

# Lesbian Gothic

## Genre, Transformation, Transgression

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*To Cambridge Lesbian Line*

### Introduction: Lesbian Gothic

In an essay discussing the significance of the sign 'lesbian' Bonnie Zimmerman comments on the variety of different definitions and connotations that critics and theorists have assigned to it over the past thirty years. They range, she demonstrates, from the focus on an essentialist, transhistorical lesbian identity current in the 1970s to the present-day postmodern treatment of 'lesbian' as a metaphor or subject position in fiction and film. Zimmerman concludes, however, that disparate though these meanings and definitions certainly are, they nonetheless share a common factor; they all depict the lesbian as a disruptive, transgressive influence who, by rejecting the roles of specular Other of man and object of exchange conventionally assigned to woman, displays a 'desire which functions as excess within the heterosexual economy.'<sup>1</sup> 'Excess' is, in fact, an appropriate concept with which to open this essay on lesbian Gothic, since it furnishes a point of connection between the two terms. For, as critics illustrate, Gothic, like the sign 'lesbian', tends to inscribe excess. Suzanne Becker, for example, in her discussion of the genre describes it as characterised by 'excess in moral terms', as well as by 'excessive emotional experiences of desire, terror and pleasure.'<sup>2</sup>

The focus on 'excess', ideological and literary, which 'lesbian' and 'Gothic' share, is a key factor in explaining the appeal which Gothic motifs hold for contemporary writers of lesbian fiction, helping to account for the interest they display in reworking and transforming the conventions of the genre. As I show in *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (1999), novels and stories of this kind are notable for their versatility. Lesbian Gothic comprises, in fact, a number of different subsections, including ghost stories, vampire narratives, Gothic thrillers, and texts centring on the witch. It also displays a variety of different styles. Works of historiographic metafiction treating uncanny events in earlier eras, urban narratives depicting the mysteries of city life, works of comic Gothic parodying the monstrous images that homophobic culture assigns to the lesbian, and postmodern texts introducing elements of magic realism, are some of the diverse forms that writers employ.<sup>3</sup>

While both American and British writers have contributed to the form, on account perhaps of the tradition of postmodern fantasy pioneered by mainstream writers such as Angela Carter and Fay Weldon, it has proved especially attractive to the latter. I aim in this essay to further the understanding of lesbian Gothic by discussing its distinctive features and examining two British examples: Caeia March's *Between The Worlds* (1996), treating the figure of the witch, and Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999) that recasts the motif of spectral visitation.

Besides its inscription of excess, there are other features that make Gothic an attractive choice of genre for writers involved in lesbian representation. Prominent among these is the fact that it is a kind of fiction with strongly female associations in terms of authorship and theme. The Gothic novels of Mary Shelley, Ann Radcliffe and other female writers explore, either literally or symbolically, topics of particular interest to women. These include woman's entrapment in the domestic sphere of the home, her problematic relationship with her body, and (especially relevant to lesbian writers and readers) female sexuality and relationships. Another aspect of Gothic which makes it suitable for lesbian recasting is that, as Rosemary Jackson<sup>4</sup> and Anne Cranny-Francis<sup>5</sup> argue, texts exemplifying the genre frequently question mainstream versions of reality and the so-called 'normal' values they inscribe. These 'normalising' images include, of course, representations of sex and gender, the interrogation of which is, again, very pertinent to the woman living in a homophobic culture who identifies as lesbian or forms primary relationship with members of her own sex. In addition, as psychoanalytic readings appropriating Freud's concept of 'the uncanny' illustrate,<sup>6</sup> Gothic frequently focuses on the subject's repressed fears and desires. Leona F. Sherman comments on the prevalence in Gothic fiction of 'the symbolisation of sexuality, overtly feared but covertly wished'.<sup>7</sup> Repressed desires and anxieties are, of course, of central importance to the lesbian subject who, lacking a history and a language to articulate her sexual orientation, may feel haunted by emotions which she cannot or dare not articulate.

