Chapter 8

Shorter Gothic Fictions: Ballads and Chapbooks, Tales and Fragments

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The publication history of the little-known Gothic story ‘Albert of Werdendorff; or, The Midnight Embrace. A Romance from the German’ (1812) provides a case study of the obscurities and complexities attending an investigation of shorter Gothic tales during the early nineteenth century. If this tale is known at all today, one would credit Franz Potter’s 2004 edition of the chapbook by Sarah Wilkinson. In his introduction to the tale, Potter reasonably argues that this tale of seduction, betrayal and revenance draws upon M. G. Lewis’s then famed ‘Alonzo the Brave and Fair Imogene’, first appearing in The Monk (1796), later in many literary magazines, and then in Lewis’s ‘hobgoblin repast’, Tales of Wonder (1801),1 a collection of Gothic ballads and burlesques. However, the real source of Wilkinson’s tale is the anonymous ballad ‘Albert of Werdendorff; or, The Midnight Embrace. A German Romance’ from Tales of Terror (1801), another anonymous collection of Gothic tales and burlesques many times wrongly attributed to Lewis. Wilkinson simply drew upon, without acknowledging, the ballad of the tale in creating her prose version and, as was her wont, she ‘extracts’ a ‘moral’ from the original: ‘virtue is a female’s firmest protector’ (Wilkinson 2004: 29). The story of Albert does not end there: as something of a revenant itself, the tale reappears as ‘The Midnight Embrace in the Halls of Werdendorff’ in Legends of Terror! and Tales of the Wonderful and the Wild. Original and Select, In Prose and Verse (1826), a 642-page compendium of Gothic ballads and prose short stories that casts its net widely in gathering Gothic tales from a variety of sources (ballads, magazines, annuals, previous collections and chapbooks). Although very few of the ‘Legends’ are attributed
to authors – indeed, the overall volume contains no indication of the names of its editors – this reincarnation of ‘Albert’ does provide both ‘Prose and Verse’, as it begins with a selection from the 1801 ballad and then reprints Wilkinson’s chapbook sans her concluding ‘moral’.

This curious, but not atypical, little bibliographic tale suggests a number of things about the subject of shorter Gothic fiction in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. First is the close literary kinship (in this case interchangeability) of prose and verse, both featuring strong lines of allegedly ‘German’-sourced horror and unqualified supernaturalism within a limited narrative frame. Next is the obvious fact that shorter versions of the Gothic, especially 36-page chapbooks such as Wilkinson’s, were far more affordable than a multi-volume Gothic novel, as they were designed with the newly literate working class as target audiences. That design is reflected not only in the affordability of such shorter Gothic works as chapbooks and broadside ballads but in their storylines, which often pit haughty and deceitful aristocrats against virtuous and long-suffering peasants. For example, the opening lines of ‘The Midnight Embrace’ set up an emphasis on class featured in countless shorter Gothics:

LORD Albert had titles, Lord Albert had power,
   Lord Albert in gold and in jewels was clad;
Fair Josephine bloom’d like an opening flower,
   But beauty and virtue were all that she had.

(Anon. 1801a: 1–4)

The ungainly lines of this ballad raise another issue long associated with shorter forms of the Gothic, especially chapbooks: their lack of artistic merit. Long considered by critics as mere ‘hack’ or ‘pulp’ fiction, these shorter Gothic tales often shamelessly redact episodes from longer Gothic novels and unapologetically draw from folk sources considered sub-literary by the period’s critics. They make no claims for originality and the more exalted regions of the imagination being defined by emergent Romanticism, although such poets as Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Walter Scott were clearly influenced by one manifestation of these shorter tales of terror, the Gothic ballad. This chapter will first define the various forms of shorter Gothic literature and their niche in the literary marketplace, before considering how they engage in the ideological and aesthetic discourses of their time.
To Make a Long Story Short: Varieties of Shorter Gothic Tales and Ballads

Prose versions of the Gothic tale appear in four different places: chapbooks, omnibus collections of tales, keepsakes and annuals, and general periodicals or literary magazines. Appearing in 24-, 36-, or 72-page formats, chapbooks were pocket-size Gothics, approximately four by seven inches in size, often stitched into a cover of flimsy blue paper lacking any kind of board binding (hence the descriptor ‘bluebook’). Selling for a shilling or less (hence the term ‘shilling shocker’), these chapbooks often offered for their mainly working- and middle-class readers affordable redactions of more expensive, longer Gothic novels or, at least, drew upon the durable fund of Gothic conventions. As Edith Birkhead in her landmark study *Tales of Terror* (1921) wrote, ‘Ingenious authors realised that it was possible to compress into … a short story as much sensation as was contained in the five volumes of a Gothic romance’ (Birkhead 1963: 185). Because of the ephemeral nature of chapbooks, it is difficult to determine the number of titles printed during the last decade of the eighteenth century and first quarter of the nineteenth century, but scholars (Frank 2002: 133–46; Hoeveler 2010: 171) have estimated an output in the thousands, making bluebooks among the best-selling literature of the age. Peter Haining provides a modern collection of representative chapbooks in his *The Shilling Shockers: Stories of Terror from the Gothic Bluebooks* (Haining 1972), and Diane Hoeveler is developing an online Archive of many rare chapbook texts.

