

## Female Gothic

From the eighteenth century onwards, Gothic writing has been conceived of in gendered terms. Some of its earliest and most celebrated practitioners were women, such as Clara Reeve, **ANN RADCLIFFE**, Charlotte Dacre and **MARY SHELLEY**, and many Gothic tales first appeared in the pages of journals like *The Lady's Magazine*. Women's periodicals also encouraged submissions from their readers and in this way a reciprocity of female reading and writing of Gothic was established. Through the circulating libraries for the middle class, and the Gothic chapbooks for the lower classes, a new generation of women readers was

able to enjoy, like Catherine Morland in Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), the delights of narrative suspense: 'While I have *Udolpho* to read, I feel as if nobody could make me miserable. Oh! the dreadful black veil!' Whether the description of the devourer of Minerva Press productions as female was accurate is debatable, as men were extensive novel readers, and Austen's heroine has her male counterpart in Peacock's Scythrop in *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) who sleeps with the *Horrid Mysteries* under his pillow.

Those who have traced the Gothic to contemporary fiction are on surer ground in assuming a primarily female readership for the romances of Mary Stewart and Victoria Holt, in which a young woman, often a governess to a widower's child, flees his house and his supposed evil designs. Daphne du Maurier is linked to Ann Radcliffe in a tradition that is held to include the **BRONTËS**, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Flannery O'Connor by this central figure of the persecuted maiden who is entrapped by a male tyrant in a labyrinthine castle. In a collection edited by

Juliann E. Fleenor, *Female Gothic* (1983), the modern versions are analysed as articulations of the passage from girlhood to female maturity and socialisation in which Gothic fantasies enact escape from the all-embracing mother into individuation through sexual response. In this volume popular female Gothics are variously interpreted as sites for the safe expression of female rebellion or drugs to enforce social conformity.

The division of Gothic writing into male and female traditions is customary and usually follows the gender of the author. It distinguishes between masculine plots of transgression of social taboos by an excessive male will, and explorations of the imagination's battle against religion, law, limitation and contingency in novels such as **MATTHEW LEWIS's** *The Monk* (1796), in which rape, murder and mortgaging of the self to the devil are variously attempted. *The Monk* is the novel praised by John Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* over the female novel of sentiment by Burney, and in preference to the girls' admiration for *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). In the female tradition, the male transgressor becomes the villain whose authoritative reach as patriarch, abbot or despot seeks to entrap the heroine, usurps the great house, and threatens death or rape. Division according to a writer's gender is not, however, consistent, as Reeve, Dacre and Shelley write in the male tradition, and Ireland and **J. SHERIDAN LE FANU** in the female, while **CHARLES MATURIN**

unites the two forms in *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820).

What is also not often noticed is that the modern female form differs from the eighteenth-century romance in moving to release the male protagonist from guilt or evil purposes to allow his marriage with the heroine. Both the male and female traditions are thereby sanitised and made socially acceptable by the cancellation of any masculine threat or

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### *Female Gothic*

55

feminine rejection. Study of the 'classic' Gothic period is similarly poised between stressing its radical potential and its conservative ideological function. Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1963) described the Gothic novel as 'a device to send maidens on journeys', and this positive assess-

ment characterises the humane approach of Margaret Doody, whose article in *Genre*, 'Deserts, Ruins, Troubled Waters: Female Dreams in Fiction and the Development of the Gothic Novel' views the form as making actual female nightmares of oppression and enclosure in a way that allows radical social protest. Although Charlotte Smith in *The Old Manor House* (1793) and Mary Wollstonecraft in *The Wrongs of Woman; Or Maria* (1798) made Gothic an overt vehicle for social and feminist critique, few recent studies attend to this ideological intervention.

Kate Ferguson Ellis's *The Contested Castle* (1989) illustrates how the Gothic revelation of the great house as a prison makes problematic the safety of the domestic sphere under capitalism at the same time as it dramatises the social relations suitable for such a society. More positively (although Ellis does allow the Gothic to have been of assistance in producing a female autonomous self), Alison Milbank's *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction* (1992) employs Benjaminian apocalyptic to analyse an appropriation of female Gothic by male writers such as **CHARLES DICKENS** and Le Fanu as a means of radical critique of capitalism and the ideology of the separate spheres. In novels such as *Little Dorrit* (1855–7) or *Uncle Silas* (1864) the heroine's allegiance to the house is asserted through her escape from it, which reveals it, and the

history-bound patriarchy that it articulates, as ruined. The Gothic heroine detects the secret power relations of aristocratic transformation while resisting, for an apocalyptic moment, the divided morality of the entrepreneurial class.

More typically, writing on the female Gothic plot reads it psychoanalytically. An influential article by Norman Holland and Leona Sherman, 'Gothic Possibilities', marks out a female alternative to the male Gothic Oedipal struggle in which the son acts to overthrow the father and gain hidden knowledge of the forbidden mother. Here the psychology of Nancy Chodorow lies behind an analysis of the Gothic plot of entrapment and escape from a labyrinthine castle as the girl's difficulty in separating from the mother when she does not have the obvious marker of sexual difference from her that the son possesses. The castle is a 'potential space' which inwardly symbolises the mother and outwardly the father, who is both feared and desired by the heroine. In this rapturous play of desire the female imagination can 'hover between radical exploration and a familiar conservative ending'.

