



GOTHIC EVOLUTIONS

POETRY, TALES, CONTEXT, THEORY

EDITED BY CORINNA WAGNER

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GOTHIC EVOLUTIONS

*This book is for
Roger Paulsen, a man with a discriminating eye
and
Andy Brown: "I'm shining like a new dime" (Tom Waits, Downtown Train)*

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* * *

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Introduction

“Gothic” is a notoriously slippery term. Over the past three centuries, it has referred to a diverse range of aesthetic forms in the fields of literature, art, music, film, fashion, and architecture. It has also been put to a variety of uses in political and philosophical debates. In all these realms, gothic has been a hotly contested word that has been deployed, appropriated, and re-deployed by competing camps. It stands to reason, then, that attempts to pin down this ambiguous term, or to categorize what is and what is not “true” gothic, is a rather pointless exercise—not the least because it tends to resist such classification. The aim here is not to define but to bring together a body of poetry and short fiction that reveals (and celebrates) the notoriously uncertain and contentious qualities of gothic forms of expression.

Above all, this anthology makes evident how persistent has been the interest in all things gothic in Western culture. Since the mid-eighteenth century, a time commonly identified with the birth of modern gothic literature, audiences have been fascinated by representations of society’s darker and more ambiguous underside. In scholarly circles and in popular culture, interest in the gothic remains strong today. This longevity is due in part to the malleable quality of gothic characters, tropes, and themes, which have evolved in response to many of the social, scientific, political, and cultural changes of the last 250 years. The current fascination with the vampire in novels, graphic novels, and films demonstrates how key gothic figures have been reinterpreted through the ages to reflect contemporary cultural concerns. In this anthology, for instance, the vampire emerges as Lord Byron’s tormented Giaour and is then refashioned as Lord Ruthven in John Polidori’s “The Vampyre,” before becoming female as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Ducayne and Robert Louis Stevenson’s mother of Olalla.

Yet the vampire is only one of many recognizable figures who consistently reappear and are adapted in this volume’s poems and stories. The gothic cast of characters includes, for instance, the seductive *femme fatale* (who appears as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Christabel and John Keats’s Lamia); the chivalrous knight (Keats’s knight-at-arms and Tennyson’s Lancelot); and the Promethean or Frankensteinian figure of scientific progress (Nathaniel Hawthorne’s scientist Aylmer, Arthur Machen’s Dr. Black, and H.G. Wells’s bacteriologist). As gothic characters evolve, so too do literary genres. Political anxiety in the revolutionary 1790s gave rise to narratives of mob terror and torture, while Romantic poems conjured the Middle Ages in response to an Enlightenment emphasis on reason and rationality. In the 1830s, a rise in medical experimentation led to an outpouring of psychological thrillers and medical horror stories, which would continue to be popular to the end of the century. In the mid-nineteenth century, uncanny homely tales countered the Victorian emphasis on domesticity and family. At the *fin de siècle*, anxieties about urbanization and

crime fuelled a boom in detective fiction and tales of social corruption. The 1880s and 1890s also produced dark dystopias about racial contamination, a response to imperialist fears. As this list indicates, the diversity, longevity, and adaptability of gothic literature is remarkable. Throughout its history, gothic writing has responded to an impressive range of cultural phenomena—from the French Revolution to the rise of capital, from burgeoning urbanization to moral reform, from imperialism to new advances in psychology, medicine, and criminology: Appendices A, B, and C are intended to provide readers with some of this important historical context, while Appendix D is a sampling of the theoretical approaches that have proven to be the most significant to the study of gothic literature.

A word should be said, too, about the national origins of the short stories and poetry included here. Clearly, most are British or American, reflecting the liveliness of the transatlantic exchange of ideas and styles. However, nations around the world have produced gothic literature, and global circulation is not insignificant; accordingly, this anthology includes translated work by the German Romantic E.T.A. Hoffmann and the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev, plus a Japanese tale as a nod to non-Western gothic traditions. Interested readers should seek specialist collections for more international work (see the “Global Gothic” section of Suggested Reading, p. 560).

Gothic Origins and Medievalism

As the word suggests, gothic has roots in the Middle Ages. The medievalist movement—a complex cultural, intellectual, and political engagement with a historical period stretching from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries—emerged and developed alongside gothic literature.

