

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Heholt, Ruth, [*Catherine Crowe: Gender, Genre and Radical Politics*](#). London: Routledge, 2021. 215 pp.

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<1>For most Victorian scholars Catherine Crowe will be known as the author of the best-selling *The Night Side of Nature: Or Ghosts and Ghost Seers* (1848), a fascinating compendium of ‘extraordinary’ ghost stories, crammed with haunted houses, poltergeists, doppelgangers and prophetic dreams. A household name in the mid to late nineteenth century, ranked alongside other popular women writers such as Margaret Oliphant, Ellen Wood and Charlotte Yonge, she has until fairly recently been confined to the side-lines or dismissed as a one-hit wonder. Yet, as Ruth Heholt’s long overdue reappraisal of the writer and her oeuvre clearly demonstrates, Crowe deserves much more recognition for her literary output across a range of popular genres as well as her important, and often radical, contributions to debates about spiritualism, the paranormal, poverty, slavery, women’s rights and animals.

<2>In this first full-length study of Crowe’s career, Heholt situates her as ‘an extremely important and influential figure in the moulding and shaping of Victorian popular literature’ (18). Drawing on her letters and other archival materials, it traces her development as a pioneering writer whose innovations in genre, concerns about women’s place, social inequalities and legal injustice all questioned the status quo. The thesis that Crowe was at the cutting edge, cannily shifting with ‘the currents and trends of the time’ (18), is wholly convincing, and all the more reason for re-establishing her as a celebrity and influencer of her time, as well as a significant writer of novels, stories and accounts of the supernatural. The scholarship builds on Heholt’s previously published chapters and articles on Crowe in relation to the supernatural and the 1840s, as well as her welcome recent edition of the sensational novel *The Story of Lilly Dawson* (Victorian Secrets Press, 2015). The arguments about genre-bending are in dialogue with current debates about the boundaries between domestic fiction, the sensationalism and realism by Mariaconcetta Costantini, Helena Ifill and others, invigorating the ways in which we understand genre formation at mid-century.

<3>Gender issues are identified as a driving force of her fiction, with the contradictions of women’s place and the patriarchal education system often to the fore. Chapters address Crowe’s forays into Newgate fiction, sensation fiction, the ‘novel in low life’, ghost stories and werewolf tales, showing her versatility and sympathy for outcasts in her representations of servants, criminals and fallen women, as well as dogs, ghouls and the victims of monomania and lycanthropy. Her novels are re-examined here as ‘anti-marriage narratives’ (134), questioning the Victorian marriage market and allowing for the possibilities of single motherhood, whilst

manliness 'seems to equate to villainy' throughout her fictional plots: 'there are no male heroes in Crowe's work,' Heholt argues (163). Both *The Story of Lilly Dawson* and *Linny Lockwood* subvert marriage plots, question romance and condemn men for the mistreatment of women, lamenting women's limited education and opportunities for economic independence.

<4>One of the strongest arguments of the book is that Crowe was not only a leading writer who fell into obscurity but often ahead of her time. There is some fascinating material here on her involvement in reform projects such as the abolition movement and animal rights. Her publication of a children's version of Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-selling novel, called *Uncle Tom's Cabin arranged for younger readers* (1853) shows her willingness to engage in controversial transatlantic conversations about race and slavery. As Heholt notes, scholars are currently trying to establish whether Stowe and Crowe ever met. She was also invested in environmental issues, though this is not documented in detail here. Her work on spiritualism and the ghostly is significantly shown to anticipate the work of the Society for Psychical Research, established in 1882. In her melding of folklore and fact in her collected ghost stories and the lesser-known 'very peculiar' (168) *Spiritualism and the Age we Live in* (1859), she both looked back to the 'old school' of eighteenth-century ghost-seeing and positioned herself 'at the cutting edge of Victorian discussions about religion and the supernatural' (169). There is a welcome attention here to the ways in which Crowe records the paranormal: the matter of fact, unemotional tone and the embracing of the 'real' are seen as out of step with contemporary ghost stories. Her publishing of testimonies and acceptance of intuition and the irrational show how she 'wanted science to look at psychic experiences in a different way' (184), a bold challenge to the male edifices of science. This is another important instance of Crowe's transgression of gender boundaries and forward-looking stance.

<5>The final chapter on 'Gothic Short Stories' shows the author's occupation of the dark side where she was often most comfortable, considering her debt to the 'mysteries' tradition reinvented in the nineteenth century. The excellent reading of her tale of superstition and female transformation 'The Weir-Wolf' explores the ways in which the heroic Manon, dressed in her brother's clothes, becomes a 'fearless wolf killer' in order to save her cousin from being burnt as a witch, 'throwing off the restricting mantle of femininity, and immersing herself in the forest' (200). Published in 1846, it predates G.W.M. Reynolds' 'Wagner the Wehr-Wolf' often identified as the first werewolf tale in English. Heholt links Crowe to critical debates about the 'beast within': 'in the Gothic imagination, werewolves represent an unsettling and fluid relationship between the human and the animal' (202). These readings of the human/animal boundary and lycanthropic transmutation are also seen to intersect with recent discussions about eco-critical approaches to Victorian literature and Gothic animals. It would have been interesting to hear more about how Crowe's interest in werewolves might have mapped onto (or not) 'the idea of a symbiotic relationship between humans and animals' (119) addressed in an earlier chapter which rather briefly considers the nature of dogs.

<6>The study is revealing of the barriers faced by the popular woman writer in a male-dominated world, as for example sensationalised accounts of her nervous breakdown (involving an episode when she ran naked through the streets of Edinburgh) threatened her reputation. Heholt is right to call out the many male voices who dismissed either Crowe's work or her position within literary society; her extensive use of reviews and commentaries on the author

delineates the relentlessness with which Victorian female authorship was subjected to judgement and damning criticism. Yet this is balanced with a reflection on Crowe's embracing of popular culture, feelings of pleasure in her successful sales figures and boldness in challenging conventions. Some important issues are raised about her contradictory views on women's rights, returning to broader debates about how to approach anti-feminist female authors. Heholt reframes these ongoing questions to ask, 'what does one do with a writer like Crowe who both is and is not conservative and/or feminist?' (126), reflecting that the answer remains unclear. In relation to her work on the supernatural where she is seen to be 'trespassing on male territory' (184), Heholt's argument is that this is yet another instance of her 'stray[ing] far out of her place as a Victorian woman writer' (185). The lack of an overall conclusion to the book leaves these questions hanging; a little more on the way forward for future researchers of Crowe and her networks would have perhaps helped to pinpoint how exactly she might be positioned in relation to other Victorian popular writers and 'lady-novelists'.

<7>As Adeline Sergeant wrote in a retrospective on Crowe in 1897, 'She left a mark upon the age in which she lived' (125), and there are certainly more things to say about the significance and influence of a Victorian woman writer correctly lauded here as both courageous and contradictory. This lucid and entertaining account, which skilfully connects the forgotten author to many of the major debates of the day, will lead the way in reinvigorating research into Crowe; it is an important and timely addition to scholarship on Victorian popular fiction, Gothic and the supernatural.