‘...my dearest Catherine, what have you been doing with yourself all this morning? – Have you gone on with Udolpho?’

‘Yes, I have been reading it ever since I woke; and I am got to the black veil.’

‘Are you, indeed? How delightful! Oh! I would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are you not wild to know?’

‘Oh! yes, quite; what can it be? – But do not tell me – I would not be told upon any account. I know it must be a skeleton, I am sure it is Laurentina’s skeleton. Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it. I assure you, if it had not been to meet you, I would not have come away from it for all the world.’

‘Dear creature! how much I am obliged to you; and when you have finished Udolpho, we will read the Italian together; and I have made out a list of ten or twelve more of the same kind for you.’

‘Have you, indeed! How glad I am! – What are they all?’

‘I will read you their names directly; here they are, in my pocket-book. Castle of Wolfenbach, Clermont, Mysterious Warning, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine, and Horrid Mysteries. Those will last us some time.’

‘Yes, pretty well; but are they all horrid, are you sure they are all horrid?’

Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey

D. Wallace et al. (eds.), The Female Gothic
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Whatever else it may have contained, Isabella Thorpe’s pocket-book does not register, record or establish a ‘Female Gothic’. It contains the titles of seven novels, not their authors. Consequently, this pocket-book reading list conveys no information about the gender of the authors. By contrast, John Thorpe responds to Catherine Morland’s query ‘Have you ever read Udolpho, Mr Thorpe?’ with ‘Not I, faith! No, if I read any it shall be Mrs. Radcliff’s [sic];’ (45), and Henry Tilney praises the ‘hair-raising’ prose of ‘Mrs. Radcliffe’ (95). It is the reading minds of John and Henry, not those of Isabella and Catherine, which respond to authorship, and the gendering of a text through authorship.

Ellen Moers first established the term ‘Female Gothic’ in 1976 with her ‘easily defined’ assumption that it is ‘the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic’. Moers almost immediately eroded her seemingly straightforward definition, however, by shifting her focus from authorship to thematics. She argued that Ann Radcliffe’s foregrounding of ‘a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine’ established a crucial Gothic trope (91). In 1993 Jacqueline Howard rightly challenged the assumption that ‘male’ and ‘female’ authorship inevitably carries ‘necessary psychological consequences’ to the texts that they produce. In 1994, E. J. Clery also interrogated the ‘commonsense category’ of ‘Female Gothic’ by revisiting the long-established lineage of heroine-centred novels by both male and female authors from which Radcliffe undoubtedly drew inspiration. These and many other fruitful interventions have usefully promoted a critical wariness of the term ‘Female Gothic’ that is recognised by the editors of special issues upon the topic. In a double issue of Women’s Writing on ‘Female Gothic’ in 1994, Robert Miles warned against regarding ‘Female Gothic’ as a ‘self-evident literary classification’, and in 2004 Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace introduced a new ‘Female Gothic’ collection in Gothic Studies by acknowledging that the term is ‘possibly, too essentialising’. The fragile critical taxonomy inaugurated by Moers has proved to be of value less for its argument than for the debates that it continues to provoke.

Following Ellen Moers, my critical intervention commences in the 1790s, and also invokes the problematic spectre of Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey (1818). At the beginning of ‘Female Gothic’ Moers follows the lead of Austen’s Henry Tilney. The first (and only) example that Moers pulls from Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey places him centre-stage: ‘Jane Austen has Henry Tilney, in Northanger Abbey, say that he could not put down Mrs. Radcliffe’s Mysteries of Udolpho: “I remember finishing it in two days – my hair standing on end the whole time”’ (91). Moers