

# “Sick with Longing”: Sickness and Sexual Dissidence in the Victorian Gothic Imagination



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SEXUAL transgression features so frequently and prominently in eighteenth and nineteenth century Gothic fiction that William Hughes and Andrew Smith posit that “Gothic has, in a sense, always been ‘queer’” (1). Furthermore, as George Haggerty argues in *Queer Gothic*, “Gothic fiction offered the one semirespectable area of literary endeavor in which modes of sexual and social transgression were discursively addressed on a regular basis,” and, therefore, it actually “helped shape thinking about sexual matters—theories of sexuality, as it were” (3). Whether that thinking was positive or not, however, remains a contested issue. Ardel Haefele-Thomas argues that “some authors employed Gothic frameworks to defend queer and other marginalized characters in ways that were quite subversive. For other authors, Gothic as a genre allows them to express their ambivalence regarding “others” in society” (2). For Ellis Hanson, ambivalence is more typical:

the Gothic often reproduces the conventional paranoid structure of homophobia and other moral panics over sex, and yet it can also be a raucous site of sexual transgression and excess that undermines its own narrative efforts at erotic containment. (176)

Hughes and Smith agree that, while early Gothic narratives set themselves apart from other literary genres in that they regularly explored transgressive configurations of gender and sexuality,

a fearful publishing industry demand[ed] that these troubling things should be contained by the eventual triumph of a familiar morality. In consequence, the genre frequently espouse[d] a characteristically conservative morality, and frequently a conventional and rather public heterosexuality. (1)

Consequently, as Dale Townshend argues, “queerness in early Gothic is consistently bound up in the problems of negative representation,” yet “while Gothic writers, almost without exception, would recoil in horror from the queerness that their texts entertained, most, often to the point of social notoriety, were of a queer disposition themselves” (27). While this may initially seem surprising, it is surely natural that living under the oppressive conditions of criminalisation and pathologization would foster a sense of ambivalence. Such appears to be the case for both Emily Brontë and Vernon Lee, Victorian Gothic writers respectively

speculated (see Kennard) and known to have had a sexual preference for their own sex, and for whom this ambivalence takes aesthetic shape in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Lee's "A Wicked Voice" (1890) and "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" (1896).

In nineteenth century England, homophobia and xenophobia were closely related. As Haefele-Thomas explains, sodomites, or inverts, "were seen as 'foreign' or 'another race'" (122). In this sense, in *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's racialised body is constructed as Other in much the same way as the bodies of those who transgressed sexually, his particular nebulousness especially reflecting the liminal position of queer individuals in this period. Although he is of indeterminate ethnicity, he laments that he apparently "must wish for Edgar Linton's great blue eyes and even forehead," to which the Earnshaws' servant, Nelly, replies: "A good heart will help you to a bonny face, my lad . . . if you were a regular black . . . Who knows but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen[?]" (Brontë 84). Discussing the role of physiognomy in early Gothic texts, Corinna Wagner argues that "the body demonstrates truths about the self that the individual could not—or would not—articulate" (80). However, she acknowledges that this is not always the case, and that sometimes

immorality, deviance and crime are not the result of science or social institutions failing to control or understand the body; rather immorality, deviance and crime are a result of those institutions *themselves*. (Wagner 86)

In the context of *Wuthering Heights*, it is interesting to consider how physiognomy figures within the institution of the home. From the moment he is introduced to the Earnshaw household as a young child, Heathcliff is vilified. As Sue Chaplin notes, he is "referred to repeatedly as demonic or monstrous; he is an 'evil beast,' an 'imp of satan' and 'a goblin'; his eyes are 'black fiends,' his teeth 'sharp, white'" (83). Even the benevolent Mr. Earnshaw, his ostensibly adoptive and potentially biological father, dehumanises him, describing him as "as dark almost as if *it* came from the devil" (Brontë 64, emphasis added). Likewise, upon first seeing him, Nelly "was frightened, and Mrs. Earnshaw was ready to fling *it* out of doors" (Brontë 64-5, emphasis added). Cathy's brother Hindley also immediately acquires a vehement hatred towards him. He is condemned from the outset because, before anything is known of his personality, his appearance is deemed unacceptable. He is thus shaped into the monster he later becomes, given no opportunity to become anything else. This is also principally what makes Cathy's desire for Heathcliff transgressive—as she bewails,

