Originally published in/as:

Neill, Natalie. "'we stare and tremble': Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Horror Novels." In *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature*, edited by Kevin Corstorphine and Laura R. Kremmel, Palgrave, 2018, pp. 165–79.

Please use this source when citing the article.
This version © Natalie Neill

Title: "We stare and tremble": Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Horror Novels

Author: Natalie Neill

In *Northanger Abbey*, when Isabella Thorpe gives Catherine Morland a list of novels to read, Catherine asks her friend excitedly, "[A]re they all horrid, are you sure they are all horrid?"[1] Jane Austen's heroine was not alone in her enthusiasm for "horrid" books. Novels of horror and suspense were exceedingly popular with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reading audiences. These novels also attracted the most criticism and parody during a period when all novels were regarded with a degree of suspicion. As Michael Gamer notes, any history of horror must take into account this genre's "cultural stigma"[2] and perceived low literary value. The first horror novels were decried for aesthetic, moral, and even political reasons. A great deal of the fear and revulsion that horror novels generated came from moralists and conservative critics. In this chapter, I discuss the history and fraught reception of the horror novel from the mid eighteenth century to the late Victorian period. I provide an overview of some of the most influential early examples of the genre in order to show how the horror novel evolved as a result of the novelists' imitation and reworking of earlier texts. I argue, moreover, that the twin forces of public approbation and critical scorn defined the early horror novel and drove its development. Throughout the chapter, I explore the mixed responses that horror elicits within

individual readers and among groups of readers. I explain horror's popular appeal as well as the negative reactions to the genre; in particular, I suggest that the horror novel has always attracted interest and fear because of its tendency to dramatize real social conditions and anxieties.

As its name suggests, horror literature is usually defined not through a clear set of conventions but rather by the chief and most obvious reaction it evokes in the reader; namely: "the thrill of horror and surprise."[3] In her essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry" (1826), Romantic novelist Ann Radcliffe argued that horror "contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates [the faculties]," but although the effect is "sudden and strong, [it] is also transient."[4] The readerly effect of horror may be fleeting, but as a novelistic genre, horror has remarkable longevity. Most accounts of the horror novel identify Horace Walpole as its originator. Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is a "Gothic" tale (that is, a medieval one) about a tyrant named Manfred, the long-suffering ladies in his family (whom he abuses as he tries to retain his ill-gotten power), an ancient prophecy, and avenging ghosts. Although the story revolves around the actions of the villainous Manfred, Walpole's title suggests that the main character of the book may be the Gothic castle itself. With its labyrinthine corridors, secret chambers, trap doors, haunted portrait galleries, and resident animated skeleton, the castle set a blueprint for countless haunted keeps in later horror novels. In addition to its prototypical setting, *The Castle of Otranto* features spectral visitations, prophetic dreams, sexual violence, and murder. Walpole claimed the supernatural and the irrational as his subject matter and thus engaged with the very ideas that the Enlightenment rationalist philosophies of his day denied. His story allowed eighteenth-century readers to confront dark and barbarous topics from a safe, aesthetic distance. This is just one reason why Walpole's curious medieval tale proved so popular (and why horror novels continue to attract readers today).

As Deborah Russell has recently shown, modern scholars of horror fiction are merely following the lead of Walpole's contemporaries in regarding *The Castle of Otranto* as the "starting point" of the genre.[5] In the late 1790s, critic T. J. Mathias bemoaned the fact that ghostly horrors loaded the shelves of "every novel shop," and he disparagingly referred to such books as *Otranto*'s "spawn."[6] Yet, no work springs out of a literary vacuum, and Walpole's tale of Gothic supernaturalism owes debts to many earlier texts and traditions. For example, the supernatural machinery, which includes the enchanted armour of a giant spectre, is adapted from Chivalric romances. The ghost scenes recall those in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Walpole also combined elements from two popular eighteenth-century novelistic genres: the novel of sensibility and the criminal biography. The Gothic villain and the damsels in distress in Walpole's book resemble the wicked rakes and wronged women found in the popular sentimental novels of the day. Manfred also bears a resemblance to the criminal antiheroes of such rogue narratives as Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753). Moreover, *The Castle of Otranto* betrays the influence of an early eighteenth-century school of poetry known as the Graveyard School—so called because the poems were gloomy meditations on death.

