

Introduction: Gothic in the Nineteenth Century, 1800–1900

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Does any one now read Mrs. Radcliffe, or am I the only wanderer in her windy corridors, listening timidly to groans and hollow voices, and shielding the flame of a lamp, which, I fear, will presently flicker out, and leave me in darkness? People know the name of ‘The Mysteries of Udolpho’; They know that boys would say to Thackeray, at school, ‘Old fellow, draw us Vivaldi in the Inquisition.’ But have they penetrated into the chill galleries of the Castle of Udolpho? Have they shuddered for Vivaldi in face [*sic*] of the sable-clad and masked Inquisition?

(Andrew Lang, ‘Mrs. Radcliffe’s Novels’, 1900)¹

Literary History and the Invention of ‘Gothic Fiction’, 1800–1900.

The history of the Gothic in the nineteenth century is subtly yet legibly sketched out in some of the semantic changes that were effected in the period to the word ‘Gothic’ itself. A notoriously overdetermined noun and adjective in English since at least the early seventeenth century – the *OED* lists the King James Bible of 1611 as its earliest recorded use in print – ‘Gothic’ for much of the long eighteenth century signified that which concerned or pertained to the ancient Gothic tribes or their language; by extension, that which we now refer to as Teutonic or Germanic; that which belonged to, or was characteristic of, the Middle Ages; that which, in all its apparent opposition to the Classicism of ancient Greece and Rome, was perceived as barbarous, rude, unpolished or in generally bad taste; and the style of architecture that was prevalent in Europe from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, the chief

¹ Andrew Lang, ‘Mrs. Radcliffe’s novels’, *The Cornhill Magazine* 9:49 (July 1900): 23–34 (p. 23).

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characteristic of which was the pointed arch.² Though these significations often clustered together simultaneously, attempts to localise one or two more particular meanings of the word were not uncommon. Chapters 1–8 in the first volume of *The Cambridge History of the Gothic* provide near-exhaustive coverage of the circulation of the term ‘Gothic’ in these and other related contexts in antiquity and throughout the period 1680–1800.

Within this range of discrete yet closely interrelated historical, political and architectural meanings, notions of the literary were somewhat eclipsed, although, as Nick Groom’s and Dale Townshend’s chapters in Volume I show, it is clear that, even if it was not always named as such, a very particular understanding of what we would now term a Gothic literary aesthetic was already beginning to take shape in the work of William Temple; John Dennis; Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury; John Dryden; Joseph Addison; and other writers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. What distinguished such early invocations of the ‘Gothic’ in these more narrowly literary senses, however, was that this was a descriptive category that was almost exclusively reserved for works of purportedly ‘ancient’ provenance, be they by writers such as Petrarch, Pierre de Ronsard, Ludovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso in the Continental tradition, or Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, John Milton and other early modern dramatists and the poets in the English. The term ‘Gothic’, in this respect, was for the long eighteenth century as much a marker of a writer’s historical positioning – his perceived relations to the sometimes noble, sometimes barbaric Gothic past – as a means of describing any text’s particular formal and thematic properties. When, in February 1765, John Langhorne, with more than a modicum of scepticism, remarked in his review of the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (published 24 December 1764) that the text teemed with ‘the absurdities of Gothic fiction’, he was seemingly unaware of the fact that this was really a modern hoax that had issued from the pen of a contemporary writer; the term ‘Gothic’ that he employed here referred instead to the fiction’s purported origins in what Horace Walpole’s translator William Marshal in the first Preface described as ‘the darkest ages of christianity’, that is, the period somewhere between ‘1095, the æra of the first crusade, and 1243, the date of the last’.³ Langhorne was

2 See the entry for ‘Gothic’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) <www.oed.com> (last accessed 12 September 2019).

3 Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, edited by Nick Groom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 5. John Langhorne’s review of first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* in the *Monthly Review* in February 1765, vol. 32, pp. 97–9 is reprinted in Peter

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altogether less complimentary, however, when, with Walpole's disclosure of authorship in the second edition in 1765, *The Castle of Otranto* was revealed to be no antique relic of 'Gothic fiction' at all, but a fabrication of disconcertingly modern origins:

When this book was published as a translation from an old Italian romance, we had the pleasure of distinguishing in it the marks of genius, and many beautiful characteristic paintings; we were dubious, however, concerning the antiquity of the work upon several considerations, but being willing to find some excuse for the absurd and monstrous fictions it contained, we wished to acquiesce in the declaration of the title-page, that it was really a translation from an ancient writer. While we considered it as such, we could readily excuse its preposterous phenomena, and consider them as sacrifices to a gross and unenlightened age.—But when, as in this edition, *The Castle of Otranto* is declared to be a modern performance, that indulgence we afforded to the foibles of a supposed antiquity, we can by no means extend to the singularity of a false taste in a cultivated period of learning.⁴

