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Review of *Fatal Women of Romanticism* by Adriana Craciun

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A Review of Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 318 pp. + xviii. ISBN: 0-521-816688-8

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The publication of Adriana Craciun's *Fatal Women* is a welcome event for all those working on British women writers of the early gothic era. In clearly focused and densely researched chapters on Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, Mary Lamb, Charlotte Dacre, Anne Bannerman, and Letitia Landon, Craciun develops her thesis about the cultural and literary ambience in which these women were working: "women's violence in the contexts of larger political, ideological, and even medical debates specific to the Romantic period, to demonstrate that women's inherent nonviolence was often a necessary feature in arguments for 'natural,' corporeal sexual difference, and that this two-sex system was by no means universally and unquestioningly accepted as unchanging by either women or men" (10). Working almost as a "third wave" feminist literary critic, Craciun corrects the older generation of feminist literary critics who have analyzed the period through either a gender-complementary model (*mea culpa!*) or through a reading of femme fatales as misogynist male fantasies (*mea culpa* again). Given that Craciun's ambitions are large in this book, she admirably fulfills them. This book is an impressive achievement, a study that provides solid and mature scholarship on these authors, their *milieux*, their major works, as well as the conflicted ideologies of the female body and mind that pervaded the period.

To begin: Craciun seeks to correct the tendency of feminist literary critics to avoid trying to explain, let alone understand, the depiction of women's violence in female-authored texts. Not a pretty subject to be sure, but what is one to do with the

murders and worse that occur in women's poems, novels, and dramas? And what can one possibly say when female characters kill each other? Traditionally, one has been forced to fall back on a few standard explanations: women internalizing the violence perpetuated on them by men or women lashing out at their oppressed posture by seizing on the opportunity to prey on another, even weaker woman. Craciun takes on this unpleasant—gothic—subject and brings to bear largely Foucauldian theoretical and critical tools: “women's writing thus need to be within this larger field of power, in which resistance is not constituted by ‘the simple absence or inversion of normative structures,’ but as a ‘heterogeneity—the overlapping of competing versions of reality with the same moment of time’” (Biddy Martin qtd in Craciun, 7). Although she is adamantly opposed to using psychoanalytic theory (as essentialist and universalizing), Craciun's critical methodologies are interesting and illuminating, particularly when she reads Landon's works in the context of medical theories of miasma and death in the air around graveyards.

As there is much valuable material in this book I will proceed chapter by chapter in my commentary. In Chapter One, “The Subject of Violence: Mary Lamb, femme fatale,” Craciun examines the matricide Mary Lamb and how her killing of her mother can be understood in relation to her later writings (largely for children). This for me was the weakest chapter in the book, and, indeed, almost absurd. In brief, Craciun's argument is that Mary Lamb “had suffered years of neglect by her mother” (21) and so she killed her. She was then psychically free, able to write, somehow having transformed a knife into a pen: “”Her crime was liberatory in two senses—it freed her from the excessive burden of caring for her sick mother (who appears to have been both cruel and

geglectufl), and marked the beginning of her career as writer, since as far as we know she did not write before the murder. Her dual positions as author of the deed of murder, and author of texts, are thus inextricably bound” (38). This statement was by far the most insensitive in the book, for it attempts to rationalize the murder of one’s mother as just another writerly strategy. More tellingly, it attempts to celebrate women’s violence and that I found disturbing. Also, when the charitable attitude to Lamb’s matricide is to understand it as a manifestation of mental illness, Craciun demurs, perhaps because of her suspicions about psychoanalysis. She goes so far as to say:

I am not arguing that Lamb’s violence was an indication of her ‘free will,’ her intentional and transgressive agency as an ‘autonomous’ subject. But neither can I accept modern diagnoses that emphasize her lack of responsibility (the most popular being bipolar or manic depressive disorder), for they represent our current medical and often anesthetizing approach to such disturbing behavior, and in my opinion cannot be offered (as they now are) as helpful explanations; like the explanations of possession, or unreason, or of moral failure, they reveal little about Mary Lamb, and much about the current dominant construction of ‘mental illness’ and its ideological interests. (35)

There is no need to belabor this point, but perhaps the choice of Mary Lamb as a “femme fatale” would have been more successful if she had killed someone other than her mother. And to see the murder of anyone (let alone one’s mother) as an act that helps one find one’s vocation in life is a logic that I do not understand: “Lamb specifically admonishes herself for being overcome by a ‘forcible impulse’ and expressing anger in a specific way—*while writing*. Her pen runs away with her in 1796, leaving Lamb at once the

victim of a demonic power (either of ‘mental illness,’ or of language), and a dangerously aggressive writer *and* murderer, who recognizes the dangerous affinity between pen and knife. We cannot separate the writer of children’s verse from the murderer, precisely because Mary Lamb tried to do just that for fifty years, and, ...found that she could not” (36; italics Craciun). If women need to kill their mothers to write children’s verse, then I would not be the only one, I think, to find no cause for celebration in either the act or the verse.