Shorter Gothic tales can also be found in many collections, such as *Romances and Gothic Tales* of 1801 (Curties 1801), written by T. J. Horsley Curties and published by the prolific distributor of Gothic chapbooks, Ann Lemoine; *Romantic Tales* of 1802 (Crookenden 1802) by Isaac Crookenden, who specialised in writing Gothic novels in miniature; *Tales of Superstition; or, Relations of Apparitions* of 1803 (Anon. 1803) published by another main purveyor of the Gothic chapbook trade, Thomas Tegg of Cheapside; Isabella Lewis’s *Terrific Tales* of 1804 (Lewis 1804); *Romantic Tales* of 1808 by M. G. Lewis (Lewis 1808), somewhat of a mixed bag including three Gothic ballads ‘of German origin’ and of its five tales, two Gothic, if one includes ‘The Anaconda, an East Indian Tale’, in which the titular serpent takes on a supernatural
menace; *Fantasmagoriana* of 1812 (Anon. 2004), a collection of German ghost stories, the French translation of which helped inspire the famed ghost-story telling contest at the Villa Diodati in 1816; *Popular Tales and Romances of the Northern Nations* (1823) by an assortment of European writers (La Motte-Fouqué et al. 1823); and the aforementioned *Legends of Terror! and Tales of the Wonderful and the Wild* of 1826 (Anon. 1826).

As for literary annuals and keepsakes, Katherine Harris (2012) has called attention to this relatively neglected venue for Gothic tales in her *Forgotten Gothic: Short Stories from British Literary Annuals, 1823–31* (Harris 2012). Christine Alexander (1993) explores the influence upon the Brontë sisters of Gothic stories plentifully found in such annuals as the *Forget Me Not, Literary Souvenir, Friendship’s Offering*, and *The Keepsake*, featuring such titles as ‘The Haunted Chamber’, ‘The Novice, or the Convent Demon’ and ‘The Curate-Confessor of Viroflay, a Real Ghost Story’ (Alexander 1993). Finally, Gothic tales appear regularly in the monthly magazines, such as *The Lady’s Magazine, The Tell-Tale; or, Universal Museum*, and the *New Gleaner, or Entertainment for the Fireside*. Robert D. Mayo (1950) has drawn up an extensive inventory of Gothic writing in the magazines from 1770–1820 (Mayo 1950), while Franz Potter’s *The History of Gothic Publishing, 1800–1835* lists some 650 titles from chapbooks, collections, annuals and magazines (Potter 2005). One finds a recurrent sidebar debate concerning this plethora of Gothic tales: some scholars contend that the chapbooks and trade Gothic are symptomatic of (Mayo 1942: 64; Richter 1996: 125) or responsible for (Punter 1980: 114) the decline of the Gothic around 1820, while many recent studies (Alexander 1993; Potter 2005; Hoeveler 2010 and Harris 2012), charting its endurance in these shorter publications, have cast doubt about that end point.

In examining these repositories of Gothic tales, one frequently comes across brief, unfinished stories labelled as ‘fragments’, and these represent the high- and low-end of Gothic prose achievement. The high-end source for such fragments is John Aikin’s ‘Sir Bertrand, A Fragment’ (1773), with an accompanying essay by his sister, Anna Laetitia Aikin (later Barbauld) entitled ‘On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror’. The essay in itself makes a distinction between high and low versions of the Gothic, distinguishing a cruder form that merely arouses suspense and curiosity from a nobler form, her praise of which remarkably anticipates Romantic enthusiasm for the sublime: ‘where the agency of invisible beings is introduced, of “forms unseen, and mightier far than we” our imagination, darting
Shorter Gothic Fictions

forth, explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to its view, and rejoices in the expansion of its powers’ (Aikin and Aikin 1773: 122). Aikin’s fragment, chronicling the adventures of a knight who encounters increasingly mysterious terrors, was designed for readers to finish the fragment, and several imitations and completed versions appear later. An examination of the chapbooks, however, supplies a less exalted rationale for Gothic fragments. One frequently finds appended to the main tale the phrase ‘to which is added’, and what is added is often a fragment, simply designed to fill out the pages of the chapbook.

