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the eighteenth century

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Shrinking Historicism

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Dale Townshend's ambitious study, *The Orders of Gothic: Foucault, Lacan, and the Subject of Gothic Writing 1764–1820* (AMS, 2007), undertakes to analyze British Gothic literature from 1764 to 1820, Michel Foucault's genealogy of modernity, and psychoanalytic theory as related and mutually illuminating discourses. Adopting the Borromean knot (by which Jacques Lacan characterizes the interactions of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and the Real), as a figure for the interactions of the three discourses (6), Townshend argues that Gothic writing attests to the fact that "[i]n order to account for the complex relations of Gothic to modernity, Foucauldian new historicism needs a Lacanian supplement" (319; cf. 11). More specifically, *Orders of Gothic* argues that Lacanian theory provides "a point of critical purchase" (10) upon the persistence into modernity of residues of the previous "classical" regime, residues which without a Lacanian supplement "are largely inaccessible, even 'invisible' to Foucault's new historicist mode" (10–11) because of Foucault's stress on epochal rupture, but that Gothic writing pervasively registers these residues, even as it participates in the deployment of modern subjectivity and Panoptical discipline that Foucault describes.

In pursuit of this thesis, Townshend offers cogent summaries of Foucault's *Order of Things*, *Discipline and Punish*, and *History of Sexuality*, as well as of psychoanalytic theory from Sigmund Freud through Lacan to Slavoj Žižek and Joan Copjec, and his engagement with Gothic criticism is comprehensive. Interpreting a wide array of Gothic texts ranging from the canonical to the relatively obscure, he moreover invokes an impressive body of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic and political theory. This bracing array of sources and conceptual frames produces intriguing and often revisionist readings of Gothic literature and makes strong cases both for the ways that Gothic literature anticipates and prepares for psychoanalytic theory, and for the ways that Gothic literature at once illustrates and problematizes Foucault's account of the shift from a "classical" age centered in blood alliance and the sovereign power to punish bodies toward a modern one based in sexuality and Panoptical discipline. But even though Townshend denies privileging psychoanalytic theory over historicism (11), too often psychoanalytic theory functions more as the hand tying his Borromean knot than a thread within it, as psychoanalytic concepts are repeatedly used to describe Gothic writing, which—thus constituted in psychoanalytic terms—almost inevitably becomes "historical" evidence that Foucault's historicism misses something in Gothics that psychoanalytic theory captures. *Orders of Gothic* also suffers from singularly poor copy-editing by AMS Press, with chapter 3 containing two section iii's (126 and 134) and with far too many typos and syntactic errors marring Townshend's already conceptually dense prose.[1]

Townshend's introduction sets forth his thesis, noting that while Foucault discusses the Gothic in his accounts of modernity's advent, Lacan says little about the Gothic, and moreover admitting that Foucault and Lacan are "strange bedfellows" (11), given Foucault's disavowals of psychoanalysis. Citing Robert Miles's *Gothic Writing 1750–1820: A Genealogy* and my own *Accidental Migrations: An Archaeology of Gothic Discourse* as instances of Foucauldian historicism on the Gothic, he focuses upon Miles's question of whether or not imaginative literature can or should be interpreted as discursive, ultimately positing (much like Miles) that while literature participates in discursivity, its aesthetic aspects reconfigure discursive

material in ways that make psychoanalytic reading of the Gothic pertinent to historicism (5–6).

Chapter 1 uses the Gothic to articulate psychoanalytic theory with Foucault's historicist claim in *The Order of Things* that modernity invented "man" as a "doublet" who is characterized by three "categories" of paradox (22). First, Townshend argues that, much as for Foucault, man at once transcends history and is "empirically" subject to historical description, Gothics initially naturalize the transcendent moral traits of their protagonists but then narratively predicate this transcendent moral character upon the "empirical" discovery of "the constitutive events" of their pasts, in ways that echo the paradox by which Freud at once naturalizes universal drives and treats patients by recovering their individual histories (26). Second, much as for Foucault, the conscious, Cartesian *cogito* assumes and is shadowed by an unthought whose pursuit yields truth, in the Gothic dreams and the narrative architecture of clues and traces (such as found manuscripts or portraits) are privileged sites of truth, although in Gothics these secrets are in fact not hidden or unthinkable but "exist in a series of relatively undisguised forms" on the surface of the texts, much as the Other for Lacan is an effect of the Symbolic rather than the inaccessible other of the Imaginary and Real (35). Third, much as for Foucault, modernity sees origins as both constitutive and elusive, even though Gothics are obsessed with "empirically" discovering the "constitutive" past of protagonists (26), when this past is revealed it replaces the false past with which the protagonists began, and in ways that echo Freud's reading of events such as the primal scene or incest both as constitutive and as imaginary constructs rather than true memory (44–45).

