

# ROMANTICISM AND THE GOTHIC

*Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation*

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## *Contents*

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page x
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>A note on the text</i>	xiii
Introduction. Romanticism's "pageantry of fear"	i
1 Gothic, reception, and production	27
2 Gothic and its contexts	48
3 "Gross and violent stimulants": producing <i>Lyrical Ballads</i> 1798 and 1800	90
4 National supernaturalism: Joanna Bailie, Germany, and the gothic drama	127
5 "To foist thy stale romance": Scott, antiquarianism, and authorship	163
<i>Notes</i>	201
<i>Index</i>	246

## CHAPTER I

### *Gothic, reception, and production*

In looking at the Gothic Fiction of the 1790s, it is important to keep in mind that this was not a strange outcropping of one particular literary genre, but a form into which a huge variety of cultural influences, from Shakespeare to 'Ossian', from medievalism to Celtic nationalism, flowed. And one concomitant of this is that most of the major writers of the period 1770 to 1820 – which is to say, most of the major *poets* of that period – were strongly affected by Gothic in one form or another. And this was not merely a passive reception of influence: Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, and Keats all played a part in shaping the Gothic, in articulating a set of images of terror which were to exercise a potent influence over later literary history. (David Punter, *The Literature of Terror*)<sup>1</sup>

At the rare times when literary historians have confronted the question of romantic poetry's relation to gothic fiction and drama, they usually have described it in the language of influence. Though few in number, scholars since John Beer and Eino Railo have noted late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century poets' fondness for gothic authors and conventions.<sup>2</sup> Recent monographs on the gothic – including studies by Steven Bruhm, Jeffrey Cox, Judith Halberstam, Kilgour, Miles, José B. Monleón, David Richter, and Williams – have remarked at least in passing upon the close thematic and chronological proximities of gothic fiction and the poetry of the same decades.<sup>3</sup> While our understanding of gothic's multiple origins and cultural functions has increased as gothic as a field of study has burgeoned, our understanding of gothic's historical and literary position within romanticism has not moved significantly beyond David Punter's manifesto of 1980 (quoted above), or even very far beyond Robert Hume's assessment of "Gothic versus Romantic" in 1969:

That Gothicism is closely related to Romanticism is perfectly clear, but it is easier to state the fact than to prove it tidily and convincingly.<sup>4</sup>

If critics since Punter have begun arguing for a more intimate and active relation between romantic and gothic writers, they have done so, as Miles puts it, with “more theoretically guarded, and aware, approaches.”<sup>5</sup> In most cases, these approaches have built upon the work of Michel Foucault, Tzvetan Todorov, and Slavoj Žižek in order to argue for gothic as container of multiple meanings or as mediator between high art and mass culture. In doing so, they effectively have banished the traditional Walpole-to-Maturin, 1764–1820 account of gothic, with its well-demarcated origins and endings. We no longer, for example, describe gothic exclusively as a genre; recent studies have represented it variously as an aesthetic (Miles), as a great repressed of romanticism (Bruhm and William Patrick Day), as a poetics (Williams), as a narrative technique (Halberstam and Punter), or as an expression of changing or “extreme” psychological or socio-political consciousness (Bruhm, Cox, Halberstam, Monleón, Paulson, Richter, Williams). While these accounts have differed with one another often and on key issues, they nevertheless have put forward accounts of gothic that pay homage to the complexity of its materials and to its responsiveness to economic, historical, and technological change.

When we turn to critical accounts of gothic’s relationship to the poetry, verse tragedies, and metrical romances that we associate with “romanticism,” however, much of this complexity disappears – in part because the question has not been treated in depth, and in part because the problem requires reconceptualization. We know, with Punter, that a relation between these two bodies of writing exists – one not simply of passive influence but punctuated by simultaneous appropriation and critique. Romantic writers’ acts of appropriation, moreover, not only coincide chronologically with their most stringent public criticisms of gothic, but also show them often borrowing the very metaphors and techniques they are most critical about elsewhere. What we have, then, are borrowings that cannot be explained exclusively in terms of influence, whether passive or active, individual or cultural. To borrow Judith Halberstam’s definition of gothic as “overdetermined – which is to say, open to numerous interpretations,” the relation of gothic to romantic ideology is itself a gothic one, since gothic’s presence in romantic writing is characterized by “multiple interpretations . . . [of] multiple modes of consumption and production, [of] dangerous consumptions and excessive productivity, and [of] economies of meaning.”<sup>6</sup> If gothic is, as Miles puts it, a “literary complex” for “diverse discourses” then the site of romantic writing’s appropriation of gothic is even more so, since as a

literary transaction it is buffeted and pulled apart by historical, economic, and ideological forces in conflict with one another.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter, therefore, approaches this scene of appropriation from the twin vantage points of reception and production, and does so to produce an account of literary exchange sensitive both to the politics of a Britain at war and to the economics of a burgeoning market publishing industry. In putting forward a framework for understanding the dynamics of gothic's reception in the 1790s and 1800s, I begin with the writings of Hans Robert Jauss, which recently have proven central and fruitful to David Richter's work on gothic's historiography. Because of the simplicity of Jauss's model of reception, however, I bring to bear on it specific notions from M. M. Bakhtin's later work on speech genres and from Jon Klancher's work on reading audiences. The chapter's final section, on genre and production, takes as its twin starting points Jauss's and Fredric Jameson's observations on the economics and ideology of contract theories of genres, and Klancher's and Miles's observations on the heterogeneity that characterizes both reading audiences and generic practice at the turn of the nineteenth century. I extend these analyses into the economic realm by asking to what extent gothic functions as a marketing tool for writers anxious to gain access to popular reading audiences.

