Jim Neilson
The 19th Century Novel Podcast
Episode 10

The Gothic Novel

Part One

> The wind was high that night, and as the creaking door swung on its hinges, every noise
> seemed like the sound of a hand struggling with the lock, or of a foot pausing on the threshold.
> But . . . was it a dream or not, that he saw the figure of his ancestor appear at the door?—
> hesitatingly as he saw him at first on the night of his uncle's death,--saw him enter the room,
> approach his bed, and heard him whisper, 'You have burned me, then; but those are flames I
> can survive.—I am alive,—I am beside you' (Maturin 60).

Such terrifying phantasms—in this case, from Charles Maturin's novel *Melmouth the Wanderer*—are
perpetually beside the reader of the Gothic Romance, a form of the English novel that developed in the
1760s, achieved its peak of popularity in the 1790s, and vanished from the British literary scene by the
1820s. The term "Gothic" derives from "Visigoth," a Germanic people from the Balkans who sacked Rome
in the year 410. It took on its medieval cast thanks to Italian Renaissance architects' disparaging references
to what they perceived as a barbarous northern European architectural style first appearing in the 12the
century. "It was intended," writes the Victorian art critic and prominent exponent of the Gothic John
Ruskin, "to imply reproach, and express the barbaric character of the nations among whom the architecture
arose . . . [to] imply that they and their buildings together exhibited a degree of sternness and rudeness . . .
the word Gothic became a term of unmitigated contempt" (161). But in 18th century Britain, "Gothic" had a
broader meaning, referring to the historical period beginning with the fall of Rome and continuing until as
late as the 17th century. As University of Windsor professor Carol Davison explains, "the 'Gothic' connoted
the spectres of Britain's primitive, superstitious, corrupt, and tyrannical Catholic past" (25).

Although the use of "Gothic" to refer specifically to a literary genre is rooted in the full title of Horace
Walpole's 1760 novel *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*, its use as a literary term is of more recent
origin. E.J. Clery, whose bio has her "Working at University of Southampton and the Centre for Early
Women's Writing at Chawton Great House, which was formerly owned by [Jane] Austen's brother Edward
. . . and resid[ing] in Winchester, close to the cathedral where Jane Austen is buried," notes that this use of
"Gothic" appeared in two literary histories published in 1899 and gained currency due to two subsequent
pioneering women scholars, Edith Birkhead, lecturer at the University of Bristol and fellow at the University
of Liverpool, and Joyce Tompkins, who taught from 1933 to 1969, at Royal Holloway College, now part of
the University of London, and Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. This use of "Gothic" to refer to a
specific literary genre appeared in Tompkins's *The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800*, published in
1932, and in Birkhead's 1921 text, *The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance.*

The literary use of the term "romance" was usually applied to medieval verse and prose narratives, often in
French, about knights and chivalry and courtly love, but the term expanded by the 17th century to cover
adventure stories set in distant lands, just about any unbelievable imaginary adventure, as well as love stories.
Among the more popular romances in the 1600s were such now obscure titles as the ten volume *Cassandre*,
by Gauthier de Costes La Calprènede, and *Le Grand Cyrus*, by Madeleine de Scudéry, who is said to be
the creator of the roman a clef, or novel with a key, a novel featuring thinly disguised well-known public
figures. *Le Grand Cyrus*, at 2.1 million words (more three times the length of *War and Peace*), has the
distinction of being one of the longest novels ever written. Clery summarizes the conventions used in these
romances: "artificial diction, numerous coincidences, the promiscuous mixing of history and fiction, absurd
idealism, and over-the-top heroics" (22). The difference between a romance and a novel, then, was the

difference between fantasy and realism, as the English playwright William Congreve explains in the preface to his own novella, *Incognita: or, Love and Duty reconcil'd*, published in 1692 but likely written five years earlier when he was seventeen:

> Romances are generally composed of the constant loves and invincible courages of heroes, heroins [sic], kings and queens, mortals of the first rank, and so forth; where lofty language, miraculous contingencies, and impossible performances elevate and surprize the reader into a giddy delight. . . . Novels are of a more familiar nature, come near us and represent to us intrigues in practice, delight us with accidents and odd events, but not such as are wholly unusual or unpresidented [sic], such which not being so distant from our belief bring also the pleasure nearer us. Romances give more of wonder, novels more delight. (32)

Congreve criticizes the romance for its fancy and praises the novel for its reality. But the novel, too, was frequently criticized. For instance, that embodiment of 18th century verities Samuel Johnson complained that "These books are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life. They are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account." Likewise, the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge declared, "where the reading of novels prevails as a habit, it occasions in time the entire destruction of the powers of the mind: it is such an utter loss to the reader, that it is not so much to be called pass-time as kill time. It conveys no trustworthy information as to facts; it produces no improvement of the intellect, but fills the mind with mawkish and morbid sensibility, which is directly hostile to the cultivation, invigoration, and enlargement of the nobler powers of the understanding" (3). It's viewpoints like these that Jane Austen addresses when, in her Gothic parody *Northanger Abbey*, she defends the novel: "there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them" (22).

The Gothic novel first appears in the mid-1700s. Nick Groom, literature professor at the University of Macau, offers as first Gothic novel: Thomas Leland Longsword's *Earl of Salisbury: An Historical Romance*, while Lisa Hopkins, Professor of English at Sheffield Hallam University, following Walpole's acknowledging his debt to Shakespeare, declares that, "with its ghosts, its castle, its incest, its doubling, and its repressions, [*Hamlet*] is so obviously a Gothic text that it is purely the fact of chronology that keeps it out of the Gothic canon" (1). But most scholars agree that the first Gothic novel or romance was Hugh Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, published in 1764. In the preface to the second edition, Walpole explains that he sought to reconcile these two forms, the romance and the novel:

> It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of Romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former, all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. . . . The author of the following pages thought it possible to reconcile the two kinds. . . . leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention . . . [and] he wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions.

