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LITERATURE AND PRINT CULTURE, 1780–1840

*(previously 'Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text')*



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**Aims and Scope:** Formerly *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* (1997–2005), *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780–1840* is an online journal that is committed to foregrounding innovative Romantic-studies research into bibliography, book history, intertextuality, and textual studies. To this end, we publish material in a number of formats: among them, peer-reviewed articles, reports on individual/group research projects, bibliographical checklists, and biographical profiles of overlooked Romantic writers. As of Issue 15 (Winter 2005), *Romantic Textualities* also carries reviews of books that reflect the growing academic interest in the fields of book history, print culture, intertextuality, and cultural materialism, as they relate to Romantic studies.

and ‘intercultural admixture’, but these were construed negatively. Borderers correlated to ‘the figure of the traitor or the apostate’, and became ‘a further spur to the recreation of impermeable divides’ (p. 196).

Saglia’s essay articulates the potentially threatening nature of all the debatable lands and border personas that figure in the collection. Debatable lands and their homeless inhabitants are produced by clashes between margins and centres. Their associations of hybridity and displacement present clear challenges to static notions of patriotism, the centre, and ‘home’. *Romanticism’s Debatable Lands* chooses to explore these tensions largely from the outside looking in: from the marginalised territory looking towards the frontier, or from the frontier looking to either side. The centre itself is rather marginalised. Joel Faflak’s essay explores the idea of nationhood as a ‘psychic space’ (or, à la Benedict Anderson, an ‘imagined community’), and Alex Benichmol considers Wordsworth’s construction of *The Excursion*’s secluded valley as ‘the fixed centre of a troubled World’ (p. 94), but *Romanticism’s Debatable Lands* largely omits discussion of the many debatable lands, real and metaphorical, that complicate the centre’s own identity and landscape (enclosure, for one). The collection, as a whole, charts in a fascinating and diverse manner the fraught cultural and constitutional formation of the United Kingdom, but from almost every basis other than England’s own debatable land. 

#### NOTES

1. Thomas Babington Macaulay, in a review essay in the *Edinburgh Review*, 47 (1828), 331.
2. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 218; Mikhail N. Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, trans. by A. M. Pogacar (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 298.
3. Heike Paul, ‘Homeless Men and Nameless Women: Notes on a Postcolonial Canon’, *Wasafiri*, 23 (1996), 41–44.
4. John Barrell, *English Literature in History 1730–80: An Equal, Wide Survey* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), p. 33.

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**Franz Potter, *The History of Gothic Publishing, 1800–1835: Exhuming the Trade* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), xii + 213pp. ISBN 978-1-4039-9582-7; £49 / \$65 (hb).**

THIS WIDE-SWEEPING STUDY SUCCEEDS in broadening our perception of the Gothic as a literary movement in the early nineteenth century, even at a time when it might seem that claims for the mode’s predominance have been overstated. As Potter repeats on three occasions, presumably by choice, ‘We need

to lower our sights' (pp. 3, 13, 151). Generally speaking, this can be taken to indicate the need for cultural historians to look beyond the 'art' fiction of Ann Radcliffe, M. G. Lewis, and others, to Gothic as a wider and more workaday 'trade' phenomenon. More particularly, the book takes issue with the view found in traditional historians of the Gothic, and apparently substantiated by Robert Mayo's survey of magazines, that Gothic declined as a significant cultural phenomenon in the early 1810s, worn out by its own predictability, an easy prey to satire, and all too easily replaced by the historical fiction of Walter Scott. In challenging this viewpoint, Potter usefully examines three relatively unexploited areas: the circulating library; Gothic 'bluebooks'; and the shorter Gothic tale. As a result, Gothic publishing is seen to have had a much more extensive history, both in terms of output and longevity.

While catalogues of circulating libraries have the potential to reveal a different kind of popularity compared with best-seller fiction, these can be perilously difficult documents to interpret. The long survival of a title (or generically indicative range of titles) in catalogues, for example, might mean a number of things, ranging from deliberate retention to preservation through neglect. After supplying a fairly routine account of the operation of libraries at this period, Potter offers findings based on a relatively small survey of ten institutions, five of them in Norwich, and two of which were proprietary subscription libraries. Statistically their holdings allow Potter to claim a level of 18 per cent of Gothic fiction among novels and romances as whole, compared with slightly less than the 15 per cent for the production of new Gothic fiction recorded for the same period in volume two of *The English Novel 1770–1829* (2000). While the difference might seem slight, Potter is intent on arguing that the maintenance of this level in the libraries *across* the period points to the continued popularity of the mode after production of new titles declined. Behind this lies the supposition of a general readership, mainly involving the anonymous 'middling' ranks, whose preferences and responses have been largely lost to literary historians.

