Helene Meyers. *Femicidal Fears. Narratives of the Female Gothic Experience.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001.

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1 Meyers's engaging study on romance and the contemporary appropriation of conventional tropes of the Gothic joins feminist debates about essentialism, victimology, female agency and the body. Instead of dwelling on traditional Gothic trends such as madness and maternity, Meyers argues that feminist critics should turn to the contemporary female Gothic which highlights violent crimes and murder in particular, and which "explores the difficulties of, and the necessity for, taking gender oppression seriously without positioning women as pure victims" (xii). This aspect of her work, essentially the analysis of recent narratives through the grid of the Gothic as well as contemporary debates among feminists and postfeminists, makes the volume particularly valuable in its contribution to cultural studies, feminism, and genre studies. Meyers delineates how women writers have used the Gothic romance to mediate the connection between gender norms and female victimization. The diachronic transformations of the genre are the focus of Meyers's analysis that shows how contemporary women writers adopt Gothic conventions to address the sexual politics of their time.

2 The second chapter, entitled "Gothic Traditions," probes the early female Gothic, paying particular attention to the question of women's fear vis-à-vis male sexual politics and the legitimacy of such apprehension. Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), for example, applies the Gothic to mitigate women's horror by presenting male protectors as true heroes and the heroine's anxiety as unwarranted. Mary Wollstonecraft's Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman (1798) stands in stark contrast to such consoling narratives because it depicts villainous male partners as those who inevitably keep the law and social mores on their side. This phenomenon signals the possibility of a continuous and unabated abuse of women, with the blind approbation of society. Daphne de Maurier's canonical Rebecca (1938) is a problematic example of the Gothic tradition going awry, since the message, although relatively conventional in its restoration of peace and woman's security in the arms of her husband, is overshadowed by a camouflaged crime. Maxim de Winters disposes of his first wife, Rebecca, following the "male status quo" which seeks to eliminate dominant and manipulative women. What is surprising and indeed alarming to Meyers, is the second Mrs. de Winters's puzzling reaction to this femicide. Far from blaming her spouse or fearing a similar fate, she commiserates with her man. Thus, the positive message of "they lived

happily ever after" is corroded by the shared secret of crime and the heroine's tacit cooperation with the murderer. Meyers concludes from her diachronical analysis that, in accordance with Gothic conventions, "good" women need not be afraid because it is only "bad" ones - meaning those who do not comply with patriarchal order - who may die at the hands of their partners.

3 Chapter Three, ominously entitled "Love Kills," starts off by differentiating between the contemporary and the traditional Gothic which, as in Radcliffe's novel, explored issues of woman's vulnerability, but provided a refuge for the heroine in the end. Modern texts rule out such blissful heterosexual relations, following in the footsteps of Wollstonecraft's Maria and contemporary crime files. In the present-day Gothic, Meyers contends, normalized familial and romantic relations end in tragedy and murder, upholding violence against women as a cultural convention. Edna O'Brien's Casualties of Peace (1966) exemplifies women's vulnerability in their relations with men. Willa, one of the protagonists, escapes from a sadistic relationship with Herod, only to die at the hands of Tom, who has mistaken her for his own wife. Beryl Bainbridge's The Bottle Factory Outing (1974) again demonstrates that women who act like "born victims" survive the onslaughts of men whereas formidable females risk their lives. Brenda is the epitome of passive and fearful behavior, apologizing to men for not allowing them to abuse her to the fullest extent. Freda, her counterpart, aggressively strives to reach her self-appointed goals. Predictably, Freda dies at the hands of the man whom she follows with amorous intentions, whereas Brenda, terrified by this femicide, turns to her ex-husband and her parents for protection. She does so because the only thing the submissive heroine learns from her experience is "that a woman outside a legitimate (i.e., male-dominated) community risks a broken neck" (54). Meyers asserts that both texts frustrate the traditional Gothic as they demonstrate that women's fear of men is well warranted.

4 Meyers brings together the Gothic and pornography in her fourth chapter entitled "The Construction of the Sadomasochistic Couple," arguing that the pornographic imagination plays upon the worst fears of the Gothic heroine by encouraging perverse and harmful sexual practices in our culture. Reinforcing the idea that masochism is part of the "feminine personality," pornography contributes to the common misconceptions present in the dominant mythology of mainstream culture. To exemplify her point, Meyers analyzes Angela Carter's Honeybuzzard (1966) and Muriel Spark's The Driver's Seat (1984), texts which insinuate that patriarchal concepts of femininity and masculinity generate male sadists and female victims. Carter's heroine, Ghislaine, craves pain and finally encourages her sadistic lover

Honeybuzzard to strangle her to death. This gruesome end is preceded by numerous instances of her boyfriend's cruelty, such as when he punches her around or slashes her face. Spark's novel presents another female murder victim as a protagonist, where the final mystery of the narrative turns out to be the fact that the heroine planned her own murder and consciously led the so-called reformed women-victimizer to her own defenseless body. Meyers thus illustrates that the persistence of the dichotomy of male victimizers and female masochists contributes to acts of violence against women and to an abundance of female corpses. The conscious avoidance of sadomasochistic scripts in arts and culture, according to Meyers, is a prerequisite for abating the prevalence of murder.

