

Laurence TALAIRACH-VIELMAS, *Wilkie Collins: Medicine and the Gothic*. Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2009, ISBN: 978-0-7083-2223-9.

Laurence Talairach-Vielmas's *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic* (2009) is a meticulous and highly illuminating study which serves anyone interested in the novelist and, indeed, readers interested in the intersection of (nineteenth-century) medicine and literature. Structured into eight chapters preceded by a short introduction to Wilkie Collins, and with an extensive Bibliography and a useful Index, the volume offers an in-depth discussion of ten novels ranging from the well-known *The Woman in White* (1859-60) and *The Moonstone* (1868) to the less famous *Poor Miss Finch* (1872). Engaging thus with a broad array of Collins's work, Talairach-Vielmas focuses on the interaction of medical and Gothic discourses, and on how the author «revised the conventions of the late eighteenth-century genre, colouring his sensational plots with ever new experimental scientific discoveries and psychological theories» (p. 7). Though the book covers substantial ground it avoids mere generalizations, and Talairach-Vielmas's original and nuanced reading of each of the novels is both fascinating and convincing. Through detailed analysis and well-researched argumentation she successfully proves how «in most of Collins's novels, the medical world is often used as a means of probing social questions, while the Gothic framework highlights anxieties related to power and control» (p. 9). Moreover, her study significantly draws attention to the novelist's preoccupation with «the ambiguous

status of practitioners» (p. 8) and other medical figures, particularly, in relation to the female body and mind.

In chapter 1, Talairach-Vielmas deals with *Basil* (1852), «Mad Monkton» and *The Woman in White* (1859-60). With *Basil*, she argues, Collins follows in the steps of Mary Shelley but, at the same time, marks «a significant instance of the evolution of the Gothic genre throughout the nineteenth century» (22). In her examination of the novel, she therefore keeps going back to Shelley's *Frankenstein* to show how Collins indeed borrowed from but also remodelled the traditional Gothic. From *Basil* Talairach-Vielmas then moves on to the novella «Mad Monkton» and *The Woman in White*. Her in-depth analysis of these three works — which view the characters' obsessions thorough a medical lens (paraphrasing Talairach-Vielmas) — provides a rich and original revision of Collins's different uses of monomania and, at the same time, of how he increasingly relied on medical science to rework traditional Gothic tropes. In effect, the chapter works as a neat overview of Collins's early development: from his initial flirtation with the medical discourse in relation to Gothic villainy and crime to his use of it as a recurrent and dominant strategy of representation.

Chapter 2 discusses *Armadale* (1866) set in 1851 and directly inspired, as Talairach-Vielmas assures, by the scientific marvels and medical discoveries published around this time. Drawing on medical and criminological discourses, Collins «creat[es] an interaction between the plot and and such non-fictional material» (p. 59) offering thus a new version of the Gothic





psychopathic obsession where criminality is linked with pathology and «science and the supernatural overlap constantly» (p. 60).

The discussion of the author's conflation of the natural and the supernatural as well as the interaction of fiction and non-fiction continues throughout the study. Hence, chapter 3 deals with *The Moonstone* (1868), a story involving the stealing of a gemstone inspired by the «Koh-i-Noor» — a real gem on display at the 1851 Great Exhibition. Collins thus draws on reality and on the mineral world, to narrate his detective novel which, as Talairach-Vielmas moreover suggests, is marked by the author's growing reliance on «natural magic»: «[t]he idea that magic could come from natural causes» (p. 75). Although Collins preserves a certain amount of ambiguity, the novel echoes nineteenth-century advances in mental physiology: «mysteries and superstitions are demystified... [and][t]he characters haunted by the ghosts of the past are in fact haunted by their own physiology» (p. 76).

The idea of terror being located in the self marks most of Collins's novels, as Talairach-Vielmas points out, but «is particularly developed in *Poor Miss Finch*» (p. 97). In chapter 4 she analyses the novel, published in 1872, which she perceives as the climax of «Collins's medicalization of the Gothic» (12). Offering a captivating and, indeed, inspiring discussion of the author's reshaping of Gothic villainy, Talairach-Vielmas guides the reader through the several levels of the narrative «steep[ed]...in late nineteenth-century medical, criminological and sociocultural discourses» (p. 13). As we see, Collins relied on scientific-medical advance to re-invent Gothic scenarios and plots in which the possessed characters of traditional Gothic novels re-appear as medical patients. Yet, the novelist did not merely turn to medicine as a tool for his Gothic re-figurations, but also to question the constructions of the medical discourse and foreground its threatening power — portraying «medical practice as a barbaric and Gothic activity» (p. 13) in which medicine makes a modern weapon. Thus, nineteenth-century medicine works both as a source of inspiration and an object of criticism in Collins's fiction.