In attempting to reconnect with this underbelly, Potter examines two marked-up catalogues of Norwich circulating libraries, identifying the owners and analysing their apparent reading choices. In each instance, however, the claimed predilection for Gothic involves an element of hedging which could veil the existence of other factors. In the case of Averil Sibel, the wife of a veterinarian, in addition to conceding that of sixty novels presumably read from the catalogue 'very few of them are Gothic', Potter seems somewhat over-concerned to claim *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) as one of that kind: 'She preferred historical, didactic and domestic tales with Gothic settings such as Owenson's *Wild Irish Girl*, the story of which confronts the issue of forced marriages between the English and the Irish' (p. 33). Another way of putting this would be to say that a new sub-genre, the Irish national tale, had subsumed the Gothic, and was here (along the celebrity of the author) attracting Mrs Sibel's interest.

The book is on safer ground when dealing with the largely uncharted publishing history of bluebooks or 'shilling shockers'. Certainly Potter, who supplies a 'broad sampling' (p. 46) of 350 Gothic bluebooks, takes the topic much further than William Watt's essayistic *Shilling Shockers of the Gothic School* (1932), providing amongst other things an account of the main publishers involved, such as Anne Lemoine and William Tegg (though the assertion that these represented large London houses is perhaps exaggerated). There are several parallels here with Angela Koch's 2002 contribution to *Cardiff Corvey*, 'Gothic Bluebooks in the Princely Library of Corvey and Beyond' (Issue 9), which is likewise supported by a checklist, and which presumably appeared too late to influence or be acknowledged in the present study. Both accounts are concerned to show that instead of being a degenerate offshoot of the Gothic novel, bluebooks are variants of the same literary tradition, containing distinct formal and thematic characteristics, and inviting fresh questions about circulation and reception.

Potter employs statistics again to point to a different trajectory of publication compared with the mainstream novel, with output of bluebooks accelerating in 1803–04 when the Gothic novel was in retreat. Once more, however, the conclusions drawn seem to be somewhat imperfectly grounded. As Potter partly concedes, figures for the mid-1800s are heavily influenced by the popularity then of magazines incorporating bluebooks, including *The Tell-Tale* and *Marvellous Magazines*. In such a narrow chronological frame, moreover, there is a danger of distortion through other factors, such as the greater amount of time needed to produce larger works and the then not uncommon custom of post-dating title pages. It is questionable too whether Potter gives a sufficiently strong idea of how many of the bluebooks were not predominantly in a Gothic mode, with the sentimental tale especially enjoying a new life in this form. His attempt to establish a distinct readership, as in the case of library fiction, is suggestive yet seems ultimately incomplete. The notion that shortness have might allowed a quick turnaround is apparently supported by the presence of bluebooks titles in two Norwich catalogues, encouraging the view that those borrowing from libraries at a nightly rate of a penny would have seen especial advantages in the form. But in the present writer's experience, it is the exception rather than the rule for circulating-library catalogues to list bluebooks, and it would appear Potter slips too easily into the plural when asserting that 'documentation in circulating libraries' (p. 76) supports the idea of a middle-class readership. The overall challenging of the traditional view of a vulgar 'working-class' readership, however, for the most part rings true, and finds useful support in analysis of the narratives themselves, highlighting their complex sentence structure, range of allusion, and accentuation of moral import.

The final area under discussion, the shorter tale in collected form or in periodical literature, is the most diffuse and in some ways the most rewarding in its results. Potter argues convincingly that changes in technology and production costs, as well as reading habits, led to the bluebooks being overtaken

by a new species of periodical literature, which proved particularly amenable to the Gothic tale. He also usefully extends this enquiry beyond the range of the respectable magazines dominating Mayo's survey, while pushing the account well into the 1830s. A third and final checklist features 300 Gothic tales, 1800–34, as found in three kinds of source: omnibus collections of tales, the new keepsakes and annuals, and more general periodicals. Amongst these, the most original element probably is the discovery of a large Gothic input in the annuals, where Potter discerns a species of tale combining the moralistic and horrific, not uncommonly mediated through a Scottian narrative framework. Seen against this background, the contribution of Gothic-like tales by writers such as James Hogg, and indeed Scott himself, seems entirely within the bounds of expectation.