The many writers interested in the poetic tale of terror turned to the ballad as a pliable medium for conjuring up the old, folk-inspired bogies and demons. With such works as Thomas Percy’s Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765) and Johann Gottfried Herder’s Volkslieder (Herder 1778–9), the mid-to-late eighteenth century witnessed a ballad revival, but for many years earlier the broadside ballad had provided the most common (in both senses of the word, vulgar and widespread) repository of cheap ‘stories in song’. Distributed widely in what Eric Nebeker has described as a ‘promiscuous’ fashion (Nebeker 2014), the broadsides could be found pasted on public posts, church doors, walls of homes and alehouses; they also could be purchased for as little as one penny from travelling chapmen. The Bodleian Library Catalogue of Broadside Ballads confirms Nebeker’s observation that many of them deal with ‘wonders and monstrous happenings’: 130 ghost stories, 242 tales of seduction and abandonment, and many more on such proto-Gothic subjects as highwaymen, incest, rape, mesmerism and fortune-telling. Reflecting recent critical interest in the folk ballad, the most recent edition of the Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period begins for the first time with a section on ‘Balladry and Ballad Revivals’. In making the case that ‘literary culture began to engage, somewhat squeamishly, with an oral culture associated with sensational stories (of infanticide, bloody feuds, supernatural events [and] illicit sex)’ (Stillinger 2012: 31), the editor provides several proto-Gothic ballads, including ‘The Dæmon-lover’.

Walter Scott believed that interest in ancient British and Germanic ballads with supernatural themes ‘might be easily employed as a formidable auxiliary to renewing the spirit of our own [art of poetry]’, which he felt ‘was at a remarkably low ebb’ in the closing years of the eighteenth century (Scott 2014a). Several ballads in the German style appeared early in the 1790s, including John Aikin’s ‘Arthur and Matilda’ from his Poems (1791) and Frank Sayers’ ‘Sir Egwin’
(in his Poems, 1792), an adaptation of Frederick Leopold Stolberg’s ‘Die Büßende’ (‘The Penitent Woman’). However, two seminal poems appeared in March of 1796 that truly galvanised fascination with the poetic tale of terror and provided two distinct approaches to the subject: William Taylor’s adaptation of Gottfried August Bürger’s ‘Lenore’ (originally entitled ‘Lenora’, later ‘Ellenore’) in the Monthly Magazine and M. G. Lewis’s ‘Alonzo the Brave and Fair Imogene’ in his novel The Monk. With its pouncing rhythms, splashy onomatopoeia and archaic diction, ‘Lenora’ provided a dramatic model of writing ballads in the old and German style. Four other translations of Bürger’s ballad surfaced within the year, and Taylor followed the success of ‘Lenora’ with several other dark ballads, most notably ‘The Lass of Fair Wone’ from Bürger’s ‘Des Pfarrers Tochter non Taubenhain’ (Taylor 1796b: 223–4). During the same period, ‘Alonzo the Brave and Fair Imogene’ appeared ten times in such periodicals as The Morning Chronicle, The Star, and The Gentleman’s Magazine (Parreaux 1960: 50). With its novel anapestic metre and contemporary diction, Lewis’s ballad served as a prototype of the new or ‘modern’ style of writing Gothic ballads.

Although the distinction between old and new styles, like those between ‘original’ and ‘imitation’, ‘translation’ and ‘adaptation’, could often become blurred, Taylor and Lewis provided two workable patterns for the poetic tales of terror to come. Some of Walter Scott’s earliest poetry shows the influence of both models: his excited discovery of Taylor’s ‘Lenora’ (which had electrified an Edinburgh literary society in a reading by Anna Laetitia Barbauld) led to his interest in translating German ballads and, eventually, to his working relationship with Lewis on a collection of Gothic ballads originally to be entitled Tales of Terror. Frustrated at delays in Lewis’s publication, Scott turned to his friend James Ballantyne for his own collection of Gothic ballads, An Apology for Tales of Terror (1799). Although only twelve copies were printed, its table of contents provides an early canon of Gothic ballads with German and supernatural themes. Scott appears with three translations from the German: ‘The Erl-King’ (from Goethe’s ‘Erlkönig’), ‘The Chase’ (from Bürger’s ‘Der Wilde Jäger’), and ‘William and Helen’ (his version of Lenore). The volume also features two ballads by Lewis (‘Alonzo the Brave and Fair Imogene’ and ‘The Erl-King’s Daughter’), one ballad by John Aikin (‘Arthur and Matilda’) and two by Robert Southey (‘Lord William’ and ‘Poor Mary, Maid of the Inn’).

Southey also had a noteworthy connection to both Taylor and Lewis. Claiming in a letter of 1799 to Charles Wynn that he ‘shall
hardly be satisfied till I have got a ballad as good as “Lenora”’ (Southey 2009), Southey joined the Norwich school of Taylor and Sayers with their agenda to create, in the words of Taylor, ballads ‘old in the costume of the ideas, as well as of the style and metre – in the very spirit of the superstitions of the days of yore’ (Robberds 1843: I.235–6). Southey composed many Gothic ballads in both the old and new styles, including ‘The Old Woman of Berkeley’, considered by Taylor as ‘unquestionably the best original English ballad extant’ (Robberds 1843: II.106); ‘Cornelius Agrippa’s Bloody Book’ (one source of Mary Shelley’s ‘The Mortal Immortal’); and the Bürgeresque ‘Donica’. All of these plus three other ballads would appear in Lewis’s long-delayed Tales of Wonder.

