

The Female Gothic

Then and Now

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When Ellen Moers first used the term 'Female Gothic' in *Literary Women* (1976), she thought that it was easily defined as 'the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called "the Gothic."¹ A definition of 'the Gothic' was, she admitted, less easily stated, 'except that it has to do with fear' (90). Moers' analysis of Female Gothic texts as a coded expression of women's fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body, most terrifyingly experienced in childbirth, was extremely influential. It not only engendered a body of critical work which focused on the ways in which the Female Gothic articulated women's dissatisfactions with patriarchal society and addressed the problematic position of the maternal within that society, but placed the Gothic at the centre of the female tradition. By the 1990s, however, partly as a result of poststructuralism's destabilising of the categories of gender, the term was increasingly being qualified and there has been an ongoing debate as to whether the Female Gothic constitutes a separate literary genre. Today, over 25 years later, the terms being offered – 'women's Gothic', 'feminine Gothic', 'lesbian Gothic', even 'Gothic feminism' – appear to suggest that Moers' definition is too much an umbrella term, and, possibly, too essentialising.

In his introduction to the special number of *Women's Writing* on Female Gothic Writing in 1994 Robert Miles suggested that the term Female Gothic had 'hardened into a literary category',² arguing that the early feminist criticism had reached an 'impasse' (132). The essays in that number were invited explicitly to explore, extend or challenge the critical validity of the term, and it was particularly suggested that essays might investigate materialist directions, re-assess the use of psychoanalysis, or use the 'Male Gothic' to contextualise their discussion. In retrospect, these essays, which do all these things as well as, in Miles' words, 'challenging . . . the concept of gender itself' (134), offered a state-of-the-art snapshot which indicated some of the most important directions in which criticism of the Female Gothic would move in the ensuing decade.

Miles' own *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress* (1995) the following year offered not merely a comprehensive account of this central figure but also, in his reading of

A Sicilian Romance (1790), one of the most lucid analyses of the Female Gothic narrative of the persecuted heroine in flight from a villainous father and in search of an absent mother.³ Studies exploring a distinction between 'Female Gothic' and 'Male Gothic' had seen this plot as typical of female writers, while male writers tended towards a plot of masculine transgression of social taboos, exemplified by Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). Any simple correlation of plot with the author's gender, however, had already been broken down by Alison Milbank's *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction* (1992) which analysed male writers' appropriation of Female Gothic, and several essays in *Women's Writing*, including her own, extended that project in important ways.⁴ In her *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (1995), another contributor, Anne Williams, argued for the existence of 'Male' and 'Female' formulas, which differ in terms of narrative technique, plot, their assumptions about the supernatural, and their use of horror/terror.⁵ She looked back through the use made of Greek mythology by Freudian psychoanalysis to locate the origins of the Female Gothic narrative (typified by female point of view, happy ending, explained ghosts and an adherence to terror), in the myth of Psyche and Eros, as opposed to the Oedipal myth which underpins the male version.

While Williams and others saw the Female Gothic as subversive and even revolutionary, Diane Long Hoeveler argued in *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalisation of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (1998) that it was the originator of modern so-called 'victim feminism'. The heroines of Gothic novels, Hoeveler contended, masquerade as blameless victims of a corrupt and oppressive patriarchal society while utilising passive-aggressive and masochistic strategies to triumph over that system. This ideology of 'female power through pretended and staged weakness' is what Hoeveler calls 'gothic feminism'.⁶

The essays in the special number of *Women's Writing* focused exclusively on pre-1900 texts. One of the most fertile areas of critical investigation post-1990, however, has been the exploration of the Gothic in twentieth-century texts by women and, extending the work of Tania Modleski and Joanna Russ on the modern Gothic romance in the 1980s, in popular culture. *Modern Gothic: A Reader* (1996), edited by Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith, for instance, included essays on Isak Dinesen, Toni Morrison, Angela Carter and Ruth Praver Jhabvala.⁷ Suzanne Becker in *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction* (1999), her study of English and Canadian women writers, most importantly Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976), chose to use the term 'Feminine Gothic' to signal her focus on the gender of the speaking subject in the text rather than the gender of the author.⁸ Such readings, influenced by poststructuralist scepticism about essentialist gender categories, have nevertheless demonstrated the continuing centrality of the Gothic in postmodern and postcolonial writings by women.

