

Book Reviews

When the Dust Settles . . . (Double Review)

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The Gothic and Catholicism: Religion, Cultural Exchange and the Popular Novel, 1785–1829, by Maria Purves. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009. Pp. 228. \$36.82. ISBN: 9780708320914.

The Gothic Ideology: Religious Hysteria and Anti-Catholicism in British Popular Fiction, 1780–1880, by Diane Long Hoeveler. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014. Pp. 361. \$115.04. ISBN: 9781783160488.

These two books represent aspects of a fascinating contemporary debate in the field of Gothic studies about the role of religion in the formation of the language and textual forms of the Gothic. Maria Purves's lively and articulate book (2009) presents a dissenting historical challenge to the prevailing critical orthodoxy on the Gothic, which she sees as rather unthinkingly and unhistorically dominated by the theme of Whig anti-Catholicism. She emphasises the influence of French sentimental pro-Catholic writing under the *ancien regime*—Mme de Tençin, Mme de Genlis, and Baculard D'Arnaud—and links the tone of that conventual, proclerical tradition (*le drame monacal*) to the influential poem "Eloisa and Abelard" of Alexander Pope. Purves argues that the sublime tone of this writing represents the cloister, not as a place of horror, but of female devotion and spirituality, an image that feeds into the counter-revolutionary popular Gothic of the 1790s via Burke's spirited defence of Marie Antoinette and all she stood for, including the "old Religion" and the values of chivalry, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Burke and then the Duke of Wellington gave great support to the emancipation of the Catholic Irish. Purves argues convincingly that a pro-Catholic Tory tradition was already influential amongst middle-class and aristocratic readers in the earlier eighteenth century and was reflected in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. That publication had already appropriated the cult of sensibility to describe female responses to conventual life and would have supported the Catholic Relief acts of the 1780s and 1790s, feeling no alarm whatsoever, it seems, about the Gordon riots. Prompted by the clarion call of Burke to defend "superstition" against "democracy" (i.e., the atheistical mob in Paris), it sprang into action to support the 5,000 or so exiled Catholic clergy, including Jesuits, who fled to England after the suppression of their Church by the Revolution in France. In the end, this sentimental tradition, Purves argues, turns into hard pro-Catholic moral doctrine ("the antiseccular Christian moral backlash") in the era after Waterloo. She points to the later founding of the great public schools of Ampleforth and Downside from this era; and she argues that the earlier Catholic Relief Acts would not have been passed at all, unless Royal tolerance and parliamentary support for Catholicism had not already existed.

One of the test questions for a definition of the Gothic based on anti-Catholic rhetoric is, Can there in theory be a Catholic Gothic? Purves's answer is a resounding "Yes." She sets

out to provide the evidence and, it should be said, she has a sharp eye for a text. Much of this book is useful, and it is thought provoking as an exercise of the reason. It is good to be reminded of some of the finer grain, and to have some of the details amplified, such as the content of each Relief Act (21–2, n.45). Some sense of the contestation built into the late eighteenth-century Gothic was already conveyed in the excellent *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* by Maggie Kilgour (1995), a book which saw the Gothic tradition as split between (and sometimes sutured, in Frankensteinian fashion, out of) the conservative and radical ideologies of Burke and Godwin respectively. But Kilgour is not mentioned.

The difficulties for the reader spring up at the point where Purves's account of the details of this neglected cultural history is offered as the basis for adjusting the perceived bias of the secondary literature via re-readings of a relatively small amount of direct empirical evidence: some canonical Gothic novels (Sophia Lee, yes; and Ann Radcliffe, to an extent; but Matthew Lewis seems hard to make fit beyond a very superficial point, and Charles Maturin tantamount to impossible) and a relatively small number of pulp Gothic fictions and chapbooks (Eleanor Sleath [5], William Ireland, Catherine Selden [5], Charlotte Dacre, Louisa Stanhope [2], Richard Warner, Sarah Wilkinson, and a few more). There is sometimes a danger that "Gothic," in Purves's account, might ultimately have no more *critical* sense than something like the formula: "a narrative set in a Cloister which praises conventual life."

