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Review of *Women's Gothic: From Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley* by Emma J. Clery

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E. J. Clery, Women's Gothic: From Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley (Devon: Northcote House Publishers, 2000). 168 pp.

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Emma Clery's new book, Women's Gothic, is an extremely readable and informative addition to the growing bibliography on the "female gothic," works that focus specifically on defining and interpreting gothic literature written by British women. As a volume in the series "Writers and Their Work," the book is designed to introduce undergraduate students to a particular writer or in this case, a genre. Concise, jargon-free, and economically priced, the book would be an excellent addition to any undergraduate course on the Female Gothic.

The volume is not a simple undergraduate trot, however, for it puts forward a thesis that has not been used before to explain the growth of the female gothic: the career and sheer presence of the tragic actress Sarah Siddons. In her Introduction Clery states, "I will be arguing that, in precise ways, Radcliffe's example constitutes a Siddonian paradigm, an enabling condition for women's Gothic" (4). For Clery, it is Siddons's most famous role, that of Lady MacBeth, that allowed her to appropriate the "cultural capital of the national genius, Shakespeare," and in turn allowed women writers to assert their own "capacity for sublimity in general" (5). It was in their cultivation of an androgynous pose, imbued both with reason and passion, that the female writers tapped into the prevailing cultural ethos. Siddons playing both Hamlet and Lady MacBeth became an important trope for the female gothicists, who realized that they could write successful literature if they could combine the "masculine" genre of history with the "feminine" one of romance and ghost stories. The new genre they refined combined Walpole with the conventions of sentimental fiction, producing a heady blend of tragicomedy

designed to appeal to a new literate population anxious to consume the latest new luxury commodity, the novel.

Clery very usefully attempts to position the female gothic within the literary and social context of passion, the sublime, and the popular growth of the theater. She also, however, follows the direction she took in her Supernatural Fiction by discussing the “dynamic nature of the texts as objects of exchange and as leisure commodities—that is the *investment* of female writers and their public in passion becomes apparent” (14). But as she points out, “the threat of female consumption of passion could not be resolved” until the early years of the nineteenth century when “romances were reconceived as harmless escapism, unlikely to be confused with reality” (18). For Clery, women won acceptance as writers through their growing stature in the marketplace, and she summarizes the key issues in her analysis of all of these authors: 1) they legitimated the visionary imagination in women writers; 2) they successfully represented the passions; 3) they explored the nature of “original genius” and “the sublime,” and by doing so they participated in the “trans-generic resurgence of tragedy towards the end of the eighteenth century” (23).

The first chapter, on Clara Reeve and Sophia Lee, examines the evolution of The Old English Baron (1778), the first “female gothic,” a work clearly imitative of Walpole’s Castle of Otranto (1764). Clery’s discussion of this novel is largely plot summary, but she does suggest helpfully that Reeve “sought to engage readers on multiple levels, through the marvellous, the probable and the sentimental” (31). The female gothic as a genre, of course, had to navigate these three literary postures, and the next major work in the field to attempt to do so was Sophia Lee’s The Recess (1783-5). Clery sets her analysis of this novel into the literary and theatrical history of Bath, where Sarah Siddons performed in 1778, as well as the historical context of the

Gordon riots, which revealed the continuing conflict in Britain between Catholics and Protestants. Asking, “how are scenes of violent conflict and suffering represented to enable their pleasurable consumption by the reader,?” Clery answers by way of discussing the novel as a tragic autobiography, a memoir that became “a showcase and medium for the passions” (44).

