

Skin Chairs and other Domestic Horrors

Barbara Comyns and the Female Gothic Tradition

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The novels of Barbara Comyns, a neglected British writer, combine literary realism with Gothic interludes and moments of magical realism. Despite attracting very positive reviews when they were published¹ and being republished by Virago during the 1980s, most of her novels are not familiar to modern-day readers.² Comyns published eleven highly accomplished novels during her life-time (she died in 1992) yet she is now all but forgotten, save for a few succinct entries in various companions to literature.³ In this essay we shall consider Comyns' work in the context of a Female Gothic tradition.

Since Ellen Moers coined the term 'Female Gothic' in her 1976 book, *Literary Women*, it has been increasingly acknowledged that women writers have made use of the non-realist Gothic mode in order to explore the problematic nature of female subjectivity in Western patriarchal culture.⁴ As Elaine Showalter has suggested, the move to theorize a Female Gothic was probably itself the result of 'the change in consciousness that came out of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s'; critics consequently focused on the Female Gothic 'as a genre that expressed women's dark protests, fantasies and fear'.⁵ As she notes (citing Claire Kahane), in the 1970s it was fashionable to read the Female Gothic as a confrontation with mothering and the problems of femininity. In the mid-1980s, however, critics influenced by poststructuralism and the work of Lacan saw Female Gothic as a mode of writing that corresponded 'to the feminine, the romantic, the transgressive, and the revolutionary'.⁶ These tendencies either to psychologically universalise the female mind or to oversimplify the cultural function of Gothic writing have recently led to attacks on Gothic criticism itself, including the way in which female critics have constructed the notion of Female Gothic. Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall, for example, argue that the impact of feminist literary studies upon readings of the Gothic has been 'mixed' and that indiscriminate readings of texts have conspired to dehistoricize Gothic writing by women. While acknowledging the value of studies such as Kate Ferguson Ellis' *The Contested Castle* (1989) and Jacqueline Howard's *Reading Gothic Fiction* (1994), they suggest that:

On the other hand, the construction since the 1970s of the predominantly universalising category of the 'female Gothic', as an embodiment of some invariable female 'experience' or of the archetypal 'female principle', leads straight out of history into the timeless melodrama in which (wicked) 'male Gothic' texts always express terror of the eternal '(M)other' while (good) female Gothic texts are revealed to be – as Anne Williams claims – not just 'empowering' but 'revolutionary'.⁷

Baldick and Mighall here offer a robust challenge to any feminist critic of the Gothic and rightly provoke us to interrogate our own practice. Mindful of Baldick and Mighall's warnings concerning the dehistoricization of texts, we wish to explore how Comyns, in her narratives of dysfunctional family relationships, appropriates and adapts Gothic tropes, blending them with elements of both realism and magical realism. In so doing, we aim to both locate her work within a literary tradition and to consider its critical reception.

Comyns' narrators are always girls or young women and their entanglement in abusive, controlling or unsatisfactory relationships invariably forms the main dynamic of the plot. These narrators present dark events unquestioningly, with what Patricia Craig has described as 'the child's unclouded vision and candour', a perspective which renders such events at once bizarrely comic and gruesome.⁸ Horrific observations are often juxtaposed with bathetic details. Comyns' quasi-autobiographical first novel, *Sisters by a River* (1947), offers a foretaste of the later works. It is a misspelt account in the first person of a childhood in which the bizarre is part of the weave of everyday life and casual cruelty is observed through the eyes of its innocent narrator (whom we are invited to accept as the author herself).⁹ Her subsequent novels, like the works of Ivy Compton-Burnett, clearly set out to challenge that twentieth-century sentimental narrative which celebrated the domestic and the familial.