Tales of Wonder provides the fullest and most representative, if problematic, range of Gothic ballads for the age. The first of this two-volume edition contains ten ballads by Lewis that he labels ‘Original’, including ‘Alonzo the Brave’, followed by its burlesque, ‘Giles Jollup the Brave and Brown Sally Green’; six of Lewis’s adaptations from German, Danish and Runic sources (including Goethe’s ‘The Erl-King’ and ‘The Fisherman’); four original ballads, two with Scottish settings, by Scott; the six ballads by Southey; and one ballad each by John Leyden, Henry William Bunbury and Julius Mickle. The second volume, drawing largely from Percy’s Reliques, provides reprints of older English ballads with supernatural subject matter; four traditional Scottish ballads (which Scott pointedly refashioned in his Minstrelsy); and as a conclusion, Taylor’s ‘Lenora’, regarded by Lewis in the headnote to the poem as ‘a masterpiece of translation’ rivaling the original. Peter Mortensen argues that ‘Lewis’s eclectic choice of sources [in Volume II]constructs an alternative genealogy – an ancient British genealogy – of supernatural poetry’ (Mortensen 2004: 82).

Despite this historical and nationalist pedigree for the Gothic ballad, Lewis’s ‘hobgoblin repast’ came under attack as ‘Tales of Plunder’ for its many non-original contributions – and for its high price of one guinea (Thomson 2009: 26–8). For the one-volume second edition of Tales of Wonder (1801), Lewis obligingly withdrew the contents of the first edition’s second volume, leading his publisher, Joseph Bell, to cobble together another collection of wholly original Gothic ballads which he entitled Tales of Terror (1801). On the Advertisement page for the second, cheaper, one-volume edition of Tales of Wonder, Bell noted that Tales of Terror ‘is printed uniform with this edition of TALES OF WONDER, and makes a good second volume to it’ (Thomson 2009: 43). Thus began the groundwork for a long and
remarkably enduring tradition of error in wrongly attributing Tales of Terror to Lewis. The anonymous Tales of Terror, also often wrongly considered as a parody of Tales of Wonder, actually, as a companion volume, carries on the mix of serious and comic Gothic ballads found in its predecessor, and some of its poetry, especially the stirring defence of a specifically termed ‘Gothic’ imagination in its ‘Introductory Dialogue’, deserves greater critical attention.

In narrating his narrow ‘escape’ from ‘the general depreciation’ of the Tales of Wonder, Scott partially attributes that volume’s generally negative critical reception to his opinion that the ‘passion for ballads and ballad-mongers ha[d] been for some time on the wane’ (Scott 2014a). Scott makes an interesting claim. It is true that he desired to distance himself from the Lewisite brand of Gothic writing as he goes on to compile a more authentically nationalist collection of ballads, The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border (1802). However, it should be noted that both he and his countryman, James Hogg, continued to collect and write ballads with supernatural themes well into the first quarter of the nineteenth century (see examples of such poetry in the recently published Longman Anthology of Gothic Verse (Franklin 2011)). For his part, Southey demanded the withdrawal of his ballads from the second edition of Tales of Wonder and, like Scott, came to regard his dabbling with ballads as, at best, a minor chapter in his poetic career. Also supporting Scott’s assertion of the Gothic ballad’s decline is the general absence of collections of such poetry in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Adriana Craciun (2002: 156–94) has argued that one such volume, the Scottish poet Anne Bannerman’s fascinating Tales of Superstition and Chivalry (1802), with its rewriting of the Gothic ballad from a woman’s perspective, became tainted by association with Tales of Wonder. Yet, unlike the prose tales of the shorter Gothic, we really do not have, to date, a study of the Gothic ballad in the periodicals, keepsakes and literary annuals from this period. While we await such a study, it seems hard to believe that a vacuum extends between turn-of-the-century poetry of terror and Poe’s ‘The Raven’ (1845).4

