More Gothic Gold: The Sadleir-Black Chapbook Collection at the University of Virginia Library

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“Gothic Gold: The Sadleir-Black Collection of Gothic Fiction” was one of Fred Frank’s favorite articles, and he wrote to me shortly after it was published to tell me how much he had enjoyed his time surveying the collection in Charlottesville, VA. When I decided to follow in his footsteps and spend the month of August 2009 working in the collection, I sent an email to Nancy Frank, telling her how keenly I felt Fred’s presence while I was working there. She wrote back saying, “Fred’s ghost must be haunting that place because he loved working there so much.” After Fred’s death, Nancy donated eight books in Fred’s core Gothic collection to the Sadleir-Black, and I had the pleasure of perusing his annotations in those volumes. But the Sadleir-Black has actually moved since Fred worked there and now is in the Small Special Collections in the basement of the Harrison Institute, to the left of the main Alderman Library building and directly across the street from the room that Edgar Allan Poe lived in while a freshman at the University. Fred considered the Sadleir-Black the most impressive Gothic collection in the United States, and certainly there is no disputing that assessment. In this essay I would like to supplement the survey that Fred did of the collection’s holdings for Gothic aficionados who have not had the pleasure of working there and suggest that Fred’s prescient quest for the “off-beat” and
rare in Gothic studies is precisely where the field is heading right now.

As Fred noted, the Sadleir-Black collection holds 1,135 titles, and that number has not increased since the final bequests made by Robert K. Black before his death in 1975. Fred has told the tale of how Michael Sadleir (originally Sadler), British novelist, bibliographer, and bibliophile, originally built the collection over many years and finally sold it in 1937 to Black, an American of Scottish descent and a graduate of the University of Virginia, who then bequeathed it to the Library in 1942. Black himself wrote a description of traveling to England to buy the collection with his inheritance and having the books shipped to him in hundreds of crates before the start of World War II. The timing was certainly fortuitous, as Sadleir reports in his version of the collection’s history, because many of the remaining Gothic chapbooks of the early nineteenth century were burned in warehouses that were hit by Nazi air raids during the worst of the London bombings. Whole collections of rare British works were lost at that time, and the fact that the Sadleir-Black collection had been removed to America only a few years before was indeed lucky. Both Mr. Sadleir and Mr. Black have left detailed descriptions of the history of the collection, and those typescripts are available in the collection. Also of real interest to me were the letters exchanged between Black and the Gothic bibliographer and literary historian, the eccentric Montague Summers. No sooner were the books shipped to America and out of London than Summers began requesting that Black send him, back in a war-torn England, some of the rarest of the books. I found this exchange of letters strange to say the least. Why would Summers wait for the collection to be sold to an American before he would ask to borrow some of the rarest titles? Why would he not have asked the same from Sadleir when he owned the books and lived nearby in England? Anyone who has studied the checkered
reputation of Summers and his behavior early in life will understand immediately.¹

Apart from the documents that trace the personal histories behind the collection of this impressive array of titles, there are most importantly the books themselves. As Fred noted, there are 20 vault items in the collection (“Gothic Gold” n2), extremely rare Gothic novels, as well as numerous items of a unique historical interest, such as the second edition of Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* owned and signed by Percy Shelley’s mother Elizabeth and the edition that we know the poet read, or Jane Porter’s copy of her *Thaddeus of Warsaw*, with her own handwritten corrections in pencil throughout. And by the way, I found many poems and chapbooks written by someone who identified himself as “An Etonian.” I mention this because Percy Shelley, who wrote two short Gothic novels while a student at Oxford, attended Eton from 1804 to 1810.

There are also two very interesting objects in the collection, both purchased by Black. The first is a child’s toy, a cardboard “bleeding nun” figure drawn very specifically from Lewis’s *The Monk*. The doll has the words “Raymond, Raymond, thou art mine” inscribed on the top above her face, and she alternates between presenting a demure face and a snarling, threatening one with the pull of the mechanism hidden on her back. The more dramatic version of the front of this ominous nun (figure 1) presents her as a knife-wielding threat, while the back of the toy (figure 2) reveals the simple mechanics by which the toy operated:

¹For an assessment of Summers as a Gothic scholar, as well as a rumored demon worshipper, pederast, and *faux* Catholic priest, see Joseph Jerome’s *Montague Summers: A Memoir*. 
Figures 1 and 2: The Bleeding Nun, front and back views; (London: Poole, 1817).

All figures used with permission from the Sadleir-Black Collection, University of Virginia Library.
The other object is a toy theater consisting of a cardboard stage set with elaborate moving screens and characters based on an 1880 Victorian production of Matthew Lewis’s *Timour the Tartar* (see figure 3).

*Figure 3: Timour the Tartar* Toy Theatre (London: Redington, 1880).

Both toys suggest that the trappings of the Gothic had become so thoroughly domesticated by the middle of the nineteenth century that children’s toys were routinely produced from their plots and characters. Thirty of the rarest Gothic novels from the collection were reprinted by Arno Press in the 1970s, under the general editorship of Devendra Varma, and that first reprint series in my opinion was responsible for keeping the study of the Gothic (just barely) alive during the heyday of the formalist movement. More recently, 171 of the Gothic novels in the collection were
microfilmed by Adam Matthew Publications, and the library itself has microfilmed 20 of the chapbooks.² Fred estimated that approximately one-third of the collection consisted of chapbooks (“Gothic Gold” Appendix), and in fact the exact number is 297, a figure that is somewhat higher than the 217 Gothic chapbooks that are listed by Angela Koch as extant in the collections of Europe, Britain, and America (“Absolute Horror”).

