

## **Forms and Feelings in the Genre**

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## **Forms and Feeling in Frances Sheridan, Sophia Lee, and Ann Radcliffe**

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### **Abstract:**

This chapter explores the connections between novels of sensibility and Gothic novels in the later eighteenth-century. Women throughout the eighteenth century were not constituted as full 'subjects' before the law, constituted through marriage as passive transmitters of property between men. This ontological status of fragmented subjectivity has been rightly identified as a key part of the 'Female Gothic', however, it emerges in earlier texts as well. Locating these texts in relation to legal discourses of ownership and inheritance, the chapter argues for the continuity of women's experiences in novels of sensibility and the Gothic.

**Keywords:** property, law, sensibility, history, gender

To paraphrase Anne Williams, regarding that 'quintessentially Gothic issue – legitimate descent and rightful inheritance', 'sensibility' and 'Gothic' are not two, but one.<sup>1</sup> In both, form modulates feeling in ways that illuminate discourses of ownership, autonomy, and identity that coalesce in particular ways around female subjectivity. While scholarship on the Gothic – and on 'Female Gothic' – has tended to focus on the final decades of the century, earlier texts demonstrate the presence of 'Gothic' forms emerging from and through novels of sensibility. Over a decade before Ellen Moers noted that 'property seems to loom larger than love' in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Leslie Fielder suggested that the 'basic fable of the Gothic...seems actually derived from such books as *Clarissa*'.<sup>2</sup>

Richardson's genre-defining novel also focuses on property and ownership as organising systems that determine the (female) protagonist's expectations, opportunities, and eventual fate. These thematic obsessions trace a line through both form and feeling in novels of sensibility and the Gothic. Frances Sheridan's *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1783-5), and Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) demonstrate an intense interest in women's roles in inheritance and ownership, as well as the ways in which these systems were part of broader ideological formations of citizenship, belonging, and identity. These issues are necessarily worked out through discourses of gender, the dominant paradigm that determined an individual's social, cultural, and political opportunities throughout the century.

Gothic criticism, particularly that focusing on 'Female Gothic', is equally obsessed with property and claims of ownership. Lauren Fitzgerald notes that 'feminist criticism in 1970s and 1980s is marked by a series of proprietary metaphors including "maps", "territories", "breaking ground", "space", and "landmarks"'.<sup>3</sup> Critical narratives about the role of the Gothic in literary studies, and especially, about the role of women in the Gothic genre, reflect the 'property plot'.<sup>4</sup> Ellen Moers' original definition drew a 'easily defined' connection

between the sex of the author ('the work that *women* have done'<sup>5</sup>) and the text, suggesting that what distinguished the Female Gothic began and ended with the same biologically-determined characteristics that distinguished the subjects from the objects of law in the eighteenth century. 'Female' qualifies 'Gothic' in Moers' formulation, but that qualification loses its function as an interpretive tool given the vagueness that defines 'Gothic' (which was 'not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear'<sup>6</sup>). Moers's definition points to the persistent tension between corporeal and incorporeal property. By yoking together an 'easily definable', apparently solid concept ('Female') with an ambiguous and intangible one ('the Gothic'), her definition recalls eighteenth-century debates over the nature of *literary* property. The role of gender in the current debates about Female Gothic echo the ways in which gender provided women in the eighteenth century with a lens through which to negotiate ownership and belonging.<sup>7</sup>

Elements of the Female Gothic are apparent in women's writing before Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777). Since Moers' definition, Ann Radcliffe has been taken (and contested) as the originator of this subgenre. Robert Miles posits 'four necessary and sufficient conditions' for Radcliffe's 'Female Gothic':

[T]here must be figurations of female genius; the possible expression of genius is tied to property, both through its presence and its threatening alienation; the threat is explicitly tied to the patriarchal principle...; and finally, the mother's absence is not a token of her irrelevance but of her supreme importance as a deferred object of the heroine's unconscious search'.<sup>8</sup>

Radcliffe is, however, not the originator of these conditions: she is the inheritor of a tradition of women's writing through which she develops a 'narrative grammar'.<sup>9</sup> Miles argues that Radcliffe's 'conditions' have 'deep roots in the ideological circumstances of her time', but these circumstances, and the fictional strategies women used to articulate these, do not begin in the 1790s. The metaphor of 'deep roots' suggests a chronological synchronicity, with Radcliffe's work able to 'tap' into layers of discourse, ideology, and opinions of her time. The questions of materiality, embodiment, and property that Radcliffe's work explores suggests a broad network of influences that reaches well before her time. Miles's felicity conditions for the Female Gothic prefigure women's writing before the emergence of the 'Gothic'.

A broader set of conditions would acknowledge not only women's writing but the social, cultural, and political debates from which such writing emerges and in which it participates. Such conditions, evident in novels of sensibility as well as women's Gothic novels centre the narrative form and expression around the ontological uncertainty of women's legal and civic position. These conditions are: the female protagonist's awareness of legal and civic precarity; the expression of this precarity is made manifest through

property – both in its dominant form of real estate and in other forms such as moveable property and money; the threat depends on women's lack of autonomy and civil status; the narrative reveals 'feeling' as an insufficient substitution for effective action in the world. These conditions coalesce around a *female* protagonist. As Carol Margaret Davison notes in her discussion of Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806), identifying a female protagonist does not 'preclude historicizing readings by underscoring how the socio-cultural sex/gender system is a shifting, but key, issue' but recognizes that 'woman' is both a crucial imaginative construct in the eighteenth century *and* a category determined by biological sex that 'affects the protagonist's life experiences and possibilities'.<sup>10</sup> By emphasising property, these conditions make explicit the connection between gender and foundational discourses of belonging(s) and ownership.