## I TOWARDS A THEORY OF GOTHIC'S RECEPTION

The only recent critic of gothic fiction and drama to make reception the focus of in-depth study is David Richter, who first addressed the subject in a 1988 essay entitled, appropriately enough, "The Reception of the Gothic Novel in the 1790s." One of the first attempts to define gothic fiction from a readerly perspective, Richter's article bases its findings on the hundreds of reviews, the dozens of letters, and the few sparse reading diaries that have survived from the era 1795–1805. Anticipating cultural studies of gothic published in the 1990s, Richter posits that gothic, and genre in general, must be reconceived "as an area of literary space, a niche in the ecology of literature":

But just as living organisms evolve, so do genres. When the cultural environment which produced the niche changes, the genre must change with it . . . It is my hypothesis that this shifting of literary niches, including the birth of new genres out of old, cannot be explained in purely formal terms, as the opening and exhausting of structural possibilities. Such changes must have been at least partly the result of a complex interaction between producers and

consumers, between authors on the one hand and audiences and publishers on the other.<sup>8</sup>

Assuming an economic and political basis for generic change, Richter first calls upon the theoretical work of Hans Robert Jauss, focusing especially on Jauss's organization of readers into three *strata*: (1) reader/writers who engage in the textual production; (2) reader/critics who influence public taste but who do not directly produce "creative" works for consumption; and (3) reader/consumers who comprise the general market for consumption.<sup>9</sup> For Richter, Jauss provides a convenient starting point because he locates in readers the power to dictate literary change: "what makes Jauss worth taking up is not any greater precision of terminology to influence studies, but rather his implicit notion that literature changes from the bottom up."<sup>10</sup> Gothic fiction's popular ascent becomes in this account the product of larger and more gradual changes in the desires of British readers, and gothic's interest to literary historians lies in its role as both a symptom and a mediator of that change: "[Gothic] sits astride a major shift in the response of readers to literature, a shift (in Jauss's terms) from *katharsis* to *aisthesis*, or, in basic English, a shift from reading for information, and for the sake of entry into a verisimilar world otherwise inaccessible to the reader, toward reading as an escape."<sup>11</sup> Richter's insistence that we read gothic and its popular reception as part of "a tendency rather than a revolution" leads him to question more political readings of gothic – particularly those of critics like Ronald Paulson and Paula Backscheider, who have argued that gothic's obsession with tyranny and "authority . . . gone mad" explore the larger-than-life anxieties created in the last years of the eighteenth century by the recurring madness of George III and by the French Revolution.<sup>12</sup> Such political readings, Richter concludes, are "attractive but empty" because the reviews themselves contradict them: "Any simplistic notion of the gothic as a metaphor for the French Revolution runs aground on the ways in which critics during the most exciting phases of the revolution fail to make such conscious connections."<sup>13</sup>

Part of my project in the next two chapters is to provide a framework that will describe the reception of gothic fiction, in Richter's terms, as "a complex interaction between producers and consumers." As I will insist, however, part of this interaction's complexity is its politics. While Richter himself only finds one review that links gothic fiction to the French Revolution, he does not examine the several other publications

– among them George Canning’s *The Anti-Jacobin; or Weekly Examiner* (1797–8), Thomas Mathias’s *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794–7), and Hannah More’s *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) – that vocally condemn the “morality” of gothic fiction and drama as politically dangerous and link it explicitly with radical and revolutionary politics. These texts help us to understand not only that gothic fiction and drama were perceived as threats to political and social order, but also how and why periodical reviewers chose to review gothic texts in less overtly political terms than more vocally partisan critical cousins like *The Anti-Jacobin*. Put another way, it is not enough merely to track gothic’s reception without contextualizing the receivers themselves, including the politics of reviewing and the cultural position of the periodical – and especially the Review – at the end of the eighteenth century.

In testing his own hypothesis that the rise of gothic fiction in the 1790s signals a larger shift in British reading practices, Richter finds confirmation of this shift from *catharsis* to *aisthesis* in several writers and readers – the first and third categories of Jauss’s model. In critical essays and reviews of gothic fiction, however, he finds no such change:

As it happens, the sensibility that I hypothesize grew in the 1790s finds virtually no expression in these publications . . . all of them alike tend to discuss the novel in neoclassical or Johnsonian terms, with an emphasis on the probability, generality and ethical probity of the narrative. This is a blow to my hypothesis.<sup>14</sup>

This marked opposition between critical and popular tastes is crucial to understanding the processes of gothic’s stigmatization in the 1790s. Gothic’s reception becomes especially marked and voluble after 1795,<sup>15</sup> and coincides in trajectory and intensity with widespread alarm in England during these years over unrest at home and possible invasion from across the Channel. In this context, however, I do not see the opposition of popular and critical tastes to be a blow to Richter’s argument. If his hypotheses about changes in British reading habits are at all credible, I do not see how there could *not* exist discernible opposition and resistance to the most apparent marker of this change – the sudden and at times overwhelming popularity of gothic fiction and drama – particularly in such a time of general anxiety and alarm.<sup>16</sup> For those segments of the population threatened by it, cultural change is more than merely upsetting and unsettling. Cultural trends, then, not only spread unevenly across a culture as Richter ultimately concludes, but also frequently provoke significant resistances at specific sites. Such



a narrative seems to me particularly plausible in the case of the reception of the gothic, whose reviewers and critics occupy markedly different positions of cultural authority and gender than do its producers and consumers.