In Comyns' fictional world damaging relationships are not limited to those with men. There are few characters in literature as comically horrific as grandmother Willoweed in *Who was Changed and Who was Dead* (1954), a formidable figure who emotionally terrorises her family (including her grand-daughter, the sensitive young heroine, Emma) and who tries to control the whole village in which she lives.¹⁰ In this sense, Comyns' Gothic bildungsromans are more reminiscent of Dickens' work¹¹ than they are of the classic Female Gothic plot, which is still often defined as the flight of a young woman from a male persecutor in some form (whether father or seducer).¹² The focus in Comyns' novels is always the trauma of coping with the family romance in the widest sense, as experienced by a young, sensitive woman and, as such, it brings to the foreground issues of abuse, emotional exploitation and the way in which a vulnerable individual can be psychologically constrained and oppressed. It does not, however, present women only as victims, nor does it attribute power solely to 'men on the rampage'.¹³ Combining a Chagalian surrealism with characters who exhibit a Dickensian energy and grotesquerie, she adapts Gothic tropes in order to explore the cruelties perpetrated within the middle-class family which, far from being a sanctuary of emotional warmth and protection, is frequently revealed to be a site of exploitative manipulation. We shall

concentrate here on three of her works, all of which represent family life as a Gothic experience: *The Vet's Daughter*, published in 1959 (which was praised by Graham Greene and turned into a musical)¹⁴ *The Skin Chairs* (1962) and *The Juniper Tree* (1985). Each of these three novels demonstrates a particular emphasis in its engagement with the Gothic.

The Vet's Daughter uses the spectral in its exploration of the dynamic of abuse within the family. Published in 1959, long before such abuse was recognised by clinical psychologists as a fairly common phenomenon within modern society, Comyns' novel is all the more remarkable for appearing during a decade when a post-war conservatism was still promoting the family as the route to personal happiness and urging women to place home and husband at the centre of their lives. Set in the early part of the century, *The Vet's Daughter* is the story of Alice Rowlands, the adolescent daughter of a bullying veterinary surgeon and his ailing wife. Alice has learnt to survive in a dark house on the borders of Clapham and Battersea where the only moments of joy are those snatched when her father is out and her mother can reminisce about her happy childhood in Wales. It is a grim household in which the vet, far from being a bringer of mercy, treats his animal charges with callousness: those which have been brought to him to be humanely destroyed he sends, instead, to the vivisectionist. Alice's observations create a Gothic world in which bodies are dislocated often to comic effect. For example: 'The door was propped open by a horse's hoof without a horse joined to it, and I looked through. He was sewing in a peke's eye.'¹⁵

The vet's patients have suffered in ways that lend the book an air of macabre comedy – the cat which was partly roasted in an oven and the parrot, which exhibits neurotic symptoms, having been confined to the lavatory because of its anti-social shrieking. Yet the novel presents us with a world in which people are frequently treated worse than animals and whose lives deny them any sort of dignity or autonomy. The fate of Alice's mother, who is suffering from what seems to be cancer, and who is casually 'put down' by her husband one evening, takes the novel into the realms of a quiet but chilling Gothic horror. Her father's subsequent installation of his mistress, Rosa Fisher – or 'the strumpet from the Trumpet' (3) as the narrator refers to her – compounds the difficulties of living at home for Alice, especially when Rosa manipulates her into a meeting with a porter from a local hotel who tries to rape her. A brief romantic interlude with Nicholas, a handsome sailor, leads only to disappointment. Befriended by her father's locum, a young man named Henry Peebles, Alice leaves London for Hayling Island in order to become a companion to Henry's depressed and agoraphobic mother, who later commits suicide.

The surreal dimension of the novel is developed through the narrator's discovery that she is able to levitate, although the astute reader will notice that each levitation occurs after a particularly traumatic episode (the first after the attempted rape, for example). This takes us, on one level, into the world of the magical and supernatural since the reader is asked to believe unquestioningly in Alice's astonishing powers, as she does herself. However, Alice's ability to levitate can be read metaphorically: we

can relate it, for example, to the now well-recognised phenomenon of psychological dissociation, developed as a survival tactic or coping mechanism, commonly found in abuse victims. 'Nothing could be worse than home' (90) thinks the narrator at one point; her gift of inducing levitation allows her to rise, quite literally, above her tormentors and her suffering. Or, more lyrically, we can read Alice's ability to levitate as representing the power of the imagination to transcend the horrors of mental cruelty through an act that is sublimely defiant of everyday reality. In this sense, like many magical realist episodes in other texts – such as the levitation episode in Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979) – it becomes a way of critiquing the oppressive nature of a particular ideology or social structure.

