Yael Shapira, *Inventing the Gothic Corpse: The Thrill of Human Remains in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*
(Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018)

The shocking display of dead bodies in various degrees of decay, mouldering skeletons, and other human remains is a central gothic trope, familiar from the 'first-wave' fictions of Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, through the nineteenth-century works of Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, and Bram Stoker, to more contemporary texts by Shirley Jackson, Clive Barker, and Stephen King, among many others. Yael Shapira's *Inventing the Gothic Corpse* sets out to provide a compelling and lucid account of the emergence and evolution of this imagery, beginning, as its title suggests, in a laboratory of sorts: the eighteenth-century literary world, with its ongoing experimentation in novel writing and the novel form. It is in the various formal reconfigurations and innovations of prose fiction by early novel writers such as Aphra Behn, Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Samuel Richardson that we can begin to see the appearance of what Shapira identifies as 'the Gothic corpse': 'an image of the dead body rendered with deliberate graphic bluntness in order to excite and entertain' (p. 1). Shapira's primary argument is thus that by considering the use of the dead body by a variety of long-eighteenth-century writers – many of them not overtly associated with the gothic literary mode – we can better conceptualise and understand the corpse's later primacy to a form linked to marketised popular entertainment. In particular, Shapira suggests, what becomes clear in the movement, from the earliest writers she studies to the latest, is a gradual, fraught, but nevertheless relentless shift from the cadaver as educational tool to the dead body as entertainment.

Shapira begins her study with an exploration of fictions by Behn and Defoe. Behn's *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave* (1688) and Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Shapira argues, initiate the steady and inexorable transition in the literary display of the dead body that marks the eighteenth century as a whole. Whereas the earlier genres from which these texts draw – including the *memento mori*, martyrology, plague tracts, and popular reportage (particularly of executions) – exhibit the dead body for specifically didactic purposes, *Oroonoko* and *A Journal of the Plague Year* represent 'a vital first step towards the thrill-oriented representation of human remains that will someday become a regular part of fictional entertainment' (p. 49). *Oroonoko*, for instance, departs from the martyrologies and execution reports that clearly inform its narrative in its use of the hero's dead body as a commodity specifically displayed for the purpose of readerly amusement. *A Journal of the*

Plague Year, in turn, adopts 'different descriptive approaches to the dead body' as a means of probing traditional uses of the corpse as an instrument of education (p. 77).

Over the next several chapters, Shapira charts the continued evolution of the literary representation of the dead body via fictions by well-known authors such as Richardson, Fielding, Radcliffe, and Lewis, as well as those of lesser-known writers such as Isabella Kelly and Mrs Carver. Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), Shapira writes, underscores the often hesitant and discontinuous nature of authors' adoption of the gothic corpse. Although the post-mortem display of Clarissa's body invites, at first glance, prurience, as suggested by Lovelace's macabre – and ultimately unfulfilled – desire to embalm it, the narrative nevertheless invokes an 'ideal spiritual response', using Clarissa's beautified body as a spectacle, but one that might teach important lessons about piety, virtue, and religion (p. 116). *Clarissa* might therefore be read, Shapira suggests, as an attempt to balance both the attraction of the dead body and the aims of the novel, an emergent form lauded by early practitioners such as Richardson as morally superior to previous forms of prose fiction precisely because of its commitment to didactic realism.

Richardson casts a long shadow over the gothic corpse's development later in the century, as becomes clear in the book's discussion of Lewis, Radcliffe, Kelly, and Carver. Shapira turns her attention to and probes the traditional distinctions between Lewis and Radcliffe – male/female, unexplained/explained supernatural, horror/terror – by thinking in particular of the ways in which both authors respond, implicitly and explicitly, to Richardson's example and to wider debates about the novel's didactic aims. Although engaging for the fresh perspective that it provides on the Lewis-Radcliffe divide, this analysis is perhaps most notable for its inclusion of the much less well-known popular novelists, Kelly and Carver. Shapira's consideration of these writers, both of whom published with the Minerva Press – a popular publishing house that became notorious for its production of lowbrow fiction of ill-repute – is a welcome probing of writers all too frequently dismissed as unskilled Radcliffean imitators. The now largely overlooked fictions by Kelly and Carver, Shapira persuasively claims, demonstrate these authors' divergence from Radcliffe's model and showcase 'the diversity of approaches' to the dead body to be found in late-eighteenth-century gothic by women writers (p. 159). Shapira traces this variety to the literary marketplace: Kelly and Carver are more radical than Radcliffe in their use of the gothic corpse because of the liberty provided by marginality. Catering almost exclusively to a popular audience and lacking Radcliffe's literary ambitions, Kelly and Carver produced

fictional versions of the dead body aimed entirely at 'interested readers rather than approving critics' (p. 167).

Although Shapira links the evolving phenomena of the gothic corpse specifically to developments in the reading, writing, and marketing of fiction, she also includes in her analysis key context provided by other contemporary genres – drama in particular. In Chapter Five, for instance, Shapira considers Lewis's *The Monk* (1797) alongside *The Castle Spectre* (1797) to help substantiate her convincing assertion that the former is as much 'a conscious and aggressive reworking of […] the body of Richardson's *Clarissa*' as it is an exasperated response to Radcliffe's particular form of explained supernatural (p. 183). Earlier in the volume, Shapira explores mid-century adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as evidence of critical concerns over the potential effects of the inappropriate or indecorous display of dead, dying, or decaying bodies. Noting the ways in which eighteenth-century productions of *Hamlet* on the English stage tended to omit, downplay, or reconceptualise the play's dead bodies, making them more obviously 'an occasion for sympathy rather than thrilling horror or laughter' (p. 97), Shapira draws a persuasive link between fiction, drama, and the anxieties focused on reading and theatre-going audiences. In both *Hamlet* and the novel, the dead body and its representation focalise concerns about newly enlarged and diversified reading and theatre-going publics, as well as the discernment of their members. Are such individuals capable of '"correctly" react[ing] to the cultural product in front of them' (p. 99), critics wonder time and again, and what are the potential dangers to society of inevitable misinterpretations?

Such concerns were famously articulated – and gently ridiculed – in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), as has been well established in gothic criticism. What makes Shapira's study so refreshing and invigorating is its close dissection (excuse the pun) of imagery that, as scholars, we tend to take for granted in our assessments of the literature we study. Shapira's detailed and considered description of the emergence and development of depictions of the gothic corpse over the course of the long eighteenth century provides a fascinating and forceful account of the evolution of the literary representation of the dead body. It will undoubtedly become a vital reference point for scholars of the eighteenth century and 'first-wave' gothic fiction, but it will also be of interest to those studying the manipulation and portrayal of death and the dead in gothic and horror more widely.

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