



Donna Heiland

Gothic & Gender

An Introduction



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Gothic & Gender

For my mother

Margaret O'Brien

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* * *

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Introduction

The setting is the Empire Theater. A piano accompanies the film unfolding silently on the screen. The audience watches, “breathless, eager for the next terror,” and what do they see?

A man in evening clothes has cornered a young woman in a slinky nightgown halfway up a clock tower. No narrative preamble required, *all ist klar*, the shadows lurk, the tower lists, the music creeps the winding stair, the villain spies a grace-note of silken hem and he’s on the chase in six-eight time up to where our heroine clings to a snatch of girlish melody, teetering on the precipice of high E, overlooking the street eight octaves below. Villain struggles with virgin in a macabre waltz, Strauss turned Faust, until, just when it seems she’ll plummet, dash her brains on the bass clef and die entangled in the web of the lower stave, a vision in tenor crescendos on to save the day in resolving chords.

This scene from Ann-Marie Macdonald’s novel *Fall on Your Knees* (p. 50) may or may not be known to you, but its melodramatic story of an innocent young woman trapped by one man and rescued by another will almost certainly be familiar. For this is the plot of a classic gothic novel, compressed into three wonderful sentences. Reduce the pressure, let the three sentences open out into three volumes, and you’ll see what stories like this generally looked like when they emerged in the late eighteenth century. Now ask yourself some questions. Why is the girl being chased and why is she in a tower? What does the man in the suit want from her, and is it he who transformed the romance of a waitz (Strauss) into this dance with a devil (Faust)? Who is the savior, and why is he showing up so late? Will the woman be better off with him than she would be with death or

the devil? And why is their story told in the language of music? Answer them and you will have the beginnings of an introduction to gothic and gender.

Gothic fiction constitutes one of our most enduring and seemingly ubiquitous forms of popular literature. Not every gothic tale looks exactly like the one in the passage cited above, but they all bear a family resemblance to it. Film might be the best-known purveyor of gothic narrative in our time: a representative but hardly comprehensive list might include slasher movies on the order of the *Halloween* series, classic horror films such as *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist*, more quietly frightening ghost stories like *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others*, even scary but not supernatural stories like *Single White Female*. Television is equally enthralled with gothic narratives: witness the long run of the *X-Files*. Mainstream presses make huge profits from the work of such well-known authors as Stephen King, Anne Rice, and many others. All of these cultural productions have their origins in mid-eighteenth-century Europe and especially England, where fascination with what would eventually be defined as gothic first took hold.

The tremendous appeal of gothic narratives merits explanation, for it is far from obvious that readers should keep returning to these highly formulaic and therefore highly predictable stories. Why are they so popular and what cultural function do they serve? Their accomplishment is double-edged, for they at once entertain and terrify us. They fill us with relief at our exemption from the dangers they represent, but force us to look at those dangers all the same. They feel like escapist fantasy, but can tell us a great deal about what William Godwin called "things as they are." All we need is the patience to read them well, to account for their complicated appeal, and to do so is my principal aim in this book. Because the broad outlines of the genre and most of its principal transformations emerged in England between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, I have chosen to focus primarily on material from this time and place (though my final chapter moves more than a century ahead to look at recent work in the gothic tradition). My second aim is to provide a critical framework for understanding the gothic that will be useful to anyone trying to come to terms not just with the works discussed here, but with other works as well. My approach to the novels is feminist in its intent, by which I mean that I wish to think through gothic fiction's engagement with the social structures that shape gender relations. I do this through an analysis that is historically informed, but theoretical in its emphasis, bringing together a broad but related range of theoretical and critical sources to demonstrate the genre's ever more complicated but fundamentally consistent concerns over time. While this study is historically based, then, it provides not so much a history of gothic fiction as a particular theoretical path through this body of literature.

That said, a brief discussion of the historical and literary contexts in which gothic fiction emerged is certainly in order. The word "gothic" literally refers to

the Gothic people, and yet, as Robin Sowerby has commented, it has been understood that “the use of the term ‘Gothic’ to describe the literary phenomenon that began in the later eighteenth century has little, if anything, to do with the people from whom it is derived” (2000: 15). Sowerby notes that Edward Gibbon was writing his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* at roughly the same time as gothic fiction emerged on the literary scene, and is right to suggest that this concurrence of events merits further thought. The Goths did much to bring about the fall of the Roman empire (of which Britain had been a part), and while gothic fiction does not literally depict the Goths’ repeated incursions into Roman territory, or the sack of Rome in A.D. 410, gothic fiction *does* tell stories of “invasions” of one sort or another. Gothic fiction at its core is about transgressions of all sorts: across national boundaries, social boundaries, sexual boundaries, the boundaries of one’s own identity. But why were people in Britain thinking so much about transgression in the late eighteenth century, and how were they thinking about it? Was it something to worry about or something to celebrate?

