

*Men with Stakes: Masculinity and the Gothic in US Television*

Julia M. Wright

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The punning title of Julia M. Wright's latest book, *Men with Stakes*, underscores her appreciation for the multiplicity of meaning. The book's cover, a detail shot from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ("Lies My Parents Told Me" 7.17), shows the vampire Spike and Robin Wood, the son of a slayer murdered by Spike when Wood was a boy, grappling over a wooden stake. These two, with their phallic-symbol names, are men with stakes both literal and figurative. They are also men with stakes in the outcome of a life-and-death conflict. The book's cover thus prefigures the argument Wright makes within its pages: that men with stakes are heavily invested in a struggle (with fathers, father figures, and the culture at large) over masculinity – and that, more broadly, "[a]t stake" is "how meaning is produced" (22).

Wright sets high stakes for her study in the "Introduction," contending that "representation in gothic television is necessarily a comment *on* representation, and on the absence of a 'real' ground to representation" (6). She emphasizes Jerrold Hogle's insight, drawn from Jean Baudrillard, "that the gothic registers anxiety about 'a pervasively counterfeit existence: the fact of signifiers relating back to signifiers'" (7). This heady insight is helpfully instantiated by a celebrated "meta" episode of *Supernatural* (2005- ), "The French Mistake" (6.15), which transports Sam and Dean Winchester to another reality wherein they are merely actors playing characters in a television show called *Supernatural*. As Wright notes, "[t]he representational *mise en abyme* of that episode is exemplarily gothic precisely because it depicts representation as not merely counterfeit, but as a counterfeit of a counterfeit that alludes to another counterfeit" (13). Narrowing her focus to representations of masculinity in American Gothic television shows, Wright observes that "in interrogating masculinity, these series explore, and sometimes take apart, patriarchy and related forms of traditional order – what 'realism,' in broad terms, would have viewers accept as natural or inevitable" (5). She references *Angel*

(“Through the Looking Glass” 2.21), in which the sensitive Lorne talks with the valiant Angel about how heroic masculinity is constructed and internalized. By contextualizing her analysis of masculinity within an overarching theory of Gothic representation, Wright builds a useful and productive framework for her readings.

In Chapter 1, “Bedeviling Paternal Discipline: Fathers from *American Gothic* to *Point Pleasant*,” Wright considers “father figures identified by their sons with discipline, whether as morality (good versus evil) or as sociality” (31). Wright concludes that *Angel* (1999-2004) presents characters who “assume the guise of various masculine performances, often unreflectively, while remaining haunted by paternal repudiation,” thereby suggesting that “masculinity is a style and patriarchy a specter” (49-50). Wright sees *American Gothic* (2016) from a similar perspective, contending that in this show “the proliferation of father figures shifts the competition to the adult men who stage various debates about what constitutes proper masculinity and what boys should be taught about it, reinforcing the premise that masculinity is constructed rather than natural” (31). Caleb Temple, the protagonist, must choose between two father surrogates, the benign Dr. Matt Crower and the (literally) diabolical Lucas Buck, who struggles (again, literally) for his soul while advocating for diametrically opposed versions of what it means to be a man. A similar dynamic is at work in *Point Pleasant* (2005), whose female protagonist, Christina, is torn between her Satanic father and human mother. She “has to learn how to discipline her ‘power,’ overtly telekinetic but figured as sexual, or everyone will die” (61); thus, the show functions as an allegory for the dangers posed to men by female sexuality and power.

Chapter 2, “Looking for Daddy: *Carnivàle*, *Supernatural*, and *Millennium*,” concentrates on the search for absent fathers, and on how what appears to be real “is exposed as a counterfeit or fake, particularly in relation to the place of the father as traditional authority and source of identity” (72). In *Carnivàle*, Ben is a Christ figure and an avatar of good; Justin is “a counterfeit-Christ” (74) and an avatar of evil. Their juxtaposed quests expose fathers as “compromised or non-normative” (74). Like Ben and Justin, Sam and Dean Winchester in *Supernatural* search for (and eventually replace) their missing father, John, who is “constructed as an all-powerful hunter not through direct representation on-screen but through the simulacrum of the sons’ representations of him” (83), which filial fantasy proves unrealistic. Frank Black of *Millennium*, also a demon hunter of sorts, profiles serial killers – yet he represents a very different type of

masculinity from John Winchester's: "soft-spoken and supportive of his wife's work, he is a caring family man" who "operates as a direct contrast to the kinds of dangerous masculinity on which the series ostensibly focuses" (86). *Millennium*, Wright argues, pursues without resolving these contrasting models of masculinity, especially in episodes that depict patriarchal households destroying themselves from within.