Given the correspondence existing between Gothic themes and lesbian/gay interests, it is understandable that certain classic Gothic texts, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Christabel' (1816), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), have received lesbian or homosexual interpretations.<sup>8</sup> All three texts utilise in different ways the motif of the double, one that lends itself particularly well to lesbian recasting. The double is a signifier of psychic division; it has been defined in psychoanalytic terms as 'a projection outward, onto a related figure, of aspects of one's own mental conflict'.<sup>9</sup> Its significance tends to be ambiguous since, while an encounter with her/his double may furnish the individual with a sense of liberation and even *jouissance*, the double may also represent an aspect of the self that s/he feels anxious or guilty about.<sup>10</sup> It resembles, in this respect, the concept of the abject which, according to Julia Kristeva, fascinates at the same time as it repels.<sup>11</sup> These ideas are pertinent to the lesbian who, encouraged by homophobic attitudes to keep her sexual orientation secret and lead a double life, frequently becomes a figure of psychic division. The motif of the double is utilised in lesbian Gothic in different ways. As we shall

see from March's *Between The Worlds*, in the case of the 'out' lesbian it signifies an image of the fearful, oppressed self which, on account of the prejudice she encounters, tends to haunt even the most confident member of the lesbian community. However, in the case of the closeted lesbian, as Waters' *Affinity* illustrates, it represents, on the contrary, a seductive image of the liberated self and the pleasures which she fantasises she would enjoy, were she only free to disregard convention and pursue her desires openly.

Another motif frequently found in Gothic texts which, like the double, carries connotations of the abject and is pertinent to lesbian existence, is 'the unspeakable' and the themes of secrecy and silence relating to it. The unspeakable carries different meanings. Something can be unspeakable because the individual lacks knowledge of it, because the knowledge is repressed, or because, though having access to it, s/he dare not admit the fact. All three meanings, as well as appearing in Gothic literature, are pertinent to the woman who identifies as lesbian.<sup>12</sup> Women have suffered for centuries from what Adrienne Rich aptly terms 'The Great Silence'.<sup>13</sup> They have been denied knowledge of lesbian sexuality and culture or, if they have managed to access it, have been prevented by convention from speaking and writing about it. As a result, in much of nineteenth and early twentieth-century fiction 'lesbianism frequently lacks a name, much less an acknowledged or acceptable identity'.<sup>14</sup> And, despite the efforts of gay activists to challenge these repressive attitudes, this sorry state of affairs continues to operate in many areas. Judith Butler, discussing the restrictions on free speech in the American military, remarks on the fact that 'certain kinds of *utterances*, namely, "I am a homosexual", are, within the recently contested policy, considered to be "offensive conduct"'.<sup>15</sup> She adds, sardonically, 'in the revised guidelines to the policy, still in dispute in the courts, it is now possible to say, "I am a homosexual" and to add to that statement "and I have no intention or propensity to act on that desire"' (76). This absurd situation would be risible, were it not for the damage it does to many people's lives.

Linked to the idea of lesbianism as 'unspeakable' is the concept of it as 'unrepresentable'. This too, of course, is relevant to lesbian fiction. As Judith Roof comments, 'Conscious of a kind of phallic preeminence, women writers are faced with the difficulty of representing perceptions unaccounted for in a phallic economy in terms of that economy'.<sup>16</sup> The contradictory project of attempting to depict lesbianism in a culture which fails to recognise its authenticity, as well as relating it to the Lacanian concept of the real which also resists representation, returns us to the topic of Gothic.<sup>17</sup> For, possibly more than any other genre, Gothic, through its utilisation of strategies of indirection, including spectral and fantastic imagery, 'pushes us', in the words of Rosemary Jackson, 'towards an area of non-signification . . . by attempting to articulate the unnameable and to visualise the unseen'.<sup>18</sup>

The features of Gothic cited above, such as its inscription of excess, its strongly female focus, its ability to question mainstream versions of reality, and the fact that certain motifs associated with it (such as the double and 'the unspeakable') lend themselves especially well to lesbian appropriation and recasting, help to explain the attraction which Gothic holds for writers and readers of lesbian fiction, indicating

its potential as a vehicle for lesbian narrative. Even those features of the genre which appear resistant to lesbian transformation, such as the tendency, apparent in horror fiction and film, to depict woman – the lesbian in particular – as evil and monstrous, far from serving to deter writers from experimenting with Gothic, appear to have the reverse effect. They challenge their skills of invention, spurring them to new acts of creativity in an attempt to subvert and rectify misogynistic and homophobic attitudes.<sup>19</sup>

The strategies of parody and inversion which writers of lesbian Gothic utilise in transforming the conventions of the genre reveal interesting connections with Luce Irigaray's theory of mimesis and Butler's concept of gender as performance which develops Irigarayan theory with reference to queer perspectives. The two theorists recommend that we challenge oppressive representations of femininity/gay identity by recasting them parodically, introducing an element of excess. Butler, in fact, recommends parodic mimicry as a tactic available to lesbians and gay men to renegotiate the boundaries of the abject by politicising it and 'resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy'.<sup>20</sup> The texts of March and Waters, as we shall see, utilise these strategies in different ways.

