

# NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 15.2 (SUMMER 2019)

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McCormick, Elizabeth, Jennifer Mitchell, and Rebecca Soares, eds. *The Female Fantastic: Gendering the Supernatural in the 1890s and 1920s*. Routledge, 2019. 246 pages.

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<1>*The Female Fantastic: Gendering the Supernatural in the 1890's and 1920's* is a welcome and outstanding addition to the expanding field of books focusing on feminist approaches to “female-authored fantastic texts” (xvii). Of specific note, *The Female Fantastic* adds to the ongoing conversation promoted by volumes like *Women and the Gothic* edited by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik (2016), and *Transgothic in Literature and Culture* edited by Jolene Zigarovich (2018), as well as studies that focus on specific authors like *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics* edited by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (2006). The editors of *The Female Fantastic* make a note that, “there is no *female* fantastic. That is to say, both terms- the gender and the genre-are slippery for different reasons” (xviii) and that “past and present and future blur, as do lines between gender identities and even categories of being” (xix). It is with observations like these that this excellent compilation of essays make up a volume that is solidly feminist, queer, and trans focused, just as it interrogates all fixed notions about gender, sexuality, and authorial intent, as well as the amalgamation of literary genres – the supernatural, the gothic, and the fantastical. One of the most unique aspects of this work is that two specific decades – the 1890s and the 1920s – serve as the focal point. By their targeting the *fin-de-siècle* decade and the decade following World War I, “this book argues that women’s fantastic writing of the 1890’s finds eerily resonant cognates in women’s fantastic modernism of the 1920’s” (xvii). Putting these two disparate decades into conversation with one another gives the book a special focus and depth. Along with

their model of having two non-sequential decades as the focal point for their chosen essays in this volume, the editors also make a bold choice when they note that, “our organization reflects a commitment to understand the genre in action and to actively place chapters focusing on different decades into conversation...the chapters in this collection are not arranged by chronology of their subjects but rather organized into four topic categories...” (xxx). In so doing, the editors have beautifully modeled what Jack Halberstam (who many of the authors cite within this volume) refers to as a queer model of time – which is one that is not linear and that collapses ideas of what may have gone before, historically, so that the works explored truly can converse with one another.

<2>The book is divided into four topical categories with each section introduced “by a scholar who provides a historical and synthetic vision of an aspect of the fantastic’s mode across the decades and places their chapters into context and conversation” (xxxi-xxxii). In their broadest sense, the four organizational categories are: Fantastic Objects in Context, Fantastic Spaces, Fantastic People, and Fantastic Creatures. Within each of these, various essays consider specific writings and issues that fit within the categories, and the breadth of these categories also allows room for lesser-known works to get the attention they deserve.

<3>Section I is introduced by Jill Galvan’s “Heaps, Rubbish, Treasure, Litter, Tatters: Fantastic Objects in Context.” The essays included in this section are Anne DeLong’s “Framing the Fin-de-Siècle Female Narrative: Ghostly Portraits of the Emerging New Woman,” Donna Mitchell’s “Monstrous Femininity and Objectified Masculinity in Daphne du Maurier’s ‘The Doll,’” Julia Panko’s “Uncanny Mediums: Haunted Radio, Feminine Intuition, and Agatha Christie’s ‘Wireless,’” and Melissa Edmundson’s “Buyer Beware: Haunted Objects in the Supernatural Tales of Margery Lawrence.” All four of these essays elegantly weave together a look at the ways that objects can take on fantastical and radical aspects. For example, Panko’s work with Christie’s short story

about a haunted radio that winds up to be no more than an evil and financially destitute nephew's re-wiring of the instrument so that he can imitate his dead uncle to scare his elderly wealthy aunt to death, actually has supernatural and subversive underpinnings. As Panko notes, "'Wireless' would seem...to be an example of the 'explained supernatural' in the tradition of Ann Radcliffe, as close to detective fiction as to the ghost story" (34). However, through Panko's close reading to Christie's tale, it becomes clear that what seems like a straightforward detective story is deeply fantastical *and* feminist. The other essays in this section reflect on supernatural objects in Margaret Oliphant, Vernon Lee, Edith Nesbit, Daphne du Maurier, and Margery Lawrence.