Walpole deliberately situated his novel in relation to the literature of his day. In particular, his novel participates in the period's revival of interest in Medieval literature. In penning his melodramatic Gothic tale, Walpole rejected the decorum that marked the literary productions of the Neoclassical writers. Importantly, Walpole's book is also a reaction against the realism that characterised the early English novels. Originally, Walpole tried to pass off his work as a true story obtained from an authentic twelfth-century manuscript, but in the preface of the second edition, he acknowledged the hoax and defended his book by offering a strong

defense of imaginative literature. In writing his mock medieval romance, Walpole's professed goal was to unleash the "resources of fancy," which had been "dammed up" by novelists' too "strict adherence to common life."[7] Thus, from its earliest period, the horror novel was defined as the dark "other" to the realist novel.

Setting a pattern for later critical responses to horror fiction, one early review of *The Castle of Otranto* evinced concern about the moral effects of Walpole's marvellous tale on the reading public. The reviewer exclaimed, "It is, indeed, more than strange, that an Author, of a refined and polished genius, should be an advocate for re-establishing the barbarous superstitions of Gothic devilism!"[8] Yet, other early readers commented on the playfulness of Walpole's book, citing the buffoonish castle servants and the wildly improbable plot events. To be sure, the exaggerated supernatural elements in *The Castle of Otranto* seem to verge on self-parody. For example, at the beginning of the book, Manfred's only son is crushed to death beneath a huge helmet, the property of the gigantic ghost. The supposed "horror of the spectacle"[9] is undercut by the sheer absurdity of the situation. Novelist Clara Reeve observed that the excesses and improbabilities of *The Castle of Otranto* tended to "excite laughter" rather than inspire fear.[10] One of Walpole's first imitators, Reeve wrote her own "Gothic Story," *The Old English Baron*, in 1778. In her preface, Reeve described the novel as "the literary offspring of *The Castle of Otranto*."[11] However, as James Watt has argued, Reeve's main objective in imitating Walpole's book was to "exorcise" the Gothic novel of any trace of "frivolity."[12] Reeve's medieval work, like Walpole's, is about usurpation, horror, and a haunted castle; yet, Reeve's work is more serious than Walpole's is, and more judicious in its treatment of the supernatural. In a letter written to a friend in the year that *The Old English Baron* was published, Walpole observes that by copying his novel, but largely "[stripping it] of the marvellous," Reeve had created "the most

insipid dull nothing you ever saw. It certainly does not make one laugh, for what makes one doze, seldom makes one merry."[13] The comment suggests that the first horror novel may well have been written with the intent to amuse, rather than horrify, readers.

Walpole's book inspired many imitators who sought to capitalize on his work's popularity with readers, such that by the end of the century, horror novels were pervasive. The Marquis de Sade argued in "Reflections on the Novel" (1800) that such novels were the "inevitable fruit of the revolutionary shocks" that hit Europe in the late eighteenth century.[14] Sade suggested that real-life horrors had desensitized the reading public, and so novelists accordingly increased the horrors in their works to achieve a response. In a period of burgeoning print culture, the novel of supernatural horror and suspense was arguably the first mass-market genre. The genre was given various names, including "the *terrible* school," "terrorist novel writing," and "*hobgoblin-romance*."[15] Even as it was becoming established, this kind of writing was targeted by reviewers and parodists for its conventionality. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote supernatural ballads that belong to the tradition of horror writing, yet he derided the horror novels of his day as formulaic. Describing the new fashion for novels of "the horrible and the preternatural" in 1797, he declared: "the public will learn, by the multitude of the manufacturers, with how little expense of thought or imagination this species of composition is manufactured."[16] Coleridge reviewed Gothic novels by Matthew Lewis, Ann Radcliffe, and Mary Robinson for the *Critical Review*. In a private letter, he remarked,

> I am almost weary of the Terrible […]—I have been lately reviewing the Monk, the Italian, Hubert de Servac & &c & &c—in all of which dungeons, and old castles, & solitary Houses by the Sea Side, & Caverns, & Woods, & extraordinary

> characters, & all the tribe of Horror & Mystery, have crowded on me—even to surfeiting.[17]

Coleridge's letter points to a paradox that still exists within horror writing: namely, the genre focuses on the extraordinary and the supernatural, yet it tends to shrink into cliché and formula. The title of one 1798 parody, F. C. Patrick's *More Ghosts!*, sums up neatly the ubiquity and predictability of supernatural horror fiction in the 1790s.

