

Review Essay

# QUEER GOTHIC

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George E. Haggerty. *Queer Gothic* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois, 2006). Pp. 231. \$20 paper. ISBN 0-252-07353-3

George Haggerty's *Queer Gothic* belongs to the long tradition of treating gothic novels as repositories of case histories for psychoanalysis. In this instance, the Freud of pop psychology has become the Freud of queer theory: Freud filtered through Judith Butler, Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The family in gothic writing is the classic Oedipal family, replete with primal scenes, castration anxiety, incest, melancholic paranoia, and sadomasochistic fantasies. In Haggerty's reading, the hero or heroine, or their author-creator, is also the Foucaultian hero, whose transgressive desires push at the limits of the normative and show patriarchal repression to be the source of all evil. More specifically, homoerotic desire is seen to be the essence of what is repressed for the sake of establishing bourgeois culture, which is "always already" heteronormative. Homosexuals who suffer from this repression gain a kind of revenge by demonizing heteronormative relations, as does Horace Walpole in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and *The Mysterious Mother* (1768), both of which sensationally exploit incest.

Certainly same-sex eroticism is central to the plot of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), and both W. H. Ireland in *The Abbess* (1799) and Maturin in *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) seem to take pleasure in fetishizing the stripped and suffering male, tortured by the Inquisition. In fact, most of the sadomasochism in *The Abbess* is highly heterosexual, but this does not seem to matter: the "always already transgressive potential" of sexual attraction of whatever sort is sufficient for Haggerty to class this novel as "queer."

The frequent celebration of female–female bonds in "the female gothic" is analyzed, most characteristically, in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), where the loss of daughter–mother love is the cause of the heroine's profound melancholy, and where the heroine marries the hero only after he has been tortured, and symbolically castrated, by the Inquisition. In Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806), on the other hand, the heroine turns against her mother, who has destroyed the happy family by falling for a lover, and eventually the heroine tortures and murders a young woman who functions as a projection of her mother. So the

maternal loss that is central to female gothic is mourned by Radcliffe but punished by Dacre. That one paradigm can have opposing outcomes perhaps explains the usefulness of Freudian theory for the literary interpreter: if projection does not work, perhaps some displacement will do the trick.

Melancholia, or specifically what Julia Kristeva calls abjection, seems to be central to the gothic, and Haggerty argues that what is mourned is preeminently the loss of homosexual love. The gothic is haunted by “the specter of the hidden sodomite.” The homosexual is suppressed by having filth heaped upon him, or by being reconstructed as a monster, equivalent to the “return of the repressed.”

Haggerty argues that sodomites in the pillory (notably the Vere Street coterie in 1810) were reviled and pelted with filth and excrement because society needed to throw a mask over its own secret homoerotic desires, i.e. to construct “the Other” as monstrous. This theory is neat, but it falls apart when we consider that *everyone* exhibited in the pillory, regardless of their offence, was regularly pelted with filth. The other two classes of offenders subjected to particularly severe treatment were brothel-house keepers and perjurers (especially those whose lies in court resulted in the death of innocent people). The specifically homoerotic element of Haggerty’s theory does not apply in the case of madams; and the generally erotic element of his theory does not apply in the case of perjurers. The piling of excrement upon sodomites, i.e. practitioners of anal sex, is only fortuitously apt, for it was also piled on those whose non-sexual immorality was also considered shameful. Even the case of sodomites isn’t correctly interpreted, since the major assailants of sodomites were female prostitutes who surrounded the pillory and directed the missiles: not because they feared their own lesbian tendencies, but because they recognized competition for their trade.

Haggerty uses this paradigm of dung and bodily filth as a signifier of repressed homoerotic desire in his interpretation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* – but it has to be rejected insofar as his original interpretation of sodomites in the pillory is incorrect. According to Haggerty, Victor Frankenstein’s abhorrence of his creature is a product of the homosexual’s internalized self-loathing. The women in Victor’s life are “sacrificed to a male same-sex fantasy because it is impossible to imagine male–male desire outside of the confines of heteronormativity.” But we must remember, though Haggerty does not, that characters are not real: they are merely words upon the page, and they can be psychoanalyzed only insofar as they are regarded as projections of their author’s mind. It is not clear to me how Mary Shelley can be projecting male same-sex fantasy, unless this is her interpretation of her husband’s

desires. Percy Bysshe Shelley in *Zastrozzi* (1810) does indeed seem to eroticize the passive male, but Haggerty goes too far when he ludicrously claims that Verezzi's stabbing himself is an "auto-erotic gesture." Further, the homoerotics of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) are clearly an accidental by-product of *heterosexual* desire, since the hero represents Shelley, and his friend is the projection of Mary Shelley herself. Haggerty in his analysis of Shelley's *The Cenci* (1819), oddly does not demonstrate any homoerotics at all, and just settles for the transgressive meaning of the word *queer*.

Just as Haggerty shifts between and conflates the two meanings of *queer*, so he fails to hold himself to a specific meaning for the word *gothic*. His demonstration that Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903) and Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) are both queer is persuasive and insightful, but neither fits easily into any definition of gothic fiction, and frankly they do not belong in this book. Twenty-three pages are given to Highsmith's novel—more than twice as many pages as for any other work—yet the only gothic feature Haggerty mentions is that the hero was abused by a wicked stepmother. Too bad Cinderella did not become a murderer.

Sometimes Haggerty advances his interpretations in too cavalier a fashion, and closely reasoned arguments are regularly short-circuited by assertions that one thing is "always already" something else, especially politics, religion, sexuality. And by claiming that culture is "always already" homophobic, Haggerty is arguing in effect that homosexual desire is "always already" perverted. This is the retrogressive tendency at the heart of queer theory.

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