Even Jauss's model of readership, which bears little resemblance to what evidence does exist concerning actual British readership, comes to bear in fruitful ways on the question of gothic's reception and its position in romantic poetry. As Jon Klancher has argued persuasively, reviewers and readers hardly constituted homogeneous, let alone mutually exclusive, groups.<sup>17</sup> Yet the relevance of Jauss's *strata* does not lie in the accuracy with which they represent actual British readers or reading habits, but rather in the uncanny resemblance those conceptual categories bear to the similarly imprecise ideas that late-eighteenth-century British writers and reviewers held about the makeup of their own readership.<sup>18</sup>

This imprecise knowledge of fellow readers has been confirmed in recent scholarly research on literacy and reading habits at the end of the eighteenth century – research that has characterized British culture as experiencing exploding literacy rates accompanied by an increasingly bewildering and diverse collection of reading audiences.<sup>19</sup> Few conservative prose writers in the 1790s, for example, display an informed awareness of this new diversity of readership beyond making increasingly anxious calls to police the reading of women and adolescents and to contain the circulation of radical texts like *The Rights of Man* (1792). For Ina Ferris, this paternalistic response, with its voice of aristocratic authority, “testifies to the pressure exerted on the literary sphere by the extension of literacy.”<sup>20</sup> Klancher, in fact, makes this irony – of a print culture whose diverse producers and consumers must struggle to comprehend changes that in many ways they themselves have produced – a defining characteristic of these years: “The English Romantics were the first to become radically uncertain of their readers . . . No single, unified ‘reading public’ could be addressed in such times.”<sup>21</sup> This more general radical uncertainty, not surprisingly, becomes anxious incomprehension when confronted by the runaway popularity of gothic fiction and drama after the French Revolution. One of the factors that makes the sudden popularity of gothic so upsetting is that it makes manifest the vast quantity of popular romance readers “out there” in British culture – readers who become threatening to reviewers, literati, clergy, and government officials only when their numbers are perceived, and their ability to affect British taste and morals imagined and computed.

The process by which the array of readers who produce, review, and read gothic texts become mistakenly separated into these *strata* is captured most vividly in those figures who inhabit, either at various points in their careers or simultaneously, all three Jaussian positions of gothic writer, gothic reviewer, and gothic reader. The ability of these writers to occupy categories of readership that are, in many ways, at odds with one another changes as little between 1790 and 1820 as do the categories themselves. Mary Wollstonecraft's contempt for "the herd of novelists" in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), for example, is as well documented as her predilection for gothicism and sensibility in her own fiction.<sup>22</sup> Like Wollstonecraft, Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes negative reviews of gothic fiction by Radcliffe, Robinson, and Lewis at the same time (1797) that he is composing his *Osorio*, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," and "Kubla Khan."<sup>23</sup> Coleridge occupies these conflicting categories of readership, furthermore, with an energy and ease that in no way abates over the next two decades. His *Friend* (1809–10) and *Biographia Literaria* (1817) attack Lewis and Maturin, respectively, in the same vitriolic terms as his earlier reviews of gothic fiction, and make a point of attacking not only these individual authors but also their "imitators" as pernicious; yet these same years see the Drury Lane production of *Remorse* (1813) and the publication of *Christabel, Kubla Khan, and the Pains of Sleep* (1816).

In many ways the barometer of popular taste in the period, Walter Scott writes in an array of genres whose diversity is only less striking than the precision with which he assumes the voice of ballad-singer, dramatist, antiquarian editor, minstrel, historian, reviewer, folklorist, lyric poet, romancer, and historical novelist. Translator of *Sturm und Drang* works and of Bürger's supernatural ballads, writer of his own "Germanised"<sup>24</sup> gothic dramas, and contributor to Lewis's *Tales of Wonder* (1801), he nevertheless moves from producing texts that celebrate black magic and the supernatural to debunking these same subjects in his critical writing – doing so with cool rationality in *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830) and with conventional hyperbole in his 1810 *Quarterly* review of Charles Maturin's *The Fatal Revenge: Or, The Family of Montorio, A Romance* (1807).<sup>25</sup> The language of this latter review, furthermore, becomes particularly interesting when we consider that Scott had recently published two "tales" with similarly dark and supernaturally haunted heroes: *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *Marmion* (1808).

Scott's lengthy review opens by stating that he has heard various female "whispers" gossiping about the *Quarterly* "that we were dull . . .

– that is, we had none of those light and airy articles which a young lady might read while her hair was papering” (*SMP*, xviii:158). With this gambit, Scott creates a scenario in which he, a mature and sensible man of letters, must order and attempt to read “the newest and most fashionable novels” in order to gratify the demands of young female readers (*SMP*, xviii:159). When Scott receives his “packet, or rather hamper” of books, the epic project of his review essay comes into full focus: not to review a single novel, but rather to make sense of the “present degradation of this class of compositions” by defining them generically and placing them into an evaluative and gendered hierarchy (*SMP*, xviii:159):

When we had removed from the surface of our hamper a few thin volumes of simple and insipid sentiment . . . we lighted upon . . . the lowest denizens of Grub-street narrating, under the flimsy veil of false names, and through the medium of a fictitious tale, all that malevolence can invent and stupidity propagate concerning private misfortune and personal characters . . . “Plunging from depth to depth a vast profound,” we at length imagined ourselves arrived at the *Limbus Patrum* in good earnest. The imitators of Mrs. Radcliffe and Mr. Lewis were before us; personages, who to all the faults and extravagancies of their originals, added that of dulness.<sup>26</sup> (*SMP*, xviii:160–2)

Scott’s Dantesque descent to that lowest circle of literary hell – gothic fiction – shows him participating unproblematically within the conventions of periodical reviewing, whose task he sees as one of confirming existing literary hierarchies and enforcing unchanging standards of taste. That Scott had been stung two years earlier by Francis Jeffrey in a review of *Marmion* for appealing to female readers by employing “the machinery of a bad German novel . . . images borrowed from the novels of Mrs. Ratcliffe [*sic*] and her imitators”<sup>27</sup> in no way stops him from assuming the same voice in his own review, associating Maturin’s novel with the same readership, and calling for him to adopt the same standards of good sense, simplicity, and restraint associated with masculine writing.