Walpole, son of Robert Walpole, the first Prime Minister of Britain, is described by the preeminent Victorian historian and Whig politician Thomas Babbington Maccaulay as having "an unhealthy and disorganized mind" and being "the most eccentric, the most artificial, the most fastidious, the most capricious of men" (qtd. in Kilgour 16). His novel is equally strange. Set somewhere between 1095 and 1243 (during the Crusades), the novel begins with a gigantic helmet falling from the sky and crushing the son of Manfred, lord of the castle of Otranto, on the day of this son's betrothal. The novel ends with

Manfred stabbing his daughter to death, having mistaken her for his son's fiancé, whom he had been obsessively pursuing. In between, we encounter hauntings, trapdoors, a giant armored leg, a hermit, a giant sword, and much more.

While some of the details in *Otranto* are idiosyncratic, it offers many tropes that would become Gothic conventions. To understand the basic elements of Gothic fiction, one need merely recall the conventions of classic horror stories and films. Or one can assemble a Gothic tale by following this recipe, composed by an 18th century wit:

> *Take—*An old castle, half of it ruinous.
>> A long gallery, with a great many doors, some secret ones.
>> Three murdered bodies, quite fresh.
>> As many skeletons, in chests and presses.
>> An old woman hanging by the neck; with her throat cut.
>> Assassins and desperadoes. . . .
>> Noises, whispers, and groans, threescore at least.
> Mix them together, in the form of three volumes, to be taken at any of the watering places, before going to bed. ("Terrorist" 225)

Appearing in the mid-18th century, the Gothic novel, with its medieval settings and supernatural happenings, presented an alternative to the realistic settings and characters in novels such as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, an alternative to the moralizing novel of sentiment, and an alternative to the ordered, balanced, and rational worldview of the Enlightenment. For much of the 18th century, the Middle Ages—the typical setting for Gothic romances—were dismissed as irrational and superstitious and therefore unworthy of study, unlike the classical age. For "the antiquarians . . . and Enlightenment philosophers," explains John H. Arnold, history professor at the University of London, "what mattered was the classical past, and the ways in which it informed and was renewed by the 'modern' world around them"; as the Greek and Roman past was rediscovered, "the middle ages came to stand for a gross barbarity of style and language" (9). Thus, David Hume in his popular and influential *History of England*, published between 1754 and 1761, derided the "many barbarous ages" his history narrated before approaching his own time and with it "the dawn of civility and science," allowing him "to present to the reader a spectacle more worthy of his attentions" (368). As late as 1818, the historian Evan Hallam could declare, "Many considerable portions of time, especially before the twelfth century, may justly be deemed so barren of events worthy of remembrance that a single sentence or paragraph is often sufficient to give the character of entire generations, and of long dynasties of obscure kings" (qtd. in Culler 153). So overlooked was the Middle Ages that after 1634 no new edition of Thomas Malory's seminal volume of Arthurian legend, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, was published until 1816, the latter volume read by a young Alfred Tennyson, influencing his cycle of narrative poems about the Arthur legend, *Idylls of the King*, which in turn provided subject matter for the Pre-Raphaelites and inspired the popular retellings of the Arthur legend in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Against elite culture's indifference towards the Middle Ages, Gothic novels offered a compelling alternative taking place in dark of night, in medieval castles and cathedrals, featuring hauntings, torture, nightmares, secret passageways, a persecuted heroine, a tormented and tormenting male aristocrat and Catholic villainy. This anti-Catholicism is a central feature in many Gothic novels and is strikingly conveyed in one of the era's most notorious novels, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*. Lewis explains how the title character's moral sensibility and good nature are overwhelmed and distorted by Catholic instruction:

> His instructors carefully repressed those virtues whose grandeur and disinterestedness were ill-suited to the cloister. Instead of universal benevolence . . . he was taught to consider compassion for the errors of others as a crime of the blackest dye. . . . in order to break his natural spirit, the

> monks terrified his young mind by placing before him all the horrors with which superstition could furnish them: They painted to him the torments of the damned in colours the most dark, terrible, and fantastic, and threatened him at the slightest fault with eternal perdition. . . . While the monks were busied in rooting out his virtues and narrowing his sentiments, they allowed every vice which had fallen to his share to arrive at full perfection. He was suffered to be proud, vain, ambitious, and disdainful: he was jealous of his equals, and despised all merit but his own: he was implacable when offended, and cruel in his revenge. (213-14)

Lewis has a character enumerate the clergy's hidden hypocrisy and amorality:

> some . . . cloaked with devotion the foulest sins. . . .the superstition which governed Madrid's inhabitants. . . . the artifices of the monks, and the gross absurdity of their miracles, wonders, and supposititious reliques. . . . the dupes of deceptions so ridiculous [who are bound by] . . . their monkish fetters. . . . enormous . . . abuses . . . frequently practiced in monasteries . . .unjust public esteem . . . bestowed indiscriminately upon all who wore a religious habit. (294)

Catholicism as depicted by Lewis imposes on a person's natural goodness and, in its dismissal of compassion, is fundamentally anti-Christian. And its practitioners are almost universally hypocritical, self-promoting rather than self-denying, violent and lustful rather than peaceful and celibate. For Lewis, celibacy is an unnatural practice whose repression produces an uncontrollable lust. And cloistered isolation, for Lewis, separates the clergy from the everyday world, leading to misanthropy.