However, it is this very gift that compounds Alice's difficulties for, once he discovers his daughter has this amazing talent, her father sets out to exploit it financially. The novel's extraordinary dénouement takes place on Clapham Common, Alice having been forced to exhibit her gift to hundreds of paying spectators. She is given a special meal ('They gave me sherry beaten up with eggs and milk') and is dressed, like a bride, in a long white dress and white silk stockings with white flowers in her hair (183). She is taken to Clapham in a closed carriage that at one point is described as 'hearse-like' (184) although onlookers assume that the group is indeed a wedding-party. However, knowing as we do that this event is a money-making performance engineered by her father, the 'ceremony' becomes a grotesque parody of the wedding service, with Alice lying on the damp grass 'in despair and humiliation' (186) before she levitates in 'a frantic effort simply to escape the horror' (187) of her father's anger. As David Punter has pointed out, the Gothic ceremonial 'is not what it purports to be, it is a coagulation around a secret', functioning around that which has been encrypted.¹⁶ The consummation of this bizarre 'wedding' is not sex but death and, indeed, Alice's fate can be read as a form of suicide, echoing that of Mrs Peebles, whose suffering – like that of Alice – has remained encrypted in the narrative of middle-class respectability. More obviously, it also gives expression to marriage as a death-like experience for Alice's mother – who would rather have married 'Evans the Post' than Euan Rowlands, of whom she was always afraid. The novel ends with Alice's sudden descent, which precipitates her death from injuries and suffocation when the crowd closes in on the main protagonists of the event. Thus the moments of vision in the text (and it is perhaps no accident that the novel is set in south London, where Blake saw the angel in the tree on Peckham Rye) finally culminate in a mysterious transcendental episode that fuses the bridal carriage with the hearse to become the Blakean 'marriage hearse'. The novel thus suggests that marriage for many women leads to the death of the self.

The final strange twist is that we suddenly realize that we have been treated to a narrative from beyond the grave since our narrator is now dead. The liminality of Alice's floating body has been translated into the liminality of the perplexing text which could never have been written for, as Elisabeth Bronfen has noted, 'It is precisely in the impossibility of this linguistic utterance ("I say to you that I am dead") that the encroachment of death on life is celebrated and at the same time literally

foreclosed.¹⁷ This ‘impossibility’, however, is not only a characteristic of Gothic writing – which often presents us with voices from beyond the grave, but is also a strong feature of magical realist texts in which the voices of the dead frequently speak – and with the same, if not more, authority than those of the living. Alice dies when she is unable to sustain the dissociation of levitation and comes down ‘amongst the people’, ‘hundreds of milling people’, whom she has heard making animal noises and who, animal-like, trample her to death (187). In both Gothic and magical realist writing the boundaries between the dead and the living are made permeable. The difference, perhaps, is that the Gothic renders such permeability sinister (thus expressing an anxiety about the fragility of the subject) whereas the magical realist text celebrates (often joyfully or comically) such fluidity (thus expressing a desire for change in the construction of the subject). *The Vet’s Daughter* finally reveals itself to be a spectral text, written from beyond the grave in order to speak the truth about the father and healer of animals. Working on the cusp where the Gothic and the magically real meet, Comyns’ novel powerfully gives shape to the experience of being a victim.

The Skin Chairs (1962) also offers a Gothic perspective on the same kind of middle-class world but this time through the eyes of a ten-year old heroine. In this novel, there is particular emphasis on the abject. Her father having died and left his family in an impoverished state, Frances, like many previous Female Gothic heroines, is sent off to live with wealthy and overbearing relations. Aunt and Uncle Lawrence are unkind and greedy people who exert control through tactics such as bullying, humiliation and emotional blackmail. Set in Leicestershire – a part of the English midlands ambiguously presented by the narrator of Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* as safe from Gothic evils¹⁸ – the work’s narrator nevertheless becomes involved in several dysfunctional relationships that result in nightmares and disturbing dreams. One of these relationships concerns the inadequacy of a young mother, Vanda, who starves and emotionally neglects her baby such that the child almost dies twice. Frances and her cousin Ruby function as the caring, but ineffectual, rescuers of this tiny victim for much of the novel and are mercilessly exploited by Vanda, who cares far more about her affair with a wealthy major than about her child. Befriended by the eccentric Mrs Alexander, who keeps a menagerie that includes monkeys and tree frogs in her suburban home, Frances becomes drawn into yet another highly demanding relationship in which Mrs Alexander’s emotional dependency soon becomes an embarrassment and a source of anxiety. Like Dickens’ ‘Little Dorrit’, Frances becomes an emotional caretaker in a society where the child is older than the woman.

