

Postfeminist Gothic

Critical Interventions in Contemporary Culture

Edited by Benjamin A. Brabon
and Stéphanie Genz



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Introduction: Postfeminist Gothic

Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz

This collection of essays addresses and examines the intersection of two much-debated and controversial concepts: postfeminism and Gothic. The resulting category of “postfeminist Gothic”¹ demarcates a new space for critical enquiry that re-invigorates previous debates on the Gothic, in particular the notion of the Female Gothic and its relation to second-wave feminism, as well as shedding light on the contemporary postfeminist conundrum. That this will not be a straightforward companionship or symbiosis is made explicit by the evasiveness and multiplicity of meaning exhibited by both terms: the Gothic has always resisted a monological definition and exceeded the laws of genre and categorical thinking, being as Fred Botting notes “an inscription neither of darkness nor of light, a delineation neither of reason and morality nor of superstition and corruption, neither good nor evil, but both at the same time” (9), and prefixing it with the equally polysemic “postfeminist” seems to complicate matters even further. Rather than putting forward a definite and singular signification of Gothic, postfeminism and by extension postfeminist Gothic, the following essays uncover and raise a new set of questions involved in this critical positioning: What does it mean to “post” feminism? How does the adjective “postfeminist” modify Gothic (and its various associations and subheadings) and what does the notion of “postfeminist Gothic” imply? As the variety of essays and topics in this collection attest, the answers to these questions are multiple and diverse, ranging from wholehearted dismissals and rejections of the possibility of “postfeminist Gothic” to scepticism and an optimistic embracing of the category. This collection is premised upon an interrogation and exploration of these terms, providing a site of exchange and debate, dialogue and conflict. It is not asking so much what postfeminist Gothic *is*; rather, it is asking about the future of Gothic and its connections with (post)feminism.

Post-ing feminism

The postfeminist phenomenon has confounded and split contemporary critics with its contradictory significations, definitional ambiguity and pluralistic outlook. Commentators have claimed the term for various and even oppositional understandings and appropriations, ranging from backlash to Girl Power to poststructuralist feminism.² The point of contention that separates these different interpretations of postfeminism arises in part from the semantic confusion around the prefix and an argument as to how a “post-ing” of feminism can be read and explained. As Misha Kavka observes, the question that has haunted – or enlivened, depending on your point of view – the debate on and use of “postfeminism” can be summarized as “how can we make sense of the ‘post’ in ‘postfeminism’ ” (31). Although the very structure of the term “postfeminism” seems to invoke a narrative of progression insisting on a time “after” feminism, the directionality and meaning of the prefix are far from settled and stable. The “post” prefix can be employed to point to a complete rupture, for as Amelia Jones declares, “what is post but the signification of a kind of termination – a temporal designation of whatever it prefaces as ended, done with, obsolete” (8). Diametrically opposed is the idea that the prefix denotes a genealogy that entails revision or strong family resemblance. In this case, the “post” signifies reliance and continuity, an approach that has been favoured by advocates of another “post” derivative, postmodernism. More problematically, “post” can also occupy an uneasy middle ground, signalling a contradictory dependence on and independence from the term that follows it. This is the viewpoint taken by Linda Hutcheon, who detects a paradox at the heart of the “post” whereby “it marks neither a simple and radical break from [the term that follows] nor a straightforward continuity with it; it is both and neither” (17).³

Adding to this interpretive struggle is the fact that the root of postfeminism, feminism itself, is also characterized by polyphony and multiplicity that undermine the possibility of a universally agreed agenda and definition. Indeed, as Geraldine Harris emphasizes, feminism has never had “a single, clearly defined, common ideology” or been constituted around “a political party or a central organization or leaders or an agreed policy or manifesto, or even been based upon an agreed principle of collective action” (9). Instead, feminism can at best be said to have working definitions that are always relative to particular contexts, specific issues and personal practices. From this perspective, the attempt to establish and settle *the* meaning of postfeminism looks more and more futile and

even misguided as each articulation of the term is by itself a definitional act that (re)constructs the meaning of feminism and its own relation to it. There is no *original* or *authentic* postfeminism that holds the key to its definition. Nor is there a secure and unified origin from which this genuine postfeminism could be fashioned. Rather than pre-empting any interpretation of postfeminism, we adopt an understanding of it as a network of possible relationships that allows for a variety of permutations and readings, from antifeminist retro-sexism to anti-essentialist poststructuralist feminism. Our examination is undoubtedly informed by a postmodern awareness of the relativization of the metanarratives of Western history and enlightened modernity, Lyotard's loss of *grand narratives*. As is evidenced by the breadth and diversity of the essays in this collection, postfeminism is not a fixed conceptual category but an open and changeable problematic that signifies in conflicting ways. Our underlying aim in selecting the essays and putting together this collection has not been to secure the meaning of postfeminism, to establish it, if you like, as a locus of truth, but rather to provide a space for debate where postfeminism remains open to interrogation.