Why did the Gothic so commonly critique Catholicism, especially during a time when the percentage of Catholics in England was in steady decline, from four percent of the population at the beginning of the 18th century to only one percent at the beginning of the nineteenth? ("Catholic"). For one thing, the Enlightenment perceived Catholicism as grossly superstitious and irrational. For another, it was associated with England's perpetually troubled colony of Ireland, as well as with its two main foes, France and Spain. And it continued to pose a threat within Britain. Fifty years before publication of *The Monk*, while British troops were battling the Spanish on the continent (in the War of Austrian Succession), the Jacobite risings, led by the Scottish Catholic Bonnie Prince Charlie (or more formally, "Charles Edward Louis John Casimir Sylvester Severino Maria Stuart"), unsuccessfully sought to replace the Protestant Hanoverian king George II with the Scottish and more rightful heir to the throne James Francis Edward Stuart, "the Old Pretender," son of James II. Thus, the anti-Catholic spirit of the Gothic novel derived both from a general Enlightenment opposition to religious superstition and an ongoing fear that such superstitious beliefs could once again hold sway over the British Isles. Because of these fears, the power of the Anglican Church, and a general intolerance of the foreign and different, Catholics were barred from serving in Parliament or in most public offices, a ban that wouldn't be lifted until passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. Catholics were also barred from admission into Oxford and Cambridge universities until the passage of the Universities Tests Act of 1871.

Featuring superstitious Catholic tormentors, mysteriously haunted castles, and ever-present threats of violent depravity, the Gothic novel served as a return of the repressed, depicting a darkness whose power the Enlightenment sought to deny and displace. No surprise, then, that scholars have often approached the Gothic from a psychoanalytic perspective. These texts easily lend themselves to such interpretations. Their basic structure—dark secrets from the past dangerously uncovered by ingenuous protagonists—resembles the psychoanalytical model of exposing repressed traumas to explain and cure current maladies. This sympathy between the Gothic and the psychoanalytic can be seen in the fact that both Sigmund Freud and his colleague Ernest Jones wrote about *Hamlet*, the most Gothic of Shakespeare's plays, and that Freud's friend and fellow psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte, who was also the great grandniece of Napoleon, wrote a biography of the Gothic short story writer, Edgar Allan Poe.

Contemporary critics have expanded the use of psychoanalysis, applying it not just to individual but to social repression, to a "political unconscious." The well-known literary critic and theorist Terry Eagleton explains this critical approach:

> Gothic represents the shadowy underside of the Enlightenment, exposing the family as a cockpit of murderous loathings and society as a tainted legacy of guilt and crime through which the unquiet spectres of the past still stalk. . . . It is also one of the first great imaginative adventures into . . . sexual politics—a kind of social unconscious in which the sedate text of our everyday lives is suddenly flipped over to reveal the appalling disfigurements which silently inform it (104-5).

Maggie Kilgour, Professor of English at McGill University, makes a similar point: "With its theory of an underlying reality, psychoanalysis helped give the gothic a new 'profundity' by seeing it as a revelation of the private life of either the individual or his culture that had been buried by habit, the conscious will, and forces of individual and social repression" (220). For many contemporary critics, including me, most novels, regardless of their mode or genre, to some degree repress or obscure a culture's unresolved social dilemmas. It's up the critic to explain both what is being repressed and how—through a novel's aesthetic features—this repression is being enacted. Because it's more emotionally excessive and transgressive than the realist novel, the Gothic novel offers a more dramatic—and more obvious—rendering of these dilemmas, while the realist novel more successfully represses these. In some ways, then, the Gothic novel, though set in the past and filled with the unbelievable, can be read as *more* realistic than the realist novel because it conveys its concerns much more dramatically and passionately. That is, its repression of the personal and the social is less successful and requires less arduous critical analysis.

Unsurprisingly, Gothic novels achieved their greatest popularity in the 1790s, giving disguised expression to anxieties aroused by the era's social uncertainty and dissension. "Between 1764 and 1820," notes George Haggerty, English professor at the University of California, Riverside, "some three hundred Gothic romances were published" (223), and between 1796 and 1806, according to Robert D. Mayo, English professor at Northwestern University, "at least one third of all novels published in Great Britain were Gothic in character while on the London stage one Gothic melodrama succeeded another" (qtd. in Davison 2).

Seeming to validate the psychoanalytic view of the Gothic, Walpole says he took inspiration for *The Castle of Otranto* from a dream: "I waked one morning," he writes, "from a dream, of which all I could recover was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle . . . and that on the uppermost banister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour" (qtd. in Haggerty 220). Beyond the inspired imaginations of individual authors, literary historians have offered several theories to explain the birth of the Gothic novel: "Antiquarian interest in Gothic architecture, changing popular tastes, frustration with 'reason,' new concepts of subjectivity and emotional response, including theories of 'pleasurable terror' or the 'sublime,' the politics of individualism, the French revolution" (Haggerty 221).

The Revolution was terrifying because it revealed that a centuries' long stable culture, with its traditional practices, established social hierarchy, and dominant religion, could be quickly and violently overturned. The novelist Fanny Burney gives expression to this astonishment: "There is nothing in old history that I shall any longer think fabulous," she writes, "the destruction of the most wonderful empires on record has nothing more wonderful, nor of more sounding improbability, than the demolition of this great nation, which rises up against itself for its own ruin—perhaps annihilation" (66). The ruins of castles and abbeys, a regular feature of the Gothic novel, are terrifying because they suggest specifically the Reign of Terror and the overthrow of the Ancien Règime, and more generally the impermanence of tradition and authority. Fear of the violent chaos generated by the French Revolution can be seen, for instance, in this passage from Lewis's *The Monk* in which a crowd is inspired to violence by anti-clerical rhetoric:

the throng surrounding [the convent] was so excessive as to prevent his approaching the Gates. In the interim, the populace besieged the building with persevering rage: They battered the walls, threw lighted torches in at the windows, and swore that by break of day not a nun of St. Clare's order should be left alive. . . . The rioters poured into the interior part of the building, where they exercised their vengeance upon every thing which found itself in their passage. They broke the furniture into pieces, tore down the pictures, destroyed the reliques. . . . Some employed themselves in searching out the nuns, others in pulling down parts of the convent, and others again in setting fire to the pictures and valuable furniture which it contained. . . . The flames rising from the burning piles caught part of the building. . . . The walls were soon shaken by the devouring element: The columns gave way: The roofs came tumbling down upon the rioters, and crushed many of them beneath their weight. Nothing was to be heard but shrieks and groans; The convent was wrapped in flames, and the whole presented a scene of devastation and horror. (303)