### Caeia March's *Between The Worlds: Witches and Women's Land*

The appropriation and recasting of the figure of the witch by writers with feminist interests and aims is by no means new. However, although Djuna Barnes and Sylvia Townsend Warner, writing in the first half of the twentieth-century, utilised imagery of witchcraft to represent female resistance to hetero-patriarchal conventions, it was not until the advent of the radical feminist movement in the 1970s that the witch achieved her full potential as a signifier of female rebellion and empowerment. Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (1970) and Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) created the ground for this. Morgan, interpreting the witch as an image of liberation, tells the reader, 'You are a Witch by being female, untamed, angry, joyous and immortal',<sup>21</sup> while Daly celebrates what she calls 'a Hag-identified vision'.<sup>22</sup> Associating the witch with marriage resistance and an independent life-style, she advises women to strive to achieve space, both psychological and geographical, where they can establish a lesbian feminist community and pursue their dreams unimpeded by male control.

Morgan's and Daly's theorisation of the witch influenced feminist terminology and politics. Consciousness-raising groups, the chief socio-political unit of the 1970s women's liberation movement, were playfully termed covens, while a radical feminist slogan, challenging the patriarchal view of the witch as malevolent, defiantly proclaimed 'Wicked witches were created by evil men'.<sup>23</sup> The newly politicised image of the witch also inspired works of fiction. Barbara Hanrahan's *The Albatross Muff* (1978), a work of historiographic metafiction set in the Victorian period, portrays the witch in a radical feminist light, while Sara Maitland appropriates a phrase from Daly for the title of her story 'The Burning Times' (1983), a fictional account of witch hunts located in an unspecified era of the past.<sup>24</sup> Maitland's narrative of a

daughter who, jealous of her mother's lesbian lover, betrays her mother to the witch hunters, combines Daly's emphasis on female bonding with her reference to the destruction of the maternal relationship in which, Daly surmises, transforming historical events into feminist mythology, the enforced collusion of the daughters in their mothers' indictment and persecution could sometimes result.

Despite the changes which have occurred in lesbian politics and styles of narrative in the past thirty years, the witch continues to provide a source of inspiration for writers today, carrying radical feminist connotations of female empowerment, marriage resistance and women's community. However, with the advent of post-structuralism and the more complex approaches to sex and gender it has generated, significant modifications have occurred in the witch's portrayal and the texts inscribing it. March's treatment of the witch in *Between The Worlds*, in combining a radical feminist confessional narrative with a postmodern emphasis on the fantastic and the surreal, brings together the political focus of 1970s feminism with the psychoanalytic approach and literary interests that characterise the 1990s.

Developing Daly's interest in the feminist appropriation of space, geographical and psychological, *Between The Worlds* focuses on the struggle waged by a group of lesbian feminists to maintain, in the face of personal and financial difficulties, a Cornish smallholding known as Eastfield Farm which they are currently renting. This tract of 'women's land'<sup>25</sup> has practical and symbolic importance; it represents both 'a healing sanctuary' (21) for women in need of refuge and tranquillity, and a focus for the local feminist community. Playing a supportive role in the project are the middle-aged Tarn, a student of history whose research focuses on the persecution of women as witches, and her lover Lerryn, an artist who paints the Cornish landscape. The sexual relationship between the two women is described indirectly in imagery of nature and represented, in Irigarayan manner, in terms of a *jouissance* that is fluid and diffuse.<sup>26</sup> This strategy of indirection, Judith Roof argues, in its avoidance of the phallocentric and scopoc, represents a tactic available to writers to solve the contradictions of depicting lesbian love in a culture which denies its authenticity.<sup>27</sup>

March's novel creates a lively interplay between third and first person narrative. The first-person narration, exemplified by Tarn's account of her life and by the letters which she sends Lerryn while staying with a friend in Germany, is confessional in tone, recalling the lesbian life stories and personal testimonies popular in the period of the 1970s. However, it is juxtaposed with a different kind of writing which utilises fantasy and parodically reworks, in typically postmodern manner, episodes from history and myth. The latter includes retellings of Cornish legends, a lesbian feminist recasting of the motif of the mermaid, and, of key importance, fictional reconstructions of the lives of women persecuted as witches. Catherine Clément, associating the witch with 'women's stories' and 'a history arranged the way tale-telling women tell it',<sup>28</sup> describes her as 'living in impossible places, in bramble forests, on the heath. . .' (54). March likewise identifies the witch with a feminine culture rooted in the natural world.

