History and the Body Gothic

Dangerous Bodies: Historicising the Gothic Corporeal. By Marie Mulvey-Roberts. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. Pp. 258. ISBN 978-0-7190-8541-3.

Reviewed by Viktória Osoliová
tade95@freemail.hu

An engaging monograph, *Dangerous Bodies* aims to give new insights into Gothic literature's obsession with corporeality. Marie Mulvey-Roberts presents a fascinating and thought-provoking study about the real-life horrors which reside in the fictional terror and horror in Gothic literature and film. She applies concise language and her arguments are clear and coherent. Each chapter abounds in detailed historical facts which are the results of thorough investigation. Mulvey-Roberts cleverly draws upon connections between the authors of famous Gothic texts and their own historical period and cultural milieu.

The book chapters explore the representation and pathologisation of the 'monstrous' body from the inception of the Gothic genre in the 18th century until the 20th century. The author highlights in her introduction that Gothic, as a body of writing, not only transgresses boundaries and ventures into taboo lands, but also generates negative stereotypes by branding 'the Other' as a dangerous body. As she argues, the existence of otherness is most palpable or evident through its corporeality (3). The Gothic monster has always been a rallying point for cultural, nationalist or religious hegemonies, since its difference destabilises the existing heteronormative ideologies normally related to race, class, religion, gender or sexuality (3). The author claims that each body is, whether real or fictional, a bearer of a politicised message. She calls the stigmatisation of the 'the Other' the process of "monsterising," which is born out of an abuse of power. Throughout Western cultural history, the body has always been controlled and exploited by the institutions of the church, medicine and state, the three most important powers. The body, therefore, has been subjected throughout history to torture and destruction. In this book, a collection of dangerous bodies are traced to the effects and terrors exercised by the institutional forces of the English Reformation, Spanish Inquisition, French Revolution, slavery, 19th-century Victorian medical malpractice, anti-Semitism, Crimean War and the Vietnam War. The book is divided into five larger chapters. Its opening chapter explores the Catholic body

https://doi.org/10.33035/EgerJES.2020.20.109

as subject to torture in the famous Gothic literary texts of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796). The following two chapters move into the nineteenth century, focusing on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). These novels discuss the contemporary anxieties and paranoia surrounding the idea of the monstrous body.

The first chapter explores how Gothic literature in the 18th century was influenced by the terrors of the English Reformation, anti-Catholic movements and the French Revolution, with particular reference to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, which is considered to be the first Gothic novel, and Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*. The wounded body was a central motif of the Gothic novel in the 18th century and a central icon of the Roman Catholic Church with its images of bleeding statues, crucifixion, martyred saints and mysterious stigmatics. The Church inspired Gothic novelists with monks, lustful priests, and immured nuns, while Gothic settings like cathedrals, convents and crypts evoke a sense of medievalism replete with superstition. This chapter also revisits the conventional position that Gothic literature in the 18th century was anti-Catholic. Mulvey-Roberts argues, however, that while anti-Catholicism remains a central element of Gothic novels, by the mid-18th century a greater threat emerged, which was the repressive secular state. Horace Walpole was a critic of Henry VIII and saw him as a bloody persecutor because of his turbulent break with Rome. In this context, the author draws attention to a neglected interpretation of *Otranto*, which—in her view—can be read as neither a defence of, nor an attack on Catholicism, but rather as a satire on Reformation. The overtly anti-Catholic *Monk* by Lewis represents the real-life threats of The Reign of Terror during the French Revolution through the image of the Bleeding Nun.