For Langhorne, the absurdity that was deemed appropriate to the dark 'Gothic' past was unconscionable in the England of the enlightened, modern present. Not even after Walpole added the subtitle of 'A Gothic Story' to the second edition of *Otranto* did 'Gothic' come to assume quite the same set of meanings that the word mobilises in literary studies today, and this despite the fact that several late eighteenth-century writers in Walpole's wake, including Clara Reeve, Richard Warner, Isabella Kelly, Mary Tuck and Eliza Ratcliffe, had all employed variations on his 'Gothic Story' in the subtitles to their own fictions. Various known instead as 'modern romances', the 'German school or horror' or the 'terrorist system of novel writing', and loosely grouped together in the fashion of those 'horrid' novels that Isabella Thorpe excitedly lists in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (written 1798–9; published late 1817; dated 1818), such fictions, though certainly perceived as belonging to a singular and recognisable literary type, were by no means marketed and read as 'Gothic'.⁵ Indeed, as Austen's novel so clearly illustrates, the devotees of the circulating libraries, those influential cultural

Sabor (ed.), *Horace Walpole: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 70–1.

4 John Langhorne's review of the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto* in the *Monthly Review* in May 1765, vol. 32, p. 394 is reprinted in Sabor (ed.), *Horace Walpole*, pp. 71–2.

5 On the naming of what we now call 'Gothic fiction' in the eighteenth century, see E. J. Clery, 'The Genesis of "Gothic" Fiction', in Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 21–40 (p. 22).

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establishments through which these ‘horrid romances’ were habitually disseminated and consumed, could never possibly have identified themselves as having particularly ‘Gothic’ literary tastes, since the word in the period, far from designating a literary genre, was primarily reserved for notions of the ‘ancestral’ or associated with what we would now term the ‘medieval’.⁶ As critics have frequently pointed out, it would not be until the early nineteenth century that ‘Gothic’ would lose many of its older historical and political meanings and come to serve as the name for the modern literature of horror and terror, wonder and supernatural enchantment, meanings that the *OED* added in a draft addition to its entry on the word as recently as December 2007: ‘Of or designating a genre of fiction characterized by suspenseful, sensational plots involving supernatural or macabre elements and often (esp. in early use) having a medieval theme or setting.’

Such changes to the meaning of ‘Gothic’, from a primarily historical category to a term of literary-critical description, are clearly evidenced in the work of the English essayist and surgeon, Nathan Drake. In the first edition of his *Literary Hours; or, Sketches Critical and Narrative* of 1798, Drake paid sustained attention to what he termed ‘Gothic superstition’, that imaginative literary strain that, for all the ‘polished’ tastes of the late eighteenth-century present, remains ‘yet alive to all the horrors of witchcraft, to all the solemn and terrible graces of the appalling spectre’.⁷ Characterised by wayward flights of fancy and tales of elves and fairies, this ‘vulgar Gothic’ tradition was internally divided for Drake between what he referred to as ‘sportive’ and ‘terrible’ varieties, yet both strains trading in the signature generation of horror and terror, and eliciting in those who consumed them the responses of ‘grateful astonishment’ and the ‘welcome sensation of fear’.⁸ Though it was said to be epitomised by the enchanted forest in Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581), the ghostliness of *The Lusiads* (1572) by the sixteenth-century Portuguese poet Luís de Camões and the spectres and sprites of some of Shakespeare’s plays, Drake in *Literary Hours* also pioneeringly extended this Gothic literary tradition into the work of a number of more recent and contemporary writers who, he argued, had all sought to emulate it, including, most notably, the poetry of William Collins, Thomas Gray and William Cooper; Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*; John Aikin’s ‘Sir Bertrand: A Fragment’ (1773); Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron* (1778); Gottfried August

6 See Alfred E. Longueil, ‘The word “gothic” in eighteenth century criticism’, *Modern Language Notes* 38:8 (December 1923): 453–60.

