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Reassessing the Gothic / Classical Relationship

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Periods of contest between antiquity and modernity are, in the words of Hans Robert Jauss, ‘a literary constant, as normal and natural in the history of European culture as the alternation of generations is in biology’.¹ Each periodic break with history is expressed less in the redefinition of the self than in the redefinition of the past, the selective characterisation of previous generations or centuries as allies or enemies to current cultural concerns. The English Gothic novel emerged out of just such a process of historical redefinition. The eighteenth century saw the production of a new, English antiquity. Writers and artists rediscovered the Middle Ages as an enchanted era of imagination, canonised vernacular authors (Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton) as classics worthy of learned commentary, and looked to the so-called ‘Gothic Constitution’ as a source of native political values of liberty and virtue. A new, expanded print readership fed a demand for English-language texts that explored the legacy of that history.² The authority of the Classical world as a political and literary model accordingly declines, transforming (in very broad terms) from ‘an emulatable model to a historical antitype’.³ In most Gothic texts, the ‘ancient’ is quite deliberately not the world of ancient Greece or Rome, but an imagined world of chivalry or romance, the Middle Ages or later. Yet rather than the Gothic simply erasing or omitting the Classical, we can read Gothic literature as one of the cultural forms in which the meaning and influence of antiquity for

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modernity is most keenly contested. If the Gothic encodes in its very name an opposition to the Greek and Latin legacy – it preserves the memory, however faint, of the people who legendarily sacked Rome – then the appearance of traces of that legacy in Gothic texts testifies to an inability truly to repress or control the past. The unexpected re-emergence of Classical antiquity in such texts is, ironically, a quintessentially Gothic motif.

The three sections of this chapter briefly trace three stages in the imagined relationship between the Gothic and the Classical in England in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁴ First, the authority of the Classical was challenged by mid-century authors as part of the investment of literary and political value in the post-Classical world. Yet writers of the period do not merely omit or ignore the Classical: they polemically reframe Classical works so that they no longer seem like models of virtue or propriety, but more distant examples of supernatural fancy and, curiously, the Gothic imagination. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) makes a spectacle out of the fragmentation and displacement of Classical authority through the scrambling of ancient texts and myths. The second stage is a reaction against that irreverence towards the past. The most significant – and underappreciated – author in this respect is Clara Reeve, whose Gothic romance *The Old English Baron* (1778) mimics the virtue discourse and exemplary moralism of the Classical historians beloved of the Whig tradition, whom she saw as foundational for both literary activity and political life. Finally, writers of the Romantic era see the city and legacy of Rome through a Gothic lens, expressing both attraction to, and repulsion from, ancient examples. Romanticism separates what had now been cast as 'neoclassical' rules and standards from a free, original ancient spirit in

harmony with their own ideas. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) suggests at once a desired closeness to Greek and Roman texts and an irremediable alienation from the world upon which the present had long modelled itself.

A Giant's Influence: Breaking the Ancient Analogy

Rome was a powerful Ally to many States; antient Authors are our powerful Allies; but we must take heed that they do not succour, till they enslave, after the manner of *Rome*. Too formidable an Idea of their Superiority, like a Spectre, would fright us out of our Wits; and dwarf our Understanding, by making a Giant out of theirs.

So Edward Young describes the oppressive influence of Classical authors in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), employing an image – the ancestor as terrifying, ghostly giant – that would be indelibly imprinted as Gothic in *The Castle of Otranto*.⁵ Young takes explicit aim at what he casts as the idolatry of Greek and Roman writers, and particularly at Alexander Pope, whose Catholicism left him open to Young's unfair charges of obeisance to continental authority. Pope's respect for the Ancients has in its background a broader discourse that connected England and Rome. Works such as Addison's *Cato* (1713) – for which Pope wrote a prologue – encouraged an analogy between Republican Romans and contemporary politicians that stood to flatter the sympathies of both Whigs and (less commonly) Tories; Pope wrote memorably that the play elicited 'Roman drops from British eyes'.⁶ If much of Pope's work undoubtedly took inspiration from Latin literary works and genres, we should be wary of accepting at face value characterisations of early eighteenth-century literary culture as a period of

uncritical imitation of Classical literary precedent.⁷ As Larry Norman has emphasised, it is precisely the partisans of the Ancients in the later seventeenth-century French *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* who stressed the distance between the ancient and the modern, in order to defend the alien moral values that readers found in Homer and Virgil; in doing so, they began to articulate, in his words, ‘nothing less than a literary paradigm of historical realism’.⁸ Identification with Classical models had never been easy or unproblematic, but a sense of the alterity of the ancient became more marked in England throughout the eighteenth century.

Another reason for that alterity was a change in the knowledge of Latin and Greek. Benedict Anderson’s claim that by 1700 Latin had largely ceased to be spoken, and that ‘even fewer, one imagines, dreamt in it’, is too simplistic.⁹ For some eighteenth-century writers, at least, the distant language of Rome seems to have encouraged the taking of certain personal and imaginative liberties – encouraged them, we might say, to dream.¹⁰ Yet it is true that the ability to read Latin and Greek depended on the resources to attend schools, or the opportunity to be tutored by a family member capable of doing so, and it was no longer to be assumed that the Classical languages formed the core of a school’s curriculum. Dissenting academies promoted the importance of modern languages over ancient ones, and the utility of Classical learning for the working and middle classes was increasingly questioned.¹¹ One pamphlet, by the father of the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, argued that Classical languages be removed from a system of general education altogether, maintaining that ‘every branch of natural history and philosophy’ afforded greater utility and pleasure than ‘the ability to read, write, and talk the languages of Greece and Rome’.¹² The Romantic call to expression and sensation over mimesis,

according to Paul Fry, was driven partly by these changes in education. Mental recourse to Classical texts and ideas was now less universal, less natural, less instinctive. ‘For a Wordsworth or Keats’, he writes, ‘the effort of suppression – at least of ancient poets, and still more, of ancient critics – need not have been as exhausting’.¹³