Claire Kahane's essay 'The Gothic Mirror' similarly attends to the daughter's move towards psychic individuation, which she finds figured

in Gothic writing as 'the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront'. Typically, Kahane reads female characters in a novel such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* as doubles for the heroine, so that the murderous Signora Laurentini becomes a mirror for Emily's own potential for madness and transgression. The projection onto other female figures of a heroine's repressed desires characterises Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's attention to *Jane Eyre* in their *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), in which Bertha Mason is an avatar of Jane's rage against Rochester and illimitable desires.

Kahane's text moves to speak in sublime language as her reader delights 'in the dizzying verge of the ubiquitous Gothic precipice on the edge of the maternal blackness to which every Gothic heroine is drawn'. This is, however, again to figure the sublime in Oedipal terms of rivalry and annihilation. Patricia Yaegar, in an article not concerned with the Gothic especially but of direct relevance to it, argues for an avoidance of the Oedipal triangle in 'Toward a Female Sublime', where the aggrandising 'vertical' Romantic sublime is to be eschewed for a 'horizontal'

**SUBLIME** (located in Irigaray and other French feminist theoreticians) that 'expands toward others, spreads itself out towards others, spreads itself out in multiplicity'.

This 'sublime of nearness', which does not overpower objects in an idealising triumph of the imagination but allows the other its alien character, is close to Irigaray's description of the production of true sexual difference in the non-possessive astonishment that Descartes describes as prior to the passions. For to remain hoist between the annihilating father and the all-encompassing mother is not to escape the castle but to remain within the tragic agon of the male Gothic. This cannot produce a female erotic since it is concerned with the collapse of the distance that makes desire possible, and posits as object either the Kristevan 'abjected' pre-Oedipal mother from whom one must separate in order to be a desiring subject at all, or the Oedipal father, who in incest would imprison the daughter in cycles of uncanny repetition which, in Freudian theory, have more to do with the death-drives, with *thanatos* rather than *eros*. The female Gothic in Radcliffe and her followers moves beyond the castle to search for virtue, community and a symbolic expression of the female.



The unrepresentable in the Gothic sublime is often sexual difference itself, which is a subject of general concern during the eighteenth century. The Gothic Novel's preoccupation with Milton, in forms as diverse as Shelley's Eveless and nameless Milton student in *Frankenstein* or Radcliffe's imitation of *Comus* in the temptation of Adeline in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) are typical of a contemporary study of

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### *Female Gothic*

57

Milton's presentation of sexual difference in the pre-fallen 'conversation' of the Edenic couple, which attracted a variety of interpretations, not all of them misogynist. Adam and Eve's loss of reciprocity of feeling and

sexual reponse after the Fall, in which nature itself is involved, comes to be figured obliquely in elegiac and graveyard poetry of the eighteenth century as the division between human and natural worlds, and which is only healed, momentarily, by the descent of 'Eve' (evening) in the benign undifferentiation of twilight.

In Radcliffe and Shelley one can see this melancholy compensation transfigured in Rousseauian fashion into the architectonics of the sublime, both in the natural sublime of imaginative expansion and the Burkean sublime of the threat of annihilation within the castle that produces sexual difference. Yaegar's female sublime is asserted against Thomas Weiskel's agonistic model of the Romantic sublime, but this is different from the Gothic sublime, which articulates a pre-Romantic dialectical relation of reason and imagination. There, the other remains itself. So in Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), a Duke, a Marquis and an abbot seek in vain to capture the errant Julia and to enforce their several wills and desires upon her, and in their search seize innocent strangers and invade pastoral retreats. Conversely, her governess, idly following the windings of a stream and in sublime meditation upon the landscape, hears a voice and discovers accidentally her lost pupil, whom she leaves in her seclusion. Again the same Julia is led to discover that her mother is not dead or a spectre but a prisoner, and chooses to share

her mother's captivity until both are released. Others in the female Gothic are not mirrors but sharers in a subjectivity centred on the sublime, which is a social category in Radcliffe, not the preserve of a privileged individual.

Radcliffe's romances end with the heroine enjoying a virtuous Rousseauian community; Shelley makes this the home from which Victor Frankenstein flees (whose members enjoy sublime landscapes and social benevolence). *Frankenstein* charts its hero's progressive stages of rejection of the feminine 'other' from his abandonment of his 'Eve', Elizabeth, to his abortion of a female monster and the murder of both Elizabeth and Justine that occurs as a direct result of his forbidding his monster a sexual partner. The novel ends with an assertion of the power of homosocial bonds in the frozen wastes of the Arctic where there are no women. Like her later novels, Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is a warning of the loss for men and women alike that ensues when the feminine other is denied symbolisation, and the female Gothic project is abandoned.

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