Despite the criticisms Coleridge offered, he regarded the novels that he reviewed as being more innovative than the common run of "Horror & Mystery" novels, many of which would have been published by William Lane's Minerva Press, a major purveyor of horror fiction in Britain in the Romantic period. Indeed, six of the seven "horrid" novels in Isabella Thorpe's list were published by Minerva.[18] Dorothy Blakey has suggested that critics used "Minerva" as a "convenient epithet of contempt."[19] Minerva publications were dismissed as poorly written, derivative commercial fictions. Minerva was also tainted by its association with German stories of "Illuminati, international conspiracies, […] occult mysteries, mysterious visions and horrifying deaths."[20] It is noteworthy that most of the "horrids" listed in Austen's parody are imitations or translations of German Schauerromane ("shudder novels") or Rauberromane ("robber novels"). As Eve Tavor Bannet puts it, Lane shrewdly "[cashed] in on the rage" for German horror in Britain in this period.[21] Thomas Love Peacock made fun of this particular literary fad in his satire *Nightmare Abbey* (1818): one of the characters sleeps with a German Gothic book "under his pillow" and dreams of "ghastly confederates holding midnight conventions in subterranean caves."[22]

Remarkably, not all works written in a thrilling or supernatural vein were denigrated by critics. The most popular, but also the most ground-breaking and respected, practitioner of the

genre in the 1790s was Ann Radcliffe, whose feminocentric novels include *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and *The Italian* (1797). At a time when the usual sum paid for Minerva novels was £10-20, Radcliffe was paid £500 for the copyright of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.[23] Radcliffe's approach was more original than that taken by the authors of the "horrids." Her novels feature female protagonists: realistically drawn persecuted heroines, through whose perspectives the narratives are focalized. The Radcliffean heroine is sensitive, susceptible to superstitious fears, and prey to the machinations of repressive, unscrupulous men. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Radcliffe's most popular novel, the heroine, Emily St. Aubert, is abducted by the villain, Montoni, and kept prisoner in the remote Gothic castle of Udolpho, where she is terrified by many supernatural appearances. Radcliffe builds upon Reeve's modifications to the genre, especially so far as the judicious treatment of the supernatural is concerned. Radcliffe was careful to provide natural explanations for each shadowy figure, strange sound, and alarming ghostly apparition. She specialized in "terror," or suspense, rather than horror per se. As she suggests in "On the Supernatural in Poetry," terror is an anticipatory anxiety over an uncertain threat, whereas horror is our response when the danger is explicit.[24] Radcliffe's theories were informed by Edmund Burke's aesthetic treatise on the sublime (1757), in which Burke argued that obscurity contributes to the awe and terror one experiences when confronting sublime objects. Radcliffe cultivated uncertainty in her texts by limiting the reader's knowledge to what her vulnerable heroines know. She also created a disorienting atmosphere through detailed descriptions of brooding Gothic edifices and the sublime natural environs in which they were set. Yet, ultimately, she asserts the realism of her work through her policy of including rational elucidations.

It is important to note that Reeve and Radcliffe had to manage critical prejudices against women, and this, in part, explains the changes they made to the genre that had descended from Walpole. Female novelists were expected to produce decorous works that conformed to notions of feminine respectability. By eschewing the excesses and sensationalism of German horror, Radcliffe won favor from the reviewers in the 1790s who considered realism to be the appropriate mode for the novel.[25] Radcliffe's virtuous heroines, and the lessons they learned about the dangers of overactive imagination, also satisfied reviewers who evaluated novels according to their capacity to provide moral instruction.[26] Yet, even as Radcliffe succeeded in obviating criticism in a male-dominated literary marketplace, she used the genre in which she worked, as it has often subsequently been used, to defamiliarize and comment on social issues and anxieties. Through stories of female persecution and male violence, Radcliffe offered serious reflections about gender relations. In her works, the fear-ridden Gothic castle comes to symbolize women's lack of freedom and power in the patriarchal world of late eighteenth-century Britain. Radcliffe was concerned with female experiences, and so it is no wonder that Catherine Morland, and many actual female readers of the day, were so taken with her novels.

Radcliffean Gothic became a recognizable (and increasingly conventionalized) style of writing. Radcliffe's policy of explaining the supernatural was widely imitated… and parodied. The device was used so often that it became hackneyed. The "rational" explanations provided for supernatural appearances regularly stretched belief. One example is found in the first American horror novel, Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland; or, The Transformation: An American Tale* (1798), a work that features a religious fanatic, murder, and death by spontaneous combustion. In *Wieland*, seemingly otherworldly, disembodied voices are revealed to have been produced by a ventriloquist. Bathetic resolutions are spoofed in many Romantic-period parodies of horror

fiction. In one 1798 parody, for example, a skull with fiery eyes turns out to be no more than a hollow turnip with a candle in it.[27] Similarly, at the end of *The Hero*, a French parody of English horror novels, the "ghosts" who torment the protagonist are revealed to be a group of students from a nearby military college, draped in sheets and powdered with flour.[28]

