

## Introduction: The Gothic in/and History

DALE TOWNSHEND, ANGELA WRIGHT AND CATHERINE  
SPOONER

History is a Romance that is believed; romance a history that is not believed

(Horace Walpole)<sup>1</sup>

### History in the Gothic

In the first Preface to *The Castle of Otranto* (published late 1764; dated 1765), Horace Walpole's literary avatar, the editor and translator William Marshal, tethers the story to follow to a precise year: 'It was printed at Naples, in the black letter, in the year 1529.' In the very next sentence, however, Marshal tempers this precision with the following cautious disclaimer: 'How much sooner it was written does not appear.'<sup>2</sup> The transition from the precise dating of the printed volume to the vagueness and ambiguity surrounding the original work is immediately arresting: 1529, after all, was an important year in the history of England, one in which Henry VIII's infamous Legatine Court, established to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, finally took place after extended delays by papal emissaries. It was a year in which a royal marriage, and most particularly the virginity and fecundity of a Queen, was opened up to intense scrutiny for the reading public, a year that saw the rupture of the English throne from the Catholic Church. The break between Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon is rehearsed on a literal level in *The Castle of Otranto* when Manfred, Prince of Otranto, seeking to secure his family line, makes an appeal to the Catholic Church in an attempt at abandoning his long-

1 Horace Walpole, *The Works of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford*, 5 vols (London: Printed for G. G. and J. Robinson and J. Edwards, 1798), vol. 4, p. 368.

2 Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, edited by Nick Groom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 5.

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time devoted spouse Hippolita in the hopes of coercing the younger Isabella, his would-be daughter-in-law, into marriage.

More figuratively, the opening page of *The Castle of Otranto's* first Preface alludes to the Protestant Reformation and subsequent counter-Reformation that took place in England in the wake of the annulment of Henry and Catherine's marriage. The manuscript, we are told, was 'found in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England', an established, presumably landed family which cannot be named, since to do so would be to risk displaying too great an intimacy and familiarity with the reviled Catholic faith. For similar reasons, the manuscript's temporal and locational origins, moreover, must not and cannot be uncovered, since to do so would be to reveal too much knowledge on the part of William Marshal. This first Preface to one of the most foundational texts of the Gothic thus boldly yokes historical precision to obscurity, hesitation and uncertainty. There is an irresolution here between the historiographical impulses of the Enlightenment, and the darkness of earlier ages, a fascination with historical process, but a caution in exercising it. Thus, *The Castle of Otranto* reveals the blandishments and risks of history. While the risks are absorbed through the work's imbrication of history and romance, the blandishments are foregrounded in the antiquarian paratextual materials that frame the 'discovered' document. 'Within the Gothic', argues David Punter, 'we can find a very intense, if displaced, engagement with political and social problems, the difficulty of negotiating those problems being precisely reflected in the Gothic's central stylistic conventions.'<sup>3</sup> The Gothic's 'stylistic conventions', one could further argue, also teach us much about the ways in which we apprehend, consume and narrativise history itself. For while the Gothic may critique the present moment through the figurations of the past, so too does it interrogate the modes through which we have learned about that past, the distancing historiographical devices that have given us access to, yet also alienated us from, the painful realities of Catherine of Aragon's marriage to King Henry, and from the attendant brutalities of the Protestant Reformation.

As these opening comments suggest, it would be remiss to introduce a three-volume history of the Gothic from antiquity to the present day without at least reflecting on the complex relationship that the Gothic mode has always had with the theory and practice of history itself. On the one hand,

<sup>3</sup> David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the present day*, 2nd edition, 2 vols (Harlow: Longman, 1996), vol. 1, p. 54.

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there is little doubt that the ‘rise’ in the latter part of the eighteenth century of what has subsequently come to be known as ‘Gothic literature’ was part of a broader epistemic and discursive shift, one in which notions of history, historicity and a sense of the historical past came to assume ever-increasing explanatory, conceptual and intellectual prominence. As Michel Foucault, the so-called ‘father’ of New Historicism, argued in *The Order of Things* (1966; translated 1970), the transition from the ‘classical’ to the ‘modern’ episteme that occurred across Western culture from the end of the eighteenth century onwards brought with it the dawning of a profound historical awareness, to the extent that it is to this period that we might look for the origins of modern notions of history itself.<sup>4</sup> The philosopher, historian and economist David Hume registered something of this burgeoning historical interest when, in a well-known letter to the publisher William Strahan in August 1770, he declared that ‘I believe this is the historical Age and this the historical Nation’, the observation as much a reflection on his own contribution to the field of historical enquiry in his influential *The History of England* (1754–62) as an acknowledgment of the work of William Robertson, Robert Henry, Adam Ferguson, Gilbert Stuart and other ‘philosophical historians’ of the Scottish Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup>

