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Paulina Palmer. *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions*. New York: Cassell, 1999. 168p.

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As a text that explores motifs long part of the gothic genre of fiction and which have now found their way into lesbian novels and short stories, *Lesbian Gothic* creates a new and intriguing understanding of both lesbian fiction and gothic tales. As a study that combines these literary forms, this book will interest aficionados of both types of transgressive works. Indeed, as presented by Paulina Palmer, the intersection of gothic conventions and texts that struggle to present an alternate subjectivity is almost inevitable. Although the author quickly admits that, as originally employed, gothic literary conventions are homophobic and misogynistic (13), her central argument is that the lesbian texts use these conventions in ways that both negate the homophobic and misogynistic characteristics and expose the marginalization of the lesbian subjectivity. Further, lesbian fiction as implicitly defined by Palmer (i.e., those works that present an ontology outside the bounds of a male heterosexual perspective) undoubtedly represent a transgressive position.

The four gothic motifs upon which Palmer expands—witches, ghosts, vampires, and the thriller—certainly exhibit homophobic and misogynistic characteristics in foundational gothic texts: e.g., *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1774), *The Castle of Otranto* (1764-65), *Wieland, or the Transformation*, and *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* (1798). Palmer recognizes, however, that despite the negative attributes which can be ascribed and attached to gothic motifs, contemporary lesbian fiction has much in common with early gothic portrayals, and the authors Palmer cites reclaim this genre. The novels explored in *Lesbian Gothic* come from the final quarter of the 20th century where, in the works produced in the wake of the Women's and Gay Rights movements, Palmer finds a rich body of evidence for her proposed link between gothic and lesbian literatures. And Palmer is well equipped to apply a historical and genre-based evaluation to this topic, as her familiarity with her subject and her substantial scholarship, evident throughout this investigation, show. Though largely unknown in academe, several novels Palmer chooses such as Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) and Jody Scott's *I, Vampire* (1984) have a strong underground following, and these choices attest to Palmer's knowledge of the field. Palmer's examination of these works, rigorously supported by the feminist and queer theories of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, and Eve Sedgwick as well as by Freud's theory of the repressed, brings these novels and authors out of the literary shadows and confers legitimacy to the works' themes. Key to Palmer's exploration of lesbian subjectivity is Kristeva's concept of the abject, which the author uses to

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describe the lesbian's position in late 20th-century, first-world cultures. And while the application of the abject to lesbian perspectives is not new, Palmer's use of this critical lens adds new dimension to Kristeva's work.

Palmer's illumination of this evocative link between gothic conventions and lesbian literature will be useful to scholars in several disciplines and this volume will contribute to the work of other theorists and critics. If the book has a flaw, it is in the formulaic organization of each chapter. Each of the four chapters introduces one of Palmer's chosen gothic motifs and each chapter follows a similar pattern: explanation of the gothic convention as it finds expression in lesbian texts, a detailed investigation of several novels which offers concrete examples of this expression, and a conclusion that restates the ways that the gothic convention manifests in each text along with a brief discussion of the similarities and differences in those manifestations. While this method and organization may be typical of such investigations, by the fourth chapter the presentation grows tedious. And I miss some assertion of the potential impact of the author's findings. Certainly much of what Palmer discovers about the needs and potential of transgressive motifs will find application in other genres such as drama and film studies. Further, these chapters reveal assumptions that underlie gothic fictions in general as well as other sorts of transgressive works, and speculation on the critical influence of these assumptions would contribute to the importance of the text. Still, this presentation does have the advantage of making the chapters simple to excerpt, and because Palmer's investigation should be of particular interest to instructors and students of literary studies, the option of using individual chapters with little explanation is appealing. The insights into literature, history, and culture, and the subtle threads of lesbian thought that Palmer reveals to run through each of these disciplines makes *Lesbian Gothic* an important read. Further, the depth of Palmer's scholarship and the extensiveness of her work into the genre of lesbian literature should make the book a staple in Women's Studies as well as literature classes. ✱