

Introduction: New Perspectives on the Female Fantastic

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David Roas and Patricia García,

"Introduction: New Perspectives on the Female Fantastic"

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David ROAS and Patricia GARCÍA

Introduction: New Perspectives on the Female Fantastic

There is no doubt that an increasing number of women creators employ the fantastic as a form of expression in literature, theatre, film, TV and comics. This is opening new paths, including the development of themes and narrative forms that are absent or little explored in the works by male authors. Nonetheless, the presence of women in the canons and academic studies on the fantastic is still noticeably low (with honorable exceptions), an aspect that affects negatively our understanding of the fantastic in particular, and of the cultural production carried out by women in general.

Nevertheless, female authors writing supernatural fiction have gained some critical attention in the past decades. Since the 1970s some academics have advocated the existence of a "female" or "feminine" form of fantastic writings, some of these critics starting from the premise that there are aspects that differentiate the male from the female life experiences (namely patriarchal oppression) and that this divergence generates different forms of imagining and writing. Ellen Moers with her pioneer "Female Gothic" (in *Literary Women*, 1976), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their influential work on the nineteenth century female writer (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979) and Ann Richter in her study *Le fantastique féminin* (1977) defended that there is a characteristic female subjectivity (a female imagination) and thus a distinctive treatment of the supernatural in fiction. This difference is allegedly identifiable on several levels, these being, for example the selection of themes, the use of language, the functions attributed to the fantastic event/creature, the use of horror or the portrayal of monstrosity in the text.

This approach faces several challenges, namely: does the idea of a "female text" derive solely from the gender of its author? Should we assume that this approach to gender is polarized in two distinctive binary categories? How can the literary critic identify the imprint of the female gaze or "female imagination" in a literary text? Is "female identity" not vulnerable to other contextual marks such as ideology, culture, class and race?

Our aim with this special issue is to revise the debates on the female fantastic from a transnational perspective. We do this by bringing together a group of international scholars who integrate the Grupo de Estudios sobre lo Fantástico (Research Group on the Fantastic). Our contributions question from different perspectives whether there is a common denominator that unifies female texts of the fantastic. We converge on the need to gender the supernatural and on a feminist standpoint in our approach, highlighting the potential of the supernatural in fiction to subvert gendered expectations and norms. We start from a conceptual distinction between the adjectives *female* and *feminine* when applied to the fantastic text. Although this distinction is at times slippery, with the "feminine fantastic," a term that features more frequently in research in Romance languages, we mean a series of themes and characterizations attributed to what conventionally is known to "interest" or to "represent" women in texts of the supernatural. Instead, the term "female fantastic" is employed here more neutrally following the definition offered by Rebecca Soares et al.: a form of the supernatural produced by "female-identified authors [...] explored from intersectional feminist lenses across decades" (xviii).

Another aspect that provides cohesion to this special issue is our approach to the fantastic. In awareness of the multiple definitions and approaches to what scholarship understands under the wide umbrella of fantastic literature, in here we use the term fantastic as specific form of the supernatural. The fantastic makes references to texts that present a realistic literary world that operates within the physical laws of our world and in which an impossible exception irrupts. This inevitably creates a problematic coexistence between the natural and the supernatural and, as such, the supernatural is presented and perceived as impossible by the reader and the characters of the narrative world.

First versions of the articles in this special issue were presented in June 2018, at a workshop hosted by the section Literary Theory and Comparative Literature at the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona and funded by the two research projects directed by the editors (*Lo fantástico en la cultura española contemporánea (1955-2017): narrativa, teatro, cine, TV, cómic y radio*, Ministerio de Economía, Industria y Competitividad, PI: David Roas; and *Gender and the Fantastic in Hispanic Studies*, British Academy, PI: Patricia García). At this event the group was able to enrich each other's research and discuss interconnecting ideas. As a result, readers will notice several theoretical concepts and methodologies that arise across the articles, providing greater consistency to this proposed subject that intertwines literary methods with political, sociological and spatial studies.

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David Roas is writer and Associate Professor of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and director of *Grupo de Estudios sobre lo Fantástico* (GEF) and *Brumal. Research Journal on the Fantastic*. He has published several books, articles and anthologies devoted to the study of the fantastic from a clearly interdisciplinary perspective in which literary theory, comparative literature, film studies and cultural studies are combined. Also, another important part of his works is linked to the specific study of the Spanish fantastic. Some of his most outstanding works are: *Teorías de lo fantástico* (2001), *Hoffmann en España* (2002), *De la maravilla al horror. Los inicios de lo fantástico en la cultura española (1750-1860)* (2006), *La sombra del cuervo. Edgar Allan Poe y la literatura fantástica española del siglo XIX* (2011), *Historia de lo fantástico en la cultura española contemporánea (1900-2015)* (2017), and *Behind the Frontiers of the Real. A Definition of the Fantastic* (2018). Email: <david.roas@uab.cat>

Patricia García is a *Ramón y Cajal* researcher in Literary Theory and Comparative Literature at the Universidad de Alcalá (Madrid, Spain). She has previously served as an Associate Professor at the University of Nottingham. García's research focuses on narrative spaces and their intersection with urban studies, feminisms and with representations of the supernatural. She has directed the project *Gender and the Hispanic Fantastic* (funded by the British Academy) and has been a fellow of the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (2018-2019). García's publications include the monograph *Space and the Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary Literature: the Architectural Void* (Routledge, 2015), the critical anthology *Fantastic Short Stories by Women Authors from Spain and Latin America* (with Teresa López-Pellisa, 2019) and the special issue *Gender and the Hispanic Fantastic* (*Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, Vol. 96.6, 2019). Email: <patricia.garciag@uah.es>