

REBELLION AND WILDERNESS: FEMALE AGENCY AND IRISH NATURE IN ELIZABETH GRIFFITH'S *THE HISTORY OF LADY BARTON* (1771)

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ABSTRACT

This paper endeavors to establish a correlation between the portrayal of female characters and Irish wilderness in Elizabeth Griffith's Gothic novel, *The History of Lady Barton* (1771). Deprived of agency and independence, female figures in the realm of Gothic fiction are often rendered as figures of *otherness* –alien, monstrous, and threatening– driven by a relentless pursuit of liberation from patriarchal constraints. Faced with the choice between madness, death or exile as defiant alternatives to submitting to societal repression, these characters become symbolic rebels against established norms, ultimately opting for a tormenting fate over submission. This portrayal positions them as figures of wildness and uncontrollability, echoing the untamed essence of nature itself. Therefore, by intertwining the fates of women like Louisa Barton and Olivia Walter with the chaotic and uncontrollable Irish landscape, Griffith's narrative, enhances the complexity of her female characters, suggesting an innate connection between their defiance and the tumultuous, uncontrollable forces inherent in the natural world. Through this lens, both women and nature emerge as sites of *otherness*, offering new avenues for resistance and empowerment.

KEYWORDS: Elizabeth Griffith, Gender, Gothic, Nature, *Otherness*.

LA REBELIÓN Y LO SALVAJE: LA AGENCIA FEMENINA Y EL PAISAJE IRLANDÉS
EN *THE HISTORY OF LADY BARTON* (1771) DE ELIZABETH GRIFFITH

RESUMEN

Este artículo se propone establecer una correlación entre la representación de los personajes femeninos y la naturaleza salvaje irlandesa en la novela gótica de Elizabeth Griffith, *The History of Lady Barton* (1771). Privadas de agencia e independencia, las figuras femeninas en la ficción gótica suelen ser retratadas como figuras de alteridad –alienadas, monstruosas y amenazantes– impulsadas por una búsqueda incesante de liberación de las restricciones patriarcales. Ante la elección entre la locura, la muerte o el exilio como alternativas preferibles a someterse a la represión social, estos personajes se convierten en iconos de rebeldía contra las normas establecidas, optando finalmente por un destino tormentoso en lugar de la sumisión. Esta representación las posiciona como figuras salvajes e incontrolables, haciendo eco de la esencia indomable de la propia naturaleza. Así, al entrelazar los destinos de mujeres como Louisa Barton y Olivia Walter con el paisaje indómito de Irlanda, la narrativa de Griffith enriquece la complejidad de sus personajes femeninos, sugiriendo una conexión innata entre sus transgresiones y las fuerzas tumultuosas e incontrolables inherentes al mundo natural. A través de esta perspectiva, tanto las mujeres como la naturaleza emergen como iconos de alteridad, ofreciendo nuevas vías para la resistencia y el empoderamiento.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Elizabeth Griffith, género, gótico, naturaleza, alteridad.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Gothic literature, the concept of *otherness* functions as a profoundly disquieting force, deeply intertwined with questions of gender and the natural world. This *otherness* is neither distant nor abstract; instead, it emerges as an intrusive and pervasive presence that destabilizes the boundary between the human and the nonhuman, often embodying elements that are simultaneously familiar and alien. As Eric Savoy aptly observes, the Gothic genre is fundamentally rooted in the presence of *otherness*—not as a remote or theoretical concept, but as a pervasive and omnipresent force that constantly threatens to resurface (Savoy 1998, 6).¹ This relentless disruption not only unsettles established social hierarchies but also challenges fixed notions of identity, whether personal, gendered, or cultural, thereby undermining rigid societal norms and destabilizing the self.

Gothic texts often invoke this *otherness* as a disturbed and distressing natural world. Nature itself becomes a conduit for the expression of internal and external anxieties, manifesting as a force that is both menacing and inexplicable. Forests grow dense and impenetrable, mountains loom ominously, and the weather turns hostile, externalizing the characters' fears. Imbued with a sense of the supernatural and the sublime, the natural world becomes a symbol of the unknown and the feared, embodying the irrational and uncontrollable, while mirroring and magnifying themes of *otherness*, horror, and the uncanny. Similarly, the Gothic genre, with its emphasis on fragmented identities and alienation, proves to be a fertile ground for analyzing discourses concerning women.² As Nicole Dittmer notes, it often unveils “perspectives of female abjection by a society that restricts expression” (Dittmer 2023, 22). In this literary landscape, monstrosities and repressed aspects of female identity become inextricably intertwined, revealing the complex interplay between societal repression and hidden dimensions of female experience. This interplay provides a profound lens for both depicting and critically examining these complexities, revealing how societal constraints shape and distort the representation of female identity.

