

Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

4-1-2004

"Gazing on the Gothic": Where Is the Field Now?

Diane Hoeveler

Marquette University, diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu

Published version. *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring 2004): 120-124. [Publisher Link](#). © 2004 University of North Texas. Used with permission. Originally printed in *Studies in the Novel*, Volume 36, Number 1, 2004, pp. 120-124.

ESSAY-REVIEW:

“GAZING ON THE GOTHIC”: WHERE IS THE FIELD NOW?

DIANE LONG HOEVELER

MICHAEL GAMER. *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. \$60.00 cloth.

LAURA HINTON. *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy: Sadomasochistic Sentiments from Clarrissa to Rescue 911.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999. \$20.50 cloth; \$18.95 paper.

DAVID PUNTER, ED. *A Companion to the Gothic.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. \$ 94.95 cloth.

Reviewing these three works together reveals in the starkest possible terms the richness and variety, as well as the contentious nature of the field of Gothic studies today. Anyone who began working in Gothic studies twenty or more years ago understands how fortunate we are now to be situated in a veritable “growth industry.” Perhaps I am dating myself, but in the late 1970s, when I taught my first course on the Gothic at the University of Louisville, I was regarded as something of an oddball to be interested in such patently inferior literature. Scholars of the Gothic no longer have to justify or defend their interests to department chairs, nor to university or commercial presses. In fact, the explosion of published works on the Gothic is an indicator of just how dammed up (repressed would be the more Gothic term) the interest in the Gothic was for so many years.

All that being said, let us examine these three books as examples of the diversity of publications currently appearing. David Punter's edition of *A Companion to the Gothic* is an example of what I would call the encyclopedic approach to the subject. There have been a number of these "Handbooks" or "Dictionaries" published recently, most notably the one edited by Marie Mulvey-Roberts (1998) and Jerrold Hogle's *Cambridge Companion* (2002). The impetus behind these works seems to be the need to define the field "Gothic" in as broad terms as possible. There is no question, of course, that the "Gothic" is the ur-narrative of the modern era, and by that I mean that it has the potentiality and amorphousness to adapt itself to whatever cultural script is currently being enacted (war, disease, religious and social upheaval, political revolution, etc.) Obviously, the Gothic as both narrative and sensibility permeates virtually all corners of modern culture, and therefore the expansive approach is a legitimate way of capturing its pervasiveness. Hence, the omnibus edition written by numerous hands.

It is what happens in those numerous hands, however, that can create problems. There is no clear agenda or point of view in an edited collection such as this, and some of the essays are much stronger than others. Like all collections of essays, when the individual contributions are consistently well-researched and clearly written, then the whole is a valuable work. But there are some weak essays in *A Companion to the Gothic*, and I suspect that these weaknesses have occurred because some of the writers thought they were writing specialized articles, rather than broad introductions to their assigned topics. The *Companion* begins with three essays on "Gothic Backgrounds," the usual interesting offering by Fred Botting, a valuable historical overview by Robin Sowerby, and a brief look at "European Gothic" by Neil Cornwell (why does he ignore Balzac's "La Grande Bretèche" [1832], cited by Wharton as the "best Gothic tale ever written," and an obvious influence on her early work?).

The volume then examines the early British canonical figures, with a strong and authoritative essay on Radcliffe and Lewis by Robert Miles, and an equally strong essay on Scott, Hogg and Scottish Gothic by Ian Duncan. There are separate essays on Mary Shelley (by Nora Crook), and Maturin and LeFanu (by Victor Sage), but the essay on "Gothic Drama" (by David Worrall) was the most puzzling in this section. Extremely narrow in focus, the essay fails to mention the most popular and influential Gothic/political dramas of the period; for instance, nothing by Thomas Holcroft or Joanna Baillie is mentioned, nor are any of the Gothic operas and melodramas that were so influential during the period. But again, one wonders what the intentions of the authors are. Is the *Companion* intended for the scholar of the Gothic or the undergraduate student? It would seem that identifying one's intended audience would be crucial in assembling a collection of this sort.

Part Three continues with forays into what Punter calls "Gothic Transmutations," and here he has assembled essays on "Nineteenth-Century American

Gothic" (by Allan Lloyd-Smith), "The Ghost Story" (by Julia Briggs), "Gothic in the 1890s" (by Glennis Byron), "Fictional Vampires" (by William Hughes), "Horror Fiction" (by Clive Bloom), "Contemporary Women's Vampire Fiction" (by Gina Wisker), "Gothic Film" (by Heidi Kaye), and "Poetry and the Uncanny" (by Punter). Again, one can quibble with exactly what is focused on and what is excluded. I would have preferred a class-based analysis of the ghost stories, most of which suggest intense anxiety around shifting class-based allegiances. And in this same essay I would have expected a mention if not a discussion of Edith Wharton's numerous ghost stories.

The final two sections of the collection include essays on "Gothic Criticism" (by Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall), "Psychoanalysis and the Gothic" (by Michelle Massé), "Comic Gothic" (by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik), "The Gothic Heroine" (by Kate Ellis), "Stephen King's Queer Gothic" (by Steven Bruhm), "Gothic and the Madness of Interpretation" (by Scott Brewer), "The Counterfeit and Abjection" (by Jerrold Hogle), and "Magical Realism of Contemporary Gothic" (by Lucie Armitt). Some of these essays—Ellis and Hogle in particular—have been published before and are little changed for presumably a different audience. The essays by Bruhm and Brewer seem much too specialized and narrow in focus to be appropriate for a volume of this sort. And where is Joyce Carol Oates? One mention is made of her early novel *Expensive People* (265), but nothing of her influential collections of Gothic short stories, *Haunted* and *The Collector of Hearts*, while her numerous Gothic novels—*Bellefleur*, *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, etc.—are ignored. Granted, no collection can cover all works in such an expansive genre, but all the more reason to encourage contributors to write for a broad audience.