The aggressive characters in this novel, like those in *The Vet’s Daughter*, shout, snarl and yell; their victims, or potential victims, weep (like Frances’ mother), internalise their fears and have nightmares (like Frances), come close to actual death (like baby Jane) or fight back (like Beppo, the monkey, or John and Esme, who finally attack Uncle Lawrence). In addition, the English class system endorses another particularly insidious form of exploitation: the wealthy of the area do not pay their tradesmen’s bills and Mrs. Alexander only rarely pays her chauffeur’s

wages. Such grim games of domination and survival are part of a Gothic fugue which also contains the grotesque body: the baby with water on its brain; Frances's sister Clare, born with a hand missing; the horrors of old age, made manifest in the 'bent old woman'¹⁹ who cannot control the spit dribbling from her mouth; the revelation of what lies beneath Mrs Alexander's turban – 'Her face was all distorted and her lips were not there any more. But her head! It was dreadful, all scabs and holes. I ran' (136). Monstrosity lives in the shires and suburbs in Comyns' world.

The sinister edifice of the classic Gothic text is translated into the more banal horrors of domestic architecture: 'ordinary' houses frequently exude an evil, claustrophobic atmosphere; there is 'something bad' (39) about Vanda's home, and Mrs Alexander's house has an 'unhealthy, enclosed feeling' (119). These Gothic horrors of middle England are weightily represented by the six skin chairs, owned by a General in the village where Frances is staying with her aunt and uncle:

The General's wife looked at them ruefully and admitted that the chairs were covered in human skin.

'He brought them back with him after the Boer War, isn't it horrible? Five of them are black men's skins and one white. I believe if you look carefully you can see the difference. He used to adore them, silly old man.'

One chair certainly was lighter than the rest and I carefully sat on it, expecting something strange to happen; but it was exactly like sitting in any other uncomfortable chair. My bare arms touched the back and, remembering what it was made of, I stood up and wiped my arms with my handkerchief. With a feeling of awe I gazed at the chairs thinking of the poor skinless bodies buried somewhere in Africa. Did their souls ever come to see what had happened to their skins or had they forgotten all about them? And did the workmen who covered the chairs know what gruesome work they were doing? (19)

Frances at first finds these chairs 'weirdly mysterious' (20) and returns to visit them on a Friday 13th with her sister Esmé. The visit is made frightful, however, by their finding the General lying on the floor, one eye open and the other eye shut (59); assuming he is drunk, they flee – only to find out later that he died 'worse than a dog' (60), from a stroke, alone in the house. Frances' fear is thus compounded by guilt; moreover, her fascination with death, represented by the chairs, has led her to an actual encounter with it. As the novel's horrors accumulate, then, the chairs themselves take on a more terrible aspect, becoming associated with multiple acts of cruelty, ranging from the emotionally exploitative games of the middle-classes to the atrocities of war.

Judith Halberstam has noted in her study of monstrosity in the nineteenth century that 'Skin . . . becomes a kind of metonym for the human';²⁰ the colonel's skin chairs stand for all those victims who are finally crushed by the weight of human aggression, neglect or indifference. They also provide a focus for the abject in the novel, since the use of human skin as chair covering breaks all boundaries concerning human identity and the dignity of human rights, throwing 'civilization' itself into question. The technologies of monstrosity that Halberstam calls 'skin shows' manifest themselves here as items of furniture. What we see in this novel is

a twentieth-century community in which the horrors of a late-nineteenth century imperial war find a home in a bourgeois community that has difficulty in facing up to the more obvious and more mundane cruelties that mark daily life in an increasingly dysfunctional society. In an England that has 'never had it so good' (according to Harold Macmillan in the Tory 1959 election campaign) such cultural hauntings should, it is implied, be as anomalous as keeping tree frogs and monkeys in a Leicestershire semi-detached house.