In this regard, Elizabeth Griffith's *The History of Lady Barton* (1771) offers a particularly illustrative case study, notably through its depiction of both female characters and the Irish landscape. The untamed and hostile elements of the natural world reflect the forces of *otherness* that marginalize and oppress female figures. This portrayal underscores the thematic convergence between the natural environment and female experience as sources of threat and estrangement. By examining this duality, my analysis seeks to illuminate how women are marginalized by societal structures and how nature itself becomes an object of fear and *otherness*. The interplay

¹ For a deeper analysis of the Gothic's interrogation of *otherness*, see Andrew Smith and William Hughes, which connects Gothic themes to issues of imperialism and marginalization. Additionally, Tabish Khair offers a re-examination of the role of the colonial/racial Other in mainstream Gothic (colonial) fiction, providing new insights into concepts of *otherness*, difference, and identity.

² On the intersection of gender and fragmentation in Gothic literature, see Diane Long Hoeveler who offers a neo-feminist perspective on female identity within these texts.



between these elements not only highlights the novel's critique of societal norms but also exemplifies the Gothic genre's broader examination of identity and alienation. Through this lens, the text's depiction of both nature and gender serves as a powerful commentary on the ways in which the Gothic tradition exposes and interrogates the constructs of *otherness*.

2. CONFRONTING CONVENTION: FEMALE AGENCY IN ELIZABETH GRIFFITH'S GOTHIC NOVEL *THE HISTORY OF LADY BARTON*

In her seminal treatise *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir articulated the notion of a fundamental division within humanity, characterized by discernible distinctions encompassing attire, physical appearance, behavioural patterns, and vocational choices. Despite the apparent superficiality of these differences, Beauvoir emphasized their undeniable presence in societal constructs. Consequently, she embarked on an inquiry into the essence of womanhood, delving into what it truly means to be a woman and the disparities it entails compared to being male. Seeking to unravel its complex dimensions and implications, Beauvoir asserted that

In actuality the relation of these two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria without reciprocity [...] A man is in the right in being a man, it is the woman who is in the wrong. It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine. [...] Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. [...] She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute –she is the Other. (Beauvoir 1949, XIV-XVI)

The concept of the Other, therefore, assumes paramount importance incomprehending the experiences and social roles of women. In Beauvoir's exposition, the Other emerges as the antithesis of the Self, serving as a shadow cast by the dominant subjectivity. No individual willingly embraces the status of objectification and insignificance; rather, it is the imposition of the Self that relegates the Other to this subordinate position. The Other, thus constructed, must accept their alienation, finding itself dependent on the Self, reversing the natural order of autonomy. By designating the woman as the Other, hence, she is implicitly positioned to conform to subordination and complicity.

Expanding on Beauvoir's examination of the concept of the Other in connection to womanhood, parallels can be discerned between her insights and the prevalent themes found in Gothic literature. In the realm of the Gothic genre, the depiction of female characters as the Other transcends being a mere thematic motif;



serving instead as a foundational element, weaving together the diverse narratives that conform the genre. The Gothic genre thrives on themes of *Otherness* and fragmented identities, offering intriguing insights into the representation of female abjection in a society that confines individual expression. This abjection manifests itself through the interplay of dichotomous forces, perpetuating conflicts inherent within the narrative structure. Within this framework, the emergence of the monstrous figure signifies a transformation, be it physical or psychological, serving as a symbolic representation of the suppressed facets of femininity (see Dittmer 2023, 11).

Hence, in the Gothic, the representation of female characters often embodies the epitome of *Otherness*, existing on the fringes of society, haunted by their marginalized identities and constrained by societal expectations. When considering, for instance, the archetypal figure of the Gothic heroine –a marginalized, often persecuted figure whose identity is subsumed by the patriarchal structures that surround her– this notion becomes apparent. Well-known Gothic characters such as Emily St. Aubert in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, for example, epitomize the Other, existing in a state of perpetual liminality, neither fully embraced by society nor free from its constraints. Torn between societal expectations and their own personal desires, their agency is stifled by the patriarchal forces that seek to control them. By applying Beauvoir's framework to Elizabeth Griffith's Gothic novel, *The History of Lady Barton*, it is possible to unravel the representation of female characters, namely Louisa Barton and Olivia Walter, as the Other and examine how they struggle to navigate the oppressive forces of society.