On the question of why transgression was on people’s minds one could write volumes. Considered in political terms, the “long eighteenth century” (1660–1800) was a period framed by revolutions. The English civil wars had seen Charles I beheaded in 1649 and the monarchy replaced by Oliver Cromwell’s “Protectorate,” which lasted until the restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660; the “bloodless revolution” of 1688 had seen James II abdicate because of issues raised by his conversion to Catholicism, and William of Orange (husband of James’s daughter Mary) take his place; the period from 1789 through the mid-1790s – arguably the high point of gothic fiction – was dominated by the French Revolution, which initially garnered the support of radical thinkers such as William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. In terms of intellectual history, the eighteenth century is generally seen as a period of “enlightenment,” a “modern” era that privileged the powers of reason, experience, and the individual over superstition, an unquestioning adherence to the teachings of the “ancients,” and willing submission to the dictates of authority. In terms of economic history, capitalism was on the rise, as was a middle class capable of challenging the authority of the ruling aristocracy. At the same time, there was a shift in the organization of family structures, as men were drawn into the workplace, women were increasingly confined to the home, and gender roles were insistently codified even as they were insistently resisted. It was a period characterized by massive instabilities in its socio-political structures. If people could have avoided thinking about transgression, it would have been astonishing.

While there were myriad reasons to turn one’s attention to what would come to be seen as the gothic possibilities of everyday life, then, how to think about those possibilities was still a question. And here again, the historical meanings – or better, uses – of the term “gothic” again guide us to an understanding of the

range of responses. Eighteenth-century England had self-consciously modeled itself on Greek and Roman culture (the first half of the eighteenth century was known as the Augustan age, after the Roman emperor Augustus), and from this neo-classical perspective, the term “gothic” suggested one of two things. On the one hand, it conjured up the barbarism and savagery of unlawful invading forces, and was understood as all that threatens civilized life. On the other hand, it took one back to the “dark ages” of the English medieval period, viewing it as a purer expression of English national identity than the neo-classical present. Thus the gothic represents a return to a national ideal (Duncan 1992: 21–2; Miles 1995: 30, 39–43). Robert Miles has noted as well that this second vision of the gothic was particularly empowering to women, opening the way to literary accomplishment as it elevated English literature above the classics. Further – and here Miles makes a somewhat unexpected claim – “the gothic myth insisted upon female equality,” viewing women not just as objects of “chivalrous devotion,” but as “partners and equals” in their relationships with men (1995: 30, 42).

When Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* burst on the scene in the final week of 1764,¹ the term “gothic” would have resonated in complex ways, and yet the historical circumstances of its use do not tell the whole story. What of the literary circumstances of its use? What kinds of things were people writing in eighteenth-century England when Walpole inaugurated this tradition? The genre with which gothic fiction has the clearest connection is, of course, the novel. This seemingly obvious point becomes less so if one considers the way in which eighteenth-century authors themselves talked about their work. Horace Walpole and Clara Reeve did not speak of their gothic fictions as novels but as romances (Duncan 1992: 2–6, 20–7; Miles 1995: 35–43). The genre of the novel was (as the name implies) new in the eighteenth century, was generally taken to include works written in a realistic idiom (think of *Robinson Crusoe*), and has generally been discussed as both symptomatic of and instrumental in the emergence of the middle classes. Romances were seen as something quite different. They were generally understood to be sentimentalized tales of times past that focused on the aristocracy, “the product of the Gothic societies of the Middle Ages” (Miles 1995: 36). Recent scholarship on the history of the novel has taught us that there were in fact close ties between the two forms (McKeon 1987; Moglen 2001), and certainly eighteenth-century authors were aware of those ties as well. Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* was intended to combine the two forms (identified in his preface as “ancient” and “modern” forms of romance), and the gothic tradition includes within it not only novels that are quite fantastic, but also novels whose realism has led critics to question whether they belong in the tradition at all (William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, for example).

