

## Gothic Metamorphoses across the Centuries

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**PETER LANG**

Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · New York · Oxford

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Palatinus (eds.)

# **Gothic Metamorphoses across the Centuries**

Contexts, Legacies, Media



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This book is dedicated to the memory of Mirella Billi, dear friend and talented scholar, whose seminal works on the Gothic – and whose passionately witty talks – inspired many of us in the pursuit of this field of study. You are always with us, Mirella.

The editors and contributors



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SERENA BAIESI

## Intersections and Metamorphoses of the ‘Female Gothic’

**Abstract:** Between the 1790s and the 1820s, more than fifty women writers wrote in what we now call the Gothic genre. Since that time until the present, Gothic literature appealed to female writers not just as authors but also as critics and as readers. In this essay, I would suggest some critical approaches to the Gothic as debated by women writers who firstly employed this genre during the peak of production and circulation in England. They were actively involved into a larger discussion on the genesis and hybridisation of the Gothic, outlining its origin, aims, forms and language with the purpose of mapping the aesthetic principles of this form from their own points of view. In particular, I am referring to Clara Reeve, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Ann Radcliffe, who were all successful authors but also sharp critics. Altogether the three writers advanced interesting theoretical ideologies of the Gothic. Published in 1785, Clara Reeve’s *The Progress of Romance* offers one of the first histories of prose fiction and the first straightforward attempt to elevate romance to the status of serious literature. In “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terrors” (1773), Anna Laetitia Barbauld describes Gothic fiction as the narrative which “awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch.” And Ann Radcliffe, who first announced a new age of Gothic romance, placed mystery at the centre of its thematic, rhetorical, and moral projection in her essay entitled “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1826). The present essay thus aims to explore theoretical approaches to the Gothic, using the critical discussion promoted by Reeve, Barbauld and Radcliffe who deploy in dialogical ways the meanings of the Gothic with the aim to identify its aesthetic principles from a female point of view.

**Keywords:** Female Gothic, feminist criticism; Ann Radcliffe, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Clara Reeve, romance, novel.

The Gothic has been a form used by female and male writers, but it is modified in the hands of women writers. (J. E. Fleenor, 27)

All readers, of all times and countries have delighted in stories of these kinds;  
And that those who affect to despise them under one form,  
will receive and embrace them in another.  
(C. Reeve “Address to the Reader” from *The Champion of Virtue*.  
*A Gothic Story*, 1777, iii)

Between the 1790s and the 1820s, more than fifty women writers wrote in what we now call the Gothic genre (Clery, 2). Since that time up until the present, Gothic literature appealed to female readers, writers and critics who defined the so-called “female Gothic” with specific shapes and aims. Indeed, in 2002 when Gary Kelly reported that he found 92.400 entries in 0.42 seconds when searching for “female Gothic” with the Google search engine, we might not be surprised to find that the same search in 2018 yields around 196.000.000 hits in 0.35 seconds, a figure that increases every day. This escalation in numbers reflects the growing popularity and critical attention paid to Gothic literature by women’s writers from the past to the present, supporting Kelly’s assertion when he said that “the female Gothic, it seems, is all around us,” (Kelly, 2002, xi) but also it advances new questions about the definition of the Gothic genre and its relations to its female writers.

In this chapter I suggest some critical approaches to the Gothic as debated by women writers who first employed this genre during the peak of production and circulation in England. More specifically, it is interesting to present and discuss in a chronological and comparative way some theoretical approaches to this literary form that was achieving resounding success at the end of eighteenth century. The origin of English Gothic fiction is dated back to the publication under the form of romance, but very quickly several writers experimented with the Gothic genre inventing new forms of novels. Women writers actively participated to the critical discourse surrounding the Gothic, publishing not only romances and novels, but also critical and theoretical remarks. They were actively involved into a larger discussion on the genesis and hybridisation of the Gothic, outlining its origin, aims, forms and language with the purpose of mapping the aesthetic principles of this form from their own points of view. In particular, I am referring to Clara Reeve, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Ann Radcliffe, who were all successful

authors but also sharp critics, and as we shall see, they advanced interesting and innovative theoretical ideologies about the Gothic.

