

## Lumen

Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies  
Travaux choisis de la Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

LUMEN

# Doth a Single Monk a Gothic Make? Constructing the Boundaries to Keep the Fictional Hordes at Bay

Deborah McLeod

Volume 16, 1997

Freedom and Boundaries  
Émancipation et frontières

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1012438ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1012438ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies / Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

### ISSN

1209-3696 (imprimé)

1927-8284 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

McLeod, D. (1997). Doth a Single Monk a Gothic Make? Constructing the Boundaries to Keep the Fictional Hordes at Bay. *Lumen*, 16, 35–51.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1012438ar>

### 3. Doth a Single Monk a Gothic Make?: Constructing the Boundaries to Keep the Fictional Hordes at Bay

In *Spectacular Politics: Theatrical Power and Mass Culture in Early Modern England* (1993) Paula Backscheider estimates that in the fifty-six years between the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 and *Melmoth the Wanderer* in 1820, four thousand gothic novels were published in England (157). Frederick Frank's estimate in *The First Gothics: A Critical Guide to the English Gothic Novel* (1987) is even higher; he calculates that no less than 4500 to 5000 Gothic novels were published in this period (ix). If the range suggested by Backscheider and Frank is accurate, then — based on Richard Altick's research in book production — gothic novels made up no less than 23 to 29 percent of all *books* published during this period.<sup>1</sup> Other more conservative critics such as R. D. Mayo have estimated that at least one-third of all *novels* published at the turn of the century were 'Gothic in character' (766). Everyone, however, would agree with J. M. S. Tompkins that at the turn of the century gothic was 'the predominant literary fashion,' and that the literary marketplace was flooded with gothic novels pandering to the appetites of a new female reading audience and stoking the rapid expansion of the circulating library system (243). Although, according to both Alison Milbank and Coral Ann Howells (among many others), the gothic continued to be immensely popular until the 1820s, gothic specialists such as Montague Summers consider it to have reached its heyday in the 1790s (Milbank 42, Howells 1, Summers 12). The gothic of this period is generally presented in terms of excess and evanescence, with David Richter's reference to the gothic as 'a craze' and Paula Backscheider's allusion to it as 'a public mania' typical of critical rhetoric (Richter, 'Gothic Fantasia' 150; Backscheider 157). With the exception of a very few works — the novels of Radcliffe, Reeve, and Lewis, for example — this torrent of gothic fiction has been perceived as a homogenous mass of dreadful writing, unrealistic plotting, and uninspired characterization, garnished heavily with the gothic's standard trappings: large helpings of looming castles, mysterious monks, decaying bodies, and victimized heroines.

In this paper I demonstrate that the standard opinion does not necessarily agree with the facts. Inspection of the output of 'the greatest single manufactory of fiction' during the 1790s (Taylor 28) — the notorious Minerva Press — reveals some rather startling results. William Lane, the founder of the Minerva Press, has been called 'the first high-pressure publisher and arch-promoter' of the novel (Kaufman 197). Lane was an astute businessman who pioneered the expansion of the circulating library system in order to construct a market for his own publications.<sup>2</sup> Although we do not know exactly how many libraries Lane established himself, in 1801 a reviewer for the *Monthly Magazine* estimated that there were 'not less than one thousand' circulating libraries in England (11: 238), and we do know that Minerva Press works were distributed throughout Britain and even as far as New York, Bombay, and Jamaica.

Although Lane has been grudgingly — if rather contemptuously — admired for his ability to turn a profit, he has hardly been regarded as a patron of the literary arts. According to A. S. Collins in *The Profession of Letters*, Lane was the 'prince' of those 'new men in "the trade"' who had an unhappy 'tendency to speculate in trash':

[Lane] poured out his novels one after another like a swarm of gaudy insects fluttering out their brief life in a dazzling burst of fashionable sunshine. The readers who were pleased by the sparkle of their tinsel must have been child-like in their tastes, but for some years they sold wonderfully well, and as Lane paid his authors little for them, he grew a rich man on the proceeds. (113)

Embedded in Collins's comments are three of the generally-held assumptions about the popular literature of the late eighteenth century. First, there is a denigration of the readership, who are presented as 'child-like' — naive readers only interested in literary tinsel. Second, the assumption is that popular publishers produced only fiction, pouring out into a willing market an endless stream of lightweight novels. And finally, there is the presentation of popular literature as ephemeral, homogeneous, and aesthetically unworthy of consideration (popular novels are 'insects,' 'a swarm,' 'gaudy,' and 'trash'). Since Lane epitomizes the popular publisher — he was, in fact, the most popular of the popular — one expects to find that he published novels to the exclusion of almost anything else. Furthermore, since it is generally accepted that '[t]he Gothic Romance was the predominant literary fashion of the 'nineties' (Tompkins 243), and that the Minerva Press was 'the greatest manufacturer and distributor of Gothic novels of [the] age' (Frank xi), one expects to find a very high percentage of gothic fiction in the Minerva Press output of the 1790s. What I have found, however, is that not only

