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The Legacy of France: "mon semblable, mon frère!": Review of *Britain, France and the Gothic, 1764–1820: The Impact of Terror* and *The Fantastic and European Gothic: History, Literature and the French Revolution*

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Britain, France and the Gothic, 1764–1820: The Impact of Terror; The Fantastic and European Gothic: History, Literature and the French Revolution

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The Legacy of France: "mon semblable, mon frère!"

Britain, France and the Gothic, 1764–1820: The Impact of Terror, by Angela Wright, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2013, xii + 211 pp., 2 illustrations.

The Fantastic and European Gothic: History, Literature and the French Revolution, by Matthew Gibson, Cardiff, U of Wales P, 2013, 230 pp.

These two books, between them surveying dozens of Gothic works published over 120 years in Britain and France, reveal how contentiously entwined the two nations were, in politics, culture, literature, and "the nationalized debate upon the relative merits of national languages" (Wright 27). This claim is perhaps not strikingly new, but these two titles position France in a much more clearly pivotal position, both as the contested site for the origin of Gothic, and as its most experimental practitioner throughout the remainder of the

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nineteenth century. They also make evident a current trend in Gothic scholarship: a focus on broadening the horizon and challenging the idea that Gothic is a British genre, or that it had British origins, or that it continued to thrive in the nineteenth century primarily in Britain. Anglo-American literary critics have traditionally focused their attention on the Gothic as a primarily British phenomenon, taking cursory glances at France and Germany only sporadically and apparently grudgingly. But the library in Corvey Castle, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, and the bibliography of its holdings, reveals that there was extensive borrowing and interaction between British and German Gothicists, while British titles from this period that can no longer be found in England are available in the German collection (Garside, Raven, and Schöwerling 1: 68–69; 2: 41; 2: 56).

Similarly, by focusing on the connections between England and France, Margaret Cohen and Carolyn Dever have identified what they call a "cross-Channel zone of literary culture [that] produced a vision of the universally emotive human subject abstracted from national difference and historical specificity" (20). Additionally, Marshall Brown has criticized the "monoglot" tendency in Anglo-American discussions of the Gothic, arguing that the "romantic gothic was a common enterprise developed by an international community of writers" (1). Peter Mortensen has also challenged what he called the "somewhat narrow construction of the gothic genre" that has been operative in the writings of Anglo-American critics by calling for a "more complex intertextual and transcultural exchange" between national productions. Mortensen claims that writers of the Gothic should be understood as "participants in an international dialogue," "allies instead of opponents, united in their aim of appropriating, absorbing, and counteracting the sexually arresting and politically threatening fictions inundating Britain from the continent towards the end of the eighteenth century" (271).

France served as a conduit between German and British Gothics, translating and adapting both traditions, while a more conservative British culture feared what it considered to be the dangerous religious enthusiasms and politically revolutionary ideas that were being disseminated through translations of French and German writings. In post-revolutionary France, of course, anxieties toward England and the German states were all the more intense, with the added complication of Napoleonic censorship and military aggression during the Empire

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period. Angela Wright's book begins at what is generally considered to be the beginning of this complex tale, Horace Walpole's proto-Gothic *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), but she complicates that conventional tale of origins by providing a very close examination of Britain's cultural and literary relationship to France during the aftermath of the Seven Years War (1756–1763). Her Introduction states her thesis most clearly, and I will say that it was a delight to read this jargon-free prose: "This book will argue that the Seven Years War – responsible for sharpening the already fraught relationship that England held with France – is in many ways responsible for the complex, ambivalent origins of the Gothic romance in 1764" (3). She initially focuses on how and why Walpole revised his Preface to Otranto, placing that document in the context of Béat Louis de Muralt's *Letters describing the character and customs of the English and French nations* (1726) and Voltaire's *Appeal* (1761). While the first version of the Preface shows Walpole to be cultivating an "aristocratic, Francophile persona" connected with "degeneracy and effeminacy" (8), his second version disguised French influences and vigorously defended Shakespeare as a symbol of a new and much more avid form of British patriotism. In situating Walpole's novel in a cross-channel debate with Muralt and Voltaire over the superiority of English language and culture, Wright argues that the Gothic is a nationalistic genre, born out of the aftermath of a lost war and lingering cultural shame. Perhaps the most original aspect of the chapter on Walpole is Wright's attempt to provide a historical source for Walpole's fictional translator William Marshal. For Wright, he might be the engraver who provided the frontispiece of Charles I's book of meditations, *Eikon Basilike* (1649), a man who was attacked by John Milton as incompetent. Wright speculates that the perhaps veiled allusion to this man "suggests [Walpole's] anxieties about representing, mediating, copying and authorship" (25).