Edward Young’s call to exorcise the spectral influence of Horace or Virgil, however, was founded on neither pleasure nor utility. Its context was instead the mid-century effort to distill a pure poetry associated with ‘fancy’ and the imagination. As the simile of the giant ghost suggests, this strain of literary activity was strongly associated with the newly valorised world of romance. Richard Hurd’s *Letters of Chivalry and Romance* (1762) is typically cited for this contrast between Classical literature and the Gothic. Unlike Young, though, Hurd does not struggle to expel the Classical. Rather, he refashions the ancient works in the image of romance:

Now in all these respects *Greek* antiquity very much resembles the *Gothic*. For what are Homer’s *Laestrigons* [*sic*] and *Cyclops*, but bands of lawless savages, with, each of them, a Giant of enormous size at their head? And what are the Grecian Bacchus and Hercules, but Knights-errant, the exact counterparts of Sir Launcelot and Amadis de Gaule?¹⁴

Classical texts, he shows, are equally populated with monsters, giants and knights. Hurd goes on to argue that the Classical works are inferior in evoking terror, but the very comparison suggests a rather particular vision of the Classical, not as a source of examples of public virtue but equally a charmed world of fancy and the supernatural. The influential *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) by Hurd’s contemporary Edmund Burke similarly reframes rather than

rejects or ignores Classical literature in order to satisfy a contemporary desire for what was dark, imaginative and terrifying. The most frequently cited author in the treatise is Virgil, and Burke evokes with emotive force the immersive experience of the Underworld for Aeneas in book 6, which becomes the experience of the reader, too: ‘Now some low, confused, uncertain sounds, leave us in the same fearful anxiety... a light now appearing, and leaving us, and so off and on, is more terrible than total darkness’.¹⁵ For Burke and Hurd, the Classical is not the paradigm of order or virtue, but a dimmer and more distant source of terror in the present.

If these influential texts reframe rather than reject the Classical, the first canonical Gothic novel is more direct in its challenge to ancient authority. *The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic Story* – to give the work its full title in its second edition in 1765 – is ‘Gothic’ at least in part because of its irreverent desire to fragment, marginalise and undermine the Classical texts to which it alludes. As a number of recent authors have observed, the second edition begins by exerting some textual vandalism on one of the holy texts of classicizing aesthetics.¹⁶ The novel begins with an untranslated quotation from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*:

...*vanae*

fingentur species, tamen ut pes et caput uni

reddantur formae... - HOR.

[...vain images will be invented, yet in such a way that

foot and head are restored to a single shape...]

Since few of us know the Latin poets as intimately as Walpole, Gray and his elite milieu did, it is difficult for us to recover the sense from simply reading these lines that

something is awry. Yet, in the novel's first instance of the uncanny, the reassuringly familiar quotation from one of the Classical tradition's best-known poems has had its wording altered and its meaning reversed. The more familiar version of these lines reads:

...*vanae*
fingentur species; ut nec pes, nec caput uni
reddatur formae... (Ars Poet. 7-9)¹⁷

[...vain images will be invented, in such a way that
 neither foot nor head are restored to a single shape...]

In the original passage, Horace is arguing for artistic unity. An artwork can never be satisfactorily unified, he claims, if it has been forced together from mismatched elements. What would result, he says, is the monster described in the *Ars Poetica's* opening lines: a grotesque, laughable, Scylla-like creature with animal and human limbs 'collected together from every place' (*undique collatis membris*, line 3). Such art would 'resemble a sick man's dreams' (*velut aegri somnia*, line 7). Walpole rewrites the Latin while maintaining the metre, replacing *ut nec... nec* with *tamen ut... et*, so that it makes a positive rather than negative statement. The venerable Roman now appears to argue that one can and should achieve artistic unity by reassembling mismatched parts. This is, of course, precisely what Walpole does in *The Castle of Otranto*: he combines mismatched elements of the 'ancient and modern' in a novel that had its origins, he claimed, in a 'feverish dream'.¹⁸

Echoes of this opening passage recur throughout in the images of the giant detached feet and limbs of Alfonso's ghost, which appear to the characters in the castle and will indeed come together at the novel's conclusion, when the spectre appears in its

final form.¹⁹ So too are there reminiscences of Classical myth in the novel, but they appear similarly fragmented and disoriented. The name Hippolyta recalls the character of Hippolyta in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but also in a broader sense the Classical myth of Hippolytus, in which a son is dashed to pieces after being accused of an incestuous affair with his stepmother. Here the myth itself is scrambled: in *Otranto*, the son is dashed to pieces at the beginning of the story, the name Hippolyta is transferred to a virtuous rather than a scheming mother, and the incestuous passion is transferred to the father, Manfred. In Walpole's Gothic drama *The Mysterious Mother* (1768) there is also striking manipulation of Classical sources. In one egregious example, Walpole has the play's impious mother, who has consciously committed incest with her son, declaim lines originally spoken by the virtuous Cato in Lucan's epic poem *Bellum Civile* – a shocking juxtaposition with Addison's Roman hero, and a parodic recontextualisation of a passage that enjoyed particular fame in the period. (Lines from the same scene are quoted, for example, on the title page of book 3 of Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*).²⁰ In the Preface to *Hieroglyphic Tales*, which Walpole began to write between *Otranto* and *Mysterious Mother* but only printed in six copies at Strawberry Hill in 1785, he imagined forging a work of history that would debunk the claims to virtue of Republican Roman heroes, intending to 'ridicule, detect and expose, all ancient virtue, and patriotism'.²¹ This direct assault on a British culture of Roman analogising was never written. But his Gothic works nonetheless undermine any direct link between contemporary British culture and the Classical past, confronting their giant influence through fragmentation, dismemberment and misuse.