Originally released in three volumes, *The History of Lady Barton* comprises a compilation of epistolary exchanges among multiple characters. At the heart of the narrative is Lady Barton, the central figure around whom the story revolves. The novel begins by introducing Louisa Barton, immediately after her nuptials with Sir William Barton, an Irish baronet characterized by his arrogance and insensitivity. Despite being flattered by his persistent wooing, Louisa finds herself devoid of both love and respect for him. As she comes to recognize her incompatibility with Sir William, she is drawn towards his affable and amicable friend, Lord Lucan. Despite Lord Lucan's reciprocation, Louisa remains faithful to Sir William, but her growing sense of guilt gradually erodes her mental and physical well-being. Amid this turmoil, Louisa finds herself in danger when Colonel Walter, another acquaintance of her husband, tries to seduce her and, after facing rejection, falsely accuses her of having an affair with Lord Lucan. Driven by jealousy and misled by Colonel Walter's slander, Sir William unjustly condemns Louisa, precipitating a severe decline in her health. In a dramatic turn of events, Lord Lucan takes it upon himself to defend Louisa's honour by engaging in a duel and killing Colonel Walter. Shortly thereafter, Sir William discovers his wife's innocence, and her reputation is ultimately vindicated. However, the unfolding tragedy culminates in Louisa Barton's ultimate demise.

In parallel with the narrative of Louisa, and broadening the novel's scope of female experience, the narrative introduces the interpolated tale of Olivia Walter, Colonel Walter's French wife. Olivia's story functions both as a reflection of Louisa's plight and as a cautionary narrative. Olivia is first introduced in the novel as an



innocent girl who succumbs to Colonel Walter's flattery and declarations of love. Their clandestine meetings intensify their romance, leading the Colonel to eventually propose elopement. Overcome by her emotions, Olivia consents, without the presence of witnesses. However, as their union progresses, the Colonel's demeanour changes, culminating in his abandonment of Olivia and the revelation of his prior marriage to another woman, Nanette. Consequently, Olivia becomes the subject of societal scrutiny and malicious accusations, branded with charges of adultery and seduction. This drives her to seek refuge, by the end of the novel, within the walls of a convent, the sole sanctuary deemed secure from the relentless judgment of society.

In this context, a simple examination of both storylines vividly highlights the striking resemblance between the experiences of Louisa and Olivia in their encounters with male dominance within the novel. These characters embody a spirit of rebellion and resistance against the established societal norms, primarily driven by the traumas they endure at the hands of male figures in the narrative. Through their unwavering actions, both Louisa Barton and Olivia Walter demonstrate a profound inclination towards embracing death and confinement, respectively, as preferable alternatives to enduring the oppressive shackles of conformity imposed by society. Their choices serve as a powerful testament to their unyielding determination to break free from the constraints placed upon them, underscoring the indomitable spirit that resides within them, an assertion that will be further supported through a parallel analysis of the life journeys of these female characters.

Beginning with the protagonist of the novel, Louisa Barton's story unlocks the silence traditionally covering particularly feminized experiences of women denying their status as property by refusing to be contained. According to Jane Spencer the character of Lady Barton serves as a criticism of prevailing materialistic and superficial matrimonial practices through her "desperate cries of protest against the bonds of marriage" (Spencer 1986, 124). The protagonist of the novel finds herself bound in marriage to a man for whom she harbours no genuine affection, only to discover the true essence of love with a man outside of her union, namely Lord Lucan. Considering the societal expectations and gender conventions that were prevalent at the time, as we previously analysed, this was a highly problematic topic. For centuries, society maintained a double standard that allowed men to pursue multiple sexual partnerships while women were subject to stricter restrictions. Towards the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this double standard was particularly evident in the legal realm, as there was a notable decriminalization of adultery for men, granting them enhanced legal authority to penalize their adulterous wives while their indiscretions often remained unpunished (see Pollak 2016, 55-56). Such discrepancy becomes apparent when examining the marital dynamic between Lady Barton and Sir William in the novel. In the initial pages, the reader is introduced to Lady Barton, whose presence serves to elucidate the underlying tenets that underpin her marital union and her husband's doctrinal perspectives concerning the fairer sex, with a specific focus on his own wife.

Sir William is introduced as a man who holds misogynistic views, asserting that women should be treated like criminals and not be allowed to write. He disparages those who enjoy writing, claiming that they are unfit for other activities



(more conventionally feminine, probably), and questions the existence of friendship among women:

women should be treated like state criminals, and utterly debarred the use of pen and ink—he says, that [...] that those who are fond of scribbling [sic] are never good for any thing else; that female friendship is a jest and that we only correspond, or converse, with our own sex, for the sake of indulging ourselves in talking of the other. (Griffith 2018, I 2-3)