Turning now to Laura Hinton's study of "somasochistic sentiments from *Clarissa* to *Rescue 911*"; the title says it all. I would classify Hinton's book as one of the many cultural studies approaches to the Gothic, along with Massé's *In the Name of Love* (1992) and Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain-Saws* (1992). This methodology begins with a broad cultural category—in this case, the notion of "sentimentality"—and then traces its permutations in a variety of cultural products: literature, film, television. The value of this approach is in its underlying assumption, that is, that literature is yet another form of ideology that differs from television only in that it seeks to disguise its agenda through appeals to (empty) categories like "aesthetics" and "high art." One is either, of course, sympathetic to this attitude or deeply offended by it (I am in the former camp, while I certainly know many scholars who are in the latter). In an introductory chapter, Hinton reviews the origins of the ideology of sentimentality, offering a useful historical summary of Adam Smith, Hume, Locke, and the advent of sado-masochistic pleasure in the spectacle of what Hinton calls "fetishistic images of female victimage" (10). Tracing the phenomenon of the female in bondage to sentimentality, Hinton

next examines how this ideology played out in popular discourses—beginning with Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-48). From there, she proceeds to Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* (1869), James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1880), Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), the "maternal-melodrama fetishism" of Douglas Sirk's film *Imitation of Life* (1959), the Sally Jessy Raphaël show, and finally to the "reality" television program *Rescue 911* (both public spectacles indicative of "the 1980s Reagan-era obsession with crime-drama" [31]). Much is made of Freud (rescue fantasies, scopophilia) and Foucault (panopticonism and hystericization) as theoretical sources, while Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane's film theories of the male gaze, female identification, and masquerade are also liberally employed.

As I have mentioned above, this sort of cultural studies approach is a matter of taste, and I suspect that hard-core Gothic scholars have a natural inclination for this methodology. The Gothic itself is predicated on precisely this cannibalistic impulse, this need to consume all forms of cultural work into the Gothic narrative. Literary "purists" have a distaste for this sort of work (disdain might be a more accurate term), but I found Hinton's book stimulating, original, and well-written and researched. The pleasure of seeing cultural continuums between diverse forms of ideology has always intrigued me. And, let's face it, it is difficult to approach texts as well-worn as *Clarissa* and *Wuthering Heights* in new ways. Hinton's focus on sado-masochism and female positioning sheds new light on these canonical works, while at the same time providing an explanation for the origins of some of our current popular culture.

Finally, Michael Gamer's *Romanticism and the Gothic*, which I would call an example of the "high scholarly" approach to the study of the genre. Gamer's book has been criticized for typos and some factual errors, but its strengths are not in its editing, which could have been more rigorous. Gamer's study is actually the methodological mirror image of Hinton's book. That is, Gamer approaches the Gothic not through its popular descendants but through its "high" cultural predecessors, in short, the canonical tradition that we have been conditioned to consider the "real Romanticism." Gamer's thesis is that the Gothic as a genre was so influential and popular that major canonical writers—Wordsworth, Scott, and Joanna Baillie—positioned themselves within the Gothic ideology in order to effectively market their works, but at the same time, they concealed or denied the influence of the Gothic on their texts in order to claim critical respectability. The strength of Gamer's book is that he has marshaled as evidence masses of primary work in newspapers, letters, and contemporary reviews, all of which place the Gothic in a new, fuller, historical context.

His Introduction, "Romanticism's 'Pageantry of Fear,'" and the first two chapters, "Gothic Reception, and Production" and "Gothic and Its Contexts," are in my opinion the most valuable work currently in print on the critical history

of the genre and its contested reception in British culture. Informed by the theories of Bakhtin, Jameson, McGann, Klancher, and numerous other critics of genre and discourse formation, Gamer seeks to ask the very interesting question: how does one account for the “process by which Gothic literature became separated from other kinds of romance, [which] requires that we understand it as emerging dialectically out of romance’s interaction with changing reading rituals and new technologies of book distribution” (66)? Scholars find these sorts of questions interesting, but admittedly, the focus of this book may be very specialized and overly nuanced for the undergraduate student, let alone the general public interested in things Gothic. The chapters on Wordsworth, Baillie, and Scott are a treasure trove of valuable research sources for the scholar of the Gothic, but the questions being treated—canon-formation and reception—may be too technical for the average undergraduate student (or, in fact, for the graduate students I routinely have in my classes).

And that brings us to ponder the question: what has happened to the scholarly study and publication of works on the Gothic? Has its very success caused a rupture into various and competing camps and presses, tending to run the gamut from the overly generalized to the overly specialized so that we are groups who speak not to each other, but past each other? As someone who has always had a rather quixotic (and sometimes doomed) streak, I would like to think that we as students, scholars, and the general public can meet as equals on the vast field of the Gothic, enjoy its uniquely bizarre beauties together, and glory together in our common frailties, our common fears, and our common fantasies.

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY