

# Queer Gothic

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UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS  
Urbana and Chicago

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Manufactured in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 C P 5 4 3 2 1

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Haggerty, George E.

Queer Gothic / George E. Haggerty.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-252-03108-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-252-03108-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-252-07353-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-252-07353-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Gothic revival (Literature)—Great Britain.
2. Horror tales, English—History and criticism.
3. Gothic revival (Literature)—United States.
4. Horror tales, American—History and criticism.
5. Homosexuality in literature.
6. Sex in literature.

I. Title.

PR830.T3H254 2006

823'.0872909—dc22 2005035188

## Introduction

Gothic fiction emerged rather suddenly as a popular form of British fiction in the later years of the eighteenth century, starting with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Ortanto* (1764) and extending at least as far as Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). In order to explain the sudden popularity of this bizarrely outrageous yet conventional form, which reached its first apex in the 1790s, literary historians have cited aesthetic history, political unrest, literary experimentation, and personal obsession. No single account has been able to establish a reason for the popularity of gothic writing, nor have critical interpretations felt at all restricted by historical circumstances or aesthetic presuppositions. Gothic fiction has given rise to a wide range of provocative readings, and it has sustained even ahistorical accounts of personality and psyche that would have been unfathomable to those writing these sensational texts.

Recent studies of gothic fiction, such as those by Emma Clery and Robert Miles and by Edward Jacobs, have usefully extended the scope of gothic writing in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> By looking at materials earlier in the eighteenth century and reconsidering a range of writing that has often been ignored, these critics have suggested that the term *gothic* itself shifts in meaning and cultural significance throughout the period I am considering. In an earlier book I argued that the opposite of historical specificity, rather vague and often indirect historical associations, served expressive purposes that no amount of historical investigation can explain.<sup>2</sup> The peculiar and often uncanny power of eighteenth-century Gothic fiction still resists attempts to

explain it, and as useful as this recent historicizing of gothic has been, it does not radically change the way “gothic” functions as a literary device in the period under discussion. A wide range of writers, dispersed historically and culturally, use “gothic” to evoke a queer world that attempts to transgress the binaries of sexual decorum.<sup>3</sup>

What does it mean to call gothic fiction “queer”? It is no mere coincidence that the cult of gothic fiction reached its apex at the very moment when gender and sexuality were beginning to be codified for modern culture. In fact, gothic fiction offered a testing ground for many unauthorized genders and sexualities, including sodomy, tribadism, romantic friendship (male and female), incest, pedophilia, sadism, masochism, necrophilia, cannibalism, masculinized females, feminized males, miscegenation, and so on. In this sense it offers a historical model of queer theory and politics: transgressive, sexually coded, and resistant to dominant ideology. While I examine gothic fiction in order to relate it to the history of sexuality, as articulated by Michel Foucault and others, I will also describe recent works of queer theory and cultural studies in order to explore the ways in which this fiction itself is codified. Joseph Bristow offers a useful summary of the emergence of the concept of sexuality in the later nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> From that perspective these works predate sexuality’s codification. But by predating, they also prepare the ground, as I hope these pages will show, for later developments in sexological studies.

Transgressive social-sexual relations are the most basic common denominator of gothic writing, and from the moment in the early pages of Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* when the anti-hero Manfred presses his suit on the fiancée of his deceased son (and she flees into the “long labyrinth of darkness” in the “subterranean” regions of the castle), a gothic trope is fixed: terror is almost always sexual terror, and fear, and flight, and incarceration, and escape are almost always colored by the exoticism of transgressive sexual aggression.<sup>5</sup> Like other expressions of transgressive desire throughout the eighteenth century, gothic fiction is not about homo- or heterodesire as much as it is about the fact of desire itself. And throughout these works this desire is expressed as the exercise of (or resistance to) power. But that power is itself charged with a sexual force—a sexuality—that determines the action and gives it shape. By the same token, powerlessness has a similar valence and performs a similar function. This creates an odd sexual mood in most gothic works, closer to what we might crudely label “sadomasochism” (a binary that critics too readily take for granted) than to any other model of sexual interaction. That nearly a century of fiction (or more than two centuries,

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depending on how broad the definition of "gothic" is) would function in this way is in itself queer, and queer, too, is the manner in which normative sexual relations are articulated and codified. No matter how tidy, no marriage at the close of a gothic novel can entirely dispel the thrilling dys- (or different) functionality at the heart of gothic.

In this study I approach the question of "queer gothic" from a number of directions. In addition to examining the representations of same-sex desire in gothic fiction, a trope that has been variously explained by critics, including myself, I attempt to show the ways in which all normative—heteronormative, if you will—configurations of human interaction are insistently challenged and in some cases significantly undermined in these fictions.<sup>6</sup> I cannot make too broad a claim because these fictions never significantly challenge the "dominant fiction" of the age.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, however, they occur in a period that had yet to construct the elaborate superstructure of sexuality that emerged in the age of sexology at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Gothic fiction offered the one semirespectable area of literary endeavor in which modes of sexual and social transgression were discursively addressed on a regular basis. It therefore makes sense to consider the ways in which gothic fiction itself helped shape thinking about sexual matters—theories of sexuality, as it were—and create the darker shadows of the dominant fiction, the darkness that enables culture to function as a fiction in the first place.