His dismissive attitude towards sorority reinforces the notion that women's primary purpose is to talk about men, a clearly chauvinist and limiting view of women's capabilities and interests. Such an unfortunate comment about women is peculiarly followed by Louisa sighing the words "love, honor, and obey," emphasizing the word "obey" and declaring that "the latter only, rests on me," referencing the traditional expectations of a wife's role in the marriage, which was to be subservient to her husband, a role that our heroine is determined to perform as "part of the covenant" (Griffith 2018, I 4). On this premise, and already assuming the misogynistic character of Sir William, the reader is not entirely surprised when coming upon a scene in which an abandoned infant is found in a garden with a paper pinned to its breast, which said that the child has been baptized by its father's name, William, suggesting Sir William had been unfaithful to his wife, resulting in an illegitimate child. Such circumstance, disconcerted Sir William

who, after many unnecessary asseverations of his innocence, [...], determined to prove his virtue, at the expense of his humanity, by ordering the child to be again left in the garden where it was found, till the parish officers should come to take charge of it; and by commanding a strict search to be made for the mother, that she might be punished, according to law. (Griffith 2018, I 138)

There are many problematic aspects regarding this passage. On the one hand, the fact that Sir William, a male character, is portrayed as being potentially unfaithful to his wife, while attempting to shift blame onto a woman, echoes the societal bias of the time, placing the burden of morality and virtue solely on women while excusing men's behaviour. Indeed, Sir William's attempt to shift blame serves as a stark reminder of how women were often scapegoated or held responsible for men's indiscretions. In this vein, the call for the mother to be punished according to the law escaping any accountability of his actions, further highlight the unequal treatment of men and women in the face of societal transgressions. On the other hand, the response of the society, as depicted in the text, where "the whole company smiled, as they knew that he had been above a year out of the kingdom" (Griffith 2018, I 139), can be seen as a reflection of the complicity and tolerance of male privilege within the social framework. It underlines the fact that society often turns a blind eye to men's indiscretions, even when they are evident, perpetuating the idea that men can act with impunity and escape consequences for their actions. The fact that Sir William's affair is viewed with amusement rather than condemnation



speaks to the normalization of men's misbehaviour and the willingness to protect their reputations at the expense of women's honour.

Hence, ensnared "under the yoke of marriage to a misogynist," borrowing Spencer's words (Spencer 1986, 125), Lady Barton turns her affection towards Lord Lucan, a man who has a high opinion of women, rather than her tyrannical woman-hating husband. However, in stark contrast to our initial perception of Sir William's character, Lady Barton finds herself enduring constant judgment from society, her own husband, and even her own self, as she is labelled (by herself) as a monster-like criminal figure, despite maintaining her fidelity throughout and never succumbing to infidelity, trying to suppress her rebellious inclinations, as herself claims:

Wretched Louisa! strive no more to varnish o'er thy faults –Thou wert a criminal, in the first act, who wedded without love; and all the miseries which proceed from thence, too justly are thy due. (Griffith 2018, II 110)

Louisa, therefore, emerges as the Other, bearing the weight of societal expectations and self-imposed condemnation, existing in a state of continual liminality, being neglected by society and incapable of breaking free from its constraints. Perceiving herself as a criminal and consequently internalizing the gender-biased societal norms imposed upon her, which demanded adherence to and embodiment of an unblemished moral character that make it impossible for her to have any kind of romantic feelings for another man outside her marriage; even in the absence of any adulterous transgressions, Louisa finds herself ensnared in the ceaseless turmoil of her psyche. Such turmoil is increased as the narrative evolves, and Colonel Walter, who also harbours a romantic interest, or rather sexual, in our female protagonist, adds complexity to the situation. Walter's reaction upon being rejected by Louisa further underscores the underlying power dynamics and societal patriarchy at play, when in a vindictive manner, he accuses Louisa of infidelity with Lord Lucan. This accusation not only serves to vilify Louisa but also exposes the perilous consequences of women's agency in resisting advances and maintaining autonomy over her own desires. Even in the absence of concrete evidence of her infidelity, the mere suggestion of it becomes a heavy burden for Louisa to bear, as Sir William –favouring male's authority and opinions over those of women– does not grant his wife any credibility condemning her as "[the] vilest of women" (Griffith 2018, III 282) and threatening with locking her in an asylum or simply abandoning her.

Despite managing to restore her image in the eyes of society and her husband; as a means of fulfilling her penance for deviating from societal expectations surrounding idealized wifely conduct, the novel portrays her graceful demise at the narrative's end when

her gentle spirit took its flight to heaven, while these fond arms in vain endeavoured to support the feeble frame from whence it parted –She sunk upon my [Fanny's] bosom, and expired! nor sigh nor groan gave warning of her death, she closed her eyes, and slept for ever! No words can paint the grief and distraction, of her unhappy husband. (Griffith 2018, III 308)



Therefore, Louisa Barton's existence is starkly delineated by the dominating presence of the male figures in her life, whether it be the chauvinistic tyranny of her husband, or the harrowing despair inflicted by Colonel Walter's actions; Louisa emerges as the epitome of the Other. Continually defined by and through male figures rather than in a relationship of connection and equality with them, her autonomy is rendered insignificant, overshadowed by the dominance and influence of the men in her life. Bound by predefined gender roles and stifled in her natural desires, Louisa's quest for self-discovery and fulfilment is tragically thwarted. Unable to find resolution amidst the confines of societal repression, Louisa Barton could not achieve a happy closure to their traumatic circumstances, finding death as the only possible solution to repression.