Throughout the eighteenth century, land continued to dominate the cultural imaginary and legal discourse, functioning as the basic paradigm for all property law. This greatly affected women's ability to claim ownership over other forms of property, including chattel (moveable) property and intellectual property, and added to the restrictions women faced in claiming their belonging, as full subjects, to political and national communities.<sup>11</sup> Ownership of land persisted as the requirement for political representation and property owners benefited from the fact that 'parliamentary representation and public office were tied to the favourite safeguard of the age, the property qualification'.<sup>12</sup> While the law could not forbid women from owning property, gendered constructions of political and civil subjects were reinforced by women's explicit exclusion, regardless of property or married status, from public office; women could not sit in Council, or in either parliamentary house, they could not serve on juries, and they could not vote.<sup>13</sup> Women with property – or with claims to property – nonetheless feature prominently in sentimental and Gothic novels: their 'fitness' for ownership and their extreme vulnerability the common interests in both.

Spectres of the woman-as-property-owner haunt both sentimental and Gothic literature: Clarissa is an early and important example, her tragic circumstances the result of familial discord after she inherits her grandfather's dairy. Sidney Bidulph is harried from estate to estate, finding security only in divesting herself of property, thus repeating women's essential role as conduits for property rather than acquirers of property. Madam Montoni, dying in the tower of Udolpho for refusing to sign away her property in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and Mrs Rayland, the matriarchal relic of Charlotte Smith's *The Old Manor House* (1793), are poignant examples. While neither are heroines, their presence in these novels challenges 'the fundamental principles of liberal ideology, namely that ownership of property serves as the basis for political freedom and individual autonomy'.<sup>14</sup> Whether married (*feme covert*) or single (*feme sole*), women fare poorly: Matilda, the primary narrator of Sophia Lee's *The Recess* who is single, married, and widowed in the long course of her

narrative, desperately tries to negotiate her impossible inheritance; Radcliffe's heroines suffer persecution in spite of their repeated attempts to avoid inheriting property. Sidney Bidulph, the acme of 'virtue in distress' and proto-Gothic heroine, struggles through marriage and widowhood with questions of belonging – both where *she* belongs and what she might claim as her own. In both sentimental and Gothic novels women can neither avoid nor fully claim property.

In the eighteenth century, women, according to Samuel Johnson, were simply never the 'right' owners; their relationship with property detectable only as an effect of their sexuality. For Johnson, the extremity of women's viciousness is expressed through a negation of their most desirable quality: chastity, on which depends 'all the property in the world': 'We hang a thief for stealing a sheep; but the unchastity of women transfers sheep, and farm and all, from the right owner'.<sup>15</sup> Comparing 'unchastity' to thievery emphasises the apparently similar stakes of the 'crimes': fornication in young (single) women is likened to 'stealing a shilling' or a 'man's purse'; 'unchastity' in married women, however, is akin to taking a thousand pounds, or to 'murdering him first, and then taking' his purse.

Furthermore, it is the concealment of the crime that particularly disturbs Johnson, who has, he claims, 'more reverence for a common prostitute than for a woman who conceals her guilt'.<sup>16</sup> Johnson's casting of women as thieves supplanting 'right' owners (legitimate heirs) through their unrestrained sexual desire betrays deep anxiety about the precariousness of property in the very act of *not* acknowledging women's roles in ownership. Despite being deprived of agency, women's role in reproduction and their (from Johnson's perspective) secret knowledge of the lineage of their offspring direct the flow of landed property ('the farm and all').

Mary Wollstonecraft carries this point further in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1797). For Wollstonecraft, the entire project of a 'revolution of female manners' depends on economic independence and civil recognition: 'to render her really virtuous and useful, she must not, if she discharge civil duties, want, individually, the protection of civil laws; she must not be dependent on her husband's bounty for her subsistence during his life, or support after his death—for how can a being be generous who has nothing of its own?'<sup>17</sup> As Lena Halldenius argues, Wollstonecraft privileges the ability to earn self-sufficiency through exertion over ownership of property.<sup>18</sup> However, as Halldenius acknowledges, 'being *enabled* to support yourself implies...that you are regarded as someone to whom things are due by law and contract'.<sup>19</sup> Women were barred from full personhood before the law, owning neither themselves nor the results of their labour. Marriage, through which women could attain (conditional) support, allowed them to claim earnings from their work – but only through their husbands.<sup>20</sup> Circumscribed by marriage, regardless of whether they were actually married or not, women occupy an ontologically unstable position in both sentimental and Gothic novels.

While Sheridan's *Sidney Bidulph* is the clearest example of a novel of sensibility, Lee and Radcliffe's novels modulate rather than wholly separate themselves from the form of sensibility in their more clearly 'Gothic' works. The difference exists in the ways in which the forms reflect states of property as conduits of feeling. Sheridan's sentimental world is comfortingly *realistic*, creating a connection that both guarantees and is underscored by the epistolary form of the novel. While Sidney's situation should provoke emotional discomfort, it is not due to any occurrence of the fantastic or marvellous. Sheridan's fictional world reflects stable and reliable models of property, kinship, inheritance, and the benevolent action of law; reaffirming progressivist history and the ultimate objectivity and benevolence of legal and legislative systems in their protection of women. Insisting that she is 'without a will of my own',<sup>21</sup> Sidney's relationship to real estate and landed property is kept appropriately – but constantly – in the background of her narrative. Nonetheless, Sheridan foregrounds these issues through the complicated presentation of Sidney's narrative: her dedication announces the influence of Samuel Richardson's fictional models; the 'editor's preface' situates the text as an authentic record; the narrative itself is Sidney's own journal, a departure from Richardson's epistolary model. However, the journal is written *for* the 'perusal' of Cecilia, an 'intimate friend, of her own sex' (*SB* 49) who is directly addressed throughout the dated entries and who picks up the narrative near the conclusion. The form of the text thus calls up the spectre of property: the journal *is* Sidney's most constant and inalienable property, conveying to the reader her 'authentic' experiences, perceptions, and feelings while circulating independently of Sidney herself. The illusion persists in the editor's framing comments at the beginning and end of the text, which serve to preserve the illusion of reality and protect Sidney from explicit public exposure.