In chapter 5 Talairach-Vielmas discusses the novella *The Haunted Hotel: A Mystery of*

Modern Venice (1879) and the ways in which Collins reworks the traditional Gothic tropes of the buried manuscript and the mysterious and haunted villainess through contemporary conceptions of the mind. Again, she offers a brilliant analysis of how Collins relied on contemporary clinical discourses to breathe new life into Gothic stereotypes, showing how the characters' repressed memories can be «read through the lens of criminal anthropology» (p. 13). As Talairach-Vielmas argues, the novel offers significant insights into modern mental physiology and its constructions of consciousness, while, at the same time, it marks the author's increasing preoccupation with «a society where science defines and secures gender identity» (p. 15), foreshadowing, in this sense, «Collins's later highly modern ghosts» (p. 14).

The discussion on the figure of the ghost continues in chapter 6 in which Talairach-Vielmas reveals how «the changes in the construction of the female spectre typify the evolution of [Collins's] fiction» (135). In *Jezebel's Daughter* (1880) and *Heart and Science* (1883), she points out, Collins's ambivalence towards contemporary medicine is hard to overlook: his Gothic villains turn to medical science to plot their crimes while the «heroines are subjected to the scientist's blade» (p. 139). The female ghost is a recurrent and highly significant motif in Collins's novels. However, from 1880 and onwards the author's representation of female spectral identity becomes far more «literal», Talairach-Vielmas observes. The entrapment of «real women's bodies within a medical discourse» (p. 139) replaces Collins's earlier more allegorical representations of the nineteenth-century management of the female self and illustrates his «journey from Radcliffean plots to more modern Gothic texts» (p. 138). As Talairach-Vielmas convincingly shows, physiology provides a significant backdrop to both *Jezebel's Daughter* and *Heart and Science*, exemplifying not only Collins's medicalization of the Gothic but also how he increasingly gothicized the medical text. In effect, the author's concern with vivisection, she suggests, parallels contemporary «anxieties related to women falling prey to medical malpractice and experimentation — already visible

in the form of experimental gynaecological surgery» (p. 152).

In the following chapter Talairach-Vielmas once again centers on late Victorian mental physiology and on how its «constructions of the mind appealed to writers of horror fiction» (p. 159). In her discussion of *I Say No* (1883) she underlines how Collins increasingly reflects on women's intellect — «a recurrent source of anxiety in the last decades of the nineteenth century» (p. 161) — presenting, however, his female protagonists not only as active readers but also «as sensitive and sensible detectives reading through spectral appearances... or superstitions» (p. 163). As Talairach-Vielmas's examination of the novel suggests — particularly in comparison with Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Eleanor's Victory* (1863) — what is so innovative about *I Say No* is not its disruption of Victorian definitions of women's mind but, rather, the fact that their «fancies and supernatural fears are medically supervised» (p. 168).

Chapter 8 sums up Collins's development through almost three decades, as examined throughout the study, and deals with *The Legacy of Cain* (1888). In her analysis of the author's last completed novel Talairach-Vielmas shows how «the increasingly physiological explanations of

mental diseases...purvey Collins's discourse on conscience...[which] *overtly* refers to criminological debates in order to revamp the uncanny» (p. 185, my emphasis). She ends thus her fascinating discussion on how nineteenth-century medical discourses increasingly permeated Collins's fiction which paved the way for a new type of Gothic and, indeed, for many subsequent «narratives capitalizing on our fears of the Other and using medical science as a modern arm to relieve or excite them» (p. 17).

In short, Talairach-Vielmas convincingly attests to the centrality of Wilkie Collins to Victorian and *fin-de-siècle* Gothic fiction as well as to the persisting importance of his work which remains a recurrent source of inspiration. Her *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic* is fascinating, enlightening, and through its interdisciplinary approach to (nineteenth-century) medicine and literature, the volume offers a series of inspiring examinations which will be of interest to a wide range of scholars in the fields of Victorian and neo-Victorian Studies, Cultural as well as Gender Studies.

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