

Deborah D. Rogers. *The Matrophobic Gothic and Its Legacy: Sacrificing Mothers in the Novel and in Popular Culture*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007. x+168pp. US\$63.95; £32. ISBN 978-1-4331-0045-1.

The Matrophobic Gothic and Its Legacy begins with a big claim: “matrophobia”—the “fear of mothers,” “fear of becoming a mother,” and “fear of identification with and separation from the maternal body”—is “the central metaphor for women’s relationships with each other within the context of patriarchal, or male-dominated, culture” (1). While her central argument is certainly hyperbolic, Deborah Rogers delineates the development of this metaphor, historicizing the matrophobia of Romantic fiction, and then moving forward to consider contemporary anxieties regarding maternity in daytime television. The book is useful insofar as it provides a variety of historical contexts that help to explain representations of mother-fear, and insofar as it makes an intervention into what Rogers sees as anti-maternalist feminisms and studies of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature. The abrupt shift from Romantic novels to contemporary television, however, may trouble some readers. Rogers’s suggestion that the matrophobia in soap operas is informed by Romantic novels is intriguing, but her illustration of the relation between these ostensibly disparate genres would benefit from a discussion or at least an acknowledgment of how the complex domestic ideologies of the Victorian and Modernist periods have shifted the terms of matrophobia over time. In this regard, this study requires considerably more exhaustive historical and theoretical research.

The book is 161 pages in length, consisting of an introduction and three sections. In the introduction, Rogers maps the development of criticism on motherhood from the anti-maternalism she identifies in critics such as Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone, to psychoanalytic approaches popularized by Nancy Chodorow, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous, historical and cultural studies by Susan C. Greenfield and Felicity Nussbaum, and finally to critics who have helped to develop matrophobia as a serious site of investigation, such as Lynn Sukenick and Adrienne Rich. She claims to depart from these studies by assuming “the primacy of the matriarchal” rather than “thinking about culture at the level of patriarchal oppression” (7). Throughout the book, Rogers carefully balances her attention to the matrophobic relationships among women with evidence that matrophobia often originates in patriarchal discourse on femininity, the body, and representation.

The first two sections of the book refer respectively to female- and male-authored Gothic texts. Chapter 1, a biographical sketch of Anne

Radcliffe coupled with an in-depth analysis of her “largely ignored” commonplace book (30), offers insight into the ways in which Radcliffe’s matrophobic plots may have been influenced by her personal and professional lives. Chapter 2 examines critical responses to Radcliffe and, more generally, the “female” Gothic. Here Rogers points out that Radcliffe’s female Gothic can perhaps be more adequately referred to as “matrophobic Gothic” insofar as it betrays considerable ambivalence about maternal roles. On the one hand, Radcliffe portrays female delusion as a consequence of absent mothers and therefore as a result of matriarchal failures, but, on the other hand, she associates the restoration of reason with the restoration of the mother or mother figure, and thus privileges a kind of maternal rationality that complicates the Gothic genre’s general tendency to portray femininity in terms of madness or hysteria (40). In contrast to these long and detailed chapters, the third chapter on Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, which also concerns the absence of mothers, seems remarkably short. This is in part owing to Rogers’s avoiding a discussion of the sizeable body of criticism on this novel and on Austen more generally. Nevertheless, Rogers does illustrate the ways in which absent or frivolous maternal figures in *Northanger Abbey* compromise the ever-important social status of its heroine.

The shift to male-authored texts allows Rogers to explore how men have interpreted and constructed women’s anxieties about motherhood. It begins with a chapter on Richardson’s *Pamela* that examines how representations of pregnancy function as symbolic punishments for female sexuality. Citing midwife manuals as her primary historical material, Rogers’s fifth chapter is incredibly graphic, but not gratuitous. This chapter’s grim details of the complications that attended childbirth in the eighteenth century illustrate the horror often inscribed onto mothers’ bodies during that period. The next chapter argues that Scott’s *Rob Roy* constructs barrenness as a consequence of deviant women adopting typically “masculine” agency. Like the chapter on Austen, though, this chapter seems short, likely because, while it is rich in historical detail, particularly on book publication, Rogers’s analysis of the novel needs to be unpacked and positioned among other studies of *Rob Roy*.

The sudden transition to soap operas at this point in the book is, as I have suggested, somewhat disconcerting, although it illuminates a fascinating area of study: the soap opera as contemporary Gothic text. The main problem with this section is that Rogers suggests that these programs signal “unabated” matrophobia without considering any of the historical developments between the Romantic period and the period(s) she now discusses. Another problem is that Rogers makes rather grandiose arguments regarding audience response without fully explaining her methodology. She makes the interesting suggestion

that the fragmented nature of the soap operas reinforces patriarchal values, which undercuts the subversive potential of the genre. But some might argue that she underestimates the critical awareness of viewers. Overall, *The Matrophobic Gothic and Its Legacy* makes some intriguing claims regarding the trajectory of matrophobia, but more work needs to be done in order to construct a truly convincing historical narrative.

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Robert Miles. *Romantic Misfits*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. x+246pp. £50. ISBN 978-1-4039-8993-2.

Robert Miles begins *Romantic Misfits* with a “simple sentence” that productively complicates the most clichéd notion about Romanticism that still circulates in popular culture: “Although all Romantics are misfits,” he writes, “some misfits did not fit” (1). Miles defines “misfits” in two senses: those writers excluded from literary history in order to establish a Romantic canon, and those writers canonized by virtue of their exclusivity, a misfit status earned as they transcended the literary marketplace, their genius neglected by all but a privileged and discerning few. This moment of Romantic canonization, occurring between “a radical Enlightenment and its reactionary counter” (8), coincided with the disintegration of the public sphere (6); literary culture, Miles contends, came to value original genius and an aesthetic independent of material contingencies and commercial pressures at the expense of broader, more democratic public engagement with the world of letters. Through arguments that are well grounded in period aesthetic theory and literary culture (in particular the satellite industries of publishing and reviewing), Miles’s five chapters test this claim.

Chapter 1—on forgeries of Shakespeare produced by William Henry Ireland from 1795 to 1796—squarely proves Miles’s thesis. Heavily influenced by Herbert Croft’s *Love and Madness* (a novel composed of forged letters that defended one of the most notorious forgers of the era, Thomas Chatterton), Ireland fashioned himself as an illegitimate trickster who (like Chatterton) rose, “self-propelled, through the force of his own genius” (21). Miles persuasively shows how Ireland’s failure to pass off his productions as those of the nation’s original genius resulted mainly from the changing nature of the public sphere. With the politicization of belletristic discourse in the 1790s, the “courts of the republic of letters” were increasingly imagined to be unfit—too radicalized—for literary debate; it was thought that only a