The novel in English is traditionally cast as the synthesis of proto-realist non-fictional forms (memoirs, periodicals, early journalism, broadsheets, conduct manuals) and the intangible quality of *fictionality*. While the novel of sensibility is, historically, closer to several posited 'origins' of the novel itself, the Gothic is usually treated as a response to the novel. Both genres, however, participate in what Catharine Gallagher identifies as 'an explicit and ongoing discourse of fictionality', which included the development of the novel as defined *against* the scandalous libel and against 'true' (non-fictional) forms as 'believable stories that did not solicit belief'.<sup>22</sup> The novel of sensibility, with its 'truth claims' located in the authenticity of 'personal' letters, developed alongside discourses of the individual as an irreducible – and unassailable – authority on subjective experience. The epistolary form was 'indisputably' the predominant one for early eighteenth-century novels and one that persisted throughout the century in novels of sensibility especially.<sup>23</sup> Commenting on the world from within an acknowledged 'personal' perspective, the epistolary novel *already* relied on a gap between the real world and the affective experience of that world: the transfer of *feeling* took the place

of objective information about the world. This was, for Adam Smith, a radically new and *human* accounting of experience, opening up the 'possibility of history registered in the eyes of spectators, a sentimental history concerned less with outward acts and public occasions than with the private passions and experiences of individuals'.<sup>24</sup> Epistolary fictions thus reproduced a believable form that carried with it the obligation of sympathetic response from the reader *and* was connected to the 'real world' in crucial ways. The conventions of form in an example like Sheridan's *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, particularly the preface, advertisement, dedication, and editor's notes, establish a conduit through which the real world is simultaneously reaffirmed and distanced. Sophia Lee and Ann Radcliffe's novels develop clearly out of the productive space that the novel of sensibility opened for articulating women's experiences in a *believable* and affecting literary form. The novel of sensibility adapts non-fictional forms to create affect; the Gothic novel scrambles those forms, fracturing and exposing the limitations of sympathy.

Both novels of sensibility and the Gothic threaten the coherence and continuity of 'the novel' by adding innovation, by creating *new* forms: the 'feeling' form of the novel of sensibility and the 'monstrous' form of the Gothic.<sup>25</sup> Understanding the Gothic as a response to novel and challenge to 'realism' positions the form as an outgrowth – a growing out – of earlier prose writing that privileged *versimilitude*. Susanne Becker for example suggests that 'excess' is the key narrative strategy deployed by the Gothic in its 'attack on classic realism'.<sup>26</sup> The claim that the Gothic has 'from the first proudly celebrated its anti-realism' presumes that 'realism' was a stable and understood quality of prose fiction by 1764.<sup>27</sup> Histories of the novel, however, demonstrate that this was far from the case. Novels of sensibility equally challenged *versimilitude* by focussing closely on unverifiable, individual emotional responses and experiences, privileging the subjective perception of the world. The semblance of the real exists most strongly in the foundations of the narrative, the familiar practices of writing and reading correspondence. In Sheridan's novel, for example, the letters are presented as authentic, whole, and unedited. Thus, Sidney's emotional authenticity is carried through the form, the materiality of which is stable and unquestioned. Lee's shift to the Gothic makes use of a less dependable materiality: the 'found' document, existing as fragile fragments, must be translated and edited in order to communicate with readers.<sup>28</sup> There is no question of authenticity in the text – it is *not* the original. In both Lee and Radcliffe, the radical instability of text is represented through the physical decay of original documents: wills, letters, deeds are presented in their 'original' fragments, from which the reader (both inside and outside of the text) must distil meaning.

Forms of property in these examples of sensibility and the Gothic reflect, and are reflected by, the forms these novels take. For different reasons, the Gothic and sensibility both were considered excessive by the end of the eighteenth century, whether that was

framed in terms of 'extremely refined emotion'<sup>29</sup> (sensibility) or form (the Gothic). While both remained popular throughout the 1780s and 1790s, they were increasingly associated with women (as readers and writers) and '*lost ground* as literature was elevated'.<sup>30</sup> Literature itself was a contested concept throughout the century. The specific ownership that an author might claim over their writing was the subject of intense debates in courts of law, Parliament, and the relatively new public medium of newspapers and journals in the eighteenth century. Legislation to regulate the competing rights of writers and publishers treated the first edition as the 'original', from which property and rights could be decided. The Statute of Anne (1712), however, did not comment on private correspondence or *unpublished* writing.<sup>31</sup> Alexander Pope's 1741 suit against Edmund Curl concerned the publication of Pope's private letters, an issue not included in the Copyright Act. Pope's suit was successful in establishing writers' property in their written expression and, crucially, set up an ongoing debate about the complexity of literary property as both material (the paper on which the words were printed) and intangible (the expression conveyed through those words) – in other words, the particular properties that belonged to *form* and to *feeling*.

