

Nicole C. Dittmer and Sophie Raine, Editors. *Penny Dreadfuls and the Gothic: Investigations of Pernicious Tales of Terror*. University of Wales Press, 2023. 272. ISBN: 978-1-78683-970-1.

True to the title, the chapters of this edited collection offer intriguing critical investigations of *penny dreadfuls* – an umbrella term used in the publication to refer to affordable and accessible sensationalist serialized fiction from the 1830s to the 1860s, targeting working-class readers. Alongside a focus on the works of prolific authors, such as James Malcolm Rymer, Thomas Peckett Prest, and George William MacArthur Reynolds, the essays also examine “less researched and forgotten texts from neglected authors” (4) with a view to re-evaluating the significance of the penny dreadfuls in relation to the Gothic mode. In the “Introduction: Dreadful Beginnings,” the editors provide a brief outline of the development of cheap serialized literature in the Victorian period, review scholarly interest in the phenomenon, and state the objectives of the publication, concluding that the compilation “contributes to [the] reassessment of the penny dreadful and establishes how these texts can further our understanding of Gothic literary culture as well as Victorian reading habits” (21).

The collection is divided into three sections, the first of which, “The Progression of Pennys; or, Adaptations and Legacies of the Dreadful,” demonstrates the penny serials’ significance in the Victorian period and beyond through their numerous adaptations as well as the influence they had on the subsequent development of the Gothic as a whole. Drawing on statistics from *Price One Penny*, an extensive online database of more than 1,000 penny titles compiled by Marie Léger-St-Jean, the authors of the chapter entitled “Penny Pinching: Reassessing the Gothic Canon through Nineteenth-century Reprinting” observe that three percent of all fiction published in weekly penny numbers between 1837 and 1860 consisted of reprinted texts from first-wave Gothic novels. Freya Blake and Léger-St-Jean argue that such reprinting practices alongside the publication of new penny titles reveal the development of mass-market fiction at the time and conclude that “there is a need to expand Gothic scholarship to include texts which are now barely remembered but which remained popular across the nineteenth century” (29). In “‘As long as you are industrious, you will get on very well’: Adapting *The String of Pearls*’s Economies of Horror,” Brontë Schlitz bases her analysis of Rymer’s serialized narrative from 1846–7 and its numerous adaptations on Marx’s essential idea that capitalism is a process of ceaseless, monstrous consumption and examines economics as a prevailing theme in them. Hannah Priest, the author of the final chapter in the first section, analyses George W. M. Reynolds’s serialized novel *Wagner, the Wehr-Wolf* (1846–7) and his long-running series *The Mysteries of London* (1844–8) to demonstrate how the depiction of the causes and mechanisms of lycanthropic metamorphosis in the former represents “broader concerns and anxieties of national identity, societal unease, and personal morality” (65) in the Victorian age.

The second section, “Victorian Medical Sciences and Penny Fiction; or, Dreadful Discourses of the Gothic,” discusses the dreadful tradition’s engagement with pivotal discourses of medicine and the sciences alongside a focus on language elements in mid-nineteenth-century serialized narratives. Manon Burz-Labrande, the author of the first chapter in this section, analyses the coeval criticism’s use of the rhetoric of contamination and contagion with reference to penny dreadfuls’ scale and circulation methods. By utilizing a Gothicized discourse, the critical establishment at the time constructed serialized fiction as “a metaphorical monster” (92) in an effort to reject its content, form, and audience. In “‘Tale of the Plague’: Anti-medical Sentiment and Epidemic Disease in Early Victorian Popular Gothic Fiction,” Joseph Crawford explores the reasons for the extensive popular distrust of the medical profession in the 1830–40s and investigates these attitudes’ manifestations in contemporaneous Gothic narratives. Nicole

C. Dittmer finalizes the discussion on serialized fiction's engagement with medical discourse by poring over the anonymous *The Wild Witch of the Heath; or the Demon of the Glen: A Tale of the Most Powerful Interest* (1841) in order to "dissect the transgressive figuration of the witch through an eco-Gothic and contemporaneous biological lens [and] to demonstrate the concerns of gynophobia as they transition from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century" (138).

The concluding section, "Mode, Genre, and Style; or, Gothic Storytelling and Ideologies," looks into the penny dreadfuls' unique fluidity of genre and style as part of their attraction for readers and focuses specifically on serialized narratives' exploitation of Gothic topoi to achieve a horrifying and, at times, humorous effect. In the chapter entitled "A Highwayman and a Ventriloquist Walk into an Inn ... Early Penny Romances and the Politics of Humour in *Jack Rann* and *Valentine Vaux*," Celine Frohn argues that what characterizes early nineteenth-century serializations is "a playful attitude towards violence, where harm or discomfort is nullified by humour" (162). In addition, the section investigates how the dreadfuls' appropriation of various narrative styles contributed to the dissemination of Gothic ideologies. Rebecca Nesvet's piece, in particular, draws on recent investigations into Gothic writing as anti-Catholic ideology and examines the works of J. M. Rymer to demonstrate how penny dreadfuls both influenced and were influenced by theological politics. The last chapter, "'Muddling about among the dead': Found Manuscripts and Metafictional Storytelling in James Malcolm Rymer's *Newgate: A Romance*" by Sophie Raine, argues that Rymer's serial develops the older Gothic tradition of *Newgate* narratives by incorporating myriad forms of narration through the use of framing devices and metanarratives.

The anthology is a valuable contribution to the scholarly re-evaluation of penny dreadfuls' literary significance. It offers perspectives on mid-Victorian serializations, showcasing their adaptability and complexity, and expands our comprehension of the Gothic in fiction.

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