

Nelson, Victoria. *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural*. Pp. 352. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012. US \$27.95; \$18.95 (paper). ISBN: 978-0674725928.

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Victoria Nelson's second book, *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural*, ends on an invocative note. "May the Gothick never lose its dedication to Story. May it never lose its outrageousness or its lowbrow ways. And may it never lose its ability to push us into territories that are totally unexpected. Long live Gothick" (266). That this sentence resembles in its structure a prayer is no coincidence. The central premise of Nelson's book revolves around the idea of the gothic as a transcendent genre, one that alters story to create new kinds of religious experiences and movements. While the gothic has previously occupied a marginal and peripheral space within the Western imagination, at the beginning of the twenty-first century it has moved to the center of mainstream and popular narratives. The gothic, Nelson argues, is an especially flexible genre, one that adapts its own conventions as well as the conventions of the genres it merges with. While the gothic was, at one time, representative of the dark underbelly of Christianity—particularly Protestant Christianity—it now is being reconfigured as the primary avenue through which secular culture experiences the sacred, just as it reconfigures concepts of what constitutes the sacred within Western culture.

Published in 2012 by Harvard University Press, *Gothicka* is an ambitious and timely project, one that overlaps with a variety of scholarship being done in a number of fields, including post-secular studies, literary theory, and, of course, popular romance studies. But while the central argument of *Gothicka* offers a rich avenue for interrogating the way narrative intersects with culture, it often stumbles, giving short shrift to the nuances of each as it tries to categorize them in terms of the gothic impulse. Nelson concedes in the Preface that, "this book will be more notable for its omissions than its inclusions" (xii) referring to those texts in popular culture she has chosen not to address. Without doubt, every scholarly book and article struggles to define its scope, encountering similar problems of omission and inclusion. This is particularly true when dealing with broad and expansive topics like the novel or the gothic. Yet, it is not the failure to mention certain

iconic texts that undermines Nelson's argument. Rather, it is the failure to mention relevant scholarship. Later in the Preface, Nelson goes on to say that,

I have made no attempt to survey the present state of Gothick scholarship and position my own thinking within it, thereby omitting mention of many current key thinkers in this vast, rich, and exciting field. Had I expended the necessary time, and space to do so, I would not have had room, either mentally or on the page, for the explorations presented here. I have learned an enormous amount from the scholars whose work I do cite and am acutely aware of the large negative space left by those I omitted (xii-xiii).

Certainly, it is not my expectation that Nelson write an encyclopedia, dutifully covering every possible manifestation of the gothic or its tributaries. Yet, there are certain omissions within the text that are glaring and reveal what I believe to be three underlying weaknesses in Nelson's central argument.

First, there is the problem of the use of the term gothic. In her opening chapter, Nelson defines the gothic or, to use her parlance, the Gothick, as a sensibility. She says, "Historically, the rapidly proliferating Gothick quickly subdivided into overlapping subgenres of supernaturalism, anticlericalism, psychological horror, and sentimental romance" (5). She continues to say that the gothic borrows from "the Old Goth historical period of the Middle Ages" and that the gothic possesses an "implicit heterodox spirituality" which occurs in its ability to transform "antagonist-villains" into "protagonist-heroes" (8). Yet, why is this a particularly gothic sensibility? Why make the claim that this metamorphic religiosity is particularly gothic and not one inherent to narrative or, more broadly, myth? Why call this phenomenon gothic and not merely supernatural, paranormal, or mythic? Why the use of the term gothic as an all-encompassing category for understanding the supernatural in narrative? Moreover, the Romance is inevitably related to and connected to myth, so why the gothic rather than either of these other established categories? In short, what aspects or qualities does the gothic incorporate that prior concepts—like Romance or myth—fail to include? For instance, what is so very gothic about Mormonism? Perhaps it is the Mormon theological belief in the deification of humanity or the intrusion into the mortal world of Gods and heroes, but if so then these concepts pre-date late 18th-century and 19th-century gothic novels as well as 14th-century Gothic architecture. This is just one example of ideas, narratives, and movements that are pulled under the heading of the gothic without a full explanation of why these concepts are connected to that tradition. If this is a sensibility, then it is one far older than the gothic and, as such, requires a more thorough clarification of the use of the term.

Second, Nelson's central claim is most definitely part and parcel of the critical movement known as post-secularism. And yet, Nelson never positions her claim within this larger body of scholarship. This presents several problems within the text, but most particularly in the lack of any delineation between religion and secularism, or between one religion and another. Religion as institution? Religion as a system of beliefs? As personal sense of the spiritual? What does she mean by the religious nature of the gothic? This lack of definition means that the term "religious" changes meaning throughout the book. At times the gothic seems to be a mechanism for critiquing a traditional Christian religious ethos, as in Nelson's discussion of the graphic novels *Preacher*, *Hellboy*, and *Constantine*:

“the Christian God and Satan have both left the building, leaving their half-human, half-supernatural offspring poised to take over” (91). More often, though, religion is addressed as something that needs revival and reconsideration. Are these different kinds of religion? Is it religion at all or rather a sense of religiosity? Is the sacred synonymous with religion? Does this only work in a Western and Christian paradigm? Both these first two issues pivot on the absence of definitions for key terms. The supernatural within a story cannot be the definition of the gothic, because such stories existed prior to the gothic novel. If the gothic is being defined as a response to the rise of secularism and rationality during the Enlightenment—which is what I believe Nelson is getting at—then what is different about this supernaturalism compared with prior instantiations? If it is that the gothic enables an underground route to the divine, then how is this not simply myth in action?