In order to unravel this definitional plurality, the interconnections of "post" and "feminism," prefix and root, have to be explored. Jane Kalbfleisch's discussion of the feminism–postfeminism coupling is particularly useful in this respect as she analyses a number of rhetorical positions that underlie different articulations of postfeminism. Kalbfleisch describes how a "rhetoric of opposition" has effected a polarization of feminism and postfeminism whereby division is given presence through the assumption that feminism and postfeminism are fully distinguishable and distinct. In this sense, "postfeminist" denotes a non-feminist stance and can be read as a term of negation that tries to move beyond the era of feminism and its theoretical and cultural practices. This rupture can be interpreted positively as liberation from old and constraining conditions and as an affirmation of new developments, or it can be read as a deplorable regression and a loss of traditional values and certainties. The rhetoric of opposition thus takes the form of both anti- and pro-postfeminism, either rejecting the term as an opportunistic move on the part of patriarchy or embracing it and thereby superseding earlier feminist movements.

On the pro-postfeminist side of the debate, one finds a generation of young women who appear to speak from somewhere outside and above feminism. In this instance, the term "postfeminism" is used to suggest that the project of feminism has ended, either because it has been completed or because it has failed and is no longer valid. The most prominent

advocates of this standpoint, Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, Natasha Walter and Rene Denfeld, support an individualistic and liberal agenda that relies on a mantra of choice and looks upon feminism as a “birthright” that no longer needs to be enforced politically (Denfeld 2).⁴ Contrastingly, the anti-postfeminist proponents preserve a myth of feminist linear progress by locating postfeminism with a sexist patriarchy and media as the latest version of “the same old thing.” The media Trojan horse is seen to have co-opted and appropriated the idea of female equality while harbouring antifeminist weaponry and gutting the underlying principles of the feminist movement. This negative reading of postfeminism inserts a hyphen between “post” and “feminism,” implying that feminism has been sabotaged by its new, trendy prefix to the extent that, as Tania Modleski notes, “texts ... in proclaiming ... the advent of postfeminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism, in effect, delivering us back into a prefeminist world” (3).⁵

Rather than situating feminism and postfeminism antithetically, the second rhetorical position that Kalbfleisch identifies, “the rhetoric of inclusion,” relies on a polarization of a different kind to eradicate the overlap between feminism and postfeminism. In this case, postfeminism is pitted against some “Other” (for example, postmodernism and post-structuralism) in a move that allows for the presumed commonalities among feminists and postfeminists while effectively erasing their potential differences (258).⁶ The critical tension within the (post)feminism coupling is defused in this way as the two terms are conflated into one and incorporated into another discursive scheme. Academic circles in particular have adopted this theoretical approach, discussing postfeminism as “a pluralistic epistemology dedicated to disrupting universalising patterns of thought” (Gamble 50). The absorption of postfeminism into what could broadly be conceived as a project of postmodernist cultural critique runs the risk of repressing its importance in other domains, specifically its place in the public debate on feminism and the modern woman. In our understanding, postfeminism exists both as a descriptive popular category and as an academic theoretical tendency and, even within these situated contexts, it does not necessarily aim for coherence.⁷

Instead of containing postfeminism within a series of well-defined boxes (academia and media, Girl Power and backlash, popular feminism and poststructuralist anti-essentialism), we maintain that it is more productive and critically challenging to look upon it as a resolutely dialogic and paradoxical stance, literally a point of interrogation. Postfeminism highlights an engagement with and “post-ing” of feminism, but what this prefixing accomplishes, how it defines feminism and what its outcomes

are remain issues of frequently impassioned discussions. Patricia Mann offers a useful description by identifying postfeminism as a “frontier discourse” that “bring[s] us to the edge of what we know, and encourages us to go beyond” (208). This collection provides a survey of the debates surrounding postfeminism and resists the critical shortcut to a unitary definition that fixes postfeminism’s directionality as either feminist or non-feminist, academic or popular, subversive or contained, neo-conservative or radically revolutionary. Adopting Kalbfleisch’s terminology, we have sought to read postfeminism through the lens of a “rhetoric of anxiety” that foregrounds “conflict, contradiction and ambiguity” and allows “our differences to function as ‘forces of change’ ” (259).