are the publications of the Minerva Press far more varied than one would expect, but Lane published far less gothic than has been previously assumed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The last decade of the eighteenth century saw an unprecedented growth in the number of novels being produced and read. James Raven, using figures gleaned from the *Eighteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue*, estimates that by the turn of the century more than 150 novels were being published every year, a rate of growth double that of the mid-century (31). Such statistics reflect both an increased interest in prose fiction and a general increase in publishing of all kinds. At the Minerva Press, William Lane, who had printed 11 items in the 1770s, and 131 in the 1780s, produced 402 in the 1790s. My research indicates that of these 402 works, 158 — or 39 percent — were texts *other* than novels. These include 54 different types of compilations, including collections of maxims, sermons, hymns, fairy tales, fables, songs, jokes and travel accounts — as well as 35 books of instruction on a wide range of subjects including spelling, cooking, brewing, parenting, military matters and medicine. During this period Lane also published 17 volumes of poetry, 13 books of music, 9 plays, 4 religious works and 42 different pamphlets. Most of these works were produced in multiple editions.

This unexpectedly high percentage of non-fiction is corroborated by Lane's 1796-1802 Minerva Library Catalogue, in which novels make up only twenty percent of the 20,722 titles listed (Kaufman, 'Community Library' 15). Although it is true that stocks are no indication of circulation, it is equally true that catalogues by their nature signify what is considered vendible. Booksellers and library proprietors in the late eighteenth century did not survive without knowing their business, and there appears to have been substantial business in lending non-fiction (Kaufman, 'Community Library' 16).

Besides non-fiction, in the 1790s Lane published 244 novels. Based on the previously discussed estimates of gothic production — that is, that 26 to 29 percent of all books or 30 percent of all novels were gothic — we would expect from 73 to 117 of Lane's 1790 novels to be gothic in character. Indeed, it seems reasonable to expect even higher numbers since the Minerva Press is particularly associated with the gothic novel. In actual fact, however, I found gothic to be under- rather than over-represented. Of the 96 novels I analysed, only 22 — or 23 percent — can be considered to be in the pure gothic mode. The bulk of the novels (45 texts or 47 percent) have courtship plots, 18 of which are in epistolary form. Other important categories are wedlock plots (14), works for youth or children (14), fictionalized memoirs or biographies (9), and adventure

plots (4). One can only get the percentage of gothic novels up to anywhere near the expected levels if one classifies as gothic novels texts which have only secondary gothic characteristics — for example, a courtship novel with a single somewhat grisly moment. If one does so, the number of gothic novels rises to 36 out of the 96, or 37 percent. The percentage, however, is still much lower than we would expect from a press that, according to Montague Summers, had ‘achieved [such] an eminence in the Gothic field of fiction that [it] has left behind a tradition and a name even to-day’ (74).

Counting as gothic novels texts with only secondary gothic characteristics raises a number of questions: Just how many ‘gothic elements’ are required to make a ‘pure’ gothic? What, in fact, constitutes a gothic novel? Just how much horror does a ‘horrid’ novel need? Or, in other words, doth a single monk a gothic make?

These are questions of definition and different critics have answered with different sets of criteria and, depending on their criteria, have generated different canons of gothic works. While this practice is naturalized in critical discourse — space constraints dictate that we only discuss a limited number of works in an article or book — its effect is evident in the remarkable diversity of authors who have been considered part of the gothic heritage. These authors include, among many others, Ambrose Bierce, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Brockden Brown, Angela Carter, Charles Dickens, Isak Dineson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Daphne du Maurier, J. S. Le Fanu, William Faulkner, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hardy, Nathaniel Hawthorne, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Franz Kafka, Stephen King, Carson McCullers, Sylvia Plath, Edgar Allen Poe, Christina Rossetti, Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and Oscar Wilde. Indeed, it has been argued that the gothic is central to an entire segment of American fiction as exemplified by the works of John Hawkes, Joyce Carol Oates, James Purdy, and Flannery O’Connor. In an attribution still more sweeping, the gothic has even been argued to be central to *all* American fiction through the gothic nature of *Moby Dick*. There is a similar diversity of opinion about the ‘best’ or ‘most typical’ gothic novel: Robert Hume, for example, sees *Moby Dick* as ‘perhaps the greatest of all Gothic novels, and an almost perfect example of the form’ while Coral Ann Howells claims a similar distinction for *Jane Eyre* (Hume 287, Howells 4).

