‘I’m scared to death she’ll kill me’: Devoted Ladies, feminine monstrosity, and the (lesbian) Gothic Romance

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In his discussion of what he sees as the predominant narrative of homosexuality, the ‘coming-out story’, Ken Plummer identifies a handful of motifs on which this narrative often centres. These include secrecy, guilt, persecution, and the incoherency and/or fragmentation of the self.(1) Although he himself does not explicate the connection, what is perhaps most illuminating about Plummer’s observation is the fact that all four are also dominant themes of Gothic fiction. Moreover, the Gothic is particularly noted for its transfiguration of the heteronormative spheres of the family unit and the domestic home from sites of love and security into raucous sites of buried secrets, maltreatment and paranoia; this is particularly significant, it may therefore be argued, for gay and lesbian characters within those spaces. Indeed, it often suggested that, as a genre so bound-up with notions of marginality, the Gothic has an inherent connection with discursive representations of homosexuality. In its original, eighteenth-century manifestation, the Gothic was positioned as a marginal genre in terms of cultural taste, gender, political affiliation and, importantly, sexuality, as two of its earliest practitioners, Horace Walpole and William Beckford, were (notoriously in Beckford’s case) in relationships with men that we would now retrospectively categorise as homosexual. Thus, as a genre that ‘is notable for its marginality and stylistic eccentricities […] [in the portrayal of] an eccentric, disruptive subject who exists in marginal relation to mainstream society’(2), the connection between the unsettling and often violent return of that which has been repressed, and the exposition of secreted homosexual acts and relationships is an association readily observed in more recent critical interpretations of the genre. It is therefore also unsurprising that many cornerstones of the genre, including R.L. Stevenson’s Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886), Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), and Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1895), have produced numerous readings of themselves as parables of homosexuality (some, it should be noted, more convincingly than others).(3)

Indeed, this essay explores the utilisation of such Gothic structures and motifs in relation to the depiction of (specifically female) homosexuality in Molly Keane’s 1934 novel Devoted Ladies. Set partly in the glittering, bohemian world of 1930s London, and partly in the ‘haunted countryside of Ireland […] full of old spirits and tensions and moods’(4); and, on one level, a doppelganger tale concerning the novel’s similarly named lesbian couple, Jessica (Houpe-Boswell) and Jane (Barker)(5), Devoted Ladies is a novel that is fundamentally doubled and divided. Indeed, this sense of perpetual doubling even extends to the life of the author herself, who, from 1926 until 1952, maintained a successful career as an author of ‘middlebrow’ Irish hunting romances (which Devoted Ladies, at least in part, is one example of) under the non de plume ‘M.J. Farrell’(6), but who later went on to enjoy what may be essentially seen as a second authorial career in her own name, publishing three more novels of a somewhat more serious or ‘literary’ countenance from 1981 through to 1988.(7) Furthermore, my reading of Devoted Ladies is not just as a work of Gothic fiction, but specifically as a Gothic Parody: a text which employs the traditional conventions of the genre specifically for comic purposes. As such, texts of this nature thereby promise what Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik refer to as ‘the laughter of accommodation’ rather than ‘the terror of disorientation’, which is traditionally associated with what I shall henceforth refer to as ‘genuine’ Gothic texts.(8) Moreover, my re-situation of Keane’s novel within the context of the parodic-Gothic tradition is intended to be in-tune with recent critical revaluations of particular middlebrow writers’ use of the Gothic mode more generally. This takes form principally through Horner and Zlosnik’s monograph, Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination (1998) and their discussion of Stella Gibbons’ pre-eminently middlebrow Cold Comfort Farm (1932) in their study Gothic and the Comic Turn (2005).
Indeed, the relative neglect of middlebrow literary culture by critical discussions of the Gothic (even within those volumes that deal extensively with twentieth-century Gothic) is highly surprising (9), as many middlebrow novelists engage with Gothic narrative and conventions in both a parodic (Keane, Gibbons, Rachel Ferguson, Dodie Smith) or genuine manner (Du Maurier, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Agatha Christie and other ‘Golden Age’ crime novelists). Moreover, with its intense focus on domesticity and the domestic space, an underlying affinity between middlebrow fiction and the Gothic tradition is arguably manifested in a shared preoccupation with what Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei refer to as the ‘visceral embodiment of the house’. (10)