7 Nathan Drake, *Literary Hours; or, Sketches Critical and Narrative* (London, 1798), p. 87.

8 Drake, *Literary Hours*, p. 90.

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Bürger's 'Lenore' (1773); Christoph Martin Wieland's *Oberon* (1780–96); and the romances of Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Gregory Lewis.⁹ Here, at the very end of the eighteenth century, texts and writers that were hitherto otherwise not specifically referred to as such are drawn together into a distinctive literary category of the 'Gothic', the term thus serving as a generic marker of sorts for some of the popular literary productions of Drake's own day. Albeit in a far more cautious and localised fashion, the otherwise largely anti-Gothic T. J. Mathias would achieve much the same when, in the one-volume reissue of the four-part *The Pursuits of Literature* of 1798, he paid tribute to 'the mighty magician of THE MYSTERIES OF UDOLPHO, bred and nourished by the Florentine Muses amid the paler shrines of Gothic superstition and in all the dreariness of Inchantment [*sic*]', a rhetorical move that similarly forged an important connection between the word 'Gothic' and the fictions of Ann Radcliffe.¹⁰

After Drake and Mathias, and throughout the course of the nineteenth century, such generic uses of the term became increasingly commonplace. In his discussion of the work of Horace Walpole in his *Lives of the Novelists* of 1825, for example, a compilation of the Prefaces that he had written earlier for the reprints of several eighteenth-century novels and romances in Ballantyne's *Novelists' Library* series, Walter Scott repeated his by-now familiar tendency to distinguish between the unabashed supernaturalism of writers such as Walpole and the explained supernatural of Radcliffe through the use of the term 'Gothic' in a notably modern, literary sense:

Romantic narrative is of two kinds—that which, being in itself possible, may be matter [*sic*] of belief at any period; and that which, though held impossible by more enlightened ages, was yet consonant with the faith of earlier times. The subject of *The Castle of Otranto* is of the latter class. Mrs. Radcliffe, a name not to be mentioned without the high respect due to genius, has endeavoured to effect a compromise between those different styles of narrative, by referring her prodigies to an explanation founded on natural causes, in the latter chapters of her romances. To this improvement upon the gothic romance there are so many objections that we own ourselves inclined to prefer, as more simple and impressive, the narrative of Walpole, which details supernatural

⁹ Like many writers of his day, including Horace Walpole, Drake misattributes 'Sir Bertrand' in *Literary Hours* to John Aikin's sister, Anna Laetitia Aikin (later Barbauld).

¹⁰ T. J. Mathias, *The Pursuits of Literature: A Satirical Poem in Four Dialogues. With Notes*, 8th edition (London: Printed for T. Becket, 1798), p. 58.

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incidents as they would have been readily believed and received in the eleventh or twelfth century.¹¹

Though, as of old, ‘Gothic’ in this extract continues to signify that which is ‘of the eleventh and twelfth centuries’, it also serves for Scott as a means of identifying and naming a specific and recognisable strand in modern literature, one that is said to be distinguished by its supernatural contents and exemplified by the romances of Walpole and Radcliffe. There is evidence of such usages in circulation across the Atlantic, too. In his *Six Months in Italy* of 1853, the Massachusetts-based lawyer and author George Stillman Hillard invoked a distinct category of ‘Gothic fiction’ in order to comment on the altogether more sanguine literary tastes of the Italian people:

They have no liking for dark and supernatural terrors which make the flesh creep. Their facile and impressible nature demands gay, airy, and smiling fancies. The shapes and conceptions of Gothic fiction—the sheeted ghost gliding from the churchyard—the midnight bell struck by airy hands—the groan mingling with the wind that sweeps through the aisles of a ruined chapel—the damp vault, and the bloody shroud—have no charm for these children of the sun. The gloomy and spectral shadows which flit through Mrs. Radcliffe’s Italian romances, are of Northern, not Italian origin.¹²

Though the word as Hillard employs it continues to suggest Britain’s mythical northern European ancestors, the Goths, ‘Gothic’, perhaps with greater insistence, also signifies the fictional tradition comprising many of the characteristics that are most often associated with the mode today: darkness and death, gloom and mystery, and the host of supernatural terrors, from sheeted ghosts to spectral shadows, that ‘make the flesh creep’. The ‘Gothic’ literary tradition that eighteenth-century writers such as Richard Hurd and Thomas Percy had identified and located in the ‘antique’ poems and dramas of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had, by the mid nineteenth century, been transposed and applied generically to modern or more recent horrid fictions. Thus, by 1889, Edmund Gosse in *A History of Eighteenth Century Literature (1660–1780)*, could describe Horace Walpole as the ‘father’ of the modern British Gothic strain, noting of *The Castle of Otranto* that ‘This Gothic novel positively frightened grown-up people to the extent of making them

¹¹ Walter Scott, *Lives of the Novelists*, 2 vols (Philadelphia and New York, 1825), vol. 2, pp. 131–2.

¹² George Stillman Hillard, *Six Months in Italy*, 2 vols (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1853), vol. 2, p. 233.