March's treatment of women's history, exemplified in her novel by Tarn's research into the witch hunts in Cornwall and the Isle of Man and her German

friend Liesl's study of the artistic achievements of the German Beguines, is notably eclectic. It interweaves a focus on the continuities linking women in different cultures, resembling the approach adopted by feminist students of history in the 1970s and early 1980s, with a Foucauldian emphasis on discontinuity and difference. In a manner recalling Rich's concept of lesbian continuum, Tarn draws analogies between examples of female victimisation in different periods, comparing the witch hunts in Cornwall and the Isle of Man and the persecution of the Beguines in Germany with the prejudice and discrimination experienced by women who identify as lesbian today. However, she also foregrounds the concept of 'difference', investigating the disparate forms that the witch hunts took in different periods and areas. Foregrounding the interplay between history and legend, past and present-day cultures, she describes the Cornish countryside as 'a between-the-worlds place where past and present meet' (225). The novel itself, in interweaving characters and events from different historical eras, epitomises, as the title signals, a similar location.

The interplay that March creates between past and present, 'continuity' and 'difference', furnishes the context for the uncanny events which occur in the final stages of the narrative. Tarn, as well as being a student of women's history and a supporter of the feminist commune movement, is also, we discover, a Gothic heroine. In this role, she experiences an incident involving 'the unspeakable' which, in turn, gives rise to a fantasy encounter with a doppelgänger. Secure though she appears to be in her lesbian identification, her trajectory nonetheless has a darker side. This is hinted at in the novel's opening episode which portrays her reading a letter from her adult daughter who is, she suspects, a victim of domestic violence at the hands of her male partner. As the narrative progresses Tarn herself encounters problems stemming from homophobia in both her professional and personal life. At the local school where she teaches she faces criticism from a colleague, a Christian fundamentalist, who disapproves of both her lesbian/feminist identification and her interest in the history of the witch hunts. When she attempts to discuss the latter in class, he tries to silence her. And when, shortly afterwards, her granddaughter Vorrie dies of cot death while in her care, she is accused by her daughter's male partner of contributing to her death through negligence. These events prey on her mind, reminding her of 'the scapegoating of women' (204) reflected in the witch trials. They induce in her a fit of paranoia, making her a candidate for the entry into the world of Gothic fantasy, along with the encounter with a double that frequently typifies it.

Alone in her cottage at night with a storm raging overhead, she experiences a terrifying slippage between present and past. She loses grip on her own identity and finds herself entering the psyche of Ellan Vannin, a famous seventeenth-century Cornish witch whose history is the focus of her research. When Ellan's baby fell sick and died, the local community held her responsible and accused her of murder. She suffered an agonising death by being incarcerated in a spiked barrel and rolled through the village streets. The accusation of child-murder directed at Ellan strikes Tarn as uncannily similar to the accusation of negligence directed at

herself in relation to her granddaughter's death. Standing on the veranda of her cottage, watching the lightening illuminate the sky, she thinks, 'It was my storm. It was her storm, Ellan Vannin's thunderstorm on a summer night with the sky on fire' (215). She identifies physically with Ellan's suffering, feeling the spikes in the barrel pierce her body, while the thunder, echoing around the valley, reminds her of 'a moaning body in a barrel' (216).

Tarn's psychic ordeal concludes with her hearing Ellan Vannin utter the words, 'The death of women's dreams is often violent' (216). Recognising that she must face the fact that life for women is frequently painful and that, as a result, they need places of refuge, she returns from the internalised realm of fantasy to re-assume her place in the external socio-political world of the feminist commune. Her resolve strengthened, she determines to devote her energies, with the assistance of her partner Lerryn, to working for the 'women's land' project.