‘We need to lower our sights’: Ideological Readings of Shorter Gothic Tales

The same factors – brevity, sensationalism, and affordability – that contributed to the popularity of shorter Gothic tales also formed the basis for their largely negative critical reception. The cheapness
of chapbooks and ballads was long understood not just in financial terms but in terms of artistic merit too. Critics considered ballads and short Gothic tales as sub-literary, cheap in the sense that they lacked artistry, complexity and that emerging Romantic criterion of merit, originality. Even modern critics who championed the cause of the Gothic expressed little regard for chapbooks.\(^5\) Devendra Varma, to cite one of the harsher verdicts, felt that the little Gothics ‘catered to the perverted taste for excitement among degenerate readers’ (Varma 1957: 189). While most modern studies of this subject acknowledge that shorter Gothic tales, especially those in chapbooks, generally lack artistic merit, some critics find such tales of value in the way that they illuminate the emergence of working-class reading culture. The phrase ‘We need to lower our sights’ comes from Potter’s study of The History of Gothic Publishing, 1800–1835 (Potter 2005: 3), and voices his insistence that if we are to understand the first Gothic revival, we need study not just its canonical novelists but also its dispersal among the so-called ‘trade Gothic’, which is dominated by such shorter Gothic tales as the chapbooks. The ‘degenerate readers’ that Varma refers to were largely members of the working classes, and as literacy rates increased among them due to the Sunday School movement and other factors, the demand for reading materials appropriate for their reading level increased as well. As such, it is impossible to discuss the chapbook and ballad without recognising that both class and religion influenced the content and style of these productions. An overview of this subject reveals a paradox: on the one hand, working-class resentment of the upper class finds expression in the plots of countless Gothic ballads and chapbooks that depict the aristocracy and clergy as corrupt; on the other, the consumption of these shorter and cheaper Gothic tales allowed the new readership to participate in a fashionable culture usually reserved for those more affluent who could afford novels.\(^6\)

Given its cheap price and wide circulation, the chapbook was a successful vehicle for spreading the often negative attitudes that the working classes had towards both the aristocracy and Roman Catholicism. More specifically, chapbooks typically presented aristocrats as libertines, rakes, seducers, predators, gamblers and adulterers, while Roman Catholic clergy were depicted in much the same way, with the added complication that they were able to hide their crimes in cloisters that were not open to public view. Wilkinson’s ‘Albert of Werderendorff, or The Midnight Embrace’ (1812) is, as we noted in our introduction, a very typical example of working-class rage directed at aristocratic lechers and their practice of dynastic
marriages. Focusing on a seduced and abandoned working-class heroine who wreaks vengeance on her aristocratic suitor and his ‘haughty’ bride, the chapbook clearly expresses working-class anger towards the class system. The working-class victim, the poisoned Josephine, returns from the dead with the power to act as a direct agent of God, not as simply someone seeking her own personal revenge. This agency suggests that the working class has divine sanction to seek restitution against its aristocratic oppressors, and such a sentiment would not have been lost on the working-class readership. Bürger’s ‘Der Wilde Jäger’ (translated by Walter Scott as ‘The Wild Huntsman’) provides, from the ballad tradition, a spectacular and highly politicised example of this kind of divine retribution. A malicious, proud Earl destroys whatever stands in the way of his hunt, first a ‘poor’ farmer and his crops, then a herdsman and his flock (on Sunday, no less). Ignoring the warning voice of a lowly hermit to desist and repent, the Earl stands terrified as, from ‘the yawning rifts’ of a deep chasm, ‘misbegotten dogs of hell’ emerge to hunt the hunter throughout time (Scott 2014b). In language that recalls the Ancient Mariner’s dictum, the hermit issues the lesson in terms of both species and class: ‘let thy fate instruct the proud, / God’s meanest creature is his child’ (Scott 2014b).

The presentation of Roman Catholicism in the tales and ballads is somewhat more complex and convoluted, but suffice it to say that the chapbook, with its almost medieval world view, cautioned the working classes against the liberal policies of the Church of England and waged something of a propaganda war against the passage of a number of bills that eventually gave Catholics emancipation in 1829. The sheer number of anti-Catholic chapbooks (more than 100) suggests that the ideology was widespread and popular, and that whole publishing houses (like Tegg, Hughes or Vernor and Hood) were committed to promulgating the Gothic as a species of covert religious writing, propagandising and quasi-pamphleteering. Chapbooks with titles like ‘Father Innocent’, ‘The Memoirs of Angelique; or, The Nun’ and ‘Monkish Mysteries’ suggest how bald and blatant the propagandising was in these works. Examples of ballads featuring jaded and licentious Catholic clergy include Lewis’s ‘Bothwell’s Bonny Jane’ (not surprisingly, showcasing a villainous monk, despite the poem’s Scottish setting), ‘The Black Canon of Elmham; or Saint Edmond’s Eve’ (author unknown), and Southey’s ‘Bishop Bruno’ (Thomson 2009).

Although many Gothic tales express this resentment towards the aristocracy and the Catholic church, their stories of olden times set
in exotic locales granted the working and middle classes access to a world of fantasy more usually reserved for the upper classes. It is difficult to know exactly what proportion of the working class purchased their own chapbooks or opted instead to obtain them through a circulating library as either a subscriber or a day-borrower. Either way, the working classes thought that they were participating in the ideological and intellectual developments of their culture. If they could not afford to attend the opera or theatre productions in even the ‘illegitimate’ theatres of London, they could read highly condensed redactions and much-simplified abridged versions of novels by Walpole, Reeve, Radcliffe or Lewis. Possessing these little Gothics allowed the working classes to have the same reading experience that the elite experienced and therefore the same access to, and ownership of, their culture’s luxury items.

