

A Brief Overview of *Anxieties of Audience: A Study of Gothic Reception*
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The persistent popularity of what we now call Gothic begs the questions: whose taste is shaped, how is it shaped, and to what extent is that taste indicative of a pure aesthetic? These aesthetic questions further lead us to similarly puzzling queries about the current state of Gothic itself: both Fred Botting's *Gothic* and David Punter and Glennis Byron's *The Gothic* propose that, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, science fiction displaces Gothic's role. While dystopic science fiction such as the *Alien* films do seem to support such claims, just as the overwhelming prevalence of slasher films supports claims for the death of Gothic in our era, the existence and popularity of texts like Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* and Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* complicate arguments that herald the death of Gothic. To get at the heart of the values and aesthetics that undergird such claims is a key task in my dissertation, because, as Marilyn Butler suggests, Gothic "speak[s]...for collective anxieties" (28).¹ I seek not simply to probe the anxieties of audiences dead for multiple centuries but rather to use the analyses of Romantic-era Gothics as a springboard into the aesthetic responses to contemporary Gothic readers and viewers. To get at the heart of these anxieties, I contextualize my study around gender issues long associated with Gothic, using Anne Williams' revolutionary reconfiguration of male and female Gothic.

Williams breaks from traditional visions of male and female Gothic defined by authorial gender and instead repositions these critical tools as signs of the repressed that allow one to read both Keats and Coleridge as authors of both male and female Gothic through a set of textual conventions. So compellingly does this version of female Gothic offer a site of alterity that it can be used not only in the psychological model in which Williams first deploys it, but also in studies of reception by virtue of its ability to group texts by their features that draw given audiences rather than simply by the gender of the author. Certainly, two of the most enduring Gothic texts in the popular consciousness, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, support this premise. The supernatural occurrences, tragic plot and collective mythos make these texts easy to place side by side, notwithstanding that one was authored by a male and the other by a female. Williams' formulation accounts more completely for the variety of perspectives that authors' of the same gender bring to Gothic. Charlotte Dacre's transgressive tendencies no longer need to be lumped with the sensibility-oriented stylings of Ann Radcliffe nor Clara Reeve simply to satisfy a biological imperative. Thus, my dissertation examines the extent to which different types of aesthetics influence reception of Gothic texts along critical divisions of gender.

To this end, "Chapter One: Staking the Claim" redefines Gothic as a gendered and dynamic force operating across literary and cultural history, while "Chapter Two: Establishing a Tradition of Reception" turns attention to initial critical reception of early Gothic texts (juxtaposing the reception of Horace Walpole with Clara Reeve and Matthew G. Lewis with Ann Radcliffe) in terms of taste, valuation, and gender. These genderings become increasingly important for "Chapter Three: Vampiric Sustenance: Blood, Brains, and Bathos," a study that specifically examines the shift in valuation that allowed texts like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* to attain canonical status notwithstanding their "popular" designations. After establishing this premise, my dissertation moves to "Chapter Four: Divided Loyalties: Romance and Horror of the Twentieth-Century." To remain consistent with prior methodologies, critical reviews will continue to play a role in the exploration of gender assumptions and value assumptions and will be supplemented by additional data from online fan communities. Doing so will better establish the polarized politics surrounding this aspect of popular culture. In fact, it is to these politics that my final chapter directs attention. "Chapter Five: Mergings of Male and Female in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the Gender Politics of Reception" reconsiders claims for the death of female Gothic and probes the merging of male and female Gothic as a new shift in the politics of gender and in the cultural situation that continues to invite the Gothic tradition.

¹ Butler, Marilyn. *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background, 1760-1830*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985.