

Call for Essays (edited collection)

Subversion and Transgression through the Unspeakable: Perspectives on Queerness and Gender in the Gothic

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During its long history, the Gothic has produced a rich narrative tradition – and rather divisive reactions. Some critics, such as Ian Watt, went as far as to attest the Gothic novel “little intrinsic merit” and regarding the genre as a “literary degradation” (290), however the sheer quantity of highly fascinating research on the Gothic questions this devaluation of the genre. Indeed, the Gothic has often been enjoyed and criticised in equal measure for playing with the forbidden, with taboo and silenced subject matter. This opens up a whole range of interesting opportunities for social commentary; since the second half of the twentieth century, the critical voices that attest the Gothic not only literary merit, but show that the genre possesses some highly interesting (re-)negotiations of contemporary socio-political criticism have abounded (see for example Crawford; Graham; James Watt).

Elaborating on this perspective, we find that it is the Gothic’s transgressive and subversive potential that makes it such a pertinent and interesting genre, which allows for a plethora of (deviant) readings. In particular, we are interested in gender and sexuality as a lens for studying transgression and subversion in the Gothic through the ages, from 1764 until today. We understand the Gothic as an umbrella term that now spans several genres such as horror, ghost stories, mystery, noir, dark fantasy, and pulp fiction in the tradition of the Penny Dreadfuls. Overall, the Gothic is characterised by elements such as the uncanny, the sublime and/or the supernatural, and an atmosphere of mystery and suspense.

In both the male and female Gothic (to use Ellen Moers’ term) of the long eighteenth century, gender and gender roles attained a transgressive slant. With its highly self-reliant heroines in the female Gothic and troubled hero-villains struggling with their desires and vices in the male Gothic, the genre has traditionally questioned the limits of usefulness of gender roles, illustrating how adhering too strictly to ideals of femininity and masculinity can go wrong. As a result, Gothic texts frequently deviate from the moral code of the eighteenth century and can be read as subverting the gendered norms of the day – a trait that later Gothic narratives have maintained, modified and played on.

Gothic narratives have also long been uncommonly comfortable with portraying transgressive behaviours in terms of sexuality and what we would term ‘queer identities’ today. More than just subverting standards of femininity and masculinity, the Gothic also tends to engage with gender-nonconformity to a more radical degree, breaking the binary mould completely, rejecting gendered standards and consistently embedding queer-coded characters and deviant desires into their stories. From the almost strikingly overt homoeroticism in Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* or Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to the allusions to erotic power exchange in Collins’s *The Woman in White*, to contemporary writers like Anne Rice and Kirsty Logan, the Gothic always has been interested in queer and transgressive sexuality. This phenomenon is well-documented (see for example Fincher, Haefele-Thomas, Haggerty, Hughes, Palmer, and Westengard); what we are interested in adding to the discussion is an updated, diachronic and more broadly transmedial perspective.

The aim of this edited collection is to explore the Gothic’s potential for transgression and subversion concerning gender and sexuality, from the long eighteenth century until today. We specifically invite contributions on both traditional and new media, ranging from eighteenth-century Gothic novels to twenty-first century horror podcasts. Topics for chapters may include but are not limited to:

- Gothic femininities: heroines, femmes fatales, gendered morality and social mores, negotiating/reconciling the female self in adversity
- Gothic masculinities: The brooding villain vs the (inept) hero and other types of male characters, types of masculinity and their transgressive potential, queer coding and atypical/non-stereotypical expressions of masculinity
- Queer identity, desire and sexuality in the Gothic: latent and overt homoeroticism, explorations of sexuality as rebellion and counter-culture, rejection of gender-norms, non-binary and trans characters, queer bodies and communities in the Gothic, queer style and the Gothic castle as home of the Other, monstrosity as a narrative strategy for enabling discussion of taboo(ed) queer topics, Gothic texts and their relationship to queer tropes (e.g. 'Bury your Gays')
- Gothic medialities: How do transgressions of media boundaries reinforce or undercut the transgressive content of Gothic narratives? How do media-specific rules of representation (or their subversion) comment on issues of gender and/or queerness?
- Marginalisation and intersectionality: the compounding of marginalised identities in audiences and fan culture vs. lack of intersectional representation in the (traditional) Gothic, intersectional perspectives in Gothic narratives, Gothic tropes and the intersections of factors of (dis)advantage, including but not limited to race, gender, class, disability, sexual and romantic orientation, nationality, and religion (at least one of the factors under consideration should be either gender or sexual/romantic orientation)
- Power hierarchies in the Gothic: renegotiating the suppressor and the suppressed, gender relations in power structures (families, politics, economic position, etc.), laws and regulations impacting the (lack of) representation of queer or non-normative characters

Please send your abstract of c. 300 words as well as a mini-biography to the editors Sarah Faber and Kerstin-Anja Mürderlein via e-mail to transgressivegothic.2021@gmail.com until 01 March 2022. Full papers of 5,000 to 6,000 words will be due on 01 October 2022.

References

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- Haggerty, George E. *Queer Gothic*. U of Illinois P, 2006.
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- Westengard, Laura. *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma*. U of Nebraska P, 2019.