As previously stated, the first half of Devoted Ladies centres on the lesbian relationship between two young women, Jessica and Jane. Whilst the existence (or otherwise) of a challenge to traditional gender roles brought about by World War I has been an established and highly debatable area of historical and literary discussion – with critics such as Martin Pugh and Sharon Oudett contesting the more generally accepted view that the both the rapid depletion of the male population and women’s adoption of more traditionally masculine roles created new, if temporary, freedoms for women in the early twentieth century – it is only more recently that it has also come to be documented that these challenges to established constructions of gender, coupled with an enlarged popular consciousness of psychological theories, resulted in an increased interest in homosexuality during the interwar years. For example, Nicola Humble argues that ‘the work of sexologists at the turn of the century and the public dissemination of Freudian ideas lead to a more general openness about the sexual, and the trauma of the First World War created a more fluid sense of gender identities, allowing concepts of androgyne to feed into the public understanding of homosexuality’. (11) As such, the ‘open’ (that is, un-coded) representations of homosexuality that we find in Devoted Ladies became progressively more commonplace in the characterisation of both male and female characters during the period. This is most evident in Radclyffe Hall’s notorious The Well of Loneliness (1928) which was banned within four months of its publication under the Obscene Publications Act (1857). In some sense, the novel’s lesbian protagonist, Stephen Gordon, acts as an arena in which a tussle between competing theories on homosexuality is played out; be it sexological claims of sexuality as innate or emerging psychoanalytical perspectives which figure sexual identity as acquired. Therefore, as Esther Saxey comments, Radclyffe Hall’s novel ultimately ‘shows the broad spread of meanings [and re-evaluations] given to sexuality and gender in the 1920s’. (12) Indeed, Radclyffe Hall’s was not the only novel of the decade (nor of the entire interwar period) to offer a ‘daring’ portrayal of lesbian sexuality. Published one year previously, Judith, the protagonist of Rosamund Lehmann’s Dusty Answer (1927), earnestly considers homosexuality as a sexual possibility in the form of her intense and romantic friendship with Jennifer. However, it is not until the arrival of Geraldine (who diverts Jennifer’s affections away from Judith and onto herself) that Judith begins to comprehend the exact disposition of Jennifer’s feelings. From this point onwards, the sexual underpinnings of the relationship between Jennifer and Geraldine are figured through the ‘courageous’ sexual imagery of Judith’s imagined scenes of the two women wrestling; with Jennifer ‘vying for [Geraldine] … a match for her in all magnificent unfeminine physical ways’. (13)

What is particularly remarkable about the proximity of these two novels is that whilst one was subject to an infamous obscenity trial and banned from British publication until 1948, the other matched its critical acclaim with a tremendous level of popular success, ultimately becoming one of the bestselling novels of the decade. (14) Defenders of Radclyffe Hall’s novel emphasised its literary merits as a reason it should be read. However, as James Douglas’s scathing 1928 editorial illustrates, this very same reason was used as further justification for the book’s suppression: ‘It is no excuse to say that the novel possesses “fine qualities” or that its author is an “accomplished” artist […] The answer is that the adroitness and cleverness of the book intensifies its moral danger’. (15) A work of ‘highbrow’ literary production, The
Well of Loneliness, therefore, is dangerous precisely because it is ‘good writing’. On the other hand, dismissed as trivial and inconsequential, the middlebrow novel appears to possess a remarkable capacity for the open and unpolicied depiction of ‘other’ sexualities and alternative domestic setups. For example, as Humble observes, the sexualised female protagonist ‘becomes an increasingly stock figure in the feminine middlebrow during this period’. (16) One example of which is the enigmatic Hannah Mole, spinster-heroine of E.H. Young’s Miss Mole (1930); a novel which is centred around Mole’s attempts to secrete her sexual relationship with a dishonoured soldier, who currently resides in her ‘four-roomed cottage washed in pale pink’ (suggesting sexual illicitness though its fleshy colouring). (17) Indeed, the exposition of Mole’s furtive liaison would both signal her expulsion from her current housekeeping position and devastate the Austenian marriage resolution on which the novel ends. Thus, it can be seen that women’s middlebrow fiction often presents sexual experience outside of the heteronormative realm of the marriage bedroom as an increasingly routine part of female existence. However, because of the critical disregard for middlebrow literary culture, what are ultimately quite dissident fictions are able to pass unproblematically into the public arena, often entirely under the radar of censorship.