But it would be unfair to Purves's book, which has made a definite impact on recent criticism of the Gothic, to reduce its argument to an exaggerated empirical quibble, despite the misleading polemics of her introduction, and the homily she reads to the scholarly community about the need for "wide reading" in her conclusion. The main thrust of her discussion is not an argument about the nature or volume of evidence at all, but an impassioned defence of certain cultural values, and she inevitably raises some difficult questions on the way. Talking of the equivocal nature of Beckford's attitude to Catholicism, for example, and reprovingly noting the "caution" of one past commentator, she asks, rhetorically, "Where does psychological appreciation end and spiritual response begin?" (79). Purves's answer seems to be that, in questions of religious belief, aesthetics are subsumable under ideology, whatever the apparent contradictions.

Diane Hoeveler's new book—provoked, at least in part, as she makes clear (28–9), by the challenge of Purves's claims—specifically sets out to bridge the gap between an account of the Gothic as an aesthetic (Michael Gamer) and as "an ideology with specific thematic content and concerns" (Robert Miles), by "reading the Gothic through genre mutations and thematic ideology" (266, n.6). Hoeveler's much broader, more inclusive frame is nothing less than the ambivalent nature of secularization itself, and the Gothic (with all its contradictions, which she calls ideological "bifurcation") figures for her as "cultural work." *The Ideology of the Gothic* is a pendant to her earlier prize-winning study of the Europe-wide "remediation" of the Gothic, *Gothic Riffs* (2010), and, within that conceptual frame, it offers a new, and potentially exhaustive, layer of archive trawl: 1,100 items. While the previous study selectively targeted a whole range of genres in the much larger field of Europe (opera, ballad, drama, melodrama, and chapbook), citing whatever traditions and contexts and debates in the relevant secondary literature were needful for analysis, this new book sets out to demonstrate, almost exclusively, in five long chapters crammed with new material, the consistent and continuous presence of the ideological level in the popular Anglo-Saxon Gothic over the range of the whole tradition (i.e., from Henry VIII on), together with French, German, and Spanish imports, up to 1880. Thereafter, she has no space, beyond a few sketchy but tantalising glimpses, to demonstrate the presence of Protestant propaganda in what she calls (in Gallic fashion) "the British lower-class imaginary" of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. I haven't much doubt that she would be able to perform this feat too, since—

incredibly, even as I write—we in these isles still live in a Protestant Monarchy. Some things

never change; but that is precisely Hoeveler's point, though she appeals to a rather utopian-looking historical end-point: "when the dust settled and the Protestant individual emerged, a bit the worse for wear . . ." (5). Is this the dust of modernism, or the dust of the second World War? When *did* this dust settle? Has it indeed settled now?

Of course, there's not much point in asking questions outside the limits that Hoeveler prescribes for herself. But it is fair to say that her contention in this book is that, through burrowing down into the undergrowth of the vast archive of truly popular Gothic, including pornography, she can demonstrate, through the very rationale of repetition ("remediation") itself, the presence of a fundamental link between the apparently very diverse media of popular genres, the nature of their repeated tropes, and the contemporary pressure points, beginning in 1536, that historically determine the cultural agenda of anti-Catholic propaganda.

This intention is not new, as she readily admits in her numerous acknowledgments of debts to earlier commentators, but the intensity of concentration and the sheer scope of her account certainly is; I know no discussion of this subject as consistently informative or that displays such a lust for empirical evidence as this one. What's new is its exhaustiveness: her (self-confessed) manic collector's need to boldly go, the thoroughness of her desire, not to consult the archive, but to establish its extent and its authenticity, despite the repetitive nature of its materials.

For example, she announces the beginning of this tradition of anti-Catholic propaganda rhetoric in the pretext that Henry VIII's lawyers drew up for him in 1536, the so-called, *Compendium compertorum* ("List of things ascertained"—curiously, Hoeveler does not translate the Latin for the reader), the report on what supposedly went on in the convents and monasteries that formed the moral basis (read "pretext") for his Dissolution—namely, the sodomy of monks, the hidden passages facilitating sexual contact between monks and nuns, and the hundreds of tiny skeletons of babies reportedly found buried within the walls. Couple that with the recent work by Franz Potter and others on the "lowest" strands of all in this tradition—the humble bluebooks and chapbooks by authors like Sarah Wilkinson of Norwich (which Purves also draws on)—and Hoeveler's self-confessed collecting mania is reflected in, or even fuelled by, the objective expansion of the archive itself. This winningly open account has an epic thoroughness that is designed, not only to surpass, but to put all previous commentary on the subject to shame.

