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**Sensational storytelling meets social networking:
a Gothic romance**

ABSTRACT

In the prefaces to their fictional texts, and in their theoretical, critical and personal writings, authors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century reflect upon their participation in and contribution to the discursive site that is the Gothic. This level of critical engagement and interaction stemmed from an acute awareness of the emerging nature of professional writing, and of eighteenth century politics of reading and reception. Gothic authors used to their advantage developments in publication and circulation for the construction of literary networks and the collective creation of their Gothic world. Using the exchanges between three early Gothic authors as evidence, this paper aims to assess the role of collaboration in the Gothic tradition. The recognition of a critical Gothic community whose discourse surrounded and informed creative production is significant to our understanding of the development, progression and decay of the Gothic genre, as it brings into question the idea of the Gothic as an 'other' and its development as oppositional, eclectic or isolated.

KEYWORDS

Eighteenth-Century Gothic
First Wave Gothic
collaboration
conversation circle
Bluestockings

The eighteenth century reading environment was characterised by a conflict between support for the increased production and circulation of print, and moral and political misgivings about the extension of reading. The commercial changes to the printing, publishing and distribution of books, including the development of circulating libraries, raised alarms about improper reading. This tension between promotion and guardedness, between commercialisation and exclusivity, was a recurrent theme in statements about the use of books. In the last decade,

eighteenth century literary critics have begun to explore the extent to which literature of the time was conscious of its intimate relation to the structures, conventions, and material bases of the public sphere, and to the new forms of subjectivity that inhabited these spaces. Most interesting within this scholarship is work that has begun to question the individualistic approach to cultural production by considering how social structures and relationships encouraged creativity within the Gothic genre. This work has initiated multidisciplinary discussion and critical debate concerning the ways in which representations of gothic from around the world contest, challenge, or redefine the usual notions of the genre. Of particular importance in this regard is the spread of literacy and informal practice of amateur literary and art criticism in the salons, coffeehouses and reading societies of Enlightenment Europe. In the prefaces to their fictional texts, and in their theoretical and critical writings, authors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century reflect upon their participation in and contribution to the discursive site that is the Gothic. This level of critical engagement and interaction stemmed from an acute awareness of the emerging nature of professional writing, and of eighteenth century politics of reading and reception. Gothic authors used to their advantage developments in publication and circulation for the construction of literary networks and the collective creation of their Gothic world. Using the exchanges between three early Gothic authors as evidence, this paper aims to assess the role of collaboration in the Gothic tradition. The recognition of a critical Gothic community whose discourse surrounded and informed creative production is significant to our understanding of the development, progression and decay of the Gothic genre, as it brings into question the idea of the Gothic as an 'other' and its development as oppositional, eclectic or isolated.

Within studies of the Gothic novel form, the eighteenth-century novelist is commonly perceived or embodied as a self-sufficient, original genius who disdains the market forces that constrain literary production. Christopher Flint argues that, instead, the Gothic novel and its author should be considered for how they operate within a communication network to explore how fiction creates a particular mimetic domain that both reports and distorts those competing modes of imagining a self, community, nation or world (Backscheider and Ingrassia 2009). David Hume considers this conversable world admirable in its capacity to exchange information and exercise the mind while producing mutual pleasure. He explains that:

Subjects of thought furnish not sufficient employment in solitude, but require the company and conversation of our fellow creatures, to render them a proper exercise

for the mind; and this brings mankind together in society, where every one displays his thoughts in observations in the best manner he is able, and mutually gives and receives information, as well as pleasure (Hume cited in Schellenberg 1996).

It also clearly has the potential, in his view, to engage in even more challenging and socially profitable exercises of the understanding. Indeed, he confidently asserts that the separation of the learned from the conversable world, which seems to have been the great defect of the last age, was rectified by a newly formed league between them. This league rendered the realm of conversation not only more pleasurable, but also productive. 'It was to be the source of a revitalised culture in which the commodities of learning – discursive forms – would be manufactured out of the materials of common life and conversation in order to guarantee the cultural ascendancy of sound understandings and delicate affections' (Shellenberg 1996). Here, Hume aligns conversational exchange with productivity in prescribing a new and self-consciously constructed pattern of sociability.