The second section contains a discussion of all of Ann Radcliffe’s novels, including the usually neglected first and last works, The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne (1789) and Gaston de Blondville (1826). Clery’s technique here is to look closely at what she labels Radcliffe’s “literary banditry,” or the technique of borrowing from others a variety of quotations as epigraphs throughout her novels. As she reveals, Radcliffe used the method to create “an authorial persona of the novel outsider in a fallen world of commodified literary production through her display of cultivated sensibility, her dramatized admiration for her ‘kidnapped’ texts from Shakespeare, Milton and company” (54). After an extended discussion of the use of this technique in Radcliffe, Clery analyzes each of the major novels in turn. Her emphasis in all of these discussions is on Radcliffe’s evolving theme and organizing principle: “the heroine-as-original-genius” (68). Viewing the novels as ideological sites where the issues of the day can be debated, Clery sees Radcliffe concerned with such questions as the relation of taste and virtue (70), dream and reality (72), or urban vs. rural sensibilities (61). By charting the shift of narrative focus from the heroine to the villain, Clery understands the character of Schedoni as Radcliffe’s final “authorial ideal”: “his skill [is in] eliciting and reading the passions of others. By possessing this ability, the complex villain becomes the counterpart of the author, displacing the heroine from her reflexive function, just as she is displaced by him as the affective centre of the narrative” (81). If passion becomes the criterion by which we gauge the narrative center of a text, then such a reading is plausible. But not many readers would find Radcliffe’s “ideal” to be

located in Schedoni.

The third chapter looks at the gothic dramas of Joanna Baillie in tandem with the gothic poetry and novels of Charlotte Dacre, aka “Rosa Matilda.” As Baillie wrote more than 20 plays in her lifetime, several of which contain gothic themes and elements, Clery has wisely chosen to focus on only two of the most clearly gothic of the dramas—“De Monfort” and “Orra.” Both of these works are examples of “interiorized Gothic,” dramas in which some evil emotion or fantasy takes root in the main characters and eventually kills or drives them insane (89). Clery positions her discussion of Baillie against the more recent feminist attempts to present her as marginalized during her own lifetime: “Baillie was intent on demonstrating her ability as a woman to rival men in the display of genius, not on defining an alternative feminine aesthetic” (91). Such a position puts Clery directly at odds with Anne Mellor’s recent Mothers of the Nation (2000) or Catherine Burroughs’s Closet Stages (1997), but for Clery the crucial issue in approaching all of these writers were that they were not victims of a male-dominated marketplace, but were instead shrewd manipulators of the Siddonian pose: “[they were] determined above all to make their mark in the literary world, and were willing to use the most powerful—and most ideologically arresting—means to do so” (91). Charlotte Dacre is another, more problematic writer altogether. Her four novels and several poems all indicate her attempt to imitate Lewis, but her most infamous tribute to him came in her novel Zofloya, a work I have analyzed as a strange blend of camp, xenophobia, racism, and anti-catholicism. Clery’s discussion again gives us a lot of the novel’s plot, but she very helpfully situates the work within the corpus of Dacre’s other works, as well as her father’s career.

The final chapter discusses Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and her novella on father-daughter incest, Mathilda.. Again, the discussions are conducted largely in relation to the

family history of Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Percy Shelley's own productions and their obvious influence on Mary. In her zeal to situate Mary's work only in relation to the literary history that directly impinged on her work, Clery differentiates her approach from other feminist and psychoanalytical methods that have been used recently to discuss these works: "All too often this episode [the father's confession of incestuous desire] has been misinterpreted as a display of the heroine's victimage, or even more naively, as a vicarious expression of Shelley's own sense of victimage. This is reductionism at its worst; the tactic of critics who prefer the role of amateur psychoanalyst to that of literary historian" (137). As someone who could be accused of "amateur psychoanalysis," I know that texts are not written in a completely historical, social, economic context, and to deny the personal is to occlude the deepest sources of creativity for any artist. But critics need not agree as to method, and obviously we never will. Clery has provided some new and valuable historical material, and for that she is to be commended. Her avoidance of the psychoanalytic is interesting to say the least in works that to me literally cry out for such an approach

Although we may ultimately differ on critical methodology, the advantages of using and consulting this work are many. It presents a range of materials, as well as the incorporation of theatrical material not generally brought into an examination of the female gothic. I hope its publication signals a growth in undergraduate courses in the Female Gothic, and a growing status for a genre that has been misunderstood, if not relegated to the footnotes of literary history.

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