Even as parodists mocked novels of horror and terror for their incredible plotlines, other critics worried about the novels' coordinates to reality. Walpole's fictional world of castles and giants is seemingly far removed from real life in eighteenth-century England, but late eighteenth-century horror writers began to close the gap between the fictional and the real. Reviewers condemned horror fiction for its lack of realism, but when novelists responded by increasing the realism, critics were not always pleased. In the same year that *The Mysteries of Udolpho* was published, another novel appeared that helped to usher in a period of intense conservative reaction to horror literature. The very title of William Godwin's controversial *Things as They Are; or the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794) announces the work's links to then present-day realities. A radical philosopher, Godwin strongly opposed monarchical government, aristocratic privilege, and institutional religion. In *Caleb Williams*, he narrativized the ideas that he had expressed in his controversial treatise, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). As Godwin freely admitted in the preface to *Caleb Williams*, he used popular fiction as a vehicle to disseminate radical democratic principles to the reading public.[29] His novel is about a poor man, the titular Caleb Williams, who sets out to expose his aristocratic master as a murderer and ends up being hunted down by him. The thrilling flight-and-pursuit structure of Godwin's work would be employed by his daughter, Mary Shelley, two decades later in her celebrated novel, *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus*. In *Caleb Williams*, the persecution plot is used to critique England's hierarchical social system and expose abuses of institutional authority. The

book raised serious alarm among British critics because it showed that the popularity of horror literature could be exploited to smuggle incendiary ideas into the sitting rooms of the nation.

Lewis's *The Monk* (1796)—a tale about a depraved priest, Ambrosio, whose crimes include the murder of his mother and the rape of his sister—also incited outrage among conservative critics. Lewis defined his approach to horror writing in opposition to Radcliffe's. Lewis admired *The Mysteries of Udolpho* but found parts of it "uncommonly dull," as he explained in a letter that recalls Walpole's response to Reeve's book.[30] Drawing inspiration from the German shudder novels, Lewis's work brims with shocking and horrifying scenes, both natural and supernatural. Whereas Radcliffe had explained away supernatural appearances and avoided blood and gore in favor of leisurely descriptions of nature, Lewis's book embraces the supernatural and relishes the grotesque. For example, in the book's shocking final scene, a taloned demon (the instigator of Amrosio's sins) hurls the monk into an abyss, where his body is desecrated by insects and birds:

> Myriads of insects […] drank the blood that trickled from Ambrosio's wounds; he had no power to drive them from him, and they fastened upon his sores, darted their stings into his body, covered him with their multitudes, and inflicted on him tortures the most exquisite and insupportable. The eagles of the rock tore his flesh piecemeal, and dug out his eye-balls with their crooked beaks.[31]

Ambrosio survives in this deplorable state for days. At last, a fierce storm pummels him to death, and the swollen river carries away "the corse of the despairing monk."[32]

This dreadful punishment was not enough to abate the fears of critics who worried that readers unable to separate fiction and fantasy would copy the bad behaviours of villainous characters. Fears about impressionable consumers of horror have proven incredibly durable:

similar concerns are expressed even to this day, in debates about the negative influence of first-person shooter games and slasher films on adolescents. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these kinds of fears concentrated on the harmful effects of novels. As Jacqueline Pearson observes, "a vigorous contest ensued over mass literacy, and whether its effect would be the erosion of standards or the effective maintenance of social control."[33] *The Monk* became a focus for anti-novel sentiment. It was deprecated as a work of violent pornography. Mathias called for its suppression and argued that Lewis had committed an indictable offense in writing it;[34] he declared heatedly: "Novels of this seductive and libidinous tendency excite disgust, fear, and horror."[35] Most distressing to critics was the fact that Lewis had been elected to Parliament as a Whig member in the very year that his novel was published. That a government official could have written such a book suggested a dangerous decline in moral standards. Coleridge concluded his review of Lewis's novel by remarking: "the author of the Monk signs himself a LEGISLATOR!—We stare and tremble."[36]

Critical pressure drove Lewis to self-censorship. In the fourth edition of *The Monk*, in 1798, the most provocative passages were omitted. It is worth noting, however, that the controversy that surrounded Lewis's novel increased the reading public's interest in the suppressed sections of the book. *The Monk*'s notoriety was one of its chief selling points. This is demonstrated by the fact that, in advertising the 1798 expurgated version of the novel, Lewis's publisher took the opportunity to announce that remainder copies of the original uncensored edition were still available for purchase at an inflated price.[37] Moreover, chapbook adaptations and imitations of *The Monk* continued to feed the public appetite for Lewisian horrors. The most successful imitation was Charlotte Dacre's sensational *Zofloya; or the Moor* (1806), a work significant in the history of horror writing because the heroine, Victoria, a female analogue of