Although the resurgence of interest in the early gothic novel is reflected in an ever-increasing number of books and articles, critics have been highly selective about the authors and works which they have considered worthy of analysis. For the most part, our understanding of the genre is based on a limited number of core works. Elizabeth Napier, for example, in her 1987 critical study *The Failure of Gothic: Problems of Disjunction in an Eighteenth-century Literary Form*, chooses four texts with

which to illustrate her thesis that the significance of the gothic genre has been overstated: Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Lewis's *The Monk*, and Radcliffe's two best-known novels, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*. Napier's choice of texts is not significant in itself, but a glance through the gothic criticism reveals it to be telling in its typicality. While critics occasionally include less central authors such as Charlotte Smith, William Beckford, and Charles Maturin, or less typical examples of the genre such as *Caleb Williams*, *Frankenstein*, and *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, the number of different authors and texts chosen is surprisingly limited. Secondary gothic novels such as *Vathek* or *Melmoth* are often mentioned but seldom examined in any depth, while Howells's inclusion of a virtually unknown text — Anthony Frederick Holstein's *Love, Mystery, and Misery* (1810) — in her study of the same name is highly unusual. Thus, our understanding of the thousands of novels categorized as 'gothic' — indeed, even our definition of what constitutes 'gothic' — has been based on a very few works by only a handful of authors.

Granted, not everyone sees this as a problem. In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick dismisses the issue flatly, noting that '[w]hile there is very little difficulty in identifying or setting a date to the Gothic novel proper, most Gothic novels are not worth reading, making it otiose to labor a definition for their sake' (3). Even if other critics are unwilling to join Sedgwick in her curt dismissal of the (alleged) bulk of the period's reading material, they still often disagree on what constitutes the gothic or even if a gothic genre exists. Gary Kelly, for example, argues that the gothic is not so much an authentic genre as an ensemble of adaptable themes and formal elements (49). Maggie Kilgour agrees; in *The Rise of the Gothic* (1995) she depicts the form as a 'Frankenstein's monster, assembled out of bits and pieces of the past'(4). According to Kilgour, the result is a 'confused and self-contradictory' genre that has spawned a critical discourse equally contrary and discordant (5).

And make no mistake, gothic criticism *is* contrary and confusing. For every critical position, there seems to be an opposite, often equally-convincing, view. Thus, Robert Hume can argue as convincingly for the genre's psychological complexity as Elizabeth Napier can for its superficiality, and Elizabeth MacAndrew can find in the genre a profound attempt to deal with the concept of evil at the same time that Montague Summers can declare the gothic to function as romantic escapism. This multiplicity of critical opinion goes far beyond the standard disagreements found with other genres; the multifarious nature of the gothic seems to inspire a particular plurality of critical viewpoint. The gothic narrative is often fragmented and multiplex, characterized by a multi-

tude of plot devices and a distancing and diversification of the narrative in time and place (seen, for example, in the popularity of exotic locales and inset tales). The gothic tends to assimilate sundry characteristics and formal devices from other genres, including the romance; the German *Ritter-, Räuber-, und Schauerromane*; the ghost story; and the fairy tale. Indeed, there is often an enthusiastic adoption of entire genres — of diaries, letters, poetry, songs and manuscripts, for example. Thus, the very structure of the gothic invites a diversity of treatment. It is truly the case that given a viewpoint the gothic will provide a site on which to exercise it. How one sees the gothic depends on which texts one chooses, and which texts one chooses depends upon how one defines the gothic in the first place.

The most common method of defining the Gothic is to regard it as a clustering of certain formal characteristics of plot, setting, character, and narrative technique. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, for example, M. H. Abrams notes that gothic authors

set their stories in the medieval period, often in a gloomy castle replete with dungeons, subterranean passages, and sliding panels, and made plentiful use of ghosts, mysterious disappearances, and other sensational and supernatural occurrences (which in some writers turned out to have natural explanations); their principal aim was to evoke chilling terror by exploiting mystery, cruelty, and a variety of horrors. (72)

Early discussion of the gothic novel by such critics as Ernest Baker, Edith Birkhead, Eino Railo, Montague Summers, and Devendra Varma tended to dwell on these gothic devices, with much effort made to trace their sources and their reduplication. Gothic fiction has inspired voluminous and often complex lists of gothic machinery, painfully sub-divided and categorized. In *Shilling Shockers of the Gothic School*, for example, William W. Watt discusses what appears to be a comprehensive list of gothic conventions, including settings (haunted castles, convents), characters (scowling villains, trembling heroines, stout-hearted heroes, garrulous servants, faithful peasants, cruel abbesses, tyrannical parents), and gothic machinery (animated portraits, mysterious manuscripts, fainting ability of heroine, banditti, identifying 'strawberry marks').

