object of admiration of the male eyes:

How can you be content to be in the World like Tulips in a Garden, to make a fine shew and be good for nothing... our Souls were given us only for the service of our Bodies, and that the best improvement we can make of these, is to attract

the Eyes of Men. We value them too much, and our selves too little, if we place any part of our Worth in their Opinion; and do not think our selves capable of Nobler Things than the pitiful Conquest of some worthless heart. (Astell 9-11)

Besides Mary Astell, there were women like Bathsua Makin, Margaret Cavendish, Elizabeth Elstob, and Damaris Masham in the early eighteenth century who upheld the women's demand for proper education for women and stressed on the rational ability of women. This generation was followed by the Bluestocking society of mid-eighteenth century. Bluestocking society was the informal association of some privileged women led by Elizabeth Montagu and Elizabeth Vesey. This group of women abstained from the popular non-intellectual activities like gossiping and playing cards, and discussed literature and other serious social and philosophical issues. They often invited male intellectual to participate in their discussion. They showed their concern for women's education and equal rights of women. Later more radical writers like Anna Barbauld and Mary Wollstonecraft came to vindicate the rights of women in social and political sphere. But they showed their distrust of the Bluestocking Society's emphasis on female advancement through dialogue and conversation. Mary Wollstonecraft was a secular rational feminist who first put forward the question of female sexuality and female pleasure at the centre of her feminist project along with other issues like education, employment etc. Though she spoke of sexual autonomy of women, she warned that unless passion was checked by reason, it would make one brutal: "Women as well as men ought to have the common appetites and passions of their nature, they are only brutal when unchecked by reason." (Wollstonecraft 182) But the problem with these feminists of the eighteenth century was that they could never escape from the rubric of enlightenment and chose to find separate identity of themselves. They just wanted to be reasonable and rational like

the men. Reason itself was a patriarchal discourse that could hardly delve the depth of female subjectivity. Similarly in a system of thoughts governed by the masculine reason, female voice could hardly find space to express itself. French feminism holds the view that women should celebrate their state of being marginalized instead of claiming to be assimilated into mainstream male ideology. Helene Cixous in her essay *Sorties* (1975), shows how the male reason is ordered as a series of binary oppositions, in which one half of the binary is taken as superior to other: for example, male/female, light/darkness, activity/passivity, culture/nature etc. What French Feminists want to stress is that the idea that femininity is just opposite of masculinity stems from the masculine logic. So women should try to find an identity outside the male system of thought. French Feminists Kristeva and Irigaray speak of pre-oedipal unconscious state or *écriture féminine* that precedes language and all sorts of reason, logic and structure. This idea of pre-Oedipal anarchic feminine state closely resembles spiritual ecofeminist Mary Daly's idea of "wild zone" where women can be free. So the celebration of unreason could be another way for eighteenth century women to subvert the dominant patriarchal ideology and find a distinct identity outside the masculine system of thought. Gerald Gardener, Margaret Murray, James Frazer, Jules Michelet have found the root of western witchcraft in the pre-Christian pagan fertility cult of goddess Diana who symbolized at once beauty, fertility as well as death, evil and magic. Gerald Gardener is regarded as the father and one of the most important proponents of neo-pagan and Wiccan movement that emerged as a reaction against the dehumanizing effect of modernism, industrialization, rationalization and universal taxonimization on human beings and above all enlightenment definition of progress by positing the need of experiencing the wholeness and connectedness with nature as central to human life. But this romantic approach is critiqued for its lack of historical and empirical evidences to

legitimize itself. But later many neo-Pagan writers like Starhawk (1989), Vivianne Crowley (1989), and Margot Adler (1986) used Jung's theory to give theoretical support to the neo-pagan movement. They used Jung's theories to understand the role of symbolic and spiritual in human experience and drawing on Jung's theory they described witchcraft history as "representative of universal psychic truths, independent of empirical history" (Leeming 961). Thus Jungian approach in understanding neo-paganism was more helpful as it could dispense with the historical and empirical truth relying more upon psychological and cultural symbols emanating from the "collective unconscious." Another important aspect of this neo-pagan movement was the centrality of the divine feminine with its dualistic aspects of death and fertility manifested in the moon goddess Diana. In *The Old Religion in the New Age*, Cassandra Carter remarked:

In Jungian terms the descent of the Goddess teaches the need for a woman to go on her own quest in search of her animus—not waiting for the knight on a white charger who will rescue her from the need to make her own choices, but going to confront the Dark Lord and solve his mysteries — going of her own choice and will into the Kingdom of the Unconscious mind. (Ibid., 961)

Thus a witch is a woman who plunges into the unconscious mind in search of her animus instead of being driven by masculine reason and logic. According to David Waldron,

“For some sectors of society the Witch represents superstition, evil, irrationality and the primitive, i.e., that which limits the potential for human progress and autonomy from nature. To others, the Witch represents beauty, nature, freedom and cultural autonomy from the corrupting and limiting influences of scientific rationalism, commodification and industrialization.”

Though Satan with all his supernaturalism disappeared from the rational mind, it reappeared in a new humanised and sublime form in the cultural scenario of the late Eighteenth century. Mario Praz in his book *The Romantic Agony* described that this process of the metamorphosis of Satan into a Romantic hero started with Milton's *Paradise Lost* and took its complete form in the gothic fiction of late Eighteenth century. Peter A. Schock coined the term "Romantic Satanism" to describe the romantic transgressive spirit that manifested itself in different forms in the writings of romantic writers like Blake, Shelley and Byron. Though in the age of reason, Devil, witchcraft and supernaturalism were simply laughed off or repressed by the rationalist thinkers and even by the feminists, it did not completely disappear. Roy Porter remarks:

However scorned and spurned during the age of reason, the demonic and magical did not so much disappear from the polite culture as change their face and place. Once disclaimed and tamed, they became available for cultural repackaging, notably in domains of literature and the arts which were themselves enjoying phenomenal growth (Ankarloo 245).

The gothic novels written in late eighteenth are replete with the representations of witchcraft, devilry, sorcery and supernatural events. Ann Radcliffe, Clara Reeve and other writers, who wrote in their tradition, tried to represent "explained supernatural" in their novels. Though they showed many supernatural incidents in their novels, they rationalized it at the end with the help of reason and logic. They represented the central female characters in their novels as powerless, humble and innocent persecuted by the patriarchal powers. They are finally reconciled with the patriarchal system through the functioning of the institution of marriage. They undergo a journey from emotionalism and immaturity to rationalism, maturity and stability in personal and social life. These writers belonged to the tradition of the rational feminists of the

eighteenth century who worked under the rubric of enlightenment values of reason. But in the other mode of writings popularized by M.G. Lewis, Charlotte Dacre and others, no such attempts were made to rationalize the supernatural events represented in their novels. The central female characters in their novels are shown as blood thirsty, demonic, murderous and dangerous. They practise sorcery and witchcraft. They are almost equated with Devil. Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*, Matilda in Mathew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk*, Carathis in William Beckford's *Vathek*, all violate the norms of the patriarchal order and are consequently punished for it. In this later group of novels, demonization of the women actually refers to their romantic transgressive spirit. Though the moralizing tone of the novels often tended to hide their subversive nature, their utter rejection of enlightenment values and sobriety aligned them with the alternative tradition that silently flowed alongside mainstream enlightenment culture and upheld the cult of irrational, anarchic but creative, fertile and organic principle of femininity that symbolized wholeness and connectedness with nature.

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