

Coda: incest and beyond



Like a malevolent virus, Gothic narratives have escaped the confines of literature and spread across disciplinary boundaries to infect all kinds of media ... Gothic texts deal with a variety of themes just as pertinent to contemporary culture as to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (2006)¹

This book has sought to bring to light the variety of incestuous configurations in the Gothic. In order to do this, I have relied not only on existing literary scholarship, but also on a broad methodological approach that includes anthropological, political, philosophical, legal and scientific insights. The interdisciplinary approach enables readings that expose the ways in which different incestuous relationships engage with eighteenth-century concerns over family, social obligation, individual rights, inheritance laws and desire. The fruits of this broad methodology are evidenced through recent works on the Gothic such as Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith's *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (2009). This collection of articles, all of which, to different ends, explore the Gothic while paying close attention to scholarship's traditional views on Gothic tropes and using a range of analytical tools, demonstrates how this approach is essential to rejuvenating Gothic studies and in bringing fresh perspectives to the foreground of the field.² Likewise, Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien's *New Directions in 21st Century Gothic: The Gothic Compass* (2015) is an exciting interdisciplinary collection of essays that

examines the breadth of Gothic remouldings in various media and cultural products. I have sought, in a similar way, to illuminate the breadth of incestuous relationships and the issues with which they are united and also to open up new lines of enquiry for Gothic scholarship as a whole.

In examining the Gothic it becomes essential to recognise the genre as an unwieldy one that resists homogenising gestures of gendering either in its contemporary reception or in later scholarly readings. My desire is not to attempt to reject scholarship on the Gothic that uses the term the Female Gothic; the wealth of criticism on the Female Gothic has enabled the subversive potential of the genre to be reclaimed and evaluated in highly profitable ways. Scholarship on the Gothic was reinvigorated through its reclamation by feminist critics that helped to establish the genre's importance as an intervention into the contemporary debates of the eighteenth century. Nor do I wish to distance myself from the feminist perspective that has allowed incest to be understood as an abuse of power reflective of patriarchy's control over female bodies. Moving away from divisions of the genre can, nevertheless, provide new insights into the concerns and anxieties explored through generic conventions as common to writers of any gender and various political and religious beliefs, in such a way as to reveal that eighteenth-century explorations of natural rights and laws, female desire, inheritance, social and familial structures, egalitarian relationships and the distribution of power were not schematically determined by an author's gender or political or religious affiliations. By opening the genre up in such a way that gender and sexuality are not the primary categories of analysis, further paradigms of the incest convention – its complex configurations and their intersections with contemporary concerns – become visible.

Instead of attempting to assert a new narrative on incest in the Gothic, it seems more profitable to make use of a broad and flexible approach towards analysis that can in turn be applied to other generic conventions and the genre as a whole and avoids the danger of becoming entrenched within the sometimes claustrophobic narrative of Gothic criticism.³ The Gothic's exploration of these issues through the convention of incest reveals a preoccupation with how institutions of power (be they political, legal, religious or patriarchal) deny freedom through systematic oppression and violence that is almost always sexualised. In what amounts to a prefiguring and disruption of Foucault's defence of s/m as a radical reimagining and sexualising of unequal power in society, the Gothic reveals that power relations inevitably sexualise the body of the subordinate.⁴

In forging new ground on which to conduct future examinations of the genre, it is important to understand and analyse, rather than to ignore and leave behind, previous modes of approaching the Gothic and the socio-historical conditions and events that gave rise to them. In so doing, the genealogy of Gothic scholarship – its different but related families, if you will – becomes itself a revealing method of examining the Gothic’s literary and historical significance and its ongoing position as an object of fetishised scrutiny.

The Gothic’s location as such has informed my discussion of representations of incest within the genre. Rather than consider the Gothic as pre-occupied with deviant or aberrant sexuality, I seek instead to expose such labels as couched in the language of heteronormativity that the Gothic itself denied. In using a variety of incestuous relationships, Gothic writers reify the dual constraints exerted by family and society, the imbrication of power, desire and violence, the potential for egalitarian conjugality, denials of male victimisation and female desire and the exchange of women. Their concerns are embedded within incestuous desires and violations, underscoring how familial structures reproduce social rules and engaging with contemporary debates regarding the nature of kinship and individual rights. In these representations, writers resist the heteronormative demands that would deny any desires with the potential to subvert the economy of exchange necessary to patriarchy and the erotic aestheticisation of violence implicit in the control of those resistant to the normative. Gothic writers, often women or homosexual men, adopted a critical stance in relation to the heteronormative, patriarchal world and their work offers alternative models of sexualities, agencies and forms of desire that are as relevant to questions of gender and sexuality today as they were in the long eighteenth century.