## The ‘female Gothic’ and the feminist critical tradition

In his study entitled *Female Gothic*, Gary Kelly argues that due to their problematic place in the literary and discursive order, women writers of the Romantic period often found themselves pressing the limits of genre and discourse, pioneering works of literary innovation and experimentation in order to resolve or evade constraints and contradictions in their ideological and cultural work as writers and women. (Kelly, 2002, xi) As women entered a domain that was potentially unsettling both to their traditional subordination and the domain of letters as a male space, their discourse showed a marked investment in the critical voice. (Folger Collective, xiii, xvi) Their role in asserting a new criticism and an innovative definition of the forms was based on the fact that they showed an ability to copy from their predecessors, but also, to master the form as active players. As asserted by Anne K. Mellor: “Romantic women writers and literary critics emphatically broke ranks with both their male and their female eighteenth-century forebears: while they shared an Enlightenment commitment to rationality, they added to it the revolutionary claim that the female mind was not only as rational as the male but perhaps even more rational.” (Mellor, 32) Before taking this idea further, though, I would like to situate my argument within a theoretical framework—that is, the role of women writers as critics and the origins of the so-called ‘female Gothic’—to show how this equivocal label has been used during the past to distinguish women writings and how it is used in a more controversial way today.

Although critics have treated the ‘female Gothic’ as a mode more than a genre, it is interesting to investigate how women writers used theoretical approaches to disclose their generic, formal, and thematic approaches to novel writing. Specifically, the present investigation focuses on how they designed their writings to express their voices, and to address concerns at a particular historical moment to a particular reading public. Like their male counterparts, in their writings, female critics addressed—often through

similar methodologies—issues raised by the emergence of criticism as a distinct and privileged form. Ellen Moers referred initially to ‘female Gothic’ in a 1974 essay that appeared in the *New York Review of Books* and was later incorporated into her groundbreaking work on women writers entitled *Literary Women* (1976). Moers’ critical work has been considered a milestone in feminist criticism—notwithstanding being out of date and out of print—because it problematized and opened up what proved to be a fertile field of investigation that asserted both women’s writing and the Gothic as central areas in literary studies.<sup>1</sup> Moers famously claimed that female Gothic is easily defined meaning “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called ‘the Gothic’.” What is more difficult to pin down, she claims, is the Gothic in general terms, except that “it has to do with fear.” (Moers, 90) In her attempt to go into detail of the genre, Moers connects the Gothic with a bodily reaction, declaring that:

“In Gothic writing fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare. Not, that is, to reach down into the depths of the soul and purge it with pity and terror (as we say tragedy does), but to get the body itself, its glands, muscles, epidermis, and circulatory system, quickly arousing and quickly allaying the physiological reactions to fear.” (90)

This assertion had been exemplified, for example by Jane Austen in her mock-gothic novel *Northanger Abbey* when the male protagonist, Henry Tilney, remarks how much he has loved reading Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* to the point he has experienced a physical reaction to it: “I remember finishing it in two days – my hair standing on end the whole time.” (Austen, 108) Similarly, Moers quotes the critic William Hazlitt, who claimed that Radcliffe mastered the art of “freezing the blood”; “harrowing up the soul with imaginary horrors, and making the flesh creep and the nerves thrill.” (Moers, 91) Indeed, both readers of the Gothic and its heroines equally register the physical reaction when stimulated by the genre. Additionally, Moers associates

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1 See Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace, “The Female Gothic. Then and Now” in *Gothic Studies*, 6:1, May 2004, Manchester 2009, pp. 1–8 and Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (eds), *The Female Gothic. New Directions*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009.

the Gothic not only with the physical responses, but tied it to mental as well as psychological consequences. This is because women writers of gothic fiction dealt with issues concerning the questioning of female identity represented by personal experience and oppression.