Hume’s enthusiastic tribute in 1770 to the ‘historical Age’ of the present in the ‘historical Nation’ that was contemporary Scotland was occasioned by his reading of draft sections of, and a detailed plan for, what would eventually become *The History of Great Britain, from the First Invasion of It by the Romans Under Julius Cæsar* (1771–93). In its published form, this was a six-volume tome of an anticipated ten-volume series on British history, from Roman times up to the present day, written by the Church of Scotland minister and historian Robert Henry. ‘I have perus’d all his Work’, Hume’s letter to Strahan continues, ‘and have a very good Opinion of it. It conveys a great deal of Good Sense and Learning, convey’d in a perspicacious, natural, and correct Expression.’<sup>6</sup> Hume’s sole reservation with Henry’s study was its sheer capaciousness, the very concern that, in the end, would prevent Strahan from purchasing the copyright to it and necessitate the author financing its publication himself: ‘his Specimen contains two Quartos’, Hume writes, ‘and yet gives us only the History of Great Britain from the Invasion of Julius

4 See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2002).

5 David Hume, ‘Letter XLII’, in *Letters of David Hume to William Strahan*, edited by G. Birkbeck Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), pp. 155–7 (p. 155).

6 Hume, ‘Letter XLII’, p. 155.

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Cæsar to that of the Saxons: One is apt to think that the whole, spun out to the same Length, must contain at least a hundred Volumes'.<sup>7</sup> For the rest, Hume was unstinting in his praise, not only recommending the work to Strahan as a performance of 'very considerable merit', but deeming its author, too, to be 'a very good Character in the World, which renders it so far safe to have dealings with him'.<sup>8</sup>

While its length made publication by Strahan financially unfeasible, it is clear that Henry's *The History of Great Britain* volubly articulated the intellectual priorities and methodological principles of the late Enlightenment. Though based on Antoine-Yves Goguet's *De l'origine des loix, des arts, et des sciences et leurs progrès chez les anciens peuples* (1758), this was a study that was self-consciously 'written on a new plan', and in its proposed aims to provide exhaustive coverage of seven different topics, from civil and military history to the history of manners and customs, in each of the historical periods that it surveyed, it participated in the same impulses expressed in that other ambitious project of the European Enlightenment, the *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751–72) of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. 'This is all that falls within the province of general history', Henry would write in the General Preface to the first published volume of the *History*, and 'all that can be universally useful and agreeable, or reasonably desired and expected in a work of this kind'.<sup>9</sup> In the late eighteenth century, the category of 'historiography' was comprehensive to the point of being all-encompassing.

The legitimacy of Henry's entire historiographic endeavour, however, required that the disruptive, overly imaginative forces of romance be strenuously kept at bay, and so to vouch for the integrity of his study, the author, writing in the third person, duly records in the opening volume the authentic documentary and monumental sources that he has consulted in his searching account of the nation's past, explaining that 'If he does not write romance instead of history, he must have received his information from tradition—from authentic monuments—original records—or the memoirs of more ancient writers; and therefore it is but just to acquaint his readers from whence he actually received it'.<sup>10</sup> Henry was not alone in his cautious exclusion of romance from the annals of true history: Hume had maintained a similar distinction between history and romance throughout *The History of*

<sup>7</sup> Hume, 'Letter XLII', p. 156.      <sup>8</sup> Hume, 'Letter XLII', p. 156.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Henry, *The History of Great Britain, from the First Invasion of It by the Romans under Julius Cæsar*, 6 vols (London, 1771–93), vol. 1, p. xi.

<sup>10</sup> Henry, *The History of Great Britain*, vol. 1, p. xi.