Because religion and the gothic are never fully demarcated, the relationship between the gothic and religious experience also remains opaque throughout Nelson’s text. Moreover, the way in which religion and theology are explicated feels flimsy at best, a point affirmed by the absence of relevant scholarship on certain ideas. For example, Chapter Four, “Decommissioning Satan,” explores the figure of the devil in literature, but prior work done on the devil, like Elaine Pagel’s seminal work *The Origin of Satan*, is not mentioned. Nor is *Paradise Lost*, without which it is hard to imagine the creation of graphic novels like *Spawn* or *Lucifer*. The effect of this absence is to put the gothic front and center as that which has allowed Satan to transform from a malevolent demon into a kind of Everyman, rather than the transformation being part of a larger, ongoing understanding of the devil in variant Christian theologies.

This points to a larger problem of the book as it constructs its argument. Each chapter feels like a discrete entity, a broad survey rather than a development of the subject as a part of the larger thesis or its attendant claims. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the chapter on romance, “Gothick Romance.” The chapter opens with a history of the sentimental romance and is followed by a cursory exploration of its relationship to the gothic. Again, romance is subsumed under the label of the gothic but it is never fully explained why this is the case. This is especially problematic because not all romance novels are a part of the gothic tradition or follow the plot of *Jane Eyre*. More problematically still, Nelson quotes from Candy Tan and Sarah Wendell’s *Beyond Heaving Bosoms* (2009) at length, using it as her main source for defining and understanding contemporary popular romance. While *Beyond Heaving Bosoms* is a useful book for understanding how a particular reading community understands romance it is, by no means, the only scholarly work on popular romance, a fact to which this journal testifies. Moreover, the underlying assumption is that romance is fundamentally a gothic genre. This is ratified in Nelson’s discussion of the eroticization of romance, saying that “most striking of all was the intrusion of two elements formerly associated only with the male Gothick: sex and the supernatural” and, later, that the “introduction of explicit sex into what had formerly been a virginally discreet genre was in part a reflection of the major shift in women’s social roles in the late twentieth century” (107). This presumes a great deal. First, it conflates the erotic and the sexually explicit. Second, it collapses all the 1970s bodice rippers into “the obligatory rape of the heroine” (107) and denies that this is both erotic and sexually explicit. What the position of rape in romance is or ought to be is certainly up for debate, but Nelson presumes that it was not erotic or read erotically by its readers. And this is simply not the case. Moreover, there were books written before the 1990s that were

sexually explicit and supernatural, which Nelson does not acknowledge in her history of romance. The thrust of this argument about the increasing sexualization of romance is unclear. Which is to say, why is the erotic and sexually explicit romance a part of the gothic sensibility and what does it have to do with spirituality or religion? This link is never attended to, and the reader is left wondering at the significance of this discussion.

The chapter ends with a close reading of Hilary Mantel's *Fludd* (1989), one that reiterates the chapter's central thesis that the gothic romance is defined by female identity formation. This text, however, seems a peculiar choice considering that the chapter has so far focused on popular romance and not its sisters in literary fiction. The purpose of this choice, I believe, is twofold. First, it is intended to show the ways in which the gothic and the romance infiltrate all genres. Second, it is intended to show how the gothic is used to transform older forms into new expressions of religiosity. However, there are plenty of popular romance novels that would have fit this premise: I can name three off the top of my head—Mary Jo Putney's *Thunder and Roses* (1993), Laura Kinsale's *Flowers from the Storm* (1992), and Patricia Gaffney's *To Love and To Cherish* (1995). Putney's novel even has the benefit of being a variation on the old gothic theme of a woman trapped in a dark manor. At the end of the chapter, Nelson states that "Even romance heroines more conventional than Roisin [the heroine of Mantel's *Fludd*] find their true identity by passing through spiritual death and rebirth in the alchemical refiner's fire" (114). This is a well-made point. Yet, if Nelson's claim is that the gothic romance deals with identity and the formation of personhood, then this is never explicitly stated. If this reading of *Fludd* is meant to tell us something about the inherently religious nature of the romance, then this point is never fully linked to the early discussion of popular romance. And if the chapter as a whole is also intended to explain a broader connection between sexuality and the post-secular, then we are left wanting a fuller exploration of that connection. Romance is left as a subset of the gothic without any explanation of why this is important to an understanding of its religiosity or its feminine, erotic impulse.

Despite these criticisms Nelson's prose is eminently readable, and the premise a fascinating and fruitful one. As a book intended for a general audience, *Gothicka* provides a good, if rather shallow, overview of the topics it discusses. However, as book that could be assigned to undergraduates in a class on the gothic or used for the purposes of scholarly research on romance, *Gothicka* does not offer much meaty or substantive analysis of the texts explored, as well as omitting important scholarly work from its discussion.