Challenging Genre and Gender Prejudice: Classics and Romance

The Gothic novel and Classical literature occupied opposite poles of literary respectability in the eighteenth century, and the values accorded to each carried implications of gender and class difference. Knowledge of Greek and Latin was consistently coded as elite and male, whereas novel-reading, especially towards the end of the century, was coded as middle class and female. Jacqueline Pearson, in her study of women's reading in the eighteenth century, quotes Lady Mary Wortley Montagu warning her granddaughter to conceal any learning she has attained as if it were 'crookedness or lameness'.²² Despite the celebrity of the so-called Bluestocking circle, woman proficient in Classical languages typically provoked suspicion and even mockery in the eighteenth century.²³ Yet the writing of novels was increasingly a means for women to achieve recognition and independence, as well as a mode through which they could assert their learning. Clara Reeve claims particular attention here as a writer who challenged the boundaries between the sorts of literary activity that were judged proper for middle-class women. In a letter preserved by Walter Scott, Reeve claims to have read 'the Greek and Roman Histories, and Plutarch's *Lives*... at an age when few people of either sex can read their names'. Scott himself quipped that her Gothic novel, *The Old English Baron*, showed evidence of greater familiarity with the Greek historian Plutarch than with the period in which the novel is set.²⁴ Deliberately so: *The Old English Baron*, often dismissed as a tame and overly sober successor to Walpole's outré Gothic fantasy, should be read instead as a meld of Plutarchan moralism and contemporary narrative form, a consciously Classicizing text that destabilises the arbitrary prejudice that accorded value to one mode of literature and learning over the other.

Prejudice is a key term in Reeve's writing. In her first work, *Original Poems on Several Occasions* (1769), published when she was already 40 years of age, she declares in her opening address to the reader:

I formerly believed, that I ought not to let myself be known for a scribbler, that my sex was an insuperable objection, that mankind in general were prejudiced against its pretensions to literary merit; but I am now convinced of the mistake, by daily examples to the contrary.²⁵

The second poem in Reeve's collection addresses a contemporary female writer's argument for equality of the sexes, and includes a long parody of Classical imagery of the Muses. In his grandiloquent *Feminiad* (1754), John Duncombe praised the learned women of Britain by casting them in Classical dress, describing them as 'British nymphs' and 'sister Muses'.²⁶ Later, in the 1770s, the painter Richard Samuel would paint the Bluestocking circle in his 'Portraits in the Characters of the Muses in the Temple of Apollo (The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain)', though one of the women depicted, the Classicist and poet Elizabeth Carter, complained that the image was so idealised that it was impossible to tell who was who.²⁷ When Reeve refers to the 'daily examples' of celebrated female authors in her *Collected Poems*, it is likely that she has the Bluestocking circle in mind, but the conservative Reeve, who spent her entire life in provincial Ipswich, seems to have felt marginalised from these other literary women. She argues in fact *against* claims for the equality of the sexes but indignantly demands that her own works be treated without prejudice. When she writes of her own efforts, images of poetic failure predominate: she describes 'the laurel wreath blasted on my brow', of the female poet as 'a muse conceal'd', of the 'fear' that 'restrains' the impoverished

author.²⁸ *Spes incerta futuri*, ‘an uncertain hope for the future’, words uttered by Evander in the *Aeneid* about his son Pallas doomed to die, is the gloomy motto attached to the title-page of this literary debut. Reeve’s earliest work offers a vision of female authorship in the period, satirising its incipient mythology, lamenting its injustices and limitations. She resentfully portrays herself as an outsider to more celebrated instances of female learning, as a gadfly biting at the Muses of the metropolis.

The complaints about prejudice in her earliest work offer a background for understanding her important two-volume work of literary history, *The Progress of Romance* (1785).²⁹ This imagined dialogue between two principal characters, ‘Euphrasia’ and ‘Hortensius’, provocatively collapses literary categories. Rather than separating the Greco-Roman tradition from the medieval, Reeve argues that Homer and Virgil were themselves authors of romance. They too wrote works of supernatural fancy, she argues, and their poems form the earliest parts of a tradition stretching through the Middle Ages and Renaissance to the eighteenth century, from the ‘ruins’ of which the novel was sprung. This is less an argument about literary history than it is about cultural capital. Because the Classical epics share the same divine machinery and outlandish fancy as the romance, there is no reason, she maintains, for one type of literature to be accorded prestige and the other not. Despite the title of the work, Reeve has little time for teleological notions like progress, and is generally indifferent to genre or historical context. It is only prejudice, she asserts, that has prevented readers from discerning ‘a striking resemblance between works of high and low estimation’.³⁰ If Walpole aimed in *Otranto* to blend the ‘ancient and modern’ romance, and thereby to draw from the more

fantastic themes that Hurd and others had opposed to the Classical, Reeve claims that the distinction between the two is merely ideological:

Euphrasia: It is astonishing that men of sense, and of learning, should so strongly imbibe prejudices, and be so loath to part with them. — That they should despise and ridicule Romances, as the most contemptible of all kinds of writing, and yet expatiate in raptures, on the beauties of the fables of the old classic Poets, — on stories far more wild and extravagant, and infinitely more incredible.³¹