Gothic/feminism

At the risk of stating the obvious, it is important to point out that an examination of a new critical category termed “postfeminist Gothic” cannot avoid addressing the relationships between and intersections of Gothic and feminism. To narrow down this field further, what is particularly relevant in the context of a discussion of postfeminist Gothic is the link between second-wave feminism, which commonly refers to the emergence of the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s, and the notion of the Female Gothic first coined by Ellen Moers in her influential study of women’s literature *Literary Women* (1976). Moers’s brief definition of the term has often been noted for its deceptive simplicity; it is “easily defined” as “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (90). Building her case partly around a reading of *Frankenstein* as a “birth myth” that reveals “the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences” (93), Moers identifies the Female Gothic as the mode par excellence that female writers have employed to give voice to women’s deep-rooted fears about their own powerlessness and imprisonment within patriarchy. Following Moers’s lead, critics have drawn on the Female Gothic to describe a familiar set of narratives that revolve around an innocent and blameless heroine threatened by a powerful male figure and confined to a labyrinthine interior space.⁸ Most famously exemplified by Ann Radcliffe’s romances, the Female Gothic plot is traditionally resolved by explaining and rationalizing supernatural elements and affirming a happy ending that reintegrates the female protagonist into a wider community through marriage, symbolizing her “wedding to culture” (Williams 103).⁹

Although these traits of the Female Gothic remain fairly constant, there has been much debate on how they should be interpreted and whether they should be understood as transgressive or conservative. Ellen Moers's original formulation of the Female Gothic has also come under attack for its blind spots regarding race and sexual orientation and its essentializing tendencies to equate the writer's biological sex with the text's gendered nature.¹⁰ In fact, Moers's conception of the category is very much a product of its time, emerging from the rise of feminist consciousness and feminist literary criticism in the late 1960s and 1970s. Moers herself acknowledges the importance of this historical context, noting in the preface to *Literary Women* that "the dramatically unfolding, living literary history" of "the new wave of feminism, called women's liberation" taught her to concentrate on "the history of women to understand the history of literature" while also pulling her "out of the stacks" and making the writing of the book "much more of an open-air activity" (xiii). Other critics have confirmed this link between feminist history and the Female Gothic, explaining that the latter resulted from "the change in consciousness that came out of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s" and as such can be understood as "an expression of the 'second wave' of American feminist literary criticism, which focused on uncovering the lost tradition of women's literature" (Showalter 127; Fitzgerald 9). Reflecting the excitement and urgency of the early days of the women's liberation movement, the initial responses to the Female Gothic tended to emphasize its subversive elements and interpret it as a protest against patriarchal society and a confrontation with mothering/femininity.¹¹

The problems that this connection with the second wave engendered came to the fore in the 1990s when, partly as a result of the introduction of poststructuralist theories into feminist analyses, the Female Gothic came to be seen as a critical category that was "unsatisfyingly simple" in its assumptions about "the intrinsic femaleness of Gothic fiction" and its acceptance of "gender as the bedrock of explanation" (Williams 11; Clery 203; Miles 134).¹² As Robert Miles suggests in his introduction to the 1994 special issue of *Women's Writing*, the Female Gothic has "hardened into a literary category" that has led early feminist criticism into an "impasse" (131, 132). It appears that the Female Gothic has become trapped in its own Gothic history, with voices growing louder and asking whether the category has "anything left to offer" (Fitzgerald 8). This scepticism has been extended to second-wave feminist criticism and its tendency to focus on and reproduce women's subordinate social position and victim status. Diane Long Hoeveler makes this point in her aptly entitled

Gothic Feminism (1998), arguing that feminist criticism has encouraged a celebration of passivity by representing women as victims who, paradoxically, use their victimization as a means of gaining empowerment. "Discussions of the female gothic, like analyses of 'feminism,' " she writes, "have, unfortunately, uncritically participated in the very fantasies that the genres have created for their unwary readers" (3). Hoeveler makes a direct link between the Female Gothic and the contemporary antifeminist stance of "victim feminism," explaining that both rely on an ideology of "female power through pretended and staged weakness," the so-called Gothic feminism (7).¹³ In this sense, the Female Gothic is complicit in the development of "victim feminism" and what Hoeveler terms "professional femininity," whereby women adopt a masquerade of docility and "wise passiveness" to achieve their aims and triumph over "a male-created system of oppression and corruption, the 'patriarchy' " (3, 7, 9).