Indeed, it is exceedingly difficult to imagine such a comic and superficially frivolous novel as Devoted Ladies eliciting such a response as ‘I would rather give a healthy boy or girl a vial of prussic acid than this novel’ (James Douglas, on The Well of Loneliness again). (18) In an interview with Polly Delvin, the evidently heterosexual Keane explains how she came to author a novel with such a probing interest in female homosexuality:

> I suppose I was rather curious and shocked by coming upon all that. Before that no one thought anything of two elderly ladies setting up house together. I’d certainly never heard a murmur. I was excited by finding out about lesbians and homosexuals. It was new. It made a subject. My interest went in spasms, there would be a sudden arousal of interest that took over, something new – like this – that would be the start of a new book. (19)

Although it is never possible to absolutely accept the author’s words at face value, from this statement it at least certainly appears that Keane did not appear to have any specific ideological agenda in writing Devoted Ladies. In other words, the book is neither a manifesto supporting nor condemning homosexuality. Instead, lesbianism is simply a new subject matter to be explored by a writer already so adept in darkly humorous portrayals of human relationships. Thus, although, as Mary Breen contends, on one hand, ‘Keane is unusual in presenting gay and lesbian desire as an integral part of a complex range of sexual possibilities’ (20), it may also be argued that Keane’s novel is part of a more generalised sweep within middlebrow literary culture, which treats lesbian relationships with what might perhaps be viewed as an unexpected degree of tolerance, examples aside from Devoted Ladies including E.F. Besnon’s Mapp and Lucia series (1920-1939), Agatha Christie’s A Murder is Announced (1950) and, as previously discussed, Lehmann’s Dusty Answer. (21) Having stated, however, that Keane’s novel does not overtly condemn homosexuality, the relationship between Jessica and Jane is by no means enabling, indeed, it is highly detrimental for both parties, but no more so than any heterosexual relationship within Keane’s oeuvre. Moreover, the central relationship in Devoted Ladies is still governed by a heterocentric model of desire, consisting of the active, masculine lover and the passive feminine beloved. (22) Therefore, as Breen suggests, within the novel Keane parodies the butch/femme aesthetic of Jessica and Jane’s relationship by exaggerating the two women into ‘grotesque’ (thus, I would add, Gothic) figures. (23) The ailing Jane, for example, slowly-but-surely dying from alcohol poisoning (if not from her lover’s frequent maltreatment) is presented as almost ludicrously feminine and helpless. Not dissimilar to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Gothic story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892), the architectural space of the bedroom, within which Jane is practically imprisoned (much like the ‘unwell’ narrator of Gilman’s story) is used in
order to confuse and conflate the identities of ‘woman’ and ‘child’. For example, Jane’s bedroom reads more like a nursery or playroom, as ‘there was no height in Jane’s bedroom. Everything squatted on the floor. The dressing table was about twelve inches high and the stool where Jane sat about to make up her face about six inches high’. (24) Moreover, just as the enraged Mrs. Danvers taunts the nameless heroine-narrator of what is arguably the most prominent example of middlebrow Gothic, Du Maurier’s Rebecca (1938) – ‘She’s the real Mrs. de Winter, not you. It’s you that’s the shadow and the ghost’ – the Gothic imagery of the ghost is employed in relationship to vulnerable and submissive femininity in Devoted Ladies. (25) This connection between ‘weak’ femininity and the ghostly is particularly evident when it is suggested that Jane’s ‘bones were no more than small enough to justify the theory that she was ghost like’. (26)