While prejudice is here used mostly in its old empiricist sense of ‘prejudgment’, there are conscious social implications to Reeve’s argument. The prose romances that the work as a whole seeks to defend were pervasively considered women’s reading and, as such, less socially elite. Even the names of characters in *The Progress of Romance* are significant: Hortensius suggests soundly Classical Roman learning, while Euphrasia, a sort of pseudo-Greek name, suggests the timeless, Hellenizing world of the French heroic romance. But Reeve self-consciously challenges these stereotypes: she makes Euphrasia, the ‘bookish heroine’, both learned about romance *and* superior to the man in her knowledge of the Classics, and he repeatedly asks for translations of works that Euphrasia has read in the original languages.³² Moreover, despite Reeve’s conservatism and advocacy elsewhere for social order, she is entirely self-conscious about the way in which her ideas challenge accepted ways of reading. When Euphrasia compares Homer to the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*, Hortensius complains that ‘you can’t be earnest in this comparison’, and then twice later says ‘you’ve staggered my opinions’.³³ In the second volume, when Hortensius has given in to most of Euphrasia’s points, he still

resentfully refers to ‘Homer and Virgil, whose works you have as I think degraded by base comparison’. Again in this section, Euphrasia resists the ‘prejudice’ that accords Homer and Virgil the first rank and casts all other epic poets as imitators. ‘You think I have a prejudice of the same kind?’, asks Hortensius angrily. ‘According to your account, Epic poets are as plentiful as mushrooms’.³⁴ Yet ‘epic’ – and indeed ‘Classical’ – are for Euphrasia terms of misplaced approbation rather than truly being descriptions of a specific historical tradition or a metrical or linguistic form. In a more explicit version of a tendency that is present in Hurd’s treatise, Reeve reassesses the distinction between the Gothic and the Classical by making the two look surprisingly alike.

This literary-critical project also helps to illuminate the Gothic novel for which she is best known, *The Champion of Virtue* (1777), which was republished in a revised form a year later as *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story*.³⁵ The novel concerns a poor son of a peasant, Edmund; a haunted castle where apparitions seem to hold the key to the murder of his real parents and the secret of his noble birth; and a series of paternal figures who act on Edmund’s behalf to restore him, by the end of novel, to his true title of Lord Lovel. Modifying an older critical model that suggested Reeve had initiated a genre of ‘female gothic’, James Watt argues that Reeve instead wrote ‘loyalist romance’, a literary type set not in faraway or exotic lands but in England, and which imagines the past not as the re-emergence of pre-Enlightenment irrationality and terror but as the source of the traditions and models that legitimate political arrangements in the present.³⁶ The supernatural elements in *The Old English Baron* are muted and subdued; Walter Scott called it ‘tame and tedious’, and mocked the contrived gentility of all involved, even the

ghosts. But this gentility in Reeve's novel is part of her sustained attempt to subvert the generic hierarchy and the prejudices underlying it.

Much of the behavior of the characters in Reeve's novel can be read as an attempt to subvert the expectations – even the prejudices – imposed by Walpole's wildly popular novel. Reeve replaces the emotional extremes of *Otranto* with exemplary virtue. In contrast to the feverish confusion and frantic accidents of *Otranto*, Reeve's characters are preternaturally knowing, moving swiftly and adroitly through the plot:

I perceive, said Oswald, that some great discovery is at hand. – God defend us! said Edmund, but I verily believe that the person that owned this armour lies buried under us. Upon this, a dismal hollow groan was heard as if from underneath.³⁷

The prose struggles to keep ahead of its characters. Nocturnal visitations are without mystery or ambiguity: Edmund 'perfectly remembered his dreams'.³⁸ Guesses by characters are unerringly correct: 'do you think it possible that he should be of either birth or fortune?', postulates one character about the central mystery, less than half way through.³⁹ 'I have no doubt that Edmund is at the bottom of this business', presciently declares another character, and then, later in the same paragraph, 'my conjecture was too true'.⁴⁰ The Preface to the first version of the novel combatively addresses the sort of reader represented later by Hortensius in *The Progress of Romance*, one who 'delights in the fables of the ancients, the old poets, or story-tellers', but who dislikes or despises the 'ancient romance and the modern Novel'.⁴¹ By deliberately stripping her story of the cheerful absurdities of Walpole's model, Reeve attempts to rebut the assumption that her chosen form is beneath the dignity of serious literature.

More specifically, I suggest, Reeve crafts her Gothic novel through conscious evocation of a particular Classical author. In the Preface to one of her last works, the reactionary and anti-Revolutionary historical novel *Memoirs of Sir Roger de Clarendon* (1793), she argues that historical writing should be a source of examples for ethical imitation. The pre-eminent exponent of this sort of moral historiography, she says, is Plutarch, the ‘prince of historians’, and she quotes from the Preface to his *Life of Aemilius Paulus*: ‘the virtues of these illustrious men are to me as a mirror, by which I learn to regulate my own life and conduct’.⁴² Reeve explicitly casts that later novel as an attempt to ‘enforce the lesson of the excellent Plutarch’, relating the lives of famous Englishmen as intended objects of moral aspiration. There is no explicit mention of Plutarch in *The Old English Baron*, but there is a pronounced emphasis on exemplary ethics and the imitation of character, which are signature Plutarchan themes:

Oh what a glorious character! said Edmund: how my heart throbs with wishes to imitate such a man! Oh that I might resemble him, though at ever so great a distance! Edmund was never weary of hearing the actions of this truly great man...⁴³

Plutarch’s *Lives*, as Gary Kelly has argued, were part of the standard reading of the Old Whig tradition, and the association between Plutarch’s Greek and Roman heroes and the values of civic service and individual liberties spoke loudly to their political nostalgia.⁴⁴ Scott’s quip about Reeve’s excessive fondness for Plutarch contains more than a grain of truth. Her novel not only encourages a new and more conservative vision of the ‘Gothic’ past; it also attempts to subvert prejudices about what people ‘of either sex’ write and

read. *The Old English Baron* combines male-oriented history and Classical literature with female-oriented romance, and challenges the distinction between the two.