Wright next examines the translations from the French of Clara Reeve (*The Exiles; or, Memoirs of the Count de Cronstadt*, based on Baculard d'Arnaud's *Les Épreuves du Sentiment*), Charlotte Smith (*The Romance of Real Life*, adapted from François Gayot de Pitaval's *Les Causes Célèbres et Intéressantes*), and Sophia Lee (*The Recess*, based on Prévost's *Monsieur Clèveland*). For Wright, the Gothic is indebted in its development to the absorption and transformation of works in the French sentimental tradition, those in particular by Voltaire, Diderot,

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Prévost d'Exiles, Madame de Tensin, Baculard d'Arnaud, the Marquis de Sade, Rousseau, and Genlis (11). But because of the political residue after the War, British authors were forced to be "consistently coy about [their] French inspiration" (10), and therefore they translated, appropriated, or plagiarized French titles, all the while obfuscating or denying what they were doing for fear of negative responses from an increasingly nationalistic British reading audience.

In her third chapter, "Versions of Gothic and terror," Wright focuses on how the Gothic came to be read as a "literature of terror" during the 1790s: "despite its best patriotic gestures, it was increasingly perceived as the translational container in which French sentiments and ideals were imported into British fiction" (65). Examining essays published in the *Anti-Jacobin Magazine* by George Canning and *The Pursuits of Literature* by Thomas Mathias, Wright asserts that it was these works, in conjunction with the *Monthly Magazine*, the *European Magazine*, and the *Monthly Review*, that fostered "satirical campaigns against Gothic romances, linking them specifically to the French Revolution" (79). The most original section of this chapter was Wright's discovery of a short-lived Scottish periodical called *The Ghost*, edited by one "Felix Phantom," that condemned the Gothic and yet came close to praising Rousseau (86).

The last two chapters of Wright's book examine Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, arguably the most important practitioners of the canonical Gothic. In her chapter on Radcliffe, "The castle under threat: Ann Radcliffe's system and the romance of Europe," Wright argues that the novels were each engaged in "a discerning, skeptical and sustained" manner with the works of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Madame de Genlis (90). Rather than dealing in simple Francophobia, *The Romance of the Forest* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for Wright, "portray the French nation and many of its inhabitants as enlightened and benevolent just as much, if not more, than they portray France as a Gothic space" (96). Much of this chapter focuses on a very close reading of the influence of Rousseauvian arguments in his Emile and Genlis's theories of education on Radcliffe's distinction between self-love and self-interest in The Romance of the Forest. In addition to discussing Radcliffe's belief that "the 'language' of a nation, reflected through its cultural embodiments, can provide agency for change," Wright also reads Radcliffe's condemnation of the

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effects of war in her travelogue and *Gaston de Blondeville*, a novel that she claims reveals Radcliffe's "increasing disillusionment with the vacillating governance of England" (116). What was most suggestive in this chapter was the use that Wright made of Radcliffe's only surviving commonplace book (now in the Boston Public Library), a source that reveals Radcliffe's lifelong interest in the political relationship between Britain and France.