When Fred worked at the collection in the late 1990s, he was most interested in looking at the rare, triple-decker Gothic novels, and then, at the issue of Gothic illustrations, and he reproduced in his article a number of rare Gothic illustrations largely taken from the chapbooks there and now available online (see his appendix). He was puzzled as to why very few of the British Gothic novels had any illustrations at all, in contrast to the French Gothic novels and the British chapbooks, which were often garishly illustrated, particularly in their frontispieces (see figure 4 for a typical, hand-colored chapbook frontispiece).

²For a complete listing of their Gothic collection, see http://www.adam-matthew-publications.co.uk/digital_guides/gothic_fiction/Contents.aspx.
Maurice Lévy’s lavishly illustrated book *Roman Noir*, a volume that reproduces in black and white more than one hundred illustrations used in the early French Gothic novels, makes it clear by way of contrast that there was simply no equivalent tradition of the visual Gothic within the British genre. Certainly this is puzzling and is a question that has still not been addressed in the scholarship.

At this point it might be fair to assume that most of the novels of any value in the Sadleir-Black are available through the microfilmed set assembled by Adam Matthew, or available through googlebooks.com. My own search in the collection, however, uncovered dozens of novels that had never been microfilmed and were definitely of historical and ideological significance. Some of those titles include George Moore’s *Theodosius de Zulvin, the Monk of Madrid: A Spanish Tale* (1802), a four volume novel that I am certain is an overlooked and important source for Charlotte Dacre’s *Zofloya* (1806); Catherine Cuthbertson’s *Sir Ethelbert; or The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (1830); the anonymous *Libertines; or Monkish Mysteries!* (1800), vehemently anti-Catholic and based on Lewis’s *The Monk*; and C. A. Bolen’s *The Mysterious Monk; or, The Wizard’s Tower* (1826) to list only a few.

More interesting to me was the sheer number of chapbooks that no one has studied or copied and that are in my opinion one of the most interesting and unusual aspects of the collection. The Gothic chapbook: what is one to make of this strange cast-off genre? Fred certainly had no time for it:

Low quality Gothic fiction [was] denoted by its garish blue coverings or wrappers. The Gothic bluebook is a primitive paperback or ur-pulp publication, cheaply manufactured, sometimes garishly illustrated, and meant to be thrown away after being “read to pieces.” . . . The reader of the bluebook received a single dose of Gothicism between the blue covers. Almost all of the hundreds of bluebooks published during the period are pirated abridgments of full-length Gothic novels. (“Gothic Gold” 433)
But Angela Koch claims that, of the 220 chapbooks she has examined, only 63 were adaptations of the longer, full-length Gothic novels, while the others were works that used “the same Gothic paraphernalia, such as family feud, illicit love, and the intervention of supernatural powers” (“Gothic Bluebooks”), but were original so far as any “formula” fiction can be. Clearly delimited as a genre that flourished between 1770 and 1820, the Gothic chapbook has been discussed in largely accusatory tones by earlier critics who blame it for the eventual decline of the canonical Gothic novel’s status and popularity. David Punter, for instance, observes that

popular writers in the genre appear to have become increasingly able to turn out a formulaic product in a matter of weeks, and the eventual decline in Gothic’s popularity was clearly at least partially to do with a flooding of the market, and also with the way in which the hold of the early Gothic masters tended to stultify originality. (114)

As there are at least one thousand Gothic chapbooks currently extant in Britain alone, ³ it is virtually impossible to provide anything other than a snapshot or freeze-frame portrait of the genre. I have chosen to look at a handful of representative types available at the Sadleir-Black collection in order to suggest the tremendous range to be found in this mode of writing. Certainly by the time Edgar Allan Poe was writing his short tales of terror (e.g., “The Tell-Tale Heart” in 1843), he had mastered the formulae necessary to produce a taut and macabre study in Gothic psychology and action. Any claim that the Gothic tale was moribund by this date is patently false given the artistry that Poe brought to the genre, not to mention that developed by

³Potter provides two appendices that list some 650 titles for Gothic chapbooks and tales published between 1799-1835. It seems safe to say that at least another three to four hundred were published during the earlier phase of the genre (1764-99). St Clair claims that the height of the “chapbook Gothic” craze occurred around 1810 (349). Scholarly sources on the earlier phase include Birkhead, who argues that “in these brief, blood-curdling romances we may find the origin of the short tale of terror” (186).
Maupassant in France or Hoffman in Germany. Between William Mudford’s “The Iron Shroud, or Italian Revenge” (1839), a tale in which a man is crushed to death in a room that collapses on him, and Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum” (1842), however, there is a considerable artistic gulf, and it is my intention to try to explain how that gap was bridged through an examination of the evolution and eventual refinement of the subjectivities presented in the Gothic tale.