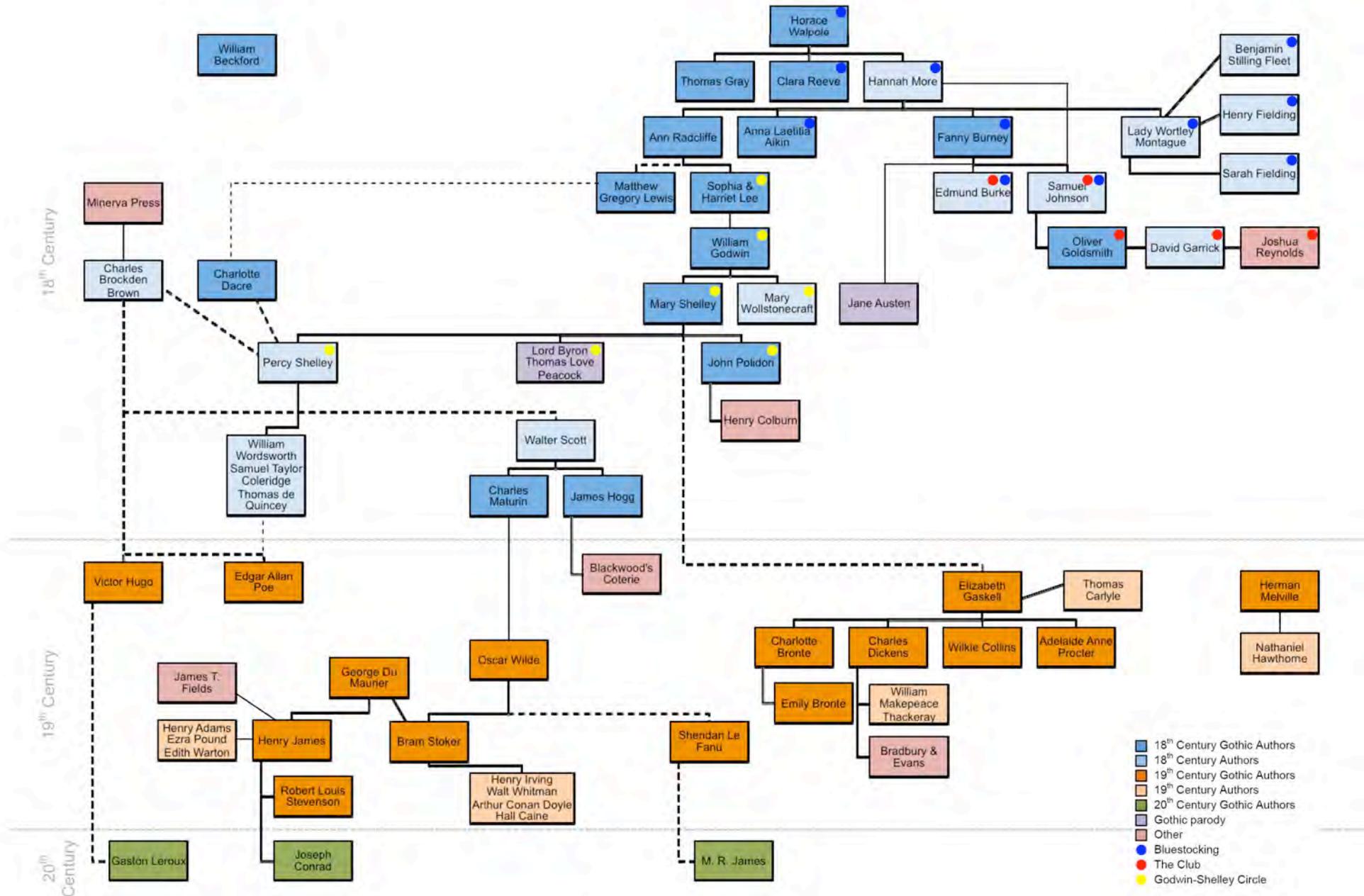


Figure 1: Gothic Connections Chart

Eighteenth century Gothic fictions allow us to examine the Enlightenment ideal of a conversational circle precisely because the Gothic narrative exposes the private body to publication (Ellis 2000). Figure 1, created by this author, illustrates the different types of community connections both amongst Gothic authors, and between Gothic authors, 'mainstream' authors, and important publishers, coteries and editors from 1740 to 1940. This depiction, by no means yet complete, is constituted not only by lines of influence (the dotted lines), but by direct correspondence, critical peer analysis, literary society co-membership and fictional negotiations (the solid lines). To briefly detail some of the relationships in this chart; Horace Walpole, considered to be the author of the first Gothic fiction, was childhood friends with Thomas Gray, accompanying him on the Grand Tour from 1739 to 1741 (Frank 2003). He was also a pen friend of Hanna More, who he met and corresponded with from 1781 (Fothergill 1983), sending her an early copy of *The Castle of Otranto* (Sabor 1987). Further, he is critically linked with Clara Reeve, as her text, *The Old English Baron*, claimed to revise his *Castle of Otranto*. Walpole, More and Reeve were all members of the Bluestocking circle, which also comprised of Fanny Burney and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, later Aikin (Tinker 1967 and Sabor 1987). In her preface to *The Old English Baron*, Clara Reeve explains that she 'read the beginning to a circle of friends of approved judgment, they gave me the warmest encouragement to proceed, and even made me promise to finish it.' (139). The circle of friends, to whom Reeve refers, included members of this Bluestocking circle. Hannah More testifies to the many pleasant and instructive hours she passed in this company, of learning, good taste and general conversation in her poem *The Bas Bleu*.

More was also close friends and corresponded with Ann Radcliffe, who went to the school of Harriet and Sophia Lee, was an influence on Walter Scott, a mentor himself to later Gothic authors Charles Maturin and James Hogg. She had quite an infamous fictional competition with Matthew Lewis, who himself influenced Charlotte Dacre (Fitzgerald 1993 and Miles 2000). William Godwin pursued Harriet Lee following the death of his wife Mary Wollstonecraft. Their daughter Mary went with poet Percy Shelley and his circle, including Lord Byron and mutual friend and fellow Gothic author John Polidori, on summer holiday to Geneva, where *Frankenstein* was created. These authors made up the Shelley Godwin circle (Cameron 1973). Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Bronte were close friends, often editing each other's work; the former writing the first biography of the later, and Dickens, Collins and Procter worked collaboratively on several Christmas ghost stories (Nurden 2006). Oscar Wilde, Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker were closely associated – Wilde and Stoker at one point chasing the same girl, only to be united in mutual rejection (*Irish Times* 1882). Henry

James, Robert Louis Stevenson and Joseph Conrad corresponded as well (Edel 1984). It is also worth noting the connections between members of different literary circles, as some authors were members of several groups. For example Edmund Burke and Oliver Goldsmith, members of Samuel Johnson's Club, also associated with notable Bluestockings (Bryant 1978). It is equally important to observe the selectivity of groups, for example Walpole never associated with Samuel Johnson due to both a political slight on Johnson's part against his father, and his general disapproval of Johnson's unimagination in his fiction (Bryant 1978 and Honour 1957).

The observation of these types of connections enables the proposal that Gothic literature, contrary to pervading critical belief, was not produced in secret and isolated circumstances, but had an intimate connection to its social context. It also suggests that when the critical essays, personal letters and journals of authors, publishers, book traders and readers are considered in relation to the fiction, a nexus of theory and practice emerges that was essential to the development of the self-conscious narrativity that partly constitutes the Gothic's unique literary form and style. Importantly, the Gothic novel maintains formal and thematic commitments to these conversational circles. The Gothic was a discursive site. Both the generic multiplicity of the Gothic, and what one might call its discursive primacy, effectively detach the Gothic from the tidy simplicity of thinking of it as so many predictable, fictional conventions. Gothic formulae are not simply recycled, as if in the service of a neurotic, dimly understood drive; rather, Gothic texts revise one another. One text initiates a dialogue with another, extending or opening the previous text, but also at times, imposing necessary closure upon it. A specific example of such a dialogue can be seen between Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* and Reeve's *The Old English Baron*. These exchanges of early Gothic authors were clearly written in a deliberate attempt to critically negotiate their generic space.

