

# NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Macaluso, Elizabeth. D. *Gender, the New Woman, and the Monster*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 116 pages.

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<1>*Gender, the New Woman, and the Monster* (2019) considers the “liminal figure[s]” (Macaluso 99) of the monster and the New Woman at the *fin de siècle* in three novels published in 1897: Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle*, and Florence Marryat’s *The Blood of the Vampire*. The inclusion of Marryat’s novel is refreshing, as it is still too often overlooked in Gothic studies (for other recent work on *The Blood of the Vampire*, see Joseph 2018 and Ifill 2019). With a female vampire as its heroine, *The Blood of the Vampire* offers a more in-depth consideration of the lives of women—and, in particular, women of colour—during the period than its more popular counterpart, *Dracula*. It is also heartening to see Macaluso reject the still widespread critical approach to Stoker’s female characters that reductively reads Lucy Westenra as a sexually-liberated New Woman. Instead, Macaluso rightfully points to Lucy’s “serious unhappiness” during the infamous three proposals scene (24). This is a necessary corrective to much of the criticism published on Stoker’s novel.

<2>The central premise of this work is “that monster figures produce Brecht’s ‘alienation effect’ (Booth, 1961, p. 192) and make strange the world around them so that they reveal truths that are not always seen by the conventional eye—that friendship between women can be lesbian, that New Women are more than overly sexual women, and that the debate about the New Woman is expansive” (11). Monsters, Macaluso argues, brings attention to the instability of social categories at the end of the century.

<3>Unfortunately, Macaluso says little that is new about these novels, or the construction of the New Woman or the monster at the *fin de siècle*. At just 110 pages, *Gender, the New Woman, and the Monster* is a very slim volume, but it is still longer than it needs to be. Stilted, repetitive writing artificially extends the rather limited analysis contained here, and makes for an unenjoyable read.

<4>Macaluso is hindered in her desire to say something that is “vastly different” (10) than previous critics, due to her over-reliance on those very previous critics. Troublingly for a book that claims to “uncover the social and cultural complexities of the *fin de siècle* and its social movements”, Macaluso’s account of the social and political views of the period is nearly entirely second-hand. Rather than reading the essays of New Women writers or their critics published in the 1890s, she relies almost exclusively on Sally Ledger’s *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the fin de siècle* (1997). Rather than reading the readily available transcripts of

Oscar Wilde's trials, she relies on the account of the proceedings given by Talia Schaffer in a 1994 article. It is a persistent problem throughout the volume.

<5>As suggested by the previous quotation, much of the book is devoted to demonstrating that fin de siècle society was not a monolith. This is, of course, entirely true, but in her efforts to dismantle the notion of cultural consensus, Macaluso ends up denying the complexity of late-Victorian attitudes towards race, empire, gender, sexuality, and class in favour of a reductive binary of "conservative" and "progressive" that lacks nuance: "the figure of the monster reveals that there was a conflict in culture in Britain at the fin de siècle between British subjects who held traditional values (conservatives) and those who exhibited progressive viewpoints (New Liberals, radicals, and socialists)" (v). The book also demonstrates a tendency to see literature merely as a reflection of its historical time period.

<6>Following a broad introductory chapter outlining Macaluso's methodological approach to the Gothic, chapter two turns to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Macaluso resists the typical reading of Lucy Westenra as a sexually voracious New Woman by focusing on the relationship between Lucy and Mina Harker, which Macaluso reads as "a friendship which approaches lesbianism" (23). Though she claims that "little critical attention" has been paid to this relationship (19), each of the major points of her argument in this chapter appeared in "Vampiric Affinities: Mina Harker and the Paradox of Femininity in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*" by Charles E. Prescott and Grace A. Giorgio in 2005. Oddly enough, having read Lucy and Mina's "intimate friendship" (20) as lesbian, Macaluso insists that Harriet Brandt's passion for Margaret Pullen in *The Blood of the Vampire* is not, asserting "there is no 'lesbian threat' between Harriet and Margaret" (78). This seems strangely inconsistent, as Harriet's desire for Margaret at the start of *The Blood of the Vampire* is far more overtly homosexual than anything either Lucy or Mina express in *Dracula*. Macaluso further insists that "The monster, Dracula, triangulates the bonds between himself, Lucy, and Mina, and makes their friendship lesbian" (102), thus reading the allegedly homosexual relationship entirely through heterosexual relationships.

<7>Macaluso's approach to homosexuality in *The Beetle* is more troubling. She describes a homosexual rape (perpetrated by the eponymous Beetle, who at this point in the text appears to be male, upon the homeless Robert Holt), but then wonders whether "Holt's benevolence as a character" suggests that gay men are "relatable subjects" (44), implicitly suggesting that being sexually assaulted by a man makes Holt—who expresses no interest in men—gay himself. It further imposes a binary understanding of gender on the Beetle, which is unsupported by the text. This assertion takes away from her more interesting argument that Holt's sympathetic portrayal demands readerly compassion for the wider plight of the impoverished and homeless in late-Victorian London.

<8>In her desire to expose the 'complexities' of social attitudes at the fin de siècle, Macaluso often seems stumped as to how to address the ambiguities and ambivalences of Gothic literature. In the bulk of her chapter on *The Beetle*, Macaluso argues that Marsh does not take either a 'conservative' or 'progressive' side in cultural debates about poverty, race, gender, or sexuality, because it simply "represents the historical period of the *fin de siècle* and its culture accurately" (62). Unable to come to terms with the variety of opinions on race and gender that characters in the novel espouse, Macaluso suggests that Marsh simply disinterestedly records public debate.

This is a reductive approach to literature that undermines the power of *The Beetle*.

<9>Macaluso's final chapter analyses the most complex figure in this study: Marryat's Harriet Brandt, who Macaluso rightly notes is *both* "kind, talented, and accomplished" *and* a monster who kills (73). This chapter will likely be instructive for an undergraduate audience or those unfamiliar with nineteenth-century scientific or social theories. Those who have heard the names "Darwin", "Lombroso", and "Galton" before will not find any new ideas contained here. Macaluso's central argument is that many of the ideas labelled as 'scientific' by the novel (and Victorian society at large) are actually derived from racism and sexism. This is obviously true, but does not seem to further our understanding of either the novel or the society it was produced within. Marryat's novel is an excellent source to engage with the ways 'science' can be mobilized as a form of social control and the dangers of blindly accepting science as objective and unbiased; unfortunately, Macaluso doesn't push far enough to make this argument. This is a shame, since criticism on this novel is still so scant. Nevertheless, hopefully this book will bring new readers to Marryat's work.

<10>On the whole, *Gender, the New Woman, and the Monster* does not suggest new readings of these texts or provide a new way of thinking about the relationship between Gothic literature and mainstream culture or progressive social movements. It would, however, suit an undergraduate reader seeking a brief overview of some of the primary critical opinions on these texts from the last forty years.

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