Similarly, in the novel, Olivia Walter serves as another cautionary character, much like Louisa Barton, both embodying the societal expectations of how women should not behave themselves in accordance with prevailing moral and ethical standards of the period. Her innocence and inexperience led her to become the other woman: ensnared in a clandestine and legally meaningless nuptial union with a man who is already bound in matrimony with another woman named Nanette; Olivia finds herself bearing an illegitimate child, thereby subjecting her to the harsh judgmental gaze of her society, and ultimately, consigned to a life of seclusion, relegated to the confines of an attic and eventually of a convent.

Without any ill intent and solely assessing her goodness as the catalyst for all her misfortunes, Olivia emerges, as well, as the Other, a woman at the margins of conventional norms. Once her status as the other woman is discovered by the society that surrounds her, especially her servants, who began treating her

with less respect than usual; they doubtless believed [Nanette's] story, and thought that [her] receiving her into [her] house, was at once a proof both of [her] guilt and fear. –The physician and apothecary who attended her, divulged the tale abroad, and [she] was looked upon by the whole city of Marseilles, as one of the most abandoned wretches. (Griffith 2018, I 247)

While acknowledging that Olivia bears no responsibility for her situation, for she too has fallen victim to deception, she arises as the one unduly burdened by the repercussions of the actions perpetrated by a man. Her condition as the Other, existing in a state of perpetual inferiority in comparison to men, leads her to be unjustly punished. She alone finds herself cast as a social pariah, whereas Colonel Walter, by contrast, remains unburdened by any obligation to atone for his deeds. Indeed, in the absence of punitive consequences, he even exhibits a clear determination to continue his adulterous behaviour, as our previous observations attest in the case of Louisa Barton.

Once Olivia believed that her circumstances had taken a turn for the better, finding refuge under the care of the Marchioness de Fribourg; her hopes were dashed again when she realized that her own damaged reputation, tainted by accusations of adultery, had preceded her. As a result, the marchioness now viewed her as a temptress trying to seduce her husband, Monsieur de Lovaine. Being labelled as “the



most ungrateful of her sex” (Griffith 2018, II 12), Olivia finds herself once again unprotected and with an infant.

This last stroke was infinitely more severe than all that I had yet endured; I now saw the impossibility of ever clearing my conduct to my husband, and devoted as I was, by him, to infamy, the peaceful asylum of the sheltering grave was now become my only hope, or wish; even a mother’s tenderness could not reconcile me to such unmerited and endless sufferings; that virtuous fondness which had sustained me through all my former trials, was now absorbed in mean self-love, and I could not refrain from praying for an end of my misery. (Griffith 2018, II 30)

Contemplating death as her sole escape, yet consumed by thoughts of her daughter’s future, Olivia, in her naivety, embarks on a quest to locate Colonel Walter in search of protection. Her quest leads her to a grim fate, as she finds herself confined to an attic. In her dire circumstances, her only perceived path to happiness is to take refuge in a convent. It is not a coincidence that Griffith chooses to present the convent as the sole feasible solution for this unconventional heroine. As previously discussed, these abject women, portrayed in Gothic literature as insane, criminal, or rebellious figures, endeavour to challenge or escape the confines of a patriarchal society, suggesting that confinement or death are preferable alternatives to enduring repression; as in these narratives, achieving a traditional “happy ending” may not be a realistic possibility.

3. UNRAVELLING IRELAND’S GOTHIC TAPESTRY: THE INTRICACIES OF LANDSCAPE, IDENTITY, AND OTHERNESS

Expanding the spectrum of *otherness* in *The History of Lady Barton*, the novel offers one of the most nuanced explorations of Irish geography. Within the narrative framework of *The History of Lady Barton*, Ireland emerges as a compellingly marginal space within the broader construction of the British nation. Ireland and the Celtic fringe overtly represent readily identifiable spatial anomalies. Yet, the liminality depicted in the novel transcends mere geographical peripherality, operating on a more profound cultural and symbolic level. These regions occupy a dual position: they are intricately linked to the broader British identity yet imbued with an essence of *otherness*. This paradoxical nature enables them to serve multiple roles, providing both a refuge from the homogenizing influences of the central British power structure and its prevailing cultural norms, while also evoking a sense of mystery and unfamiliarity—an unsettling *otherness* that establishes a space that results both enticing and potentially menacing depending on the circumstances (see Morin 2018, 123-124).