Ambrosio, is a murderous nymphomaniac. *Zofloya* was especially shocking because it challenged notions of feminine propriety. Dacre defied the conventional, gendered notions of male villainy and female victimhood; she also challenged the expectations placed on female writers. One hostile reviewer accused her of having "maggots in the brain."[38]

Writers like Dacre resisted the critics and pushed boundaries of good taste and morality (as horror writers are wont to do); yet, criticism and parody did have a clear impact on the way that horror writing evolved. Most significantly, the frequent complaints about the genre's lack of originality encouraged greater diversity in horror writing. Edward H. Jacobs argues that the horror and terror market in the late eighteenth century was driven by the "economics of genericism."[39] Writers were assured of a ready-made audience if they wrote within certain generic constraints. Publishers and circulating library owners also relied upon readers' familiarity with the genre to sell books. By the 1810s and 1820s, however, this strategy was becoming less viable because the fictional conventions had grown overly familiar. Consequently, writers began to move away from the medieval settings and superstitions that had typified most horror novels after Walpole's. Anticipating what Julian Wolfreys calls the "inward turn" of the Victorian horror novel,[40] early nineteenth-century writers no longer consigned the horrors and terrors to the distant past; instead, writers brought the dangers closer to home by giving their stories more familiar, contemporary settings.

The most famous horror novel of the Romantic period, and perhaps of all time, is Shelley's 1818 novel about the mad scientist Victor Frankenstein, who creates a being by galvanizing body parts plundered from charnel houses. Shelley appropriates the flight-and-pursuit structure of *Caleb Williams* and updates the Promethean myth; yet, in other ways, her novel is radically innovative. In large part, this is because it, like *Caleb Williams*, is a highly

topical work. It is set in the near-present day of Shelley's first readers and is informed by nineteenth-century theories about electricity. *Frankenstein* is quintessentially Romantic in its style and themes. The outcast creature embodies the disappointed hopes of the French Revolution; he is a figure for Romantic angst, melancholy, and rebelliousness. Not surprisingly, *Frankenstein* struck a chord with Romantic readers. Within months of its publication, Thomas Love Peacock remarked that the book was "universally known and read."[41] Two hundred years later, Shelley's horrifying warning tale is an entrenched feature of the popular imagination. *Frankenstein* stages Romantic-period anxieties, but its theme of scientific overreaching continues to resonate. The book at once inaugurated the monster novel and probed the theme of the "monster within," which would become a major preoccupation of Victorian horror novelists. Shelley's novel urges the reader to ask who the real monster is, Frankenstein or his creature? In fact, the monster is not "other" at all; as D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf contend, "the monster is an ugly image of Victor's narcissism, the pride that leads him to style himself as a creator."[42] Through the doubling of the creator and his creature, Shelley anticipates such end-of-century doppelgänger novels as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), which likewise explore the "monstrous" side of the divided self.

Stories about ghosts were popular among Victorians, in part reflecting the extent of the spiritualist movement that developed after Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory called into question traditional religious beliefs; however, horror novelists also created new types of monsters to replace the spectres and feudal villains of eighteenth-century Gothic fiction. After the publication of *Frankenstein*, monster novels proliferated and splintered into subgenres, further illustrating the diversification of the horror novel in the nineteenth century. Ancient

Egyptian monsters are the antagonists in such works as Jane (Webb) Loudon's *The Mummy! A Tale of the Twenty-Second Century* (1827), which imagines a future in which electricity is used to resurrect the gruesome corpse of the pharaoh Cheops, and Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897), which is about a shape-shifting monster with a "huge, slimy, evil-smelling body" and "myriad legs,"[43] who hypnotizes and torments a politician in retaliation for the desecration of an ancient tomb. Victorian werewolf novels include G. W. M. Reynolds's *Wagner, the Wehr-Wolf* (1846-47)—a penny dreadful about a man who is transformed into a werewolf after making a pact with a demon—and Clemence Housman's female werewolf novel, *The Were-wolf* (1896).

Vampires were the most popular of the nineteenth-century monsters. The first vampire tale—John Polidori's "The Vampyre" (1819)—was a product of the same ghost story contest that occasioned the writing of *Frankenstein*; thereafter vampires were taken up by novelists to explore a wide range of Victorian fears. Key texts are James Malcolm Rymer and Thomas Peckett Prest's pulpy and episodic *Varney the Vampire* (1845-47), J. S. Le Fanu's lesbian novel *Carmilla* (1872), and Bram Stoker's classic work *Dracula* (1897). Appealing to middle- and working-class readers, the vampire novels feature "corrupt" aristocratic vampires and can be seen to dramatize nineteenth-century class struggles. After the publication of Darwin's *On the Origins of the Species* (1859), bloodthirsty revenants were also used to express fears about atavistic regression; if human beings evolved from primitive life forms, was devolution also possible? Darwin's science made it harder to deny that humans—no matter how outwardly civilized—had the same animal impulses as other creatures. In Le Fanu's female vampire novel such fears intersect with ideas about gender in the Victorian period. The vampire Carmilla attacks her victim, the virginal Laura, in highly sexualized scenes. Like most other nineteenth-century vampires, Carmilla is characterized as a sexual predator: the attacks occur while the

