

Introduction: A History of Gothic Studies in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

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Gothic and History

Gothic has always been pre-eminently concerned with history. From the medievalism of the eighteenth-century Gothic Revival to the post-Freudian concern with psychic histories and the return of the repressed, Gothic texts have always been driven by what Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith characterise as ‘the peculiar unwillingness of the past to go away’.¹ This historical sensibility is an inevitable corollary of modernity: as people began distinguishing a modern age from what went before it, they needed to address what the past meant and their relationship to it. Gothic arose in the eighteenth century as one means to explore the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of the modern subject’s separation from the past. Thus, as David Punter states of the first phase of Gothic writing (1760–1820), ‘Gothic seems to have *been* a mode of history, a way of perceiving an obscure past and interpreting it’.² What is commented on less frequently, however, is that the study of Gothic itself has a history, that a prestigious three-volume publication like this one is of its historical moment and would not have been possible even a quarter-century ago.

This Introduction seeks to map the history of Gothic scholarship in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as the academic discipline that we might now call Gothic Studies came into being. The critical-historical framework it thus constructs serves to contextualise the individual histories charted by individual chapters in this volume. It is not intended to be comprehensive: as will become rapidly apparent, it is not possible to list every single important

¹ Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith, ‘Introduction’, in Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith (eds), *Modern Gothic: A Reader* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 1–5 (p. 4).

² David Punter, *The Literature of Terror Volume 1: The Gothic Tradition* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 52; italics in original.

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contribution to Gothic scholarship and there is much that, of necessity, has been left out. Nevertheless, it draws lines of connection between works through four significant and overlapping stages: the first wave of Gothic criticism between the 1920s and the 1960s; the emergence of Gothic Studies as an academic discipline from the late 1970s to the early 2000s; the increasing understanding of Gothic as a ‘contemporary’ mode in the 1980s and beyond; and, finally, what can be seen as the institutionalisation of Gothic in the twenty-first century. In doing so, it argues that Gothic Studies in the twenty-first century is simultaneously at its most fertile and at an impasse, a complex deadlock that Gothic scholars of the future must resolve.

Gothic Criticism: The First Wave

Two crucial influences on the development of the modern Gothic occurred at the end of the nineteenth century: the invention of film, and the invention of psychoanalysis. These two enormous historical shifts can scarcely be underestimated in the history of the Gothic: the one opened up new ways of telling tales of terror in a mass market medium, while the other enabled a profound shift not only in the ways Gothic narrative could be written but also in the ways that Gothic could be approached by literary criticism.

As Dale Townshend observes in the introduction to Volume II of this series, by the end of the Victorian period, the Gothic novel’s critical stock was low. Indeed, the Gothic novel scarcely existed as a critical concept: E. J. Clery notes that the term ‘is mostly a twentieth-century coinage’ and although it was used twice in literary overviews published in 1899, it was only established with Edith Birkhead’s *The Tale of Terror* (1821), the first sustained critical work on Gothic fiction.³ A passion for book-collecting in the 1920s fuelled by the clearing of many country-house libraries following the First World War enabled the rediscovery of many obscure works from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and a corresponding renewal of readerly interest. As a result, a clutch of critical works addressing the Gothic began to emerge, including Eino Railo’s *The Haunted Castle* (1927), Michael Sadleir’s ‘The Northanger Novels’ (1927) and J. M. S. Tompkins’s *The Popular Novel in England 1770–1800* (1932). Mario Praz’s *The Romantic Agony* (1930, translated 1933) also placed Gothic authors including Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Gregory

³ 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 (pp. 21–2).

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Lewis, Mary Shelley and Charles Maturin within a wider literary tradition of dark eroticism.

Gothic, however, had never been a solely literary affair. Even leaving aside, for a moment, the term's long-standing associations with architecture, Gothic theatre thrived throughout the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Gothic was, moreover, fundamental to pre-cinematic technologies such as the phantasmagoria or magic lantern show; David J. Jones has mapped with precision how Étienne-Gaspard Robert's *Fantasmagorie* (1798) created an immersive Gothic experience using the latest projection technologies.⁴ Early film drew from the language of these pre-existent technologies and, as Simon Brown and Stacey Abbott demonstrate in the first chapter in this volume, was almost immediately perceived both as a Gothic medium in itself – a 'kingdom of shadows', in Maxim Gorky's words – and as a medium for Gothic storytelling.⁵ According to Christopher Frayling, 'only with the advent of cinema did "the Gothic" come into its own . . . "Gothic film" . . . propelled a long-marginalised and sometimes subversive form of literature from the past into the wider cultural bloodstream, and in the process turned it into myth.'⁶ Cinema was, in fact, only the first of a series of new media through which Gothic would flourish in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including radio, television and, ultimately, digital media. Chapters by Brown and Abbott, Mark Jancovich, Derek Johnston and Mark Olivier directly address the ways in which Gothic adapted to fit these new media, but an awareness of the increasingly trans-medial nature of Gothic informs the approach of many of the other contributors to this volume, too.