Feminist criticism in the late 1970s and 1980s – the so-called second wave of feminist criticism – was notable for its identification and adoption of proprietary metaphors, including ‘maps’, ‘territories’, ‘breaking ground’, ‘space’, and ‘landmark’ that together suggested a shared perspective in recovering a literary tradition of women’s writing.<sup>2</sup> Together with Moers, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar represented the moment at which “feminist criticism set out to map the territory of the female imagination.” Looking to recover a lost inheritance, these studies focused on “a whole body of texts that make up our literary heritage”, to use Showalter’s words. (Showalter, 3) In *Literary Women*, Moers similarly highlighted the importance of women’s “possession of their own tradition”, and defined the ‘female Gothic’ as a literary space that drew on a set of cultural connections between the body, ownership, and texts. (Fitzgerald, 15) The concept of ownership became central to analysing not only the texts produced by women writers of Gothic fiction, but also their theoretical concepts. Indeed, women were the great innovators of Gothic forms and those who introduced Gothic conventions into mainstream English fiction. As Lauren Fitzgerald suggests, “Female Gothic as defined by Moers may present difficulties as a critical category, but it still has the power to teach us an important lesson about the sway that the Gothic has had over readers, criticism and culture.” (Fitzgerald, 15)

Then, following Julia Kristeva’s critical methodology, we can examine the extent to which the ‘female Gothic’ can be read in the context of feminist, counter-feminist, or anti-feminist discourses.<sup>3</sup> By the early 1990s, the concept of the ‘female Gothic’ had been continually reassessed by many feminist and cultural studies, which have destabilized the categories of gender. The phrase has increasingly been qualified following numerous debates as to whether the ‘female Gothic’ continues as a literary genre to

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2 See Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

3 See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

be separated from, or in contrast with, the ‘male Gothic’. While critics such as Anne Williams and others view the ‘female Gothic’ as subversive and even revolutionary, Diane Long Hoeveler argued in her *Gothic Feminism* (1998) that it was the originator of modern so-called ‘victim feminism’, “a species of professional femininity, as a form of gender contraction and an ideology that grew out of the literary discourse systems we have come to identify as the Gothic, the melodrama, and the sentimental and sensibility traditions of virtue vindicated and rewarded.” (Hoeveler, xiii)

The majority of post-1990 critical investigations have focused on the exploration of the Gothic in twentieth-century texts by American, Canadian and post-colonial women writers. As a consequence, today the term has been further delineated into sub-categories such as ‘women’s Gothic’, ‘feminine Gothic’, ‘lesbian Gothic’, and even ‘Gothic feminism’, all of them challenging the critical validity of the expression itself, and opening up new fields of investigation around several issues and locations. Above all, the 1990s witnessed the move of the ‘female Gothic’ from the margins to the mainstream. In addition to the works of David Punter, Fred Botting, Andrew Smith, Angela Wright, and others, Emma J. Clery’s *Women’s Gothic* (2000) provides a valuable new reading of women’s Gothic texts grounded in their original historical contexts. Accordingly, recent critical approaches proposed by New Historicists and those working in cultural studies put forth methodologies that join issues of gender and sexuality with literary, cultural, social, political and economic contexts; they ask us to remember the important elements that shaped the forms and tastes of the Gothic genre, and the ‘female Gothic’ in particular. Because of its relatively open generic texture, the novel, especially the Gothic romance, could be used to appropriate and diffuse all kinds of discourses that were otherwise barred to women, or difficult for them to openly and directly engage with. (Kelly, 2002, xxix)

## Clara Reeve and the ideological function of the romance

During the heyday of Gothic writing, the genre carried several connotations and was distinguished by its use of different but recurring

elements, a series of conventions derived from the old romance which, to quote Horace Walpole's famous distinction between ancient and modern romance, encompassed poetry, drama, and fiction. (Clery, 2–3) A subsequent distinction was drawn between romance and novel, followed by a combination between the two: though diverse in content, romances traditionally dealt with the marvellous, while novels represented the manners and speech of their contemporary societies. Above all, novels examined psychological truth, as Walpole stated in his second preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, where the fusion of romance and novel generated a new form of romance in which characters possessed psychosocial and believable traits while still investigating the region of the marvellous.