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England, as did most other historiographers of the period. Contemporary essayists, aestheticians and cultural commentators, for their part, continuously enumerated the differences between history and romance, while writers of fiction often pondered the relations between the two in Prefaces and other paratextual materials. As Hugh Blair explained in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), the ‘primary end’ of history was ‘to record Truth, Impartiality, Fidelity, and Accuracy’, all of these, in turn, said to be the ‘fundamental qualities’ of the historian himself.<sup>11</sup> In relation to such priorities, however, the fanciful and idealising tendencies of the romance mode could only ever be perceived as counter-historical. Substituting the excesses and vagaries of fiction for empirically verifiable historical fact, *The History of Great Britain* thus presented itself as an exercise in legitimate historical writing, participating, in this way, in what scholars such as Karen O’Brien, Mark Salber Phillips and others have shown to be the climate of extraordinary historiographic interest, variety and innovation in British culture of the eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

Even a cursory perusal of a selection of titles and subtitles alone is sufficient to indicate that, in its earliest forms, Gothic fiction was driven by similar historicist impulses, from the ‘Gothic Story’ added to the second edition of Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* in 1765, through the ‘Gothic Story’ that was Clara Reeve’s *The Champion of Virtue* (1777) and the ‘Tale of Other Times’ of Sophia Lee’s *The Recess* (1783–5), and into the ‘Gothic Tale’, ‘Gothic Story’ and ‘Gothic Times’ variously invoked in the subtitles of many other fictions. As Clara Reeve put it in the Preface to what she in 1778 now titled *The Old English Baron*, this story, like *The Champion of Virtue* before it, was ‘distinguished by the appellation of a Gothic Story’ primarily insofar as it purported to offer ‘a picture of Gothic times and manners’.<sup>13</sup> For the late eighteenth-century writer of fiction, the term ‘Gothic’ signified, first and foremost, a sense of the distant, somewhat barbaric historical past, but also included the imaginative literary tradition – ghosts, goblins, fairies, wonders and enchantments – with which that past was most closely associated. In one sense, then, Gothic literature appears to have been the child of its cultural moment, for in its jettisoning of the contemporary and near-contemporary

11 Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2 vols (London, 1783), vol. 2, p. 260.

12 See, for example, Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

13 Clara Reeve, *The Old English Baron*, edited by James Trainer, intro. by James Watt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 1.

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settings of the eighteenth-century realist novel, and through its self-conscious revival of the ‘Gothic’ forms and times of medieval and Renaissance romance, Gothic fiction, drama and poetry, as Markman Ellis has put it, itself constituted ‘a theory of history’ and a popular form through which history could be apprehended and consumed.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, however, it is clear that, as our opening comments suggest, the Gothic adopted a sceptical and at times critical stance in relation to history and antiquarianism, the very historiographic modes of enquiry with which its genesis and cultural consolidation towards the end of the eighteenth century was contemporary. It is instructive in this regard to consider Horace Walpole’s responses to Henry’s *The History of Great Britain*, the same study that had provoked such enthusiastic responses from Hume in his letter to Strahan in 1770. As Walpole, having read a volume of Henry’s published work, wrote to the author in March 1783, ‘In one word, Sir, I have often said that *History in general is a Romance that is believed, and that Romance is a History that is not believed*; and that I do not see much other difference between them.’<sup>15</sup> Whereas Hume had celebrated Henry and his work as the epitome of the ‘historical Age’, Walpole insouciantly dismisses the historian’s entire enterprise as little more than an exercise in imaginative fiction. The audaciousness of Walpole’s comment here cannot be overstated: relegating the soaring, overarching stadial narratives of the conjectural historian to the realm of literary fiction in the same gesture that he elevates the imaginative musings of a romancer to the level of authentic history, Walpole strikes at the heart of the Enlightenment historiographer’s attempts to separate out truth from falsehood. History and romance, he irreverently argues, derive their differences not from any absolute or inherent qualities so much as from the levels of credibility that their readers invest in each. That these were sentiments that Walpole ‘often’ expressed is easily corroborated, for variations on the claim worked their way into several of Walpole’s letters and throughout his published and unpublished works, to the extent that they became a Walpolean refrain of sorts.<sup>16</sup> But what is particularly striking about its iteration in the letter to Robert Henry in 1783 is the observation that follows the assertion, one that complicates and undoes the very equivalences

14 Markman Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. II.

15 Horace Walpole to Robert Henry, 15 March 1783, in W. S. Lewis (ed.), *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, 48 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937–83), vol. 15, p. 173.

16 See Dale Townshend, *Gothic Antiquity: History, Romance, and the Architectural Imagination, 1760–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 29–30.

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between history and romance that Walpole has only just set in place: ‘nay, I am persuaded that if the dead of any age were to revive and read their own histories, they would not believe that they were reading the history of their own time’.<sup>17</sup> Ghosts or the reanimated spirits of the dead, in other words, can only ever prove the conclusions of the historian wrong. Though romance and history, for Walpole, might, in essence, be indistinguishable, spectres, the stuff of Gothic romance from *Otranto* onwards, always exceed the historian’s scrupulous gaze. Situated in a realm well beyond historiography’s reach and remit, the ghosts conjured up by the Gothic romancer look down in contempt and disbelief at any attempt at rational, historical reasoning.