Psychoanalysis would have a more subtle but even more far-reaching effect on Gothic narrative. As Markman Ellis observes, 'the effect of psychoanalysis was to universalise the lessons of the Gothic novel, oddly increasing its cultural significance and prestige by explicating its relevance and importance'.⁷ Sigmund Freud's own contribution to what would eventually be established as Gothic criticism was his essay on "The 'Uncanny'",

⁴ See David J. Jones, *Gothic Machine: Textualities, Pre-cinematic Media and Film in Popular Visual Culture, 1670–1910* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), pp. 57–78.

⁵ Maxim Gorky, 'Last Night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows', reprinted in Colin Harding and Simon Pople (eds), *In the Kingdom of Shadows: A Companion to Early Cinema* (London: Cygnus Arts, 1996), pp. 5–6 (p. 5).

⁶ Christopher Frayling, 'Foreword' in James Bell (ed.), *Gothic: The Dark Heart of Film* (London: BFI, 2013), pp. 5–7 (p. 5).

⁷ Markman Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 13.

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published in 1919. In this work he analyses E. T. A. Hoffman's short story 'The Sandman' (1816) as an example of the *unheimlich* or unhomely, the creeping feeling that occurs to us when something happens to recall infantile complexes that have been repressed into the unconscious, enabling the recognition of the event or object that has provoked the return as simultaneously familiar and estranged. Of course, the concept of the return of the repressed has become a fundamental tenet of Gothic criticism and is almost impossible to sidestep. However, a broader Freudian approach inspired by *On the Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), in which the dream contains a latent content that can be decoded to reveal the workings of the unconscious, also lies behind much of twentieth-century Gothic criticism.

The Freudian notion of the return of the repressed merges in twentieth-century criticism with an older understanding of Gothic as anti-classical to create an idea of Gothic as a uniquely subversive, even revolutionary mode. This idea appears as early as Michael Sadleir's influential article on 'The Northanger Novels' (1927), in which he calls the Gothic romance 'an expression of a deep subversive impulse' comparable to the French Revolution and its authors 'prophets of iconoclasm', albeit ones whose 'once inflammatory art' would be received as escapism.⁸ However, it takes its more characteristic form in the Surrealist André Breton's assessment of what he calls the eighteenth-century '*romans noirs*' in his essay 'Limits not frontiers of surrealism', published in English in Herbert Read's *Surrealism* (1936). Breton, overtly influenced by Freud's understanding of the dream-work, constructs the Gothic as a radical genre that is in deliberate opposition to social realism and which reveals 'latent content, the means of fathoming the secret depths of history which disappear beneath a maze of events'.⁹ This would have a profound influence on Gothic criticism in the twentieth century.

Breton's stance was vigorously contested by Montague Summers in *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel* (1938); Summers's view of Gothic is almost fanatically conservative, and thus he suggests that the Surrealists have wilfully misinterpreted Sadleir's more nuanced position, having 'confused and deliberately commingled' revolution in literature with social

⁸ Michael Sadleir, 'The Northanger Novels', *The Edinburgh Review* 246:501 (1927): 91–106 (pp. 93, 94).

⁹ André Breton, 'English Romans Noirs and Surrealism', in Victor Sage (ed.), *The Gothick Novel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 112–15 (p. 112). Translated by Sage from André Breton, 'Limites non frontières du Surréalisme', *Nouvelle Revue Française* 48:1 (1937).

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revolution.¹⁰ In a final, almost comical move, he denounces the ‘intimacy’ between Surrealism and Communism.¹¹ Summers’s argument is in some respects a dead end in Gothic criticism, as its conservative politics is at odds with the tenor of most subsequent scholarship. Gothic for Summers is overwhelmingly nostalgic; he describes Romanticism, with which he aligns Gothic, as ‘reactionary in its revolt against the present since it yearns for the loveliness of the past as so picturesquely revealed to us in art and poem’.¹² In contrast, later twentieth-century scholars generally found Gothic to be progressive in its values and, as we shall see, often revolutionary in sentiment.