Finally, in her chapter on Lewis, "'The order disorder'd': French convents and British liberty," Wright examines "how deeply entrenched the Gothic is within counterfeit textual practices that might distract attention from its Gallic origins or inspiration" (123). She begins this chapter by citing one particularly intriguing example of a "counterfeit" text, *Laura; or, Original Letters. A Sequel to the Eloisa of J. J. Rousseau*. In fact, this anti-Catholic novel was written by the German Friedrich August Clemen and then translated into French by the Swiss author Gabriel Seigneux de Correvon before making its way into an English translation, published in 1790. This chapter looks closely at a number of anti-clerical French works, dramas, and novels that Lewis knew from the summer he spent in Paris in 1791. At issue here is the contested question of Lewis's motives, political and religious, in writing *The Monk*. Wright seems to want to absolve Lewis of the charge of anti-Catholicism, although we know that the Whigs (and he was a Whig MP) took every opportunity to fan the flames of anti-Catholicism throughout this period (Haydon; Charlesworth; Hoeveler). Instead, she argues that Lewis took from Sade, not a condemnation of Catholic practices, but a "detestation of religious iconography. The uncomfortable visual connections that they forge between their heroines and the Madonna seek to upset the assumptions of their readership, rather than criticize Catholic devotion per se" (133). But in fact, this condemnation of "religious iconography" in both Sade and Lewis is part and parcel of a larger anti-Catholic agenda, a manifestation of the Protestant condemnation of saint worship or what was to their eyes, idolatry. Similarly, Wright takes Lewis's anticlerical drama *Venoni* at face value, accepting his bogus message to "BE TOLERANT!" unambiguously (143–44). I read this adaptation from the French of Boutet de Monvel's *Les Victimes cloîtrées* as yet another of Lewis's forays into anti-Catholic territory. His sudden plea for religious toleration has to be understood, I think, as a broad wink to his audience, a smirk that says something like, let's all play along with

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this suddenly fashionable toleration business, but we all really know what we think about the Catholic clergy and their institutions. And, in fact, the review in the *Monthly Mirror* makes much the same point, noting that the play's anti-Catholicism was moderated "by desire of Mr. Sheridan, *the tolerant*" (their emphasis; qtd. Macdonald 171).

While I certainly agree with Wright's thesis, that the Gothic emerged out of Britain's political engagement with eighteenth-century French culture, I would qualify that to say that a large aspect of that anxious relation was with France's identity and history as a Catholic country, and that is what is elided in Wright's study. The most telling example of this, apart from the chapter on Lewis, is an advertisement that Wright cites which was placed in the *Morning Chronicle* inviting "friends to the Free Administration of Justice" to a dinner on the "5th of November, 1794" (83). While Wright reads this advertisement in the light of "the system of terror" that William Pitt's government had inaugurated against the London Corresponding Society and the "treason trials," she fails to note the most important aspect of the dinner, its date: 5 November. Guy Fawkes Day was a national holiday when a liturgy was held to celebrate the defeat of Popery in both 1605 and 1688, and a proclamation was read that praised: "The happy deliverance of King JAMES I and the three estates of *England*, from the most traitorous and bloody intended massacre by Gunpowder: and also for the happy arrival of . . . King *William* on this day, for the deliverance of our church and nation" (*Book of Common Prayer*, 1740). But not content with just religious services, the populace every year burned an effigy of the pope in a parodic version of a Catholic *auto-da-fé*. In a symbolic act that condemned "false religion, cruelty and persecution, and foreign jurisdiction over the realm," the bonfire represented "the defeat of the forces of evil, and expressed the conviction that they would never triumph. It was a ritual of purification: the realm had been cleansed of its ill and cankers" (Haydon 30; 35). It seems only fair to observe that in focusing solely on either politics or religion, one is always bound to miss the full picture.