According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick the extreme conventionality of the gothic novel gives it a unique status in literature:

Surely no other modern literary form as influential as the Gothic novel has also been as pervasively conventional. Once you know that a novel is of the Gothic kind (and you can tell that from the title), you can predict its contents with an unnerving certainty. You know the important features of its *mise en scène*: an

oppressive ruin, a wild landscape, a Catholic or feudal society. You know about the trembling sensibility of the heroine and the impetuosity of her lover . . . (9)

She notes that the gothic novel is so conventional, 'it would be possible to *write* a gothic novel by the formula that would only be useful for *describing* a mid-Victorian, or eighteenth-century picaresque, or modern one' (10). And certainly, it has seldom been questioned that we can *identify* a gothic novel by those same conventions or even — as Sedgwick maintains — by the title alone.

But this is not perhaps as unproblematic as it first appears. Abrams's definition fits numerous gothics, but not, perhaps, all. What if a text has only some of the characteristics? Which ones are the important ones, the elements that define the gothic? For Robert Hume, the 'key' characteristic is an atmosphere of 'evil and brooding terror' (286). For Victor Sage, the 'hallmark' of the gothic is 'a deliberate archaism' (17), while Chris Baldick considers the central characteristic to be an ancient, ruinous house that imprisons the protagonist and represents the presence of the past over its inhabitants (Milbank 41). Each 'key,' 'hallmark,' or 'central characteristic,' however, excludes texts generally accepted as gothics. Again, we return to the question: can we, in fact, define what constitutes a gothic novel?

Frederick Frank attempts to answer this question in *The First Gothics*, his 1987 bibliography of the early gothic. His purpose is 'to present a usable taxonomy of the several varieties of Gothic experience,' to which end he presents a highly detailed three-page definition, including a list of what he considers the 'nine most important formal characteristics and imperative motifs of the Gothic novel' (xiii). These are claustrophobic containment; subterranean pursuit; supernatural encroachment; aliveness of architecture and objects of art; 'extraordinary positions' and lethal predicaments; abeyance of rationality; the possible victory of evil; supernatural gadgetry, contraptions, machinery, and demonic appliances; and finally, 'a constant vicissitude of interesting passions' (436-37). Frank — exhibiting true taxonomic tenacity — further offers a list of gothic sub-categories including gothified history, horror gothic, terror gothic, romance of the ruin, monastic shocker, triple-decker gothic, turret gothic, shudder or quiver gothic, chivalric romance, and so on.

Frank's typology of the gothic novel seems seductively comprehensive — until one tries to classify something with it. Then one discovers that paradoxically, it is *so* comprehensive that its categories are simultaneously too wide and too narrow to be of use. Frank has gathered together so many possible conventions that it is conceivable that almost any eighteenth-century text could be considered gothic. At the same time his sub-categories are so restrictive, that a novel can be classified with



them only by distortion. For example, a 'grotto gothic' is, according to Frank, 'a Gothic novel which restricts most of its action to a single cavernous or natural, subterranean environment.' He then notes that many novels have titles which designate caves, grottos, or interior enclosures. This is, of course, true, but so few (if any) authors encave their protagonists for the bulk of three, four or five volumes that the category is virtually useless.

Some critics find the presence or absence of gothic machinery relatively unimportant; for them the Gothic is defined by authorial purpose or the novel's effect on the reader. Ian Watt considers that the main purpose of the gothic is to create emotion in the reader. According to Elizabeth MacAndrew, gothic novels function as embodiments of 'ideas about man's psychology' written to educate the reader's feelings through the arousal of sympathy through pity and terror (4). For her, then, novels with a didactic structure such as *Caleb Williams* or *Frankenstein* are more central to the gothic tradition than the mass of novels organized as gothic melodramas (Richter, 'Gothic Impulse' 292). Not so for Ellen Moers, though she too defines the gothic in terms on its effect on the reader. She sees the gothic as a genre in which 'fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite authorial intent: to scare' (90). David Seed also sees terror 'virtually defin[ing] the genre,' especially the fear of one being exerting total control over another (271). For Moers and Seed, then, it is likely that *Hermesprong* (which Frank includes in his gothic bibliography) would be a less central example of the genre than *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey* (1797) or *Edgar; or, The Phantom of the Castle* (1798).

The third method of definition involves the 'fit' of a text into a pre-existing ideological framework. Feminist and Marxist literary critics, for example, may generate different canons of gothic novels depending on their interests. Kate Ferguson Ellis, for example, is interested in the entrapment and enclosure of women in the gothic novel; in *The Contested Castle* she argues that the 'female gothic' is a 'site of resistance' which allows women to protest against their political and economic subjugation. Her work tends to centre on the texts of Radcliffe and other female authors. David Punter finds in the gothic 'a unique mode of projecting the conflict and terror of inter-class relations' (Richter, 'Gothic Impulse' 284). For him three central Gothic texts are Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), and Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), since to his mind all three investigate — rather than portray — the extremes of terror, and in all three the terror has to do with persecution. Because Ellis and Punter are exploring different

ideological viewpoints, they see different texts as central and thus delineate different canons of representative works.