I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if [Hindley] had not brought Heathcliff so low, I shouldn't have thought of it. It would

degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him. (Brontë 106)

Emily Brontë does not, however, condemn Cathy and Heathcliff's desire for one another in light of its transgressive properties. Instead, her condemnation is directed at attempts to annihilate it, in radical opposition to the hegemonic discourse espoused by her contemporaries.

The nineteenth century marked a radical shift in thinking about dissident sexuality when, in 1886, the German sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing popularised the term "homosexuality" in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, categorising it as a pathological condition and thus lending credence to existing widely-held beliefs about sexual transgression. In *Effeminate England*, Joseph Bristow discusses what he refers to as "Wilde's fatal effeminacy," writing that "Wilde was indisputably a pathological figure" and that, in this sense, "the sexual criminal had transformed by degrees into something of a gothic spectre" (16, 18). Significantly, Wilde's pathologization was explicitly related to physiognomic views of effeminacy—Arthur Symons, describing Wilde in his memoirs, wrote that "no such mouth ought ever to have existed: it is a woman's that no man who is normal could ever have had," and proceeded to characterise Wilde as "[a] man with a ruined body and a ravaged mind and a senseless brain" (146-7). Wilde was aware of the manner in which he was perceived, referring to himself in a letter as "a pathological problem in the eyes of German scientists" (695). It is noteworthy, then, that he explores sickness in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and yet, in doing so, shifts its cause from internal deviance to external jurisdiction. In the novel, Lord Henry describes how the "soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful" (Wilde 74-5). Sickness, for Wilde, is not symptomatic of transgressive sexuality, but of its repression. This is likewise the position adopted by Brontë and Lee in their respective works, in which sense Lee is exceptionally modern in her thinking, and Brontë is half a century ahead of her time.

In both *Wuthering Heights* and "A Wicked Voice," transgressive desire leads directly to sickness, yet not in the manner connoted by the work of early sexologists. Immediately after Heathcliff's departure from *Wuthering Heights* after hearing that Cathy is engaged to Edgar Linton, Cathy suffers a "commencement of delirium" and is pronounced "dangerously ill" (Brontë 113). As Jean Kennard, who reads *Wuthering Heights* as a narratological allegory for Emily Brontë's own queer sexuality, puts it, "[t]he separation of Heathcliff from Catherine makes Catherine ill" (128). When he returns, after Cathy's marriage, much to Edgar's displeasure, Cathy declares that "if I cannot keep Heathcliff for my friend—if Edgar will

be mean and jealous, I'll try to break their hearts by breaking my own" (Brontë 142). She subsequently becomes seriously ill with "a brain fever" (Brontë 157) once again, and dies soon thereafter. It is not her transgressive desire for Heathcliff that marks the destruction of her health, but her inability to indulge it—as she remarks to Nelly, "we separated! ... Not as long as I live, Ellen: for no mortal creature. Every Linton on the face of the earth might melt into nothing, before I could consent to forsake Heathcliff" (Brontë 106). Later, as she lays dying, Heathcliff chastises her:

I have not one word of comfort. You deserve this. You have killed yourself. . . . You loved me—then what *right* had you to leave me? What right—answer me—for the poor fancy you felt for Linton? Because misery and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan could inflict would have parted us, *you*, of your own will, did it. I have not broken your heart—you have broken it; and in breaking it, you have broken mine. (Brontë 183)