Indeed, Clara Reeve (1729–1807) proclaimed from the very title of her romance, *The Old English Baron, A Gothic Story* (1778), that her work was a “literary offspring of *The Castle of Otranto*”, because of its supernatural elements. She also recalls in her “Preface” the distinction between “ancient Roman” and “modern Novel”, affirming that her Gothic story unites the “most attractive and interesting circumstances” of them both, but, at the same time, “it assumes a character and manner of its own.” (Reeve, 1788, iii) In spite of her admiration for Walpole, Reeve challenged Walpole's authority of the genre commenting that she did not approve Walpole's abuse of the fantastical excesses.<sup>4</sup> Reeve aimed to reform the romance adopting in her work a more realistic approach to the evocation of the supernatural. As a consequence, with her Gothic story Reeve was explicitly altering the genre, anticipating Ann Radcliffe's historical accuracy and the element of probability of the Gothic romance. Following Reeve's approach, Sophia Lee (1750–1824) offered an historical romance on the secret history of the Stuarts, entitled *The Recess; A Tale of Other Times* (1783–5), and Charlotte Smith published *Old Manor House* (1793). Both writers followed and responded to Walpole's Gothic example, while opposing it on a broader political front. They appropriated historiography, antiquarianism, and studies of feudalism and chivalry in order to advance a reformist political approach in support of a bourgeois-democratic politics. (Kelly, 2002, xxxii)

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4 See Gerd Karin Omdal, “Clara Reeve's *Progress of Romance* and the Female Critic in the 18th Century”.

Reeve's desire to experiment with new forms of Gothic romance and discusses its dynamics has to be found in another work, not fictional but critical, entitled *The Progress of Romance* (1785). Here Reeve advances her theorisation about the ideological function of romance for women and society at large. This work has a great importance for the theorisation of the genre, and for contributing to the affirmation of a female literary tradition. It is in fact a rare work of literary history, criticism and cultural study, where the author justifies the cultural and literary importance of romance of all kinds—ranging from ancient to modern—and even argues for its superiority to the noble genre of epic. (Kelly, 2002, xxxiii)

Reeve is the first to argue for a systematic distinction between the romance and the novel, announcing the superiority of the former. Demonstrating the arbitrary nature of the literary canon, she opens the way for substantial revision of the generic hierarchy:

“The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. – The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. The Romance in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen. – The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses, of the persons in the story, as if they were our own.” (Reeve, 111)

*The Progress* offers one of the first histories of prose fiction and the first sincere attempt to elevate the novel to the status of serious literature, since it has been so far ignored or undervalued in the English tradition. The author acknowledges that romances “many not improperly be called the polite literature of early ages” and “have been the favourite amusements of later times”. While in “rude and barbarous ages, they resided in the breath of oral tradition [. . .] in civilized nations, they were of course committed to writing: and in still more polished period, they have varied their forms, and have appeared either in prose or verse, according to genius of the writers, or the state of the times”. (Reeve, iii) Reeve's elevation of the romance into the high status of serious literature means also her attempt to challenge the hierarchical literary order imposed by a male tradition based on classics and epic. Referring to the romance as a genre mistreated and obliged by the élite society, Reeve incorporated in



her metaphorical objection all subaltern social groups, especially women writers, who were considered to be the lowest representatives of English literature. As remarked by Kelly, Reeve: “challenges the gendered character of the literary order by combining a number of discourses in an original form that appropriates, modifies, and displaces certain discourses conventionally gendered masculine, while developing certain discourses conventionally gendered feminine.” (Kelly, 1999, lx)