It is this assemblage of tales as a whole which allows Potter to claim most forcibly the continuing vibrancy of Gothic publishing, with a final chart, combining novels, bluebooks, and tales, showing peaks in the 1820s and 1830s higher than in any preceding decade. As elsewhere in the book, however, an apparently hard-cast statistical conclusion invites interrogation on a number of levels. Not only are disparately sized units given equal weighting, it would also appear that the lists of tales and bluebooks are to some degree samples (albeit large ones), whereas the numbers for novels are from a source that claims to be exhaustive. The totals for the years for 1826 and 1830 are likewise very much distorted (as Potter acknowledges) by the 121 items included from the popular collection *Legends of Terror!*. More disturbingly, there are occasional indications of statistical inconsistency within the study as a whole. Figure 2.1, illustrating the annual production of Gothic novels in comparison with the overall production of novels, presents the two in such a way that a seemingly false total is arrived at, combining rather than absorbing sums (a procedure not followed in comparable graphs following). At a later stage, Potter sub-divides his 300 tales into 134 titles or 45 per cent in periodicals and 169 tales or 56 per cent in popular collections (pp. 83, 96), for which inconsistency there may be a reason, though it is not immediately evident.

The last three main chapters in the book offer accounts of three writers navigating different channels of 'trade' Gothic fiction: the relatively obscure figure of William Child Green; Sarah Wilkinson, the most prolific writer of bluebook redactions; and Francis Lathom, a stalwart of the circulating-library novel. In the case of Green, the bulk of the commentary falls on his novel *Abbot of Montserrat* (1826), which has been available to modern scholars in facsimile for some time, and which is seen as representing a morally corrective version of Lewis's *The Monk*, motivated in Potter's account by 'pious didacticism' rather than 'monetary' considerations (p. 97). Nothing is made of the fact that two of Green's other verifiable titles, *The Prophecy of Duncannon* (1824) and *The Woodland Family* (1824), were apparently first issued as number publications, a form of distribution not covered by this account. The chapter on Wilkinson makes a number of advances in biographical and critical terms, one especially

interesting feature being the discovery of a number of telling crossovers between her bluebooks and conventional novels. The Lathom chapter also provides engaging new material about the varied career of this originally Norwich-based author, whose capacity to meld established Gothic motifs with currently more fashionable modes, such as historical romance, is seen as a root cause of his enduring success as a 'trade' novelist.

A final short chapter on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) draws attention to its early adaptation as a two-penny pamphlet and stage melodrama. In operating as a kind of coda, this encapsulates some of the main strengths and weaknesses Potter's study. On a number of particular points the account is arguably misleading. The claim that *Frankenstein* shared with 'trade' novels the distinction of being 'critically disparaged but financially lucrative' (p. 146) is hard to square with the original small print run and reviews provided by leading journals, which together could be taken to suggest the obverse. Nor can one entirely agree that adaptations significantly contributed to the novel's 'extraordinary evolution into a pillar of the genre' (p. 146), when other factors such as the author's literary pedigree and early inclusion in Bentley's *Standard Novels* are left out of the equation. At the same time, as a demonstration of the power of 'trade' Gothic' in popularising a source text, and the interchangeable nature of novels, bluebooks, tales, and stage melodrama, this final case history more than justifies the last and concluding appeal to 'lower our sights'. ■

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS



**Peter Garside** is Professor of Bibliography and Textual Studies at the University of Edinburgh. He has co-edited an edition of James Hogg's *The Forest Minstrel* (EUP, 2006), and has more recently published an edition of Walter Scott's *Waverley* (EUP, 2007) for the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels.

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**Richard Hill** completed his PhD at Edinburgh University in 2006, and is now teaching English at the University of Hawaii, Maui Community College. His thesis was entitled 'The Illustration of the Waverley Novels in Scotland: Walter Scott's Contribution to the Nineteenth-Century Illustrated Novel'. He has written articles on Scott, Hogg, and book illustration, and is currently working on the lifetime illustrations of Robert Louis Stevenson.

**Wendy Hunter** is in the process of completing her PhD thesis at the University of Sheffield, which has a working title of 'Literary Identity in the Work of James Hogg'. She has recently published an article on Hogg's periodical *The Spy* for the *Literary Encyclopaedia* and has contributed to a forthcoming e-book on Hogg's contributions in Chambers' *Edinburgh Journal*.

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