On the origins of the Gothic novel:

From Old Norse to Otranto

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> A primary vehicle for the literary Gothic in the late eighteenth to early nineteen centuries was past superstition. The extent to which Old Norse tradition provided the basis for a subspecies of literary horror has been passed over in an expanding critical literature which has not otherwise missed out on cosmopolitan perspectives.

This observation by Robert W. Rix (2011, 1) accurately assesses what may be considered a significant oversight in studies of the Gothic novel. Whilst it is well known that the ethnic meaning of 'Gothic' originally referred to invasive, eastern Germanic, pagan tribes of the third to the sixth centuries AD (see, for example, Sowerby 2000, 15-26), there remains a disconnect between Gothicism as the legacy of Old Norse literature and the use of the term 'Gothic' to mean a category of fantastical literature. This essay, then, seeks to complement Rix's study by, in certain areas, adding more detail about the gradual emergence of Old Norse literature as a significant presence on the European literary scene. The initial focus will be on those formations (often malformations) and interpretations of Old Norse literature as it came gradually to light from the sixteenth century onwards, and how the Nordic Revival impacted on what is widely considered to be the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole (1717-97). As will be argued, although Walpole was ambivalent in his opinions of the growing influence of Nordic antiquity in the latter half of the eighteenth century, it is quite clear that it played a important role in stimulating his 'Gothicised' imagination, not least due to his close association with the poet Thomas Gray (1716-71), an unabashed enthusiast for the Old North. The essay will conclude with an examination of how, over a hundred years later, this material and all things Viking, along with the attendant glamorisations, had become an accepted and uncontroversial cultural reference point in the novels of Bram Stoker (1847-1912).

The Scandinavian recovery period from the sixteenth to the early eighteenth century

The manuscripts containing myths and legends concerning pagan Scandinavia fall broadly into three areas. The first and most mythologically informative area includes *The Poetic Edda*, an

anonymous collection of over thirty poems, many of which were preserved from oral tradition, and *The Prose Edda*, a systematised account of Old Norse mythology set down in the early thirteenth century by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson (1178/9-1241). As Iceland had converted to Christianity over two hundred years earlier, Snorri's *edda* takes particular care not to offend biblical orthodoxy, so providing a euhemerised introduction which explains the error of Norse paganism in terms of naïve Scandinavians mistaking northward migrating descendants of heroes of the Trojan wars for gods. The second area includes medieval histories, such as Adam of Bremen's late eleventh-century *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* (Deeds of the Bishops of the Hamburg Church), Saxo Grammaticus's late twelfth-/early thirteenth-century *Gesta Danorum* (The History of the Danes) and Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, an early thirteenth-century history of the kings of Norway. Explicit disapprobation of pre-Christian practices is most apparent in the histories by Adam and Saxo. The third and by far the largest area is the Icelandic sagas, which range from the seemingly historical to the wildly imaginative. The sagas also preserved the majority of skaldic poetry, an occasional verse-form using a highly complex metre. Whilst Old Norse manuscripts continued to come to light from the Renaissance onwards, it was the interpretations placed on them and the various medieval histories by patriotic Scandinavian scholars that characterised their early reception history.

Initially, there were three main problems for the Scandinavians in their efforts to reclaim their respective country's pre-Christian history. Firstly, there was the widespread perception elsewhere in Europe that Scandinavia was a cultural backwater, one where Christianity was late in arriving and where Greco-Roman Classicism had had little impact and, so, had left the European north culturally impoverished. Endorsing this view was Giorgio Vasari (1511-74), whose influential *Lives of the Artists* (1524) included a 'philippic against the Gothic style' which denounced north European medieval architecture as barbaric compared to the Classical Revival of his own time (Pearsall 2001, 2). Secondly, as was the case with Snorri Sturluson's *edda*, any attempt to recover the pagan past needed to be reconciled with biblical history, hence the continued need for euhemerisation. Thirdly, political relations between the Dano-Norwegian coalition, which included Iceland as a Danish colony, and Sweden were very strained. The, perhaps inevitable, consequence of these problems was that interpretations placed upon the Scandinavian past were invariably convoluted and typically determined to belittle their political opponents. Ethnographic insults and counter-insults were aimed across the Baltic inlets throughout the early recovery period.