Of course, the fractious relationship between history and romance that Walpole would articulate here was already in place in *The Castle of Otranto* from nearly two decades before. The Preface to the first edition, as we have already observed, framed it as an exciting antiquarian discovery: a translated and edited text that, though printed in 1529, was, in all likelihood, written in Italian between 1095 and 1243, and, as such, a relic of ‘the darkest ages of christianity’.<sup>18</sup> If this framing technique courted the stultifying ‘dryness’ of the antiquarian method that Walpole bemoaned elsewhere, he was determined to thwart these expectations in the narrative that followed with a tale of magic, wonder and enchantment. Indeed, during the eighteenth century, the distinction between romance and history often superimposed itself upon the distinction between romance and the realist novel, to the extent that Walpole’s self-professed aim, as the second Preface to *Otranto* put it, to rejuvenate contemporary prose fiction with the fanciful resources of romance was thus as much a statement of literary intent as it was a riposte to what he took to be an unimaginative and moribund historical and antiquarian tradition.

Subsequent Gothic fictions articulated as powerful a challenge to the work of the eighteenth-century antiquary and historiographer through the pointed modifications that they made to the Walpolean trope of the recently discovered document. Although Walpole’s ‘Gothic Story’, for all its professed antiquity, had remained remarkably intact, these historical documents were reduced in the hands of subsequent writers to a pile of incomplete and inconclusive fragments, to manuscripts that frustratingly disintegrate into illegible traces at precisely that crucial moment in the narrative in which they are expected to yield their burning secrets. In the ‘Advertisement’ to *The Recess*, for instance, Lee observed that ‘The depredations of time have left

<sup>17</sup> Walpole, *Correspondence*, vol. 15, p. 173.    <sup>18</sup> Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, p. 4.

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chasms in the story, which sometimes only heightens the pathetic.<sup>19</sup> Though Lee's editorial persona subsequently claims that what she calls an 'inviolable respect for truth' would not permit her to 'connect' these disparate fragments in the story 'even where they appeared faulty', it is quite clear that *The Recess* depends wholly upon the powers of romance to synthesise and make sense of otherwise unfathomable historical material, as if the latter, without such interventions, were fundamentally lacking in significance, meaning and narrative potential.<sup>20</sup> Though taking her historical bearings from William Robertson's *The History of Scotland During the Reigns of Queen Mary and James VI* (1759) and Hume's *The History of England*, Lee in *The Recess* supplements formal historiography with a Gothic tale of anxiety, suffering and female incarceration, boldly inventing twin daughters for Mary, Queen of Scots, as a means of amplifying her text's feminist politics. Faced with such a feminised, romantic assault upon the largely (but by no means exclusively) masculine historiographic tradition, it is perhaps unsurprising that a critic in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1786 complained that 'we cannot entirely approve the custom of interweaving fictitious incident with historic truth; and, as the events related approach nearer the aera we live in, the impropriety increases; for the mind, preoccupied with real facts, rejects, not without disgust, the embellishments of fable'.<sup>21</sup>

Adeline, the heroine of Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), similarly bears witness to the limits of historical sense-making and interpretation when she discovers a manuscript that purportedly relates the truthful history of her late father: 'She attempted to read it, but the part of the manuscript she looked at was so much obliterated, that she found this difficult, though what few words were legible impressed her with curiosity and terror, and induced her to return with it immediately to her chamber.'<sup>22</sup> Perusing the document later, Adeline encounters in it no clear, concise and linear narrative but a near-illegible historical record that is plagued by impenetrability, decay and the elision of crucial information. The typography of the text in volume II represents these gaps in historical evidence and documentation through a preponderance of asterisks – \* \* \* \* – the same lacunae that facilitate in the

19 Sophia Lee, *The Recess; or, A Tale of Other Times*, edited by April Allison (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), p. 5.

20 Lee, *The Recess*, p. 5.

21 Review of *The Recess* from *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1786, quoted in E. J. Clery and Robert Miles (eds), *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook 1700–1820* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 181.

22 Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, edited by Chloe Chard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 116.