Gary Kelly has recently observed that the chapbook is another manifestation of early street literature with its ‘emphasis on destiny, chance, fortune and levelling forces such as death, express[ing] the centuries-old experience of common people … with little or no control over the conditions of their lives … For these people, life was a lottery’ (2002: x). According to Kelly, the fact that the working classes were the target audience of these early productions is also obvious from their very heavy use of narrative repetition, their emphasis on incident and adventure and their episodic and anecdotal structures. A major difference between working- and middle-class reading materials is the absence in the working-class works of any extended depictions of subjectivity or emotions in the protagonists (Kelly 2002: x, xv). Kelly argues that the earlier ‘lottery mentality’ that was operative in the working-class chapbooks was eventually replaced during the late eighteenth century by a dominant ‘investment mentality’ that we can see evidenced in the emerging middle-class chapbooks. This investment mentality was characterised by Protestant ideologies of self-improvement, self-advancement, modernisation and self-discipline, or what he refers to as ‘the middle-class discourse of merit’ (Kelly 2002: xxiii).

Increasingly hostile to working-class street literature, which it saw as politically subversive and at the same time spiritually reactionary, the middle class effectively displaced street literature by co-opting it. Hence Hannah More published her Cheap Repository Tracts (1795–8) for the working classes, actually imitating cheap broadside ballads and chapbooks and suffusing them not with the ‘lottery’ but with the ‘investment’ mentality that she and her cohorts were attempting to promulgate: a disdain for immediate gratification,
a focus on the disastrous consequences of moral relativism, and a stress on the accumulation of ‘solid and useful’ knowledge for middle-class life. In her study and checklist of early nineteenth-century bluebooks, Angela Koch concludes that, in contrast to the full-length Gothic novels such as those by Lewis, in which horror is a manifestation of moral ambivalence and unrestrained use of the supernatural is common, ‘the sentimental and rationalised contents’ of many bluebooks ‘reveal them as a reactionary mode of the Gothic’ that reassures the general reader that their own concepts of reality are ‘stable’ (Koch 2002: 9).

The Gothic chapbook tradition is split, then, between working- and middle-class agendas, both of which were presenting alternative versions of the secularised uncanny to their readers. One group of tales – the middle-class variety – made claims for the powers of reason, rationality and secularised education, while, paradoxically, it kept alive the vestiges of a belief in a mythic and sacred past of divine beings. As Kelly notes, the representation of subjectivity is more developed in these works, but this subjectivity is often severely ‘disciplined’ so that the new bourgeois citizens are those who control their emotions in even the most perilous of situations (Kelly 2002: xix). The other group of tales – the working-class variety – persisted in promulgating a ‘lottery’ view of life, with fate, magic or luck as the ultimate and inscrutable arbiters in all matters and with human beings merely pawns in the hands of tyrannical forces they could not fully understand. For Kelly, the subjectivity that occasionally appears in working-class chapbooks is

like the simulation of richer fabrics on cheap printed cottons of the period, … a form of symbolic consumption rather than ideological and cultural instruction for the text’s readers. It is as if the readers of the street Gothics were aware that there was a certain model of subjectivity prized in middle-class and upper middle-class culture, but that subjectivity in itself was of little interest … for these readers. (Kelly 2002: xxiii)

One example of this working-class ideology embroidered with middle-class subjectivity and moralising can be found in Isabella Lewis’s Terrific Tales (1804). A series of short vignettes without titles that purport to be true, the contents of Terrific Tales are fantastical and reveal an interesting mix of residual supernaturalism, rationalisation and Christian moral exemplum. For instance, one tale concerns an aristocrat, ‘of very inordinate passions’, who is kidnapped by a
spirit who arrived on horseback. Obviously a prose revision of the
Germanic ballad ‘Lenore’, the homily at the conclusion remarks on
his abduction as ‘a punishment for his excessive passions’ (Lewis
1804: 7). What is most interesting about these tales, besides their
repetitive use of spectres, devils, ghosts in chains, warnings from
purgatory and clouds of sulphur, is their persistent assurance that
the afterworld exists. In one tale, a dead man appears to his friend
to exclaim, ‘Michael, Michael! Nothing is more true than what has
been said of the other world’ (Lewis 1804: 61), and such a mes-
sage allows us to understand one more reason for the popularity of
these works. The supernatural was not supposed to be explained
away, but instead confirmed as real. This was not a populace ready
to accept the stark lessons of materialism and the finality of death,
and the short Gothic tale provided its new readership with not just
thrills but an assurance of a better world to come. If in these tales a
better world was fitfully and often critically imagined by the work-
ing classes as the province of aristocratic power and prestige, the
afterlife promised its own rewards.