victim is in bed, and they involve the penetration of teeth into the victim's throat or chest, and an exchange of bodily fluids. Yet, like Victoria in *Zofloya*, Carmilla's actions are especially shocking (and salacious) because she is female. Carmilla is described as "a sooty-black animal," "a monstrous cat," "a beast in a cage," and "amphibious."[44] Le Fanu's "beastly," (sexually) appetitive female vampire at once reinforces, and calls into question, Victorian ideals of female purity.

Many Victorian novels also engage anxieties about imperialism and race. In *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Brontë domesticates Gothic themes by relocating the Radcliffean plot to an isolated Yorkshire manor-house. Like Radcliffe, Brontë privileges terror over horror and makes use of the explained supernatural. The unidealized heroine, a plain young English governess, is troubled by "preternatural" laughter[45] and strange appearances at Thornfield Hall. Before her wedding to the brooding Mr. Rochester, she sees a strange, vampire-like[46] creature tearing her wedding veil. The revelation that Rochester was previously married, and that his insane Creole wife still lives in his house, is more horrifying to the governess than any supernatural explanation could be. According to Gayatri Spivak's classic reading of the novel, Bertha is the colonial "other" who must "set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction."[47]

In his review for *Fraser's Magazine*, George Henry Lewes remarked that parts of *Jane Eyre* "smack of the circulating library," particularly the depiction of "the mad wife and all that relates to her"; yet, Lewes praised the work in general for its "truth" and "vividness."[48] Brontë accommodated the sensational elements to the domestic realism of the Victorian novel. Thus, she satisfied the popular taste for "melodrama and improbability"[49] while appealing to the critical preference for realism. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847)—a dark tale of stormy

passions and domestic brutality—likewise fuses romance and realism, yet whereas Jane achieves domestic happiness with her reformed Rochester, Catherine and Heathcliff's semi-incestuous, supernatural love affair will not be contained within bourgeois domesticity. One reviewer described it as "a terrific story, associated with an equally fearful and repulsive spot. It should have been called *Withering Heights*, for anything from which the mind and body would more instinctively shrink, than the mansion and its tenants, cannot be easily imagined."[50]

The Brontës' novels, like those by Shelley, Stevenson, Wilde, and Stoker, have enduring interest; they continue to be read, studied, and adapted today. The noncanonical Victorian horror novels represent a more ephemeral class of fiction. The penny dreadfuls or bloods were cheap, serialized, often plagiaristic novels, with no pretensions to literariness. The writers did not seek critical approbation. They were paid by the word and chased mass-market tastes. Consequently, the novels were often excessively long and excessive in other respects too. Their excesses (like *Otranto*'s excesses) garnered both thrills and laughter. For example, Rymer and Prest's lurid penny dreadful *The String of Pearls* (1846-47) recounts the story of Fleet Street barber Sweeney Todd, who slays his customers and sells their remains to a neighbouring pie shop. Ghastly humor is created through the references to the "delicious pies; there was about them a flavour never surpassed, and rarely equalled; […] oh! With what rapidity the pies disappeared!"[51] Jokes intersperse Rymer and Prest's other serialized horror novel, the rambling but entertaining *Varney the Vampire*. At one point in the tale, it is decided that the best way to get rid of the vampire, Sir Francis Varney, is to send him to America. One character reasons: "They will take good care there that he sucks no blood out of them; for, although an American would always rather lose a drop of blood than a dollar, they keep a pretty sharp look out upon both."[52] In these and other

texts, the teeter-tottering between horror and humor creates an "ambivalence of effect," which, according to Victor Sage, is "a central feature" of the horror genre.[53]