Scenes such as this suggest that the Gothic novel's popularity was partly due to the ways these texts resonated with an audience shocked by the terror and chaos of the French Revolution, a context explained in 1799 by the Marquis de Sade: "this kind of fiction," he wrote,

'twas the inevitable result of the revolutionary shocks which all of Europe has suffered. . . . There was not a man alive who had not experienced in the short span of four or five years more misfortunes than the most celebrated novelist could portray in a century. Thus, to compose works of interest, one had to call upon the aid of hell itself, and to find in the world of make-believe things wherewith one was fully familiar merely by delving into man's daily life in this age of iron. (109)

The Gothic was also a response to the hubris of Enlightenment philosophies and the uncertainty produced by rapid technological change—an anxiety Mary Shelley literally embodied in *Frankenstein* (published in 1818). In the same year, the English essayist William Hazlitt wrote that Gothic novels like Ann Radcliffe's "derived part of their interest . . . from the supposed tottering state of all old structures at the time" (161). Carol Davison identifies some of these tottering old structures. "The spectres of both the Industrial and the French revolutions," she writes, raised "many questions . . . about political economy, religion and spiritual reality, illegitimate and legitimate authority, the dangerous potential of mass literacy, individual rights and social responsibilities and socio-political repression and its impact on the individual" (48). Likewise, Eagleton sees the Gothic and other non-canonical forms as responding to "a culture in fragments, an identity of permanent crisis, and a history marked by disruption and dispossession" (*English* 100). And the pioneering feminist literary scholar Ellen Moers concludes that this era generated "that vague paranoia of the modern spirit for which Gothic mechanisms seem to have provided welcome therapy" (91).

Living with such uncertainties, writers turned to a past that was similarly tumultuous and terrifying. And this turn to the past, with its awesome ruins, the skeletal remains of abbeys lost to time and Henry VIII, inevitably suggested human mortality. Gothic novels often conveyed fear of death directly: through physical evidence of our mortality in the form of putrescent cadavers, as when a character in Lewis's *The Monk* recounts seeing a ghost-like figure who "lifted up her veil slowly. . . . I beheld before me an animated cor[p]se. Her countenance was long and haggard; her cheeks and lips were bloodless; the paleness of death was spread over her features; and her eyeballs, fixed steadily upon me, were lustreless and hollow" (155). In the same manner, the protagonist in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* sees behind a veil "a human figure of ghastly paleness, stretched at its length, and dressed in the habiliments of the grave. What added to the horror of the spectacle, was, that the face appeared partly decayed and disfigured by worms, which were visible on the features and hands" (662). In both cases, it's a seemingly young woman who is revealed to be a rotting corpse, emphasizing that even this embodiment of youth and beauty is prey to decay. And in both instances, this truth is revealed by the lifting of a veil. In its association with Salome and with weddings, the veil is connected to female sexuality, its removal a symbolic undressing. In these scenes, though, the only intimacy is that of the grave. The appearance of a cadaver where one expects to see a

beautiful woman suggests a fear of sexuality: pleasure cannot come without punishment. And it is a traditional image of the inevitability of death: youth and beauty don't last; fertility becomes sterility. All of these repressed fears become manifest in this image often used by Gothic novelists.

In addition to literal descriptions of putrescent corpses, Gothic novelists conveyed their dread through their invocation of the sublime, moving from the cadaverous to the cavernous. The notion of a "sublime terror" originated with Edmund Burke's 1755 work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. For Burke, in the words of Stanford University Emerita Professor Terry Castle, "Anything that conveyed ideas of 'pain or terror' to the mind yet brought with it no actual physical danger . . . prompted emotions of sublimity in the viewer. Natural objects that were vast, powerful, obscure, dark, towering, or irregular were often sublime in the extreme" (675n5). Burke believed this feeling comes from our deep instinct for self-preservation. The sublime, in other words, is what we feel when we confront, at a safe distance, our mortality. This feeling emerges when we face large and powerful natural objects because they remind us of our individual insignificance. The scale of a mountain range, of a desert, of the arctic—and their cold silence toward human life—render our existence inconsequential. We are awestruck by the beauty and majesty and terror of these scenes.

In the Gothic novel, often set in remote, mountainous regions, nature frequently is used to convey this sense of the sublime, as in this passage from Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in which the novel's protagonist, Emily St. Aubert, contrasts the impressive Apennine mountain range with the more sublime Alps: "Wild and romantic as were these scenes, their character had far less of the sublime, than had those of the Alps. . . . Emily was often elevated, but seldom felt those emotions of indescribable awe which she had so continually experienced in her passage over the Alps" (226). This sense of the sublime can also be conveyed by manmade structures—age-old castles and looming cathedrals and ruins with labyrinthine passageways and dungeons—for these, too, are "vast, powerful, obscure, dark, towering [and] irregular" and thus can create sublime terror for protagonists and readers alike. Radcliffe's protagonist is overcome by her first glimpse of the castle of Udolpho: "Emily gazed with melancholy awe upon the castle . . . though it was now lighted up by the setting sun, the gothic greatness of its features, and its mouldering walls of dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object" (226-27). Just as mountain peaks are sublime because of their long age and their rugged triumph over the elements, so Gothic castles are sublime because of their antiquity and their having survived the ravages of man and nature. The Reverend Archibald Alison in his 1793 treatise *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* explains: "Nothing is more sublime than the form of rocks, which seem to be coeval with creation, and which all the convulsions of nature have not been able to destroy. . . . The Gothic castle is . . . more sublime than all [other buildings] because, besides the desolation of time, it seems also to have withstood the assaults of war" (226-27).