Attention is also beginning to be paid to the use of Gothic modes by Modernist and inter-war women writers as diverse as Daphne du Maurier, May Sinclair and Stella Gibbons. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik's *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination* (1998) is a good example of how a theoretically-informed study of an ostensibly 'popular' writer within this context can not only

open up her work but also intervene in the debates around the Female Gothic itself.⁹ The Female Gothic formula, as outlined by Williams and earlier by Eugenia DeLamotte, which resists an unhappy or ambiguous closure and explains the supernatural, for instance, does not fit du Maurier's work.

Following on from the work of Terry Castle and deploying poststructuralist theory, Paulina Palmer's *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (1999) was based on the understanding that 'Gothic and "queer" share a common emphasis on transgressive acts and subjectivities.'¹⁰ The growth of 'lesbian Gothic' fiction over the past 25 years, she argued, developed out of a specific historical context – the feminist movement and the growth of lesbian/queer studies, which in turn created a readership for texts which appropriated, reworked and parodied Gothic modes and motifs to articulate lesbian subjectivities. Arguably, Palmer's concept of 'lesbian Gothic' could be projected backwards to illuminate earlier texts. Interestingly, for instance, Rictor Norton's *Mistress of Udolpho: The Life of Ann Radcliffe* (1999), the first full-scale biography which offers the contextualisation which has been missing for so long, reads the novels in terms of their 'lesbian subtext.'¹¹

Above all, perhaps, the 1990s has witnessed the move of the Female Gothic from the margins into the mainstream. It is included as a matter of course in Maggie Kilgour's *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (1995), David Punter's seminal *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fiction from 1765 to the Present Day* (1980, second edition 1996), and Fred Botting's *Gothic* (1996).¹² Recent collections of essays, such as Andrew Smith, Diane Mason, and William Hughes' *Fictions of Unease: The Gothic from Otranto to The X-Files* (2002), include readings of women's texts, such as Laura Kranzler's essay on the Black Lace imprint of modern erotic Gothics, alongside essays on Walpole, Stoker, Le Fanu and Collins.¹³

The most recent development in the field is the return to historicist readings. E. J. Clery's *Women's Gothic: From Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley* (2000), ostensibly a modest undergraduate guide, actually provides a valuable new reading of women's Gothic texts grounded in original historical contextualisation. She counters the common picture of women writers in the Romantic period as operating under unfavourable conditions of restraint, concealment and self-censorship, by highlighting their acknowledged status as professional writers, influenced and enabled by the powerful figure of Sarah Siddons as an ideal of female genius. Her title signals a move away from the psychoanalytic readings of these texts as parables of family relations within patriarchy typically associated with the 'Female Gothic'. Instead, she argues that their key concerns are 'the legitimation of visionary imagination in women writers, methods of representing the passions, the issue of arousing the reader or audience, and the profit motive.'¹⁴

Like the 1994 number of *Women's Writing*, this special edition of *Gothic Studies* was conceived as a way of assessing the current state of play in the criticism of the Female Gothic. Judging by the impressive response to the call for papers, this is one of the most thriving areas of literary studies, hence our decision to make this a double issue of the journal.

In 'Female Gothic and the Institutionalization of Gothic Studies' Lauren Fitzgerald argues that Ellen Moers' account of the Female Gothic has its roots in a Lockean, European Enlightenment, philosophy of ownership. For Fitzgerald, this philosophy also influenced a 1970s feminist revision of the canon that involved identifying, and reclaiming, a 'herstory' of women's writing. Issues concerning the critical ownership of Ann Radcliffe, for example, illustrate how academic feminism has approached, and developed, the idea of what constitutes 'women's writing', whilst simultaneously indicating the extent to which Enlightenment ideas of ownership have shaped the Anglo-American feminist tradition.