In many ways, the short Gothic tales found in the chapbooks represent examples of what Charles Taylor has called cultural technologies or textual practices that serve to instantiate the ambivalent moral agenda of what he calls “secularization 3.” The usual interpretation of the secularizing process—dubbed “subtraction stories” by Taylor (22)—is that either religion in “public spaces” diminished during the origins of modernity (called “secularization 1” by Taylor), or that “religious beliefs and practices” declined (called “secularization 2”). Taylor argues that both of these approaches are inadequate because, while there is certainly less religion in modern Europe, this is not a universal feature of the Western experience (the United States being the prime counter-example). Nor is it true to say that the separation

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4Richter has claimed the “Gothic is to all intents and purposes dead by 1822” (Progress 125), while Mayo asserts that “from 1796 to 1806 at least one-third of all novels published in Great Britain were Gothic in character” (“Gothic Romance” 766); earlier he had observed that “the popular vogue for romances of terror was over in 1814, but their appeal was still fresh in the minds of readers” (“Gothic Short Story” 64).

5Baldick claims that Poe’s tales are distinctly different from the earlier Gothic tales, which he sees as inferior and merely redactions of the longer Gothic novels (xvi). One of the earliest scholarly attempts to discuss the genre can be found in William Watt, who argues that “shilling shockers” are the transitional link between the late eighteenth-century Gothic novels and the short tales of terror as developed by Poe, Maupassant, and LeFanu.

6My forthcoming book, “Gothic Riffs: Secularizing the Uncanny in the European Imaginary, 1780-1820,” uses Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age to examine a variety of Gothic genres as one of those newly invented cultural practices that advocate for what he calls “secularization 3,” or the ability to hold several competing and contradictory beliefs at the same time.
of the public and religious spheres is rigorously observed. Taylor argues instead that while the creation of a Western “secular age” is indeed historically unique, its defining feature is not a diminution in religion, but a change in the “background” of the public “imaginary” (13). Using Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Taylor defines “background” as the pre-philosophical understanding that conditions thought by being universal, within culture, and invisible to its citizens (13). During the Enlightenment there was a unique change in this “background,” one that asserted for the first time that human beings have the choice as to whether they locate the experience of “fullness” in the quotidian realm of everyday life or in the transcendent and spiritual, or in some other construction that allowed them to simultaneously embrace both world-views. For Taylor, the final stage of secularization can be understood as a matter of personal choice as to whether one locates supreme value in the supernatural and transcendent, in mundane “human flourishing,” or in a “cosmology” that combines the two, a locus that he calls “secularization 3” (2-4). As Taylor observes, “there has been a titanic change in our western civilization. We have changed not just from a condition where most people lived ‘naïvely’ in a construal (part Christian, part related to ‘spirits’ of pagan origin) as simple reality, to one in which almost no one is capable of this, but all see their option as one among many” (12).

For Taylor, this transition in subjectivity occurred when the concern for and emphasis on earthly “human flourishing” replaced the high value that had been placed on accumulating “merit” in an afterlife:

I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true. (18)
Taylor also argues that, paradoxically, this modern secular mindset was largely fostered in the eighteenth century by religious reforms and enthusiasms—what he calls “Providential Deism”—an argument supported by modern historical opinion, which tends to see schools of French rationalism, for instance, as the exception during an eighteenth century that was otherwise marked by a revival of religious feelings and beliefs (19). According to Taylor, this change of mindset—this fundamental alteration in the Western “background” (13)—did not happen by accident. On the contrary, it was the product of several newly invented cultural practices and technologies, and I would claim that some of those technologies can be seen in the development of the highly Gothicized phantasmagoria, the melodrama, the chapbook, and the opera, all of which performed their cultural work by transforming that “background” through iteration and repetition.

But for Taylor, the work of the social imaginary is not a simple matter of “re-enchantment” as Max Weber has employed the concept. Instead, he argues that the development of “secularity” was based on “images, stories, legends” developed initially by an elite and then spread through the wider culture (172) through “new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices” (22). These cultural practices paradoxically revealed the uncanny doubleness at the heart of secularization, that is, that it was possible to continue to believe simultaneously in both the realms of the supernatural and the natural, the enchanted and the disenchanted, at the same (uneasy) time. For Taylor, this “repertory of collective actions at the disposal of a given group of society” (173) actually encouraged the development of what he calls a “social imaginary” that advocated a sort of imaginative pluralism that in turn fostered the coexistence of the transcendent and the immanent realms:

The great invention of the West was that of an immanent order in Nature, whose working could be systematically understood and explained in its own terms, leaving open the question whether this whole order had a deeper
significance, and whether, if it did, we should infer a transcendent Creator beyond it. This notion of the “immanent” involved denying—or at least isolating and problematizing—any form of interpenetration between the things of Nature, on one hand, and “the supernatural” on the other, be this understood in terms of the one transcendent God, or of Gods or spirits, or magic forces, or whatever. (15-16)

Within the “background” of the popular cultural imagination, a variety of attempts were made to resolve the metaphysical split between the material and transcendent realms that had occurred during the Enlightenment period. For instance, it is significant that the Minerva Press, the most successful purveyor of Gothic chapbooks in Britain and with their fingers firmly pressed to the pulse of their lower and middle-class reading public, also promoted a variety of socially and politically conservative values in its publications. On one hand, the chapbooks were invested in an imminent Protestant, rationalistic, and Enlightenment agenda, while on the other hand, they were riddled with ghosts, superstitions, and reanimations of the world of anima. This bifurcated subjectivity is at the heart of ambivalent secularization, and in the chapbooks we can also examine how class came to play a crucial role in defining the transformations of the Gothic uncanny.