In the Preface to the Second Edition of *Castle of Otranto*, Walpole states that:

If the new route I have struck out shall have paved a road for men of brighter talents, I shall own with pleasure and modesty, that I was sensible the plan was capable of receiving greater embellishments than my imagination or conduct of the passions could bestow on it (cited in Lewis 1996: 12).

He goes on to propose that:

I might have pleaded, that having created a new species of romance, I was at liberty to lay down what rules I thought fit for the conduct of it: but I should be more proud of having imitated, however faintly, weakly, and at a distance, so masterly a pattern, than to enjoy the entire merit of invention (Walpole cited in Lewis 1996, p. 14).

Here Walpole outlines an awareness of and a desire for the future developmental possibilities or potential of a new form. In speaking of a new kind of romance in which the fancy is freed from restraint to treat the psychological reactions of men and women in extraordinary positions, Walpole indeed paves the way for men and women of brighter talents. He is, as Foucault may describe, a discourse creator (1972). In his *Hieroglyphic Tales*, he metafictionally reflects upon the story making process. In a way, he encourages the revisions and reviews of future Gothic authors, reviews such as that of Clara Reeve in her Address to the Reader in *The Old English Baron*. Reeve writes:

Pray did you ever read a book called, *The Castle of Otranto*? If you have, you will willingly enter with me into a review of it...with all these brilliant advantages, it palls upon the mind, and the reason is obvious; the machinery is so violent, that it destroys the effect it is intended to excite... and several others of its readers have confessed the same disappointment to me (cited in Trainer 2003: 137-139).

Here Reeve indicates a communal or at least shared reading experience or discussion of Walpole's *Otranto* with several other readers. Together, they have seemingly agreed that Walpole's style is one of detrimental exaggeration or excess, which overwhelms the senses of his readers and destroys the particular reading effect he sort to invoke through suspense and fear. She goes on to say,

In the course of my observations upon this singular book, it seemed to me that it was possible to compose a work upon the same plan wherein these defects might be avoided, and the keeping as in painting might be preserved. This Story is the literary offspring of *The Castle of Otranto* (Reeve cited in Trainer 2003: 139).

With this, Reeve begins to critically reflect on the way she has improved the genre. While maintaining a sufficient degree of the marvelous to excite the attention, Reeve emphasises that the story should be kept within the realms of probability in order for its effect to be preserved. She explains that a lack of credibility, resulting from excessive or nonsensical descriptions, weakens the suspense and dissolves the fear the reader feels, and instead incites

laughter. However, Walpole found Reeve's attempt to improve his Gothic map or pathway to be unsuccessful:

Have you seen *The Old English Baron*, a Gothic story, professedly written in imitation of *Otranto*, but reduced to reason and probability! It is so probable, that any trial for murder at the Old Bailey would make a more interesting story...I cannot compliment the author of *The Old English Baron*. It was totally void of imagination and interest; had scarce any incidents; and though it condemned the marvelous, admitted a ghost – I suppose the author thought a tame ghost might come within the laws or probability... it is the most insipid dull nothing you ever saw. It certainly does not make one laugh, for what makes one doze, seldom makes one merry. This is a caput mortuum. Adieu, I have not a quarter of a minute to say more (cited in Frank 2003: 263-4).

Just as Reeve found *Otranto* too sensational, Walpole found *Old English Baron* too heavy with reason and probability. This, he claimed, prevented imaginative freedom and ultimately extinguished the interest of the story. He goes further to suggest that Reeve's inclusion of a ghost in her story contradicts her prefatory condemnation of the supernatural. To her remarks that his suspense is reduced to comedy, he responds that his story is the better for making its audience laugh, as this is a preferable state to boredom. Turning his attention away from, what is in his view, an unworthy successor, Walpole praises Anna Laetitia Aikin's *Sir Bertram, a Fragment* for being far more in line with his own vision for the Gothic:

Mrs. Barbut's [sic] fragment was excellent. She flattered me by stooping to tread in my eccentric steps. Her *Fragment*, though but a specimen, showed her talent for imprinting terror (Walpole cited in Frank 2003: 265).