Chapter Two, “Violence against difference: Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, and women’s strength,” was a solid examination of the various discourses about women and gender that emerged from the French Revolution. Most tellingly, Craciun places Wollstonecraft alongside Sade, examining her “Sadean speculations,” as well as “feminism’s antihumanist inheritance,” unpopular topics indeed (75). But, as I said earlier, this is a bold book that takes risks. At times, as in the Lamb chapter, the risks are not worth the effort, but with Wollstonecraft, Craciun is on solid ground.

Chapter Three, “‘The aristocracy of genius’: Mary Robinson and Marie Antoinette,” she continues to pursue a contrary route, again with interesting results. This chapter attempts to explain why Robinson, a decidedly middle-class woman with upwardly mobile class aspirations, would choose to champion Marie Antoinette as a wrongfully martyred queen and mother. Craciun examines a number of poems, and mentions the major novels (more detailed discussion of these novels would have been helpful). She moves to claim that Robinson attempt to establish a “feminist meritocracy” (91), that would challenge the monarchy by critiquing “class and sex privilege” (97). This “Republic of Letters” that she envisioned would place its trust in the growing print culture’s “liberating and

democratizing potential” (97), and yet somehow still hold on to Marie Antoinette as its female figurehead: “Robinson’s lament of Marie Antoinette is a lament of the larger exclusion of women from public discourse, and of women poets from due public acclaim” (105).

Chapter Four, “Unnatural, unsexes, undead: Charlotte Dacre’s Gothic Bodies,” has been published earlier in her introduction to the Broadview edition of Dacre’s *Zofloya*, as well as in Craciun’s ERR article, but it is useful to have all this material together. Dacre is an important female gothic writer, and we have here not simply a discussion of *Zofloya*, her best known novel, but also her *The Passions*, a novel that deserves to be taught in women’s novel courses (alongside *Sense and Sensibility*?). Again, I do not agree with Craciun’s attempt to rehabilitate Dacre or to celebrate the violence in her texts, but I appreciate and admire her scholarship and research on Dacre’s life. And there is much to explain in Dacre, not the least is her use of a black slave as the body that the devil assumes on earth and her depiction of a murder of one (small) woman by another (much larger one). In order to explain these violently racist and sexist actions Craciun uses medical discourse, this time Bienville’s *Nymphomania*, in order to claim that “Dacre’s literary reworking of such misogynist medical discourse offers an instructive example of how women’s imaginative representations of bodies can transcend the passionlessness or reticence often ascribed to them by modern critics” (121). I would need to see very clear evidence that Dacre ever read Bienville, but be that as it may, Craciun does mount the best (and most elaborate) defense she can for Dacre’s over-the-top works: “Dacre, unlike Bienville, is precisely the sort of novelist she warns us against, her narratives of sexually transgressive women who destroy properly asexual women and

are themselves punished are, in fact, sophisticated accounts of the discursive construction of *both* natural and unnatural women and their sexuality” (135 italics Craciun). Again, this is a matter of taste ultimately. As someone who has read Dacre, I do not find “sophistication” in her works, nor can I be persuaded that I am missing a subtle critique of a medical tract. I find the chapter interesting and am particularly intrigued by placing it alongside *Zaflora, or the Generous Negro Girl* (1804), but Dacre cannot be rehabilitated for me, nor can the murder of Lila by Victoria be explained away by claiming, as Craciun does, that “the true subversive potential of Dacre’s heroines lies in their mutual annihilation” (153). Lila did not kill Victoria; it was the other way around. Nor did these murders occur simultaneously (as you will recall, Victoria is hurled into the pit of hell by her black lover when he reveals himself as Satan). Again, in her bid to rationalize women’s violent acts Craciun has put herself in yet another morally awkward position.

In Chapter Five, “‘In seraph strains, unpitying, to destroy’: Anne Bannerman’s femme fatales,” Craciun hits her stride, and this chapter is one of the two strongest, largely because she is not trying to rationalize some outrageous act of mayhem. True, Bannerman’s prophetesses have a tendency to kidnap men, while her mermaids and dark ladies are constantly returning from the dead to seek some sort of justice or vengeance, but there is little overt violence and hence no critical acrobatics needed. The strengths of this chapter are exactly the strengths that Craciun brings to a project. The research is original, meticulous, on-site, and thoroughly incorporated into her readings of the poems.

Her final chapter, “‘Life has one vast stern likeness in its gloom’: Letitia Landon’s philosophy of decomposition,” is another very strong chapter and again it

seems not to have been published previously. By closely examining the medical discourses that arose out of the outbreak of Asiatic cholera in 1831-32, Craciun is able to place Landon's works in a very relevant historical, medical, cultural, and moral ambience. Quoting from newspaper articles and medical works of the day, she establishes the climate of fear that permeated this culture, explaining at the same time the anti-materiality and anti-naturalism that run throughout Landon's poetry and novels. Her placement of Landon as a corrective to Wordsworth is particularly useful and her discussion of Landon's novel *Ethel Churchill* is valuable and interesting on a number of points. For gothicists, one comment is particularly telling: "a poetics of decomposition and decay, distinct from that of ruins and fragmentation" has yet to be written (248).