Scholars most frequently claim that the short Gothic tale or chapbook grew out of the earlier tradition of cheap broadside (because printed on one side of the paper) ballads or street literature, and certainly one can see in the shorter eight-page chapbooks the residue of this direct oral to written tradition. Gary Kelly has recently observed that this early street literature is characterized by its “emphasis on destiny, chance, fortune and leveling forces such as death, express[ing] the centuries-old experience of common people . . . with little or no control over the conditions of their lives. . . . For these people, life was a lottery” (Varieties x). According to Kelly, the fact that the lower-classes were the target audience of these early productions is also obvious from their very heavy use of narrative repetition,
their emphasis on incident and adventure, and their episodic and anecdotal structures. The other major difference between lower and middle-class reading materials is the absence in the lower-class works of any extended depictions of subjectivity or emotions in the protagonists (x, xv). One example of this lower-class ideology at work can be found in *Tales of Superstition: or Relations of Apparitions* (see figures 5 and 6), a work that is extremely similar to Isabella Lewis’s *Terrific Tales* (1804), a series of short vignettes that purport to be true, although the contents are fantastical and reveal an interesting mix of residual supernaturalism combined with rationalizing Christian moral exemplum.

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**Figures 5 and 6: Tales of Superstition** (London: Tegg and Castleman).
For instance, one tale concerns an aristocrat, “of very inordinate passions,” who is kidnapped by a spirit who arrived on horseback. Obviously a prose revision and redaction of the Germanic ballad “Lenora,” the homily at the conclusion remarks on his abduction as “a punishment for his excessive passions” (7). What is most interesting about all of these collections of tales, besides their repetitive use of spectres, devils, ghosts in chains, warnings from Purgatory, and clouds of sulphur, is their persistent assurance that the afterworld and the realm of the transcendent do indeed exist. In one tale, a dead man appears to his friend to exclaim, “Michael, Michael! Nothing is more true than what has been said of the other world” (61), and such a message is the major reason for the popularity of these works. The supernatural was not supposed to be explained away, but instead confirmed as real. Although the elite and the intelligentsia might have been willing to accept the stark lessons of materialism and the finality of death, the lower class was not able to do so, and the Gothic chapbook reveals in all its convolutions the persistence and continuing power of the supernatural in the social imaginary.

In 1800 a three-volume Gothic novel could cost as much as two weeks’ wages for a laborer, and we know that, for the most part, the library fees at a circulating library also would have been out of their reach. The longer (thirty-six and seventy-two page) prose chapbooks cost from sixpence to a shilling, or the price of a meal or a cheap theater seat (Kelly, “Fiction” 218), and they seem to have had a written rather than a purely oral origin. The Gothic chapbooks can best be understood in two ways: first, as adaptations of the extremely popular European fairy tale, and secondly, as redactions of the longer Gothic novels and dramas. Circulating widely between 1750 and 1820, these tales are European culture’s first “best-sellers.” In fact, G. Ross Roy claims that a conservative estimate of the sale of Scottish chapbooks during this period runs to over 200,000 a year, a huge number given the fact that they were purchased largely by members of the working class. Originally running as twenty-four pages of
single sheet, duodecimo, these truncated tales were frequently bound in coarse blue paper and sometimes illustrated with rough woodcuts and printed in a rude and unfinished style of typography (50-51).

Gothic bluebooks and chapbooks have been something of the step-child of Gothic scholarship, most frequently ignored because of their derivative nature as well as their lack of artistic sophistication, depth, or significance. Montague Summers claims that they were the reading material of “schoolboys, prentices, servant-girls, by the whole of that vast population which longed to be in the fashion, to steep themselves in the Gothic Romance.” They are, in fact, commonly referred to as “the remainder trade” or “the trade Gothic” (84-85). More recently, William St Clair has claimed that, in fact, the chapbooks were read by adults in the country areas, and young people in both the town and the country. It would be a mistake, therefore, to regard the ancient popular print as confined to those whose education fitted them for nothing longer or textually more difficult. Many readers, whether adults or children, lived at the boundary between the reading and the non-reading nations. They were the marginal reading constituency whose numbers fell when prices rose and rose when prices fell. (343-44)

Whatever the exact class of their readership, I would claim that Gothic bluebooks and eventually the Gothic short tale’s importance can be appreciated only by understanding that they carried the ambivalent agenda of secularization within their slim and

7Varma deplored the development of the genre, seeing it “as an index of the sensation-craze into which the Gothic vogue degenerated in its declining years,” also observing that the Gothic bluebook “catered to the perverted taste for excitement among degenerate readers” (189). Frank writes:

Why were the Gothic writers so often drawn to the use of fairytale and folklore motifs of the kinds found throughout the chapbooks? The answer may be that the grotesque motifs and violent patterns of action of these primitive stories provided the distortions of reality and amoral disorientation that the Gothic writers depended upon for rendering their powerful effects. The motifs themselves are variations of the malignant sublime. (First Gothics 415)
flimsy covers. It is not for nothing that Percy and Mary Shelley, along with Byron, Claire Clairmont, and John Polidori, were reading aloud from a collection of German tales of terror the night before Mary Shelley began writing *Frankenstein* (1818) and Polidori penned *The Vampyre* (1819). These German short stories began their literary life as *Das Gespensterbuch (The Ghost Book)*, a five-volume collection of tales by Johann August Apel and Friedrich Laun that were first translated into French by J. B. B. Eyriès as *Fantasmagoriana; ou Recueil d’Histoires d’Apparitions, de Spectres* (1812), and then as *Tales of the Dead* (1813), when they were translated into English by Sarah Utterson. During the summer of 1816 the Diodati circle were very fashionably reading from the French collection.