If gothic novels do not need to “look” gothic – if they do not need the “trappings” (as they are often called) of castles, ghosts, corrupt clergy, and so on –

then what exactly defines the genre? The answer would still point to a series of conventions, just slightly different ones. As I noted above, the stories of gothic novels are always stories of transgression. The transgressive acts at the heart of gothic fiction generally focus on corruption in, or resistance to, the patriarchal structures that shaped the country's political life and its family life, and gender roles within those structures come in for particular scrutiny. Further, and importantly, these acts are often violent, and always frightening. For gothic novels are above all about the creation of fear – fear in the characters represented, fear in the reader – and they accomplish this through their engagement with the aesthetic of the sublime or some variant of it. The sublime is the aesthetic category through which eighteenth-century critics understood the disruptive, irregular, transgressive energies I have been discussing, and an understanding of how this aesthetic shapes the gothic's handling of its stories of social transgression is crucial to an appreciation of its literary accomplishment.

This book argues that, from their origin in the eighteenth century, gothic novels explored the workings of patriarchal politics through an aesthetic based in the subjective realities of sensibility and the sublime. My first chapter begins with a theoretical discussion of the term "patriarchy" as it has been understood by the political scientist Carol Pateman, then moves on to discuss how patriarchal principles are seemingly naturalized in the eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse of sensibility. From there, the chapter considers novels by Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, and Sophia Lee that show how the basic "formula" of gothic fiction anatomizes and explores the workings of a patriarchal society. The second chapter considers gothic's fascination with the sublime, which is by definition an experience so overwhelming that it holds the promise of breaking through the boundaries of patriarchy and every other social structure, but which often does just the reverse and upholds those structures by quenching opposition to them. Readings of eighteenth-century theoretical writing about the sublime open into discussion of how Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, and Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or, The Moor* deploy the sublime in order to contain perceived threats – from women, and from some men too – to the status quo. The third chapter is tightly tied to the second in its reading of Ann Radcliffe as a writer who rejects the sublime as a mode of social control, implicitly recognizing its tendency to oppress women and others who threaten the structure of patriarchy, and who in fact takes pains – as critics have noted from the start – to offer rational explanations for anything that is initially terrifying. Those who would otherwise have been controlled by fear – and they are women above all – are thus enabled to fight back in ways that let them strengthen their place in the patriarchy.

The fourth and fifth chapters shift their theoretical underpinnings from the eighteenth-century concept of the sublime to what a number of critics have iden-

tified as the twentieth-century version of the same thing: Freud's concept of the *Unheimlich* or uncanny. This movement in the argument is not meant to suggest either that gothic fiction suddenly lost interest in the sublime, or that out of the blue it developed an altogether new interest in the uncanny. Rather, it responds to particular emphases of the novels discussed under this rubric, and builds on the work of the preceding chapters by exploring the relationship of the sublime to the uncanny. The two experiences are indeed alike in their capacity to create fear in those who undergo them, though I read them as differing importantly in both their causes and effects. Where the sublime breaks down boundaries between a perceiving subject and something outside herself, the uncanny confronts the subject with something long repressed or forgotten, but does not allow that breakdown of boundaries. Instead the person is literally or figuratively "haunted" by this reminder of a past that she cannot identify and cannot escape. From an introductory discussion of the uncanny, chapter 4 moves to discuss William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, who are inheritors of Radcliffe in their use of an increasingly realistic idiom to describe social injustice, and innovators in their understanding of how that injustice can manifest itself as a pattern of uncanny encounters between the empowered and the disempowered. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, discussed in chapter 5, thinks still more radically about how social injustice shapes individuals with its portrait of a "monster" who is the uncanny double of his maker. The sixth chapter maintains a focus on the uncanny in its discussion of Emily and Charlotte Brontë, whose development of what we might call "domestic gothic" focuses particularly on ways in which uncanny relationships disrupt the very possibility of a functional "home."

The seventh chapter considers how gothic fiction opens up into stories of national and colonial identity. Freud's *Unheimlich* gradually metamorphoses into Homi Bhabha's "unhomely," a term that for Bhabha describes the inevitably doubled sense of "home" that characterizes the life of a colonial subject. Charlotte Smith's efforts to define English identity at the very moment of the American colonies' rebellion sit interestingly alongside Charles Brockden Brown's efforts to define American identity in a novel set just a little before the rebellion (though written just after it). *The Old Manor House* and *Wieland* both show us nations whose identities are defined but to some degree also undermined by their (past) colonial ties, and the double-edged nature of those connections are but a prelude to the painfully unsettling experience portrayed in Matthew Lewis's *Journal of a West India Proprietor*. Lewis's *Journal* is a non-fictional text, yet it without question has a place in this discussion, for it demonstrates clearly how gothic fiction shaped eighteenth- and nineteenth-century understandings of lived experience and vice versa.