This range of examples from critics serves to illustrate two points. The first is that even though we all know what we are talking about when we talk about the 'gothic,' our definitions have two shortcomings. Either they are shaped by the need to do certain ideological work for us, or they tend to describe only certain canonized or accepted novels. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (or some other equivalent text) becomes our template for the genre. This works as long as every novel we look at fits the pattern perfectly. But of course every novel does not. The 1790s saw the beginning of popular formulaic fiction; we find in these years far more variation than we would expect, given our modern understanding of popular literature. The novelists and publishers in the 1790s were on new ground; they were facing mass production and large reading audiences for the first time. Although we can see some awareness of the idea of formulaic fiction in this period, the authors of the nineties were writing novels rather than 'gothics'; they had no 'gothic style sheets' enforcing certain generic norms in the fashion of today's Harlequin Romances.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, the evidence adduced from the critics suggests that we have set up a number of 'hermeneutic circles' by which we find what we are looking for. This is especially — and perhaps, most surprisingly true — when we define the gothic with the seemingly objective criteria of certain conventions. Frederick Franks' work on the gothic is a prime example of this process; he has collected and codified conventions to the point that the generic classification collapses under the weight of the diversity of the texts it must support. It becomes clear that almost any work can be considered gothic if one has enough desire to make it so.

Take, for example, *The Restless Matron, a Legendary Tale* (1799), a three-volume Minerva Press novel by Mrs. Showes. The title refers to the Countess of Pyft; she is understandably restless since she is a spectre haunting a castle in Switzerland in order to work off a curse. Her husband, who had wished for a girl, is so disappointed when she gives birth to a stillborn daughter after seven sons in a row that he curses her: all the women who give birth to daughters will die in childbed, and every resultant daughter will not only be blamed for her mother's death, but will end up seduced, miserable, cast-out and condemned by the family. He then has his wife buried alive. The Matron's project in the novel is to lift the curse by getting one of the succeeding countesses to trust her enough to give birth in her old apartments.

The action of the novel spans several generations and focuses on a number of women. Count Ulrich, a vain, extravagant sensualist who proves to be the original count's spiritual descendant, marries Agnes, then murders her in order to marry his malevolent mistress, Viria. Their

wedding becomes a 'combination of funeral and bridal entertainments,' however, with the suicide of Ulrich's aunt, a victim of the curse who has been seduced and left pregnant, and who drowns herself after attempting to kill her newborn child. The curse also taints the life of Ulrich's sister Lina, who must withstand an attempted seduction and rape and is only saved through the intervention of the ghost of a friendly hermit. Even though this ends the final portion of the Matron's curse, the Matron continues to wander around in a dress dipped in blood, not able to rest until she has confronted the spirit of her husband and urged Viria to repent. The novel ends with Viria poisoned and Lina happily married.

Is this a gothic? Well, it certainly has the hallmarks; it has a castle and a ghost, mysterious unexplained events (for example, the Countess's corpse does not decompose), a curse, someone buried alive, someone poisoned . . . what other markers could one possibly desire?

What such a classification masks, however, is the tone of the novel. The Countess is the most charming and domesticated of spectres. She and Agnes become the best of friends; they visit, they chat, the ghost acts as the younger woman's mentor. The only characters afraid of the restless matron are servants who are clearly foolish; even the villains find her just a bit of a nuisance. Obviously, the reader is not meant to be frightened. This novel, in fact, cries out to be read as a feminist fable, and as an example of a female writer transforming the gothic genre for her own purposes. Critics who define the gothic by conventions, however, will likely classify *The Restless Matron* as gothic. Critics who look to authorial purpose or the effect of the text on the reader — some evocation of the sublime, the subconscious, or of liberation from reason — have the choice of seeing the novel either as something other than gothic or as a failed attempt at one. The third set of critics will appropriate it or reject it according to their own interests: feminists might appropriate it, Marxists may not. But even if feminist critics want to appropriate this text, it does not fit particularly well into any feminist paradigm. This novel is not a story of patriarchy triumphant, nor is it a tale of female empowerment; it is a novel that deserves to be taken on its own terms, not as an example of a class, but as a delightful excursion beyond the limits of our impulse to classify.

*Rosella; or, Modern Occurrences* (1799) by Mary Charlton presents similar difficulties. In *The First Gothics* Frank classifies *Rosella* as 'pure or high gothic' in the 'terror mode.' He notes its many satiric elements and explicitly compares it to *Northanger Abbey*. According to Frank,

All the heroine's hopes and expectations of medieval confinement in a spectre-filled abbey are undercut by having each successive 'terror' dissolve into a

'modern occurrence.' Ordinary gentlemen at the breakfast table become cadavers, fiends lurk in the library, guest lists turn into horrible manuscripts . . .

