

Richard Marsh

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Minna Vuohelainen's book, *Richard Marsh*, about the author of the same name, is part of the series 'Gothic Authors: Critical Revisions' where it fits in exceedingly well. The other volumes in the series so far range from the seminal authors, like Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker, through to the more obscure Charles Brockden Brown. Richard Marsh bridges this divide well, with Marsh's works becoming increasingly familiar to Gothic students and scholars, but remaining some distance away from traditional canonical writers. The introduction captures a sense of Marsh's rising reputation amongst academic critics. From its first line, *Why Richard Marsh?*, Vuohelainen's introduction immediately makes a compelling case as to why Marsh is a writer worthy of much more critical attention. Marsh is seamlessly placed within a literary context of writing primarily for working-class audiences, as well as alongside his better known peers. Marsh is depicted as a modern writer who is able to blend high and low culture, whose 'popular' fiction 'shares a spatial thematic with elitist, proto-modernist forms of writing' (4). A fascinating highpoint for those not familiar with Marsh's biography is his history as a fraudster. Vuohelainen notes that at one time Marsh 'began to live a life of fraud, paying for his expenses at British and continental hotels by issuing cheques against a defunct bank account, pocketing the change and moving on before the fraud was discovered' (7). These experiences, Vuohelainen explains later, informed some of his fiction.

Vuohelainen states that 'The central aim of this study is to establish what kinds of literary "worlds" appear in Marsh's Gothic fiction' (9), even making a 'plea for a greater spatial awareness in Gothic Studies' (120) in the monograph's conclusion. The use of theory is well applied and easy to follow. The introduction provides a clear overview of the spatial theories discussed for the unfamiliar, and a key argument is that 'space is not simply an

empty container or a backdrop to action but both a product of social forces and an active constituent in the creation of identities and behaviours' (14). The book establishes that the 'Gothic manifests a distinct spatial awareness' (16) and gestures towards how such an approach could be applied to other works. Vuohelainen refers to Marsh's 'starkly modern, often realist urban and domestic backdrops' (13) as an example of how Marsh was able to set his stories against them, showcasing his resistance to dominant ideologies.

The book consists of an Introduction, four chapters, and a short conclusion. Each chapter addresses a different aspect of Marsh's work and selection of texts, managing to complete a survey of Marsh's fiction without sacrificing a sustained argument or compelling subject matter. Vuohelainen explores the tremendous range of Marsh's writing and the many genres it falls within compared to his peers, writing in such diverse genres as detective fiction, romances, essays 'and, under his real name Bernard Heldmann, school stories' (3). Equally importantly is Vuohelainen's ability to situate Marsh beyond his Gothic output, and his most famous novel *The Beetle* (1897), with which he has been most closely associated.

The first chapter "'Exactly Where I Was I Could not Tell': Panopticism, Imageability and the Gothic City" focuses on his recognisably Gothic novels, *The Beetle*, *The Goddess: A Demon* (1900) and *The Joss: A Reversion* (1901), situating them as part of a tradition of urban, and specifically London, Gothic from this period. Marsh's clever use of city space makes London seem mystifyingly Gothic. The second chapter is titled "'The Key of the Street': Displacement, Transit and Gothic Flux". Perhaps making a distinction from the perception of Marsh as a purely Gothic writer, here the realist elements within Marsh's works are signposted. Vuohelainen 'examines instances of rootlessness and restlessness as they appear in Marsh's depictions of homelessness and economic displacement, of modern transport, of walking and flight' (44). The role that the related, transitory spaces also play within this framework, such as train stations and restaurants, are also acknowledged. Building on the previous chapter, the third chapter, "Houses of Mystery: Liminal Thresholds and Gothic Interiors", makes use of Marsh's novels *The Beetle*, *The Goddess*, *The Joss* and *The House of Mystery* alongside the short stories "A Psychological Experiment" (1900) and "An Experience" (1900). The utilisation of both novels and short stories is a strength of Vuohelainen's as it widens the understanding of Marsh's oeuvre. Marsh's ability to combine Gothic tropes and established conventions with social issues, such as slum housing, portrays him as a writer able to use such contexts to enhance his horror writing, in this chapter

conflating domestic shelter with a site of danger: ‘the domestic space of the Gothic house becomes a site of parasitic contagion’ (73).

The fourth chapter “Laughing in the Face of the Authorities: Haunting and Heterotopia in Richard Marsh’s Short Supernatural Fiction” develops the themes of the previous chapters, such as liminality and panopticism, further still and discusses Marsh’s tendency to situate his ghost stories in unconventional locations. Vuohelainen identifies a trend of writers of this period to ascribe something sinister to collectors, citing horror stories by authors like Vernon Lee and Arthur Conan Doyle, which feature once significant items languishing in museum catalogues. Vuohelainen’s ability to situate Marsh’s short fiction amongst that of his better-known peers and identify cross-threads is, again, impressive. It not only demonstrates the research and ingenuity in this monograph, but again helps establish Marsh as a writer whose wider works require further study.

The concluding chapter brings together the previous chapters and directly addresses Marsh’s creation of worlds. Vuohelainen suggests that Marsh’s Gothic managed to anticipate post-war spatial theories, and finds that the ‘Gothic mode is actively engaged in the creation of imaginary worlds that interact with and even inform contemporary perceptions of reality’ (121). The conclusion reiterates the need for a greater depth of study into Marsh’s oeuvre, citing his short fiction in particular as requiring further critical attention, and emphasising the potential of ‘*The House of Mystery*, *The Goddess* and *The Joss* with their rich depictions of fin-de-siècle London and Gothic interiors’ (120). Such statements neatly bring the introduction to mind, and leave the reader with no doubts that ‘the literary landscape of the fin-de-siècle remains incomplete without a serious critical consideration of Marsh’ (122-123).

Overall, not only is *Richard Marsh* an excellent and in-depth study of Marsh’s work, showcasing the range of his output as well as its quality, but in doing so provides an excellent example of how to approach a monograph on a neglected writer. The book is supported by extensive notes and a detailed bibliography, including details of where Marsh’s short stories were published, making this a valuable resource in itself for those studying Marsh, or looking to. I would recommend *Richard Marsh* broadly: it naturally seems essential reading for anyone interested in Marsh and for its discussion of the importance of spatial theory and the Gothic, but as the conclusion makes clear Marsh and his works have much to offer anyone studying popular fiction, a huge range of genre fiction, and the fin-de-siècle.