Rather than offer a final word on the role of incest in the Gothic, or to look backward, I wish instead to look forward and to raise questions, to provoke discussion and debate and to propose further evaluation of Gothic texts – and conventions – beyond those studied here. There is a wealth of material that remains largely untouched by scholarship. Some novels upon which I could only touch within the remit of this book but that bear further scrutiny include Alethea Brereton Lewis’s fascinating and odd novel *The Nuns of the Desert: or, The Woodland Witches* (1805); the many anonymous novels such as *Adeline; or the Orphan* (1790) or *Montrose, or The Gothic Ruin, A Novel* (1799); Sarah Sheriffe’s interesting and at times bizarre *Correlia, or The Mystic Tomb, A Romance* (1802); and

not at all least of these is the vast archive that comprises the Gothic fiction of the popular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century periodical the *Lady's Magazine* (1770–1832). The latter is a large body of primarily anonymous fiction that frequently takes up the conventions and concerns of the Gothic, yet the short stories and serialised novels remain almost entirely unstudied by scholarship, in part because they have been viewed, as the Gothic itself so long was, as unworthy of serious literary scrutiny. Much work thus remains to be done on the literature of the long eighteenth century and Romantic period, particularly on the enormous body of magazine fiction which so often contains surprising reworkings and unique treatments of Gothic conventions.

In moving forward, it is necessary to consider the ways in which representations of sexuality in the period examined in this book, the 1760s–1840s, shift, reappear and are exhumed in the genre's later cycles of popularity and in its various forms of cultural production. At key moments in the genre's development during the Victorian period, at the *fin de siècle*, in the mid-twentieth century Southern Gothic and in the current era's fixation on vampires and werewolves, while many aspects of the texts have metamorphosed the focus on desires and the forbidden has persisted. The very nature of the Gothic necessitates that this is so; the genre maintains a fundamental openness to alternative sexualities and relationships that begs consideration of the transgressive in its continual transformations. As Jerrold E. Hogle states, the genre's durability is due to the way 'it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural, throughout the history of western culture since the eighteenth century'.⁵ The argument regarding incest and its relation to sexuality and gender made in this book has implications for the convention's treatment in other works; how, for example, does sibling incest emerge in twentieth-century Gothic novels such as V. C. Andrews's *Flowers in the Attic* (1979)? With what set of concerns are depictions of cousin incest, aestheticised violence and abuses of power engaged in Joyce Carol Oates's *First Love: A Gothic Tale* (1996)? Can we reconcile Sarah Michelle Gellar in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with eighteenth-century heroines and what is at stake in doing so? The relationship between these modern representations and eighteenth-century portrayals of incest may be ambiguous, but considering their kinship expands the potential readings of not only the most recent Gothic revolutions, but also of their literary predecessors.

The early writers of the genre made use of the incest thematic to expose eighteenth-century inequalities such as the consequences of coverture and primogeniture, abuses of institutionalised power and women's subjugation within the state and home, often availing themselves of the period's philosophical rhetoric to do so. Pointing to these writers' preoccupation with political and social circumstances specific to the eighteenth century may seem an incongruous way of highlighting the genre's ongoing relevance. But whether we consider the Gothic in the form of an eighteenth-century novel or a twentieth-century television show, it is precisely the genre's mutability and ability to engage closely with contemporaneous issues that has such significant implications for our study of its history and future incarnations. In any society that seeks to marginalise, criminalise or efface those who would, like Calantha, 'love to step over every bound ... to run fearlessly forward, in spite of the maxims of the world',⁶ the Gothic's inherent capacity for representations of the transgressive and marginalised is acute. This book has focused on the incest thematic to explore the Gothic's most omnipresent concern: that the extensive possibilities for human – and sexual – relations be more comprehensively understood. This is a concern that, I fear, is even more vital now than throughout the centuries of evolving Gothic fiction. I hope that this study urges further exploration of the various means, incest and beyond, through which the Gothic provides a safe space for its writers, readers and viewers to theorise and participate in alternative models and narratives of human existence.

NOTES

- 1 Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 8. Spooner argues that 'we should be careful of assuming that Gothic simply reflects social anxieties in a straightforward manner' (p. 8).
- 2 Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (eds), *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- 3 Lauren Fitzgerald points to the binary of male/female oppression found in Gothic plots as replicated through the conventions of feminist criticism that seeks to liberate the Female Gothic from its marginalisation by earlier male critics in 'Female Gothic and the Institutionalization of Gothic Studies', in Wallace and Smith, *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, pp. 13–25.
- 4 See Foucault's statements regarding s/m in 'An interview: sex, power, and the politics of identity', *The Advocate*, 400 (7 August 1984), 26–30, 58; and Leo Bersani's argument that the fundamental problem in Foucault's claim that

acting out sexualised reversals of dominant–subordinate power relations is a challenge to the social hierarchies of power is that such reproductions are themselves respectful of the ‘dominance–submission dichotomy’ without questioning fully the value of structures of power or the inherent eroticism therein, ‘Foucault, Freud, fantasy, and power’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2:1/2 (1995), 15–17.

- 5 Jerrold E. Hogle, ‘Introduction’, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 4.
- 6 Elizabeth Thomas, *Purity of Heart, or The Ancient Costume, A Tale, In One Volume, Addressed to the Author of Glenarvon* (London: W. Simplin and R. Marshall, 1816), p. 181.