He considers the heroine to have kinship with the 'fool-hardy heroines of the mock-gothic category.' Besides the difficulty with conflicting classifications (it is somehow both 'pure or high gothic' and 'mock-gothic'), Frank's synopsis hardly does justice to this complex and disturbing novel. In actual fact, while *Rosella* does focus its satiric gaze on the gothic novel, it is far more concerned with lampooning the sentimental aspects of the popular fiction of the period. Like *Northanger Abbey*, *Rosella* has a rather prosaic heroine, and both novels explore the mechanisms of social control. But *Rosella* is a much darker, more disturbing novel than *Northanger Abbey*; this is a novel in which the exertion of social control has a frighteningly realistic violent edge.

Rosella is the unacknowledged daughter of a novel-mad woman. Her mother, Sophia, as a foolish young heiress had eloped with a young man with an unfortunate predilection for gambling, who dies almost immediately after the wedding. Sophia's father cleans up the whole mess: Sophia's marriage is kept secret, and her daughter is brought up as a friend's ward. Sophia, who spends years in a limbo of childless-parent and widowed-spinster-hood, consoles herself by reading romances, until à la *The Female Quixote*

at length every pretty young woman she saw, was immediately supposed to be a damsel suffering under the pressure of excessive sensibility, and every haberdasher's journeyman who trudged on Sundays across a road skirting her father's grounds, was transformed into a love-lorn swain in search of his caged divinity. (1: 122)

As Rosella grows older, Sophia focuses her romantic mania onto her daughter, casting Rosella in the role of young heroine and herself as 'one of those celebrated mamas, destined to bring forth beautiful and tender-souled creatures' (1: 121). Since all heroines have adventures and since such events are strangely lacking in Rosella's life, Sophia takes her on a tour of Scotland, and, by forcing Rosella into situations where adventures might be likely, careens her into various indecorous and dangerous scrapes. Rosella, who is torn between horror and loyalty, finds her reputation damaged despite her resolute attempts to do what is socially correct. Sophia's madcap expedition ends abruptly when her cousin and heir arrives in Scotland, abducts her, claims she is insane, and confiscates her property. All is eventually resolved with Sophia admitting the error of her ways and Rosella marrying.

What is unusual about this novel is its realistic and unflinching portrayal of violence against women. For example, Sophia's aunt, Mrs. Delaval, is held a virtual prisoner in a friend's household. The friend's husband, Mr. Macdoual, manipulates Mrs. Delaval through her friendship with his wife and by threats of violence. Mrs. Macdoual, 'a good-humoured looking, little fat woman,' scuds about 'in a manner that demonstrated an unseen battle between constitutional civility and constitutional corns' and is completely helpless against her husband's violence (4: 33-34). When Macdoual is heard 'thundering anathemas, and horsewhipping one of his girls' Mrs. Macdoual 'stopped her ears very carefully and begged to be informed when Maggy had done screaming, for to hear the poor thing, and not be able to help her, made her quiver like an aspin-leaf' (4: 46). Charlton is unflinching in her depiction of the effects of such violence: Mrs. Macdoual, despite her good nature, is seen to be willing to sacrifice both her children and her friend's health for family peace; the Macdoual girls are shown to be brutalized by continuous abuse; and Mrs. Delaval, although she eventually escapes, dies a short time later from an injury sustained in the Macdoual household.

Charlton is equally severe in her depiction of the violence that is used to curb Sophia's quest for feminine power through romantic narrative. Throughout the text Sophia's romantic illusions are linked to fantasies of female power; her imaginary romantic narrative rights wrongs against women and explicitly rewards femininity. After her abduction by her cousin, however, Sophia emerges completely tamed, the narrative figuring her in the role of the penitent: her 'person . . . was emaciated, her countenance pale, and . . . she had lost her hair' (4: 172). She sees her former beliefs as 'follies' and 'chimeras' and avows a system of rigid self monitoring and control. Her emotional self-containment is mirrored in her voluntary physical seclusion; she retreats to the country and refuses to quit her 'enclosure,' not even trusting herself to attend her daughter's wedding 'from the fear of betraying a too potent emotion' (4: 286, 304). Perhaps most interesting is the reaction of the male characters to Sophia's 'sobered sentiments.' When the hero sees the reformed Sophia, he is 'shocked by the alteration' but 'felt a secret gratification in observing the sedateness of her countenance, and the composed gravity of her conversation' (4: 286). The novel closes with Sophia safely contained and Rosella firmly ensconced in a patriarchal value system.

The physical violence that brings Sophia into line is never targeted at Rosella, but Charlton explicitly connects the daughter's transgressions of social codes with her mother's 'insanity.' At one point in the narrative, for example, one of the novel's most respected male characters notes that 'If . . . [Sophia] is really sane, which I have some reason to suppose, I trust that her past danger will henceforth teach her to pay a little more

deference to the established usages of society' (4: 113). By splitting the heroine function in her narrative between Rosella and Sophia, Charlton simultaneously displaces the violence away from the overt heroine (it would be unthinkable for the heroine to lose all her hair or become emaciated) while exposing the violence that enforces feminine codes of behaviour. This is a powerful and sophisticated novel, but its complexity is effaced by its classification as either 'pure or high gothic' or 'mock-gothic.'