*Progress* is structured as a fictional dialogue – inspired by Madame de Genlis’s *Théâtre d’éducation* (1785) – between the protagonist, Euphrasia, an expert of prose fiction and defender of romance, and a learned gentleman, Hortensius, who embodies the misogynist rhetoric of the male reader. Their dialogue is based on gender division, where Euphrasia challenges her opponent using literary weapons – books and her tongue as a sword –, in order to promote the cultural role of literature through the feminisation of the discourse. At the end of *The Progress*, Reeve suggests to her readers a selected reading list of those romances more suitable for instruction and entertainment. Actually, Reeve addresses her comments to the writers as well as to the readers of romances, since the literary skills of the authors are as important as the instruction of the receivers. In elevating the cultural and ethical value of prose writing, Reeve denounces the dangers of circulating libraries and novel reading on the part of the young female public without guidance and assistance. Reeve is in fact acknowledging and promoting the pedagogical effects of fiction that were commonly accepted by both radicals and conservatives of the time. She writes:

“Romances are of universal growth, and not confined to any particular period or countries. They were the delight of barbarous ages, and they have always kept their ground amongst the multiplied amusements of more refined and cultivated periods, containing like every other branch of human literature, both good and evil things. They are not to be put into the hands of young persons without distinction and reserve, but under proper restrictions and regulations they will afford much useful instruction, as well as rational and elegant amusement.” (Reeve, xv-xvi)

Consequently, Clara Reeve consolidated a ‘female Gothic’ that was designed to intervene in the late eighteenth-century political discourse of reform in the interest of improving the genre’s social and cultural meanings. Her work may seem to repress or omit the feminine from the

public and cultural spheres, including literature, but actually it advanced a feminisation of a sphere of literature with the aim of improving it and be useful for the society at large.

## The Pleasure derived from Objects of Terror

In her essay, “On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing” (1810), Anna Laetitia Barbauld acknowledges the historical and social value of the novel, and its importance in shaping everyday reality. In particular, Barbauld agrees with Reeve’s elevation of good romances. They are in fact as great as the epic, with “more of character and less (indeed in modern novel writing) of the supernatural machinery.” (Folger Collective, 175) More importantly, Barbauld associates the romance tradition with the modern Gothic, writing that “Romance writing was destined to revive with great splendour under the Gothic power, and it sprung out of the histories of the times, enlarged and exaggerated into fable.” (176) In Barbauld’s opinion, history, heroic adventures and the mysterious are the prevailing elements of the first Gothic romances. She enlists names and titles of both European and British literary traditions to illuminate women’s contributions to the genre. Together with moral judgment, the writer also ascribes to the novel the element of entertainment, which, she claims, is the legitimate end of every writer.

In the preface to her fifty-volume collection *The British Novelist* (1810), Barbauld reiterates the important role of the novel in literary tradition:

“When the range of this kind of writing is so extensive, and its effect so great, it seems evident that it ought to hold a respectable place among the productions of genius. [. . .] To measure the dignity of a writer by the pleasure he affords his readers is not perhaps using an accurate criterion; but the invention of a story, the choice of proper incidents, the ordonnance of the plan, occasional beauties of description, and above all, the power exercised over the reader’s heart by filling it with the successive emotions of love, pity, joy, anguish, transport, or indignation, together with the grave, impressive moral resulting from the whole, imply talents of the highest order, and ought to be appreciated accordingly. A good novel is an

epic in prose, with more of character and less (indeed in modern novels nothing) of the supernatural machinery.” (Barbauld, 2-3)<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding the public could read a large amount of less dignified novels circulating at that time, many great and distinguished works were also published, and the majority were written by women:

“Though a great deal of trash is every season poured out upon the public from the English presses, yet in general our novels are not vicious; the food has neither flavour nor nourishment, but at least it is not poisoned. Our national taste and habits are still turned towards domestic life and matrimonial happiness, and the chief harm done by a circulating library is occasioned by the frivolity of its furniture, and the loss of time incurred. [. . .] And indeed, notwithstanding the many paltry books of this kind published in the course of every year, it may safely be affirmed that we have more good writers in this walk living at the present time, than at any period since the days of Richardson and Fielding. A very great proportion of these are ladies: and surely it will not be said that either taste or morals have been losers by their taking the pen in hand. The names of D’Arblay, Edgeworth, Inchbald, Radcliffe, and a number more will vindicate this assertion.”