Gothic Visions of Antiquity in the Romantic Age

With all his senses about him, he heard a noise at the door of his tent, and looking towards the light, which was now burnt very low, he saw a terrible appearance in the human form, but of prodigious stature, and the most hideous aspect. At first, he was struck with astonishment; but when he saw it neither did nor spoke any thing to him, but stood in silence by his bed, he asked “who it was?” The spectre answered, “I am thy evil genius, Brutus; thou shalt see me at Philippi”. Brutus answered boldly, “I’ll meet thee there;” and the spectre immediately vanished.

In this passage, we see a concatenation of eighteenth-century Gothic tropes. A noise startles a hero or heroine in the darkness. A candle or lamp offers flickering, dying light. The hero peers out to see a spirit dilated to giant size (as in *Otranto*); the spirit appears above or beside a bed (as in the haunted chamber of the late Marchioness de Villeroi in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*); it hounds the protagonist for a horrific crime he has perpetrated (as in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*). Only when we see the names at the end of the excerpt is the truth revealed. This is not in fact an excerpt from a Gothic novel or short story, but a passage from John and William Langhorne’s 1778 translation of Plutarch’s *Lives*, describing Brutus hounded by terrors after his assassination of Julius Caesar, a scene that was familiar in a different form to eighteenth-century readers from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (Act IV, scene 3).⁴⁵ We might instinctively look to the

influence of Walpole's *Otranto* on the Langhorne's rendering of Plutarch; and sure enough, just five years before the first edition of the Plutarch translation, John Langhorne himself wrote reviews of the first and second editions of *The Castle of Otranto* in the *Monthly Review*, praising, at least in the first of these, the novel's 'great dramatic powers'.⁴⁶ But attributing the supernatural elements to the influence of Walpole underestimates the extent to which Greek and Roman literature was itself viewed as a source of terror and the supernatural, despite Joseph Addison's specious claim at the beginning of the century that antiquity lacked stories of this type.⁴⁷ Ghosts were not the exclusive property of any period or genre. Classical literature could be viewed through Gothic eyes, and this anecdote in particular fits with current trends. When the publisher James Fletcher Hughes published a chapbook entitled *Terrific Tales* in 1804, one of the stories included was this one, here under the title 'The Ghost of Brutus appearing to him before his death'. The probably pseudonymous author Isabella Lewis expands on the description of the spectre ('a monstrous and hideous figure of a human body emaciated, withered, horrible'), appends a brief account of Brutus' subsequent suicide at the Battle of Philippi, and even cites actual Greek texts as sources for the tale.⁴⁸

Gothic elements are identifiable in other Classical translations of the Romantic era. Stuart Gillespie has remarked upon the 'Gothic cast' (or perhaps Gothic parody) in an early imitation of Juvenal's eighth *Satire* by William Wordsworth and Francis Wrangham, who transform the Roman poet's scene of an atrium adorned with ancestral busts into a gloomy English castle in which a 'grim warrior train' of knights' has 'frown'd on time and hostile brooms in vain'.⁴⁹ Matthew Lewis begins *The Monk* (1796) with a poetic imitation of Horace's *Epistles* 1.20, the Roman poet's jealously erotic

address to his book as a beloved male slave; the gender of the book in Lewis's version is deliberately obscured, but the imitation communicates strongly the Gothic author's own anxieties about the consequences of his sensationalistic novel, 'doomed', he says, 'to suffer public scandal'.⁵⁰ Perhaps the most extended and notable Classical translation by a major Gothic author is Lewis's later *The Love of Gain* (1799), a highly Gothicizing and much-expanded translation of Juvenal's thirteenth *Satire*. Juvenal's original poem (written soon after 127 CE) explores the terrors of conscience on the guilty, and oscillates unnervingly between brash expressions of divine defiance and nightmarish evocations of supernatural retribution. It is easy to see its appeal.⁵¹ Lewis frequently deviates from the Latin original to incorporate scenes reminiscent of *The Monk* and his melodrama *The Castle Spectre*, so that the Classical imitation becomes an implicit commentary on his own Gothic literary works. Like Reeve and other earlier writers, Lewis shows that Gothic images of the supernatural were already evident in Classical writers, confuting a literary-historical narrative that saw a breach between the two. He also highlights the hypocrisy of his conservative critics, who fulminate against *The Monk* for its alleged impiety and corrupting influence but continue to embrace Juvenal as a trusted favorite, praising him for putting, in William Gifford's words, 'the deformity and horror of vice, in full and perfect display'.⁵²

