

and culture. Despite these absences, the book analyzes an impressive range of material from many different genres and sub-genres, and its analyses of major novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Clarissa* are usefully brought into dialogue with close readings of more peripheral texts to the field of literary studies, including the political writings of Robert Filmer, James Tyrrell, and Algernon Sidney as well as works by Delarivier Manley and Haywood that blur the boundary between political and novelistic writing. The final result is a project that employs a unique focus as it contributes to our growing awareness of ongoing politically charged debates and tensions in eighteenth-century British culture, which, in turn, complicate inherited master narratives of the rise of the individual, the rise of the middle class, and the rise of the realist novel.

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Carol Margaret Davison. *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature 1764–1824*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009. xvi+368pp. £19.99. ISBN 978-0-7083-2045-7.

Gothic Literature, 1764–1824 integrates a timely and well-researched introductory overview of British Gothic literature in its earliest phase with a clarifying examination of the often dismissive critical reception-history of the Gothic canon. One of the most recognizable features of this study includes a streamlined reconception of the contested category of the “female Gothic.” Davison offers her book, the first in a four-volume series commissioned as “A History of the Gothic,” as a “springboard into Gothic Studies” and a practical and engaging resource for “the novice and specialist alike” (21). She supports this pragmatic agenda with an extensive and accessible set of notes, supplementary materials, and appendices. While Davison focuses largely on the novel and the usual hit list of Gothic authors, she also takes her reader into less familiar terrain. The real strength of this book lies less in its readerly utility, accessibility, and scope than in the way it weaves together various strands into a coherent argument about the generic identity, aesthetic and political vitality, and historical trajectory of the Gothic tradition without sacrificing the unique and convergent interests of the specific texts it examines.

Driven by a sensitivity to anachronism and a desire to disambiguate overwrought categories and debates, Davison’s main goal is to contextualize her subject as a corrective to a number of “longstanding

anti-Gothic biases” and the equally “dehistoricizing” effects of some theoretically “heavy-handed” trends in current scholarship (3, 11, 12). Davison argues persuasively that the modern impulse to privilege contemporary theory produces a kind of historical myopia or theoretical narcissism whereby critics lose sight of the singular peculiarities of text and context in the process. Her first chapter asks “why, in the so-called Age of Reason, was there a seemingly insatiable appetite for the irrational, in the form of the Gothic novel,” which “focused its lens on a past seemingly far removed from eighteenth-century realities?” (24). In support of the claim that the Gothic emerges as a natural and predictable “response to the trauma of modernity,” Davison firmly embeds the Gothic in its cultural, intellectual, and political context as a revolutionary mode of critical historical consciousness (51).

The second chapter explores the many sources that converge in Horace Walpole’s ur-Gothic text *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and the elemental and thematic ingredients that cohere in his paradigmatic Gothic “recipe.” In response to scholars who have recently defined the Gothic less as a tradition with a clearly defined generic identity than as a contentious domain structured by authorial antagonisms, Davison—in a self-consciously provocative, if theoretically uncanny, move—overtly embraces a structuralist anatomy and suggests a progressive history of dialogue in order to validate the Gothic’s generic integrity and the continuity of its development. She concludes with a brief account of Clara Reeve’s middle-class corrective appropriation of Walpole’s recipe in *The Old English Baron*, which Davison sees as an important and “necessary bridge” to the monumental works of Ann Radcliffe, the textual focus of the following chapter (81).

In chapter 3, Davison sets out to redefine and revitalize the vexed category of the “Female Gothic,” a “sub-genre” or “branch of Gothic fiction”: “perhaps the most useful and uncontroversial definition of this classification would be limited to its narrative focus—namely, on a female, as opposed to a male, protagonist” (91). Though characterizing the foundational efforts of authors such as Ann Radcliffe as representing a “branch” or “sub-genre” of Gothic fiction seems to belie their centrality, Davison’s open-handed reconception of the term serves nicely to contextualize female concerns within the Gothic tradition. Davison argues that, despite recent claims about her meek and conservative position, Radcliffe sparked a “proto-feminist/middle-class cultural ‘revolution’” (86, 99).

Continuing in this vein, chapter 4 examines the Gothic’s efflorescence during the French Revolution and its suitability, and more radical appropriation, for domestic socio-political criticism and psychological exploration. While Davison here explores a wide range of cultural phenomena as well as offering thoughtful accounts of Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* and William Beckford’s *Vathek*, her primary focus is on

William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*. While traditional Gothic novels were set in the distant past and in Roman Catholic countries, Davison credits *Caleb Williams* with being the first narrative experiment to "bring the Gothic home" by bringing it to bear more explicitly on contemporary British politics and the inner workings of human consciousness—an engaging move Davison uses to conceptualize the overall developmental trajectory of the Gothic mode.

Chapter 5 examines Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*, Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya; or the Moor*, and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. Influenced by Godwin's domestication of the Gothic, all three texts confront and thereby bring home Radcliffe's conventional Female Gothic recipe. Far from repudiating Radcliffe's efforts, by challenging the Female Gothic's conventional parameters of female characterization, they actually fortify its ability to act as a contemporary "vehicle for feminist socio-political critique" (143).

The final three chapters continue to trace the ongoing evolution of Godwin's revitalizing domestication of the Gothic as it morphs and interfaces with various other interdependently evolving literary forms. Chapter 6, for example, explores how many Romantics—from William Wordsworth to Mary Shelley—appropriated a Gothic language and symbology and often veiled their "substantial Gothic 'borrowings'" (167). Chapter 7 considers the way in which Walter Scott's *Waverley* and the historical novel, as well as works such as Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, internalize Gothic strategies in order to render national histories and psychic experience "more realistic and problematic" (195). The Gothic, which emerged in part as a critique of the early realist aesthetic, thus provides many newer generic developments, including the Victorian Gothic—the subject of her brief but suggestive final chapter—with dynamic and singular ways to realistically interrogate modern subjectivity.

Studiously reflecting the exponential growth of critical interest in Gothic studies, especially in recent years, this book is testimony to how far scholarship in the field has come. *Gothic Literature, 1764–1824* provides some much-needed coherence to a burgeoning field and is an intelligent, reader-friendly, and thought-provoking study of Gothic fiction in its earliest stages and beyond. This book will be of much use to students and scholars alike.

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