The History of Lady Barton immediately opens with a conventional Gothic portrayal of wild Celtic scenery through the eyes of its protagonist, Lady Louisa Barton. Recently married to the Irish baronet Sir William Barton, Louisa recounts her adventures to her sister, Fanny Cleveland, as she travels from the familiar comfort



of her English family residence to her new life in Ireland. Upon reaching Holyhead, on the coast of Wales, Louisa encounters a landscape markedly different from anything she has ever seen. She delves into a detailed description of these unfamiliar surroundings, employing explicitly Burkean terms to capture their unsettling power.

The wilderness, or even horror, of this place, for we have had a perpetual storm, is so strongly contrasted with the mild scenes of Cleveland Hall, or indeed, any other part of England that I have seen, that one would scarce think it possible for a few days journey to transport us into such extremes of the *sublime* and *beautiful*—I am persuaded that all the inhabitants of Wales must be romantic—there never was any place appeared so like *enchanted ground*, and the scenes shift upon you almost as quick as in a pantomime. (Griffith 2018, I 7-8, emphasis mine)

In introducing the novel with a vivid depiction of the Celtic landscape—particularly that of Wales—as an alienating terrain, Griffith appears to underscore and fortify the prevalent cultural and geographical *otherness* traditionally ascribed to these ostensibly “barbaric” lands that permeated this genre thus far. The depiction of the natural scenery in enchanted terms, invoking the specter of supernatural and natural threat, enables the text to establish, as Christina Morin suggests, “an immediate social and geographical distinction” (Morin 2018, 124) between England, and the Celtic fringe, thereby reinforcing its inherent separateness and mystique within the narrative.

As Louisa’s journey unfolds, her arrival in Dublin presents a significant juncture in the novel. Having traversed the unfamiliar and enchanted terrain of Wales, she now encounters the core of Ireland. This geographical shift, however, does not signify a departure from the pervasive mystical strangeness that characterized her Welsh experiences. Instead, Dublin appears to echo the same enigmatic nature that infused her previous experience. Following a tumultuous voyage marked by a violent storm that nearly capsized the ship, Louisa finally sets foot upon the shores of Ireland, which she describes as

a desert island, for it is entirely surrounded by an arm of the sea, and uninhabited by every thing but a few goats, and some fishermen, who are almost as wild as they—It was about four o’clock in the morning, when we arrived at this dismal place, and such a morning, for darkness, rain and wind, I never saw! (Griffith 2018, I 15-16)

While critical analyses of Irish Gothic fiction frequently cite this passage for its exemplification of the portrayal of the Irish landscape within the genre,³ its

³ Kilfeather identifies this passage as “the scene of adulterous possibilities and unruly designs” with the impending storm pushing Lord Lucan to confess his love for Louisa, thus sowing the seeds of the ensuing unhappiness to unravel. Kilfeather argues that the storm externalizes Louisa’s anxieties—her fear of her husband’s jealousy, her own and Lord Lucan’s illicit passion, and her trepidation toward the foreign society she is about to enter. Drawing a comparison between Lady Barton and Victor Frankenstein, Kilfeather points out that her introduction to Ireland occurs when the ship is blown off course, symbolically landing her on an isolated part of the northern coast (2014, 6). Similarly, Christina



significance is often downplayed due to the author's Irish origins and established positive treatment of the Irish landscape in a positive light in previous work productions (i.e. see *Amana* iv-v). This tendency prioritizes later, more affirming descriptions within the novel, potentially dismissing this initial portrayal of estrangement as a mere bad "first impression" (Killeen 2014, 6). However, such an approach risks overlooking the potential subversion inherent in an Irish author presenting her homeland as an alienating terrain. The implications of this depiction, in my reading of this passage, are clear: the disruptive portrayal of Ireland from the onset is not accidental. As an Irish author writing in London, Griffith needed to navigate a complex political atmosphere and adhere to conventional traditions that appealed to an English audience. Therefore, whether her motivations were driven by a desire for financial success, producing a work that would be more palatable and marketable to her target readership, or a strategic effort to engage the English readership from the beginning of the narrative, Griffith's alignment with English-minded Gothic conventions is quite telling.

In her initial foray into the Gothic tradition, therefore, Griffith sought to immerse the English reader by utilizing the Irish landscape to evoke a sense of *otherness* and danger. By presenting Ireland in a manner that emphasized the isolation and dislocation, the author catered to the tastes of a foreign readership that found allure in the portrayal of the Irish landscape as mysterious and foreboding. Through the deployment of potent natural imagery –darkness, rain, and wind– the author cultivates a sense of awe-inspiring sublimity, tinged with alienation, satisfying the Romantic fascination with untamed nature and the confrontation with overwhelming forces.

