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Review of *The Contested Castle: The Gothic Novel and the Subversion of the Domestic Ideology* by Kate Ellis

Diane Hoeveler
Marquette University, diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu

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Diane Long Hoeveler

English, Marquette University

Milwaukee, WI

Kate Ellis's purpose in *The Contested Castle* is to examine the relationship between two "epi-phenomena of middle-class culture: the idealization of the home and the popularity of the Gothic" (pp. ix-x). According to Ellis, the point of connection between the two is the female reader, a newly empowered figure, eagerly courted by publishers for her discretionary time and income. The new gothic novels that these women read so voraciously, however, did not simply reinforce the gender constructions that late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century capitalist culture proffered. The gothic novel also worked to subvert those constructions, particularly the ideology that imprisoned middle-class women in their homes, like so many captive Eves in a fictitious paradise regained.

Ellis initially substantiates her thesis by pointing to the development of the "separate spheres" ideology, clearly distinguishing not only women from men, but also the middle-class hearth from the chaos and potential violence inherent in the growing lower-class urban centers. After this extremely brief sketch of historical conditions, Ellis

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claims: "Thus the middle-class idealization of the home, though it theoretically protected a woman in it from arbitrary male control, gave her little real protection against male anger. Rather, it was her endangered position that was so ideologically useful, allowing her to stand for the class itself, beset on all sides by aristocratic license and lower-class violence" (p. xi). One wonders, however, why Ellis fails on this last point to use Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, volume 1, there by missing an opportunity to place her argument about the reification of gothic sexuality into the highly contextualize discourse-system to which it so rightly belongs.

The psychological sources for the reification of gothic sexuality (institutionalized paranoia, hysteria, and manic depression) are noticeably absent or treated in a perfunctory fashion in this volume. Ellis's major contribution along this line appears to be her claim that two cultures inhabited the gothic psychic landscape: the "guilt culture," characterized by negative thoughts and an obsession with real or imagined guilt, and the "shame culture," marked by its adherence to codes of honor and ritualized public acts for preserving a man's reputation (p. 158). Both of these cultures are, as Ellis rightly contends, manifestations of male created ideologies the first epitomized by the Catholic confessional (she cites Foucault on this point) and the second institutionalized as chivalry (essentially a homoerotic exchange system between men, using women as objects of exchange, fetishized commodities). Again, one wonders why she has not buttressed both of these arguments by recourse to the central discussions of both in Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language* and *Powers of Horror*.

Although the book is not as well researched as one would hope and its explications of the novels are fairly predictable, it does have an interesting organization and makes some suggestive statements about specific cultural trends. Divided into four sections, it begins by examining "The Myth of the Fall and the Rise of the Heroine," using the Miltonic paradigm to claim that the extension of Protestant impulses into "the secular domain of home and family involve[d] nothing less than a modification of the myth of the fall itself" (p. 31).

Building on the image of an enclosed garden, Ellis structures the next two sections on "the narrative point of view in relation to an idealized, imaginary recovered Eden where domestic life could flourish" (p. 57). The second part explores what Ellis calls "Insider Narratives,"

the novels of Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee, Charlotte Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Ann Radcliffe. For these early female gothic writers, the genre provided the means to explore women's powerlessness in marriage, the danger of giving way to sexual passion without appropriate legal protection (that is, marriage), and the stifling limitations imposed on women by the ideology of separate spheres. The third part of the book," Outsider Narratives," neatly reverses the perspective. Here Ellis examines the male gothicists — Matthew Gregory Lewis, William Godwin, and Charles Robert Maturin — and their use of the "vampire" theme. Throughout these "male" texts the "vampire-exile is not only doomed to sustain himself off the blood of his victims but compelled to confine his infernal visitations to those beings he loved most while upon earth, those to whom he was bound by ties of kindred and affection" (p . 149). Alas, Ellis fails to develop at any length the barely disguised homoerotic sexuality or castration anxiety implicit in the male vampire.

The last section consists solely of a discussion of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* while the epilogue examines Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. In *Frankenstein*, according to Ellis, both Victor and Walton participate in the persistent male fantasy of a "band of brothers" united in unfettered individualism an ideology particularly suited to life in a "shame culture." Women function in this society as saviors only by virtue of their attachment to the home and their sacred duties as mothers. Shelley demolishes the ideology of separate spheres, but Ellis claims that "women are even worse off in the world of honor and shame than they are in the home: the intellectual and sexual sides of their nature have as little place in the extradomestic sphere of male domination as they do in the home" (p. 204). For Ellis, *Wuthering Heights* stands as the gothic novel most clearly linked to *Paradise Lost* through its themes — the necessary resistance to arbitrary authority, usurpation, primogeniture, imprisonment, marriage choice, and the war of a sinister religion against innocence. Her most original observation about the novel concerns the application of Nancy Chodorow's theory of the gendered gaze to the "gender asymmetry" in the gothic novel. In conclusion, Ellis argues that "men usurp the home from other men, [but] the real usurpation seems to be the power of women that they have erased, or which women have surrendered the price of integration into a culture that 'placed' them in the home" (p. 218). The gothic novel clearly is concerned with power — its

appropriation, its misuse, its cooptation, its sexual nature. Ellis succeeds in touching on the central issues here, but her discussions are not developed with the critical skill or depth that they deserve.