It is Breton’s approach that has thus proved to be the more influential on the subsequent history of Gothic criticism. In his undertaking to ‘fathom the secret depths of history’ lies the seeds of another persistent theme within Gothic criticism in the later twentieth and twenty-first century: that Gothic possesses a unique power to reflect or refract the time at which it is written. This approach is glossed further in Devendra P. Varma’s *The Gothic Flame* (1957), another key work in the development of Gothic criticism. Glossing Breton, Varma asserts, “The “fantastic” in literature is the surrealist expression of those historical and social factors which the ordinary chronicle of events in history does not consider significant. Such “fantasia” express the profoundest, repressed emotions of the individual and society.”¹³ Psychoanalysis and historical analysis are folded into one another here to suggest that Gothic is the dream-work of history, and by interpreting its symbols we can bring to the surface what history does not know about itself.

As it entered the 1960s, then, Gothic was critically constructed as a mode that was in tune with the times: a genre of social revolution, a ready-made counter-narrative, one in which the deepest fears and desires of Western culture were apparently made manifest in dream-like form. This is how it was characterised in Leslie Fiedler’s wildly influential *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), which argued that ‘the Gothic novel is fundamentally anti-bourgeois’ and ‘an anti-realistic protest, a rebellion of the imagination’, a provocation which Catherine Spooner’s chapter in this volume takes up.¹⁴ In this revolutionary guise, Gothic was adopted by the many social movements of the 1960s and afterwards, of which feminism was the most prominent.

¹⁰ Montague Summers, *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel* (London: Fortune Press, 1938), p. 398.

¹¹ Summers, *The Gothic Quest*, p. 411. ¹² Summers, *The Gothic Quest*, p. 18.

¹³ Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame* (London: Arthur Barker Ltd., 1957), p. 217. See also Punter, *The Literature of Terror Volume 1*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), pp. 107, 117.

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The Birth of Gothic Studies

Gothic Studies as a formal discipline was fashioned in the late 1970s, and forged in the crucible of second-wave literary feminism. In *Literary Women* (1976), Ellen Moers devoted two long chapters to the Gothic novel, coining the phrase ‘female Gothic’ and infamously describing Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818, 1831) as a ‘birth myth’.¹⁵ Ironically enough, this proved to be the birth of Gothic Studies, as the fast-growing feminist movement seized on Moers’s partial rehabilitation of Gothic as a genre principally written and read by women and thus suffused with women’s concerns. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) may not explicitly have positioned itself as a work on Gothic fiction. Nevertheless, its discovery of a model of literary doubling in Charlotte Brontë’s pairing of heroine Jane Eyre with the mad Bertha Rochester, the archetypal madwoman in the attic, drew on Gothic tropes and proved a model of inspiration for generations of feminist critics to come. Notable works to take up the theme of female Gothic over the ensuing decade include Juliann E. Fleenor’s *The Female Gothic* (1983); Kate Ferguson Ellis’s *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (1989) and Eugenia C. Delamotte’s *The Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (1990). In the early 1990s, influential works from feminist film studies including Carol Clover’s *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992) and Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) also made a significant impact on feminist approaches to Gothic. The focus on gender was soon followed by similar attention to other forms of identity politics, including race in Kari J. Winter’s *Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change* (1992) and sexuality in Paulina Palmer’s *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (1999), each inaugurating flourishing scholarly traditions in their own right. In this volume, Arthur Redding, Lucie Armitt and Ardel Haefele-Thomas directly address these traditions although their influence is felt throughout the book.

Identity politics were, of course, prevalent throughout the academy from the 1980s onwards, and Gothic is not exceptional in this respect. There is

¹⁵ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: The Women’s Press, 1978), pp. 90–110, 98.

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something about Gothic's particular nature, however, as what Robert Miles calls 'a coherent code for the representation of fragmented subjectivity', that renders it particularly conducive to being read in this way.¹⁶ This is, of course, also the quality that made it particularly amenable to psychoanalytic criticism earlier in the century. However, identity politics tended in many cases to move Gothic criticism on from psychoanalytic methodologies towards a broader range of theoretical approaches and, in several respects, a renewed attention to historical context.