Part Two

The Gothic novel, like the novel of sentiment, was criticized by adherents of realistic fiction. Jane Austen, for one, satirized the form in her mock-Gothic novel *Northanger Abbey*, as in this passage which contrasts the fantastic of the Gothic with the prosaic of everyday life: "in the central part of England. . . . murder was not tolerated, servants were not slaves, and neither poison nor sleeping potions to be procured, like rhubarb from every druggist" (137) or this passage in which the novel's protagonist, Caroline Moreland, is attracted to a man she had met only once because she hasn't again run into him in the small, elite social circle of the town of Bath, an absence she romanticizes: "this sort of mysteriousness," Austen writes, "which is always so becoming in a hero, threw a fresh grace in Catherine's imagination around this person and manners, and increased her anxiety to know more of him" (21). Another proponent of a realist aesthetic, Walter Scott, pointed to the absurdities of Gothic fiction in the introduction to his novel *Waverly*, imagining what a reader would have expected if he'd given his novel a Gothic title: "a castle . . . the keys . . . consigned to the care of some aged butler or housekeeper, whose trembling steps . . . were doomed to guide the hero, or heroine, to the ruinous precincts? . . . stories of blood and horror which [a heroine] had heard in the

servants' hall. . . . a profligate abbot, an oppressive duke . . . black cowls, caverns, daggers, electrical machines, trap-doors, and dark-lanterns" (3-4).

The Gothic was mocked by much of the respectable, male literary establishment, ostensibly for its lack of originality, its lack of realism, its lack of moral seriousness and the threat all of this posed to vulnerable readers. As often in such moral panics, these objections were couched in the need to protect the children. One anonymous reviewer, writing in 1798, for instance, worried that the Gothic novel "spread terror throughout all the nurseries and boarding schools of the metropolis." These novels, he wrote, serve "no useful purpose. . . They can only tend to infuse the most wild and ridiculous ideas into the minds of young people; fill them with groundless fears; make them imagine every *dark chamber* to be haunted, and even to be startled by their own shadows" (Review of *Santa Maria* 786). Likewise, another anonymous writer asked, "what instruction is to be reaped from the distorted ideas of lunatics[?] . . . Are we come to such a pass, that the only commandment necessary to be repeated is, 'Thou shalt do no murder?' Are the duties of life so changed, that all the instructions necessary for a young person is to learn to walk at night upon the battlements of an old castle, to creep hands and feet along a narrow passage, and meet the devil at the end of it?" ("Terrorist" 224).

On this view, it was the role of culture to instruct and the role of cultural guardians to paternalistically repudiate inappropriate instruction. And it was the lower classes, women in particular, who needed to be guarded from what Davison refers to as "the dangerous potential of mass literacy." "The popularity of the gothic novel," according to Fred Botting, Professor of English Literature at Kingston University, London, "highlights the way that the control of literary production was shifting away from the guardians of taste and toward the reading public itself, much to the chagrin of those interested in maintaining an exclusive set of literary values" (43). Thus, the 18th century satirist who offered the mocking Gothic recipe I quoted earlier deplored these novels' absence of moral purpose, specifically their impact on women, asking, "Is the corporeal frame of the female sex so masculine and hardy, that it must be softened down by the touch of dead bodies, clay-cold hands, and damp sweats? Can a young lady be taught nothing more necessary in life, than to sleep in a dungeon with venomous reptiles, walk through a ward with assassins, and carry bloody daggers in their pockets, instead of pin-cushions and needlebooks?" (224-25).

That a critic of Gothic romances believes a lady should be taught the necessities of life via pin-cushions and needlebooks suggests that the Gothic romance, many written by and read by women and often featuring an unchaperoned and vulnerable heroine in a dangerous foreign setting being tormented by a threatening male, was perceived as a challenge to the patriarchal system. It's easy to see why novels featuring an independent woman discovering herself through overcoming a dominant male would be thought threatening. The popularity of the Gothic n in the novel in the 1790s, specifically what has become known as the "female Gothic," suggests these novels were responding both to prevailing 18th century masculinity, the same male behaviors that the sentimental novel sought to correct, as well as to changing gender relations, that is, the onset of bourgeois domesticity, which would become such a mainstay in Victorian households.

Of the former, the reaction against 18th century masculinity, we should consider the standard female Gothic plot, which Fred Botting synopsizes as a story "of [an] orphaned heroine with all the virtues of middle-class domestic values discovering [her] aristocratic birthright after a series of terrors, persecutions and imprisonments" (65). This heroine's struggles against tyrannical males, against imprisonment in a castle, against threats of violence, against what appear to be supernatural forces was a painful education in and an overcoming of, to use a contemporary term, toxic masculinity (the license and libertinism and dominance of 18th century males), a necessary step before she could claim her right as heiress and spouse.