In her essay, Barbauld identifies the Gothic romance with some of the more popular Romantic prose genres, including national tales, sentimental stories, and novels of manners, thus highlighting the intersections of this genre with many other forms. As a successful writer, she felt authorised to examine and evaluate the canonical writings of both men and women, establishing that verisimilitude and fantasy, truth and transcendence, rationality and romance were all ingredients of the Romantic novel.

In her famous essay “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terrors” (1773), Barbauld commented again on the Gothic. Here, the writer describes the Gothic as a kind of fiction that discloses unresolved arguments between rationality and more suggestible and mysterious states of mind for an ever-expanding reading public:

“A strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch; and where the agency of invisible beings is introduced, of ‘forms unseen, and mightier far than we,’ our imagination, darting forth, explores with rapture the new world

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5 Originally published in 1810. Here quoted from Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing” in *The British Novelists, with an Essay, and Prefaces Biographical and Critical* (London: Rivington, 1810).

which is laid open to its view, and rejoices in the expansion of its powers. Passion and fancy cooperating elevate the soul to its highest pitch; and the pain of terror is lost in amazement. Hence the more wild, fanciful, and extraordinary are the circumstance of a scene of horror, the more pleasure we receive from it; and where they are too near common nature, though violently borne by curiosity through the adventure, we cannot repeat it or reflect on it, without an overbalance of pain. [. . .] *The Castle of Otranto* is a very spirited modern attempt upon the same plan of mixed terror, adapted to the model of Gothic romance.” (Aikin, 60)

Despite its enormous popularity, Gothic romances suffered disapproval due to their evocation of the supernatural, a key element of the genre that openly challenged the enlightened rationality of the eighteenth century. Thus they were judged to be morally and aesthetically improper, scandalous, as well as overly sentimental and sensational. Attacked by reviewers and intellectuals of the period – including Wordsworth – Barbauld wrote in support of the Gothic: “The old Gothic romance and the Eastern tales, with their genii, giants, enchantments, and transformations, however a refined critic may censure them as absurd and extravagant, will ever retain a most powerful influence on the mind, and interest the reader independently of all peculiarity of taste.” (58)

## Ann Radcliffe and the supernatural

In similar language, Ann Radcliffe defended the genre, especially the terror Gothic, in her critical essay, “On the Supernatural in Poetry”. Found among her posthumous papers, this essay was written approximately in 1802, but published and circulated in 1826. In it, she distinguishes terror from horror, explaining that the first enlarges readers’ minds by requiring them to participate imaginatively in the narrative’s evocation of fear and trepidation, while the second’s explicitly violent episodes leave no room for the imagination to operate and thus restrict readers’ faculties:

“Terror and Horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend, that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions,

nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one.” (Radcliffe, 145-52)

Radcliffe’s aesthetic of terror is a unique approach to the Gothic founded on suspense, a narrative technique that allows the expansion of the mind and increases the faculties of the imagination. Her romances evoke supernatural presences and interventions only to provide rational explanations at the end in what has been called the “explained supernatural” typical of Radcliffe’s Gothic works. The writer also implies terror’s moral superiority to horror, accusing those writers who abuse horror scenes of corrupting the Gothic genre’s original essence.

Moreover, Radcliffe’s essay reveals the crucial connection between terror writing and the eighteenth-century aesthetic of the sublime. Evoking Shakespeare and Milton as precedents for her employment of terror in fiction—as well as Burke as an intellectual influence on its theory and practice—Radcliffe argues that terror has always been a source of the sublime. Referring to Burke’s influential enquiry into the “Origin of the Beautiful and the Sublime”, Radcliffe includes in her description of terror the influence of two major landscape painters: Salvator Rosa (1615–1673) and Claude Lorraine (1600–1682). As many critics—notably Beatrice Battaglia—have argued, Rosa’s and Lorraine’s paintings play a crucial role in Radcliffe’s narrative. In her romances, the writer used written words to reproduce what visual artists conveyed in painting. The so-called “word paintings” was employed by Radcliffe to generate in fiction the ‘natural’ ever-changing landscape. The aesthetic categories of sublime, beautiful, and picturesque traditionally associated with the Romantics were essentially anticipated by Radcliffe in her Gothic ‘paintings’. The alternation of light and shade, the change of perspective, movement, and different points of view were the key elements William Gilpin placed at the centre of his theory of picturesque beauty. And Radcliffe adopts the very same features in her romances. In particular, she employs the language of the picturesque to describe the unique relationship between her heroines and the natural world. Indeed, nature in all its minutiae is the main protagonist of Radcliffe’s works, playing a central role as the everlasting presence of the omnipotent that guides and protects fragile human beings. The encounter with the natural – a sort of divine power – often opposes