5 In the fifth section, entitled "Paranoia Will Destroy You or Will It?," Meyers argues that the women's feeling of paranoia is not only justified but also serves a positive aim of unifying them as a class of subjects. Edna O'Brien's I Hardly Knew You (1978) presents a heroine born into a volatile home with an abusive father and a browbeaten mother. The protagonist's own marriage reiterates the unbalanced patriarchal script; her numerous affairs with married men only reconfirm the impossibility of positive erotic bonds with the opposite sex. Once engaged in a relationship with a younger man and her son's best friend, she kills him half consciously, taking revenge on all the males who have hurt her. Diane Johnson's The Shadows Knows (1974) presents a freshly divorced and anonymous N. who is confronted with violent acts directed at her African-American home. The plot revolves around the paranoia caused by these acts; the heroine suspects various men, from her own ex-husband to her previous baby-sitter's boyfriend. As she begins to conceive the possibility of revenge on her part, N. comes to realize that she has not only been a victim but also an accomplice in other women's oppression. Both narratives stress a layered gender, race, and class oppression, the legitimacy of the paranoid subject, and the need to be aware of latent danger as a self-defense strategy.

6 In Chapter Six Meyers looks at postfeminism, which, as a backlash against Second-Wave feminism, depoliticizes the fundamental issues of its forerunner and strives to contain the Gothic as passé. Meyers argues that such a reaction involves a dangerous denial of the still-palpable perils women face in society. Moreover, this conservative rebuttal takes women back to the pre-feminist era rather than advancing them. To illustrate this cultural phenomenon, Meyers posits Joyce Carol Oates's *Soul/Mate* (1989), whose heroine moves within the parameters of a postfeminist *Weltanschauung*. Dorothea, a young widow, falls in love with a married man, Charles, while she herself becomes the focus of attention of a murderous psychopath, Colin. Her admirer, who is also Dorothea's male *alter ego*, kills all the

people who stand in the heroine's path towards future bliss and, ultimately, kills himself. The woman can finally become her lover's lawful wife as well as the director of the foundation she had worked for. Without demonstrating determination or ambition, Dorothea gets what she wants by means of Colin's bloodshed. Acting in a self-effasive and passive manner and remaining dependent on men, she adheres to the codes of hegemonic femininity. Her desire to contain her relationship with Colin, as well as her efforts to hide her drive for professional success, delineate postfeminists' efforts to ignore the persistence of the Gothic world.

7 Meyers concludes that the tendency to contain feminism and the quotidian Gothic leads to the denial of gender hierarchy and gender oppression. The femicidal strand in the contemporary Gothic corroborates women's trauma in reaction to hegemonic definitions of gender as well as the contemporary flight from essentialism reinforced by tenacious somatophobia. For Meyers, Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* (1981) shows postfeminism as symptomatic of such fear of the body. Rennie, a journalist, sets off to a Caribbean island to forget her recent mastectomy, unsuccessful love affairs and a break-in by an unidentified pervert to her Toronto apartment. There, she becomes involved in island politics and ends up in prison. Whether she returns home or remains in jail on the island remains unclear to the end. Atwood has her protagonist Rennie retrospectively observe her own (postfeminist) flight from women who, like her mother and many others, offer martyrdom, abandonment, and disillusionment with life. Rennie looks back on how she has always avoided female bonding, yet heterosexual relationships turned out lackluster as well. Imprisoned, she finally faces her own fear of men, and realizes that escaping from femaleness and denying the Gothic world only magnifies its threatening presence. As she decides to care for her tortured cellmate, Rennie initiates female connection, using her touch to cure, and, figuratively, her body as a necessary element for reinvigorating feminist thought.

8 In conclusion, Meyers argues that her study, as well as contemporary Gothic texts, place an emphasis on women's "difficulty of refusing victimization but also on the necessity and the possibility of such refusals" (154). Despite its popularly acclaimed allure, heterosexual romance remains the symbol of gender oppression and sadomasochistic relations. Denying the feminist Gothic leads to bigger harms, as it reiterates old scripts of male violence, female victimization, and lack of awareness on the part of the victims. Meyers insists that we "all swim in Gothic waters" (155) and a conscious analysis of this state may help create healthier environments.

9 Overall, Meyers's close readings of various modern narratives, viewed through the optic of traditional Gothic and contemporary feminist trends, make this book a singularly

engaging study. The logical division of chapters skillfully lays stress on the necessity to account for the underpinnings of engendered violence. One might take issue with the author's preference for depressing scripts that invariably essentialize women as victims. And although in the introduction Meyers calls for empowering readings which would avoid pigeonholing women as prey, her ensuing analysis invariably accentuates victimization. Yet this in no way detracts from the author's achievement: *Femicidal Fears* contributes eloquently to the ongoing debate on gender and power relations through its gratifying and eminently readable investigation of crucial modern texts.