The latter point, that these novels were a reaction to incipient bourgeois domesticity, is noted by Indiana University Emeritus English Professor Patrick Brantlinger, who sees a continuity between disparate

novelistic genres: "Both the sentimental novel and the Gothic romance," he writes, "deal with the effects of potentially 'degrading' desires and of liberating individuals from emotional and moral restraints" (26). These restraints would become more fixed as domesticity became more established as a female ideal. Thus, female Gothic novels, as exemplified by *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which were written by women and centered on a female protagonist, were responding to the growing hegemony of conservative bourgeois values. Brean Hammond, Emeritus Professor at the University of Nottingham, and Shaun Regan, Lecturer at Queen's University, Belfast, elaborate on these changes:

> Suburbanization, the increasing availability of luxury goods, and increasing standards of living [for upper- and middle-class women] resulted in a more decorative purpose for many women, who were required to become their husbands' status symbols, and settled into an existence of hostessing and reading. Accompanying this change in social role was an ideological shift, whereby women began to be considered as inhabiting a separate social sphere of emotional expertise. It was in the early eighteenth century that women were first constructed as custodians of moral and emotional virtue, as homemakers with a monopoly on sensitivity. (11)

It was against this backdrop that the female Gothic novel developed and to which it responded. As George Haggerty explains, "The Gothic novel records the terror implicit in the increasingly dictatorial reign of [middle class] values" (221), the heroine being imprisoned in a castle and ruled by a tyrannical male reflecting the domestic imprisonment of bourgeois marriage. The resolution of the female Gothic novel, with heroine marrying, though, can seem reactionary, as if having encountered and overcome the horrors of domesticity, the heroine surrenders to it in a milder form. Perhaps such conclusions reflect a recognition of the limits women faced: these conclusions were what were perceived as the best that could be hoped for, not a radical overturning of the reign of bourgeois domesticity but a moderating of its worst excesses. Thus, Radcliffe concludes *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by having her heroine gain an inheritance and marry her true love. "Oh how joyful it is," she writes,

> to tell of happiness, such as that of Valancourt and Emily; to relate, that, after suffering under the oppression of the vicious and the disdain of the weak, they were, at length, restored to each other. . . . O! useful may it be to have shown, that, though the vicious can sometimes pour affliction upon the good, their power is transient and their punishment certain; and that innocence, though oppressed by injustice, shall, supported by patience, finally triumph over misfortune! (672)

The innocent, virginal heroine of the female Gothic romance, then, anticipates the Angel in the House. In the words of Kate Ferguson Ellis, Associate Professor of English at Rutgers University, "The Gothic novel . . . foregrounded the home as fortress, while at the same time exposing its contradictions. Displacing their stories into an imaginary past, its early practitioners appealed to their readers not by providing 'escape' but by encoding, in the language of aristocratic villains, haunted castles, and beleaguered heroines, a struggle to purge the house of license and lust and to establish it as a type of heaven on earth" (xi-xii).

The conservative closings of these novels, ironically, granted their authors the freedom to titillate their mostly female readers by offering an alternative to middle class domesticity while ostensibly reinforcing it. Threatened and threatening, the heroine and villain of the Gothic romance provided female readers, writes Haggerty, "the thrill of illicit sexuality or the masochistic enjoyment of their victimization" (226), as well as a variety of "transgressive sexual practice[s]: sadomasochism, incest, miscegenation, cannibalism, necrophilia, and homosexuality" (233), as can be read in this scene from *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, in which the virginal teen protagonist stumbles into a torture chamber:

> she perceived no furniture, except, indeed an iron chair, fastened in the centre of the chamber, immediately over which, depending on a chain from the ceiling, hung an iron ring. Having gazed upon these, for some time, with wonder and horror, she next observed iron bars below, made for

the purpose of confining the feet, and on the arms of the chair were rings of the same metal. . . . An acute pain seized her head, she was scarcely able to hold the lamp, and, looking round for support, was seating herself, unconsciously, in the iron chair itself. (338)

Scenes like this support Brantlinger's observation that "the Gothic romance is the soft porn of the late Enlightenment" (33). As such, and especially in the even more scandalous form of the male Gothic, whose focus, writes Kilgour, "is on the individual as satanic revolutionary superman, who is so extremely alienated that he cannot be integrated into society" (37), the Gothic novel could not persist within the cultural constraints of Victorian Britain. For instance, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* features a raping and murdering monk, a cross-dressing and Satan-worshipping friar, a poisoning prioress, nun-murdering and convent-burning rioters, a ghostly bleeding nun, the Wandering Jew, frequent depictions of female sexual desire and male sexual obsession, and many acts of black magic. Not exactly the stuff of *The Mill on the Floss.*

Such content was too shocking, too sexual, too blasphemous to fit into the decorous world of Victorian fiction. ((There was some room, however, within the less constrained world of American letters—where the Gothic persisted through writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ambrose Bierce.) But in Britain, so "the story goes," asserts University of Georgia English Professor Emerita Anne Williams, the Gothic "died during the 1820s, and [Charles Maturin's] *Melmoth the Wanderer* [published in 1820] is the last important Gothic 'novel'" (2). But that doesn't mean the Gothic was erased from the pages of Victorian fiction. Writing in 1810, one satirist provided a formula for how to transform a romance into a novel, a formula that anticipates how the Gothic romance was transformed and domesticated into the Victorian novel: Where you find a castle, put an house, a groan, put a sigh; a giant, a father; a blood-stained dagger, a fan; where you find a knight, put a gentleman without whiskers; a magic book sprinkled with blood put a letter bedewed with tears; a gliding ghost, a usurer or attorney; a midnight murder, a marriage; but a lady who is a heroine need not be changed, being versatile ("Age" 209-10).

