

The Routledge Companion to
Gothic

Edited by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy



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AND DEREK AND CHRISTINE SPOONER

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CONTENTS

<i>Notes on contributors</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
1 Introduction <i>Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy</i>	1
Part I Gothic traditions	5
2 Gothic traditions <i>Emma McEvoy</i>	7
3 Eighteenth-century Gothic <i>Robert Miles</i>	10
4 Gothic and the Romantics <i>Emma McEvoy</i>	19
5 Victorian Gothic <i>Alexandra Warwick</i>	29
6 Gothic in the twentieth century <i>Catherine Spooner</i>	38
Part II Gothic locations	49
7 Gothic locations <i>Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy</i>	51
8 Gothic cities <i>Robert Mighall</i>	54
9 American Gothic <i>Teresa A. Goddu</i>	63

CONTENTS

10	Scottish Gothic <i>Angela Wright</i>	73
11	Irish Gothic <i>Richard Haslam</i>	83
12	Gothic and empire <i>James Procter and Angela Smith</i>	95
13	Canadian Gothic <i>Coral Ann Howells</i>	105
14	Australian Gothic <i>Ken Gelder</i>	115
Part III Gothic concepts		125
15	Gothic concepts <i>Emma McEvoy and Catherine Spooner</i>	127
16	The uncanny <i>David Punter</i>	129
17	Abject and grotesque <i>Kelly Hurley</i>	137
18	Hauntings <i>Andrew Smith</i>	147
19	Gothic femininities <i>Alison Milbank</i>	155
20	Gothic masculinities <i>Brian Baker</i>	164
21	Queer Gothic <i>Ellis Hanson</i>	174
22	Gothic children <i>Sue Walsh</i>	183

CONTENTS

Part IV Gothic media	193
23 Gothic media <i>Catherine Spooner</i>	195
24 Gothic culture <i>Fred Botting</i>	199
25 Contemporary Gothic theatre <i>Emma McEvoy</i>	214
26 Gothic – film – parody <i>Kamilla Elliott</i>	223
27 Contemporary horror cinema <i>Benjamin Hervey</i>	233
28 Gothic television <i>Eddie Robson</i>	242
29 Gothic and the graphic novel <i>Andy W. Smith</i>	251
30 Gothic music and subculture <i>Paul Hodgkinson</i>	260
31 Gothic and new media <i>Jason Whittaker</i>	270
<i>Index</i>	280

1

INTRODUCTION

CATHERINE SPOONER AND EMMA McEVOY

APPROACHING GOTHIC

What is Gothic? There is no single, straightforward answer to this question. For many years, it was taken for granted that the Gothic novel flourished from the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 to Charles Maturin's *Melmoth*, *The Wanderer* in 1820. Gothic novels could be easily identified by their incorporation of dominant tropes such as imperilled heroines, dastardly villains, ineffectual heroes, supernatural events, dilapidated buildings and atmospheric weather. (A helpfully comprehensive list is provided in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, 1980.) Texts that appeared after this time were considered either as throwbacks to this earlier model (such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, 1897) or simply as not being Gothic. As time went on, however, and criticism of the Gothic became more sophisticated, it became evident that not only was this model inadequate to describe texts produced after 1820, from James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) to contemporary TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), but that there were highly significant Gothic novels, such as William Beckford's Oriental tale *Vathek* (1786), which exceeded these generic presumptions.

Gothic has since been defined according to its emphasis on the returning past (Baldick 1992, Mighall 1999), its dual interest in transgression and decay (McGrath 1997), its commitment to exploring the aesthetics of fear (Punter 1980) and its cross-contamination of reality and fantasy (Jackson 1981). Alternate traditions of 'male' and 'female' (or perhaps more correctly, 'masculine' and 'feminine') Gothic have been identified (Moers 1976, Sedgwick 1985, Ellis 1989), with their focus on the respective psychologies of the villain (who is not necessarily gendered male) and the heroine (or, occasionally, a male hysteric). Most critics now acknowledge that Gothic has continued until the present day, albeit in constantly evolving forms, and is flourishing particularly strongly at the current time.

With this in mind, we have organised this book so as to avoid, as best we can, the old-fashioned list of dominant Gothic tropes. Our organisational principle has been to foreground approaches to Gothic rather than ways of defining it. We have sought to bring together new ways of looking at Gothic, as well as reprising some of the older ways. Our first section, 'Gothic traditions', takes a historical approach to Gothic literature, covering the major periods and

movements in which Gothic has flourished, from the eighteenth century to the present day. 'Gothic Locations' explores some of the most significant settings for the Gothic, from America, Scotland and Ireland to the postcolonial landscapes of Australia, Canada, the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean. By focusing on the geographies influencing the production of Gothic, as well as locations actually depicted in the novels, we have been able to juxtapose multiple anglophone voices, considering those who 'write back' to the Gothic canon as well as many of the most widely read and studied authors. 'Gothic Concepts' offers a range of critical and theoretical tools commonly used to approach Gothic texts, from the uncanny, abject and grotesque to explorations of femininity, masculinity and queer sexuality. It functions both to problematise and to show by example some of the most common critical approaches to the Gothic. Finally, 'Gothic Media' explores some of the ways in which Gothic is dispersed through contemporary non-literary media (one of the most neglected areas of Gothic scholarship).

The volume covers a vast array of texts, including most of the major novels incorporated in the Gothic 'canon', as well as a very diverse selection of less familiar material. Inevitably, some individual favourites will be missing; we hope that the introduction of some exciting new ones will compensate for those. For reasons of space and linguistic consistency, we have regretfully had to omit all non-anglophone material, except in a few contextualising references. We have tried, to a certain degree, to emphasise contemporary texts in a variety of media, as we feel this is an area underserved by existing criticism, and about which there is a substantial student interest. We do not claim comprehensiveness for this volume: it is intended as an introduction. Essays are bite-sized, providing a taster that hopefully will whet readers' appetites to discover more. The experts who have contributed to the book are diverse in their styles and approaches, and do not always agree with one another – we consider this to be part of healthy academic debate. In conclusion, this book aims to provide a useful introduction to the most crucial topics in Gothic studies today, pointing to the diversity of the field and suggesting the great potential for future research.

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Part I

GOTHIC TRADITIONS