There is a slightly different problem in the case of *The Farmer of Inglewood Forest* (1796), a very popular and much-reprinted novel by Elizabeth Helme. The fact that it has been discussed in Montague Summers's *A Gothic Bibliography*, listed in Frederick Frank's *The First Gothics*, and summarized in Ann Tracy's book of gothic plot summaries seems to indicate a gothic classification. Its inclusion in these texts, however, is somewhat surprising since there is no supernatural or other recognizable gothic paraphernalia. In fact, this is a relentlessly sentimental novel, rather in the mode of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, in which the idyllic rural peace of Farmer Godwin and his family is destroyed by chance contact with urban decadence (the villain debauches one of the daughters by teaching her Godwin's philosophy and ruins her brother by encouraging him to read novels). The novel's classification as a gothic is based, in Frank's case, on what he calls Helme's skilful 'manipulation of prurient, morbid, or violent material' including a rape, an incestuous relationship, and a scene in which a seducer confronts the bodies of his victim and her supposed infant laid out in a coffin. The classification is suspect, however, since the rape is actually a seduction, the incestuous relationship is a near-miss, and the coffin scene is no more sensational than similar scenes in dozens of other sentimental novels. It appears likely that Summers never read the novel but included it in the interests of bibliographic thoroughness. Frank assumed its gothic status from Summers's listing and only skimmed the novel looking for gothic conventions to confirm Summers's classification. Its presence in Tracy's book may be misleading, though it is presumably one of those she says she has included to prevent others from making the same mistake.

This mis-classification of *The Farmer of Inglewood Forest* is not an isolated incident. Classifications of many texts are made from previous readings by others, by reading the opening and closing portions of each volume, or even just by guessing from the title. If the author of a four-volume courtship novel happens to put the word 'castle' in the title or mentions a monk at the end of a volume or puts the heroine in a cave at the end of the novel, the text has a very good chance of being listed in a Gothic bibliography somewhere. Straight-out errors of fact are even more of a problem. For example, Frank classifies Mary Julia Young's

1798 novel *Rose-Mount Castle: or, False Report* as ‘pure or high Gothic’ and notes that ‘[t]he false report apparently involves the reputed death of the heroine Myra herself after she has been secretly consigned to the haunted darkness of Rose-Mount Castle’ (428). In the copy of *Rose-Mount Castle* I read, I looked in vain for Myra, her death, or a haunted castle. Instead I found a male protagonist — the son of a French duke and an Irish mother — who washes ashore in Ireland and unluckily takes refuge in a bandits’ hideout. After a series of adventures, none involving ghosts, the bandits are rehabilitated (they all become sailors), the hero marries Louisa, and they take their place in the family home, Rose-Mount Castle. The ‘false report’ here is the novel’s plot summary and classification as ‘pure or high gothic.’

\* \* \* \* \*

The popular literature of the 1790s offers particular challenges for bibliographers and literary critics. We are faced with a daunting number of texts, some very badly written, many in very poor condition. Often these early novels are extremely rare; some have been literally read to pieces, while others exist only as single copies in private collections or in rare book libraries. So we have had good reasons to rely on the readings and research of others. But close inspection of these readings against the original texts indicates that they have not always been as accurate as they might be; indeed, they are often highly misleading.

The critics of the 1790s found dealing with this deluge of publications no easier than the critics of the present day. During the last decade of the eighteenth century, literature was only one of a number of things perceived as being out of control. By rendering the popular novel homogeneous, critics contained — or enjoyed the illusion of containing — the explosion of fiction, first, by feeling they could understand it, and secondly, by defining and valorizing an elite or high literature through the denigration of a popular or low fiction. A primary element of this critical movement was the classification of popular fiction into various sub-genres — such as the gothic and the sentimental — which were associated with femininity and thus devalued. Genre classification by formula or codifiable conventions, however, is problematic at best; it both elides distinctions between texts and results in a hermeneutically circular process by which many non-gothic texts have been incorrectly classified.

I have attempted to draw attention to this critical movement by questioning some of the basic assumptions about the popular literature of the 1790s. Although we have long accepted that there was a deluge of popular gothic fiction in the last decade of the eighteenth century, my research on the Minerva Press output of this period challenges the given

notion. Of course, my own system of classification is as open to critique as anyone else's. I have no doubt that I have formed my own hermeneutic loops by which I tend to discover what I intend to discover. But I would argue that — given that I have consistently attempted to give full weight to the standard understanding of the period (in other words, my findings are slanted towards finding more rather than less gothic) — I am still finding not only that there is more diversity within the Minerva Press output than we have previously assumed, but that Lane was publishing far less gothic than we have previously believed. If the Minerva Press, the very emblem of popular publishing, did not produce the flood of gothic we have assumed to exist, then it is unlikely that anyone else did either. And, if this is the case, we have been labouring under a serious misconception about the literary marketplace of the period.