In Britain, the Gothic couldn't be avoided; its remains were all around. In the 18ᵗʰ century, antiquarians grew increasingly curious about the strange Gothic remains that dotted the British Isles, a fascination which led to the construction of Gothic edifices, even sham ruins or so-called "follies." According to Suzanne Lang, "antiquarian interest in England's past and the romantic feeling toward mediaeval remains seems [sic] to be at least partly responsible for the ruins and follies which made their appearance in English landscape gardens from the early eighteenth century onward" (250). Horace Walpole, author of the first Gothic novel, had his summer home, Strawberry Hill, built according to the Gothic model. It became a popular tourist attraction, causing Walpole to grumble, "I have but a minute's time in answering your letter, my house is full of people, and has been so from the instant I breakfasted, and more are coming—in short, I keep an inn; the sign, the Gothic Castle. . . . my whole time is passed in giving tickets for seeing it, and hiding myself when it is seen—take my advice, never build a charming house for yourself between London and Hampton-court, everybody will live in it but you" ("Gothic"). From this initial interest in ruins developed a widespread appreciation for Gothic architecture in Victorian Britain, becoming, in the words of Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner, respectively professors of Victorian Literature and Culture and of Literature and Visual Culture at the University of Exeter, "the dominant architectural mode—transforming the English landscape, with 75 percent of new churches built on a Gothic classical model, as well as museums, railroad stations, townhalls, and pumping stations, the naming of children and the design of homes" (3).

In his 1836 book *Contrasts A Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste*, the prominent architect Augustus Northmore Welby Pugin, who helped design the most famous neo-Gothic structure, the rebuilt Palace of Westminster, home of Parliament, clearly asserts the greatness of the Gothic and the inferiority of the modern: "On comparing the Architectural Works of the last three centuries with those of the Middle Ages, the wonderful superiority of the latter must strike every attentive observer" (6). This interest in the physical remnants of medieval structures led architects like Pugin to design contemporary buildings according to

Gothic models. This acceptance of the Gothic style, though, was not universal. Pugin's design for the Foreign Office building in Whitehall was turned down because he was Catholic, making his Gothic design too associated with "papal aggression." The neoclassical style was also rejected—for being too associated with the French Revolution (Cannadine 282). In the end, the Foreign Office building was designed according to the style of the Italian Renaissance. Nonetheless, the Gothic and the medieval persisted in the arts. In painting, the medieval was an essential subject for the Pre-Raphaelites, as their name suggests. The William Morris-inspired Arts and Crafts Movement, which flourished from the 1880s to the 1920s, embraced the medieval in its designs for books and tapestries and furniture and stained glass. If in the 19th century the Gothic novel disappeared, an appreciation for things Gothic persisted.

Much of this appreciation for the Gothic and the medieval was a reaction against industrialization, an attempt to regain the artistry and craftwork of the pre-industrial age. But this was an appreciation for Gothic design, not for its wildly transgressive elements; for Gothic style, not for its sublime; for finials and arches, not terror and awe. Although notions of the sublime had been a key element of Romantic literature in the early 19th century, in works by poets such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as well as in the paintings of J.M.W. Turner, for the Victorians, the Gothic meant medieval minus the sublime. This appreciation for the sublime was overwhelmed by the miracles of the modern. Ruined castles, however foreboding, couldn't match the terror of dark, Satanic mills and dirty urban slums or the wonder of the Crystal Palace. The natural world, too, seemed conquerable through human ingenuity. The power of rivers was harnessed by textile mills. Great expanses were rapidly traversed by rail. Iron bridges spanned great gorges. Canals cut through the English countryside and the Suez. This wonderous world had no need for the supernatural. No spectral presence or haunting sounds could be more awe-provoking than the telegraph, patented by Samuel Morse the same year Victoria became queen, with the first transatlantic telegraphic communication, a congratulatory telegram from Queen Victoria to President James Buchanan, sent in 1858.

Another factor which led to the demise of the sublime was the dark questions it raised about the nature of the divine. The harmonious bourgeois world constructed by the Victorians depended upon a benign God. But geology's discovery of deep-time and the extinction of species and the implications of Darwinian natural selection unsettled the benign view of God and caused some Victorian intellectuals to view nature as godless and cruel, with humans not made in God's image but merely another species likely to persist only in the fossil record. The poet Alfred Tennyson in *In Memoriam* rued the fact that man once "trusted God was love indeed / And love Creation's final law." But that trust in God's love, Tennyson feared, might be a delusion. The world did not reveal God's hand but its opposite: "Nature, red in tooth and claw, / With ravine, shriek'd against [man's] creed." Tennyson feared that humans were no special creation but just another species, a creature that will "Be blown about the desert dust, Or seal'd within the iron hills." Likewise, in that traditional symbol of the divine, the ocean, the poet Matthew Arnold heard the "long withdrawing roar" of the sea of faith, leaving humanity in an almost-Gothic setting, "on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night."

As for the Victorian novel, while dispensing with some of the Gothic's more scandalous elements and worn-out conventions, it often retained key elements of the Gothic: hints of the supernatural; a central, dark mystery; a sense of the uncanny, usually connected to a particular setting or person; a virginal heroine besieged; and confrontations with a terrifying villain. The Gothic persisted in such novels as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* and especially in sister Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, in the Newgate novels of the 1840s, the sensation novels of the 1860s, and the penny dreadful serials. The Gothic can also be found in the many popular ghost stories written by countless Victorian authors, including Rhoda Broughton, Ellen Wood, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Sheridan Le Fanu, Wilkie Collins, Mary Gaskell, and of course Charles Dickens, in "A Christmas Carol." The Gothic was fully resurrected and updated at the end of the century with the appearance of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Henry James's *Turn of the Screw.* But the Gothic thrived throughout

the century. Just as it had offered an outlet for the irrational during the age of reason, so the Gothic served as an expression of horror and the uncanny in an era of progress and bourgeois domesticity. "The scandal of Gothic," explains Patrick Brantlinger, "arises partly because, in relation to both religion and sexuality, it demonstrates that rationality is either impotent or profoundly irrational" (27), ideas that were anathema to proper Victorians. Consequently, the Gothic sensibility, disguised and transmuted, persevered, its spectre inhabiting and inspiring and undermining the realist bourgeois Victorian novel, whispering of the terrors of the irrational and the unconscious that no amount of public utterances of confidence and belief in progress could eliminate.