Another interesting physical detail Keane gives Jane is her, frequently mentioned, scar from the correction of a ‘hare lip’; a scar which, although hardly repellent (indeed, in Jane’s case it is makes her face ‘fascinating’ and ‘complell[s] curiosity’ (27)), technically still signifies a physical deformity. Moreover, deriving its name from its resemblance to the mouth of a hare or rabbit, Jane’s scar, to some degree, destabilises boundaries between humanity and animalism. This may be considered an example of ‘monstrosisation’ because, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen contends, monsters are ‘disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration’. (28) However, if Jane is a defenceless and docile hare, the powerful and aggressive Jessica, in contrast, with ‘lips curled back from her teeth like a dog, saliva their corners’, is rather more of a predatory fox or wolf. (29) Moreover, Jessica possesses a marked penchant for violence, both towards others and herself, often relieving her temper by biting on the bath until her teeth bleed or cutting herself with fragments of ceramic; and thus, for much of the novel, is figured as ‘a genuinely frightening figure from whom there can be no escape’. (30)

Keane’s descriptions of Jessica, however, also corresponds to a more general trend in literature of the period in which the fashion for unfeminine bodies is mocked and satirised as ‘paradoxically drawing attention to female physical attributes’. (31) In Jessica’s case, the novel’s narrator comically deflates her own masculine self-fashioning through comments such as, her ‘dark hair was cut with a charming severity. If her dark face had been less heavy and turbulent in expression, Jessica would have almost succeeded in looking as hard and boyish as she hoped to look’. (32) Jessica also has a favoured exhortation of ‘How rude!’ which she employs in various scenarios throughout the novel. As Delvin suggests, ‘the word “rude” is used throughout the book to denote shocking or aberrant emotion’ (my emphasis). (33) Therefore, it might also be proposed, that, within the context of the novel, the term ‘rude’ moreover signifies what Julia Kristeva terms ‘the abject’. As Barbara Creed elucidates:

Kristeva argues that the constitution of acceptable forms of subjectivity and sociality demands the expulsion of those things defined as improper and unclean. Whatever is expelled is constructed as an abject, that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ […] A crucial aspect of the abject is, however, that it can never fully be removed or set apart from the subject or society; the abject both threatens and beckons. (35)

Defined as that which threatens to disturb the established structures of heteronormative society, there is also a sense in which homosexuality is figured in terms of abjection. Indeed, as Palmer insists, representations of ‘lesbian[s] in fiction and film as monstrous, and the relegation of [them] to the realm of the abject’ are exceedingly commonplace. (36) Thus, it is not surprising that, although it may be her own choice catchphrase, it is Jessica herself, as the novel’s most unswervingly homosexual character, that

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‘take[s] endless pains to be rude’(37); with the doubly-coded term working on the level of both Jessica’s diction and a wider connotation implied by the author.

Furthermore, the relationship between the boisterous Jessica and the vulnerable Jane appears, I would argue, to be a lesbian re-configuration of the Gothic Romance; a genre that comes to be exemplified by Du Maurier’s Rebecca. A particular variant of one of the most fundamental narratives (the ‘romance plot’) in the Gothic Romance, the second stage of the narrative – in which the hero and heroine become emotionally and/or physically distanced – is facilitated through the female protagonist’s suspicion and/or discovery of the hero’s capacity to harm her. In the case of Du Maurier’s novel, this moment of facilitation is Maxim de Winter’s confession to his new wife of the murder of his former bride: the titular Rebecca. It is not surprising, therefore, that Joanna Russ has both humorously and influentially stripped-back the Gothic Romance to the basic narrative formula of ‘Somebody’s trying to kill me and I think it’s my husband’ in her 1973 article of the same name.(38) Indeed, if we are to consider Jessica as fulfilling the masculine role in a masculine/feminine dichotomy then this transfiguration of the husband character from a ‘protector’ to an aggressive and dangerous masculine ‘other’ is precisely what we witness in the opening chapter of Keane’s novel when Jessica unleashes ‘fine torrents of abuse’ at Jane, ultimately attacking her with a glass bottle:

‘I can’t bear to see her like that […] half asleep - half drunk. It disgusts me. Why I’d rather see her dead I think.’ And with this she picked up the bottle of Tonic Water and made menacing gestures with it across the room at Jane. Jane had just enough time to scream: ‘Now Jessica, don’t you throw that bottle at me’ when Sylvester […] saw the crack of broken glass and heard Jane scream: ‘Oh – you’re horrible to me,’ as she bowed her bleeding head upon his divan.(39)