Following this vein, Louisa persists in her bleak depiction of Ireland. One might expect a shift in tone, or perhaps a concession to a more picturesque aspect of the landscape. However, her subsequent statement, referring to the exploration of the island as "gone to reconnoitre la carte du paï, de la terre inconnuë, ou nons etions [*sic*]" (Griffith 2018, I 18) further reinforces the motif of disparity. Scholars such as Kilfeather and Morin have scrutinized this passage for its implications, revealing a portrayal of Ireland and its inhabitants as inherently foreign, aligning them more closely with the Catholic Continent –notably France– than with Protestant England. On one level, the narrator's choice of the French language, a language associated with England's historical rival, according to their analysis, resonates powerfully with the political anxieties surrounding these nations. Throughout centuries of Anglo-Irish relations, a persistent fear haunted the English political consciousness: the spectre of a Franco-Irish alliance, fanning English anxieties, dictating foreign policy decisions, and ultimately contributing to a climate of mistrust and suspicion

Morin characterizes Louisa's initial encounter with the Irish landscape as imbued with a "mystical strangeness," suggesting that Ireland is portrayed as "an intriguingly liminal area of the British nation" (2018, 123-124). Additionally, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, in its fifth volume dedicated to Irish women's writings and traditions, includes this passage as an example of *The History of Lady Barton's* "very early use of the Gothic possibilities in the Irish landscape" (Deane *et al.* 1991, 797).



permeating English interactions with Ireland. Thus, viewed through the lens of these anxieties, such linguistic choice becomes a potent reflection of and a contribution to the prevailing climate of mistrust between the two countries. Furthermore, by constructing Ireland as “*terre inconnue*,” Griffith reinforces this sense of Ireland’s foreign nature and potential threat. Associating Irish and French identities, Griffith is reinforcing the notion of “estrangement between England and Ireland” (Kilfeather 1994, 40), with the English ruling elite perceiving Ireland through a lens of *otherness*. Ireland emerges, thus, a distinct entity, one that did not nearly fit into the English conception of nationhood. Instead, it was seen as an alien land, culturally and religiously divergent from Protestant metropolitan England (see Morin 2018, 123-127; Kilfeather 1994, 38-40).

Extending the concept of *otherness* further, Louisa continues by claiming

Suppose us now to have walked about a mile and a half, without discovering any object but the sea, which surrounded us, when, to our great delight, we spied land, tho’ still divided from us by a gulph we thought impassable. We stood however on the shore, inventing a thousand impracticable schemes to cross this tremendous Hellespont. (Griffith 2018, I 19-20)

Griffith further reinforces the motif of isolation and remoteness associated with Ireland by alluding to the absence of any significant geographical features besides the sea. The emphasis on the gulph as “impassable” emphasizes this sense of seclusion, along with the emphasis on the “thousand impracticable schemes” devised to cross this obstacle, leading the characters “trapped” within the Irish landscape, serving as a way of emphasizing the perceived difficulty and danger of traversing even a small distance within the Irish landscape. Nonetheless, a glimpse of relief and positivity is subtly introduced by Griffith after an Irish gentleman fearlessly swims his horse across to rescue Louisa and her companion. This act initiates a gradual transformation in the heroine’s perspective, leading her to reassess her ingrained rejection of Ireland and everything associated with it as she becomes acquainted with its people. Thus, Louisa eventually acknowledges

From the first notion that you could conceive of our generous hosts, you must believe that we were politely and elegantly entertained; but neither your idea, nor my description can do justice to their hospitality; they have given me the most favourable impressions of this country, on my first entering it. (Griffith 2018, I 23-26)

This perception is, however, swiftly challenged by Sir William, whom Louisa notes is “partial to his native land.” He cautions her wife not to expect “a whole nation, of such –fools!,” a warning which Louisa quickly dismisses by claiming “heigh, ho! this is my only comment” (Griffith 2018, I 26-27).

Once again, highlighting in just a few pages, the tensions between England and Ireland at the time, Sir William, as an Englishman, embodies the broader English perspective on Ireland, often characterized by a mixture of condescension and dismissal. His advice reflects a recognition of the simplistic and negative generalizations about the Irish that were widespread among the English populace.



Louisa's dismissive response, "heigh, ho" boldly challenges these deeply ingrained stereotypes. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Louisa exhibits a perspective devoid of the pervasive prejudices against the Irish. Her casual dismissal of Sir William's cautionary remark signifies a radical departure from the norm. Despite initially agreeing with and perpetuating such stereotypes, Louisa ultimately illustrates her capacity to perceive the intrinsic goodness in people irrespective of their nationality or the broader political context, serving as a profound critique of the reductionist and monolithic views held by many of her English compatriots.