It was a different kind of book, however, that set the seal on Gothic Studies as a formal discipline. David Punter's *The Literature of Terror* (1980) surveyed Gothic from its origins in sentimentalism, graveyard poetry and discourses of the sublime to 'modern perceptions of the barbaric' in the fiction of the 1970s.¹⁷ Punter's definition of Gothic was necessarily loose, but his achievement was to establish that Gothic was, indeed, a continuous and coherent literary tradition that ran from the mid eighteenth century to the present day, discarding the value judgements that had previously plagued its academic study and demonstrating that it repaid close literary analysis. Punter's book created a canon and conferred legitimacy on Gothic as an intellectual endeavour. As such, it permitted Gothic Studies to exist.

The other important move in the early 1980s that freed up the academic study of Gothic was its decoupling from the concept of genre. In *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (1982), Alastair Fowler argued that 'the character of genres is that they change', becoming more elastic and more easily combined with other genres or modes.¹⁸ Thus, over time, 'the gothic romance ... yielded a gothic mode that outlasted it'.¹⁹ This intervention had a dual effect. First, it meant that Gothic could be more flexibly and fluidly defined, and Gothic could be discovered in texts – and media – where it had hitherto been ignored. Critics continued to loosen Gothic from the straitjacketing notion of genre in a variety of ways: for Robert Miles in *Gothic Writing, 1750–1820: A Genealogy* (1993) it is a 'discursive site'; for Michael Gamer in *Romanticism and the Gothic* (2000) it is an

¹⁶ Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing, 1750–1820: A Genealogy*, 2nd edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 2.

¹⁷ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror Volume 2: The Modern Gothic* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 119.

¹⁸ Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 18.

¹⁹ Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 109.

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‘aesthetic’.²⁰ The other effect of refiguring Gothic as a mode is that it loosened it from the more pejorative associations of ‘genre fiction’ and allowed it to creep into the teaching canon in universities and schools. Gothic was gradually attaining respectability.

The advantage and the problem with the shifting critical understanding of Gothic as a mode, discursive site or aesthetic is that it meant that almost anything could be defined as Gothic, and while this led to fruitful and sometimes thrilling new directions of study, it also brought with it a lack of critical purchase. While defining Gothic became a vexed – and frequently dull – question for critics in the 1990s and beyond, a vague and shifting sense of the function that Gothic performs resulted in a weakening field. Studies twinning Gothic with a variety of different adjectives proliferated in the twenty-first century (Fred Botting poked fun at this trend with his 2001 essay ‘Candygothic’, for example). At best, this produced exciting new combinations of Gothic and theory – Queer Gothic, Ecogothic – but this could also dwindle into the endless taxonomisation of subgenres and, at worst, deliver an ever-multiplying and, thus, ever-vanishing critical object.

As the twenty-first century commenced, voices of dissent began to be raised in Gothic criticism, with scholars calling out what they saw as its most egregious tendencies and each, in their own way, calling for the restoration of rigorous historical specificity to studies of the Gothic. The first target was the psychoanalytic-historical approach to the Gothic. This had been disputed as early as 1980, with the first edition of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, which argued that the psychoanalytic focus on uncovering the hidden depths of Gothic texts neglected precisely what was most interesting about them – their emphasis on surfaces. In an influential essay simply titled ‘Gothic Criticism’, first published in 2000, Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall denounced what they term the ‘anxiety model’ of much Gothic scholarship, or the idea that it is the work of the Gothic critic to ‘reveal’ the hidden anxieties of the age.²¹ They argue,

The assumption that cultural ‘anxiety’ is reflected or articulated in Gothic fiction is not only rather simplistic: it is tautological. Horror fiction is used to confirm the critic’s own unproven point of departure, that this ‘oppressive’

²⁰ Miles, *Gothic Writing, 1750–1820*, p. 4 and *passim*; Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 4.

²¹ Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall, ‘Gothic Criticism’, in David Punter (ed.), *A New Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2012), pp. 267–87 (p. 279).