Cathy suffers not because she loves Heathcliff, but because she cannot allow herself to love him as she really wants to. If, as Kennard argues, Emily Brontë's own transgressive sexuality is encoded in *Wuthering Heights*, then the implication is that her source of torment was not that sexuality itself, but her unwillingness, or perceived inability, to indulge in it. It is notable, therefore, that Cathy and Heathcliff are eventually reunited in death: "a little boy" tells the narrator, Lockwood, that he saw "Heathcliff, and a woman" roaming the moors (Brontë 347). As Alison Milbank notes, "the most vivid materiality is accorded to the ghosts of the novel" (162)—when Lockwood encounters Cathy's ghost, she bleeds—he "pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes" (Brontë 54). The reunion of Cathy and Heathcliff is not, in this sense, only a spectral one, but a bodily one, too. Significantly, their spectrality does not evoke horror—the novel's final image is of "moths fluttering among the heath and hare-bells" and "soft wind breathing through the grass" (Brontë 348). Even if the indulgence of their desire for one another is permissible only in death, it is permissible nonetheless, and not only permissible, but beautiful.

Likewise, in "A Wicked Voice," exposure to the voice of Zaffirino, the eighteenth-century Venetian singer whose voice haunts Magnus, a composer with a passionate hatred for singing, leaves Magnus "wasted by a strange and deadly disease" (Lee 158). Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham write that, for Lee, "[d]esire ... is always a risky business, all too often bringing death and destruction in its wake" (12). In fact, Lee herself referred to desire, and transgressive desire in particular, in terms of illness in a private journal in 1885:

may there not, at the bottom of this seemingly scientific, philanthropic, idealizing, decidedly noble-looking nature of mine, be something base, dangerous, disgraceful that is cozening me? ... may I be indulging a mere depraved appetite for the loathsome while I fancy that I am studying diseases and probing wounds for the sake of diminishing both? Perhaps (quoted in Psomiades 28).

Crucially, however, she goes on to ponder “which of these two, the prudes or the easy-goers, are themselves normal, *healthy*?” (qtd. in Psomiades 28, emphasis added). In her essay, “Deterioration of the Soul,” she also poses a question which is echoed in Wagner’s aforementioned commentary on the institutional production of deviance: “does society not produce its own degenerates and criminals, even as the body produces its own diseases, or at least fosters them?” (Lee 942). Like Wilde, she appears to conceive of sickness not as emerging from dissident desires, but from the societal obligation to resist them.

Intriguingly, “A Wicked Voice” was inspired by a real encounter with a portrait of an eighteenth-century composer while Lee was visiting the Bologna music school with John Singer Sargent in 1872, during which “she and Sargent had both wished that they could hear the dead singer’s voice—a voice that had historically been said to have curing properties” (Haefele-Thomas 125). The voice which inspired the story was associated not with infection, but with medicinal healing. It is notable, then, that Zaffirino is not an inherently malicious figure. Relaying the story of the death of his aunt, the Procuratessa, a Venetian nobleman, Count Alvise, describes how, in life, Zaffirino “was in the habit of boasting that no woman had ever been able to resist his singing” (Lee 132). The Procuratessa “laughed when this story was told her, refused to go to hear this insolent dog, and added that it might be quite possible by the aid of spells and infernal pacts to kill a gentildonna, but as to making her fall in love with a lackey—never!” (Lee 132). It is not the threat of death which the Procuratessa disbelieves, but the threat of desire. Drawn to her resistance, “Zaffirino, who piqued himself upon always getting the better of any one who was wanting in deference to his voice” (Lee 132), visits the Procuratessa, and, as had been forewarned, “at the third air ... she gave a dreadful cry, and fell into the convulsions of death” (Lee 134). It is significant that exposure to Zaffirino’s charms is not intrinsically fatal—the Count states that he “*could*” kill his victims “if he only felt inclined” (Lee 132, emphasis added); it is not a foregone conclusion. The Procuratessa died not because she desired Zaffirino, but because she was resistant to that desire.