### Sarah Waters' *Affinity*: Haunting/ Herstory

In contrast to the motif of the witch that, while maintaining its popularity today, came to the fore in the lesbian/feminist theory and fiction of the 1970s, the emergence of spectral visitation as a theme for lesbian fiction tends to be associated with the late 1980s and 1990s, the period typified by the feminist appropriation of, and dialogue with, psychoanalysis. The treatment of spectrality in contemporary lesbian narrative is influenced by the different meanings that, developing Freud's concept of 'the return of the repressed' articulated in 'The "Uncanny"' and other of his essays, it has acquired in lesbian/feminist theory. Irigaray initiated a poignant cluster of significations when, describing the effects of *déréliction*, the condition of alienation and exile to which she sees the female sex relegated on account of the male suppression of a female genealogy, she depicts women as 'dissolved, absent, empty, abandoned', reduced to the insubstantial role of 'a dream, a shade or even a ghost'.<sup>29</sup> The important role that the motif of spectrality plays in queer theory is registered by Diana Fuss who remarks on the current 'preoccupation with the figure of the homosexual as spectre and phantasm, as spirit and revenant, as abject and undead'.<sup>30</sup> While Fuss herself uses the motif to explore the uneasy relationship existing between heterosexual and homosexual economies, 'each haunted by the other' in the manner of a 'ghostly visitation' (3), Butler, accusing society of exiling gay people to the domain of the abject, describes these excluded subjectivities as set to 'haunt those boundaries [of the human] as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation'.<sup>31</sup> Terry Castle, meanwhile, explores the way that spectral imagery has been utilised in the fiction of the past to disembody and decorporealise lesbian desire.<sup>32</sup> These different resonances and shades of meaning all appear, displaced in fictional form, in Waters' *Affinity*.

*Affinity* is a work of historiographic metafiction set in Victorian London. Centring her narrative on the spiritualist movement which flourished in the 1860s and 1870s, Waters teases out the contradictions of power/powerlessness which the movement exemplified for women and, by using it as the context for a lesbian

romance narrative, explores its transgressive potential as a vehicle for subverting conventions of sexuality and class.

The novel opens with Margaret Prior, a young unmarried woman whose father, an academic working in the field of history, has recently died, attempting to escape the claustrophobia of her upper middle-class home by volunteering as a 'Lady Visitor'<sup>33</sup> at Millbank women's prison and, to the dismay of her mother who associates the working-class inmates with infection and depravity, paying her first visit there. Margaret, however, is no conventional do-gooder. The series of personal tragedies which have prompted her to assume the role of prison visitor are conveyed to the reader indirectly, filtered through her memories and thoughts. Intelligent and well-educated, she enjoyed attending her father's lectures and assisting him with his work at the British Library. His death, as well as being an emotional blow, has put an end to her intellectual life, frustrating the plans for the research trip to Italy which the two planned to make together. She has also, we learn, suffered an even more devastating loss, one about which convention dictates that she keep silent, confiding its pain only to her diary. Her lover Helen, whom she first encountered at one of her father's lectures and was due to accompany them on the trip to Italy, has deserted her. Tired of the secrecy and subterfuge which the lesbian relationship involved and seeking to lead a 'normal' life, Helen has accepted a proposal of marriage from Margaret's brother Stephen and borne him a son, leaving Margaret feeling emotionally bereft.

On making her initial visit to Millbank gaol, Margaret is portrayed as a ghostly, frustrated figure, an image, in fact, of Irigarayan *déréliction*. She compares the female prisoners, with their pale countenances and enforced muteness, to spectres and, sitting writing her diary at night by the dim light of the lamp, thinks, 'How my mind runs to ghosts, these days!' (126). In this emotionally vulnerable state she attracts a further instance of victimisation. Among the many examples of female wretchedness she encounters on her visits to the prison, one particular woman arouses her interest. This is the medium Selina Dawes, sentenced to five years incarceration for the part that she allegedly played in the death of a woman who attended one of her seances, when, she maintains, the male spirit who materialised became unruly. Margaret, though initially sceptical of Selina's claim to be able to communicate with the spirit world, is eventually convinced of her integrity. Erotically infatuated with Selina, she credits her protestations of love and, believing her assurance that she can escape from gaol with the help of her spirit friends, agrees to assist her escape by using her personal inheritance to finance her journey to the continent and, in addition, elope with her. The reader, on the contrary, is positioned to respond to Selina with a degree of ambivalence. In fact, by keeping open until the novel's final pages the question of whether Selina really does enjoy paranormal powers or, on the contrary, is engaging in an elaborate confidence trick, Waters maintains an air of suspense, teasing us about the outcome of events. Will the narrative conclude with Margaret finding happiness with Selina in Italy, or will she again face desertion, paying the price for trusting Selina's words and – forgetting everything her father, a scholar committed to Enlightenment ideals of rationality,