Thus, in spite of a burgeoning readership and a literary marketplace in which numerous men and women often read, write, and review gothic simultaneously, the discourses that make up the reception of gothic fiction and drama configure gothic readers, writers, and reviewers as wholly separate entities, suggesting that in the 1790s perceptions of British readership change more slowly than the constitution of the readership itself. This factor begins to explain not only why Reviews maintain “Johnsonian” assumptions, but also why the categories of

writer, reviewer, and reader continue in literary discourse to endure as mutually exclusive categories both in reviews and in authors' prefaces of gothic texts.

The "Apostrophe to the Critics" that opens Charlotte Dacre's *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* (1805), for example, is typical for its depiction of critics as unknowable, overzealous, and uncomprehending: "I confess I stand in awe of the critics, for I am diffident of myself – I fear they will lash the effervescence of its sentiments, and the enthusiasm of its fancy; but let them remember, I write not to *palliate* either, but to exemplify their fatal tendency."<sup>28</sup> Dacre's argument, however self-effacing, nevertheless carries with it a double edge repeated constantly by other writers of gothic fiction in the period – that critics, however awe-inspiring and sublime to the gothic writer in their incomprehensibility and obscurity, are also incapable of comprehending the immediate pleasures and functions of the gothic. Claiming an essential difference between herself and "the critics," Dacre argues that this difference bars her from condemnation, since reviewers should not condemn what they are too old, too masculine, and too learned to understand: "the effervescence of its sentiments, and the enthusiasm of its fancy." The only extant review of Dacre's first work of fiction, in turn, addresses her romance with a curt paternalism reminiscent of Scott's tone toward his female readers of "light and airy" gothic fiction, commending its "moral" because it cautions young women against "mischief" and toward "social duties."<sup>29</sup> Its tone not only acknowledges the essential difference between gothic writer and gothic reviewer by standing in stark contrast to Dacre's own tone, but also exemplifies typical assumptions about gender and age inscribed in the categories of "gothic reviewer," "gothic reader," and "gothic writer."

Of these three categories, the first two of these (gothic reviewer and gothic reader) are especially fixed in opposition to one another at the turn of the nineteenth century. The gothic writer, while perceived overwhelmingly as a female figure writing for young women, nevertheless carries some class and gender instability because its ranks include, much to the chagrin of its contemporary critics, antiquarians and men of taste like Horace Walpole and William Beckford, who have "wasted" their genius by writing in the genre. As chapter 2 will show, this gender ambiguity – femininity blurred by what eighteenth-century reviewers termed a flamboyant, "wanton" masculinity – is itself a legacy of romance's cultural status in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Gothic reviewers, on the other hand, speak from far more predict-

able positions – as emblematic and experienced Men of Letters whose time is wasted by women who write, and especially women who read, fiction:

That the majority of novels merit our contempt, is but too true; and, for the above given, it is a truth of a serious and painful nature. The very end of a novel is to produce interest in the reader, for the characters of whom he reads: – but, in order to produce this interest, it is necessary that the novel writer should be well acquainted with the human heart, should minutely understand its motives, and should possess the art, without being either tedious or trifling, of minutely bringing them into view. This art is so little understood by the young ladies who at present write novels, which none but young ladies and we, luckless reviewers, read, that it is not wonderful that they should have incurred a considerable share of neglect from us.<sup>30</sup>

For the above *Monthly* reviewer, a piece of fiction can only claim success, and therefore a legitimate reason for existing, if it can demonstrate extensive and *productive* knowledge of human nature. As the reviewer's pronouncements upon the novel and upon young female writers and readers suggest, such knowledge resides typically in a mature, experienced, and, in most cases, masculine mind much like the reviewer's.

Jauss's reader–reviewer–writer model, then, adopts itself surprisingly well to the reception of gothic fiction and drama in the 1790s and 1800s – not because it accurately represents British readership in these years, but because it coincides with how British readers perceived and represented themselves. Just as one notices, when reading early reviews of *The Monk* and other novels like it, how cursorily reviewers read (and misread) actual gothic texts even as they dismiss the genre as a whole, so one also realizes with increasing certainty that the categories of gothic writer, gothic reviewer, and gothic reader matter as much as the actual demographics of gothic's readership. One need only look, for example, at a case like Elizabeth Moody's anonymous review of James Thomson's *The Denial; or, The Happy Retreat* (1790) to gain a sense of how the gender and class inflections associated with these three gothic *strata* invade and often take over the act of reviewing:

Of the various species of composition that in course come before us, there are none in which our writers of the male sex have less excelled, since the days of Richardson and Fielding, than in the arrangement of a novel. Ladies seem to appropriate to themselves an exclusive privilege in this kind of writing; witness the numerous productions of romantic tales to which female authors have given birth. The portraiture of the tender passions, the delicacy of sentiment, and the easy flow of style, may, perhaps, be most adapted to the genius of the softer sex:

but however that may be, politeness, certainly, will not suffer us to dispute this palm with our fair competitors. We, though of the harder sex, as men, and of the still harder *race as critics*, are no enemies to an affecting well-told story: but as we are *known* not to be very *easily pleased*, it may be imagined that those performances only will obtain the sanction of our applause, which can stand the test of certain criteria for excellence.<sup>31</sup>

The review is particularly breathtaking for the directness with which it defines and insists upon the specific gender and class inflections attached to the occupations of reviewing and novel-writing. What begins as a potentially negative review written by a woman of a romance written by a man quickly becomes something fundamentally different and more traditional: a self-identified “male” reviewer denying the value of popular fiction written by “Ladies” by asserting “certain [and in this case overtly masculine] criteria for excellence.” The only thing more striking than Moody’s representation of herself as a member first of “the harder sex” and then of “the still harder *race as critics*” is the way that Thomson’s sex carries less significance than *The Denial*’s gender. What matters here, then, are not Moody’s and Thomson’s sexes, but rather the respective gender and class positions of the cultural categories in which they participate. Almost automatically, Moody aligns herself with the ultra-masculinity of eighteenth-century literary reviewing, “hard[ening]” herself as she aligns Thompson with “the softer sex,” thereby claiming the very mantle of masculine “excellence” and taste that she denies him.

In performing this double act of realignment, moreover, she provides a prototypical example of both the pervasiveness and the power of these Jaussian readerly *strata* at the end of the eighteenth century. If taking on the masculine garb of the reviewer is to authorize and authenticate oneself, then part of that process of authorization involves defining oneself not only within the category of reviewer but also in opposition to other categories. It is not enough that we understand why Moody must change her own sex to that of “the still harder” critic; we also must understand that part of her process of self-definition involves that of completing the reviewer–writer dichotomy by feminizing *The Denial*’s author. In other words, it is not enough for a male reviewer to oppose a male writer of popular fiction; the gender of the writer being reviewed must be transformed through association with the “female writers” who supposedly dominate both the reading and the writing of popular fiction. If gothic readers, gothic writers, and gothic reviewers are specific categories that do not reflect the demographic makeup of late-eighteenth-century British readership yet dominate gothic’s reception, then

we must begin to ask what function these categories serve, why they take on an increasingly oppositional relation to one another as the 1790s progress, and how they shaped the practices of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century writers attracted to the gothic.

## II GOTHIC DIALOGUES

My purpose in providing the above examples is to stress the extent to which we are confronting, in the reception of gothic, positions already hardened during the course of the eighteenth century. Gothic's reception is part of a strong and longstanding grid of preconception and reification – one that finds its origins in the history of the reception of prose romance, and that structures the assumptions and terminology of readerly responses to gothic. Consequently, I have described gothic's reception both as a series of exchanges between individuals or actual groups of readers, and as a highly conventional set of exchanges between readerly categories. It is this fixedness of the categories of gothic writer, reader, and reviewer, I contend, that primarily shapes gothic writer-reviewer discourses, and produces such succinct dismissals as Clara Reeve's of "doughty critics" or the *Monthly Review*'s of Ann Radcliffe's *Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789): "To those who are delighted with the *marvellous*, whom wonders, and wonders only, can charm, the present production will afford a considerable degree of amusement. This kind of entertainment, however, can be little relished but by a young and unformed mind."<sup>32</sup> The frequency with which such caricatures recur, furthermore, confirms that we must consider gothic's reception as occurring among sectors of the British readership that, however much they might actually overlap with one another, define themselves oppositionally as separate and distinct from other sectors. In Jon Klancher's words, gothic writers, reviewers, and readers "are not simply distinct sectors of the cultural sphere. They are mutually produced as an otherness within [each's] discourse."<sup>33</sup>

Our sense of the dynamics of this standoff is somewhat limited by the scant direct knowledge we have about actual readers of gothic fiction and drama – what Richter calls "the real-life counterparts of [*Northanger Abbey*'s] Catherine Morland."<sup>34</sup> This paucity of evidence – of published or unpublished records or diaries of gothic readers – has allowed critical writers and satirists to assume that gothic readers were, like Catherine Morland, young, female, naive, and easily manipulated. One could go so far as to argue that no single literary stereotype has enjoyed such

widespread acceptance on so little first-hand information. The little evidence that does exist, moreover, pointedly contradicts the portrait of gothic readers drawn by critics and historians for over two centuries. Analyzing the borrowing records of proprietary libraries and the catalogs of circulating libraries, Paul Kaufman has found British libraries to be dominated neither by women nor by gothic and sentimental fiction.<sup>35</sup> Jan Fergus, in her seminal work on circulating libraries, not only has corroborated most of Kaufman's findings, but also suggested that borrowing fiction was neither a female nor a middle-class enterprise:

The information in Samuel Clay's buying and borrowing records, then, makes it necessary to modify five out of six clichés about the eighteenth-century provincial reading public . . . first, that the circulating library of this time does not seem to have greatly expanded provincial readership. Nor did women constitute the overwhelming majority of patrons in this provincial library; in fact, men and women displayed about equal interest in borrowing books. Novels did form the most popular genre in this library – the one received idea about readership that Clay's records support. But the notion that women in particular borrowed novels exclusively and voraciously is inaccurate. Neither sex borrowed novels exclusively, and only one reader, [a butcher named] Latimer, borrowed them voraciously . . . Finally, and most important, neither Clay's bookselling activities nor even his library indicates that the middle class had come to dominate the reading public.<sup>36</sup>

Looking again to *Northanger Abbey's* Catherine Morland, then, we see Austen exploring this same gap between predominant stereotypes of gothic readers and actual readers of gothic fiction, for no one is more convinced of the truth of the category "gothic reader" than Catherine:

"I never look at [Beechen Cliff]," said Catherine, "without thinking of the south of France."