Matthew Gibson's *The Fantastic and European Gothic* picks up the narrative where Wright leaves off: in the literature written in France, Germany, Ireland, and Scotland from the end of the French Revolution to the 1870s. This book is a sort of sprawling "comp lit"

study, whereas Wright's is focused much more tightly on a clear and manageable thesis. Gibson instead attempts to place the Gothic novellas and *contes* of Charles Nodier, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Théophile Gautier, Paul Fèval, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, and Robert Louis Stevenson into relation with Todorov's theories of the fantastic. The chapter on Nodier examines very briefly a number of his works - "L'Histoire d'Hélène Gillet," "La Fée aux miettes," *Le Vampire*, "Smarra," "The Crumb Fairy," "Inès de las Sierras," a tale inspired by Scott's *Bride of Lammermoor*, and *Jean Shogar* – within the context of the French frénétique. Gibson talks about how these texts challenged science and were counterrevolutionary in spirit; that is, "they laid the blame for terror and horror upon the Enlightenment" (35). In addition, he examines literary influences, formalistic stylistic innovations, and the importance of Walter Scott's essay "On the supernatural element of fictitious composition, and particularly on the Works of Ernest Theodore Hoffmann" (1827), translated and published in France as "Du Merveilleux dans le roman" (1829), on an understanding of the development of the European Gothic. As Gibson argues, Scott's attempt to deride Hoffmann for a French reading audience was a "complete failure" (49), while Hoffmann's tales successfully challenged, at least on the continent, the model that Scott was trying to establish in his development of the historical novel.

Gibson's chapter on Hoffmann looks at his *Das Fraülein von Scuderi* in the context of metaphors relating to "the divinity and seminal role of Louis XIV's kingship," as well as the diamond necklace scandal. For Gibson, Hoffmann "presents a view of French society as moving from a more noble concept of commodity to a more degraded concept," representing the decline of a responsible autocracy (73). He also touches briefly in this chapter on the influence that Schiller's translations of Pitaval's *Causes Célèbres* (1731–1743) had on Hoffmann's tales (70). Given Wright's discussion of the importance of Pitaval for Charlotte Smith and Ann Radcliffe, it is interesting that this French quasi-journalist also was influential in Germany a century after the initial publication of his work.

In his examination of Théophile Gautier, he looks at "The Dead Woman in Love," *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, and "Onuphrius," a vampire and double tale. As *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is one of the most famous examples of the use of androgyny in French literature, I

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was expecting an extended discussion of that trope, but its multifaceted aspects were not analyzed here. Rather, it was labeled as a metaphor for the "union of the aesthetic with the real, of the spiritual with the material" (84), and its homoerotic implications were not explored. Similarly, his discussion of "The Dead Woman in Love," with its character the priest Romuald, fails to recognize the complex intertextual context of the figure. For instance, he might have placed the tale in relation to Robert Southey's 1798 ballad translated from the Spanish about "St. Romuald," a French monk who was famous for wrestling with Satan in his hermit's cave and then tempted by a beautiful woman who was Satan in disguise.

There are two chapters on the novels of Paul Féval, author of *La Vampire*, *Le Chevalier Ténèbre*, and *La Ville Vampire*, a romp about a young Ann Radcliffe chasing a kidnapped and vampirized friend to Serbia and then Montenegro. A conservative Catholic, Légitimiste, and counter-revolutionary, Féval frequently figured vampirism as a "brigandry of monetary greed" (109). In addition, his works "see the true Gothic terror as the callousness unleashed by rationalism and then positivism," and "the rise of the malign spirit of materialism" (109). While placing these titles in their historical context, Gibson also attempts to bring in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, citing in this chapter (as he does throughout), how the transformation of public space influenced the development of "la vie privée." At the same time, this reification of the private sphere and the nuclear family caused "the moral erosion of a set of communal, Catholic values" (119).

The discussions of Le Fanu and Stevenson are fairly truncated and concern wellknown works ("The Room in the Dragon Valont" and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) that have been widely discussed in a European context for quite some time. Gibson's most original proposition is his conclusion that "the terror and horror of the Gothic can result from embracing, rather than reneging upon, Enlightenment principles" (188). Both of these books have valuable content for the student of the Gothic as well as the specialist-scholar and both of them uncover some new materials and approaches. Their publication signals how vibrant and continually contradictory the research in the field is right now.

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