The second chapter investigates the corrupting effects of slavery. The 19th century was an unsettling historical period for Great Britain. The country gained vast lands through territorial expansion and became the largest colonizer. In the view of many British people, slaves and colonials symbolised the exotic, racial and ethnic "Other." This chapter thoroughly investigates that some Gothic authors, like Horace Walpole, William Beckford and Matthew Lewis, had West Indian connections—especially in the Caribbean—and some of their wealth came from sugar plantations mostly worked by slaves. Many abolitionists regarded slavery as a form of civil death, which deprives a person of their humanity. In this fascinating chapter, Mulvey-Roberts draws a parallel between Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the issue of slavery. She provides details from the life of Mary Shelley, including her support of abolitionism. According to the author, *Frankenstein* can be read as an allegory of slavery. She argues that Mary Shelley's monster, made out of corpses, is like the slave in being living dead. Accordingly, Shelley's monster parallels 19th-

century racial stereotypes in skin colour and size. Both Shelley's male and female monsters are a patchwork of various body parts and invite readers to see them as metaphors for mixed race. *Frankenstein*, therefore, is a "parable of the life cycle of a slave and, as such, a narrative embodiment of real-life terror and horror" (53).

The third chapter provides a historical and medical overview of 19th-century sexual surgeries on men and women aimed at controlling their sexuality. 19th-century sexual surgery were used to 'cure' a wide variety of ailments, including allegedly immoral forms of behaviour, like hysteria and masturbation. Hysterectomy was a kind of "castration of women" which was believed to cure a wide variety of female maladies such as menstrual disturbances, insanity, hysteria, nymphomania (95). Masturbation was considered to be the main cause of insanity, hypersexuality and hereditary disease. Therefore, sexual surgeries and other treatments were used to 'correct' women and men who were deemed hysteric and sexually perverse. This formed a subtext to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which reflects the social and political instabilities of gender during the second half of the 19th century. Some of Stoker's relatives were doctors and surgeons, from whom he acquired clinical and surgical details for the writing of *Dracula*. Therefore, Mulvey-Roberts argues that *Dracula* can be read as a medical novel which mixed medicine with the supernatural. Stoker's vampire figure was not just a blood-sucking supernatural being and an embodiment of otherness in terms of ethnicity, morality, religion, but in terms of gender as well. Mulvey-Roberts highlights that the female vampire in *Dracula* is associated with the social anxieties and paranoia felt about liberated female sexuality in the 19th century. Vampirism was not just interpreted as an image of sexually transmitted disease, but as a "trope for an invented female pathology, believed to require a surgical solution" (93).

The fourth chapter continues to discuss the vampire theme in connection with Jewishness by drawing a parallel between them. The Jewish body has always been represented as that of a bloodsucker and a carrier of various diseases. Even the body parts of Jewish people, such as the nose and eyes, were pathologised. The first vampire film was based on *Dracula*—the German Expressionist movie, *Nosferatu* (1922)—which used the dangerous vampire body as a metaphor for the crypto-Jew. Mulvey-Roberts investigates whether the representation of the vampire in *Nosferatu* influenced the well-established Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda within Weimar culture or not. The chapter later draws upon how Nazi propaganda films might have applied the vampire trope to Jews in movies such as Paul Wegener's Golem films, *The Eternal Jew* and *Jew Süss*.

Chapter five applies the imagery, discourse and rhetoric of vampirism to the context of warfare. Mulvey-Roberts argues that war is the ultimate horror and bloodsucker and highlights that it has been rarely analysed from this aspect. This

chapter examines the connection between vampires and war in novels, films and short stories from the Crimean War, through the Russo-Turkish conflict and the First World War, up until the Vietnam War. Mulvey-Roberts writes about the horrifying effect of war on bodies of soldiers and body politics in general. The figure of the vampire often symbolised the enemy in wartimes. As the author explains, "like the vampire, war replicates itself through blood" (180). She also argues that traces of the Crimean War can be detected in Stoker's *Dracula*. The novel can be read as a war novel, and as a military campaign against the enemy, who is none other than the figure of the vampire.

In conclusion, this page-turner will be of interest to academics and students of Gothic studies, gender, film studies and history. I would especially recommend it to those who are interested in the relationship between history, literature and film. In this comprehensive monograph, Mulvey-Roberts sums up her argument about corporeality in the following manner: "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).