
REVIEWS

Diane Long Hoeveler. *Gothic Feminism*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. 250p.

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Looking at gothic novels by women of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, Diane Long Hoeveler applies feminist and poststructuralist critical approaches that have been previously used to illuminate Victorian novels. Hoeveler draws upon such critics as Michel Foucault, Nancy Armstrong, and Mary Poovey to argue that female gothic novelists support the ascendancy of the middle class through “professionalizing” their heroines’ sexuality by having them assume masochistic poses. Through such poses, heroines attempt to establish control over the domestic sphere. In other words, gothic feminism parodies female masochism rather than presenting it as a reality as do feminist studies such as Michelle Masse’s *In the Name of Love*. Instead, Hoeveler argues that the heroines of Gothics written by women masquerade under the guise of proper femininity while covertly using passive-aggressive tactics to defeat patriarchal tyranny. Consequently, the gothic heroine simultaneously supports yet undercuts patriarchy’s dominance. Hoeveler contends that the enduring effect of the gothic heroine’s stance as innocent, wise victim has been to inspire the “victim feminism” of today.

Proceeding chronologically, Hoeveler starts by exploring Charlotte Smith’s *Emmeline* as the template for later feminist Gothics: a feminized hero helps the victimized heroine overcome corrupt patriarchal forces to win the property she deserves. Oppressive aristocrats are defeated by the rising bourgeoisie which proves itself through “the drastic purging and pruning of excessively gender-coded behaviors, characteristics, and emotions” (47). In line with this, the hero must be wounded, weakened, and feminized through “ritual maiming,” whereas the heroine must develop the rationality associated with the masculine beneath her pose of feminine passivity. Hoeveler’s emphasis on the feminization of gothic heroes recalls her earlier book, *Romantic Androgyny*.

After discussing *Emmeline*, Hoeveler dedicates two chapters to Ann Radcliffe’s popular Gothics. The title of the chapter about Radcliffe’s early novels, “Gendering Victimization,” compared with that of the chapter about her late novels,

“Gendering Vindication,” suggests Hoeveler’s view of Radcliffe’s development. Hoeveler combines analyses of *Northanger Abbey*, *Frankenstein*, and Charlotte Dacre Byrne’s (Rosa Matilda’s) *Zofloya, or the Moor* in the following chapter, entitled “Hyperbolic Femininity.” Whereas *Northanger Abbey* clearly parodies gothic conventions, *Frankenstein* hides feminine dilemmas within the male creature whose monstrosity parallels that of the female body when seen through patriarchal eyes. On the other hand, *Zofloya* utilizes race — Moorishness — to create a similar effect: a Moorish male outcast is associated with female criminality.

Hoeveler’s final chapter, “Romantic Feminism,” posits that *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Villette* are Victorian culminations of the earlier tradition that emerge from the Brontë sisters’ gothic circumstances. Hoeveler writes, “But finally each of these novels stands as an indictment of the limitations of gothic feminism in their examination of various gothic feminist strategies — rejection of motherhood, control of the patriarchal estate, struggle with tyrannous religious forces, overthrow of the suffocating and claustrophobic nuclear family, the celebration of education for women — and each novel concludes on a compromised note” (186). The strategies of victim feminism employed by Brontë heroines succeed only partially in defeating patriarchal limitations.

Hoeveler’s argument is most effective when she focuses upon novels like *Northanger Abbey* that parody gothic conventions. Her argument is less convincing when she focuses upon melodramatic novels such as *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Villette*. However, Hoeveler does convincingly link melodrama with parody through the hyperbole involved in both. *Gothic Feminism*’s other weak point is a tendency to analyze each novel in the order of its plot that comes irritatingly close to plot summary at times.

Nevertheless, Hoeveler contributes to feminist and nineteenth-century studies through the recovery of little-known women writers such as Smith and Byrne and through an examination of Gothics by women as the ancestors of modern victim feminism. ❀