‘On horror’s head horrors accumulate’: The Legacy of
Shorter Gothic Tales and Ballads

Although early Gothic tales traditionally occupy the lower rungs in the
hierarchy of literary works as a minor form of a genre already marked
by considerable critical condescension, they did lay the groundwork
for later, more sophisticated explorations of the dark regions of human
consciousness. The descendant of the humble chapbook, the penny
dreadful, numbered among its youthful readers Charles Dickens,
Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Louis Stevenson. The better accomplished
tales of terror from Blackwood’s Magazine (beginning publication in
1817) provided an even more direct influence on Poe and the many
Victorian writers who would adapt and transfigure Gothic themes.
Finally, the Gothic ballad, despite critical attacks on the ‘new species
of horror-breeding bards’ (Anon. 1801b: 289), would play a role in
the formation of what we now understand as Romantic poetics.

When Robert Louis Stevenson half fondly, half ashamedly, referred
to his Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886) as his ‘penny (12
penny) dreadful’, a mere ‘Gothic gnome’ (Stevenson 1994–5: V.128,
163), he pointed to one legacy of the early nineteenth-century Gothic
chapbook and tale. The penny dreadfuls furnished lurid serial sto-
ries appearing in parts over a number of weeks, with each weekly
installment costing one penny. Gothic chapbooks, which disappeared around 1830, transmuted via advances in print technology and made their way over to the double-columned pages of cheap newspaper copy. As Louis James observes, Tegg, Hughes, Hurst and the other publishers of the Gothic chapbooks ‘could not compete with the new, larger printing presses, which turned out quarto and folio magazines for a penny’ (James 1963: 72).

Although the penny dreadfuls share with the chapbook a focus on sensationalist literature aimed for the working classes (and, for the dreadfuls, an increasingly adolescent one at that), they introduced some new twists to the Gothic tradition, especially with their interest in criminal psychology and their often more contemporary and local settings, such as dark London cityscapes. This serial literature provides one link between Gothic shorter tales and the more psychologically nuanced tales of Poe, Dickens and Stevenson. For example, one of the teenage Dickens’s favorite reads was The Terrific Register, a penny magazine weekly which featured such topics as murder, ghosts, incest and cannibalism; he claimed the stories ‘frightened the very wits out of [his] head’ (qtd in Forster 1875: I.vi). The influence of penny dreadfuls can be seen in not only the interpolated tales of his Pickwick Papers (1836) but in his many ghost stories and in the practice of serial publication itself. Coming full circle, a cable television series entitled Penny Dreadful premiered in the UK and USA during the spring of 2014 on Showtime, reanimating in mash-up format the tropes, conventions and themes of the Victorian penny dreadful with the high-gloss production values of contemporary televised horror shows. Imagining vampires on the loose in working-class London, the series employs all of the devices that made the original penny dreadfuls so popular: sudden shocks, violent assaults on damsels in distress, the sexual victimisation of children, and the correlation of blood, severed body parts and sex in a series of nauseating tableaux.

The tales of terror from Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine furnish the most compelling example of the transition from earlier Gothic tales to the emergence of the modern short story with interests in the bizarre and the supernatural. The authors of some of these tales have Gothic pedigrees: Thomas De Quincey, James Hogg (especially with his ‘The Mysterious Bride’), William Godwin Junior, John Galt (friend and biographer of Byron) and Walter Scott. Noting that the magazine’s canny editor, William Blackwood, ‘was most interested in terror fiction’, Morrison and Roberts describe these tales as ‘sensational and shamelessly commercial’ yet trace their impact on such writers as Browning, Dickens, the Brontës and most especially
Poe, ‘who emulated, parodied, and reworked Blackwood’s tales throughout his career’ (Morrison and Roberts 2013: 6). Morrison and Baldick, editors of Tales of Terror from Blackwood’s Magazine, acknowledge the link to earlier Gothic stories but importantly note that the Blackwood tales depart from their predecessors in ‘their sharper and more explicit rendering of terror … The usual tone in these stories is one of clinical observation (although without the customary detachment) rather than of genteel trepidation, and for the most part the terrors are unflinchingly “witnessed”, not ambiguously evoked’ (Morrison and Baldick 1995: xv). One can think of many nineteenth-century writers of terror tales who traverse the divide between detachment (see the ghost stories of Henry James) and witness (a preoccupation of Poe’s and also of George Lippard’s). With these tales comes a new aesthetic finally regarding shortness as a literary virtue: according to Poe, ‘brevity’ or a ‘reading in one sitting’ contributes directly to ‘the intensity of the intended effect’ and provides a better ‘unity of impression’ (Poe 1989: 373).

