

November 2021

A Review of Agnieszka Łowczanin, *A Dark Transfusion: The Polish Literary Response to Early English Gothic: Anna Mostowska Reads Ann Radcliffe* (Peter Lang, 2018)

David Punter
University of Bristol

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/textmatters>

Recommended Citation

Punter, David. "A Review of Agnieszka Łowczanin, *A Dark Transfusion: The Polish Literary Response to Early English Gothic: Anna Mostowska Reads Ann Radcliffe* (Peter Lang, 2018)." *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, no.11, 2020, pp. 421-424, doi:10.18778/2083-2931.11.26

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts & Humanities Journals at University of Lodz Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture by an authorized editor of University of Lodz Research Online. For more information, please contact journals@uni.lodz.pl.

 **David Punter**

University of Bristol

A Review of Agnieszka Łowczanin, *A Dark Transfusion: The Polish Literary Response to Early English Gothic: Anna Mostowska Reads Ann Radcliffe* (Peter Lang, 2018)

In this book, Agnieszka Łowczanin considers the work of Anna Mostowska (1762–1811) principally in relation to the work of Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823), but her range is far wider than that and situates Mostowska in the context of a broad swathe of early English Gothic novelists, principal among them Horace Walpole, Matthew Lewis and Jane Austen. Mostowska’s corpus of work is quite small and has not always been well assessed by critics, but this book does much to restore her to her rightful place in Polish literature, while tracing broader cross-currents of influence in the wide field of European Gothic.

The Introduction sets the scene, attending to the increased recent attention to a variety of national Gothics, while confirming that within this format of a canon of “global Gothic” very little attention has thus far been paid to the Gothic of East/Central Europe. Łowczanin conducts an extremely thorough literature review, listing all of Mostowska’s works and alluding to the relevant critical reception.

Chapter 1, “Anna Mostowska: Her Times and her Gothic Project,” opens by introducing the reader to the various cultural contexts of Poland/Lithuania leading up to the late eighteenth century. It traces the introduction of Gothic in the region, principally through architecture, and introduces two arguments which will run through the book, about Gothic as a female mode of writing and about Gothic as essentially bound up with political, even nationalistic, projects, before detailing Mostowska’s own position within the social and national context, as an aristocratic woman nevertheless attempting, very much against the grain, to earn a living by writing.

Chapter 2, “Romance, Translation, Terror and the Gothic,” enters into the critical dispute in England in the late eighteenth century about the romance and the novel, focussing especially on Horace Walpole’s revolutionary experiments with genre, before shifting terrain onto the broader field of European debate. French sources play an important role here, and act as a suitable transition to bring on stage the parallel, yet different debates in Poland/Lithuania, where the novel was very much an emergent form in search of a definition. A key text here, occupying a very similar originary position to Walpole’s Prefaces to *The Castle of Otranto*, is Mostowska’s Preface to *Strach w Zameczku*, which is characterized by modesty and caution, but which still emphasizes the respectability, even the necessity, of depicting elements of fear and the supernatural. In *Strach w Zameczku*, Łowczanin picks out a number of key themes which indicate both the similarities and the differences between Mostowska’s Gothic project and those of the contemporary English authors: the role of the Church and religion, the position of feminism and the task and role of fiction as entertainment, to name but three.

She then introduces us to other stories in Mostowska’s Gothic *œuvre* and offers us this insightful account of her preoccupations:

[Mostowska] has a full understanding that the dark recesses of a terrified heart remain impenetrable irrespective of the era, fear remains the emotion that knows no borders of time . . . that no rationality or enlightenment can control. The Gothic is for her a clay from which she moulds a variety of shapes and emotions, a bridge she constructs to take us, her readers, to the evasive, unexplored past that abounds with mysteries, that is a remote territory from which a few stories and a few records remain, but from which no traveller has ever returned. (129)