<4>Luke Thurston opens Section II with "Profoundly and Irresolvably Political: Fantastic Space." The three essays in this section all consider fantastical places from Anne Jamison's look at Somerville and Ross's Irish supernatural lore in *The Silver Fox*, to Céline Magot's "The Haunting House in Elizabeth Bowen's 'The Shadowy Third,'" and concluding with Jean Mills's "Obscene, Grotesque, and Carnavalesque: Hope Mirrlees's *Lud-in-the-Mist* as Menippean satire. All three essays offer the reader vastly different ideas of place and space. While Jamison's focus is as open and expansive as the Irish landscape and supernatural lore found in the natural world, Magot focuses in on the claustrophobic space of the classically Gothic domestic sphere where women are terrorized by the men in their lives (Bowen's story recalls Elizabeth Gaskell's classic "The Old Nurse's Story"). And, Jean Mills's essay offers a queer look at Mirrlees's Menippean satire in *Lud-in-the-Mist* that creates a world where everyone is "affected by and participating in the carnival" (109). Mills notes that the "integration of Fairyland with *Lud-in-the-Mist* is the sought after combination and bonding of the body with the self and with the body politic as a whole" (109).

<5>Section III moves away from objects and places to examine fantastic people – specifically occultists and mesmerists and the ways that the female body, specifically, was objectified, and yet, also often sexually liberated and empowered. Scott Rogers

introduces this section with “The Fantastic and the Modern Female Experience: Fantastic People” writing that, “Female mediums who had ‘materialized’ a spirit would often encourage participants to touch the spirit, or the spirit would expose parts of its body to demonstrate that it was indeed materialized” (117). Scott also notes that the essays in this section “explore the myriad ways that authors deployed the fantastic as a means of exploring alternatives to traditional expectations for women’s behavior or identities” (118). This section includes Mary Clai Jones’s “Marie Corelli’s *Ziska* and Fantastic Feminism” which beautifully puts Corelli’s piece in direct conversation with H. Rider Haggard’s *She* (1887), but with a feminist bent. Andrew Hock Soon Ng’s piece “The Fantastic and the Women Question in Edith Nesbit’s Male Gothic Stories” examines the ways that Nesbit’s Gothic tales skirt around feminist concerns only to restore “the patriarchal and heteronormative status quo” (148). Jennifer Mitchell explores Radclyffe Hall and Virginia Woolf – literary contemporaries and uneasy allies – in “Fantastic Transformations: Queer Desires and ‘Uncanny Time’ in Work by Radclyffe Hall and Virginia Woolf.” And then this section is rounded out with Elizabeth English’s “‘To find my real friends I have to travel a long way’: Queer Time Travel in Katharine Burdekin’s Speculative Fiction.”

<7>The final section of the book is entitled “Invitation to Dissidence: Fantastic Creatures,” and is introduced by Jessica DeCoux. Colleen Morrissey explores more work by Marie Corelli – *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) - in “Rewriting the Romantic Satan: The Sorrows and Cynicism of Marie Corelli.” Lizzie Harris McCormick looks to Clemence Housman and Aino Kallas in “Beauty is the Beast: Shapeshifting, Suffrage, and Sexuality in Clemence Housman’s *The Were-Wolf* and Aino Kallas’s *The Wolf Bride*. Finally, Kate Schnur’s “The Doctor Treats the Ten-Breasted Monster: Medicine, the Fantastic Body, and Ideological Abuse in Djuna Barnes’s *Ryder*.” McCormick’s essay notes that “female werewolves interrogate gender and sexuality identities in ways intimately linked to the corporeality of the beast and diffuse feminist conversations of their days,” which leads to more radical and empowering readings of Housman and Kallas (223). Whereas

Schnur's essay exploring Barnes's *Ryder* brings the reader back to the horrible reality that women and children often have to learn to live within the reality of abusive patriarchal structures. But, even here, Schnur argues, there can be found a "brief and private moment...of resistance: a moment that begins to allow for new endings, new narratives, and new storytellers" (241). As a whole, *The Female Fantastic* does an exemplary job of giving us all new narratives and new connections between the 1890's and the 1920's as it moves our evolving conversations forward into the future.