In this novel, however, there is a happy ending more redolent of comic Gothic or magic realism, and redemption from evil in the form of a triumphant, if mundane, human goodness. This is made evident in baby Jane's survival (she is adopted by a benign doctor who treated her in hospital) and in Frances' family being rescued from poverty and their bullying relatives by Mr Blackwell, a newcomer to the village who has bought the General's house, 'Springfield' (including its skin chairs). Mr Blackwell, a generous and wealthy man, marries Frances' mother and Frances thus finds herself living in the same house as the 'terrible' furniture. The last few pages reveal the chairs as having some sort of anthropomorphic presence for Frances, who hears 'rumbling and grumbling', 'moaning and groaning' and 'a kind of chanting' (198, 199) emanating from the room where they are kept. She decides to adopt Esmé's suggestion – that the chairs be given a Christian burial – but realises that only those who have been baptized can be given such a burial. In a bizarrely surreal episode, she chooses the names of well-known poets for the six chairs: Percy Shelley, George Byron, Edgar Allan Poe, Alfred Tennyson, William Yeats and Anon. Circa, 'who seemed to have died a very long time ago' (200). The last sentence of the novel sees her at peace, having read through the Baptism service and most of the Burial Service, 'leaning forward in Percy Shelley with my head on the table' (200). However parodic these services, they bestow some sort of ceremonial resolution not just on the suffering of the six victims of the Boer War, but on that of all 'victims' in the text. These range from maltreated animals, to Frances' docile mother, taunted and humiliated by her wealthy relations, to the infant Jane whose spirit defies her mother's attempts to kill her by neglect. On one level, of course, Frances' child-like act of incongruous reparation ends the novel on a note of whimsically macabre humour. Yet the bestowal of names (however inappropriate) on what are, in fact, pieces of detached skin, restores the boundary between the civilized and the barbaric by effecting a funeral service for six victims of war torture who (presumably) had no proper burial. The comically incongruous choice of names also allows Comyns to lay to rest a white male tradition of writing whilst asserting the validity and strength of her own.

In *The Juniper Tree*, published in 1985, Comyns uses the folk-tale to emphasise Gothic's tendency to draw on deep mythic roots. Taking its title and the bones of its plot from one of the tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, the novel's power lies in its easy transformation of an old and chilling folk tale into a narrative of modern despair and terror spiked with comic observations. Like other contemporary women writers – such as Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood and Carol Ann Duffy – Comyns delighted in what Alicia Ostriker has defined as 'revisionist mythmaking'

and what Angela Carter has more colourfully described as the process of 'putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode'.²¹ Indeed, in many respects *The Juniper Tree* echoes Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber' (1979), which itself reworks the 'Bluebeard' folk tale. The novel's strange amalgam of the folk story, the Gothic and the suburban (it is set between 1979 and 1984 in Richmond and Twickenham, in south-west London) can, again, be read as a family parable in which the heroine's sense of guilt, obligation and inadequacy position her as ripe for emotional exploitation.

Bella Winter's lack of self-confidence derives from several sources, including a highly manipulative and controlling mother whose jealousy formerly expressed itself in such cruelties as savaging her daughter's favourite toy, turning it into a 'Frankenstein monster of a doll'²² and in making hurtful remarks about Bella's body during her adolescence. A highly reflective narrator, Bella recognises in retrospect such behaviour as mental cruelty and understands obscurely that it has its source in her mother's own misery: 'I have few happy memories of my mother. She seemed to blame me for my father's disappearance' (12). She later learns, from her mother's new partner (who sits in a Gothic chair whilst revealing all) that she was conceived out of wedlock and that her mother's subsequent shame and misery is the root cause of all the bitterness felt between them. Bella's sense of inferiority has been further exacerbated by a car accident which resulted in the breakdown of a relationship (her lover had been driving at the time) and which has left her with a deep, long scar on one side of her face. Her one solace is her small daughter, Tommy (also called Marline), the product of a one-night stand after a party where she met 'a young Negro wearing a crimson velvet jacket' (22). Both mother and child, however, are frequently subjected to the casual cruelty of others – Tommy because she is 'half-caste' and Bella because of her disfiguring scar (which, in true Gothic mode, often acts as a livid indicator of her unexpressed emotions).

