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STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

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Dangerous Bodies: Historicising the Gothic Corporeal, by Marie Mulvey-Roberts, Manchester UP, 2016. 258 pages, £70.00. ISBN 978-0-7190-8541-3

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A book that comes with endorsements from Fay Weldon and David Punter promises to be an exciting addition to the recent rich scholarship on the Gothic. Marie Mulvey-Roberts's *Dangerous Bodies* does not disappoint. Her stated aim is to look at the relationship of English Gothic literature and German and Anglo-American film to historical horrors, detailing the interaction of fictional terror with real-life nastiness. The book displays a wealth of references and a dazzling array of authorities and scholars, from Foucault, Derrida and Žižek to writers on specific texts like David Punter, Robert Miles, Dale Townshend, and Steven Bruhn.

Inevitably the concentration on the body implicates institutions most eager to control and exploit it in our Western culture: medicine and the church. Mulvey-Roberts brings out the fleshiness of so much religious doctrine which concerns the persecuted and persecuting bodies; the dangerous ones she describes emerge from the English Reformation, the Spanish inquisition, and the French Revolution, as well as from Victorian medical (mal)practice, anti-Semitism, and warfare, from the Crimean to the Vietnam.

A fascinating strand in *Dangerous bodies* is the ambiguity of Gothic. While the major Gothic writers let their work unlock taboos and cross frontiers, they also perpetuate negative stereotypes of the Other. As Mulvey-Roberts argues, the fictional horrors of the Gothic may blind us to the horrors of the real; they may naturalize what should be opposed. The Gothic monster has, after all, been a rallying point for cultural, nationalist or religious hegemonies. At its most dangerous the Gothic can be a way of rationalising the Other. The horror text functions as "a rite of defilement that sometimes appears to collude with the forces of oppression and yet, at the same time, can be cathartic and transformative by collapsing the boundary between the self and monstrous Other" (9).

Although wide-ranging in reference, the book's subject is primarily the vampire as iconically created by Bram Stoker in *Dracula*. It traces the immense influence of this book on German Expressionist cinema and in spinoff literature through the twentieth century. Mulvey-Roberts is less interested in the class-ridden vampire created by Lord Byron and his physician John Polidori about the time when Mary Shelley was getting the first inklings of *Frankenstein*, though their works are mentioned. What she chooses to investigate she looks at in intricate detail. Some of the arguments are not new but they are cleverly brought together in new ways, and all sources are meticulously referenced.

The book is divided into five large chapters. The first notes how the English Reformation and French Revolution appeared to destroy the Gothic world so that Horace Walpole and Matthew Lewis, Stoker's precursors, try to recapture it imaginatively in Gothic fiction. Mulvey-Roberts considers the now conventional notion that English Gothic is anti-Catholic, arguing that, while anti-Catholicism remains an element, by the mid eighteenth century a greater threat was repressive secular government. This then was exacerbated once the fear of contagion from the French Revolution gripped England at the end of the century. Walpole, author of the first well-known Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, was a critic of Henry VIII, seeing him as a bloody persecutor through his violent break with Rome. In this context his novel becomes neither defence of nor attack on Catholicism but rather a satire on the Reformation that goes some way aesthetically to recreate abandoned Catholicism. The more overtly anti-Catholic *Monk*

by Matthew Lewis is seen to replay the horrors of the French Revolution, especially through the image of the Bleeding Nun. This image draws on the Terror that enveloped women such as the queen, Marie Antoinette, and her close friend, the Princess de Lamballe.

The second chapter concerns the corruption and corroding effects of African slavery on all the cultures involved. It notes the connection with historical slavery of both Walpole and Lewis, to whom may be added other Gothic writers, William Beckford, author of Vathek whose vast wealth came in part from slave-worked sugar plantations in Jamaica, and, more controversially, Mary Shelley, whose *Frankenstein* uses both the abolitionist and the pro-slavery discourses. While taking the liberal side on the question of slavery itself, Shelley is less clear when it comes to the issue of immediate emancipation: whether slaves needed to be prepared for their freedom or set free at once. In a skillful close reading, *Frankenstein* becomes a parable of the life cycle of a slave, embodying real-life horror and terror. The monster's unfinished bride resembles the demonization of rebel female slaves and touches on fears of miscegenation. Stories of brutal slave uprisings play into the portrait of the monster as both worthy and blood-thirsty, while in life and fiction slave and slave-owner can change places and mirror each other.

The third and subsequent chapters concentrate on readings and permutations of *Dracula*. Associating the female vampire and the hysteric woman, Chapter Three concentrates on the book's subtext of sexuality. It describes the historical efforts to control male and female sexuality and comments in detail on the practice of sexual surgery which was used to cure deviant women at the time. *Dracula* is read as a medical novel merging medicine and the supernatural. Through his relatives Stoker knew something of the punitive operations on female sexual and reproductive organs, as well as the warning literature about female orgasm and the horrors of masturbation in both sexes. Vampirism, it is argued, forms a trope for invented female pathology needing surgery for a cure (female castration), as well becoming an image of sexually transmitted disease.

Bram Stoker may have read some of Sir Richard Burton's anti-semitic writings. In *fin de siècle* discourses of degeneration, the Jewish body is made pathological and criminal. Dracula is not explicitly Jewish, though a few hints suggest there might have been a slight reference. Chapter Four focuses on Jewishness and the blood through mediation of the

most famous film inspired by *Dracula*, F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*, which in turn inspired other works that clearly link the vampire and the Jew. Applying the vampire trope to associate Jews and sexual disease and plague, Nazi propaganda films made image after image of the vampiric monstrous Jew.

Whether or not Hitler ever read *Dracula* or saw *Nosferatu*, he was certainly influenced by their progeny. The Nazis brought about not only the vampire of anti Semitism but also the vampire of the largest war ever seen. The final chapter of the book concerns war viewed as the ultimate blood-sucker. Stoker's brother sent him descriptions of the horrors he experienced in the Russo-Turkish war in the 1870s, showing the draining effect of war on the body politic and on men's bodies. In *Dracula* there seem to be traces of the Crimean War, while the pursuit of the vampire takes on the quality of a military campaign. War begets other wars as vampires make other vampires. So it is fitting that war is often allegorized as a vampiric woman, a woman who also spreads syphilis in wartime brothels. With war, tropes of fiction and history come together. The biggest mass of dangerous bodies arrives with the First World War, where history itself becomes the tale of terror.

In the conclusion, Mulvey-Roberts sums up the argument succinctly and convincingly: "Corporeality has been used by the Gothic to express horror of the Other, whether it be through the body of the Catholic, Caribbean slave, femme fatale, Jew or enemy soldier. The construct of the monster is a declaration of war on individuals, who are demonised for their marginality and whose bodies are overlaid with fear and danger" (221).