the awful reality of contemporary society and the laws that subjugate the human body and spirit, particularly those that are female.

Along with Walpole and Reeve, Radcliffe was one of the first to announce a new age of Gothic romance, placing mystery at the centre of its thematic, rhetorical, and moral projection. Subsequent Gothic novelists – notably Matthew Lewis and Charlotte Dacre – more strongly associated the idea of mystery with the deliberate obfuscation of religion and the dark machination of satanic forces, and thus transformed the terror Gothic into the horror Gothic. Both terror and horror fiction, however, were infused with political and social significance and connotations of protest as well as gender issues. Indeed, both forms questioned the nature of power—namely, the source of its authority in an oppressive past—and the ways in which contemporary society and gender roles reinforced it.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the strength of these critical investigations by Reeve, Barbauld, and Radcliffe, all point to the extent to which women critics were engaged in the literary and cultural life of their time, incorporating their concerns for women and women's writing with more traditional anxieties about gender roles. They placed themselves in dialogue with male critics around the issue of the Gothic, and, like their male counterparts, they were preoccupied with questions of genre. Inserting their voices in what we might call the 'female Gothic', Reeve, Barbauld and Radcliffe inaugurated new enquiries about the genre, especially relating to the criticism of the novel as a form not yet sanctioned by tradition. This field of enquiry offered a place for women to participate in defining the genre. (Folger Collective, xviii) Moreover, most of these women novelists aimed to achieve commercial success. Thus in order to maintain their audience's constant curiosity, they keenly pursued formal and thematic innovations while respecting—but also reforming and testing—generic conventions. Novelists could exploit the relative openness of the novel-form in order to adjust it for their respective innovative outputs, leaving ample margins of experimentation. They could also combine elements of different forms,

making intersections and metamorphosis of the genre they mastered in order to advance their issues and concerns. Women in particular faced obstacles when engaging with innovation, but nonetheless challenged generic and discursive borders and limits, pioneering significant innovations in form and genre. (Kelly, 2002, xxiv)

To use Diane Long Hoeveler's definition and also to look back to Ellen Moers, the motivation for women who wrote what we now call the 'female Gothic' was both simple and complex: such writers sought to put forth their own definitions of the genre in competition with the masculine world, with the aim of defining their femininity. (Hoeveler, xiii) Hoeveler demarcates "Professional femininity" as "a cultivated pose, a masquerade of docility, passivity, wise passiveness, and tightly controlled emotions" in an attempt to understand how female Gothic novelists helped to popularize and promulgate a newly defined and increasingly powerful species of bourgeois female sensibility and subjectivity. (xv) Although the Gothic at this time was shaped by a male reality and formed by patriarchal society, Juliann Fleenor in her introduction to *The Female Gothic* declares that it was perpetuated by the female writer choosing a form outside the literary mainstream. (Fleenor, 27) "The Gothic and the female experiences have common schizophrenia," says Fleenor, and as a consequence, "women's lives – as readers and as writers – are shaped by and in turn shape the literary forms they choose to read and to write. For these reasons the Gothic form has played and continues to play a large part in the literary endeavours of women." (28) As a consequence 'female Gothic' is not just a sterile and useless distinction between female and male works, but is a useful term to identify, question and debate women primary texts as well as their critical approaches. If we read gothic novels and theoretical aesthetic about the genre in comparative ways, we can still find plenty of literary vigour and complexity in unresolved issues of gender relations, politics and social questions.

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