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heroine the florid imaginings of Gothic romance, what Radcliffe refers to as ‘the mystic and turbulent promptings of imagination’.<sup>23</sup> Intense and often incapacitating romantic conjecture steps in to fill those gaps in the narrative for which historical records alone cannot account. As Jonathan Dent has shown, the relationship between eighteenth-century Gothic and contemporary historical writing remained throughout the period one of antagonism and conflict, subversion and critique, with fictional narratives from Walpole, through Reeve and Lee and into Radcliffe, often exposing and foregrounding that about which formal historiography in the period had little or nothing to say.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, to read historical documents in the Gothic is always to open oneself up to the possibility of egregious misinterpretation, most embarrassingly so in the case of Catherine Morland’s misreading of the laundry list in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (written 1798–9; published late 1817; dated 1818). When Charles Robert Maturin utilised the well-worn convention of the discovered document in his meta-textual commentary on the then somewhat belated Gothic tradition in *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), he returned to Radcliffe’s earlier treatment of the trope, signifying the ‘blotted and illegible’ pages of the ‘discoloured, obliterated, and mutilated’ manuscript that John Melmoth reads early on in the story through a characteristic preponderance of asterisks \* \* \* \* \*.<sup>25</sup> Like the mental reveries of Radcliffe’s heroines, the numerous fictional narratives and narratives-within-narratives in Maturin’s text arise as if as a means of compensating for these gaps and silences within the official records of historiography. Stories give rise to more stories in an interminable process that, while attempting to fix the ever-shifting historical ground, only generates further textuality.

Early Gothic writing, in this respect, is the writing of Jacques Derrida’s ‘archive fever’, the mode that anxiously sets about the recording, arrangement and narrativisation of history even as it tirelessly confronts the deathly *pulsion* towards archival incompleteness, obliteration and lack.<sup>26</sup> The simultaneity of historical retrieval *and* erasure, recovery *and* loss is central to the form, a doubleness to which the Gothic responds with the further engendering of romance. Political theorist, philosopher and Gothic novelist William Godwin articulated the grounds for what we might describe as a distinctly ‘Gothic’

23 Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, pp. 132–44.

24 Jonathan Dent, *Sinister Histories: Gothic Novels and Representations of the Past, From Horace Walpole to Mary Wollstonecraft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

25 Charles Robert Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, edited by Douglas Grant, intro. by Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 39, 28.

26 See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

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conceptualisation of historiography in his essay ‘Of History and Romance’ in 1797, in which he countered the ‘general’ histories of such eighteenth-century conjectural or philosophical historians as Hume, Robertson, Edmund Burke and Edward Gibbon with the ‘particular’ histories told by the modern ‘historical romancer’. While the former traded in abstraction, and subordinated an interest in the particular to the greater aims of narrating the teleological progress of the nation from civilisation to barbarism, the historical romancer dealt always with the individual, with the human subject as located tightly within history and with the historical narratives that recounted his or her experiences accordingly demonstrating a penchant for the conditional, the detailed and the particular. As Godwin sees it, formal Enlightenment history, the historiography of the contrasting variety, is as plagued by difficulties remarkably similar to those explored in contemporary Gothic fictions:

He who would study the history of nations abstracted from individuals whose passions and peculiarities are interesting to our minds, will find it a dry and frigid science. It will supply him with no clear ideas. The mass, as fast as he endeavours to cement and unite it, crumbles from his grasp, like a lump of sand. Those who study revenue or almost any other of the complex subjects above enumerated are ordinarily found, with immense pains to have compiled a species of knowledge which is no sooner accumulated than it perishes, and rather to have confounded themselves with a labyrinth of particulars, than to have risen to the dignity of principles.<sup>27</sup>

Historical evidence turns to fragments in the historian’s hands, and, like a character in Gothic fiction, he is left to flounder in a labyrinth of unsynthesised conjectures. A history of the particular is thus Godwin’s favoured historical mode, but if this is an approach to narrating the past that is best wielded by what he terms the ‘historical romancer’, it is because Godwin, like Walpole before him, remained convinced of the formal, thematic and methodological equivalences between romance and history. ‘It must be admitted indeed that all history bears too near a resemblance to fable’, he writes, for ‘Nothing is more uncertain, more contradictory, more unsatisfactory than the evidence of facts’; ‘If then history be little better than romance under a graver name’, he boldly continues, ‘it may not be foreign to the subject here treated, to enquire into the credit due to that species of literature, which bears the express stamp of invention, and calls itself romance or novel.’<sup>28</sup> Like the

27 William Godwin, ‘Of History and Romance’ <[www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/godwin.history.html](http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/godwin.history.html)> (last accessed 17 June 2019).

28 Godwin, ‘Of History and Romance’.