Bella is thus presented as an emotionally vulnerable and highly sensitive heroine whose craving for love renders her a potential victim. But this is a sophisticated parable and her exploiters are not, this time, drawn from the Dickensian gallery of exploitative rogues we see in Comyns' earlier work. They are, in fact, a charming, urbane and happily married couple who live in a Georgian house, built on 'enchanted ground' (56) in Richmond. In their mid-thirties, Bernard Forbes and Gertrude, his wife of German origin, are well off (he runs a successful art gallery) but desperate for a child. Having become friendly with the couple, Bella is delighted when Gertrude becomes pregnant. Statuesque, calm and very beautiful, Gertrude becomes an icon of maternal tranquillity during her pregnancy although she develops the strange habit of eating the blue berries – 'so blue and poisonous-looking, and smelling strange' (70) – from the Juniper tree in the Richmond garden. The pair of noisy magpies that inhabits this tree watch over events and, like the birds in the original German tale, seem to have an uncanny understanding of what is going on and of how a Gothic destiny will unfold.

The warm affection and praise that the Forbes heap on Bella restore her self-confidence. Working and living above a small antique shop in Twickenham, she

happily awaits, with Gertrude, the birth of the baby in October 1980. The novel takes a turn into the dark, however, when Gertrude dies in childbirth, having asked Bella to care for her child. Bernard is distraught and Bella becomes drawn into helping to run the Richmond house. Bernard begins to see Bella as his protégée-cum-daughter and, by the time Johnny is teething, he puts pressure on her to give up her job and flat and move into the Richmond house permanently in order to look after his child. Resisting this, she nevertheless becomes increasingly vulnerable to his emotional demands, feeling her need for independence as 'selfish' (135) whilst recognising that, in the early 1980s this is something of a retrograde step: 'I said, "Bernard, how Women's Lib would hate me if they knew how I feel about you"' (134). They finally become engaged, Bella moving into the Richmond house along with some of her favourite antiques, which include a large oak chest. After a honeymoon in Madrid, Bella returns to a house which, as in du Maurier's *Manderley* in *Rebecca*, is still haunted by the presence of the first wife, made tangible by the preservation of her 'hand-embroidered underclothes' (149) exactly where Gertrude left them.

Whilst spoiling his young son, Bernard gradually loses interest in his new wife, taking up another young protégée. With the help of Peter, whom Bernard employs as a picture-restorer, Bella creates a room of her own in the basement, privately known as 'Paradise Found', where she keeps the oak chest. Deeply depressed by her husband's increasing remoteness, Bella becomes jealous of her stepson and begins to feel emotionally and mentally unstable. This sets the scene for the novel's appalling dénouement in which Bella feels herself emotionally responsible for Johnny's accidental death, caused when he climbs into the chest and destabilizes the lid which comes crashing down, breaking his neck. Unable to cope with confessing to her part in his death, Bella buries him beneath the Juniper tree in the garden and explains to his father that he was suddenly taken off for a birthday treat by his German aunt, Charlotte. In the meantime, she procures a bottle of Valium tablets and writes a suicide note. Her intentions are foiled, however, by the arrival of policemen who have been alerted to the fact that one of the magpies in the Forbes' garden snatched a gold chain from the hand of a local jeweller as he stood in the street. Thinking her 'crime' has been discovered, Bella loses consciousness and suffers subsequently a severe mental breakdown. During this period of hallucinations and madness, Bernard becomes more and more distant whilst Bella's mother takes care of her grand-daughter and relations between mother and daughter improve dramatically. The end of the novel sees Bella moving into a large house with her mother and daughter and, finally, marrying Peter.

Comyns' reworking of the folk tale thus follows Carter's project of ironically appropriating a narrative from folklore in order to explore alternative cultural possibilities. In appropriating a tale 'that may be the most widespread in the world',²³ Comyns' novel uses a folkloric account of family dynamics as her plot but she challenges the patriarchal assumptions upon which the old story rests. Bella is not the evil and murderous step mother who wilfully kills her husband's rightful heir and, in some versions of the tale, feeds his severed head to his father in a stew.