"You have been abroad then?" said Henry, a little surprised.

"Oh! no, I only mean what I have read about. It always puts me in mind of the country that Emily and her father travelled through, in the 'Mysteries of Udolpho.' But you never read novels, I dare say?"

"Why not?"

"Because they are not clever enough for you – gentlemen read better books."

"The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure. The Mysteries of Udolpho, when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again; – I remember finishing it in two days – my hair standing on end the whole time." . . .

"But I really thought before, young men despised novels amazingly."



"It is *amazingly*; it may well suggest *amazement* if they do – for they read nearly as many as women."<sup>37</sup>

Both Fergus's and Kaufman's findings concerning the readership of fiction suggest statistically about gothic readers what Austen's Henry Tilney here embodies: that men "read nearly as many as women," and that gothic fiction attracted educated and elite readers capable not only of understanding irony but also of treating their own reading experience with it. For Austen, as for Kaufman and Fergus, the actual gothic reader has little in common with the "young ladies and . . . luckless reviewers" assumed by the *Monthly* and other Reviews to be the only readers of gothic fiction. That Austen raises and explodes this assumption about the gender and level of education of gothic readers *twice* in the same passage provides us with some sense of the prevalence of the stereotype and degree of irritation it caused her. Looking to *Northanger's* famous passage defending novels, furthermore, the perpetrators of such a stereotype are equally clear: "Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans."<sup>38</sup>

These "threadbare strains" of "abuse," and the effects that they had on other writers in the period, require further investigation and theoretical work. In writing prose fiction, Austen has little choice but to defend the novel against reviewers and to supplement their portrait of the naive female gothic reader (Catherine) with an older and more sophisticated counterpart (Henry). For a poet, dramatist, or learned editor, however, such a direct defense of – and association with – popular fiction is both unnecessary and, in the face of the repetitive vitriol and clichés of eighteenth-century reviewing, undesirable. By the end of the eighteenth century, in fact, gothic reviewer–writer discourses have become so hyperbolic and so mechanistically *conventional* as to force us to re-examine their cultural function. Gothic writers and reviewers may ostentatiously speak to one another, but the utter sameness of their mutual addresses spurs us to ask for whom these authorial prefaces and critical reviews are intended, and where, if anywhere, communication exists in these discourses. Put another way, in discourses so predictable in their rhetoric and modes of address, why do gothic writers and reviewers write with so much energy?

How long, *O Novelist!* wilt *thou* abuse our patience? How long wilt thou continue to persecute us by the publication of "Nothings," and those too in "so strange a style" – So nonsensically, so stupidly written, that even Laughter is unable to

exercise his functions on them. – How long, we say, wilt thou continue this? – Why wilt thou put us under the disagreeable necessity of seizing the whip? – of lashing thee –

– “Naked thro’ the world:  
Even from the East to the West.”<sup>39</sup>

For these reasons, gothic reviewer–writer discourses at the end of the eighteenth century hardly can be called “dialogic” in the manner in which scholars usually invoke the term.<sup>40</sup> They instead present us, in the language of Bakhtin’s later work on speech genres, with speakers who claim to speak to one another yet speak past one another: a series of addresses by addressers without addressees made up of apparently meaningless utterances.<sup>41</sup> Partisan in their fixed tones and stances, these discourses either must verge on becoming functionless babble or must achieve their primary communication elsewhere – i.e., with other sectors of the British readership.

Understanding this dynamic – of speaking to one group while actually communicating with another – allows us to move beyond imagining gothic’s reception in the 1790s as simply an impasse between stubborn and unthinking participants. It allows us, in fact, to view stubbornness as a writerly strategy and impasses as serving economic and political functions. Gothic writers may remonstrate with reviewers directly, but such remonstrations function even more potently as appeals to book-buyers and book-borrowers, particularly when writers are able to position themselves in opposition to a supposedly older and masculine critical audience and (either directly or indirectly) in alignment with the female and younger readers who stereotypically comprise the bulk of gothic’s readership. Within this model of writer–reviewer discourse, Jane Austen’s defense of novel-reading in *Northanger Abbey* is only atypical in the openness of its use of economic language, and in the degree of irony and sophistication with which it wields the notion of “patron[age]”:

Alas! if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it. Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse . . . every new novel . . . Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body.<sup>42</sup>

Gothic reviewers, in speaking past the gothic writers whom they address, engage in similar practices. As the example of Moody typifies, part of this strategy “to abuse . . . every new novel” involves self-authorization and self-definition. As guardians of taste in a culture that

privileges male over female writers, poetry over prose, and learned and didactic over popular literature, reviewers dismiss gothic writing almost by definition, since to countenance it is to undermine the very positions of privilege from which they derive their authority.

