

Gothic Remains: Corpses, Terror and Anatomical Culture, 1764-1897

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Of the many enjoyable aspects in Laurence Talairach's analysis of the literary, cultural and medical use and significance of the 'the corpse' in the long nineteenth century, its Acknowledgements are a fascinating highlight into the process and networks that formed the project; reflecting on the fragmented nature of a monograph's production in a way that is refreshing and reassuring for the Early Career Researcher. Talairach lures us in with the tantalising opening, 'It was on a Sunday morning that my grandmother died the first time' (p.ix). This is not fiction, but fact – yet the reciprocity and the overlap between these categories lays the foundation for the study that follows, offering 'new insights into the ways in which medical practice and the medical sciences informed the aesthetics of pain and death typically found in Gothic texts, and the two-way traffic that emerged between medical literature and literary texts' (10). *Gothic Remains* extends the chronological range and genre focus of recent studies such as Yael Shapira's *Inventing the Gothic Corpse: The Thrill of Human Remains in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Palgrave, 2018) and Anna Gasperini's *Nineteenth Century Popular Fiction, Medicine and Anatomy* (Palgrave, 2019), to provide 'a

historicist reading of canonical and less known Gothic texts, explored through the prism of anatomy' (9).

Chapter One focuses on the 'skeleton-in-trunk' motif prevalent in early Gothic novels as one key expression of the desire to discover and reveal the 'naked truth' of the self and the body that left it vulnerable to violation and commodification. In novels such as Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777) and Minerva Press romances such as *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey* (1797), authors intertwined the theatricality of the skeleton with realistic concerns from the development of anatomical culture to signify contemporaneous concerns such as an illicit blurring of sexuality and anatomy, or the dangerous 'secularisation of British culture' (41) so that readers are confronted 'with powerfully contradictory images of human remains and constructions of the human subject' (47).

Chapter Two interrogates the development of anatomical models and the use of wax to create the illusion of life in medical and cultural settings. Talairach explores how the contradictory emotions of wonder and terror these objects evoked were used in Gothic literature to interrogate 'both the world and the body' (51). Case studies include the use of wax effigies in a context of real European displays and their documentation in travel writing – including the travel journals of many authors who subsequently translated their experiences with real anatomical models and strange life-like monuments into their Gothic works. Through discussions of, for instance, Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), the writings of the Marquis de Sade, and Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Talairach deftly demonstrates the 'permeable boundaries between genres' (60). The class and gender politics of the collection and display of cadavers and remains by both exclusive higher-class institutions and popular carnivals provide material for works from Wordsworth's 'Bartholomew Fair', to George Bewer's *The Witch of Ravensworth* (1808) and Dickens'

Great Expectations (1861). Each of these works are analysed in relation to topics such as staging, the female corpse, ‘erotic yet macabre’ (74), and the criminal body.

The subject of crime and sexuality is particularly relevant in the third chapter, in which the characterisation of resurrectionists – ‘iconic villains’ of nineteenth-century Gothic literature – and the medical practitioner in the context of body-snatching, are explored. Again the commodification of ‘the self’ and ‘the body’ are dominant themes, as is the hybridisation between medical culture and literature, with ‘many of the authors’ of ‘tales of terror’ about body-snatching being ‘themselves medical practitioners’ (93). Discussions of varied forms and genres from the broadside ballad, to poetry by Southey and Shelley, to short tales in the periodical press, non-fiction essays, and large fiction works such as G.M.W. Reynold’s *The Mysteries of London* (1844) and Dickens’ *The Tale of Two Cities* (1859), demonstrate the breadth and depth of ‘the corpse’ and its cultural networks.

Whilst the contribution of body-snatching to the furnishing of medical museums provides a link between chapter three and the subsequent chapter, it also reveals what I suspect was a quandary over structure. In many ways the examples and line of enquiry had the strongest connection with chapter two’s interest in display, impropriety, and sensation. There were lots of helpful recaps to draw connections together, but sometimes laborious repetition. Nevertheless, Talairach helpfully expands on the fascinating frequency of bodily specimens in Gothic literature, the threat to identity in the anonymity of objects and phials on display, and further on the perceived pornographic and obscene nature of these displays.

The final chapter uses tales by Poe, and returns to those by Samuel Warren and Reynolds, to examine the topics of live burials which by the mid-1840s, ‘had become a hackneyed trope of the literature of terror’ (180). Talairach shows how the public perception of best medical practice was inseparable from notions of ‘Britishness’ and decency; with the

‘uncaring handling of the corpse’ considered a sign of foreign barbarism (187). The debates over the limits of life and signifiers of death and the literary and cultural development of the cataleptic patient susceptible to such a fate, is traced in the context of neurological sciences and in literary works on somnambulism, hypnotism, and vampirism. Finishing with an analysis of *Dracula* (1897), Talairach once again emphasises the gendered taint to these depictions, as ‘the cult of invalidism and the cult of the dead woman worked in tandem throughout the period, and images of consumptive women oscillated between saintly emblems of womanhood and more sexually transgressive ones’ (202).

Although there is a wealth of material here, chapter three in particular is demonstrative of moments throughout the book in which I felt overwhelmed by the volume of material and in which there were sometimes too many competing lines of enquiry, arguments and heavy long quotes were reproduced and not always broken down. It may also be a consequence of the publisher’s protocols, but Talairach discusses a number of visual representations of anatomy and body-snatching which, although described in detail, would have been more effective if the images had been reproduced. Overall, however, this book is an extremely interesting and important interdisciplinary addition to the Gothic strain of Medical Humanities, with numerous readings demonstrative of Talairach’s insightful attention to the ‘cross-fertilisation between literature and medicine in the nineteenth century’ (181).