She is instead a woman lured by emotional longing into a loveless marriage, in order to satisfy her husband's need for reliable childcare. Her worst sins are despair and envy. The unintended death of the child and the ensuing mental trauma provide for Bella a rite of passage through which she must pass before a new dispensation ensues. For the reader, the Gothic moments in which the child is in effect twice buried and then retrieved enact the pain of such transition.

The happy ending is overdetermined. Both the transformation of the 'bad' into the 'good' mother and the establishment of marriage as an equal partnership are clearly complex responses to the early days of second wave feminism which, whilst alerting women to the need for independence, perhaps rather too simply demonised the opposite sex and ignored the psychological reasons why a woman might still subvert her own desires to those of a male partner. As in Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber', closure offers salvation to its young heroine through marriage to a gentle and sensitive 'new man' figure. Arguably, both Carter and Comyns paid a price for creating narrators who could be seen to be colluding with masculine desire rather than giving voice to an independent female sexuality: Carter's work attracted hostile reviews for its seeming political incorrectness during the 1980s, Comyns' work was simply ignored by feminist critics.²⁴

What does the critical neglect of a female novelist who was particularly gifted at adapting Gothic devices and at rewriting myth and fairy tale in the mode of magical realism, tell us about feminist criticism and the construction of the Female Gothic during the second half of the twentieth century? Certainly the generic hybridity of Comyns' writing, like that of Carter, was at odds with the somewhat prescriptive notion of authentic women's writing (as confessional and/or depicting a strong heroine) that held sway during the 1980s. Indeed, the combination of realism, the Gothic and magical realism might well have been perceived as resulting in a rather fey and whimsical treatment of the oppression of women – a subject considered deadly serious by second wave feminism and appearing to demand the grim realism of a Marilyn French. Yet such hybridity allows Comyns to question notions of subjectivity in a highly effective manner.

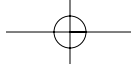
Comyns' work does not recognize political correctness. Cruelty in her novels does not observe stereotypes; like her early Female Gothic predecessors, she represents women as being as capable of exploitation as men. In her fictional world, men as well as women become victims and a woman's ability to hold on to her own space and her own identity is in constant tension with the need to love and be loved. Those who do not manage to keep these elements in balance find themselves psychologically obliterated by others. England of the present and recent past is stalked by monstrosity and this monstrosity is most often found within the bourgeois home. Comyns' heroines, while being honest, are often naïve to the point of colluding with their own oppression. Only through undergoing crucial moments of Gothic horror and transfiguration are they released into a happier state that, it would seem, enables them to tell their own stories. For Alice this entails producing a narrative from beyond the grave but others, like Frances and Bella, survive through abuse and danger, having learnt a great deal about themselves and human

nature in the process. In Comyns' novels the *unheimlich* is the encrypting of the unspeakable within the bourgeois family that always claims a conventional transparency. Her work thus takes the reader into a world rife with a 'commingling of the improbable and the mundane'²⁵ and one which is dense with comic horror. It is a world underpinned by a fear of death that haunts the narrators in a number of bizarre and surreal ways, including the death of the self through madness or psychological obliteration. What all her heroines have in common is the desire to avoid 'live burial'²⁶ within the family unit, whether the gravedigger is a man or a woman. It is, then, perhaps time to disinter this gifted woman writer whose works have been critically buried because they did not conform in the late twentieth century to either the parameters of Female Gothic as defined by the academy or to those of women's writing as celebrated by feminist critics. The case of Barbara Comyns suggests that while the Female Gothic has given us a way of reading, it is one that we constantly need to revise.