Although Gothic fiction is often associated with notions of excessiveness, particularly, as Fred Botting explains, an aesthetic excess characterised by ‘an over-abundance of imaginative frenzy untamed by reason and unrestrained by […] demands for simplicity’(40), I must also argue that excess is moreover a key comic strategy deployed by Devoted Ladies in parodying the Gothic mode. Jessica’s assault of Jane is rendered highly amusing precisely because it is unprompted and needlessly violent. After all, she simply decides to attack Jane and does so without a second thought. Thus, whilst under different circumstances (that is, within a work of ‘genuine’ Gothic), this may well have been a terrifying scene of abuse, through its excessive and farcical dimensions Keane’s novel engages the reader in a different emotional treaty to that of a horror narrative, promising humour and amusement rather than the trepidation and anxiety conventionally associated with the transfiguration of the husband figure into an ‘uncanny’, double site of both safety and hazard.

Furthermore, much like other middlebrow Gothic Parodies, such as Gibbons’ Cold Comfort Farm, Ferguson’s The Brontës Went to Woolworths (1931) and Smith’s I Capture the Castle (1949), Devoted Ladies is an intriguingly metafictional novel. Indeed, Jane’s escape from her exciting, but detrimental, ‘lesbian Gothic Romance’ is initiated by Jane’s reading of the evocative images of the Irish countryside in Keane’s own earlier novel, Young Entry (1928). Keane’s book is sent to her by the man to whom she eventually gets engaged, George Playfair (pleasant, but dull, as his name suggests), in a job-lot of (entirely made-up) books, which, like Young Entry, possess oddly yet knowingly sexualised titles; titles such as, ‘The Wanderings of William’, ‘Joan Whips-in’ and ‘The Girl who Gave’ (‘a masterpiece of suggestive tact’, as Jessica describes it).(41) Thus, after much crying and pleading, Jane convinces Jessica to let them holiday in Ireland, where they end up staying at Kilque, family home of their friend Sylvester. Set against the sublimity of the Irish mountains, Keane’s depiction of the crumbling and ruinous Kilque initially bears pronounced Gothic overtones. Although it is certainly true that, as Delvin

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maintains, Keane’s fictional houses ‘are never safe places, never sanctuaries’(42), there is, however, a fundamental difference between Keane’s portrayal of Kilque as opposed to more genuine apogees of the Irish Gothic tradition: a genre in which, instigated by a severe sentiment of culpability inherent to the Protestant Ascendancy, the ruined Irish manor house comes to symbolise centuries of political and colonial conflict.(43) As Rachael Jane Lynch observes of Keane, ‘horrifying at times as her vision of [the] impotence and decay [of the Anglo-Irish Descendancy] can be, she is unquestionably funny’. (44)

Thus, any apparent Gothic inflection of Kilque as a property is entirely tempered by the excessive, farcical behavior of its inhabitants. Defusing that which is threatening by underscoring that which is absurd, the sharp, witty dialogue and excessive gestures of its characters uphold the novel’s comic frame which the darker, more Gothic undercurrents of the text attempts (though never quite succeeds) to break. Kilque is therefore, in some sense, a house without history: that is, the house is in a ruinous state for no other reason apart from the fact that it is simply is! Bearing no references to Ireland’s fraught history, the novel displays a distinctly laissez-faire attitude towards the ‘trauma’ of colonisation, which representations of the crumbling Irish mansion are usually thought to typify.(45) As Milada Frankova suggests, Keane’s decaying Anglo-Irish households ‘certainly [do] not carry the emotional load of some other Big House novels’(46), rather they are comic parodies of a more genuinely Gothic subject-matter.