Works Cited

"The Age; a Poem: Moral, Political, And Metaphysical.: With Illustrative Annotations. In Ten Books."

    London: Printed for Vernor, Hood, and Sharpe, 1810. *HathiTrust Digital Library*,

    babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.aa0006008239&view=1up&seq=7&skin=2021.

Alison, Archibald. *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste.* Printed by J. J. G. and G. Robinson,

    London; and Bell and Bradfute, Edinburgh 1790. *Internet Archive*,

    ia802608.us.archive.org/2/items/essaysonnaturepr00alis/essaysonnaturepr00alis.pdf.

Arnold, John H. *What Is Medieval History?* Polity Press, 2008.

Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey.* 1818. W.W. Norton, 2004.

Botting, Fred. *Gothic.* 2nd ed. Routledge, 2004.

Brantlinger, Patrick. *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British*

    Fiction. Indiana Univ. Press, 1988.

Burney, Fanny. *Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay, Edited by Her Niece.* Vol. 5 (1789-1793).

    London: Henry Colburn, 1843.

Cannadine, David. *Victorious Century: The United Kingdom, 1800-1906.* Penguin, 2019.

Castle, Terry. Introduction and Notes. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, by Ann Radcliffe. Oxford, 1998.

"Catholic Church in England and Wales." Wikipedia. *Wikipedia Foundation*, 7 Aug. 2022,

    en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church_in_England_and_Wales.

Clery, E. J. "The Genesis of 'Gothic' Fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction.* Edited by

    Jerrold E. Hogle, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002, pp. 21-40.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Seven Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton.* 1856. Rpt. New York: Burt

    Franklin, 1968.

Congreve, William. Incognita and The Way of the World. 1692, 1700. London: Edward Arnold

    Publishers, 1966. archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.113218/page/n27/mode/2up.

Culler, Dwight A. *The Victorian Mirror of History.* Yale Univ. Press, 1985.

Davison, Carol Margaret. *Gothic Literature 1764-1824.* Univ. of Wales Press, 2009.

De Sade, Marquis. "Reflections on the Novel." *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*. Translated by

    Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver, Grove, 1966, pp. 91-116.

Eagleton, Terry. *The English Novel: An Introduction*. Blackwell, 2005.

Ellis, Kate Ferguson. *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*. Univ.

    of Illinois Press, 1998.

"Gothic Revival Architecture." *Wikipedia*. Wikipedia Foundation. 13 Mar. 2022,

    en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_Revival_architecture.

Groom, Nick. *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2012.

Haggerty, George. "The Gothic Novel: 1764-1824." *The Columbia History of the British Novel*. Columbia

    Univ. Press, 1994, pp. 220-46.

Hammond, Brean and Shaun Regan. *Making the Novel: Fiction and Society in Britain, 1660-1789*.

    Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Hazlitt, William. *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*. 1818. Oxford Univ. Press, 1907.

Hopkins, Lisa. *Screening the Gothic*. Univ. of Texas Press, 2005,

    jasna.org/persuasions/printed/number27/klenck.pdf.

Hume, David. *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Cgraesar to the Revolution in 1688*. Vol.

    2. 1754-1761. London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864. *Internet Archive*,

    https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.167509/.

Johnson, Samuel. "The Modern Form of Romances Preferable to the Ancient. The Necessity of Characters

    Morally Good." *The Rambler*, 31 Mar. 1750, *Samuel Johnson's Essays*,

    www.johnsonessays.com/the-rambler/no-4-the-modern-form-of-romances-preferable-to-the-ancient-

    the-necessity-of-characters-morally-good/.

Kilgour, Maggie. *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*. Routledge, 1995.

Lewis, Matthew. *The Monk*. 1796. Broadview, 2004.

Maturin, Charles. *Melmouth the Wanderer*. 1820. Oxford Univ. Press, 1998.

Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women*. Doubleday, 1976. *Internet Archive*,

    archive.org/details/literarywomen00moer/.

Parker, Joanne and Corinna Wagner. Introduction. *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism*.

    Edited by Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner, Oxford Univ. Press, 2020, pp. 1-19.

Pugin, A. Welby. *Contrasts A Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding*

    Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste. 1836. Edinburgh: John Grant,

    1898, *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/contrastsorparal00pugi/.

Radcliffe, Ann. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. 1794. Oxford Univ. Press, 1998.

Review of *Santa Maria, or the Mysterious Pregnancy*, by J. Fox. *Gentlemen's Magazine*, vol. 68, pt. 2, 1798,

    HathiTrust Digital Library, pp. 786-87,

    babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015018405202&view=1up&seq=1&skin=2021.

Ruskin, John. *The Stones of Venice*. 1851-1853. Edited and abridged by J.G. Links, 1960, Da Capo, 2003.

Scott, Walter. *Waverly, or 'Tis Sixty Years Since*. 1814. Rev. ed. Oxford Univ. Press, 2015.

"Terrorist Novel Writing." *Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797. Eighteenth Century Journals*, pp. 223-25,

    www.18thcjournals.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Images/Spirit%20of%20the%20Public%20Journals

    %20for%201797/117#Issues.

Walpole, Hugh. *The Castle of Otranto* in *Three Gothic Novels*. Penguin, 1968, pp. 37-148.

Williams, Anne. *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995.