

*Joseph Sheridan LeFanu* by Aoife Mary Dempsey, University of Wales Press (Gothic Authors: Critical Revisions), 2022, 224 pp.

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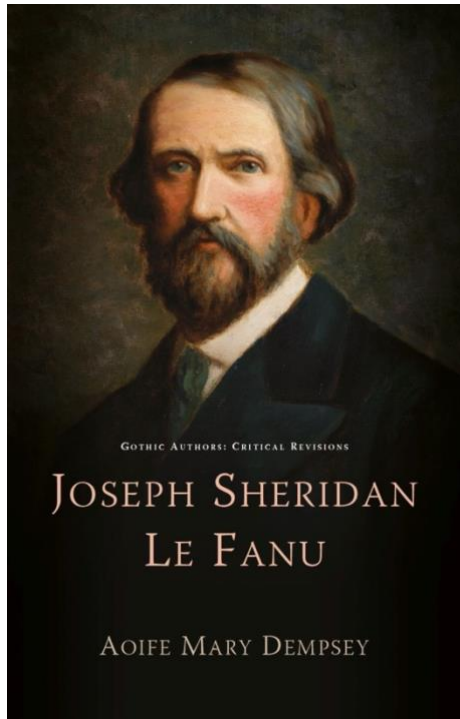
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## BOOK REVIEW

*Joseph Sheridan LeFanu*

By Aoife Mary Dempsey

University of Wales Press  
(Gothic Authors: Critical Revisions)

2022

224 pp.

Little is known about “the invisible prince,” Sheridan Le Fanu, the reclusive writer of Gothic and sensation fiction, despite his popularity in his own time and continuing influence. In this critical survey of Le Fanu’s major works, their publication history, historical context, and subsequent criticism, Aoife Mary Dempsey looks back on canonical Le Fanu scholarship and sheds some light on this shadowy figure and “the extant confusion regarding his literary corpus” (18). Not since W.J McCormack’s 1980 biography has anyone attempted such a comprehensive account of Le Fanu’s life and work. *Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu* is part of a series of “innovative introductory guides to writers of the Gothic,” Gothic Authors: Critical Revisions, whose stated purpose is offering “new critical approaches and perspectives” while being “both accessible and informative.” It currently includes critical surveys of Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, Richard Marsh, Patrick McGrath, and Charles Brockden Brown.

Dempsey situates Le Fanu’s body of work within the context of original periodical publications, and Le Fanu’s relationship with the publishing world, especially the journal he owned and operated, the *Dublin University Magazine*. Noting the tendency of both popular and scholarly audiences to read Le Fanu’s stories in posthumous anthologies rather than as how they originally appeared in the periodical press, Dempsey advocates for “reading laterally.” That is, she encourages us to consider the influence of audience demands and market trends on his work, and to consider this market relation and reading context more deeply in our interpretations, explaining that “Reading laterally can help us to

understand Le Fanu's motivations and to consider how his fiction would be interpreted by his readers within the context of the articles, poems and literature present in the holistic discourse of the magazine" (144). Describing the political and aesthetic positions of the main journals in which he published, Dempsey emphasizes that these periodical contexts played an important part in Le Fanu's creative process, as well as affecting contemporary audience reception.

While some scholars have begun to consider the importance of the periodicals in which they originally appeared for understanding individual short works, Dempsey surveys Le Fanu's oeuvre with an eye towards its relationship with periodical publishing. In a sense, this is also a history of Le Fanu's engagement with the publishing industry, tracking his literary influence as not only a writer, but as an editor, publisher, friend, critic, and journalist. Dempsey outlines some of the ways, directly and indirectly, Le Fanu influenced other authors, such as Charles Dickens, Bram Stoker, James Joyce, and the Brontës.

Dempsey also points out that the context of periodical publishing is intertwined with social and political history, and her primary concern is the Irish political landscape. The intricacies and nuances of tensions between Protestants and Catholics and the evolving nature of these tensions throughout Le Fanu's lifetime is a key context Dempsey explores in depth and illustrates with close reading of his work. Informed by New Historicism, post-colonial theory, and periodical studies, Dempsey's critical method is primarily close reading as well as the aforementioned lateral reading favoured by periodical studies.

In addition to explicating the historical and periodical contexts, Dempsey provides a critical overview of Le Fanu studies to date, and offers a much-needed update, contextualizing not just Le Fanu's work, but critical trends and their influence on the field today. In essence, she gives the reader a picture of the state of Le Fanu scholarship and points to possible avenues for future research. Despite its overarching view, the book also notes where gaps exist and where more research is needed, providing useful direction for the curious student.

Now, having held their breath this long, the cultists may ask, in a collective sapphic sigh: what about *Carmilla*? They will be both delighted and disappointed at turns. *Carmilla* criticism tends to be divided between that which addresses the sexual content, and that which focuses on its connection with Irish politics. Although noting that, "Indeed, much of the story's afterlife has been due to the queer interpretation of the primary relationship, with both lay and academic readings following this line of thought" (99), and providing key sources for the curious, keeping with the Irish political context rather than the

history of sexuality, Dempsey herself does not pursue “this line of thought,” at least not here.

For Dempsey, *Carmilla*, set in a foreign country, marks Le Fanu’s move away from Irish fiction to an English context, in an English periodical, to express Irish political interests (101-106). She notes that in this period, he makes a strong turn towards the supernatural gothic, which he had only dabbled in before (106). However, she tempers her critique by reminding us that *Carmilla* cannot merely be an analogy for Irish politics, ending her explanation of the larger contexts of this work’s production history with the suggestive caveat that “A fuller reading of the contexts of the story shows that a myriad of [sic] influences were at work” (106) and that “This story, like all Le Fanu’s work, cannot be plucked from its material or socio-cultural contexts in order to support a larger argument about waning Protestant power in nineteenth-century Ireland” (106-107). Those other contexts, Dempsey leaves for other scholars to contend with. Although some might disagree with her claim that “The patently queer relationship between the characters [in *Carmilla*] is practically unidentifiable elsewhere in his work (excepting, perhaps, the relationship between Maud Ruthyn and her cousin Milly) (100),” Dempsey is careful to leave her claims open to further discussion, and, just as we are left with *Carmilla*’s “ambiguous alterations” (Le Fanu 78), one gets the sense she might even welcome such disputations.

With its comprehensive breadth and clear, accessible style, Dempsey’s work is a must-read for Le Fanu scholars and fans alike. Surveying existing Le Fanu criticism to date, while also expanding upon it, this is perhaps the ideal, got-to book on Le Fanu that fictional seeker Harriet Vane dreamt of writing when she pursued her research on his life and work at Oxford in Dorothy Sayers’ 1935 novel, *Gaudy Night*. As interest in Le Fanu is gathering steam once again, let Dempsey’s tome be the starting point for future research.

— Anne Young

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**Dr. Anne Young** is an independent scholar living in London Ontario, where she enjoys gothic and horror media through an intersectional feminist lens set in a gilded arabesque frame. Currently engaged in writing the biography of Carmilla Karnstein, she has previously published on women’s hidden authorship in both the cult novel *Story of O* and the popular films of Dario Argento.

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