If Victorian horror novelists often brokered between horror and humor, just as Walpole did, their novels also continued to evoke a mixed response in another sense, too. The escapist penny bloods were popular with working-class readers, especially young men. Critics, on the other hand, regarded these works as depraved and corrupting. Victorian reviewers, like their Romantic predecessors, evaluated novels according to moral standards. As Patrick Brantlinger asserts, the Victorian "critics and educators did much moralizing about the sad state of popular tastes and the semi-literacy of the mass readership" who sought entertainment, not edification, from their reading material.[54] It is noteworthy that many of the serialized horror novels (*The String of Pearls* and *Varney the Vampire* included) and shilling shockers (e.g., *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*) had urban settings. A good example is G. W. M. Reynolds's sensational *The Mysteries of London* (1845-48), which is described by Fred Botting as a "darkly realistic […] urban Gothic," in which London is shown to be a horrifying "labyrinth of immorality."[55] In such novels, the locus of horror is the teeming modern city, not a castle of old. The gritty settings seem to answer the critics' demands for realism, but the dark, urban milieus increased concerns about the deleterious effects of horror fiction. The urban horror novels tapped into prevalent fears about urbanization and moral decay by exposing the seedy underside of city life. Critics worried that the novels would exacerbate social problems by luring semi-literate readers into crime.

Urban corruption is a key theme in Wilde's fin-de-siècle horror novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde drew inspiration from *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), a Romantic-period horror novel by an earlier Irish writer, Charles Maturin. In Maturin's book, John Melmoth sells his soul in order to extend his life; in Wilde's novel, a similar Faustian bargain is struck by

Dorian Gray. Dorian is allowed to remain young and handsome, while a portrait of him grows old. Whereas Melmoth ends up wandering the earth as a miserable outsider, Dorian merely haunts London's dens of ill repute. As he partakes in sordid urban pleasures, his portrait becomes increasingly hideous, a reflection of his moral degradation. It is significant that Dorian is guided in his descent by a "poisonous book" given to him by the hedonist Lord Henry Wotton. Correspondingly, reviewers in the 1890s regarded Wilde's book as poisonous.[56] W. E. Henley of the *Scots Observer* denounced *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as follows:

> it is false to human nature—for its hero is a devil; it is false to morality—for it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health, and sanity. The story […] deals with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigative Department.[57]

During Wilde's 1895 trial for homosexuality, parts of *Dorian Gray* were read in court by the prosecuting attorney as evidence of the "unnatural iniquity" of Wilde's own offences.

From the 1760s to the late Victorian period, the horror novel developed through a process of imitation and innovation, with novelists continuously reworking and updating the tropes that Walpole's book provided. Just as Walpole invented the horror novel by drawing from earlier texts and traditions, the late Victorian writers renewed the genre through a process of revision: Wilde adapted the Faust theme operating in *Melmoth the Wanderer* to tell his story about repression and double lives; Stoker's Count Dracula has more in common with the aristocratic villains of eighteenth-century Gothic novels than with the vampires of European folk legend. Horror writers have always profited from the popularity of their genre, and this has driven them to imitation and sometimes to cliché. Yet, as I have shown, writers were attentive to criticism:

they responded to critics and parodists by adapting and updating the inherited formulae and by investing horror writing with greater realism. Ultimately, though, their concessions failed to secure a better reputation for horror novels. Their efforts often merely fuelled the longstanding critical concerns about horror's pernicious real-world effects. Moreover, many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century horror novelists ignored the critics and catered to general readers instead. Notwithstanding critics' obdurate hostility toward the genre, readers embraced horror novels—as readers continue to do. Indeed, horror's transgressive reputation goes a long way towards explaining the appeal of this genre both then and now.

---

[1] Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Claire Grogan (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2002), 62.

[2] Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 10.

[3] Ann Radcliffe, "On the Supernatural in Poetry," in *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook, 1700-1820*, ed. E. J. Clery and Robert Miles (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 168.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Deborah Russell, "Gothic Romance," in *Romantic Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Angela Wright and Dale Townshend (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 55.

[6] Thomas James Mathias, *The Pursuits of Literature*, 14th ed. (London: T. Becket, 1808), 423, quoted in Russell, "Gothic Romance," 55.

[7] Horace Walpole, "Preface to the Second Edition," *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. Nick Groom (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

[8] Review of *The Castle of Otranto*, by Horace Walpole, *Monthly Review* 32 (May 1765): 394.

[9] Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. Nick Groom (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 18.

[10] Clara Reeve, preface to the second edition of *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story* (London: Charles Dilly, 1780), vii.

[11] Reeve, preface, iii.

[12] James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict, 1764-1832* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), 60.

[13] Horace Walpole, "To William Cole," 22 August 1778, in vol. 2 of *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis and A. Dayle Wallace (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 110.

[14] Marquis de Sade, "Reflections on the Novel," in *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove, 1966), 109.

[15] E. J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 148.

[16] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Review of *The Monk*, by Matthew Lewis, *Critical Review* 19 (1797): 194.

[17] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "To William Lisle Bowles," 16 March 1797, in vol. 1 of *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), 318.