This firmly establishes a nexus between the Female Gothic, second-wave feminism and theories of female victimization as well as a view of a corrupt and ubiquitous patriarchy that seeks to dominate and suppress women. However, as Judith Butler reminds us, it is important to resist such universalizing standpoints as in the effort to "identify the enemy as singular in form," we are applying "a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms" (13). Although we do not wish to deny Ellen Moers's rightful place in the history of Gothic and feminist criticism and we also acknowledge, as Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace note in their introduction to a special issue of *Gothic Studies* (2004), that "the term 'Female Gothic' is still a flexible and recognisable term" (6), we are also convinced that Gothic and feminist categories now demand a self-criticism with respect to their own totalizing gestures and assumptions. We need to re-examine the relationship between Gothic and feminism in a way that does not take "the shortcut to a categorical or fictive universality of the structure of domination" or an essentializing positioning of women as innocent victims (Butler 4). A glance at the variety of essays and topics in this collection gives credibility to the notion that "we are no longer in a second wave of feminism" (Gillis and Munford 2) and, by extension, that we might also have crossed a psychological barrier and reached a new critical space beyond the Female Gothic (and its ghosts of essentialism and universalism). We advance the notion of "postfeminist Gothic" to mark this point in Gothic and feminist criticism that asks us to remain self-critical and alert about the complex issues surrounding the processes of power in contemporary culture.

We agree with Helene Meyers that "the Gothic ... becomes a site to negotiate between the scripts of 'male vice and female virtue' " (often used

as an apt description of the literary Gothic) and the “‘gender skepticism’ associated with much poststructuralist criticism” (xii). Yet, unlike Meyers, we adopt the framework of postfeminism to interpret this moment in Gothic and feminist criticism. In *Femicidal Fears* (2001), Meyers defines postfeminism in terms of a backlash and “the conservative, retrogressive politics of Reagan and Thatcher” (15). In Meyers’s account, postfeminism effects a “flight from femaleness” in its denial of the Gothic world and women’s victim status therein and, as a result, it threatens to become “anti-Gothic Gothic” (144, 118). Contrastingly, we do not seek so much to uncover the Gothic potential of postfeminism (which undoubtedly is part of the postfeminist spectrum of meaning); rather, we want to explore how Gothic changes when prefixed by the modifier “postfeminist.” By entitling our collection *Postfeminist Gothic*, we endeavour to open up both terms to a variety of interpretations and significations, instead of narrowing down their respective paradoxes and ambiguities. As Anne Williams points out in *Art of Darkness* (1995), “most – perhaps all – Gothic conventions express some anxiety about ‘meaning’ ” (67). What the following essays demonstrate is that postfeminism is engaged in a similar struggle and that “postfeminist Gothic” is a contentious new category and critical realm that revitalizes Gothic and feminist criticism and invites new perspectives beyond the theories of the second wave and the Female Gothic.

Postfeminist Gothic

“Gender ... is the law of the Gothic genre,” Robert Miles notes in his introduction to *Women’s Writing*, but he also maintains that it “is not the key to the Gothic genre (still less the reverse)”; rather, the task is “to unlock these shapes” (134). As the essays in this collection attest, gender and the relationships between the two sexes remain important issues that postfeminist Gothic engages with. Questions of femininity and masculinity are taken up by a number of contributors who debate their relevance and meaning for a postfeminist Gothic world. What the essays accomplish though is not just a description of “the contours” of gender but a probing further and a questioning of those very constructions (Miles 134).

Lucie Armitt sets up the postfeminist Gothic frame in her opening essay on contemporary women’s writing. Focusing on three female-authored and woman-centred novels, her analysis revolves around the question of how women’s story is articulated within postfeminist Gothic and how the violence and Gothicism that second-wave feminism exposed in women’s lives under patriarchy are represented in this