***Promethean Horrors: Classic Tales of Mad Science*, ed. by Xavier Aldana Reyes**
(The British Library, 2019)

The British Library's 'Tales of the Weird' series has recently facilitated the rediscovery of much 'long-lost material from the Library's vaults' (p. 271). The resulting series of anthologies packages tales of horror and the supernatural from previously forgotten authors, alongside more well-known examples of the genre, in attractively designed paperbacks. This mix of classic horror tales with more obscure material makes the series suitable for both newcomers and more seasoned readers of gothic and weird fiction. Each book in the series is introduced and edited by literary experts – in this case, Dr Xavier Aldana Reyes of Manchester Metropolitan University – who provide short forewords to each tale, contextualising the story in reference to the theme of the collection and the author's other works.

Promethean Horrors: Classic Tales of Mad Science will be particularly enjoyable for readers interested in expanding their knowledge of medical-, scientific-, or eco-horror texts, featuring as it does stories from Mary Shelley, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. P. Lovecraft, as well as lesser-known tales by L. T. Meade and E. Nesbitt. Aldana Reyes's introduction provides a thoughtful framework for considering the place of the mad-scientist figure in the gothic canon, suggesting that '[w]here other Gothic figures may be born evil, the mad scientist is guilty of being malcontent, of not thinking about the consequences of pushing nature too far' (p. 7). Fittingly, many of the stories in this collection explore the impact of the mad scientist's actions on their loved ones, with predictably tragic outcomes. What emerges from the volume is a sense that the mad scientist's desire to understand more about the world is not an innately evil one; instead, this craving for knowledge often morphs into a ruthless, ambitious drive which leaves no room for moral considerations. This makes him an intriguingly ambivalent figure, and one who reflects the gothic mode's enduring fascination with the heavy costs of scientific advancement.

Promethean Horrors is helpfully arranged, with stories proceeding in chronological order of publication date, from E. T. A. Hoffman's 'The Sandman' (1816) to George Langelaan's 'The Fly' (1957). Some of these stories will already be familiar to readers, but that doesn't stop them from being good old-fashioned horror fun – for example, the high-camp drama of 'The Sandman' begins with the breathily theatrical statement that '[s]omething horrible has crossed my path of life' (p. 15), and proceeds from there directly toward lunacy. Incorporating clockwork automata, castration metaphors, eye snatching, and mesmerism, there are few gothic tales more bonkers than this. However, it bears rereading for being not only a

deeply enjoyable example of the mad-science subgenre, but also at times a genuinely frightening one. Hoffman's tale has an unnerving quality that evokes the sensation of waking from nightmares, when the lines between memory and dream and reality seem very thin. Protagonist Nathaniel's obsession with automaton Olympia also provokes questions about the boundary between human and non-human, inspiring one of the story's most chilling lines: 'God preserve you, brother […] but it seems to me, that you are in an evil way' (p. 46). It is hard to say what exactly is wrong with Nathaniel – 'an evil way' is both nonspecific and foreboding enough to reflect the ethos of Hoffman's story, which is that some people are simply evil, and will spread that evil to others however and whenever they can. Contributing to the story's strange dreamlike quality is the extent to which malevolent inventor Coppelius/Coppola has little by way of stated purpose; he's an evil double, a stealer of eyes, a monster invented to scare children into going to sleep. He does it because he wants to, making him the most delicious kind of gothic villain.

Other mad scientists in this collection are more sensitive to the impact of their experiments on their loved ones; the emotional toll on significant others is given particular attention in Shelley's 'The Mortal Immortal: A Tale' (1833), Nesbit's 'The Five Senses' (1909), and Langelaan's previously mentioned 'The Fly'. All three stories contain rather touching depictions of the mad scientist's core relationship under threat, whether as a result of differing opinions on vivisection as a testing practise (Nesbitt), or of hasty experiments performed by the scientist using their own bodies as test subjects (Shelley and Langelaan). 'The Mortal Immortal' provides a particularly gruelling portrait of a relationship in slow decline, as the mad scientist of the tale, Winzy, accidentally ingests a potion that imparts immortality. He remains youthful while watching his wife slowly decline into old age. Winzy's wife Bertha is so tormented with jealousy and despair at his never-ending youth that she begins to fantasise that all the unfelt years will heap themselves upon Winzy in one fell swoop, so that he might 'awake some morning white-headed, and bowed down with all the marks of advanced years' (p. 70). Perhaps the saddest aspect of this is that Winzy joins in with his wife's fantasies, not knowing what else to do and having lost the ability to connect with her any other way. As always with Shelley, the reader is warned that the leaps and bounds of scientific progress wreak havoc not only on the scientist but on those close to them, if the scientist is clouded by ego or carelessness.

In the wake of such poignant material, it is difficult for a story as remote and grim as 'The Secrets of the Scaffold' by Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1883) not to feel a little slow, although that very grimness might linger in the reader's mind for longer than they expect. Both

'Secrets of the Scaffold' and old favourite 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' by Edgar Allan Poe (1845) explore what signs of 'life' might remain after death, although they come to rather different – if similarly viscous – conclusions. A later story, 'The Body Snatcher' by Stevenson (1884), begins as a gruesomely entertaining romp about – what else? – body snatching, but slowly unfolds into a rather more sophisticated narrative about slow and insidious moral corruption, with a nasty twist in the tale. Meade's 'The Blue Laboratory' (1897) injects a welcome jolt of practical, no-nonsense energy into the proceedings, in the form of a story about an English governess working in Russia who discovers that her employer is conducting unethical experiments on the possibility of photographing human thought. Aldana Reyes's introductory note on this story explains that Meade often published mystery and detective stories in *The Strand*, the magazine which carried Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. This provides a useful context for some of governess Madeline's eagle-eyed and forthright qualities. Initially more like an action-adventure story in tone, a sudden, gory shift in Meade's tale places it firmly in the science-fiction horror camp, and highlights the fact, as Aldana Reyes points out, that 'there were many excellent female writers of science fiction working throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who have been unduly forgotten' (p. 163).

The collection finishes with another story in the tragic mode, in the form of Langelaan's 'The Fly'. The plot of the story might be familiar to fans of David Cronenberg's 1986 body-horror masterpiece of the same name, which is itself a remake of Kurt Neumann's earlier film adaptation from 1958. In the original Langelaan story, mad scientist Dr André Delambre (whose name is changed to Seth Brundle in Cronenberg's film) is experimenting with a device intended to disintegrate matter and reintegrate it at a different point in space, rendering other forms of travel obsolete. Unfortunately, when he attempts to transport himself via this method to test its safety and efficacy on human subjects, Delambre accidentally traps a fly in the disintegration chamber with him and emerges a changed man. Langelaan's story differs in some respects from its adaptations – particularly the detail of the physical transformation in the Cronenberg adaptation, which was much praised for its special effects upon release and won an Academy Award for Best Makeup – but the emotional core of the story remains unchanged. Delambre's relationship with his wife is the driving force behind the narrative; she works tirelessly to help him recover, until it becomes clear that no recovery is possible. For this reader, Langelaan's tale is perhaps the most effective version of the emotional arc that structures so many of the mad-scientist stories in this volume: the tragedy of remaining attached to a person who is slowly becoming a monster. It makes a fitting end to a collection that manages to be

entertainingly far-fetched in its plots, and yet affectingly authentic in its depictions of human relationships, successfully showcasing a subgenre that is preoccupied with the personal cost of collective progress.

Rebecca Gibson