*Sidney Bidulph* offers a productive example of the ways in which novels of sensibility contain the motifs of the Gothic in an already gendered form. Sidney's 'memoirs' hover exactly between these questions of form and feeling in terms of property and ownership. Her experiences narrative are extreme by any measure of the sentimental heroine: without a *will* of her own, she is repeatedly caught up in circumstances through no *fault* of her own. At the outset, Sidney's sprightly letters to Celia portray a character that, like Austen's Catherine Moreland, should lead few readers to suspect she had been 'born a heroine'.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the letters might initially be understood as a cheerful, if quite strict, moral lesson in filial obedience. Sidney spars with her brother George over his coarse language, pokes fun at her own moralising tendencies, and insists to her 'intimate friend', Celia, that she is 'not a prude' in reporting the gallant language of courtship (*SB* 60). What is remarkable, for a novel that Samuel Johnson insisted had made readers 'suffer so much' is the relative *lack* of feeling that Sidney displays.<sup>33</sup> The letters – regardless of content – remain remarkably coherent and Sidney is more often 'astonished' or 'left wondering' by her experiences than left without words. When her first suitor, Orlando Faulkland, runs off with another woman, Sidney is 'astonished' by the event, admitting that it has 'sunk the man considerably in my opinion' (*SB* 195). After reading (and copying out) Faulkland's explanatory letter for Celia, Sidney's merely wonders 'what knight-errantry is this? What a madcap!' (*SB* 214). People around Sidney display strong emotional responses; Sidney writes with a clear detachment, often bringing her correspondence up to the present but never writing in the present moment. Thus, the excessive suffering that Johnson complains of cannot be found in Sidney's performance of feeling. Even the wildly dramatic conclusion is met with relatively calm

writing. Celia, who picks up the narratives after arriving on the scene in the aftermath of Faulkland's tragic end, is equally 'astonished' to find her 'so calm under so trying an affliction' (SB 460). Johnson's high praise for the novel illustrates the ways in which the form carries 'something more' than words on paper.

The moment of Gothic excess comes at the conclusion of the text, by which point, the narrative has been taken over by Celia, Sidney's intended reader. By emerging *in* the novel, Celia breaks the illusion of intimacy established for the extra-diegetical reader; Celia can act, where the reader can only *feel* – or 'suffer so much'. There is a pointed criticism here of the limits of sympathy: while the reader (qua Johnson) may 'suffer', Celia immediately journeys to 'the dear friend of my heart', having been 'terrified' by the 'melancholy close' of Sidney's final letter: 'Adieu, my Cecilia, adieu; nothing but my death should close such a scene as this' (SB 459). The 'scene' Sidney refers to is the revelation of Faulkland's bigamy, his wife having survived and recovered from Faulkland's passionate attack on her and her adulterous lover (SB 458). Celia's 'narrative', which the editor 'offers to the public, as he received them, without any alteration or addition', summarise Sidney's survival and the first ten years of her 'retirement' (SB 459-467). The novel is on the brink of a distinctly Richardsonian moral conclusion, with Sidney offering the lessons of her experience as guides for her own daughters, when Celia interrupts:

'Gracious Heaven! How inscrutable are thy ways! Her affluent fortune, the very circumstance which seemed to promise her, in the eve of life, some compensation for the miseries she had endured in her early days now proved the source of new and dreadful calamities to her, which, by invoking the unhappy daughter of an unhappy mother in scenes of the most exquisite distress, cut off from her even the last resource of hope in this life, and rendered the close of her history still more..... (SB 467)

This invitation to the Gothic functions as a formal bridge between the epistolary narratives of sensibility and the omniscient perspective of Radcliffe's Gothic. In between, Sophia Lee's quasi-epistolary novel recalls the direct address of Sheridan and the coherence of novel conventions. These three examples suggest a transition from personal reflection and expression to 'public' narratives, not explicitly tied to an identifiable character or named perspective. The property described by each undergoes a similar transformation from the abstract ownership of expression in Sidney's letters, to affective ownership that cannot be recognized in Lee's novel, to the struggles over real property and legal recognition in *The Romance of the Forest*.

As Sue Chaplin notes, even William Blackstone must admit that *property*, the fundamental right of Englishmen and the origin of the social contract, is '*comprehensible*

only as a textual phenomenon...transferable only by words on parchment'.<sup>34</sup> Yet, Blackstone also insists that 'something more substantial' than a written contract should guarantee ownership of land and this 'something more' animates the connection between property and ownership in women's sentimental and Gothic fictions.<sup>35</sup> Horace Walpole's inaugural Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) brings to monstrous life Blackstone's convergence of national constitution and architectural space. The eponymous castle, which throughout the novel has manifested the dis(re)membering of its proper owner, suddenly re-members itself, appearing as a supernatural figure of authority to 'correct' the historical crime of usurpation and realign history and property. Radcliffe and Lee's subtler handling of this convention is apparent in the seeming autonomy of the properties and the connection between the heroine and *her* role in 'correcting' wandering properties. Locke's presupposition of an intimacy between people and things reaches a climax in the 'possessive self', whose power is such that 'the thing itself bears the imprint of its possession'.<sup>36</sup> The Lockean idea of property as a (dis) embodied extension of the self finds Gothic expression in Radcliffe's mysteriously communicative abbey that is, somehow, *recognizably* the property of Phillipe de Montalt. The original Marquis de Montalt, Adeline's father, discovers the identity of his persecutor and understands the 'horrid scheme' when he sees the abbey, which not only indicates its owner but also stands in for him, communicating *in absentia* Phillipe's plans to his ill-fated brother. The Gothic property thus effaces the boundary between absence and presence, possessing a supernatural power to conjure up its owner.