The earlier “lottery mentality” that was operative in the lower-class chapbooks was eventually replaced during the late eighteenth century by what Kelly calls a dominant “investment mentality” that we can see evidenced in the emerging middle-class chapbooks. This “investment mentality” was characterized by the Protestant ideologies of self-improvement, self-advancement, modernization, and self-discipline, or “the middle-class discourse of merit” (*Varieties* x, xxiii). Increasingly hostile to lower-class street literature that it saw as politically subversive and at the same time spiritually reactionary, the middle class effectively displaced street literature by co-opting it. Hence Hannah More published her *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795-98) for the lower classes, actually imitating cheap broadside and ballad chapbooks and suffusing them not with the “lottery” but with the “investment” mentality that she and her cohorts were attempting to promulgate: a disdain for immediate gratification, a focus on the disastrous consequences of moral relativism, and a stress on the accumulation of “solid and useful” knowledge for middle-class life.  

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8 Mayo was the first critic to recognize the essentially bourgeois moralizing tone of the Gothic tale as published in the periodicals, while he asserted that the Gothic bluebook was too crude to appeal to the rising middle-class reader (“Gothic Short
the one that John Guillory has identified as “covert pastoralism” (124) and claimed is operating in Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Sensing that they are being marginalized by a bourgeois reading public that has begun to exert power in the literary marketplace, Wordsworth and More create a binary of lower class and aristocrat and actually begin to present themselves as aristocrats in peasant dress.

But if there was a middle-class attempt to co-opt the chapbooks, there was also a concerted effort to condemn their popularity altogether. For instance, Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) specifically condemned the “devotees of the circulating library” for indulging in

a sort of beggarly day-dreaming during which the mind of the dreamer furnishes for itself nothing but laziness and a little mawkish sensibility; while the whole *material* and imagery of the doze is supplied *ab extra* by a sort of mental *camera obscura* manufactured at the printing office, which *pro tempore* fixes, reflects and transmits the moving phantasms of one man’s delirium, so as to people the barrenness of an hundred other brains afflicted with the same trance or suspension of all common sense and all definite purpose. (3: 36; his italics)

There is a certain amount of fear as well as class resentment expressed here about an unregulated (non-elitist) press pandering to what Wordsworth had called the “fickle tastes, and fickle appetites” of the lower-class reading public (Preface [1800]).

The Gothic chapbook tradition is split, then, between lower and middle-class agendas, both of which were presenting alternative versions of the secularized uncanny to their readers. One group of tales—the middle-class variety—made claims for the powers of reason, rationality, and secularized education while, ambivalently, it kept alive the vestiges of a belief in a mythic and sacred past of divine beings. As Kelly notes, the representation

Story” 448). In a later article (1950), he focused on the chilly reception given the bluebooks by “many critics, editors, and members of the general reading audience in whose eyes *romance* was the hallmark for barbarous superstition, unreason, moral depravity, and bad taste” (787; his emphasis).
of subjectivity is much more developed in these works, but in a writer like John Aikin, a Protestant Dissenter and author of “Sir Bertrand: A Fragment” (1773), a short Gothic tale that was written to demonstrate the aesthetic principles put forward in his sister Anna Barbauld’s essay “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror” (1773), this subjectivity is severely “disciplined” so that the new bourgeois citizens are those who control their emotions in even the most perilous of situations (Varieties xix). The other group of tales—the lower-class variety—persisted in promulgating a “lottery” view of life, with fate, magic, or luck as the ultimate and inscrutable arbiters in all matters and with human beings still presented as what Taylor calls “porous selves” (38) or pawns in the hands of tyrannical forces they could not fully understand. For Kelly, the subjectivity that occasionally appears in lower-class chapbooks is like the simulation of richer fabrics on cheap printed cottons of the period, [it] is a form of symbolic consumption rather than ideological and cultural instruction for the text’s readers. It is as if the readers of the street Gothics were aware that there was a certain model of subjectivity prized in middle-class and upper middle-class culture, but that subjectivity in itself was of little interest, or perhaps supposed to be of little use or value, for these readers. (Varieties xxiii)

