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MISCELLANEOUS

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Historicising the Gothic Other

Marie Mulvey-Roberts Dangerous Bodies: *Historicising the Gothic Corporeal* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 258.

Themes associated with the body, particularly bodily trauma and abnormality, are obviously a staple element of the Gothic genre. They will include the metamorphosed, shape-shifting bodies of a vampire, a werewolf, or Dr Jekyll; the freakish, deviant body of a monster, a hybrid, and Frankenstein's creation; the gory, brutalized body of a (female) serial killer victim, and the apparitional, evanescent non-body/after-body of a ghost or a vision. The abject, Gothic body is conventionally understood to represent the fears and anxieties of the culture in which these stories were written, shifting as the contexts of these texts might be varied historically and geographically.

This rather conventional understanding of the role of a body in Gothic fiction seems to be embraced and richly complemented by Marie Mulvey-Roberts in her latest book, *Dangerous Bodies: Historicising the Gothic Corporeal* (2016). The gothic texts selected as the main focus of five chapters are interpreted as embedded in historical and biographical contexts. The book provides a detailed, meticulously researched account of previously neglected documents, providing a minute analysis of possible inspirations for literary and filmic texts that could have come from historical events, accounts, or influences from family and literary acquaintances. Thus,

"historicising the gothic corporeal" involves here an immersion of Gothic texts in their cultural contexts with utmost attention paid to the textual and historical detail.

Mulvey-Roberts focuses on the classic Gothic works of literature and film: *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), *The Monk* (1796), *Frankenstein* (1818), *Dracula* (1897) and *Nosferatu* (1922), as well as 20th- and 21st-century literary and cinematic works, surrounding them with less-known cultural texts, historical events, biographical data, documents, letters and journals, in order to "reveal how the demonization of the Other, as reflected in Gothic literature, may be traced to institutional persecution and acts of war" by "point[ing] to the real-life narratives of fear, danger and persecution" (p. 11).[1] According to the author, the radical power of the Gothic lies in the deconstruction of the self and Other/monstrous binary as that of a perpetrator and a victim (p. 2), following Foucault's characterization of the Gothic as a text that "is always about the abuse of power" (Foucault, quoted in Mulvey-Roberts, p. 4). Thus, the book is organized not around the Gothic cultural landmarks, but rather around the bodies of the Other—the Catholic, the slave, the woman, the Jew, the soldier—that these novels (at times covertly and inadvertently) present. In Mulvey-Roberts's eyes, the truly Gothic energy in the background of these texts is the events of mass destruction—the Inquisition, the French Revolution, slavery and slave rebellions in the Caribbean, medicalization of females and their mass mutilations on the Victorian operating tables, 20th-century anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, and the military conflicts—when history fed itself on the bodies of the Other. Mulvey-Roberts's interpretation might at times be surprising, as it shows that the authors of Gothic classics, traditionally perceived as radical and non-conforming to the mainstream ideas of their times, were indeed perpetuating those discourses which justified the abuse of the Other: anti-Catholicism, racism, anti-Semitism or misogyny, performed in the settings of the "monastic community, slave plantation, operation theatre, Jewish ghetto and battlefield trench" (p. 1).

In the opening chapter of the book, Mulvey-Roberts convincingly presents the 18th-century Gothic novel, particularly Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, as not purely anti-Catholic, as it is generally considered, but more ambiguous; Walpole's admiration of Catholic aesthetics is combined, according to the author, with a satire on the usurpation of religious power by Henry VIII. She presents Catholicism as a strong

[1] All page numbers in parentheses reference the volume under review.