taught her – succumbing to the lure of the irrational? Waters also plays tantalising games with genre and ideology, teasing us about the kind of the novel that we are engrossed in reading and the political perspective it inscribes. Is *Affinity* a Gothic romance which imaginatively endorses the paranormal, or a Gothic thriller which exposes it as fake by furnishing a rational explanation for Selina's apparently paranormal powers? Will the novel's conclusion leave us on the plane of fantasy or will it shatter the web of the spectral illusion which Waters has skilfully constructed by giving us a feminist materialist explanation of events?

Waters' narrative of lesbian desire is enriched by the recasting of a number of motifs familiar from Gothic fiction and film. It represents, among other things, a lesbian/feminist reworking of the motif of the haunted house. Margaret's upper middle-class home and Millbank prison, though ostensibly having little in common, reveal on closer scrutiny significant similarities. Both are patriarchal establishments, the former embodying the oppressive power of the Victorian family and the latter of the state, carrying associations of female entrapment. Both attempt to exert control by operating a system of surveillance. Mrs Prior strives to keep an eagle eye on her daughter Margaret's activities, while Millbank prison is constructed on the model of a panopticon, the architectural structure associated by Foucault with state control. Both home and prison, moreover, carry spectral connotations. Described in imagery of darkness and shadows, they are haunted by their inmates' memories and frustrated desires – ones relating to lesbian love in the case of both the middle-class Margaret and her working-class counterpart Selina. The correspondence between home and prison is further accentuated by the fact that Margaret, on entering the latter, rather than being struck by the difference between the women prisoners and herself, as we might expect, finds herself identifying with them. In a passage heralding her feelings of attraction for Selina which, it is interesting to note, resembles Winterson's treatment of the motif of the amorous exchange of hearts in *The Passion* (1987), she imagines an interchange of hearts taking place between herself and the women prisoners. In addition, the sigh she hears emanating from Selina's cell strikes her as 'the perfect complement' (26) to her own melancholy mood. Perceiving that, like herself, Selina nurses personal griefs, she thinks, '*You are like me*' (82).

It is, in fact, this sense of identification which Selina exploits in seeking to persuade Margaret to assist her escape from gaol. Playing on the dual meanings of the word, the conventional meaning of 'resemblance' with that of 'paramour' which it signified in nineteenth-century spiritualist circles,<sup>34</sup> she emphatically tells her 'You were seeking me, your own *affinity*' (275). In the interplay of doubles which, as this episode illustrates, pervades the narrative, Selina performs a particularly complex role. While acting as a substitute for Margaret's former lover Helen, she also represents the *doppelgänger* of Margaret herself. On the one hand, she represents an image of the sexual *jouissance* which Margaret hopes she will enjoy if she dare transgress the law and help her escape, while, on the other, she signifies a darker message. In Gothic fiction and film, as Ruth Parkin-Gounelas explains, the protagonist's encounter with her/his double frequently acts as a harbinger of death.<sup>35</sup>

There are hints in the final stages of the narrative that Margaret's encounter with Selina heralds this grim doom.

Another aspect of *Affinity* which merits comment is its representation of lesbianism – or rather, its subtly contrived refusal to represent it directly. In keeping with the Victorian era, in which the action is located, the word 'lesbian' never actually occurs in the text. Descriptions of lesbian love-making are also absent, reflecting the isolated and frustrated situation of both Margaret and Selina. Lesbian sexual practice exists, in fact, for both women as either a memory from the past or a fantasy located in the future. While lesbian desire, is powerfully, though indirectly, evoked both in Margaret's poignantly nostalgic memories of her relationship with Helen and the erotic gaze which she directs at Selina when visiting her in gaol, this desire, as suits its significance as the unspeakable and unrepresentable of phallogocentric culture, a figure for the Lacanian real, remains verbally unarticulated and undiscussed. There is literally no space for its discussion. Margaret's conversations with Selina are necessarily brief, inhibited by the prison warders' surveillance, while Helen, Margaret's former lover, is now a wife and mother and has rejected her lesbian past. As a result, Margaret seldom has the opportunity to converse with her alone.