One cannot discuss the Gothic chapbook phenomenon without also briefly addressing the development of the circulating library as a “front” so to speak for its own publishing house, William Lane’s Minerva Press being the most famous example. Lane’s Circulating Library opened in 1770 in London and had ten thousand items in circulation by 1794. We know that circulating libraries were widespread and viewed with more than a little class suspicion by 1775, because Sir Anthony Absolute in Richard Sheridan’s comedy The Rivals says to Mrs. Malaprop, “Madam, a circulating library in a town is as an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge! It blossoms through the year!—And depend on it, Mrs. Malaprop, that they who are so fond of handling the leaves will long for the fruit at last” (20). This
interesting metaphor suggests that the chapbooks may be the “leaves,” but the “fruit” is something much more valuable: the possession of culture, class, and cultivation that cheap access to literacy provides. But just as circulating libraries were viewed with suspicion by the upper classes for the easy access they provided to gaining a modicum of culture, so were they seen as important for the role they played as moral guardians to the working class. In the how-to pamphlet *The Use of Circulating Libraries Considered* (1797), circulating libraries were specifically encouraged to avoid stocking too many chapbooks and pamphlets, but to have 79% of their stock in fiction. However, library proprietors were also urged to consider the following advice: “Reading and instruction should be universal—the humbler walks of life require much culture; for this purpose I would recommend to their perusal, books of authenticity, in preference to those of entertainment only” (200-02). From this advice we can infer that the preferable form of fiction was of the morally didactic variety (“the novel”) rather than of the “romance” (or Gothic) type. The very existence of these libraries, though, was seen as playing a disruptive role in the distribution of cultural materials that were viewed by the upper classes as encouraging the working classes in their misguided and even dangerous social aspirations.9

As literacy rates increased among the lower classes (Stone), the demand for reading materials for them proportionally increased as well. It is difficult to know exactly what proportion of the working class purchased their own chapbooks or opted instead to obtain them through a circulating library as either

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9The Edmonton Circulating Library (England) stated its terms for subscription as five shilling a quarter; nine shillings for six months; sixteen shillings a year. Extremely detailed discussions of the evolution, economics, and patronage of circulating libraries in Britain can be found in a number of sources: Blakey 111-24; Jacobs 157-235; Potter 114-36; and Hume. Richter connects the rise of circulating libraries with the increase in more naïve readers (“Reception” 126), while Punter argues the opposite, claiming that the “confidence trick” that Gothic authors play on their readers (making them believe in phantoms only to sneer at the belief) actually “demands a type of discrimination largely unnecessary in the reading of earlier realist fiction” (96).
a subscriber or a day-borrower (the latter option would have been the much more economical route to borrowing). Either way, through the act of reading the chapbooks, the lower classes were participating in the ideological and intellectual struggles of their culture. If they could not afford to attend the opera or theater productions in even the “illegitimate” theaters of London, they could read highly condensed redactions and much simplified abridged versions of Walpole, Reeve, Radcliffe, or Lewis’s long novels. Doing so allowed the working classes, they thought, to have the same reading experience that the elite experienced and therefore the same access to and ownership of their culture’s luxury items. By the early nineteenth century, however, the tales were being collected into longer anthologies that frequently contained up to five previously published stories, while the popular *Tell-Tale, or Universal Museum* (1805) began reprinting popular stories by authors like Sarah Wilkinson in its six volumes.

As I have noted, literary critics have been slighting if not downright hostile to the popularity and prevalence of the Gothic chapbooks during the early nineteenth century in Britain, France, and Germany. We know, for instance, that Percy Shelley, Robert Southey, and Walter Scott read them as children (Potter 37), and there is a certain appeal in their child-like simplicity, their distillation of plot, and their flattening of character. More interesting, however, is the confused spiritual ideology they promulgated for their reading audience: alternately advocating either a bourgeois, moralistic, and “investment” mentality (what Taylor calls the “buffered self” [38 *passim*]) or a “lottery,” lower-class, and fatalistic attitude toward life (the “porous self”). By examining one work of one particular Gothic chapbook author, we can see the sometimes confused struggle between these two attitudes. Along with Isaac Crookenden (1777-1820), Sarah Scudgell Wilkinson (1779-1831) was one of the most prolific writers of Gothic chapbooks, the author of some twenty-nine volumes of fiction and more than 100 short works, at least half
of which are Gothic. Working at times as a writer (and perhaps editor) for Ann Lemoine’s *Tell-Tale Magazine*, or independently trying to support her mother and (possibly illegitimate) daughter Amelia, Wilkinson scratched along as a “scribbler” and owner of a circulating library until she was forced on more than one occasion to apply for financial assistance to the Royal Literary Fund, a form of welfare for indigent and worthy authors. I will examine one of her best-known works, “The White Pilgrim” (based on Pixérécourt’s drama *Le Pèlerin Blanc* [1802]), as representative of the titles available at the Sadleir-Black. What is most interesting in this work is its confused and at times frantic heteroglossia, its parasitic grasping after every known Gothic mode in the attempt to produce yet another new and marketable genre, the Gothic tale of terror.¹⁰

Wilkinson has received a certain amount of critical attention recently, largely because of attempts to recover “lost” female writers and to place the chapbook tradition itself into its larger cultural and literary context. The works and career of Wilkinson, one of the only female “hack” writers that we know by name, can be fruitfully examined as a case study of middling to lower-class female authorship during the early nineteenth century. In fact, her very prolific publishing profile recalls Bradford Mudge’s observation that the development of mass culture during this period was linked to the dominance of women as the authors as well as readers of circulating library materials. But this female-inflected mass culture was increasingly figured at least by the Regency and the early-Victorian periods as a diseased, metastatic type of female reproduction because it challenged the hegemonic model of the realistic novel (92).