Likewise, Magnus also obviously desires Zaffirino, but fiercely resists those desires. His distaste towards singing is explicitly tied to the flesh: he describes “the voice” as “that instrument which was not invented by the human intellect, but begotten of the body, and

which, instead of moving the soul, merely stirs up the dregs of our nature!” (Lee 129). Yet, when he is about to first come into contact with Zaffirino’s voice, he feels that he “was going to meet [his] inspiration, and [he] awaited its coming as a lover awaits his beloved” (Lee 139). He comes to desire contact with Zaffirino and, in attempting to suppress this desire, he almost comes to meet the same fate as the Procuratessa. In the same manner as *Wuthering Heights*, “A Wicked Voice” is therefore radical: it is not transgressive desire itself which is associated with sickness, but attempts to resist it.

Similarly, in “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,” the young Prince Alberic falls ill after being told the story of his ancestral namesakes’ involvements with the Snake Lady, a beautiful and seemingly immortal woman cursed to live as a snake for all but one hour each day. Notably, the language with which this malady is described has much in common with the language typically used by religious bigots to condemn homosexuality—the priest who is sent for to attend him describes him as “just escaped from the jaws of death—and, perhaps, even from the insidious onslaught of the Evil One” (Lee 51). Yet, when Alberic learns that not only is the Snake Lady alive, but that she is the very woman he has come to know and adore as his godmother, he almost immediately recovers, and the priest remarks that “the demon has issued out of him!” (Lee 54). The following day, “his limbs seemed suddenly strong, and his mind strangely clear, as if his sickness had been but a dream” (Lee 254). Once he acknowledges his freedom to indulge his desires, even if he must keep them secret from the outside world, Alberic’s illness passes. Once again, transgressive desire is portrayed not as an illness in itself, but as a means of escape from it—a proximity to Wilde’s portrayals of illness and repression which illuminates Emma Liggins’ reading of the tale as homage to him, “published at a time when Oscar Wilde was persecuted and imprisoned, like Alberic will be, for his aesthetic and sexual beliefs and practices” (47-8). It is notable that Alberic first encounters the Snake Lady through a “tapestry of old and Gothic taste” (Lee 19-20), since Lee believed in a relationship between art and wellbeing. In Kathy Psomiades’ words, “[t]he human animal ... has a biological and a bodily need for art’s healthful effects ... [w]e become the beautiful through perceiving the beautiful, and perhaps even more importantly, we become healthy” (32-33). The Gothic, transgressive Snake Lady does not threaten Alberic’s health, she produces it.

Psomiades describes Lee as “a woman thwarted by the demands of Victorian morality from getting what she must have really wanted” (29-30)—sexual communion with other women. In light of this, “A Wicked Voice” can be read as an exploration of Lee’s ambivalent relationship towards her own desires. While she, like Brontë, if Kennard’s view is accepted as fact, appeared to view them as something to be repressed, as in much of Gothic fiction, repression is rarely successful, and attempting to maintain it can only ever be disastrous.

George Haggerty argues that “gothic fiction can be read as reinscribing the status quo. Gothic resolutions repeatedly insist on order restored and (often) on reassertion of heteronormative prerogative” (10). It is this convention which Emily Brontë and Vernon Lee appear to set out to challenge in their works. While *Wuthering Heights* does conclude with a restoration of order, that restoration involves the spectral reunion of Cathy and Heathcliff, the most transgressive characters in the novel. In “A Wicked Voice” and “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,” meanwhile, order is not restored at all—Magnus “can never lay hold of [his] inspiration” (Lee 158) due to his total preoccupation with Zaffirino’s voice, which he longs to hear again, and the concluding deaths of Alberic and the Snake Lady, the latter being murdered in her reptilian form by Alberic’s grandfather’s Jester and the former subsequently dying of grief, are presented as tragic, not comforting. In this sense, despite the proliferation of representations of transgressive sexuality in Gothic fiction from its inception, Brontë and Lee demonstrate not only originality, but also genuine radicalism. Despite these texts’ ambivalent treatments of transgression, they offer a glimmer of hope in a world which was deeply hostile to those marked in any way as “queer.”

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