Sentimental properties remain self-contained and singular in *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, reflecting the sentimental construction of identity as (at least externally) consistent and individually distinct. *Sidney Bidulph* pares family down to a few intimate and established relationships, making external claims a violation of both narrative and affective coherence. Gothic properties, on the other hand, reflect the Gothic impulse to dissipation, disintegration, and plurality. Exploring the Gothic ruin in *Romance*, La Motte opens a series of doors, with the attendant increase in tension and reader anticipation, only to reveal further doors. Matilda and Ellinor's recess is likewise a sprawling structure, continuous with its natural surroundings but distinct because of the evidence of 'labor' in the construction of its various rooms.<sup>37</sup> While the same labyrinthine nature of the properties allows the heroines to escape nefarious plots against them, it also implies the nature of female identity and the legal and historical processes that determine that identity. Like William Blackstone's description of English common law, the properties in Lee, Smith, and Radcliffe recall the 'days of chivalry' but are fitted for 'modern inhabitant[s]'.<sup>38</sup> The relationship between women and property exposes the extent to which Blackstone's insistence on the importance of maintaining historical and legal continuity negatively affects the same people it should protect. Even in Blackstone, the law demonstrates its own romantic origins: he locates the

'days of chivalry' in 'moated ramparts, embattled towers, and trophied halls', the same elements that Samuel Johnson claims disfigure romantic writing.<sup>39</sup> Johnson and Blackstone both attempt to delineate 'legitimate' interpretations of text. Neither, however, offers their work as representative of the discourse in question. Blackstone's *commentaries* on the laws do not constitute the laws of England; to do this would be 'to deny [the law's] origin in a source beyond contingencies of history and textuality'.<sup>40</sup> Thus, romance becomes the perfect vehicle with which to conceal the origins of law while asserting its transcendent authority. By comparison, Johnson grounds the authority of proper fiction on the taste and preference of 'the present generation' and furthermore locates the origin for good writing in 'general converse and accurate observation of the living world'.<sup>41</sup> Without this foundation in the observable world, romance floats dangerously free; it has no applicability, no relevance to the reader because it exists beyond 'his sphere of activity'.<sup>42</sup> To bring Johnson's criticisms to bear on Blackstone's *Commentaries* must rely on the common ground both share in their policing of written texts. Johnson dismisses romance for the same reason that Blackstone employs it: it points to an origin that is constantly deferred and, therefore, that cannot be proven or disproved. Both Radcliffe and Lee use this instability in the Gothic, as a genre that draws on novels of sensibility and romances, to challenge women's position as *belongings* rather than belonging: Radcliffe's novels demonstrate the place of romance in history and destabilize the connection between women and romance while Lee's *The Recess* uses the Gothic to charge both history and romance for their inability to offer women identity or include them in common, national cultural and material inheritance.

The romance is part of the generic inheritance of both the Gothic and the novel of sensibility. Again, while the Gothic may demonstrate a more explicit connection to romance, novels of sensibility nonetheless demonstrate through attention to personal relationships and emotion a clear literary legacy. In addition, the letter – transformed to everyday communication rather than over-determined plot point – carries over the deeply subjective world of the romance. The delineation of the passions in seventeenth-century French romances finds domestic expression in novels of sensibility; extravagant passions become refinements of feeling, a transformation also echoed in the form – from ten volumes (for *The Princess of Cleves* (1678)) to Sheridan's three-volume novel. Sidney Bidulph is not a romance heroine, but her demands on Faulkland demonstrate a level of moral rigidity and adherence to form that are not unlike the conventions of romance. Gothic literature inherits not only the romance's popular appeal and cavalier attitude towards historical, geographical, and temporal continuity, but also its negative association with women as readers and writers. The development of the romance from seventeenth-century French tradition to the late eighteenth-century English Gothic demonstrates an increasing awareness of the illusion of passion or feeling as a source of social or cultural authority for women. By focusing on the

extreme vulnerability of women, regardless of their 'sensitivity', Sheridan, Radcliffe, and Lee offer narratives that denude 'feeling' as a source of power and relocate women in the real world of subjects (owners) and objects (property).

Women in these novels are connected variously to landed estates ('real' property) and chattel ('moveable' property). These related forms of property correlate with a similar split in the heroine's personal identities: while articles of chattel property – miniatures, letters, mementos – support their private constructions of self, the contested estates in the novels – family homes, the recess, the abbey – represent wider historical, public, and legal identities. Neither is more or less 'true', but the presentation of identity in these novels as subject to different surveillance and verification offers an illuminating picture of women's complex connection to property and ownership. What the novels struggle to establish is a 'natural' connection between fetishized objects of sentimental ownership and the role of 'owner' demanded by real property. Regardless of their superior sensitivity or moral worth, female protagonists face the irreducible fact of their exclusion from law based on their sex. Landed property constitutes the position of 'owner' in ways that may be affectively filled by women, but in the final accounting, women fall short of the legal and political qualifications for ownership. Wolfram Schmidgen argues that the rights of property in the eighteenth century 'create the owner', not the reverse.<sup>43</sup> The legal reality of being constituted *through* the law, rather than before the law, is familiar to the appearance of women in fiction and in legal discourse.<sup>44</sup> Thus the terrifying form of law that demands an individual's complete annihilation before being 'properly' constituted as a legal subject finds fictional analogies in female protagonists' experiences with landed property. Sidney can make no claims on her consanguineal family's estate except as a 'guest' after her husband abandons her. Matilda, in Lee's *The Recess*, marries in order to secure her identity, a move that strips her of that identity. In *The Romance of the Forest*, Adeline's discovery of her connection to the Abbey makes her into a representative of her family, of which she has virtually no knowledge or affective association. As the plot makes it more and more difficult for her to physically leave the abbey, the narrative moves closer and closer to tying her, by title, to the land that imprisons her.