¹⁰Frank characterizes Wilkinson’s writings as “plundering” and “automatic Gothicism produced and marketed for the reader’s fee of six pence” (*First Gothics* 412, 413). James discusses the authors of Gothic chapbooks as “hack writers” and “lower-class writers . . . [who] had not enough skill to create through atmosphere a suspension of disbelief” (80-81). More recently, Kelly has stated bluntly, “Wilkinson was a hack” (*Varieties* xxi).
Wilkinson’s biography is bleak reading indeed (Potter 109-15), and it illustrates that the high point of the Gothic trade occurred roughly between 1800-1815, its decline causing Wilkinson to turn to writing children’s books by 1820 in order to survive. Within five years, however, that market had also shrunk to such an extent that she was again appealing to the Royal Literary Fund: “I need not point out to you that the depression in the Book trade and consequently scantiness of employ in Juvenile works has been great . . . . Forsake me and I perish” (RLF, 12 December 1825). Casting herself as the Gothic heroine of her own life story, Wilkinson was, unfortunately, prescient. But before the very bleak death she suffered in 1831 at St. Margaret’s Workhouse, Westminster, she was determined to produce Gothic chapbooks that would appeal to a growing reading audience of literate lower-class females.11 As she herself observed in the preface to her last Gothic novel, *The Spectre of Lanmere Abbey; or, The Mystery of the Blue and Silver Bag: A Romance* (1820):

Authors are, *proverbially*, poor; and therefore under the necessity of racking their wits for a bare subsistence. Perhaps, this is my case, and knowing how eager the fair sex are for something *new* and *romantic*, I determined on an attempt to *please* my fair sisterhood, hoping to profit myself thereby. If the following volumes tend to that effect, I shall be gratified; but if they meet with a rapid sale, and fill my pockets, I shall be elated. (qtd. in Potter 12; Wilkinson’s italics)

It would seem that whatever “elation” Wilkinson had as an author of Gothic chapbooks was short-lived, while her claim to be producing “new” works is a bit disingenuous. Before her sad end, however, she did write a number of works that disseminated the major Gothic tropes to a very wide, lower-class reading public and helped to codify the lower classes’ understanding of “romantic” as “Gothic.”

11A bibliography and analysis of the critical reaction to Gothic romances can be found in W. F. Gallaway’s “The Conservative Attitude toward Fiction, 1770-1830” and H. E. Haworth’s “Romantic Female Writers and Critics.”
A good deal of ideological ambivalence can be seen in Wilkinson’s “The White Pilgrim; or, Castle of Olival” (see figure 7). Based on the earlier Pixérécourt drama as translated into English in 1817 by Henry R. Bishop as “The Wandering Boys; or The Castle of Olival,” Wilkinson’s version suggests that she was adapting and publishing Gothic chapbooks at least as late as 1818. As the story begins we are introduced to the Count of Castelli, “the truly amiable and liberal” Horatio, living with his beautiful wife Amabel and their two sons in a castle in Berne, Switzerland (5). Devoted to their sons and the welfare of their tenants and dependents, the young couple has made their domain “a second Eden” (5), unaware that there are serpents lurking in the guise of attendants, namely the Chevalier Roland, Seneschal of the castle, and his assistant Otho, Captain of the Guard. Pregnant again, Amabel has a “fearful dream” the night before her husband is to make a short trip to settle some legal affairs with
his friend Count Vassali. When she informs her husband of her forebodings, he responds, “What Amabel superstitious? This is indeed a novelty, for which I was unprepared” (7). Mocking his wife’s primitive “superstitions,” Horatio next ignores the warning cries of “screech-owls and crows” as he begins his journey with his servant Claude, who warns him that the cries of the birds are “ill-omens” (7). The consummately rational man, Horatio ignores all of these warnings only to leave his family defenseless to the schemes of Roland.

Upon his return, Horatio is informed that his wife has fled the castle, her maid Theresa asserting that she has absconded with a paramour (“a near relation of her own, whom you had forbid the castle”) seen lurking around the grounds (11). When all the evidence points to the truth of this story, Horatio resigns himself to caring for his sons until he grows restless for travel and a change of scene. Leaving his sons with a tutor, Horatio sets out for England, where he coincidentally discovers the missing maid Theresa, who tells him that she and her father had been bribed by Roland to stage the disappearance of Amabel during Horatio’s absence. Horatio further learns that Amabel has in fact been held captive these past three years in a “subterranean cavity” on the castle grounds (20), and so he begins to plot his revenge by letting it be known that he has perished in a shipwreck during the channel crossing. The resolution of the story occurs when the reader is informed that Roland is the illegitimate brother of Horatio, the son of the former Count and a woman who was “of obscure birth and illiterate manners” (19). When he learns that Horatio has died at sea, Roland now produces a will that allows him to claim all of Horatio’s estates (21). At this very moment, the reading of the suspicious will, a pilgrim, “clad in white, his robes, his hat, and staff were all of that virgin hue,” appears asking for refuge “after performing his vow of pilgrimage to the shrine of our Lady of Loretto” (21). The appearance of this man is almost atavistic, antediluvian, suggesting the uncanniness of the Catholic past, its ability to erupt as the
not-quite repressed that still figures on the edges of this culture. But the white pilgrim is also a melodramatic figure because he is introduced by Roland as “deaf,” reminiscent of the “deaf and dumb” characters that form the melodramatic core of Thomas Holcroft’s Gothicized dramatic adaptations.¹²