Angela Wright in "'To live the life of hopeless recollection": Mourning and Melancholia in Female Gothic, 1780–1800' explores how novels by Eliza Fenwick, Sophia Lee, Maria Roche, and Ann Radcliffe critique, via their fascination with portraiture, eighteenth-century consumerism. Wright argues that this engagement with image-making indicates late eighteenth-century concerns with fashion, opulence and consumerism which become relocated in women's Gothic writing through the correlated issues of female insanity, desire and loss.

In 'The Construction of the Female Gothic Posture: Wollstonecraft's *Mary* and Gothic Feminism' Diane Long Hoeveler returns to the idea of the Enlightenment. Hoeveler argues that Wollstonecraft in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was working within a male-dominated tradition of Enlightenment values, and that consequently her views are coloured by an implicit adherence to this tradition. Hoeveler suggests that this adherence is confirmed by Wollstonecraft's *Mary, A Fiction* (1788) which provides a sentimental celebration of the passive and weak Female Gothic heroine. Hoeveler argues that such a celebration of passivity has had a deleterious effect on feminism by encouraging women to see themselves as victims as a means, paradoxically, of gaining empowerment.

Ranita Chatterjee in 'Sapphic Subjectivity and Gothic Desires in Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy*' discusses the representation of lesbian desire and foreshadows Paulina Palmer's concluding article in this issue, on lesbian writing from the 1990s. Chatterjee argues that Fenwick's 1795 novel uses images of lesbian desire in order to challenge the then prevailing models of gender. Fenwick's associations with such Jacobins as William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Hays underline her radical credentials, and Chatterjee argues that *Secresy* develops feminist ideas drawn from Wollstonecraft. However, she also argues that the novel's focus on same-sex desire challenges the whole notion of gender ascriptions in the period and so ultimately moves the debate beyond Wollstonecraft, in what is an alternative critique of Wollstonecraft than that posed by Hoeveler.

That the Female Gothic is not just associated with the novel is illustrated by 'Uncanny Stories: the ghost story as Female Gothic' in which Diana Wallace explores nineteenth-century ghost stories written by Elizabeth Gaskell, and later tales by May Sinclair, and Elizabeth Bowen. Using ideas drawn from Modleski and Irigaray, she argues that such tales explore how a patriarchal culture represses/buries images of the maternal. She further argues that the ghost story enabled women writers to evade the marriage plots which dominated the earlier

Radcliffean Female Gothic, meaning that they could offer a more radical critique of male power, violence and predatory sexuality than was possible in either the realist, or indeed Gothic, novel. For Wallace the ghost story functions as the 'double' or the 'unconscious' of the novel, giving form to what has to be repressed in the longer, more 'respectable' form.

An additional, although largely unexplored aspect of the Female Gothic, the issue of race, is explored in "Collusions of the Mystery": Ideology and the Gothic in *Hagar's Daughter*' by Eugenia DeLamotte who examines the representation of race in Pauline Hopkins' *Hagar's Daughter* (1901/2). She argues that the novel provides a revision of the Female Gothic and also exploits narrative devices familiar from detective fiction. The solving of the 'mystery' that lies at the heart of the novel is one which explodes the ideological 'mystery', and the national crime of slavery, which separates Black and White, masculine and feminine, home and state, and African American and Euro-American families.

One of the characteristics of the Female Gothic plot is its representation of romantic love. Andrew Smith in 'Love, Freud, and the Female Gothic: Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars*' explores how Stoker's novel raises some complex questions about love through its use of a male love-struck narrator, who appears to be caught in a Female Gothic plot which casts him as its hero. In the novel 'love' becomes increasingly sinister as it turns into a destabilising and dangerously irrational emotion that ultimately aligns love with feelings of justified horror. *Jewel* (1903, revised 1912) thus develops a male reading of a Female Gothic plot in which the idea of female empowerment becomes defined as horrific. However, this idea of a pathologised love, Smith argues, is not unique to Stoker and can be linked to Freud's account of love, which reveals how social issues relating to male authority appear within psychoanalytical debates about emotion at the time.