The one private conversation which does take place between Margaret and Helen occurs in the former's bedroom when, ironically, considering the fact that it is her desertion which is the cause of Margaret's dependence on the drug, Helen brings her nightly draught of chloral. The tone of the conversation is understandably tense, with both women struggling to control their feelings and avoid doing one another further emotional injury. 'Don't go too near the bed!', Margaret warns her ex-lover bitterly. 'Don't you know it's haunted, by our old kisses. They'll come and frighten you' (204). Introducing a vampiric image that vividly evokes the desperate way she clings to the memory of the relationship, she pictures the kisses 'hanging in the curtains, like bats, ready to swoop' (204). The vampire is another motif which frequently receives transformation in lesbian Gothic, and Waters utilises it here to particularly good effect.

The most striking strategy that Waters employs to evoke lesbian desire in the narrative is, however, reference to the spectral. This enables her, like March, though employing a different tactic, to avoid the scopic perspective which feminist theorists, Irigaray in particular, see as typifying a phallogocentric economy. It is also intellectually appropriate. Just as the spirits which Selina claims to conjure up in the séances she holds represent the 'excess' of a materialist, rationalist culture, so lesbian desire signifies the excess of a hetero-patriarchal economy. And, like lesbian desire in Victorian society, the spirits that Selina claims to conjure, though insubstantial and elusive, are nonetheless highly disruptive. They also resemble lesbian desire in being a topic of public controversy and debate. What exactly is their status? Are they 'real', figments of the spectators' imagination, or a deceptive masquerade produced by the medium's trickery and sleight of hand?

As the upper middle-class Margaret's erotic infatuation with the working-class Selina illustrates, Waters underpins her treatment of lesbian sexuality with an

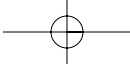
analysis of class relationship and conflict. Her portrayal of Selina, and the dramatic shifts of circumstance she undergoes, demonstrate that the profession of medium could furnish the ambitious working-class woman with an effective, if precarious, means to ascend the social ladder and achieve fame and fortune.<sup>36</sup> The figure of the working-class servant-girl also plays a key role in the narrative. Endorsing the viewpoint of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, Waters portrays the servant-girl, on account of her alien class affiliations, as signifying ‘the hole in the social cell’,<sup>37</sup> the chink in the closely protected carapace, of the bourgeois family where forces of disorder can creep in to unravel family ties. In linking the topic of the disruptive effects of intimate female relationships with that of working-class insurrection, she imaginatively develops the focus of a long and distinguished line of texts, including Freud’s case-study ‘Dora’ (1905), Jean Genet’s play *Les Bonnes* (1947), Nancy Meckler’s film *Sister, My Sister* (1994) and Margaret Atwood’s novel *Alias Grace* (1996).

March’s *Between The Worlds* and Waters’ *Affinity*, though both recasting Gothic conventions in order to investigate the oppressed position of women who form primary relationships with members of their own sex and to represent the transgressive effects of lesbian desire, reveal significant structural and tonal differences. *Between The Worlds*, in creating an interplay between different historical periods and the women inhabiting them, is centrifugal in design. *Affinity*, on the contrary, is centripetal, continually returning the reader from the home, the séance, the London streets and the other locations which it introduces to the oppressively claustrophobic interior of Millbank prison and the *topos* of female entrapment which it embodies. Two fictional texts that I’ve selected for analysis from among many, they give an insight into the vitality and versatility of lesbian Gothic.

## Notes

- 1 Bonnie Zimmerman, ‘Lesbians Like This and That: Some Notes on Lesbian Criticism for the Nineties’, in ed. Sally Munt, *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 4.
- 2 Suzanne Becker, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 1–2.
- 3 Paulina Palmer, *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (London: Cassell-Continuum, 1999), pp. 1–23.
- 4 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981).
- 5 Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 103.
- 6 Psychoanalytic studies of Gothic include Jackson, *Fantasy*, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (London: Methuen, 1980).
- 7 Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman, ‘Gothic Possibilities’, *New Literary History*, 8/2 (1976–7), 289.
- 8 See Ruth Parkin-Gounelas, *Literature and Psychoanalysis: Intertextual Readings* (Basingstoke: Palgrave: 2001), pp.109–118; William Veeder, ‘Children of the Night:

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