Moreover, it is whilst at Kilque that Jessica and Jane’s explicitly lesbian relationship comes to be paralleled by the peculiar friendship between Sylvester’s cousin ‘Piggy’ (whose real name is Viola) and her married friend Joan. ‘Piggy’ (subsequently ‘nasty Piggy’, ‘wretched Piggy’, ‘stupid Piggy’) (47), as her cruel pet-name suggests, is overweight, unattractive and well of aware of herself as ‘Alone, burningly alone, terribly apart and unwanted’. (48) Although it is not suggested that theirs is an explicitly lesbian relationship, such as Jessica and Jane’s, Piggy and Joan’s friendship is still imaged in sadomasochistic terms through Piggy’s disproportional loyalty and devotion to the aloof, disinterested and, at times, strikingly malicious Joan. As such, Piggy allows herself to be repeatedly ill-treated and taken advantage of by her friend: ‘such moments try love almost too highly, but Piggy’s love has survived many and still endured’. (49) I would suggest the primary reason for such a deliberate paralleling of these two relationships, is that it is precisely through such mirroring that the rather distinctive sexual dichotomy of the novel is revealed. Indeed, within the novel the binary of sexual behaviour is not the expected one of heterosexuality/homosexuality, but rather the privileging of those who are involved in sexual relationships over those who are not. In Devoted Ladies, the only marginality to be feared is the exclusion from sexual activity, as to be in a relationship, whether with a man or a woman, is, indeed, to be a stable and coherent individual. In fact, part of the inherent Gothicism of Keane’s writing is derived from the idea that, within her oeuvre, sexual attractiveness is tantamount to successful subject formation. Thus, to lack the ability to command sexual interest is to ‘becom[e] a body which has no stable identity’, which, as Rosemary Jackson insists, is a key anxiety articulated through the Gothic mode. (50) Moreover, as men, so the internal logic of Keane’s novels decrees, are never sexually unattractive, it is only women who suffer from this malfunction in identity acquisition, and this is precisely where Keane’s representation of sexuality intersects with notions of monstrosity. If sexual desirability is situated as the cornerstone of identity, then, as Breen comments, it is the undesirable single woman (rather than the homosexual per se) who ‘is perceived as the true aberration, the freak of nature’, or, in other words, the monster. (51)

Thus, in its malicious treatment of Jessica and Piggy, Devoted Ladies appears to engage with interwar debates surrounding spinsterhood and what The Listener described, three year’s prior to the novel’s publication, as the ‘Present Crisis in Marriage’. (52) Indeed, marriage remains a contentious issue throughout the decade, for on one hand, as Martin Pugh asserts, the 1930s ‘marked the start of a significant long-term trend towards marriage’ (53), yet at the same time, sustained campaigning for more tolerant divorce laws resulted in A.P. Herbert’s Matrimonial Causes Bill (1937), a bill which granted both

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men and women the right to attain a divorce on the grounds of brutality, insanity or desertion. (54) Middlebrow responses to these issues are therefore equally divided, as on one hand there exists a general trend within the interwar middlebrow novel which sees the peculiar rise to power of the spinster. Examples include Christie’s Miss Jane Marple, endowed with superior intellect and powers of observation that verge upon the uncanny; Young’s aforementioned Hannah Mole, and the astoundingly capable Guinevere Pettigrew of Winifred Watson’s modern fairytale Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day (1938); the unmarried middle-aged woman becomes a strangely empowered figure in literature of the period. These characters categorically refuse the marginalisation indicated by their financial hardship and diminished social standing, ultimately ‘ris[ing] above class, gender and indigence to control house and novel’, as Briganti and Mezei have argued (my emphasis). (55) On the other hand, concurrent to this celebration of spinsterhood, there are those middlebrow novelists, such as Keane and Ferguson, whose response to the figure of the interwar spinster is rather more conservative, sporting a kind of spinster-baiting more indicative of Jane Austen. Ferguson’s The Brontës Went to Woolworths, for example, is, as Patsy Stoneman suggests, marked with a pronounced ‘fear […] [of the Brontës] as spinsters ruled by erotic consumption’ (56), in its dispelling of the nineteenth-century models of male-female relationships, represented by the Brontës as an almost grotesque fantasy. Similarly, in Devoted Ladies, single women are, as Breen insists, ‘cruelly lampoon[ed] […] and no corrective or consolatory moment is ever staged’. (57) Ultimately, the unmarried woman is set-up by Keane as a monstrous figure to be desperately avoided.