I wish to argue, however, that the ritualistic abuse of gothic writers by gothic reviewers involves more explicit acts of intimidation as well. Gothic reviewers most often attack individual gothic works, and gothic as a genre, not to remonstrate with gothic writers to write in other genres, but rather to make clear to other readers – and especially to other writers – the cultural costs of reading and writing gothic texts. However indirectly stated, this communication constitutes a palpable threat, and if gothic reviewers perform a specific kind of cultural work, it is to define and reiterate the risks of reading and writing gothic to those members of the British readership contemplating it. Looking back to the above-quoted review of *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*, for example, gothic readers risk associating themselves with the “unformed mind[s]” of adolescents, with the “stupidity” of female “nonsense,” and with the vitiated tastes of readers for whom “wonders, and wonders only, can charm.” More seriously, gothic writers risk losing their cultural legitimacy, social respectability, and standing as serious authors. I read gothic’s critical reception, therefore, as a regulatory discourse – carried out under the fiction of paternalistic advice to a given gothic writer, but functioning as an implicit threat to other readers and writers potentially attracted to the gothic.

### III MARKING AND MARKETING GOTHIC

Once you begin to examine the historical development and empowerment of any particular system, what you discover is a collection of accidental contingencies that have been turned into opportunities. (Marlon Ross, “Contingent Predilections”)<sup>43</sup>

If reception confers genre and hence cultural status upon texts, this does not mean that genre is any less central to textual production – as writerly practice, publishing strategy, or political opportunity. Genre may depend in part upon reception, but the claims that writers make for their texts, and the decisions that publishers make concerning how to package and promote those texts, fundamentally matter to how genres develop and to how texts interact within cultures. They matter to modern critics and historians, moreover, for what they suggest about a text’s intended audience, expected stature, and anticipated sites of political resistance.

Because writers and publishers attempt to frame reception, strategies of textual packaging can tell us much about the anxieties and hopes that have shaped that text's composition, production, and distribution.

In beginning here, I am hardly espousing original ideas; even the most traditional notions of genre have assumed it to be a mediating tool between writers and their various publics, whether that tool be E. D. Hirsch's "heuristic device" (1967) or Cyril Birch's "comfortable saddle" (1974).<sup>44</sup> Similar formulations have occurred in studies as widely varied as Philippe Lejeune's *On Autobiography* (1989), which takes as its fundamental assumption the idea of genre as a pact between writer and reader,<sup>45</sup> and Fredric Jameson's foundational *The Political Unconscious* (1981), which makes as one of its central projects that of historicizing genre's contractual "pact" until its ideological moorings are exposed:

The strategic value of generic concepts for Marxism clearly lies in the mediatory function of the notion of a genre, which allows the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life . . . Genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact.<sup>46</sup>

For Jameson, genre is inextricably tied to notions of institutionally sanctioned propriety, and is therefore "a form of social praxis, . . . a symbolic resolution to a concrete historical situation."<sup>47</sup> Such a formulation sees popular genre not only as tapping into widespread readerly desire, but also as possessing the power to placate cultural anxieties and displace them into the realm of fantasy.<sup>48</sup> Taken to its logical conclusion, it produces arguments similar to those of Jauss and McGann — that the conventionality of texts and the popularity of genres are measures of the degree to which a text eludes its own historicity. Jauss, in fact, nearly collapses the conventional into the ahistorical: "The more stereotypically a text repeats the generic, the more inferior is its artistic character and its degree of historicity . . . [Genres] transform themselves to the extent that they have history, and they have history to the extent that they transform themselves."<sup>49</sup>

In associating ideology with the infiltration and institutionalization of market economics, Jauss and Jameson largely duplicate Raymond Williams's identification of ideology with processes that produce politically interested meanings for culturally dominant groups.<sup>50</sup> They therefore construct, either self-consciously or on the level of assumption, models

in which texts “fall” to the extent that they are institutionally coopted by established genres. In their respective hierarchies, texts descend yet further into cliché and cultural irrelevance if participation includes the economic cooptation by the popular press:

It is . . . the generic contract and institution itself, which, along with so many other institutions and traditional practices, falls casualty to the gradual penetration of a market system and a money economy. With the elimination of an institutionalized social status for the cultural producer and the opening of the work of art itself to commodification, the older generic specifications are transformed into a brand-name system against which any authentic artistic expression must necessarily struggle. The older generic categories do not, for all that, die out, but persist in the half-life of the subliterate genres of mass culture, transformed into the drugstore and airport paperback lines of gothics, mysteries, romances, bestsellers, and popular biographies.<sup>51</sup>

In the above formulation, genres rarely “die out” because, as they become more institutionalized, they simply change their position within the cultural systems they occupy, or feed and disperse themselves into other forms. With cultural institutionalization comes increasing economic institutionalization and distribution, where the genre is recognized as a commodity and therefore produced for consumption. Appropriately Blakean in his vision of genres that fall into a “half-life” and are kept alive to work in the hellish mills of mass culture and airport- and drugstore-level commodification, Jameson re-enacts a distinctly romantic trope describing the fragmentary process of commodification as political and cultural tragedy. Politically resistant discourse, like the prototypical romantic artist, must “struggle” against conventionality because conventions always carry with them the impurities of the institutions that established them. While by no means nostalgic for the past, Jameson sees commodification as both tragic and inevitable because of its intellectual bankruptcy and its power to reproduce itself with mindless efficiency. As genres fall “casualty to the gradual penetration of a market system,” their “ideologemes” increasingly, but never completely, reflect or refer to that market economy.

I would like to apply these two assertions – of genres as essentially ideological, and of generic institutionalization as inevitably economic – to explain the stubborn distance between gothic readers and reviewers at the end of the eighteenth century, and to formulate a model that will describe gothic’s behavior in the 1790s and 1800s as an economic entity within British market publishing. I do so primarily because the way that gothic conventions find their way into “high” literary discourse at the

turn of the nineteenth century is not adequately represented by Jameson's narrative, even though its presiding logic – of commodification necessitating a fall from “high” to “low” culture – governs the terms by which the borders between high and low are patrolled.