## Gothic Fiction and the Erotics of Loss

### Poor Conrad

Poor Conrad, set up to be the hero of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), instead enters the novel as a mangled corpse, "dashed to pieces, and almost buried under [the] enormous helmet" that is the first sign of his father Manfred's future demise. His death motivates much of the gruesome action of the novel, but his broken form, this "disfigured corpse," rarely gets more than a perfunctory sigh of displeasure. It is time to look more closely at his "bleeding mangled remains" and to the place they hold in the deeper gothic plot that the novel subtly suggests.<sup>1</sup>

Manfred's hopes are crushed with the death of this "homely youth, sickly, and of no promising disposition, . . . [who] was the darling of his father" (15). The assiduousness of such affection, however displayed, render Conrad singularly unprepossessing—Manfred's love is hardly the nurturing kind—but Manfred still attempts to use the boy as a sexual prop to keep his crumbling dynasty from falling about his head. Walpole says that Manfred's "fondness for young Conrad" (17) and his "impatience for [the] ceremonial" between Conrad and Isabella, his intended, are in part the result of his fear of an "ancient prophecy" (15). In this sense, the pathetic boy represents Manfred's failure to establish a legitimate line. But he is also a sexual surrogate for Manfred, and Manfred's fondness and impatience for the nuptials suggest that he has invested the wedding with a personal erotic significance. This is confirmed as soon as Conrad's body has been carried away. Instead of mentioning his wife or daughter, Manfred urges his servants to "take care of the lady Isabella"

(19). If his little darling cannot perform the ritual that privilege and power require, Manfred decides, he will have to marry the girl himself.

Isabella “felt no concern for the death of young Conrad” (20) but learns to her dismay that Manfred’s concern will lead to her own victimization. By pressing his suit for her hand, Manfred causes her to flee, and the flight of Isabella within the gloomy confines of the castle’s subterranean regions is one of the set pieces of the novel. This is not coincidentally the first gothic moment of erotic fear: “The lower part of the castle was hollowed into several intricate cloisters; and it was not easy for one under so much anxiety to find the door that opened into the cavern. An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions, except now and then some blasts of wind that shook the doors she had passed, and which grating on the rusty hinges were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness” (27).

Walpole may not have known that he was offering terms for what would come to be known as “female gothic,” but he did understand that female vulnerability had great fictional potential. Here Walpole does what becomes the hallmark of gothic fiction: In a single image he combines the sexual anxiety of a victimized female, the incestuous desire of a libidinous male, the use of the actual physical features of the castle to represent political and sexual entrapment, and an atmosphere deftly rendered to produce terror and gloom. The scene, retold hundreds of times in gothic fiction, is absolutely basic to the form. Because he understands that gothic fiction can represent abject terror and frenzied aggression in ways other fiction only approximates, Walpole’s depiction of this moment, and others like it, takes on talismanic importance in the history of gothic fiction.

In a simple and practical way, the loss of Conrad as his own sexual agent leads Manfred on a sexual rampage that results in his brutal rejection of his wife Hippolita, the near-rape of his son’s fiancée Isabella, and the grisly murder of his daughter Matilda, his one other hope for legitimacy. A gothic novel is about fear, specifically erotic fear, and the ways in which desire renders the family a hotbed, as Foucault might say, of sexualized brutality and nightmarish erotic tensions. But this sexual excess, this dysfunctionality, is traceable to that original moment of loss. If Conrad had lived—that is, if that vaguely homoerotic pact between powerful father and pitiful son had been allowed to survive—the structure of family, of community, and of culture would have been different. Of course, the loss of Conrad is already a given when the novel opens; his death enables the fiction. The paternal rampage is directly the result of the loss and disappointment that Conrad represents. But this fiction of paternal license is not just any fiction; it is the “dominant

fiction," not just of gothic literature but also of Western culture in a larger sense.<sup>2</sup> Manfred's anger, his sexual voraciousness, and his deep regret are the qualities that begin to define subjectivity in Western culture, as Freud would point out. The practical loss of an heir, in other words, hints at a deeper loss as well. No one in the novel puts that deeper loss into words, but everyone feels its force, and a pall of melancholy hangs over the work even at its close, where Theodore, a young peasant, chooses Isabella because with her he can "forever indulge the melancholy that had taken possession of his soul" (110). Walpole creates a melancholic mood in this first gothic novel as a way of exploring his peculiar version of erotic desire: a desire founded on loss.