DEBORAH MCLEOD  
University of Victoria

## Notes

- 1 Altick estimates that production shifted from an average of 100 titles per year in the mid-eighteenth century to an average of 372 titles per year in the 1790s.
- 2 According to Dorothy Blakey, Lane was 'largely instrumental in the spread of the circulating library movement to the provinces' (119). Paul Kaufman qualifies Lane's contribution to the development of the circulating library system, noting that Blakey does not take sufficient account of the rapid spread of book clubs and coffee houses that took place long before Lane's contribution ('Community Library' 10).
- 3 This is not to say that authors were not aware of writing within the conventions of a particular genre; they certainly were aware of the conventions of the romance, for example. But the requirements of a rapidly expanding market for fiction had an effect on the perception of novels and novelists. It is in this period that the metaphors of the factory become closely linked with the production of popular fiction. One also sees the idea of writing to formula becoming more common; see, for example, the prescription for transforming domestic fiction into gothic fiction that appeared in *The Age; A Poem: Moral, Political, and Metaphysical* (London, 1810) 209-10.



## Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 4th ed. New York: Holt, 1981.
- Altick, Richard. *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1957.
- Backscheider, Paula R. *Spectacular Politics: Theatrical Power and Mass Culture in Early Modern England*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993.
- Birkhead, Edith. *The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance*. London: Constable, 1921.
- Blakey, Dorothy. *The Minerva Press, 1790-1820*. London: Oxford (The Bibliographical Society at the University Press), 1939.
- Collins, A. S. *The Profession of Letters: A Study of the Relation of Author to Patron, Publisher, and Public, 1780-1832*. Clifton, NJ: Kelley, 1973.
- Ellis, Kate Ferguson. *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1989.
- Frank, Frederick S. *The First Gothics: A Critical Guide to the English Gothic Novel*. New York: Garland, 1987.
- Howells, Coral Ann. *Love, Mystery, and Misery: Feelings in Gothic Fiction*. London: Athlone, 1978.
- Hume, Robert. 'Gothic versus Romantic: A Reevaluation of the Gothic Novel.' *PMLA* 84 (1969): 282-90.
- Kaufman, Paul. 'The Community Library: A Chapter in English Social History.' *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*. n.s. 57, pt. 7 (1967): 1-67.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Libraries and Their Users*. Collected Papers in Library History. London: Library Association, 1969.
- Kelly, Gary. *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789-1830*. London: Longman, 1989.
- Kilgour, Maggie. *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- MacAndrew, Elizabeth. *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*. New York: Columbia UP, 1979.
- Mayo, Robert D. 'Gothic Romance in the Magazines.' *PMLA* 65 (1950): 762-89.
- Milbank, Alison. 'I could a tale unfold': Women, Romanticism and the Gothic.' *Ward*. 41-49.
- Moers, Ellen. 'Female Gothic.' *The Endurance of Frankenstein*. Ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher. Berkeley: U of California P, 1979. 77-87.
- Napier, Elizabeth R. *The Failure of Gothic: Problems of Disjunction in an Eighteenth-century Literary Form*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1987.
- Railo, Eino. *The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism*. London: Routledge, 1927.
- Raven, James. *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1750-1800*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992.

- Richter, David H. 'The Gothic Impulse: Recent Studies.' *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction*. Ed. Michael Fred Kaplan and Edward Guiliano Timko. New York: AMS, 1983. 279-311.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 'Gothic Fantasia: The Monsters and the Myths. A Review-Article.' *The Eighteenth Century* 28.2 (1987): 149-70.
- Sage, Victor, ed. *The Gothick Novel: A Casebook*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. New York: Methuen, 1986.
- Seed, David. 'Gothic Definitions.' *Novel* 14.3 (Mar. 1981): 270-74.
- Summers, Montague. *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964.
- Taylor, John Tinnon. *Early Opposition to the English Novel: The Popular Reaction from 1760 to 1830*. New York: King's Crown, 1943.
- Tompkins, J. M. S. *The Popular Novel in England, 1770-1800*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1961.
- Varma, Devendra P. *The Evergreen Tree of Diabolical Knowledge*. Washington: Consortium, 1972.
- Ward, Geoff, ed. *A Guide to Romantic Literature: 1780-1830*. Bloomsbury Guides to English Literature. London: Bloomsbury, 1993.
- Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the English Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957.
- Watt, William W. *Shilling Shockers of the Gothic School: A Study of Chapbook Gothic Romances*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1932.