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unwilling to seek their beds.¹³ Though it was not without its literary implications in earlier periods, ‘Gothic’ over the course of the nineteenth century forfeited many of its older political and historical meanings in order to serve with greater clarity and precision as the name for a modern literary genre or type, one accompanied, as such, by canonical or iconically ‘Gothic’ writers the likes of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Gregory Lewis.

The Gothic and the Romantic in Nineteenth-Century Literary Historiography

This critical construction of ‘Gothic literature’ in the nineteenth century largely occurred against and in relation to the formation of canonical British ‘Romanticism’, that other retrospectively applied category of literary periodisation with which it has remained in constant tension ever since. The distaste of the poets whom we now refer to as ‘Romantic’ for the ‘Gothic’ writers and texts with whom they were contemporary are well known, and include Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s censorious review of Matthew Gregory Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) in *The Critical Review* in February 1797; William Wordsworth’s claims to have ‘counteracted’ the taste for ‘frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse’ in the Preface to the second, two-volume edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800;¹⁴ Coleridge’s dismissal of the lurid popular fictions of the circulating library in a footnote to chapter three of *Biographia Literaria* (1817); and the various indictments and anti-Gothic pronouncements of figures such as Robert Southey, Walter Scott, Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley.¹⁵ William Hazlitt’s Lecture VIII ‘On the Living Poets’ (1818) gives some indication of how the Romantic literati perceived the popular taste for the Gothic that prevailed among many readers of their own day. Here, Hazlitt

13 Edmund Gosse, *A History of Eighteenth Century Literature (1660–1780)* (London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1889), p. 301.

14 See Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, 1798 and 1800*, edited by Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2008), p. 177.

15 For an overview of Romantic reactions to the Gothic, see Dale Townshend and Angela Wright, ‘Gothic and Romantic: An Historical Overview’, in Angela Wright and Dale Townshend (eds), *Romantic Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 1–34. For other important accounts of the relationship between the Gothic and the Romantic, see Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Tom Duggett, *Gothic Romanticism: Architecture, Politics, and Literary Form* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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argued that if the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) of Wordsworth and Coleridge could be said to have had one major advantage for contemporary letters, it was that it rejuvenated a simple, native tradition in English verse by retrieving the nation's literature from the clutches of the extravagant and marvellous 'German' Gothic strain:

It was a time of promise, a renewal of the world of letters; and the Deucalions, who were to perform this feat of regeneration, were the present poet-laureat [*sic*] [Robert Southey] and the authors of the *Lyrical Ballads*. The Germans, who made heroes of robbers, and honest women of cast-off mistresses, had already exhausted the extravagant and marvellous in sentiment and situation: our native writers adopted a wonderful simplicity of style and matter.¹⁶

While the Romantic imagination was native, original, organic and visionary, the Gothic was a foreign and debased association-driven formula that barely aspired even to the lowly realms of fancy. Using the extraordinary fictions, poetic and otherwise, that were conceived during the Summer of 1816 in Switzerland as a particular, localised example, Madeleine Callaghan and Angela Wright's chapter in this volume explores the relationship between the Gothic and the Romantic further, showing that the relationship between the two was far more complex, and by no means as absolute and clear-cut as the comments of Hazlitt and other Romantic writers suggest. Maximiliaan van Woudenberg's chapter, in turn, reveals the extent to which Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818; 1831), today lauded as a central text of both Gothic literature and canonical British Romanticism, drew upon the 'cosmopolitan' Gothic conventions of early nineteenth-century Germany and France, particularly as these were realised in actual and literary manifestations of the phantasmagoria or magic-lantern show.

And yet, taking Romantic writers at their word, and overlooking the extent to which they too often made recourse to some of the characteristics of the Gothic aesthetic, literary historians of the nineteenth century routinely installed a sense of 'Romanticism' on the basis of its perceived differences from what was simultaneously being constructed as the genre of 'Gothic fiction'. In *A History of English Literature* (1864), for example, Thomas B. Shaw, a graduate of St John's College, Cambridge, and eventually tutor and Professor of English to the Grand Dukes of Russia, ambitiously sought to write for his students a history of English letters that stretched from the

¹⁶ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets. Delivered at the Surrey Institution* (London: Printed for Taylor and Hessey, 1818), p. 320.