So, do we have a bottom-up or a top-down definition of the Gothic genre? You would imagine it would be the latter. A key aspect, for example, is her emphasis on the frailty of the Whig/Hanoverian ascendancy; the Papacy, it seems, did not recognise the legitimacy of the regime until the death of the Old Pretender in 1766. But despite her emphasis on the volume of archival evidence she has been able to capture, Hoeveler is no blind empiricist: her intention is to further the agenda of "ambivalent secularisation" which drove her earlier book and to bridge the gap between Robert Miles's 2002 Kristevan rationalisation of Hume into a version of ideology (Catholics in the eighteenth century are "screens" for the abjection of Dissent by [established?] Protestants) and Michael Gamer's print-culture and market-led aesthetic approach (5), also published in 2002. These cast the Gothic as the "evil twin" of Romanticism, an inflammatory spectrum of hyperbolic and violent aesthetic effects, from which Wordsworth and Coleridge were obliged to distance themselves on the grounds of reputation and market-credibility. Hoeveler's framing synthesis thus is an amalgam of these two discourses and a visibly eclectic construct:

a reactionary, demonized and feudal Catholicism is created in order to stand in opposition to the modern Protestant individual, who then alternately combats and

flirts with this uncanny double in a series of cultural productions that we recognize as Gothic novels. (3)

The characteristic tropes of the popular Gothic are common elements of this demonizing propaganda recreated in the eighteenth century by a Whig and Hanoverian Protestant ascendancy nervous about its legitimacy, for the consumption of an expanding audience of almost illiterate working-class counterparts, whose links to (established?) Protestantism needed reinforcing. The remediation of the Gothic is thus an embodiment of the conflicts that a divided Protestant audience feels at different levels of its desires. Hoeveler quotes Linda Colley to this effect, too. This argument makes sense and provides the book with a recognisable garment in which to dress the profusion of empirical data that the author is (to do her credit) often, not just collecting, but reinterpreting.

One nagging problem which is not addressed in the book: Hoeveler, at different points in her text, gives the reader a different impression as to exactly what the truth content of Henry VIII's *Compendium compertorum* actually might have been. Perhaps this cannot be known. Out of 17 references in the index, several indicate that these charges were not necessarily founded in truth. On page 202, for example, the phrase "purported discovery" appears to suggest a weakening of the charge of sodomy's truth-content; at other times these charges are also said to have been "a scathing and substantially accurate series of reports" (201). The main point of this document, of course, is that its charges are repeated ad infinitum in the pornographic propaganda that stemmed from them in a number of "type-scenes"; but inevitably the question arises as to the degree to which the document is bogus.

Hoeveler's very impressive book gets better as it goes on. For me, the chapter on the Inquisition, "The Foreign Threat," has a European dimension that connects things up in the print landscape of European culture, not just in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Little ripples of fresh connection appear on every page. The final chapter on the rhetoric of Protestant "bad conscience" in the sublime descriptions of ruined abbeys and the ideology of antiquarianism is one of the best things I have read on the Gothic for a very long time. It exposes the ideological contradiction at the heart of antiquarian discourse, which goes back to the *Compendium compertorum* and Henry's dissolution of the Abbeys, and exposes some contradictions in the fetishism of, for example, Netley Abbey. Amid the welter of details to which one could draw attention, there are two marvellous passages quoted in support, one from Horace Walpole and the other from Anna Letitia Barbauld, that illustrate perfectly the contradictory nature of this rhetoric. The frame of Hoeveler's discussion, we realise towards the end of her book, is also created out of a dialogue with Horkheimer and Adorno on popular culture. The question of anti-Semitism in Europe (replete itself with "bad conscience") and the theme of the scapegoated Other lie behind her account of the complex discursive bifurcations of Protestant ideology. From now on, any editor of a Gothic text will need to consult this extraordinary book.