Chapter 3, "Latchkey Hero: The Horrors of Class in Eric Kripke's *Supernatural*," concentrates on Dean Winchester, whose life has been defined – and circumscribed – by hunting monsters. As Wright explains, "the failure of a father to protect his son from a violent world is represented as disabling the son's access to the American Dream and confining him to a class position lower than the one he enjoyed in early childhood" (98). After his mother is killed by a demon in their home and his father takes him and his brother Sam onto the road, Dean is not only removed from but also repelled by middle-class status, for "[t]he suburban house remains a site of loss, of a childhood terror that voids all desire for it" (108). Dean's personality and masculinity are deeply conflicted: on the one hand, he "operates outside of the consumerist, homogenizing aesthetic of suburbia, freed of property, legality, and other middle-class constraints in a Route 66 ideal of 'butch' power"; on the other hand, "he internalizes his class position as self-abjection, incapable of moving anywhere but downward to self-annihilation" (110). Wright concludes this engaging chapter by noting that it is a revised version of an article published in 2008, after whose appearance a *Supernatural* character may have been named after her. In "I Believe the Children Are Our Future" (5.6), this fictional Julia Wright is possessed by a demon and gives birth to a demon-human hybrid who could become the Antichrist. The tribute seems at once flattering and disturbing.

In Chapter 4, "Gothic Foundations: 'The Pest House,' 'Hell House,' and 'The Murder House,'" Wright considers episodes of *Millennium*, *Supernatural*, and *American Horror Story*. Maintaining that "*Millennium* is relentlessly concerned [...] with the limits of science, particularly psychology" (125), she shows that in "The Pest House" (2.4) a psychological explanation of a serial killer's behavior proves inadequate, and that a supernatural one is required. Wright next offers "Hell House" (1.17) as an illustration of how the first seasons of *Supernatural* "[insist] on the survival of oral tradition and its ongoing power, while also maintaining the simulacrum of popular culture as another vehicle of communication and misdirection" (138). This episode, one of the most ingenious in the series, explores what happens

when a group of teenagers creates a phony haunted house by drawing occult symbols on its walls, staging a hanging in the basement, and spreading their story in person and online. Unbeknownst to the pranksters, among the symbols is a Tibetan spirit sigil that realizes widely shared thoughts. The fake thus becomes real, and the Winchesters must combat not a ghost but a tulpa, an idea come to life. Moving to “The Murder House,” the third episode of *American Horror Story*, Wright notes that the narrative structure of the episode (and the series) reinforces its thematic focus on ghosts, “with repeated switches in timeframe having the same temporal effect as the ghosts themselves: the past is always on the verge of erupting into, and refiguring, the present” (142). The book’s emphasis on masculinity reemerges when she points out that “most of the ghosts are children, women, or gay men,” a fact reinforcing “the implication that patriarchal violence, both physical and epistemological, is the guiding concern of the season” (143). Wright ends the chapter by stressing how *Millennium*, *Supernatural*, and *American Horror Story* “have a sustained interest in a specifically gothic concern with authenticity, veracity, and verifiability in a post-Enlightenment world” (150).

“Gothic Conspiracy and the Eyes of Lara Means” concludes the book by returning to the second season of *Millennium*, whose episodes underscore a split “between an idealized masculinity of agency, the American Dream, and institutional control, and a disruptive, often incomprehensible, femininity that counters that nostalgic vision” (165). This last chapter, like those that precede it, exemplifies how Wright moves gracefully between micro and macro levels, situating nuanced and perceptive close readings in ambitious epistemological – and, indeed, ontological – contexts. Overall, *Men with Stakes* is a valuable study for anyone with a stake in how agency, representation, and masculinity intersect in American Gothic television.