

Dangerous Bodies: Historicising the Gothic Corporeal

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In this ambitious and comprehensive tome, *Dangerous Bodies* engages with the Gothic's obsession with the corporeal. Marie Mulvey-Roberts presents a vibrant and fascinating study with an impressive scope and scale as it charts the representation and pathologizing of the 'monstrous' body from the resurgence of the Gothic in the eighteenth century through to the late twentieth century.

The book opens with an exploration of the Catholic body as subject to torture and iconoclasm in the Gothic literature of Horace Walpole and Matthew Lewis in eighteenth-century England. The chapters which follow move into the nineteenth century, focusing upon how Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), seminal Gothic texts, exhibit contemporary anxieties surrounding the idea of the monstrous body which can be read as cultural paranoia surrounding the threat of racial and gendered otherness. To this end, the study makes for disquieting and appropriately challenging reading throughout, both in terms of the subject matter and its concern with the immolation and persecution of the body (whether through war, female circumcision, anti-Semitism, or the slave-trade) but also in its insistence in raising 'some uncomfortable questions' and revising long-held assumptions about the political and cultural ideas of the authors of the Gothic texts with which it engages (5). In so doing, the point that Mulvey-Roberts highlights in her introduction, that subversive corporeal and textual bodies have traditionally been aligned, seems to be pertinently illustrated here as she writes that 'such iconoclastic approaches are part of a process for dislodging deeper disruptions quietly coiled beneath the very taboos that Gothic scholars so readily dismantle' and that 'it is surely the stuff of unease to consider how well-loved writers might be reinforcing negative stereotypes relating to the body, in regard to race and gender, that run counter to the liberal and humanitarian sympathies of modern audiences' (5). In its making strange of the canon, the book ascribes an ameliorist agenda to the writings of Mary Shelley, suggesting the possibility that the Creature in *Frankenstein*

offers a fictional counterpart to the very real racial other of the black African slave as the novel incites fears of miscegenation and presents anxieties regarding the extent to which slaves would be ready to peaceably embrace the freedom for which the pro-abolitionist movement campaigned (54).

Meanwhile, Chapter Three poses the argument that Stoker's *Dracula* rehearses the fears of a liberated female sexuality that contemporary medical surgery attempted to subdue and that 'vampirism... be read as a trope for invented female pathology, believed to require a surgical solution' (93). For Mulvey-Roberts, Stoker's novel must be read with the contextual knowledge that Stoker was familiar with the practices of his brother, Sir William Thornley Stoker, a surgeon who performed clitoridectomy as an attempt to restrain female masturbation and to cure lunacy and that this awareness might be encoded in *Dracula* as 'the staking of Lucy by Van Helsing and his team can be seen as a sublimation of the castrating surgeon and his assistants operating on a hysterical female patient' (94).

Such unsettling re-readings of the historical situation of the canonical Gothic texts persist in the fourth chapter as Mulvey-Roberts asks whether the representation of the vampire in F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) was used to influence anti-Semitic propaganda in Weimar Germany to capitalise upon a terrifying cultural alignment of the Jew and the vampire. The chapter later explores the meta-filmic agency of E. Elias Merhige's film dramatization of the making of Murnau's film, *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), in which the creator Murnau is depicted as the villain, as 'the director vampirises his actors and film crew in a frenzied feeding of their lifeblood for the life of his film' and 'demented director morphs into demented dictator', thereby re-aligning the vampire with the Nazi (158, 159).

Perhaps less controversial for the canon, but no less palatable as a depiction of 'the supreme Gothic horror' is the final chapter in its reading of war as an act of vampirism, a connection that, as the author herself states, has received little critical attention despite the body of literature from writers such as Marie Nizet, Bram Stoker, Manly Wade Wellman, Mary Butts, Kim Newman and David Drake whose works depict war as the 'supreme blood-sucker' (179).

Mulvey-Roberts employs a rich and intricate prose, and each chapter is dense in historical fact and anecdote as she draws upon connections between the authors of these texts and their cultural milieu. At times, however, some these connections seem a little laboured and some of the claims in the chapters on Shelley and Stoker's novels really have to work to convince in their argument. For example, she posits that Matthew 'The Monk' Lewis's management of the slaves on his own plantation drew inspiration from Shelley's

Frankenstein, 'the idea of the mad scientist, who could create new beings from dead bodies, may well have appealed to Lewis as a fantastically pragmatic solution for keeping up his stock of slaves' (72). The latter chapters, however, seem less inclined to make such speculations and, perhaps, with their division of focus upon a proliferation of Gothic texts, they seem much more cautious in their critical approach.

Nevertheless, this is an exciting project and there is potential for development in terms of an exploration of modern Gothic, particularly when chapters such as 'Nazis, Jews and Noseratu' seem to highlight the continuing contemporary prejudices attached to the bodies of immigrants and religious others. In this respect, although the book maintains a commitment to the corporeal rather than the spectral (with a rather heavy emphasis on the vampire and Stoker's novel in particular which seems to colonize discourses of the Gothic here), *Dangerous Bodies* is haunted throughout by Derrida's notion of hauntology. Mulvey-Roberts acknowledges the importance of this early on in the study as she alludes to the idea of the 'spectre, a thing of the past, returning in the future' (8) as, for example, the horrors of war described in the bloody tales of vampires foretell those of future atrocities. The Gothic literature she explores here looks both backwards to horrors past, 'encrypting the return of the repressed, as well as pointing towards what was to come' (222). Though the conclusion may seem unflinchingly bleak, perhaps if we are to locate any optimism here, it might come through her insistence that we continue to return to the Gothic canon with fresh eyes, fortified against complacency, ready to encounter its horrors anew.