The imagery of ghosts and haunting is also part of the Classical/Gothic intersection in the Romantic era. Jonathan Sachs has described what he has called the 'internally differentiated classicism' of the period, the divergence of the cultural associations of ancient Greece from ancient Rome in British culture during and after the French Revolution.⁵³ While the philhellenic strain in the second-generation Romantics –

most famously exemplified by Percy Shelley's cry that 'We are all Greeks' – identified Greece with unfettered originality and artistic freedom, the Roman Republic became a model of renewed importance for understanding contemporary political upheavals. With a heightened awareness of the transience of political forms, post-Revolutionary Romantic writers looked upon Rome as an earlier paradigm of a civilisation that had fallen, and tended to employ Gothic tropes in describing the city. They imagined it as deserted and decayed yet still capable of exerting a powerful, even supernatural force upon visitors. It was, in short, a haunted city.⁵⁴ The imagery of ghosts and spectres, often dismissed by Romantic poets in their later works as childish or too closely connected with popular fiction, was unapologetically part of the Romantic imaginary when describing the Classic ground of Rome.⁵⁵

Gothic writers and texts also contributed to this cultural representation of the Eternal City as unnervingly undead. When the lonely Lionel wanders around a desolate Rome as the last man alive in Mary Shelley's post-apocalyptic *The Last Man* (1826), he remembers 'the dark monk, and floating figures of 'The Italian', and how my boyish blood and thrilled at the description'.⁵⁶ Indeed, Ann Radcliffe's novels are notable for their repeated association of the Classical with what is empty, ruined or sinister: consider, for example, the busts of ancient authors in the threatening, cavernous hall of the Marquis in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791); the poem describing an attack on a trader on the site of the neglected ruins of Troy in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794); and the description of Roman monuments in *The Italian* (1797) as 'gigantic skeletons, which once enclosed a soul'.⁵⁷ In 'The Vampyre' (1819), the first extended example of prose narrative of a vampire in English, John Polidori similarly describes Rome as 'another

almost deserted city', and the story takes place in large part in Athens, where the central character haplessly follows archaeological trails and attempts to decipher inscriptions with the ancient travel writer Pausanias in hand.⁵⁸ Mary Shelley herself contributed to the theme in a story fragment unpublished in her lifetime, 'Valerius, the Reanimated Roman' (generally dated to 1819), in which English travellers encounter a Republican-era Roman who was 'like a statue of one of the Romans animated to life'. But the story records disillusionment on all sides. Valerius is dismayed that the monuments of his own Republican period in Rome have been effaced by the gaudy structures of the later Emperors, such as the Colosseum. Meanwhile, Shelley describes the unease felt by the modern traveller in the presence of this antique figure ('I cannot call it dread, yet it had something allied to that repulsive feeling'). Ultimately, the story expresses Shelley's sense of the unbridgeable gulf between modern, post-Revolutionary Britons and the Roman characters who were once models for British culture.⁵⁹

Perhaps the best-known Gothic adaption of Classical themes in the Romantic period is Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818), the very subtitle of which suggests the revival of ancient ideas.⁶⁰ We know from Mary Shelley's diary that she was reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in 1815, which describes in its first book Prometheus's fashioning of human beings from clay (1.80-87), and Percy read Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* to her in 1816. The novel of course concerns Victor's desire to 'renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption', a project connected to contemporary notions of 'life-function' in biology and chemistry, but which is identified within the text as a revival of the premodern ideas of alchemical writers in the Renaissance. Yet this text too suggests the barrier between ancient and

modern, an ambivalence about the Classical inheritance and a scepticism about the capacity to revive it. In a scene mocked by contemporary reviewers for its incongruity, the monster undergoes a liberal education and, in particular, reads the first volume of Plutarch's *Lives*. Shelley, in the persona of the monster, echoes the conventional claims that reading the Greek historian can lead one to 'admire and love the heroes of past ages', but the description of the lesson offered by the ancient writer is far from uniformly positive:

I read of men concerned in public affairs governing or massacring their species. I felt the greatest ardour for virtue rise within me, and abhorrence of vice... Induced by these feelings, I was of course led to admire peaceable law-givers, Numa, Solon, and Lycurgus, in preference to Romulus and Theseus.⁶¹

The example of the Romans is double-edged, comprised of men who both governed and massacred their species. The monster regards the very founder of Rome, Romulus, as less admirable than his pacifistic successor, Numa. The Classical analogies offer at best an ambivalent pattern for modern life – and indeed the central character, Victor Frankenstein himself, corresponds very imprecisely with his ancient model. William Godwin, Mary's father, described Prometheus's creation of human beings in his guide to mythology in this way: 'The man of Prometheus immediately moved, and thought, and spoke, and became everything that the fondest wishes of his creator could ask'.⁶² This sounds nothing like Victor's own experience with his creation, and as the novel progresses, he degenerates further and further from his Classical paradigm. He is at best a very approximate – at worst, a disappointing and destructive – modern version of the ancient Prometheus.

Despite the implied equivalence in the subtitle, Shelley's novel describes a grotesque, failed revival, rather than an intimate communion, between modernity and antiquity.

The very desire of Romantic-era authors to reanimate aspects of the Classical in the Gothic would have seemed counterintuitive in the mid eighteenth century, when the Gothic emerged as part of a desire to elaborate a political and cultural alternative to the predominance of the Classical. Yet the effort in any era to redefine its relationship to the Classical past raises the more basic question of what counts as 'Classical' at all. Is the word a chronological descriptor, a marker of value, an aesthetic designation? It can mean any and each of these, according to ideological needs.⁶³ For most contemporary readers of Greek and Roman literature, I suspect, the idea of seeing affinities with the Gothic is far from outlandish or perverse. Many of the aspects of ancient literature and culture that claim attention today in Classics classrooms and studies - the violence and female subjectivity of the *Bacchae* or *Medea*; the surreal fantasies of Aristophanic comedy; the graphic horror of Lucan or Senecan tragedy; the curse tablets and ghost stories of everyday ancient life - bear the qualities that the eighteenth century recognised as Gothic: an attraction to the irrational, a fascination with grotesquerie and violence, the seduction of the supernatural. 'Gothic Greece and Rome' sounds less paradoxical now than ever.⁶⁴ If wrestling with the meaning of the past for modernity is part of the cultural work of Gothic literature, allusions to Classical texts by Gothic authors draw attention to aspects of ancient literature that exceeded artificial rules of propriety and evoked a chaotic space of disturbing violence and emotion. To see the Classical displaced from cultural centrality, relegated to the margins and yet returning as a spectral presence, is to see antiquity through Gothic eyes. Many of us see with those eyes still.