Late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medievalists responded to a rapidly modernizing world. They often (but not always) produced an anti-rationalist language that questioned the goals of Enlightenment secularism, philosophy, and scientific thought. Medievalists engaged in important debates on big questions, as is reflected in a vocabulary that includes such words as *community*, *kinship*, *liberty*, *justice*, and *democracy*. Medievalists challenged those political, philosophical, economic, and scientific developments that they identified as threatening to human happiness, social welfare, and political stability. In the 1830s and 1840s, medievalism generated the Tory humanism of the Young England movement, which promoted a romanticized feudalism and philanthropic work among the well-to-do. Key political figures, headed by Benjamin Disraeli, sought a strong monarchy, a national church, and a society modelled on an idealized, paternalistic feudalism. In the 1860s, the artisanal socialism of the Arts and Crafts Movement, associated most strongly with the writer and artist William Morris, advocated medieval decoration and craftsmanship alongside anti-industrial economic reforms.

In the eighteenth century, Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and medieval ballads were collected and edited, as well as imitated and forged. This antiquarianism inspired Romantic poets to turn to the past. John Keats’s “The Eve of St Agnes” (p. 163) is replete with rich medievalist architectural detail, while his “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (p. 150) recalls the traditions of Provençal ballads. More than waxing nostalgic about an idealized past, medievalist novelists and poets addressed modern concerns. So, for example, Sir Walter Scott wrote historical romances, antiquarian ballads, and Arthurian narrative poems; he also produced chivalric pageants that made tartans and kilts fashionable symbols of Scottish identity. All these activities are tied to early nineteenth-century

desires to cultivate distinct regional identities and dialects, and to support the development of Scottish nationalism.

There is also a close interdependence between the visual and the literary in medievalist gothic expression. This is demonstrated most clearly in the endeavours of the eighteenth-century antiquarian and man of letters Horace Walpole. During the various building stages of his fantastically neo-gothic villa Strawberry Hill (1749–76), he wrote the first modern gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), thereby initiating a close relationship between literature, architecture, and design. In the following century, the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood would create lush iconographic images, recalling the saturated colours and compositional style of medieval illuminated manuscripts. John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt were inspired by Keats's poems, while John William Waterhouse and Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted scenes from Tennyson's work. In addition, Arts and Crafts furnishings, tapestries, and wallpapers displayed courtly scenes culled from Arthurian legend and Chaucerian tales. Many designers, including William Morris, also duplicated the techniques and practices of medieval craftspeople in the production of these fine objects.

Politics and the Gothic

It would be fair to say that psychological critical approaches to gothic studies were dominant throughout much of the twentieth century. More recently however, scholars have emphasized the importance of historical context to our understanding of the emergence and evolution of this literary genre. This is right, since from its inception in the eighteenth century, gothic literature has been intimately connected to political events and social transformations. Fred Botting points out that the Enlightenment—the same era that “produced the maxims and models of modern culture”—also “invented the Gothic” (3). Indeed, gothic literature and art began as both a reflection of, and a challenge to, Enlightenment emphases on secularization, commerce, and scientific method. Gothic opposes its excessive style against Enlightenment order and rationality, yet just as often, it has been used to endorse those same qualities. In fact, Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* encapsulates this doubleness and ambiguity: is the monstrous produced when reason is not exercised, or is reason itself a slumber that gives rise to the monstrous?

If Enlightenment gave birth to the gothic, then revolution reared it. The formative impact of historical events such as the Spanish Inquisition, the American War of Independence, and the French Revolution operated powerfully in the gothic imagination, in part because these events revealed some uncomfortable truths about human drives and passions. A plethora of gothic motifs—labyrinthine mazes, unruly mobs, corrupt trials, cannibalizing vampires, and crumbling feudal castles—are manifestations of humanity's deepest fears about the exercise of arbitrary power, the passing of old regimes, and the human capacity for violence. Labyrinths that wound their way under cathedrals and medieval castles signified how the supposedly solid foundations of religious and political authority were being threatened by radicals and reformers.

At the same time, these motifs expressed fears about how seemingly easy the world could be turned upside down. In 1790s France, for example, it seemed as if revolutionary fervour had changed peaceable citizens into monsters overnight. To observers of the Reign of Terror of 1793–94, which sent shocking numbers of citizens to the guillotine, it seemed as if republicans, who had once been motivated by high political ideals, were now cannibalizing one another. These fearful observations