Examining the legacy of the Gothic ballad involves a rewriting of one origin of Romantic poetics. Recent critical assessments (Gamer 2000; Mortensen 2004; Hoeveler 2010) have stressed the formative role played by the Gothic ballad and its reception in the theorising of Wordsworth and Coleridge. One no longer considers Wordsworth’s programme to ‘counteract this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation’ in purely aesthetic and ethical terms, as an expression of concern that stories based on ‘extraordinary incidents’ can ‘blunt the discriminating powers of the mind’ (Wordsworth 2008: 177). Critics such as Gamer argue that what motivates Wordsworth’s attack on ‘deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse’ (Wordsworth 2008: 177; emphasis added) is his desire to distance his ballads from those in the Gothic vein, which in those crucial years of 1796–1800 were at their apex. The presence of Bürger figures largely in many of the Lyrical Ballads, and recent studies chart how Wordsworth worked to ‘counteract’, contain and transfigure that influence: using parody in ‘The Idiot Boy’ to mock ‘Lenore’; mollifying the eerie effects in ‘The Thorn’ by attributing them to a superstitious narrator in his reworking of ‘Des Pfarrers Tochter non Taubenhain’; and evoking in ‘Hart-Leap Well’ the creed of natural piety to temper the anti-aristocratic invective of ‘Der Wilde Jäger’. However, these conscious reworkings of seminal Gothic ballads encountered an irony: ‘most reviewers had failed to read the ballads as distinct from – and as critiques of – other contemporary [G]othic writers’ (Gamer 2000: 117). Indeed, some contemporary critics found Wordsworth’s poems to
suffer from the matter-of-factness, idiosyncrasy and repetitiveness long associated with the common ballad tradition: ‘tiresome loquacity’, according to Southey (Southey 1798: 198); ‘low and inelegant expressions [that] ... degenerate into mere slovenliness and vulgar-ity’, according to Francis Jeffrey (Jeffrey 2008: 412). Wordsworth’s fierce attack on the Gothic in his Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) clearly aims to disassociate his poetry from the literature of terror. This anti-Gothicism finds expression in many ways: his assertion that ‘feeling’ matters more than ‘action and situation’, those key features of the ballad with its narrative emphasis; the sanctifying glosses attached to the too-Gothic ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ and its demotion in the 1800 edition; the substitution of ‘Michael. A Pastoral’ for ‘Christabel’; and the addition of the word ‘Pastoral’ to the title of the 1802 edition, providing a verse genre about rustics more literarily acceptable than the lowly ballad. There can be little doubt that Wordsworth’s advocacy of a more meditative, lyrical and less incident-driven poetry would prove decisive in canonical accounts of emergent Romanticism and would help serve to marginalise the Gothic ballad further. Yet there also can be little doubt that Wordsworth drew upon the Gothic ballad to define his own poetic agenda.

Occupying a modest place, at best, in the literary canon and a commercially successful niche in the literary marketplace, shorter Gothic fictions remain of considerable historical interest today. In their appeal to a relatively new readership, the working classes, from whose ranks emerged its authors and publishers, they warrant attention in accounts of the first Gothic revival and the broader cultural contexts out of which it emerged. These little Goths also provided a paradigm of popular culture against which an emerging high literary culture, that of Romanticism, defined itself. While economic exigencies played a significant role in their brevity, these tales and ballads point the way to the great short stories and poetry of terror to come later in the nineteenth century.

Notes

1. Despite the 1801 date on the title page, evidence points to its publication in late 1800 (see Thomson 2009: 41). Lewis used the phrase ‘hobgoblin repast’ in an undated letter to Scott (which he marked ‘1798’); see Lockhart 1862: 10.
2. In 1815, M. Randall of Stirling published an edition of ‘Albert of Werdendorff’ ... ‘to which is added the Danger of Pleasures’.
3. Taylor’s ballad was actually composed in 1790 and circulated widely before its publication.

4. *Legends of Terror.* … *In Prose and Verse* (1826) contains twenty ballads, seven of which are taken from *Tales of Wonder* (1801) and *Tales of Terror* (1801).

5. Hoeveler surveys the treatment of chapbooks ‘in largely accusatory tones’ by earlier and modern critics (Hoeveler 2010: 171–2, 178), including such scholars as Montague Summers, Frederick Frank and David Punter.

6. Gary Kelly notes that in 1800 a three-volume Gothic novel could cost as much as two weeks’ wages for a labourer, while the thirty-six- and seventy-two-page prose chapbooks cost from sixpence to a shilling, or the price of a meal or a cheap theatre seat (Kelly 2002: 218).


8. David Chandler provides an important reassessment of Southey’s infamous comment on the ‘Rime’ – ‘a Dutch attempt at German sublimity’ – by reading it from the perspective of the Taylor school of writing ballads in the ‘old’ style (Chandler 2003–4).

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