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culture was terrified by its ideological ‘Others’; and thus if the Gothic features the Other in demonic form, these demonic forms must reflect society’s fears about the Other . . . Since Gothic horror fiction has a *generic obligation* to evoke or produce fear, it is in principle the *least* reliable index of supposedly ‘widespread’ anxieties.²²

For Baldick and Mighall, the result of the pervasive and unquestioning adoption of this implicitly psychoanalytic approach to history is that ‘Gothic Criticism has abandoned any credible historical grasp upon its object, which it has tended to reinvent in the image of its own projected intellectual goals of psychological “depth” and political “subversion.”’²³ It also results in a weakening of the definition of Gothic itself, which is ‘defined not according to observable features of theme and setting but according to the realms of psychological depth from which it is supposed to originate (dreams, fantasy) or the psychological responses it is believed to provoke (fear, horror, terror). Gothic Criticism is commonly unable and unwilling to distinguish its supposed object from the generality of fearful or horrible narratives’.²⁴

In a similar vein, Alexandra Warwick and Roger Luckhurst took respective aim at what Luckhurst named the ‘spectral turn’ in criticism, a preoccupation with textual hauntings inspired by the English translation of Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1994).²⁵ In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a sudden vogue for using Derrida’s highly localised and specific practice of discovering Shakespearean spectral traces within the writings of Karl Marx as a model for discovering textual hauntings within any given work. Both critics were perturbed by the way that this rendered all texts implicitly Gothic. This, they suggested, resulted in a loss of critical purchase on Gothic as an object of study. Identifying Julian Wolfreys’s *Victorian Hauntings* (2002) as a particularly egregious example, Warwick writes that ‘it is a critical step that renders Gothic absolutely ubiquitous and simultaneously nullifies it. It is no longer at the dark margin, but the normal state of textual affairs’.²⁶ Spreading his net more widely to take in works by Wolfreys, Jean-Michel Rabaté and Jodey Castricano, Luckhurst argues that ‘because the spectral infiltrates the hermeneutic act itself, critical work can only replicate tropes from textual sources, punning spiritedly around the central terms of the Gothic to produce

²² Baldick and Mighall, ‘Gothic Criticism’, p. 280.

²³ Baldick and Mighall, ‘Gothic Criticism’, pp. 267–8.

²⁴ Baldick and Mighall, ‘Gothic Criticism’, p. 274.

²⁵ Roger Luckhurst, ‘The Contemporary London Gothic and the Limits of the Spectral Turn’, *Textual Practice* 16.3 (2010): 527–46, *passim*.

²⁶ Alexandra Warwick, ‘Feeling Gothicky?’, *Gothic Studies* 9:1 (2007): 5–15 (p. 8).

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a curious form of meta-Gothic that elides object and instrument', and producing 'what Derrida has elsewhere termed "doubling commentary"'.²⁷

For Warwick, this crisis of definition within Gothic Studies is matched by a comparable ubiquity of the Gothic in contemporary culture, something that she identifies as 'the effect of a kind of aftershock . . . of psychoanalysis'.²⁸ She suggests that the attitude to psychoanalysis has moved on, however, in the light of what she calls therapy culture. Whereas once the Gothic text registered the terrors of trauma and the impossibility of coming to terms with it, contemporary texts rather seek out trauma and cultivate it: 'contemporary culture *wants* to have trauma, it is induced, predicted and enacted, persistently rehearsed even when it is not actually present'.²⁹ What was distinctive about Warwick's article was not only her critique of contemporary critical approaches to Gothic but also her identification of a particular contemporary Gothic, one that merited study on its own terms. This was a late branch of Gothic scholarship to develop, but one that underwrites this volume.

Contemporary Gothic

Early Gothic criticism acknowledged the influence of the Gothic in the twentieth century only very tentatively. While most critics agreed, like Sadleir, that 'the spirit of melodrama and of terror . . . persisted unsubdued and persists to this day', there was very little attempt to address this in any sustained or coherent fashion.³⁰ For the majority of critics, the Gothic novel began with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) – with precedents in Spenser, Shakespeare, Jacobean drama and graveyard poetry – and ended with Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). What Varma calls 'residuary influences' in later works from James Hogg and William Harrison Ainsworth to Charles Dickens, the Brontës and Edgar Allan Poe were regarded as either a falling off from a golden age or a transmutation into a different form.³¹ Summers was the most vehement proponent of this view, acknowledging the similar properties of modern crime fiction, for example, but dismissing the majority of it as 'unhealthy and unwholesome rubbish'.³² As we have seen, he treated the idea that the Surrealists might be continuing the work of Gothic literature with unmitigated scorn.

²⁷ Luckhurst, 'The Contemporary London Gothic', pp. 535, 536.

²⁸ Warwick, 'Feeling Gothicky?', p. 10. ²⁹ Warwick, 'Feeling Gothicky?', p. 11.

³⁰ Sadleir, 'The Northanger Novels', p. 105. ³¹ Varma, *The Gothic Flame*, pp. 173–205.

³² Summers, *The Gothic Quest*, p. 13.