Chapter 2 then reads Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* and *Mysterious Mother* as instances of three "caveats" raised by the Gothic to Foucault's account in *The History of Sexuality* of the transition from the classical age's regime of blood alliance to the modern regime of sexuality. The first of these caveats argues, against Miles and other critics, that the shift from alliance to sexuality in Gothics is "a thoroughly paternal affair" (56), aligning Walpole's representation of paternity with Lacan's argument that the Symbolic order's institution of the Name of the Father replaces biological fathers with Symbolic

ones defined by the Law that they decree and embody, as evidenced for example by the fact that in *Otranto* Manfred—whose attempt to manipulate marriage for political purposes marks him as the Symbolic father of blood alliance—is supplanted by Jerome, Frederic, and the ghost of Alfonso—whose privileging of sensibility over politics marks them as Symbolic fathers of sexuality. Townshend’s second caveat reiterates his critique of Foucault’s stress upon historical rupture, arguing that Gothics represent the shift from blood alliance to sexual affinity as “fraught” and “conflictual” in ways that challenge Foucault’s (alleged) view that sexuality superimposed itself over the family and other institutions that had previously deployed alliance in “a relation of cooperation, exchange and harmonious co-existence” (77). Third, Townshend argues that in the Gothic, the modern subjects of sexuality are associated with the love privileged by sentimentality and sensibility rather than with sexuality *per se*, which on the contrary is polemically linked to the perversions of paternal subjects of alliance like Manfred in *Otranto*.

The next three chapters pursue the thesis that conflict among Lacan’s Symbolic fathers in Gothics stages the fraught transition from Foucault’s alliance to sexuality, incorporating later Gothics from Ann Radcliffe to Mary Shelley, but also placing Gothics’ representation of paternity in context of contemporary discourses about political authority, education, marriage, and incest, as well as in context of further psychoanalytic concepts. Focusing on John Locke’s critique in *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) of Robert Filmer’s monarchist *Patriarcha* (1680), chapter 3 stresses how the Gothic fathers of alliance register Locke’s critique of Filmer’s attempt to conflate domestic and political authority, while the fathers of sexuality in Gothics register the debate started by Locke in his critique of Filmer, but taken up by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Sarah Trimmer, about whether fathers, as rulers of the domestic sphere, should privilege reason or imagination in the education of their children. Taking *Frankenstein* as “the logical point of culmination” for “the Gothic tradition that runs from Walpole through Reeve and Lee, and into Radcliffe, Roche, and others in the 1790s and beyond” (134), Townshend argues that Shelley’s novel epitomizes how this tradition discredits the competing “paternal regimes advanced by Filmer, Locke, and Rousseau” and ultimately offers only a

“threadbare . . . mythological discourse on fatherhood which can safely assert little more than the father’s necessary prohibition of incest” (155). Although the chapter provides intriguing historical context beyond Foucault and Lacan for Gothics’ representation of paternity, it often strains plausibility, as in the claims that “Locke . . . appears to be a late seventeenth-century version of Lacan’s paternal metaphor” (111) and that Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* is “a quasi-Gothic romance” exploiting “the trope of the tyrannous father” (129).

Chapters 4 and 5 shift from situating Gothic representations of paternity within contemporaneous discourses to arguing for the ways they anticipate Freudian/Lacanian theories of incest and Lacanian/Žižekian theories of *jouissance*, extimacy, and phantasy. The second section of chapter 4 does make the keen historicist point that incest law in the eighteenth century was implausibly broad—prohibiting marriage between affines as well as blood relatives because it originated in Catholic ecclesiastical rather than British civil law—and that it was (therefore) implicated in Britain’s polemic definition of itself as Protestant rather than Catholic in ways that Linda Colley has stressed (179–83; cf. 226–30). However, by arguing that this legal definition of incest “seems to present Gothic writing with a certain difficulty . . . given that the Gothic, almost by definition, deals in families, both nuclear and extended, who are either unknown, lost, prohibited, or greatly damaged and disfigured” (183), Townshend oddly displaces this context as irrelevant to the Gothic, whose representation of incest is instead interpreted as anticipating Freudian/Lacanian theory in ways that implicitly naturalize psychoanalytic theory as a more valid historical context for Gothic views of incest than the historically contemporaneous discourses about incest that Townshend so cogently summarizes, only to minimize.

Chapter 5 argues that Gothics install the regulated, monogamous, Protestant subject of sexuality in part by staging perverse fathers like Ambrosio in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* as a negative image of this normative subject (209). Townshend first links the Orientalist perversions in William Beckford’s *Vathek* to the more typical Gothic construction of Catholicism as the locus of perversion via Lacan and Žižek’s argument that fear of the Other is predicated

upon its ability to steal the *jouissance* proscribed by the Symbolic order except via the screen of phantasy (209–20). He then offers intriguing and deeply researched readings of how some British discourses contemporary with the Gothic constructed Catholicism as the perverse Other of regulated, modern, Protestant pleasure, while others—most notably utilitarian theory from Frances Hutcheson to John Stuart Mill (245–50) but also political economy—installed in modern British subjects the superegoic injunction to enjoyment (i.e., *jouissance*) theorized by Žižek and historicized by Roy Porter (243–45). Ultimately, Townshend argues for Gothics as the “disastrous place of collision” (251) between these contradictory injunctions to regulated pleasure and perverse *jouissance*, stressing how “the more radical implications of the sublime” (251) as theorized by Edmund Burke and Anna Laetitia Barbauld (with her brother John Aikin) aesthetically legitimated readers’ pleasure in the perverse enjoyments of Gothic characters like Ambrosio. Again, however, Townshend’s argument for Gothic as a site of “collision” among the contemporary discourses that he details is too often displaced by tendentious interpretation of how both Gothics and these discourses illustrate the theories of Lacan and Žižek about desire and othering, as if the common link to these psychoanalytic axioms in itself proved Gothics’ historical reconfiguration of contemporary discursive material.