Unsurprisingly therefore, the climax of Devoted Ladies witnesses the destruction of these ‘monsters’ in a move to uphold the dominant ideologies set up within the novel. Having been excluded from the local hunt by the other characters, Jessica and Piggy arrive late and remain somewhat ostracised from the festivities. Then, having been insulted beyond repair by Joan on her arrival, Piggy transfers her subservience onto George and thus, when alone in the car with Piggy, Jessica reveals her intention to devastate the relationship between Jane and George by disclosing an account of Jane’s lesbian past, a violent impulse is released in Piggy, who…

did not think. She only felt and knew. Her blind gift of serving where she loved cast out all fear. She put her foot down on the accelerator and the car leapt forward and dropped. (58)

Taking into account Keane’s symbioticism between sex and identity, Piggy’s physical act of deliberately crashing her car to kill herself and Jessica; the two figures ostracised by the sexual (or soon to be sexual) relationships that exclude them, can be seen as mirroring a more psychological process of the ‘sickening dissent into disintegration’ which Chris Baldick identifies as exemplifying the Gothic narrative. (59)

Ultimately, like all works of parodic Gothic, Devoted Ladies problematises the boundaries between parody and ‘genuineness’ by locating itself ‘on the unstable boundary between humour and horror and transgress[ing] it in both directions’. (60) Thus, Keane parodies established Gothic conventions – including the anthropomorphised house and landscape, the doppelgänger and female insanity – in order to achieve a supremely comic narrative. Moreover, the added advantage of the parodic-Gothic mode (compounded by its relegation to the status of ‘middlebrow’) is that that the novel is able to explore so-called ‘transgressive’ sexualities and alternative domestic arrangements without the risk of censure that might accompany a realist method, as in the case of The Well of Loneliness. However, although, in an almost canavalesque inversion of values, Devoted Ladies positively delights in the glorification of the ‘rude’ (‘I hope you have something really rude and unkind to tell me, darling’, as Jessica implores(61)), ultimately it is a moderately conservative narrative which sees a complete ‘clamping down’ on transgression and, through Piggy and Jessica’s deaths, the restoration of (hereteronormative) order and