The third chapter, “Sensibility, Femininity, Education, and the Gothic,” is for me the finest in the book, full of critical acuity and adept in pointing out the many ways in which Gothic, despite its apparent distance from quotidian life and from social and political concerns, is nevertheless full of contemporary relevance, and also the specific ways in which Mostowska’s work participates in this cultural dialectic. Here is where the argument about the relations between Mostowska and Radcliffe achieves its full depth. A particularly fascinating example is Łowczanin’s contrast between Radcliffe’s emphasis on the influence of fathers and male relatives on daughters as opposed to Mostowska’s emphasis on mother/daughter relations: “[T]he first striking difference between Radcliffe’s and Mostowska’s writing is in the motherless households of Radcliffe’s heroines and the fatherless households of most of Mostowska’s stories” (133). An extended

and brilliant analysis of *Matylda i Daniłó* deals adeptly with the theme, or motif, of the ghost—later in the book, Łowczanin speaks of the ghostly spectral figure Emily sees in Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*, who may or may not be the sinful Laurentini, before returning to the figure of the ghost in Mostowska’s tale:

Edwarda’s ghost, similarly dreadful and pale, is in the same way the embodiment of her sinful existence, used by Gryzalda in the story she tells her daughters as a corrective measure to regulate their behaviour. Everything about her life has a tragic end, her marriage she terminates with the murder of her husband, her motherhood, terminated by “heaven” to check her moral downfall, and then her existence as a ghost when she appears tormented as a dreadful spectre. (185)

The crucial theme that Łowczanin so ably brings out here is that of moral instruction: both Radcliffe and Mostowska may be writing “entertainment” but they are also writing with serious purposes in mind, concerning the upbringing of young women, purposes that can be seen as conservative in the sense that there is an imperative to submit to the demands of patriarchal society, yet also as radical in that they provide women with voices of their own with which they may choose to express their frustrations with the system in which they are forced to live.

One of the most intriguing suggestions made in the book is that Mostowska follows Radcliffe to an extent by deliberately providing incomplete explanations for the phenomena, especially the supernatural events, that she describes; there is here, it is claimed, “an understanding that Gothic stories are to be written with ‘gaps’ left in them” (137) for the reader to fill. It might not be going too far to say that this presence of the narrative lacuna is proto-modern in essence, and that is one of Mostowska’s great strengths.

There is much more that could be said about this excellent book: it is very good, for example, on the relations between Gothic and the ruin, which has such different meanings in England and in Poland:

Ruins in England were the result of domestic politics, of internal transfers of power with often religious implications. . . . By contrast, the possible reservoir of ruins Mostowska could be drawing from was the result of numerous foreign invasions into the territory of Poland-Lithuania, where architectural structures . . . often ended up destroyed by the invaders during recurrent military conflicts. (194)

But I will conclude by calling attention to what I consider to be the book’s three greatest strengths, which emerge with particular force in the final

chapter, “Empire and Female Gothic.” The first is that it provides us with an excellent account of the political and cultural situation of Poland-Lithuania at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries so that we as readers are able to read and appreciate Mostowska’s work with new depth. The second is that, in its account of Gothic’s engagement with history, the book also provides us with a key to the more contemporary history of Poland as the figure of Gothic continues to revive and gain added potency. The third, and it would seem the most important of all for Łowczanin, is the connection between Gothic and the situation of women. Here is part of the concluding paragraph of a book which is a pleasure to read, as well as providing a series of highly articulate challenges to political and social orthodoxy:

424

[I]n her historical Gothic stories [Mostowska] depicted those she knew history would bypass: women. She used the Gothic to write about women left in their alcoves, often when their men were out on the battlefields making history, about women who had to bear the daily consequences of man-made politics, about those manipulated by men, and those who were playful, domineering, and strong. Her stories centre on wives, daughters, mothers, lovers, and ageing story-tellers, and on their emotions of love, longing, hatred, fear, and revenge.

David Punter is Professor of Poetry Emeritus and Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of Bristol, UK. As well as hundreds of articles and essays, he has published many books on the Gothic, as well as other areas of literature. His best-known work is probably *The Literature of Terror*; his most recent book on the Gothic is *The Gothic Condition*. His other books include *Writing the Passions*; *Rapture: Literature, Addiction, Secrecy*; *Metaphor*; *Modernity*; and *The Literature of Pity*. He has also published eight books of poetry.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9683-5501>
david.punter@bristol.ac.uk