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Anglo-Saxon period through to the reigns of Kings George I and II. His account of the ‘Dawn of Romantic Poetry’ – a section of his history that surveys such earlier poets as William Collins, Mark Akenside, Thomas Gray and William Cowper, before going on to consider the more familiarly ‘Romantic’ figures of Walter Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Thomas Moore, P. B. Shelley, Keats, Byron and Thomas Campbell – sets in place many of the assumptions about so-called ‘Big-Six’ Romanticism that are still prevalent today:

The great revolution in popular taste and sentiment which substituted what is called the romantic type in literature for the cold and clear-cut artificial spirit of that classicism which is exhibited in its highest form in the writings of [Alexander] Pope was, like all powerful and desirable movements, whether in politics or in letters, gradual.¹⁷

Though slow to take effect, Romanticism by this reckoning was a revolutionary and resolutely anti-Classical literary ‘movement’ that demonstrated a perceptible tendency ‘to seek for subjects and forms of expressions in a wider, more passionate, and more natural sphere of nature and emotion’.¹⁸ But what is particularly notable about Shaw’s construction of the category of the ‘Romantic’ in *A History of English Literature* is the way in which he cautiously negotiates the Gothic qualities of the literature that he includes within it, be that the ‘necromantic agency’ and the ‘midnight expedition of Deloraine to the wizard’s tomb in Melrose Abbey’ in Scott’s *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805); the ‘tragic and gloomy’ tone of Scott’s *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819); the ‘atmosphere of mystical and supernatural influences’ and the ‘superhuman purity and unearthliness of the characters’ in Wordsworth’s *The White Doe of Rylstone* (1815); or the ‘wild, mystical phantasmagoric narrative’ that is Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (1798).¹⁹ Although, as these phrases suggest, Shaw at least countenances the poignantly Gothic moments in some of the best-known novels and poems of the Romantic canon, he tends either to condemn them as examples of aesthetic failure, or to apologise for their existence as merely the necessary paraphernalia of the writer’s quest for antiquarian authenticity. The supernaturalism of Coleridge’s ‘Christabel’ (1816), for example, he deems too unrealistic, dream-like and ultimately ‘fatal to the poem as a work of art’, while the fantastic elements in Wordsworth are said to lend to the poetry a ‘somewhat affected air’; the Gothicism of Scott,

17 Thomas B. Shaw, *A History of English Literature* (London: John Murray, 1864), p. 374.

18 Shaw, *A History of English Literature*, p. 374.

19 Shaw, *A History of English Literature*, pp. 407, 415, 449, 453.

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for its part, is modestly commended as an example of the ‘completeness with which the poet throws himself back into past ages’ in order to ‘speak and think’ like ‘a minstrel of the fourteenth century’.²⁰ As in Langhorne’s review of Walpole a century earlier, Gothic could only be excused if it were explained as a deliberate echo or trace of the ancient Gothic past.

The depth of Shaw’s anti-Gothic biases becomes especially apparent when, in a section of *A History of English Literature* entitled ‘Modern Novelists’, he turns to discuss the romances of Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Gregory Lewis, Mary Shelley and Charles Robert Maturin. Though aspects of his appraisal of these writers are surprisingly positive – the ‘wonderful fictions’ of Radcliffe, he maintains, ‘exhibit a surprising power (perhaps never equalled) over the emotions of fear and undefined mysterious suspense’ – Shaw for the most part rehearses the opprobrium that earlier nineteenth-century critics had levied against the tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic romance.²¹ Of *Otranto*, for instance, he claims that ‘The manners are totally absurd and unnatural, the heroine being one of those inconsistent portraits in which the sentimental languor of the eighteenth century is superadded to the female character of the Middle Ages—in short, one of those incongruous contradictions which we meet in all the romantic fictions before Scott.’²² Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron* (1778), by the same token, is said to contain ‘the same defects’ as Walpole’s haunted castle, while, for all her powers of narrative suspense, Radcliffe is said to be a poor portrayer of literary character whose fictional repertoire remains, in the end, decidedly limited.²³ Writing about Lewis, Shaw cuttingly claims that *The Monk* ‘owes its continued popularity (though, we are happy to say, only among half-educated men and ecstatic milliners) chiefly to the licentious warmth of its scenes’, and while Maturin’s imagination was often vivid, his works in general ‘are full of the most outrageous absurdities’, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) in particular a ‘farrago of impossible and inconceivable adventures, without plan or coherence’.²⁴ Even Shaw’s comments on *Frankenstein* are, at best, ambivalent: some of the scenes in this otherwise ‘powerful tale’ are ‘managed with a striking and breathless effect’ that ‘makes us for a moment forget the childish improbability and melodramatic extravagance of the

20 Shaw, *A History of English Literature*, pp. 449, 454, 407.

21 Shaw, *A History of English Literature*, p. 463.

22 Shaw, *A History of English Literature*, p. 462.

23 Shaw, *A History of English Literature*, p. 463.

24 Shaw, *A History of English Literature*, p. 464.