Notes

¹ Hans Robert Jauss, 'Modernity and Literary Tradition', trans. by Christian Thorne, *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2005): 329–64 (p. 330).

² Jonathan Brody Kramnick, *Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700–1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³ Jauss, 'Modernity and Literary Tradition', p. 352.

⁴ I examine many of the texts in this chapter in greater detail in James Uden, *Spectres of Antiquity: Classical Literature and the Gothic, 1742–1826* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵ Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (London, 1759), p. 25.

⁶ Alexander Pope, *Minor Poems*, edited by Norman Ault and John Butt (London: Methuen, 1964), pp. 96–98. On the political analogy between England and Rome, see Philip Ayres, *Classical Culture and the Idea of Rome in Eighteenth-Century England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Ayres (at p.49) cites Voltaire, who begins his 'Letter VIII' on England by saying: 'The members of the English parliament are fond of comparing themselves to the old Romans'. See Voltaire [François-Marie Arouet], *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (London, 1778), p. 44.

⁷ On the 'preromantic' and Romantic mischaracterisation of Pope as a poet concerned only with imitation, order and decorum, see Robert J. Griffin, *Wordsworth's Pope: A Study in Literary Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁸ Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). p. 210.

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 38.

¹⁰ Thomas Gray's exuberant early Latin poem about living on the moon (*Luna Habitabilis*) is a good example; it bears the influence of Johannes Kepler's popular Latin moon-voyage text entitled *Somnium* ('The Dream'). See Estelle Haan, *Thomas Gray's Latin Poetry* (Latomus: Brussels, 2000), pp. 168-73.

¹¹ For a concise overview, see Penny Wilson, 'Classical Poetry and the Eighteenth-Century Reader', in Isobel Rivers (ed.), *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), pp. 69-96 (pp.72-75).

¹² William Stevenson, *Remarks on the Very Inferior Utility of Classical Learning* (London, 1796), 34.

¹³ Paul H. Fry, 'Classical Standards in the Period', in Marshall Brown (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 5: Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 7-28 (p. 14).

¹⁴ Richard Hurd, *The Works of Richard Hurd*, 8 vols (London, 1811), vol. 4, p. 266.

¹⁵ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, edited by Paul Guyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 69.

¹⁶ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, edited by W. S. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Walpole's manipulation of these lines and their significance for the novel as a whole has received detailed analysis recently in H. Christian Blood, *Some Versions of Menippea*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz, 2011, pp. 158-62; Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens (eds), *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017),

pp. 1-7; and James Uden, 'Horace Walpole, Gothic Classicism, and the Aesthetics of Collection', *Gothic Studies* 20 (2018) 44-58.

¹⁷ I print the text and punctuation from Richard Bentley (ed.), *Q. Horatius Flaccus, ex recensione & cum notis atque emendationibus Richardi Bentleii* (Cambridge, 1711), p. 293.

¹⁸ W. S. Lewis (ed.), *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937–1983), vol. 1, p. 188.

¹⁹ *The Castle of Otranto*, p. 112.

²⁰ Paul Baines and Edward Burns (eds), *Five Romantic Plays, 1768–1821* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 15-16 (= Lucan, *Bellum Civile* 9.565-84); David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), p. 455.

²¹ Horace Walpole, *Hieroglyphic Tales* (Twickenham, 1785).

²² Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.70; Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Selected Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, edited by Robert Halsband (Hammondsworth, Penguin Books, 1986), 237.

²³ Jane Stevenson, *Women Latin Poets: Language, Gender, and Authority from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 387–94.

²⁴ 'Clara Reeve', in Ioan Williams (ed.), *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 94–101, p. 98: 'Clara Reeve, probably, was better acquainted with Plutarch and Raptin, than with Froissart or Olivier de la Marche'.

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- ²⁵ Clara Reeve, *Original Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1769), p. xi.
- ²⁶ John Duncombe, *The Femiuiad, a Poem*, edited by Jocelyn Harris (Los Angeles: Williams Andrew Clark Memorial Library, 1981), pp. 8, 9.
- ²⁷ Montagu Pennington (ed.), *Letters from Mrs. Elizabeth Carter, to Mrs. Montagu, between the years 1755 and 1800* (London, 1817), pp. 47–48, cited by Shearer West, ‘Roles and Role Models: Montagu, Siddons, Lady Macbeth’, in Elizabeth Eger (ed.), *Bluestockings Displayed: Portraiture, Performance and Patronage, 1730–1830* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), pp. 164–86 (p. 164).
- ²⁸ Reeve, *Original Poems on Several Occasions*, 3, 18, 79.
- ²⁹ Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance, through Times, Countries, and Manners*, 2 vols (Colchester, 1785).
- ³⁰ Reeve, *Progress of Romance*, vol. 1, p. 24.
- ³¹ Reeve, *Progress of Romance*, vol. 1, p. 21; cf. Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 9.
- ³² Reeve herself read Latin well; her second work (*The Phoenix*, 1772) was a translation of the Neo-Latin novel *Argenis* (1621) by John Barclay.
- ³³ Reeve, *Progress of Romance*, vol. 1, pp. 22, 28.
- ³⁴ Reeve, *Progress of Romance*, vol. 1, vol.2, 68, 69.
- ³⁵ Clare Reeve, *The Old English Baron*, edited by James Trainer, intro. James Watt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- ³⁶ James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict, 1764–1832*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 42–69.
- ³⁷ Reeve, *The Old English Baron*, p. 46.
- ³⁸ Reeve, *The Old English Baron*, p. 39.