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harmony to the house of Kilque. Thus, Keane’s processes of monstrosisation, resulting in the loss of bodily and psychological integrity, is a genuinely frightening undercurrent of the novel. Continually threatening to interrupt the narrative’s light-hearted and comic framing, in some sense this ‘darker’ facet of Keane’s novel replicates what David Punter considers to be the paranoid structure of the Gothic narrative: that Gothic novels are works of ‘paranoiac fiction […] [in which] readers are placed in a situation of ambiguity with regards to the fears of the text’. (62) Whilst, for once, homosexual and bisexual characters, such as Jane and her (and Jessica’s) valet, Albert, may have escaped the Gothic prism unscathed, unwanted and sexually marginalised spinsters such as Piggy and Jessica (regardless of her sexuality) are not so lucky. Their deaths are described in the stylistic detachment of the narrative voice, with a characteristic coolness and indifference that is truly horrifying, particularly for the reader who happens to coincide with the object of Keane’s attack. What’s more, if we are to accept the intended audience of the middlebrow novel as middle-class, middle-aged women, this object of attack may indeed have been a frighteningly large proportion of her own readership.
3. Elaine Showalter’s homoerotic interpretation of Stevenson’s text, for example, is predominantly based on a complete mis-reading of an 1885 painting of Stevenson and his wife by John Singer Sargent in which Showalter maintains that what is clearly a front hallway with a visible staircase and front door is a ‘closet’ which Stevenson appears to be walking out from. She also invests words from Stevenson’s texts with dubious sexual significances, such as ‘chocolate-brown fog’ and ‘back-end of the evening’ both referring to anal sex, which, with no further evidence, I would insist, is a poor stretch at best. See, Elaine Showlater, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), pp. 105-126.
5. This notion of the similarly named Jessica and Jane as *doppelgängers*, rather than as independent subjectivities, is one certainly emphasised by the delightful, yet highly anachronistic, cover art to Virago’s latest (2007) edition of the novel, in which the figures representing Jessica and Jane are almost identical mirror images save for minor changes in hairstyle, jewelry and costume.
6. A note is perhaps required on the way in which I have employed the term ‘middlebrow’ throughout this article. ‘Middlebrow’ is a disparaging phrase developed in the 1920s as a neologism formed in relation to the more historically and culturally established term, ‘highbrow’, and used to delineate popular fictions of the early twentieth-century that are deemed suitable for a reader of ‘middle-bred’ intelligence from the ‘intellectual’ works of literary Modernism. Thus, as opposed to the works of early twentieth century writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, middlebrow fiction is often characterised by traditionally linear narrative structures and a lack of formal experimentation. Indeed, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, middlebrow fiction only demands from the reader ‘a moderate degree of intellectual application, typically as a result of not deviating from convention’ (my emphasis). Nicola Humble therefore argues that, as such, middlebrow fiction often performs a dexterous balancing act ‘between the low pleasures of romance and simple narrative fulfillment and more elaborate intellectual satisfactions’. Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 11.
7. Indeed, the first of these three later publications, *Good Behaviour* (1981), was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize (then the Booker-McConnell Prize) of that year, thereby emphasizing its perceived ‘literary’ merit.
8. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, ‘Comic Gothic’, in David Punter, ed., *A Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 252. My use of the term ‘Gothic Parody’ therefore loosely corresponds to what Horner and Sلوزنيک refer to as ‘Comic Gothic’. Whilst I am in absolute agreement with Horner and Zlosnik’s definition of the features which differentiate ‘comic’ (parodic) from ‘serious’ (genuine) Gothic, in light of Linda Hutcheon’s theory of parody, my preferred term for this type of text is still ‘Gothic Parody’. Hutcheon’s argument is that parody, as opposed to comedy or satire, is specifically directed at literary or linguistic targets – ‘coded forms of discourse, literary genres or particular texts’, which, in the case of the novel under examination, would include Gothic Romance novels such as Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938), as well as more general Gothic tropes such as the ‘mad’, Gothic lesbian. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), pp. 43-45.
20. Ibid., p. 207.
27. Ibid.
29. Keane, *Devoted Ladies*, p. 4. The hare/fox metaphor, which I have derived from Keane’s animalistic imagery throughout the novel, seems particularly appropriate, as the second half of the novel, in-keeping with many more of Keane’s early work, is primarily a hunting romance.
40. Botting, Gothic, p. 3.
41. Keane, Devoted Ladies, p. 57.
45. Indeed, Margot Gayle Backus suggests that Keane’s later novel Two Days in Aragon (1941), which very much deals with the devastating and traumatic legacy of England’s colonisation of Ireland, may have been written as a sort of ‘atonement’ for her nonchalant attitude towards Irish history in earlier novels, such as Devoted Ladies. See, Margot Gayle Backus, The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice, and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 195.
48. Keane, Devoted Ladies, p. 153. This is also, of course, another striking example of the collapse of the human/animal binary already discussed in relationship to Jessica and Jane.
49. Ibid., p. 197-98.
51. Breen, ‘Piggies and Spoilers of Girls’, Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing, p. 209. In this sense, Shirley Jackson’s 1959 novel The Haunting of Hill House bears a striking resemblance to Devoted Ladies, in that it is the lonely, isolated and unloved Eleanor that the titular house chooses to torment, ultimately driving her to suicide (in the very same manner that Piggy kills herself and Jessica) rather than the novel’s noticeably lesbian character, Theodora. Indeed, Robert Wise’s 1963 film adaptation, The Haunting, is particularly noted in Gay and Lesbian studies for this very reason: that is one of, if not the, earliest film in which the transgressive, aberrant, homosexual character lives on, whilst the normative, dutiful, heterosexual character dies in their place. For a fuller analysis of Jackson’s novel see, George E. Haggerty, Queer Gothic (Chicago IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pp. 131-150.
54. See, Diana Wallace, ‘Revising the Marriage Plot in Women’s Fiction of the 1930s’ in Maroula Joannou (ed.), Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 64.
55. Briganti and Mezei, Domestic Modernism, p. 102.