[18] In the order in which they appear in Austen's list, the seven "horrid" novels are Eliza Parsons's *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793), Regina Maria Roche's *Clermont: A Tale* (1798),

Eliza Parsons's *The Mysterious Warning: A German Tale* (1796), Karl Friedrich Kahlert's *The Necromancer, or The Tale of the Black Forest, Founded on Facts, Translated from the German of Lawrence Flammenberg by Peter Teuthold* (1794), Francis Lathom's *The Midnight Bell: A German Story Founded on Incidents in Real Life* (1798), Eleanor Sleath's *The Orphan of the Rhine: A Romance in Four Volumes* (1798), and Carl Grosse's *Horrid Mysteries: A Story Translated from the German of the Marquis of Grosse by Peter Will* (1796). *The Midnight Bell* is the only one that was not originally published by Minerva.

[19] Dorothy Blakey, *The Minerva Press, 1790-1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 1.

[20] Eve Tavor Bannet, "Charles Brockden Brown and England: Of Genres, the Minerva Press, and the Early Republican Reprint Trade," in *Transatlantic Literary Exchanges, 1790-1870: Gender, Race, and Nation*, ed. Kevin Hutchins and Julia M. Wright (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 139.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Thomas Love Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey/Crotchet Castle* (London: Penguin, 1986), 47.

[23] Rictor Norton, *Mistress of Udolpho: The Life of Ann Radcliffe* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), 94.

[24] Radcliffe, "On the Supernatural in Poetry," 149.

[25] Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic*, 69.

[26] The anonymous author of the essay "Terrorist Novel Writing" (1799) expresses the conventional standards by which all novels were evaluated, as well as the prevailing negative attitudes towards horror writing: "A novel, if it is useful at all ought to be a representation of human life and manners, with a view to direct the conduct in the important duties of life, and to correct its follies," he insists; "But what instruction is to be reaped from the distorted ideas of

lunatics, I am at a loss to conceive." In vol. 1 of *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797* (London: James Ridgway, 1799), 224.

[27] R. S., Vol. 3 of *The New Monk* (London: William Lane, 1798), 63-4

[28] Louis François Marie Bellin de la Liborlière, *The Hero; or, The Adventures of a Night*, trans. Sophia Shedden, ed. Natalie Neill (Kansas City, Valancourt, 2011), 130.

[29] William Godwin, preface to *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, by William Godwin, (London: Penguin, 2005), 3.

[30] Matthew Lewis, "To his mother," 18 May 1794, in vol. 1 of *The Life and Correspondence of M. G. Lewis* (London: Henry Colburn, 1839), 123.

[31] Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, ed. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2004), 363.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 192.

[34] Mathias, *The Pursuits of Literature*, 245.

[35] Ibid., 367.

[36] Coleridge, Review of *The Monk*, 198.

[37] Macdonald and Scherf, introduction to *The Monk*, by Matthew Lewis, 21 note 2.

[38] Review of *Zofloya*, by Charlotte Dacre, *Literary Journal* 1 (June 1806): 634.

[39] Edward H. Jacobs, *Accidental Migrations: An Archaeology of Gothic Discourse* (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), 159.

[40] Julian Wolfreys, "'I wants to make your flesh creep': Notes Toward a Reading of the Comic-Gothic in Dickens," in *Victorian Gothic: Literary and Cultural Manifestations in the Nineteenth*

Century, ed. Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2000), 31.

[41] Thomas Love Peacock, "To Percy Bysshe Shelley," 30 August 1818, in vol. 1 of *The Letters of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. Nicholas A. Joukovsky (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 147. 146-7.

[42] Macdonald and Scherf, introduction to *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2005), 31.

[43] Richard Marsh, *The Beetle*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2004), 52.

[44] J. Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla* (Ægypan Press, N.d.), 69, 146.

[45] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Richard J. Dunn (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 91.

[46] Ibid., 242.

[47] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 251.

[48] G. H. Lewes, Review of *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë, *Frazer's Magazine*, December 1847, 36, 686-95, in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 85.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Review of *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Brontë, *New Monthly Magazine*, January 1848, 140, in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 229.

[51] James Malcolm Rymer [and] Thomas Peckett Prest, *Sweeney Todd: The String of Pearls* (New York: Dover, 2015), 28.

[52] Rymer [and] Prest, *Varney the Vampire* (New York: Dover, 2015), 411.

[53] Victor Sage, "Gothic Laughter: Farce and Horror in Five Texts," in *Gothick Origins and Innovations*, ed. Allan Llyoyd-Smith and Victor Sage (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 203.

[54] Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), 170.

[55] Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 125.

[56] Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson*, 10.

[57] Quoted in Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 59.