The ambiguity of women's public identities also provides moments of potential escape. Sheridan's novel – *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* – is actually the story of Mrs. Arnold (Sidney's marriage occurs in the first volume); yet her status as a married woman is secure in name only. Mr Arnold abandons her, bankrupts the family, returns a broken and impoverished man, and dies, leaving her a widow. She then becomes 'Mrs Faulkland' briefly – a marriage revealed to be bigamous when Faulkland's wife turns out to have survived Faulkland's frenzied attack on her and her adulterous lover. Sidney's single stroke of luck comes from an episode belonging to a Romance in the form of a long-lost

cousin, Mr Warner, on her mother's side, who reappears to bequeath his considerable fortune with Sidney. Her good fortune, however, is nearly missed since Warner, returning to London, can only discover that Sidney 'had been married and was a widow' but he could 'learn no more about' her (*SB* 375). Thus the title of the novel, combined with the epistolary form, produces the illusion of a stable identity that is antecedent to the law but available only privately. Sidney's public identity is changeable; her private self is not. In Radcliffe and Lee, the fluidity of women's public identities also enables the protagonists to escape various traps. In *The Recess*, while the narrative is technically an epistolary form, the single address and durational structure immerse the reader fully, without repeatedly drawing attention to a shared 'present'. These are letters outside of time, written to a recipient in the future. The form preserves the subjective authority necessary for a narrative that positions itself in the shadows of official histories. Everything is possible, but little is probable. Women's identities change radically throughout the novel through various marriages, moving Matilda and Elinor further from and tantalisingly closer to their 'true' selves. Matilda's letter also makes space for other writers – her twin sister, Elinor, their lovers, Essex and Leicester all appear as writers of their own personal experiences, inserted into Matilda's writing but allowed to remain individual. Radcliffe's omniscient third-person narrator positions Adeline differently – as the object of narrative interest as much as she is the object of competing individual and institutional desires in the novel. The use of free indirect discourse nonetheless suggests that she is knowable, a blurring of interior and exterior in the form that resonates with the instability of objects and subjects in the text.

Radcliffe's abbey and Lee's recess represent property as both monumental and transient. The structures offer evidence of their original grandeur and purpose but also irrefutable proof of their passing. Nonetheless, the created spaces continue to exert and enact the force of the laws that brought them into being and rely on their continued (ideological, if not actual) importance. The entrances, which are concealed but functional in both the abbey and the recess, are critical details in these novels and both authors spend time and description on the intricate process of entry and exit from the properties. In *The Romance of the Forest*, the entrance – a 'Gothic gate' – is the only feature that 'remained entire', though now 'obstructed by brush-wood' (*ROTF* 15). Despite the ruin of the abbey, La Motte, 'thinking it possible it might yet shelter some human being', knocks first before 'forc[ing]' open the gate (*ROTF* 15). Figuratively, Adeline's 'access point' to her true identity and history – the mysterious 'manuscript' – is equally functional; that is, she is not too late to claim her inheritance and family property. Elinor and Matilda, who are on the other side of a locked door, find an exit from the recess leading to a 'pile of ruins' (Lee 37). Upon turning back to 'observe how the entrance was hid', they find that the tomb that shelters the entry conceals it entirely: '[t]he little door, which dropt after us, was one stone, lined with wood, and so neatly

fitted, that even when unfastened, it was not to be discerned' (Lee 37). The intricate and secret doors to Gothic spaces contain the essence of the law as a discourse that demarcates spaces but does not inhabit any space completely.<sup>45</sup> Property laws are figured most powerfully at the margins of property (doors, walls, gardens) and it is these liminal spaces that trap and befuddle the heroines, who struggle to pass through without capture or notice. These invisible boundaries of property also mark the limits of genre and the transgressive places of generic play that confuses the associations between women and romance, and romance and resistance.

In *The Romance of the Forest*, Adeline's mysterious persistence in her 'reject[ion] of the advantages...offered her [by the Marquis]' is attributed to her 'infatuation [for the] heroism of romance' (ROTf 136). Given Adeline's natural sensibility and moral superiority, La Motte's only recourse is to reshape her perception. His treatment of Adeline is effectively an attempt to 're-educate' her into ignorance, instructing her to ignore the evidence of her own senses and understanding in order to accept 'reality'. His invocation of 'romance' as opposite to the female behaviour desired by men is important considering his own arbitrary use of fictions where and when they suit his purposes. The description of the Marquis's first abduction of Adeline to his villa demonstrates the intertwined nature of romance, Gothic, and sentimental styles. The complete blackness of the night is augmented by rainstorm and no details of her direction or destination are given. 'After two hours' Adeline and her captor reach the edge of the forest and, seemingly quite suddenly, come upon a 'high and lonely wall' (ROTf 156). Though the interior of the villa is a riot of romantic imagery, its external appearance rivals the abbey in its obscurity and threatening sublimity. Adeline can 'just distinguish [the villa wall] by the moonlight' and, though superficially romantic, she discovers it to be an extensive labyrinth of hidden doors and hallways (ROTf 156, 164-165). The entrance, concealed in a 'high lonely wall', is barely visible by moonlight and, like the dimly lit passageway that follows, implies the need for secrecy. Inside, the Marquis's villa displays Eastern artistic influences and tastes that serve to highlight his depravity and connect him with the 'decadent' East. Of course, it is not the splendid frescos, silver lamps, silk sofas, impressive busts, perfume receptacles, or Etruscan vases that enchant Adeline. Instead, left briefly on her own, she naturally gravitates to the windows. It is overlooking the Marquis's 'extensive garden, where groves and lawns, and water glittering in the moonbeam, composed a scenery of varied and *romantic* beauty' that Adeline is closest to accepting him (ROTf 157, my emphasis). 'Insensibly soothed and interested' by a melody she hears from her prison, Adeline's ability to act is momentarily paralysed (ROTf 157). She rejects the Marquis's artificial palace of delights by reacting to them as she does to the supernatural events at the abbey. Both are 'charms to lure [her] to destruction' and both require her to reassert her reason to regain control of the situation (ROTf 157). The rhetoric of romance