That twentieth-century Female Gothic heroines are more likely to be trapped in domestic spaces than semi-ruined castles is explored in 'Skin Chairs and other Domestic Horrors: Barbara Comyns and the Female Gothic tradition' in which Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik explore the work of the English novelist Barbara Comyns whose best-known works were published between 1950 and 1985. They focus on *The Vet's Daughter* (1959) and *The Skin Chairs* (1962) and explore how Comyns' use of parody, wit, and humour exposes the horrors of domestic life. For Horner and Zlosnik this constitutes a Female Comic Gothic which is grotesque and blackly comic in its critical assault on patriarchal plots, and so constitutes a particular form of the Female Gothic which became popular in the twentieth century.

Gina Wisker in 'Viciousness in the kitchen: Sylvia Plath's Gothic' extends the argument about the horrors of domesticity. She argues that Plath's domestic Gothic exposes the duplicities of women's roles and the surprising paradoxes of fear and love, Otherness and self in representations of mothering and marriage. Using Freud's notion of the 'uncanny', Wisker suggests that Plath's poems defamiliarise the familiar roles and expectations of women's lives. Above all, Plath exposes the dangers of complacency and the losses that come with the acceptance of a limited (patriarchal) world view.

In 'Lesbian Gothic: Genre, Transformation, Transgression' Paulina Palmer discusses Caeia March's *Between The Worlds* (1996) and Sarah Water's *Affinity* (1999). Palmer argues that writers of lesbian fiction are drawn to the Gothic because it is a form which has traditionally given space to the representation of transgressive sexualities. The Gothic is also a vehicle through which the interrogation and problematising of mainstream versions of reality and so-called 'normal' values is made possible. Palmer argues that these novels parodically rework the grotesque portrayal of character, which is familiar from mainstream Gothic fiction and film, and in doing so they challenge and resignify the category of the abject to which lesbians and gay men are conventionally relegated.

These essays suggest that, despite or, indeed, because of, the rigorous debates which are ongoing around its usage, the term 'Female Gothic' is still a flexible and recognisable form for an area which is if anything gaining in vigour and complexity.

As a postscript, it is worth noting that *Literary Women* is currently out of print in Britain, and has been for some years. For feminist critics, then, whether female or male, there is another consideration here. Given the tendency for women's texts in particular to fall out of favour and out of print, there is a danger that Moers herself might suffer this fate. We might wish, therefore, to retain Moers' term for political reasons, however much we problematise and qualify it, because it does act as a historical marker to the pioneering work done by her and others in correcting the one-sided accounts of the Gothic, and indeed of literary studies in general, which had prevailed until that point.

Notes

- 1 Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, [1976] (London: The Women's Press, 1978), p. 90. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.
- 2 Robert Miles, Introduction, *Women's Writing: the Elizabethan to Victorian Period*, Special Number: Female Gothic Writing, 1/2 (1994), p. 131. All subsequent references to this special issue are given in parentheses in the text.
- 3 Robert Miles, *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
- 4 Alison Milbank, *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); Alison Milbank, 'Milton, Melancholy and the Sublime in the "Female" Gothic from Radcliffe to Le Fanu', *Women's Writing: the Elizabethan to Victorian Period*, Special Number: Female Gothic Writing, 1/2 (1994), pp. 143–160.
- 5 Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1995).
- 6 Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalisation of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (Pennsylvania State University Press; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), p. 7.
- 7 Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith, eds, *Modern Gothic: A Reader* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996).
- 8 Suzanne Becker, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999).

- 9 Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).
- 10 Paulina Palmer, *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (London: Cassell, 1999), p.8.
- 11 Rictor Norton, *Mistress of Udolpho: The Life of Ann Radcliffe* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1999), p. 150.
- 12 Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fiction from 1765 to the Present Day*, 2 vols, (Second Edition, London and New York: Longman, 1996); Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).
- 13 Andrew Smith, Diane Mason, and William Hughes, eds, *Fictions of Unease: The Gothic from Otranto to The X-Files* (Bath: Sulis, 2002)
- 14 E. J. Clery, *Women's Gothic: From Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley*, Writers and Their Work series (Tavistock: Northcote, 2000), p. 23.