inspiration for the 18th-century Gothic, with images of the passion of Christ and *imitatio Christi* among the believers (p. 14); the horrors of the Inquisition (p. 15), and holy stigmatism (p. 16). Horace Walpole's "urtext for the Gothic novel" (p. 16) is both a criticism of Catholic superstition and an expression of his fascination with the medieval past, which thus paradoxically satirizes the English Reformation and the political scene of his age. Further on, Mulvey-Roberts discusses Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, particularly the figure of the Bleeding Nun, as both an expression of European anti-clericalism and "the necessary fruit of the revolutionary tremors felt by the whole Europe" (de Sade, quoted in Mulvey-Roberts, p. 35). The author situates *The Monk* within a wider range of Gothic literature, from Marquis de Sade's works to Diderot's *The Nun* (1796), not only to illustrate the monstrosities of the French Revolution as reflected in these literary texts, but also to suggest that Catholicism was interpreted as destabilizing for English Protestant femininity (p. 35) – a concept which will continue well into the 19th century, for instance, in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853). The bleeding female body of the nun in Lewis's work is thus an abject symbol of femininity. But what this chapter most evidently illustrates is the fact that in this book, Mulvey-Roberts does not offer purely a complementation of classic readings of gothic texts; what she does, via meticulous examination of historical contexts, is to offer a convincing interpretation that stands in stark contrast to these traditional readings, as she does in chapter one: instead of seeing the 19th-century Gothicism as anti-Catholic, she proves that it is hugely inspired by and stems from a fascination with Catholicism.

The second chapter analyses Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a representation of both the living and dead body of a slave, interpreting the novel as "a parable of the life cycle of a slave and, as such, a narrative embodiment of the real-life terror and horror" (p. 53). The novel as an allegory of slavery refers, according to Mulvey-Roberts, to focal issues of the early 19th-century abolitionist movement and its fear of social anarchy as a possible consequence of emancipation. Thus, the Frankenstein's monster's hybridity is, Mulvey-Roberts claims, "a metaphor of mixed race" (Ibid.), while his large frame and physical strength represent the fear of "black potency" (Ibid.). Mulvey-Roberts repeats after Andrew Lloyd Smith that the creature's story at the core of Mary Shelley's novel resembles a slave narrative, while Victor Frankenstein's refusal to create a female version of the monster reflects "demonization of female rebel slaves" (Ibid.). Finally, the creature's murderous rage refers to slave rebellions occurring in the

Caribbean in the early 1800s, and his murder of Elizabeth Frankenstein hints at the possibility of rape and thus the taboo of miscegenation (Ibid.). Mulvey-Roberts's claim that Shelley's novel is an expression of her ameliorist opinions—that the slaves' emancipation should not be immediate, but preceded by earlier education and better treatment, in fear of their bloody revenge—is backed up by varied historical evidence, among them Shelley's personal connections to slave owners: Gilbert Imlay, the father of her half-sister Fanny, was involved in the slave trade (p. 61), and the aforementioned Matthew Lewis, the author of *The Monk*, owned over 500 slaves on two Jamaican plantations he inherited in 1812 (p. 67), while Shelley's friend Fanny Wright established in 1825 a plantation in the US called Nashoba Commune, a failed quasi-utopian and ameliorist experiment where slaves were to be prepared for emancipation (p. 59). This evidence, combined with contemporary political documents, accounts of slave rebellions and the cultural and quasi-scientific discourses of race in the early 1800s lead the author to conclude that *Frankenstein* represents the anxiety connected with the possible emancipation of the racial Other. And again, this conclusion offered by Mulvey-Roberts interestingly stands in contrast to the traditional scholarship which sees *Frankenstein* as an illustration of Shelley's radicalism; a detailed historical reading of Shelley's milieu allows one to perceive a much more ambiguous picture of the political convictions standing behind this classic text.

Similarly, in the next chapter Mulvey-Roberts makes a connection between Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and late 19th-century discourses of medicine, particularly gynaecology and psychiatry, via his family connections; as she notes, Stoker came from a medical family, and his oldest brother Sir William Thornley Stoker was a gynaecological surgeon who performed both ovariotomies and clitoridectomies and who, Mulvey-Roberts claims, might be a model for Professor Van Helsing in the novel (p. 118). The chapter offers a fascinating yet terrifying account of late Victorian "medical sexism" (p. 94), expressed in sexualisation of mental disturbances, such as hysteria, and in their treatment via female castration, called by the author "sexual lobotomy" (p. 94). The author sees *Dracula* as a "medical novel" (p. 94), with the staking of Lucy as the key scene, "a sublimation of the castrating surgeon and his assistants operating on a hysterical female patient" (p. 94). Mulvey-Roberts uses medical discourses of the time to show how female sexuality, for instance masturbation, was pathologized and, when it comes to *Dracula*, demonised, and found to be in need of exorcism by Van Helsing. In contrast to the previous two

chapters, this reading of *Dracula* and of medicalisation of female sexuality in the Victorian period is nothing new.