Notes

- 1 *The Juniper Tree*, published in 1985, for example, provoked the *Daily Telegraph* reviewer to write: 'Miss Comyns is a novelist of exceptional gifts' (cited in the blurb for the Mandarin Fiction edition published in 1993).
- 2 Six of Comyns' novels are still available from Virago. They are: *The Vet's Daughter*; *A Touch of Mistletoe*; *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*; *Sisters by a River*; *Who was Changed and Who was Dead* and *The Skin Chairs*.
- 3 See, for example, the entry on Comyns in Jenny Stringer, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Literature in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), which describes her style as 'characteristically faux-naïf' and her work as marked by a 'piercingly original view of family life and peculiar, often surreal, humour'.
- 4 Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, [1976] (London: The Women's Press, 1986).
- 5 Elaine Showalter, *Sisters' Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 127.
- 6 Showalter, *Sisters' Choice*, p. 127.
- 7 Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall, 'Gothic Criticism' in David Punter, ed., *A Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 227.
- 8 Patricia Craig, introduction to Barbara Comyns, *A Touch of Mistletoe*, [1967] (London: Virago, 1989), p. v.
- 9 Barbara Comyns, *Sisters by a River*, [1947] (London: Virago, 1985), p. 53. All subsequent page references are to this edition and will be given in parentheses in the text.
- 10 Barbara Comyns, *Who was Changed and Who was Dead*, [1954] (London: Virago, 1986).
- 11 Comyns was a great admirer of Dickens' novels as is evident from, for example, her introduction (written in 1980) to *The Vet's Daughter* and the various allusions to his work which crop up in her novels – for example, the whimsical reference to a dogs' beauty parlour in *David Copperfield* which can be found in *The Juniper Tree*, p. 16.
- 12 Cf. 'Daphne du Maurier is linked to Ann Radcliffe in a tradition that is held to include the Brontës, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Flannery O'Connor by this central figure of the persecuted maiden who is entrapped by a male tyrant in a labyrinthine castle': Alison Milbank, 'Female Gothic' in Marie Mulvey-Roberts, ed., *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 54.

- 13 See Kate Ferguson Ellis, 'The Gothic Heroine and Her Critics' in David Punter, ed., *A Companion to the Gothic*, p. 263.
- 14 Comyns' novel became the musical, *The Clapham Wonder*, written by the composer and lyricist, Sandy Wilson, who is probably best known for *The Boyfriend*. The musical opened at the Marlow Theatre, Canterbury in 1978 but did not transfer to London.
- 15 Barbara Comyns, *The Vet's Daughter*, [1959] (London: Virago 1981), p. 3. Page numbers are given hereafter in the text and refer to this edition.
- 16 David Punter, 'Ceremonial Gothic', in Glennis Byron and David Punter, eds, *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 39 and 48.
- 17 Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Death', in Marie Mulvey-Roberts, ed., *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, p. 42.
- 18 'Charming as were all Mrs Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for': Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, [1818] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 202.
- 19 Barbara Comyns, *The Skin Chairs*, [1962] (London: Virago 1986), p.172). Page numbers are given hereafter in parentheses in the text and refer to this edition.
- 20 Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 7.
- 21 Alicia Ostriker, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking' in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (London: Virago Press, 1986), pp. 315–16 and Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line' in Jenny Uglow, ed., *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 37. (Carter's essay was originally published in *Gender and Writing*, ed., Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora Press, 1983).
- 22 Barbara Comyns, *The Juniper Tree* (London: Methuen, 1985; London: Mandarin Paperbacks, 1993), p. 12. All page references are to the Mandarin edition of *The Juniper Tree* and will appear in parentheses in the text hereafter.
- 23 'This may be the most widespread story in the world. Pacific Islanders, Italians, Appalachian highlanders, all have their variants.' <http://www.folktale.net/Junipertr.html>, 05.11.02.
- 24 Both Patricia Duncker and Avis Lewallen attacked Carter's writing as pornographic. See Patricia Duncker, 'Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers', *Literature and History*, 10:1 (Spring 1984), 3–14 (but especially p. 10) and Avis Lewallen, 'Wayward girls but wicked women?' in Gary Day and Clive Bloom, eds., *Perspectives on Pornography* (London: Macmillan, 1988).
- 25 Salman Rushdie, defining magical realism, as cited in Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction' in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds., *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 174.
- 26 The phrase, which is taken from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (London: Methuen, 1986), is used by Kate Ferguson Ellis in her essay 'The Gothic Heroine and her Critics' in David Punter, ed., *A Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 265.



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