First, however, I want to explain why I hesitate to reduce, as Jameson does, genres to “essences,” and ultimately to ideologemes. To reduce a genre to an ideological function fails to explain why genres are so often appropriated for purposes other than hegemonic ones, and why genres so frequently fragment and feed other forms. At the very least, it denies the role that generic inversion, parody, burlesque, and montage – to name just a few highly conventional strategies – play in instituting historical change and in binding literary and political discourses to one another. More importantly, it fails to acknowledge, as Katie Trumpener has asserted recently, that genres develop over time dialectically through their interactions with other kinds of writing, as “names, characters, set pieces, and plots are constantly borrowed back and forth between genres, even among writers of sharply divergent political views who claim to disapprove of each other's work.”<sup>52</sup>

By asserting this, I by no means wish to deny gothic's ideological importance to British readers or its participation in the production of dominant beliefs in the decades that followed the French Revolution. In associating the Napoleonic Wars with the rise and fall of gothic's popularity, scholars have long maintained that gothic fiction and drama performed important cultural work in these years by allowing British readers to satisfy private desires and anxieties while participating in collective narrative fantasy. The majority of these conventions James Watt suggestively groups under the rubric “loyalist gothic romance”; it is remarkable, however, how many of these same devices appear in what Watt calls “subversive” gothic texts as well.<sup>53</sup> Gothic's nostalgia for simpler and more hierarchical class and gender structures, its fabling about the birth of the British nation, its xenophobia and anti-Catholicism, and its fondness for continental travel (not possible during the war years) all smack of the ideology of popular wartime fantasy. This critical narrative, however, hardly exhausts or fully explains the multitude of divergent and often conflicting political roles gothic plays in these years. It addresses, for example, neither how gothic can accommodate radically different political viewpoints even as it is denounced as politically dangerous, nor how it can function as a vehicle for British nationalism even as it is rejected as an invading foreign literature. I find gothic's ideological flexibility – striking given the general monotony of

critical responses to it – to be eloquent testimony that market economies rarely operate with perfect ideological efficiency to the point of completely excluding outside discourses, even when supported by state censorship. At the very least, gothic's vexed reception in the censorious 1790s, ranging as it does between commercial success and critical condemnation, should alert us to its ability to produce multiple significations, and to fulfill multiple functions within the late-eighteenth-century literary marketplace.

Part of gothic's instability, of course, is endemic to any text, be it a material book or the collection of social conventions that comprise a genre. Derrida's famous passage from "The Law of Genre," quoted as an epigraph for this book's Introduction, puts this with famous succinctness: "Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging."<sup>54</sup> If texts never fully "belong" to a genre – and chapter 2 will attempt to demonstrate otherwise – part of this chapter's project has been to describe the ways in which genre nonetheless infringes upon texts through critical and economic reception. Texts both bring to bear *and* have borne upon them multiple genres. If Derrida's formulation by itself is incomplete for our purposes because it does not attempt to theorize how texts operate economically and politically within romantic period culture, then we must supplement it accordingly.

One need only look to the "Prolegomenon" of Stuart Curran's *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (1986) – with its listing of lyrical dramas, lyrical ballads, historical novels, and modern eclogues – to register the penchant for formal and generic experimentation at the turn of the nineteenth century. Most explanations of this proclivity, furthermore, have leant toward the contextual, connecting it to the intense political changes wrought by the French Revolution, to larger political and economic changes within British culture, or, like Jon Klancher, to some combination of the two: "the intense cultural politics of the romantic period obliged writers not only to distinguish among conflicting audiences, but to do so by elaborating new relations *between* the individual reader and the collective audience."<sup>55</sup> Political divisions in the romantic period, it seems, not only produce divisions among reading audiences, but also force writers to renegotiate the writer–reader pact by writing for multiple and often conflicting audiences simultaneously.

Consequently, if Bakhtin is even partially correct in arguing that every genre choice presupposes an audience choice, then genre in the

romantic period increasingly becomes a way not only of targeting a particular audience but also of potentially negotiating *between* audiences, as writers demarcate their texts with multiple genres in order to propose pacts with multiple audiences. This hardly means, nor do I mean to suggest, that every generic or discursive shift within a text or between texts signals a shift in audience, nor does it account for all of the ways that texts cite, sample, and allude to one another. It does mean, however, that genre can become a means of reaching particular audiences, whether comprised of “real” readers or imagined *strata*. By invoking gothic or any genre, writers and publishers can *mark* a text with genre and thereby attempt to place that text into a chosen position in the contemporary literary landscape. It becomes, in short, a way for authors to *market* texts to imagined audiences.<sup>56</sup>

In foregrounding the economic and cultural processes that govern gothic’s transmission into other cultural forms and practices, then, I have asked in this chapter, perhaps counterintuitively, to what degree generic production imagines and even defines reading audiences, and how audience reception can define generic identity and determine cultural status. Part of the project of chapter 2, therefore, will be to locate these questions within the history of gothic’s formation and reception and the various contexts that informed it. Such an approach, I hope, will provide more than just a picture of writers negotiating between the conflicting demands of various audiences. It will grant us access to the economic, political, and aesthetic considerations that confront all writers and that are inherent in any act of textual production. More pointedly, it will present us with emblematic situations in which writers must gesture to audiences that define themselves in opposition to one another, and thereby risk becoming self-divided, duplicitous, uncertain, and dialectic.