By framing Louisa's development within the context of Anglo-Irish relations, this interaction, therefore, becomes a microcosm of the larger socio-political dynamics between England and Ireland, with which Griffith was particularly well-acquainted. Through Louisa's journey from prejudice to empathy, the author subtly critiques the colonial mindset that sought to define and dominate Irish identity through simplistic and derogatory stereotypes, that established Irish citizens as inherently inferior. Louisa's transformation, therefore, challenges such reductive views, opening up the possibility of ultimately transcending such ingrained biases that had dominated Anglo-Irish relationship for centuries. Addressing the limitations of the colonial gaze, Sir William's patronizing viewpoint encapsulates the condescension and dismissal characteristic of imperial ideology, which sought to maintain control through a presupposed superiority. However, Louisa's shift towards empathy symbolizes the potential for the dismantling of these oppressive structures.

This perception echoes consistently throughout the novel, underscoring the notion that while Ireland may be portrayed as a mysterious and captivating realm, villainy is not inherent to its landscape. This evolving depiction of Ireland, therefore, invites a reconsideration of how cultural identity is constructed and perceived within the framework of colonial power. Griffith's work stands as a sophisticated exploration of how narratives of *otherness* and exoticism can both reflect and challenge colonial ideologies. In presenting Ireland not merely as a site of colonial conflict but as a space ripe with potential for understanding and empathy, *The History of Lady Barton* pushes readers to engage with a more multifaceted view of Irish identity. Thus, Griffith not only entertains but also provokes a deeper contemplation of the complex interplay between cultural identity, colonialism, and the possibilities for genuine reconciliation. Whether this outcome was a deliberate authorial intention or an unintended consequence of Griffith's own origins and intrinsic admiration for her homeland remains uncertain. What is unequivocal, however, is that Griffith's narrative transcends simplistic categorizations, inviting a rich spectrum of interpretive possibilities within literary criticism. By incorporating a consideration of the environmental and natural spectrum; this narrative challenges existing paradigms and opens avenues for future scholarly exploration, offering a fertile ground for deeper investigations that have yet to be thoroughly examined.



4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Elizabeth Griffith's *The History of Lady Barton* masterfully navigates the complex interplay between landscape, female agency, and cultural perceptions within the context of Irish Gothic literature. As we have shown, the remarkable journeys of Louisa Barton and Olivia Walter serve as poignant testimony to their unwavering determination to break free from the suffocating constraints of societal norms pervasive in the Gothic narrative. While they may initially appear to embody the archetypal damsels in distress, their fierce determination to defy convention elevates them beyond mere victims, positioning them as active agents in their own narratives. In the broader scope of Gothic literature, heroines frequently find themselves ensnared in circumstances of captivity or persecution, often succumbing passively to their fate. However, what distinguishes Louisa and Olivia's experiences is their proactive resistance against such subjugation. Opting for death or exile over surrender, they subvert the traditional trope of female submission, embodying a courageous defiance that challenges the patriarchal norms of their era. Their resolute choices resonate not only as individual tales of defiance, but as emblematic symbols of the collective struggle endured by women in a society intent on confining them to prescribed roles. By embracing death and seclusion, Louisa and Olivia emerge as beacons of the ongoing fight for women's autonomy, steadfastly refusing to conform to the patriarchal expectations imposed upon them. Their narratives serve as potent reminders that even within the confines of eighteenth-century society, female characters need not be relegated to passive roles or limited solely to furthering male-driven plots. Instead, they manifest as complex, multidimensional figures whose subtle acts of rebellion challenge established gender norms and ardently advocate for women's autonomy.

Moreover, Griffith's depiction of Ireland, as a land suffused with enigmatic beauty and captivating mystique, adds further depth to the thematic exploration and narrative development. The Irish landscape, depicted as a transformative force, mirrors the internal conflicts of the protagonists while subverting established notions of Irish identity and the Gothic genre itself. From the rugged wilderness of Wales to the desolate shores of Ireland, Griffith deftly portrays the liminality of these landscapes, imbuing them with symbolic significance that resonates throughout the narrative. Through Louisa and Olivia's journeys, readers are invited to reevaluate preconceived stereotypes, discovering within the folds of Ireland's landscape a realm teeming with warmth, hospitality, and benevolence. In this way, Griffith challenges prevailing narratives of Irish *otherness*, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of the landscape shaped by its rich history, culture, and the enduring resilience of its people.

In essence, *The History of Lady Barton* transcends the confines of its time, standing as a testimony to Griffith's skill as a storyteller and her keen understanding of the complexities of female agency and Irish cultural identity. Through its compelling narrative and richly drawn characters, the novel provides readers with a window into a realm where women challenge societal norms, finding strength and empowerment amidst the nurturing embrace of the natural world.



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