The analysis of the figure of a vampire continues in the fourth chapter of the book, where *Nosferatu*, the German expressionist film of 1922, is interpreted by Mulvey-Roberts as a representation of European anti-Semitism of the period. This anti-Jewish sentiment was fed by, for instance, the colonial discourse which saw Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe, emigrating to Western Europe and the USA at the turn of the 20th century, as a menace (p. 130), represented by the Gothic figure of the Wandering Jew (p. 132). The Jew, stereotypically characterised by cupidity and engaged in usury, is represented by the vampire, the bloodsucker (p. 133), and as a "threat to racial purity" (p. 131); he/she connotes disease and contagion, represented in *Nosferatu* by the rat-like physique of Count Orlok. Mulvey-Roberts also discusses *Rassenromanen* (race novels) of the early 20th century, steeped in anti-Semitic sentiment, as early signs of German fascism. Based on Derrida's hauntological concept of the revenant that "signals towards the future" (quoted in Mulvey-Roberts, p. 151), she claims that German expressionist cinema, and particularly *Nosferatu*, "foreshadows the horrors lying ahead" (p. 152). The cinema, as well as other cultural artefacts discussed by Mulvey-Roberts, such as popular novels and newspaper cartoons, became the contemporary opium for the masses, paving the way for the horrors of the Holocaust.

Finally, in her last chapter, Mulvey-Roberts turns to the discourses of war, from the Crimean (1853–1856) to the Vietnam War (1959–1975), in order to show "the draining effects of war on the body politics" (p. 180). The cultural texts mentioned in this chapter include, among others, Marie Nizet's *Captain Vampire* (1879), *Nosferatu* and an earlier film, *J'Accuse* (1919), and the contemporary film *Deathdream* (1974) as well as *The Bloody Red Baron* (1995) by Kim Newman, an alternative historical Gothic novel. These texts, along with propaganda posters and cartoons, represent war as the ultimate vampire, feeding on the bodies of soldiers.

In her conclusion, Mulvey-Roberts locates her analysis within the field of hauntological interpretation of War Gothic, as "literature dealing with oppression […], a political genre encrypting the return of the oppressed" (p. 222), who, like the spectral soldiers of the First World War rising from their graves in *J'Accuse*, reproach and warn the living. The author perhaps fails to emphasize either in her introduction or in the conclusion a recurring theme in her book which is female oppression and the anxiety caused by female sexuality – starting from the menstrually abject Bloody Nun in

The Monk, through potentially dangerous female creation in *Frankenstein* representing women slaves, and the Victorian hysteric in chapter three, to the fear of miscegenation represented in the vampire myth and the danger imposed by syphilitic prostitutes during the war symbolised by a female vampire in the last chapter. Mulvey-Roberts's work does not propose entirely novel readings of the texts discussed—after all, interpretations of Frankenstein's monster as a slave, a vampire as a Jew, and Lucy/Mina as a hysterical/sexually liberated New Woman have been discussed in Gothic studies since the 1990s but her analysis is wonderfully extensive in its historical and cultural range. It is an insightful and highly informative addition to the body of Gothic scholarship, recommended to any student or scholar in the field.

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Historicising the Gothic Other

The following review discusses the recent book by Marie Mulvey-Roberts, *Dangerous Bodies: Historicising the Gothic Corporeal* (Manchester UP, 2016), which offers a historical perspective on gothic literary and cultural texts. In the book, Mulvey-Roberts examines how gothic fiction represents the bodies of the Other – the Catholic, the slave, the woman, the Jew, and so on – on which the history cannibalistically feeds itself; a meticulous historical research allows her to shed new light on both canonical as well as more marginal gothic texts. This review offers an overview and a brief comment on this significant addition to gothic studies.

Keywords: gothic body, the Other, historical approach, Mulvey-Roberts
Słowa kluczowe: gotyckie ciało, Inny, badania historyczne, Mulvey-Roberts