Madeline Potter, ***Theological Monsters: Religion and Irish Gothic***. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. 2026, 238 pp. Hb £75.00. ISBN: 978-1-83772-35406

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In *Theological Monsters: Religion and Irish Gothic*, Madeline Potter examines the works of Charles Maturin, J. Sheridan Le Fanu, and Bram Stoker to define a coalescent mode of religious interpretation within Irish Gothic literature of the late nineteenth century. Potter's aim "to identify the emergence of a new category of monster, namely the theological monster" as "a being who, regardless of outer appearance, derives its monstrosity internally" intersects within both Gothic literary and monster studies for her juxtaposition of such monsters as Melmoth, Carmilla, and Dracula with their religious and sacramental capabilities (2). Such internal or sacramental monstrosity, as Potter goes on to describe, transcends existing critical tendencies to reduce these monsters to replicate any given denominational depiction of monstrosity. Instead, Potter posits theological monstrosity as the result of reading such monsters as themselves material and literal examples of sacraments, ones that directly exhibit and problematise human encounters with the divine. "Put simply," Potter outlines in her introduction, "the theological monster's potential to hurt its victims resides not in physical threat (though that may well be present), but rather in the threat to the victim's soul: the theological monster has the potential to damn its victims" (2). Melmoth, Carmilla, and Dracula, for example, are "not, in fact, theologically demons" as many theological readings of their works have positioned them (13). Moreover, their capacity to be understood as "a demonic or a monstrous sacrament" within their respective texts instead makes them "*like* a sacrament," which blurs the binary between sacred and demonic through which theological monstrosity emerges, for Potter, within the Irish Gothic conceptually (14, emphasis original). Therefore, in defining the nature of theological monstrosity within her chosen triumvirate of Irish Gothic writers, Potter's central argument lies both in unravelling these assumptions surrounding monstrosity as metaphorical and in understanding the monsters within Maturin, Le Fanu, and Stoker as sacraments.

Consequently, Maturin, Le Fanu, and Stoker serve as Potter's case studies of theological monstrosity within the Irish Gothic, and her monograph does not reduce the genre to solely encompassing these authors. Rather, Potter's focus in *Theological Monsters* is to explore the

Irish Gothic as "a location of the emergence of theological monstrosity as a literary mechanism in the works of Maturin, Le Fanu, and Stoker" (22). Her argument, then, is situated within a comprehensive evaluation of these authors' Gothic works, as well as the extensive critical archive on Irish Gothic and monster theory, within which Potter locates a pervasive critical tendency which treats monsters like Melmoth, Carmilla, and Dracula as "grotesque parodies of theologies" or reflections of the human (209). For instance, Potter builds upon and challenges Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, which determines that "the monster is always a reflection and a metaphor" of the human experience or specific religious maxims (Cohen 1996). This mediative understanding of monstrosity as something abstract or metaphorical, rather than material, possibly obscures the nuances of Maturin's, Le Fanu's, and Stoker's works as lying only in the extents to which they reflect a given denominational appearance of monstrosity. Engaging further with such seminal works as Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Timothy K. Beal's *Religion and Its Monsters*, and Stephen T. Asma's *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, Potter fleshes out the ways in which cultural analysis has sought to bridge the monstrous with the religious, while also scrutinising how these existing attempts fall short of their larger critical and theological potential when it comes to Irish Gothic monstrosity. With this foundation, *Theological Monsters* "highlight[s] how particular aspects of such theologies permeate Gothic fictions," with Maturin, Le Fanu, and Stoker as its central examples, "without being perfectly transposed onto them" (11). Theological monstrosity, therefore, functions as an embodiment of the divine rather than as an extension of the human.

Theological Monsters: Religion and Irish Gothic is a thorough exploration of the Irish Gothic that creates a compelling historicist and theoretical case for theological monstrosity as a new interpretive framework to Gothic literature and nineteenth-century studies alike. Potter's monograph offers a refreshing approach to Gothic literary studies that evaluates historical influences such as the Oxford Movement and the prevalence of religious themes in her Gothic works without reducing these influences and themes to rigid exegesis of Christian denominational binaries. Instead, theological monstrosity is "a category which is ontologically autonomous, and not automatically dependent on human experience" (207). Applied primarily to *Melmoth the Wanderer*, *Carmilla*, and *Dracula*, Potter's frame reinvigorates these long-studied Gothic works and their critical potential for exciting new approaches and possibilities. To that end, Potter indeed explores and centres such elements of Christian theology as the Augustinian definition of the sacrament within *Theological Monsters*, but the concept does not limit theological monstrosity to Christian readings alone (13). Instead, by "unveil[ing] the relationship between monster and God," or monster and the divine, Potter's definition of theological monstrosity gives form to the cultural processes and materiality of literature and theology, and thus is a generative concept that may be applied to a variety of religious and cultural readings without limitation (207). Potter's monograph and her conceptual framework thus invite additional dialogue and application. *Theological Monsters* ultimately provides an approach that is both critically provocative and generative for Gothic literature and monster studies, revamping how the frames of monstrosity and theology relate to the Gothic genre and, by extension, transcend the bounds of the nineteenth century and its works. For its exciting readings of such popular Gothic works as *Melmoth the Wanderer*, *Carmilla*, and *Dracula*, I recommend *Theological Monsters* to readers interested in the Irish Gothic, depictions of monstrosity in Gothic literature, and Victorian popular fictions generally.

Works Cited

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, ed. 1996. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.