The final two full chapters of *Orders of Gothic* shift from arguing about how Gothics at once illustrate and contest Foucault’s claims in *The Order of Things* and *The History of Sexuality* about the advent of modern subjectivity, toward interpreting the ways Gothics and Lacanian theory supplement and revise Foucault’s arguments in *Discipline and Punish* about the shift from a classical regime of the sovereign power to a modern regime of Panoptical discipline.

Chapter 6 contends that the sovereign power to torture bodies, exemplified in *Discipline and Punish* by the execution of Damians, persists into Gothics despite the predominant ways their narrative structure deploys Panoptical discipline, most notably by rehearsing darkness and torture only to expose it to light via techniques such as Radcliffe’s explained supernatural. Stressing that Joanna Baillie, Barbauld, and Burke all refer to the torture of Damians as an instance of the sublime, Townshend argues—building on the previous

chapter's analysis of the sublime's "radical" tendencies—that Gothics aesthetically reconfigure torture for pleasurable consumption by internalizing it as a "sublime" and "exquisite" mental/emotional "torture" rather than painful bodily violence (278–84). He then interprets this sublime internalization of torture in Gothics as an instance of the ways that Lacan's theory of *objet petit a* as "the inner scrap of the inchoate real, or, in Gothic terms, the remainder of the dark classical age that haunts the subject of enlightened modernity" (280) captures the complexities of the historical transition from punishment to discipline more accurately than Foucault's alleged insistence upon historical rupture (285–289, esp. 285).

Building on this argument that Gothics' internalization of torture registers the persistence of earlier forms of power into Foucault's modernity, chapter 7 offers an alternative gendered history of the Gothic, arguing that while female Gothics of the 1790s such as Radcliffe's "sketch out the modern subject's discursive coordinates" (292), Gothics of "the first two decades of the nineteenth century" (308) like Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*, *Frankenstein*, and Percy Shelley's *Zastrozzi* are "more concerned with the unrepresentable excess of this discursive schema, with its remainders and stains, its residues and its shadows" (292). Invoking Lacanian theories of *objet a* and "extimacy" as a frame for gendering this difference, Townshend argues that these later Gothics recuperate the masculine tradition of excess and perverse *jouissance* typified in chapter 5 by Lewis's *The Monk* and indeed mount an "assault upon the tradition of the female Gothic" (295): "In the male Gothic of *The Monk* and *Zofloya*, the screen falls away in order to expose the anamorphic blindspot of the object *petit a*, while in the female Gothic of Radcliffe, the screen is drawn back into place to cover over, conceal, and screen off the object's horrors" (313). This argument usefully questions "some of the facile gendered distinctions so readily applied to Gothic writing" by other critics (294), but using Lacanian theory to interpret the (persuasively delineated) difference between these two traditions also weirdly distances what Townshend claims as a gendered distinction from gender, *per se*. And by using Lacanian theory to describe what is "the real . . . object of interest" in Gothics like *Zofloya* (291), Townshend as often before rather predetermines his conclusion that Gothics

are doing something to which Foucault's historicist analytic makes "little more than a gestural reference" (308).

Townshend's "Afterword" argues that, despite Foucault's condemnation of Freud in *The History of Sexuality* for institutionalizing "The Repressive Hypothesis" and his critique of Lacan's theory of how the Symbolic order relates subjects to power, Lacan's theory of power is almost more Foucauldian than Foucault, because Lacan's recognition of the Symbolic order as at once deploying power and generating its resistant residue accords more than Foucault would admit with Foucault's notorious claim that "[w]here there is power, there is resistance."^[2] This is certainly a provocative claim, and an apt end to a thoroughly provocative book. However, here as often before, the claim depends too much upon replacing Foucault's terms with Lacan's, rather than weaving them together in the mutually-illuminating Borromean knot that Townshend claims tangles up both theories with Gothic writing.

NOTES

^[1] For example, the statement that "In his notorious romance *The Monk* (1797), Matthew Lewis substitutes the orientalism of Beckford's romance [*Vathek*] for the heightened Catholic setting of Madrid . . ." (220) should read "substitutes the orientalism of Beckford's romance [*Vathek*] *with*" rather than "for" "the heightened Catholic setting of Madrid," since *The Monk* is set in Madrid. Other errors are more irritating than nonsensical, as with the flawed agreement in the phrase "Entrusted by her father to the didactic powers of her own experience, the Gothic heroines of Radcliffe and Roche" (125) or in "manifestation of an long-standing genealogical tradition" (80).

^[2] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978), 95.