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# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Nicole C. Dittmer. *Monstrous Women and Ecofeminism in the Victorian Gothic, 1837-1871*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023, vii-ix + 227 pp.

**Reviewed by Teresa Fitzpatrick, Manchester Metropolitan University**

<1>Monstrous women abound in the Victorian Gothic in many shapes and sizes and have been the focus of many a feminist gothic scholar, but Dittmer's new monograph brings a fresh perspective to the discussion. For a start, Dittmer strips our understanding of this gendered gothic trope right back to its roots in the Victorian popular imagination and contemporary discourse. Finding its source in contemporaneous medical and scientific journals, conduct books and popular literature, the figure of the monstrous woman established itself (un)easily as representing the impulsive, wild, chaotic side of female nature believed to stem from female biological reproductivity. Demonstrating how popular contemporary medical treatises illustrated this clear link as a potential destructive force within a patriarchal society, these popular discourses highlighted (particularly overt) female sexuality as compounding a penchant for irrational behaviour that advocated the need for women to conform to the gender roles and behavioural strictures that firmly positioned them within a controlled domestic sphere. This enforced repression of women's sexuality whilst commanding a conformity to patriarchally-defined femininity stripped women of agency, not only over their bodies but, as Dittmer's monistic approach asserts, their minds as well. Dittmer opens up this gothic figure of the monstrous woman to new perspectives and interpretations by dispelling the dualistic perceptions of women as angel/monster, corporeal/psychological as well as the associated nature/culture, human/nonhuman into a figure of body-mind.

<2>Indeed, despite the title, Dittmer's investigations clearly fit securely within the growing field of medical humanities, drawing as she does throughout the volume on contemporary Victorian medical theories to underpin the various guises of the monstrous female within the subsequent close analyses of three specific figurations: the madwoman, the criminal femme fatale, and the hybrid she-wolf. Dedicating a chapter to each, Dittmer re-evaluates these non-conforming behavioural transgressive female characters within the contemporary medical discourse as

monstrous in their challenge to patriarchal gender constructs. Exploring the apparent mad female protagonists of *Wuthering Heights* (E. Brontë, 1847), *Jane Eyre* (C. Brontë, 1847), and *The Wronged Wife* (Rymer, 1863), Dittmer argues that ‘medical and gothic narratives were responsible for informing one another’ (57), in which repressed and subsequent submission to intense emotions of love, sexuality and passion led to mania, and particularly hysteria, ‘was corroborated by early-to-mid-Victorian medical sciences strictly as a female malady’ (57). Stepping her argument towards an ecofeminist perspective, Dittmer demonstrates that these hysterical madwomen are closely aligned to their environments, wherein ‘the feminized gothic landscape’ reflects the ‘repression of instincts’ that ‘embody the terrors of female restriction and transform the domestic ideal into a fearful and unstable domain’ (91). Drawing on several well-known ecogothic critics (Smith and Hughes, 2013; Keetley and Sivils, 2017; Estok, 2019), Dittmer concludes that ‘threatening nature reflects in associations between female madness and the tumultuous environment’ (92) in these tales to ‘demonstrate the instabilities of prescribed femininity and female nature’ (93) whereby monstrous madwomen propose ‘that all female forms and dispositions, outside of prescribed roles, are sites of excess and social destruction’ (96).

<3>In Chapter Three, Dittmer begins to bring psychological and biological discourse, and the immaterial mind and the material body together to explore the ‘criminal malfeasance [of monstrous women] and their reactions to environmental influences’ (99). Deemed ‘unfeminine, mad, and responsible for the corruption of patriarchal ideologies’ when allowed to indulge their ‘inherent instincts’ (99), female criminals, such as the femme fatale, use their female sexuality and attractiveness for untoward felonious behaviour. Using contemporary criminologist and evolutionary theories to re-evaluate the villainous females in Rymer’s *String of Pearls* (1846-7), Errym’s *The Dark Woman* (1861) and Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), Dittmer argues that these monstrous femmes fatales underline the Victorian duality of feminine roles. While these female protagonists adhere to accepted social norms and behaviours on the one hand, their criminal manipulation through use of their otherwise repressed sexuality on the other categorises them as monstrous women affected by their environment and their nature. The ultimate demise of these criminal women characters of Victorian Gothic, however, explicates their behaviour with recourse to the contemporary popular psychological discourse that posited that women’s biology implied latent insanity that connected criminal behaviour with mental instability. It is in this chapter that Dittmer makes firm use of ecofeminist critics to support her analysis of these criminal women as liminal characters who transgress and blur boundaries between culture and nature, although not necessarily engaging deeply with any specific concept beyond the interconnectedness of mind-body, nature-culture, human-nonhuman dichotomies.

Rather, Dittmer introduces Victorian medical discourse to overarching ecofeminist perspectives to situate this particular strand of monstrous women as ‘material-semiotic representations in gothic literature’ (138) that challenged patriarchal ideologies.

<4>Ecofeminism and ecogothic criticism come more to the fore in Dittmer’s examination of the she-wolf in Chapter Four in exploring this monstrous configuration within the entangled concepts of femininity and Nature. A hybrid figure of that embodied female sexuality and opposition to oppressive social positions, ‘the shapeshifting she-wolf is determined as a transgressive material-semiotic coalescence of nature and culture, male and female, and animal and human’ (143), blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman animal, culture and nature that ecofeminism seeks to explore. Continuing to outline the influence of contemporary cultural and medical discourses on fictional female representations of monstrosity, Dittmer argues the she-wolf’s illustration of the animal within associates this transgressive figure ‘to reproductive functions including puberty, menstruation, and pregnancy ... [as] implied markers of destructive female nature’ (146). Focusing on the monstrous (lycanthropic) women in ‘The White Wolf of the Hartz Mountains’ (Marryat, 1839), *Wagner, the Wehr-Wolf* (Reynolds, 1846-7), and ‘The Gray Wolf’ (MacDonald, 1871), Dittmer argues that ‘[t]he she-wolf is a material rejection of the early-to-mid-Victorian feminine role’ that functions as a representation of ‘her struggle for agency’ (178). Embodying Victorian anxieties about the emerging discourse on women’s agency and independence through such a hypersexual creature as the she-wolf further ‘centralize[s] madwomen and criminals at the intersection of women, nature, and the mind-body’ (180).

<5>As a study of monstrous women and nature, Dittmer’s introduction of contemporaneous Victorian medical and scientific, psychological and theological, criminological and evolutionary theories and discourses to ecofeminist criticism offers a fresh perspective to the entangled interconnectedness that the period’s patriarchal gender constructs belie within Victorian Gothic fiction. Rather than disentangling the women-nature association that some feminist theories have sought to engender, Dittmer steers us towards reconsidering the monstrous women trope as navigating a pathway in the margins between the various dualistic boundaries that not only strikes a blow for women’s agency and independence but challenges the value of patriarchal ideologies. Through close analysis of specific examples of monstrous women in Victorian Gothic, Dittmer asks us to read these gendered figures, not as abhorrent monsters whose instability threatens (patriarchal) society, but to see their actions as ‘an expression of women’s desire to re-connect with nature’ in a ‘plea for expression and freedom of agency’ (186). This volume would

be an invaluable addition to the reference libraries of (eco)gothic scholars, those interested in medical humanities, and a must-read for scholars of women and gender studies of the nineteenth century.