that describes the Marquis's actions implicitly comments on the power dynamics in operation behind the ideology of romantic love. While superficially emancipating women by placing them in a position of power over their male suitors, romance traps women as effectively as the Gothic castle. The Marquis represents the potential for male aggression to be disguised as love or desire in the context of romance. The end result of male aggression or love is the same for women: 'Every luxury is at your command...[E]very pleasure possible to be enjoyed within these walls you shall partake, but beyond them you shall not go' (*ROTF* 160).

Adeline's only remaining power is to choose to acquiesce before she is forced to do so.

In her attempted escape from the villa, Adeline is trapped by the gardens that 'charmed' her previously, and as though to prove her suspicions correct, they do nearly lead to her destruction. As in her previous attempt to escape the Gothic forest, Adeline cannot bridge the worlds. When she is a captive or when incapacitated, Adeline crosses easily from Gothic forest to romantic villa to sensible Savoy. When she attempts action, however, she becomes further enmeshed in each world, unable to affect her environment. Her hesitation during her escapes clearly illustrates the impossibility of 'real' escape for women. Caught halfway between the ruined abbey and the tomb in the forest, Adeline freezes in fear, realising that the Marquis is directly in front of her. At this moment, she understands the impossibility of both flight and return: 'to proceed was to run into the hands of the Marquis; to return was to fall into the power of La Motte' (*ROTF* 153). Father or husband? Adeline chooses the tomb, perhaps manifesting an unconscious desire to suspend the decision entirely. Again when she escapes through the window of the Marquis's voluptuous prison she is drawn back by a light that she hopes will lead her to someone who might 'be won to favour her escape' (*ROTF* 165). The light leads her directly to the Marquis, who as her closest blood family *should* be the character most willing to assist Adeline. His Gothic identity as family and stranger, protector and persecutor, stems from his original crime. Fratricide calls up allusions to the Genesis story of Cain and Abel – thus, an 'original' crime – as well as to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, an allusion strengthened by the repeated invocations to 'unfold a story'. Retreating in horror she subsequently flees from Theodore, whom she mistakes for the Marquis. Both attempts at escape force Adeline to examine her involvement in the worlds she is fleeing and question the assurance of laws designed for women's protection. Uninscribed by the name of the father (the name of the law) that would ensure her safe travel over boundaries demarcated by law, Adeline is incapable of crossing these barriers unassisted and she is equally lost in the romantic world as she is in the Gothic world.

Adeline's manuscript, in Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest*, evidences the same instability between history and romance. Found in the 'ancient foundation' of the Abbey, the manuscript is at the centre of Radcliffe's narrative, yet, as Robert Miles points out, the

discovery of the manuscript defamiliarizes a typical device of disclosure in romances by remaining marginal to the plot: 'everything that needs to be known emerges in court independently of the testimony offered by Adeline's elliptical script'.<sup>46</sup> The importance of the script, like the recess itself, is that it 'stands in' for writing by women.<sup>47</sup> The plot of *Romance* reveals that 'romantic' things, dismissed by most characters, have a tendency to accurately describe reality. Radcliffe uses the manuscript to comment on the relevance of romances to her contemporary audience: Adeline's manuscript is found in the 'ancient foundation' of the abbey and 'is so much obscured by time that it can scarcely be decyphered' (*ROTF* 115, 144). Lee's work is also presented in 'an obsolete stile' which she has 'alter[ed to] the language of the present age' to avoid the same kind of 'unintelligible' text Adeline discovers (*Recess* 5). For Adeline, however, the unfolding of events makes clear that the manuscript is not, in fact, ancient and, in spite of Adeline's confidence that she 'shall not be punished for the crimes of another', the crimes related in the manuscript have a direct effect on her current and future state (*ROTF* 142). History in Lee's narrative, however malleable, still retains a tragic sense of completion; Matilda's tragedy is that she is never recognized, that she remains figuratively in the recess but can no longer claim its protection and obscurity. The insular, self-sustaining nature of the recess as it first appears in the text coincides with a positive view of women's omission from history since women's participation in history leads only to madness and despair. Adeline does achieve public recognition of her identity, but the damaging potential of this acknowledgement is immediately forestalled by her marriage to Theodore La Luc and her automatic transformation into Adeline La Luc.

