



Elizabeth D. Macaluso, *Gender, the New Woman, and the Monster*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 110 pp.

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Gender, the New Woman, and the Monster explores “the special interrelationships that monsters have with female protagonists of British fin-de-siècle fiction,” as a means of understanding “some of the new ways that gender is indeterminate and resists categories and boundaries in both fiction and the history of the British fin de siècle” (2). The book focuses on three texts from 1897 which feature characters that can be read as examples of the New Woman. This multifaceted cultural figure was prominent at the same time that monster fiction was enjoying a burst of popularity and, “like the foreign and perverse monster,” was “an indeterminate figure” that disrupted assumptions about gender (2). Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* has long been a popular text for exploring issues of gender and monstrosity, Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* has amassed a decent body of criticism, and Florence Marryat’s *The Blood of the Vampire* is in the process of doing so. The New Woman has featured in critical discussions of all three texts (for example, respectively, Senf 1982; Margree 2007; Hammack 2008). Nevertheless, the endless adaptability of the Gothic and its monsters, which invites multiple queer readings that disturb gender distinctions, means that there is certainly space for another critical contribution to this area.

Each primary text is afforded a chapter to itself, beginning with *Dracula*. Macaluso demonstrates that, by attacking Lucy, Dracula brings her and Mina into a stronger and more intimate queer relationship, with Mina becoming “Lucy’s caretaker, family member, and spouse” (26). Dracula also facilitates an erotic encounter between them when Mina finds Lucy partially dressed in the churchyard (27-8). This allows for a reading of Lucy and Mina as having a “female friendship that approaches lesbianism”, which is used “to suggest that same-sex relationships can be productive” (21).

The next chapter argues that *The Beetle* displays, and invites, different reactions to the “foreign and perverse” Beetle, to the poverty-stricken Holt, and to the New Woman, Miss Lindon. By doing this, Marsh’s novel “shows the conflicted nature of the debates over colonialism, sexuality, and poverty” at the fin de siècle (43). While this allows for an overview of some key themes in Marsh’s novel, the New Woman is only discussed in earnest briefly, towards the end of the chapter. It would have been good to see a more sustained consideration of the “special interrelationship” between the monster and the New Woman in order to offer a new intersectional reading of the novel.

The chapter on *The Blood of the Vampire* analyses Marryat’s depiction of the energy-sucking, biracial vampire Harriet Brandt, who is monster and New Woman in one. The novel, it is argued, reveals that the social ostracization of Harriet is caused by the English characters’ racism and sexism, under the guise of the “scientific determinism” promoted by Dr Phillips (73). By making this clear, Marryat “allows readers to see past [Harriet’s] monstrosity and, instead, sympathize with her,” (73) thereby offering a challenge to late-Victorian xenophobia and misogyny.

The book, while not offering drastically new readings of its primary texts, covers themes that are relevant to anyone interested in fin-de-siècle popular fiction and its engagement with some of the big issues of the day (especially gender, class and colonialism). However, the development of the argument is hampered at times by slippages in logical progression and by repetition in terms of both words and ideas. For example, the phrase “foreign and perverse” appears an excessive nineteen times in the fourteen-page introduction, sometimes twice in a sentence. This suggests that more support was needed at all stages of the peer-review and publication process.

The critical approach is one which tends to summarise issues in binary terms which emphasise conflict over complexity, despite the stated focus on gender indeterminacy and the acknowledgment that “the *fin de siècle* [sic] was notable for complex and conflicting attitudes toward social issues that affected Britain” (37). Many of the “boundaries” which the “liminal figure of the monster” supposedly “collapse[s]” (3) are artificially set up or exaggerated. Distinct oppositions are drawn between traditional conservatives and progressive liberals, who viewed New Women as “either monsters or laudable figures” (5). Other Victorian fiction is reductively described in order to present the primary texts as superior. For example, it is erroneously claimed that “novels like *The Moonstone*, *The Odd Women*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *Jude the Obscure* [...] each deal with a particular social issue, like colonialism, the New Woman, sexuality, and poverty,” in contrast to *The Beetle* which “involves all four of these issues” (6). In relation to the primary texts themselves, the author sets up simplifying questions in order to offer a more ‘complex’ answer:

Is Dracula straight or gay? He chooses both female and male sexual victims. Is the Beetle male or female? His/her gender is ambiguous. Is Harriet Brandt white or black? Is she good or bad? Her race and character are also ambiguous.

(11)

Such tactics lead to some problematic readings, in particular the analysis of *The Beetle* as a reflection on late-Victorian anxieties about homosexuality. The Beetle's attack (in seemingly male form) of Holt is read as a homosexual assault, which (because Holt is a "benevolen[t]" character), apparently leads us to question whether "gay men [are] monsters or relatable subjects?" without explaining why Holt (the victim) should be perceived as "gay" (44). This scene calls for more sensitive and nuanced consideration (see, for example, Margree 2007). Such an approach does not substantiate the claim that the "book will show that the subject of gender, at the fin de siècle, is more complex than scholars have thought" (8), and limits its contribution to our knowledge of Victorian gender and popular fiction.

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