These comments indicate that Walpole thought himself in a position to deliver judgment on what he saw as other authors' attempts to follow his generic plan. It also signals a deliberate manipulation and conscious incitement of particular responses from particular people. Walpole responded more favourably to texts written by his friends or literary acquaintances, like Aikin, in order to ensure they in turn responded positively to his texts, and his positioning of himself as a kind of trustee of the genre also ensured that his text was held up for further emanation. It seems that this strategy indeed worked:

Since this author's time, from the perusal of Mrs. Radcliffe's productions and some of the German tales, we may be said to have 'supped full with horrors,' but none of these compositions have a livelier play of fancy than *The Castle of Otranto*. It is the

sportive effusion of a man of genius, who throws the reins loose upon the neck of his imagination. The large limbs of the gigantic figure which inhabits the castle, and which are visible at intervals; the plumes of the helmet, which rise and wave with ominous meaning; and the various enchantments of the place, are imagined with the richness and wildness of poetic fancy (cited in Sabor 1987: 87).

In this, her introduction to the first English edition of *Otranto*, Aikin writes quite appraisingly.

This exchange does not even touch on Walpole's extensive letter writing and comprehensive prefaces and postscripts that outline his idea of a new kind of romance. In these, Walpole deliberately incites debate and elicits feedback, and comments on both his own and his peers' texts, knowing full well that he will later publish the exchanges in his volumes of correspondence. What it shows, though, is that, by engaging with peer feedback or criticism, Gothic authors fostered or encouraged a creative environment that invited self and peer critique. This supports the conclusion that Gothic authors were more concerned with the collective contribution to, and development of, their genre, than with individual recognition, and that they express this structurally in their fictions and in their critical writings. For example, Reeve's most important critical writing, *On the Progress of Romance*, was actually structured as a course of evening conversations. Gothic authors and texts claim connection to a tradition, the character of which becomes one of perpetual internal critique, revision and reformation. In speaking of Walpole's development of suspense, Aikin observes, 'it is obvious how greatly such a provision must conduce to the ends of *mutual* support and assistance' (cited in Norton 2000: 281; emphasis added). Even later Gothic authors themselves theorize extensively about such dialogues. Mary Shelley states, in the thematic and formal reflection in her introduction to the third edition of her novel *Frankenstein*, that:

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist of creating out of a void; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substance, but cannot bring into being the substance itself (cited in Hunter 1996: 171).

Eighteenth century Gothic fiction thus shows the readiness of novelists to explore the impact of developments in popular publishing and commerce on literary meaning and the reading and writing experience.

The impact this has on the understanding of the Gothic's cultural poetics, genre politics and social ordering is that it brings into question the idea of the Gothic as an 'other'. While the Gothic must not be robbed of its particular aesthetic or denied the peculiarity and

uniqueness of its literary form and style, an endeavour must be made into why the most common conception of it seems to be at odds with the social conditions under which it was produced. Despite dark themes and settings, no doubt inspired by a context of literary censorship and an increased commercialisation and commodification of literature and society at large, there is still a central social element to the Gothic; a hankering for community that seems to indicate the importance of more than its 'look'. What is interesting is how the dominant Gothic aesthetic of isolation and eclecticism might be reconciled with the social conditions of its production and proliferation, for the painting of a more holistic picture. A literary, or indeed more generally, a critical community, is something considered to be enabled by new digital and social networking technologies; the opportunities for interactivity existing within the online or virtual space. What is therefore of particular interest is that there is evidence in the eighteenth century of a similar fashion of engaging with colleagues and texts, connected very much to the professionalisation of writing, and in turn, theorised upon, and embedded, in the fictional and critical works of Gothic authors. Intriguingly, Gothic criticism is increasingly taking shape in a similar way to the genre itself – the Gothic was composed, enjoyed and is now critiqued communally.

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