My final chapter discusses novels by the Canadian writers Margaret Atwood and Ann-Marie MacDonald, whose responses to the gothic engage the tradition

and at the same time show us ways to move beyond it. Feminist, postmodern, and post-colonial, these writers envision a world in which differences – of gender, of race, of nationality – are eventually embraced rather than eradicated. A coda provides an overview of the movement by which gothic gradually became a major focus for literary critics, paying particular attention to the feminist reinvigoration of gothic studies that began in the 1970s and continues today, as discussions of gender come into dialogue with discussions of race, class, nationalism, imperialism and more.

Patriarchal Narratives in the Work of Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, and Sophia Lee

The Structure of Patriarchy

Early gothic novels make absolutely clear the genre's concern with exploring, defining, and ultimately defending patriarchy.¹ Patriarchy is a term that can seem to lack critical force, perhaps because it has so often been used to talk rather impressionistically about any sort of social structure that seems to be run by men. Such uses of the term are not entirely inaccurate, but they flatten out the historical specificity and richness that it should rightly conjure up. When Walpole published the "first" gothic novel in the mid-1760s, he was writing at the end of nearly a century of debates about whether human society was intrinsically patriarchal or whether it was in fact the result of a social contract among its members.

Carol Pateman has forcefully summarized and critiqued the debate between the patriarchalists and the contract theorists, and in the following pages I present those parts of her argument that are most salient to a reading of gothic novels.² As Pateman reminds us, the most extreme version of the patriarchal argument had been put forward in Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* (1680). Published at the

height of the Exclusion Crisis in Britain, when Parliament had made repeated efforts to ensure that the Catholic James II would not succeed to the throne, and written much earlier, probably during the period leading up to the beheading of Charles I, this treatise is an unwavering argument for the divine right of kings to rule over their people.³ Filmer locates the derivation of monarchy in literal patriarchy or fatherhood, reaching back to the Bible for his precedents, and citing Adam as the first patriarchal ruler. Adam's patriarchal authority was that of a father first and king second; as Filmer writes, "not only Adam but the succeeding patriarchs had, by right of fatherhood, royal authority over their children" (1991: 6). Logic dictates that the roles of father and king would become distinct from each other when a king's subjects began to include more than his biological descendants, and Filmer himself acknowledges that by the time he is writing it "may seem absurd to maintain that kings now are the fathers of their people" (1991: 10). He clings to the connection, however, arguing that kings "either are, or are to be reputed as the next heirs to those progenitors who were at first the natural parents of the whole people, and in their right succeed to the exercise of supreme jurisdiction" (1991: 10). Scholars of Filmer have argued that, where "traditional patriarchal argument" made an analogy between the roles of king and father, he went further, "claiming that paternal and political power were not merely analogous but *identical*" (Pateman 1988: 24).⁴ This conflation of the roles of father and king creates logical problems, however, for "if fathers were the same as kings, wielding the same absolute power, then there could be no 'king', merely a multitude of father-kings" (Pateman 1988: 84).

Alternatives to what Pateman describes as Filmer's "classic patriarchalism" came most powerfully in the work of those philosophers who argued that human society was the result of a social contract. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were among the principal proponents of contract theory, and over time they succeeded in shifting radically the ways in which social organization was understood. Pateman credits Locke with formulating the "historically decisive" response to Filmer when he proposed distinguishing between "paternal power" and "political power" (Pateman 1988: 85), and so doing away with the problem of the "father-kings."

Where Filmer had insisted that people were born subject to a patriarchal rule that went as far back as Adam, Locke, in his *Second Treatise on Government* (1690), argued that they existed in "a *State of perfect Freedom* to order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the Will of any other Man" (Locke 1988: 269 [II, §4]). The individual's movement from this state of nature into a civil society occurs with the making of a "Compact" among people "agreeing together mutually to enter into one Community, and make one Body Politick" (1988: 276-7 [II, §14]). While this "body politic" is composed