Adeline's identity involves the realignment of property and inheritance along proper and law-abiding channels. Matilda's identity threatens property and stability because it suggests the extent to which one property (England) may have several, equally deserving owners. Property identity becomes as fragmented and confused as personal identity. The same qualities that make Matilda's recess the perfect place for concealment also make it easily forgotten; like Adeline's manuscript, Matilda cannot affect history except to teach women to become critical, active readers of both history and romance. The perfect reader of Gothic romances, Adeline feels the 'wretched writer appeal[ing] directly to her heart' and activated by her reading, the manuscript telescopes time, making 'his past sufferings...present' (*ROTF* 132). Adeline's increasing obsession with the manuscript suggests the 'insidious and intimate relationship between the reader and text' that disgusted eighteenth-century literary critics, who believed that an 'unlicenced indulgence of the imagination' was corruptive to family values and could render young (female) readers 'unfit' for real life.<sup>48</sup> In both Lee and Radcliffe, however, the heroines are 'rendered unfit' for real life by *family*, not through their reading of 'romances'. The 'insidious and intimate' relationship between Adeline and her father-uncle, Phillipe Marquis de Montalt, for example, is a

manifestation of the effects of unrestrained male ambition and corruption, *not* of romance reading.

Already an aside in authoritative history, Adeline occupies a similar position to Matilda and Ellinor. The difference between the two texts is one of direction. *The Romance of the Forest* begins as the 'striking story of Pierre de la Motte, and the Marquis Phillipe de Montalt' (ROTf 1) and Adeline's ignominious entry four pages later should be *part* of the story of La Motte. Yet it is Adeline's story that instigates and completes the relationship between La Motte and Montalt. This encroachment of a marginal character on the centre is pivotal to *The Romance of the Forest* and echoes in the structure and narrative of the text. Embedded firmly in a tradition of authoritative, historically verifiable, male writing, Radcliffe's novel adopts the value given to male writing in eighteenth-century literary criticism the same way that Lee's writing takes on the mantle of history. In both texts, the central property represents history: indeed, as sites of monastic worship, both properties refer back to Catholic England. Both properties belong to the heroines by use and experience rather than by proclaimed legal right, thus connecting ownership to personal history. Problematically, both 'belong' to the heroine only while she remains secreted there, 'belonging' to the property. Property in the Gothic novel changes dramatically when no longer associated directly with the heroine. Like the manuscript, the abbey in *The Romance of the Forest* simply disappears: a metonym for Adeline herself, who 'disappears' first from the Marquis' reach and then from her old identity when she marries Theodore La Luc. Before marrying Theodore, Adeline has her father's remains removed from the abbey as her 'last duty' as a daughter after which 'she became more tranquil and resigned' (ROTf 355). Her marriage transforms her from Adeline de Montalt to Adeline La Luc, severing her connection to the abbey by altering her name and identity from daughter to wife. Similarly, Matilda's clandestine marriage to Lord Leicester marks the twins' departure from the recess. In Lee's world, property left 'ready to accommodate any future unfortunates' has the potential to warp into a perverse reflection of its original purpose (*Recess* 67). Seeking the 'piety and innocence' of the recess, re-imagined as a space that 'bounded all our wishes...contained all necessary to existence', Matilda and Leicester discover it to be perverted into 'the shelter of rapine [and] murder' (*Recess* 99, 97). Lee's text reveals property to be, like History, essentially amoral, reflecting the author/owner over any objective fact or truth. While Radcliffe introduces the past as a threat to the present, her narratives wrest property from the (male) villain long enough to allow the heroine to correct past mistakes and direct proper channels of inheritance into the future.

Gothic conventions obscure the 'natural' gender privilege under the law; men in these texts are inadequate to their sentimental duty of protecting women's best interests. Property law is similar to a negligent parent, willing to ignore *how* property moves provided it

continues to move along family lines. By focusing on estrangement, on the separation of women from consanguineal male kin, Radcliffe and Lee develop the problems inherent in sentimental models of familial duty. Ultimately, the texts conform to a type that Jacqueline Labbe has described as 'property romances': texts that 'question the traditional certainties represented by both the morality of love and the necessity of ownership'.<sup>49</sup> Cleansed of its Gothic past and returned to its 'proper' owner, property can continue to function as an ordering social principle. In spite of the attempts to correct the feudal privilege of birth right through the use of sentimental ideology, in which property is the reward of virtue not high birth, Radcliffe and Lee's novels insist on the primacy of property as the indicator of belonging. Law, for both authors, remains an amorphous and amoral institution: vulnerable to corruption by individual evil men, but also capable of being restored to its position as a benevolent system through which good men act in women's interests. Sentimental conventions in these Gothic texts underscore this gendered relationship to 'good' legal practice. Far from being passive, oppressed receptacles for patriarchy, the ideology of sensibility understands women as an opportunity for men to demonstrate their best characteristics. The epistolary form of Sheridan's novel reflects this limited feminine agency. The illusory documents – both Sidney's letters and the narrative 'authenticity' of deeds, wills, and records in Lee and Radcliffe – establish a textual economy in which the materiality of the text exists in a coextensive relationship with the 'Real'. The shift from sensibility to the Gothic is the shift from depending on the form (the letter) as uncomplicatedly authentic, with a clear and equally uncomplicated message, to a deep suspicion of the validity of texts themselves. Lee's reader must confront the unreliable nature of writing, illustrated in the decaying, fragmentary substrate that Matilda's history is written upon. Radcliffe's reader must further suspect the appearance of 'authentic' documents, such as confessions, letters, and wills, but to a revolutionary end. By creating a space that enables the sharing of women's experiences and points out the frailty of these forms to convey subjectivity, sensibility and the Gothic trace the articulation of women's awareness of their irreducible ontological status as individuals.