³⁹ Reeve, *The Old English Baron*, p. 72.

⁴⁰ Reeve, *The Old English Baron*, p. 97–98.

⁴¹ Reeve, *The Old English Baron*, p. 137 (in an appendix of the Oxford edition of the novel).

⁴² Clara Reeve, *Memoirs of Sir Roger de Clarendon, The Natural Son of Edward Prince of Wales, Commonly Called the Black Prince; with Anecdotes of Many Other Eminent Persons of the Fourteenth Century* 3 vols (London, 1793), vol. 1, pp. vi-vii.

⁴³ *The Old English Baron*, 73; cf. at 134–35: ‘Sweet is the remembrance of the virtuous, and happy are the descendants of such a father! they will think on him and emulate his virtues; they will remember him, and be ashamed to degenerate from their ancestor’.

⁴⁴ Gary Kelly, ‘Clara Reeve, Provincial Bluestocking: From the Old Whigs to the Modern Liberal State’, in Nicole Pohl and Betty A. Schellenberg (eds), *Reconsidering the Bluestockings* (San Merino: Huntington Library, 2002), pp. 105–25.

⁴⁵ John and William Langhorne, *Plutarch’s Lives, translated from the original Greek*, 6 vols, 3rd edition (London: 1778), vol. 4, p. 402. The translation was first published in 1770, but this section was expanded and made considerably more dramatic in this third edition.

⁴⁶ Peter Sabor (ed.), *Horace Walpole: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 70–72.

⁴⁷ ‘The Ancients have not much of this Poetry among them, for, indeed, almost the whole Substance of it owes its Original to the Darkness and Superstition of later Ages...’: Joseph Addison, no. 419, July 1, 1712 in Donald F. Bond (ed.), *The Spectator*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), vol. 3, p. 572.

⁴⁸ Isabella Lewis, *Terrific Tales* (Chicago: Valancourt Books, 2006.), p. 25. On this text, see Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Riffs: Secularizing the Uncanny in the European Imaginary, 1780–1820* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), pp. 197–98.

⁴⁹ Stuart Gillespie, *English Translation and Classical Reception: Towards a New Literary History* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 133.

⁵⁰ Matthew Gregory Lewis, *The Monk*, edited by D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2004), p. 35.

⁵¹ Lines from the poem also appear on the title page of John Moore's influential *Zeluco* (1789). See John Moore, *Zeluco*, edited by Pamela Ann Perkins (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2008), p. 1.

⁵² William Gifford, *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis* (London, 1802), p. li.

⁵³ Jonathan Sachs, *Romantic Antiquity: Rome in the British Imagination, 1789–1832*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 11.

⁵⁴ Jerome J. McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 313–33; Timothy Webb, 'Haunted City: The Shelleys, Byron, and Ancient Rome', in Timothy Saunders, Charles Martindale, Ralph Pite and Mathile Skoie (eds), *Romans and Romantics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 203–24..

⁵⁵ On the contested relationship between 'high' Romanticism and the Gothic in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and in contemporary scholarship, see Dale Townshend and Angela Wright, 'Gothic and Romantic: An Historical Overview', in Angela Wright and Dale Townshend, *Romantic Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 1–34.

⁵⁶ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, edited by Morton D. Paley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 462.

⁵⁷ Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, edited by Chloe Chard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 156; *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, edited by Bonamy Dobrée with notes and intro. by Terry Castle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 206–8; *The Italian*, edited by Robert Miles (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 226–27.

⁵⁸ John Polidori, *The Vampyre and Ernestus Berchtold; or the Modern Oedipus*, edited by D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2008); James Uden, ‘Gothic Fiction, the Grand Tour, and the Seductions of Antiquity: Polidori’s ‘The Vampyre (1819)’’, in Roberta Micallef (ed.), *Illusions and Disillusionment: Travel Writing in the Modern Age* (Boston: Ilex Foundation, 2018), pp. 58–77.

⁵⁹ Charles E. Robinson (ed.), *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 332–44.

⁶⁰ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*, edited by Marilyn Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For the fullest account of Shelley’s transformation of Classical materials in *Frankenstein*, see Jesse Weiner, Benjamin Eldon Stevens and Brett M. Rogers (eds), *Frankenstein and its Classics: The Modern Prometheus from Antiquity to Science Fiction* (London, Bloomsbury, 2018).

⁶¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 104.

⁶² Edward Baldwin [William Godwin], *The Pantheon, or, Ancient History of the Gods of Greece and Rome*, 2nd ed. (London, 1809), p. 77.

⁶³ James I. Porter, ‘What is “Classical” about Classical Antiquity?’ in James I. Porter (ed.), *Classical Pasts: The Classical Traditions of Greece and Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 1–68.

⁶⁴ On ghost stories within Classical literature, see especially D. Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome: Ghost Stories from Classical Antiquity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999) and Antonio Stramaglia, *Res inaudita, incredulae: Storie di fantasmi nel mondo greco-latino* (Bari, Levante editori, 1999).