Thinking that he can safely discuss his plans in the presence of the white pilgrim, Roland reveals to Otho that he intends to poison the orphan boys and kill their mother: “she had long since become an object of disgust and hatred to her betrayer, for she had nobly resisted every attempt to despoil her of her honor and fidelity” (22) The servant Ruffo enables Amabel to escape her dungeon, and she tells an abbreviated tale of abuse and misery that recalls the fate of Agnes, the pregnant and imprisoned nun in Lewis’s *The Monk*: “she was delivered prematurely of a child, who died the same night; she was allowed no assistance, and having wept many days over her dear blossom, she buried it with her own hands in one corner of the damp dungeon” (28). Whereas her story recalls a literary source, the intended fates of her sons recall a particularly Gothic moment in British history, the murder of the two princes in the Tower of London by Richard III in 1483. In an almost-repetition of that crime, this text instead allows the white pilgrim to save the children in the nick of time by substituting a safe potion for the intended poison. We learn later that all of these actions have been orchestrated by the white pilgrim, the avenging husband and father Horatio in disguise. Vassali brings the king’s troops to storm the castle, and at the decisive moment, the white pilgrim strips himself of his robes and appears as “the real Count Olival” (29) to denounce the evil machinations of his illegitimate half-brother.

¹²Another one of the many examples of French melodramas making their way to the British shore as first dramas and then chapbooks can be seen in Thomas Holcroft’s drama, *Deaf and Dumb*, translated by him from the French drama by J. N. Bouilly, *L’Abbé de l’Épée* (1800). Initially the drama became Holcroft’s *Deaf and Dumb, or the Orphan Protected* (Drury Lane, 1801), and then the chapbook for children, *Julius, or the Deaf and Dumb Orphan; A Tale for Youth of Both Sexes: Founded on The Popular Play of Deaf and Dumb*. 3rd ed. (London: Harris, 1806).
“The White Pilgrim” positions religious as well as class ideologies front and center. The lower class is pandered to in the privileging of premonitions and ill-omened birds, while bourgeois attitudes can be detected in the descent of Roland from an “illiterate” mother. There are clearly “lottery” elements in this work, as Horatio, an aristocrat, is frequently saved by the most chance-like occurrences (literally running into Theresa on a street in London). There are also bourgeois attitudes present, as Horatio rescues his family through cunning, skill, and what we would almost call omniscience. Originally written as a melodrama in France in 1801 and then recast as a British chapbook by Wilkinson around 1818, the text suggests the revenant power of Catholicism and the persistence of superstitions among lower-class readers. In fact, John Kerr’s 1820 dramatic version of the work, titled “The Wandering Boys,” continued to be so popular that it was performed in the British repertory and published as late as 1894.

The question that is most frequently begged in so many discussions of the Gothic chapbooks is the reason for their popularity. Fred Frank claimed that they appealed to “the type of reader who had neither the time nor the taste for a leisurely Gothic experience. That there were many such readers during the Gothic craze is a well-documented fact” (First Gothics 420). But this is just another way of saying that you will always have the poor with you. A more important question might be to ask, why were the Gothic chapbooks so fractured by both class and religious issues? One possible explanation is offered by McWhir, who notes that in the very process of rejecting superstition, one suspects that these authors take pleasure in it, though their genre prevents them from completing the transition from shocked incredulity to imaginative suspension of disbelief. The completion of the movement towards suspension of a disbelief that can be assumed and therefore deliberately transgressed moves us from superstitious anecdote or supernatural tale to Gothic fiction. (McWhir 36)
As part of its secularizing and modernizing agenda, this culture saw a dramatic rise of literacy among the lower class, and the circulating library emerged as an important component of the public sphere in which commercial interests would ideally be complemented by secularizing and moralizing trends. In a culture in which literacy was seen as advancing the bourgeois cause of promulgating moral and civic responsibilities and inculcating “investment” values, the library and its publication arm, even one as lowly as the Minerva Press, produced works that would attempt to accomplish important civilizing work at the same time they made a profit. But finally, the Gothic chapbook presented its lower-class readers with yet another instance of ambivalent secularization, a literary technology that was predicated on the notion that many different belief systems could coexist, and that the mixing of traditional spirituality with newer rationalistic approaches to life would allow them to remake themselves as effective citizens of the new nation-state.

The Sadleir-Black, as I said at the outset, is the largest Gothic collection assembled under one roof in the United States. Its collection of Gothic chapbooks is certainly one of the largest in this country, although the Cleveland Public Library would appear to rival it in sheer numbers. Finally, I would argue that, despite Fred’s dismissal of them, they deserve closer scrutiny by scholars in the field for their ideological and historical significance.

I would like to thank the librarians at the Sadleir-Black Collection—in particular Gayle Cooper, Sharon Defibaugh, Margaret Hrabe, and Regina Rush—for their assistance and patience during my month there. The Sadleir-Black catalogue can be accessed at http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/small/collections/sadleir-black.

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