In sixteenth-century Denmark, two printed editions of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, one in the original Latin and one in Danish translation, formed the basis of Danish insights into their early ancestors but, for further insight, the Danes needed to look to Iceland and its vast store medieval manuscripts. The most influential Icelander on future Danish and Icelandic scholars was Arngrímur Jónsson (1568-1648), who referred to Old Norse as 'Old Gothic'. Arngrímur used Icelandic saga sources to write a now lost history of the Danish kings, and perturbed by the poor reports Iceland had received from visitors, wrote the chauvinistic *Brevis commentarius de Islandia* (Defence of Iceland) and *Crymogæa* (On Iceland). Given such efforts by learned Icelanders, the Danes would always be better informed than the Swedes and, as a result, somewhat more sober in the significances they attached to manuscript evidence. Lacking such resources, the Swedes were largely dependent on Adam of Bremen's unflattering history of their pagan past, which they combined with early Roman histories, notably Tacitus's first-century, often approving, history of the Germanic tribes, *Germania*, and Jordanes's sixth-century history of the Gothic tribes, *Getica*, which they construed as meaning exclusively Swedish tribes. The main significance of Swedish interpretations of their past lies in the impact they had on Danish scholars, whose responses were typically belligerent and not a little hyperbolised.

Setting the tone for future rivalries with the Danes were the Swedish brothers Johannes Magnus (1488-1544), the last Catholic Archbishop of Uppsala, and Olaus Magnus (1490-1557), who as a consequence of the Lutheran Reformation, inherited his brother's title in name only. According to Johannes's posthumously published *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sveonumque regibus* (A History of All the Kings of the Goths and the Swedes) of 1554, the Swedish Goths were originally led by the biblical Magog, Noah's grandson. Fortunately, Magog had taken his tribe to Sweden before the destruction of the Tower of Babel, the upshot being that the Goths spoke the language of God and had therefore succeeded in spreading civilised values across Ancient Greece on through to the birth of Christ. It was these divinely ordained virtues that had enabled the Goths to triumph over the Roman legions, as recounted in Jordanes's *Getica*. Moreover, claimed Johannes, the surviving evidence of the *ur*-language of the Goths is Gothic script, otherwise known as runes, which, on the one hand, he wrongly asserted to be uniquely Swedish, and on the other, implied them to be a common form of manuscript writing. This extraordinary theory was one that Olaus Magnus not only fully endorsed but also used to remind enemies of the Swedes, i.e. the Danes, how unwise it would be 'to join battle with the elements themselves' (Johannesson 1991, 189).

Pursuing a similar, if less excessive, line of what had become known as Gothicism was the Dane Ole Worm (1588-1654). Here again, doubtless in response to Swedish assertions, runes were the issue. For Worm, runes provided not only an insight into Danish origins, character and vocation but also into the origins of language, for, he argued, Danish runes, that is to say all runes, are derived from Hebraic script. With the help of the Icelanders, most notably Magnús Ólafsson (1574-1636), Worm's *RUNIR seu Danica literatura antiquissima … eller literatura runica* (Runes or the Most Ancient Danish Literature) of 1636 drew particular attention to 'Krákumál', a heroic poem rendered by Worm in both runic script and Latin that became widely translated in Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as 'The Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrok'. In this, the hero, Ragnar, has been cast defenseless into a Northumbrian snake-pit, where he proudly reflects on his many triumphs as a Viking warrior. 'Laughing shall I die', concludes Ragnar, for he is sure of his glorious transportation to Valhalla by Odin's Valkyries, where, according to Worm's text, he will drink ale from the skulls of his fallen enemies. However, while the arresting idea of a human skull-cup is one that would become widely quoted by future enthusiasts for 'runic poetry', the text provided for Worm by Magnús Ólafsson had misinterpreted the Old Norse phrase *or bjúgviðum hausa* as signifying a human skull, whereas it actually means 'from the curved branches of skulls', a poetic locution for 'drinking-horns' (Gordon 1981, lxix-lxx).

Such solecisms apart, the latter half of the seventeenth century presented even greater opportunities for the Danes to advertise the literary genius and indomitable spirit of their ancestors. The discovery of the manuscripts of *The Poetic Edda* in Iceland in 1634 and the presentation of them to King Frederick III of Denmark in 1662, led the Danish scholar Bishop Peder Resen (1625-88) to include Danish and Latin translations of the eddic poems 'Völuspá' (The Seeress's Prophecy), a Creation to Ragnarök augury, and 'Hávamál' (The Sayings of the High One), an extensive articulation of Odin's wisdom, alongside Resen's landmark translation of the whole of *The Prose Edda* (Faulkes, ed., vol. 2, 1977-79). For Resen, Norse mythology contained 'certain higher spiritual truths, to be apprehended intuitively', which recent scholars have perceived as a shift from the 'pragmatic' to the 'metaphysical' (Clunies Ross and Lönnroth 1999, 7; Malm 1996). From here on, reconciling Norse paganism with the bible could be done on a philosophical basis rather than in terms of tortuous arguments concerning the divinely blessed origins of the Goths, not that this stopped such desperate efforts entirely.

The final decades of the seventeenth century marked the high point in antipathies between Danish and Swedish scholars. Setting aside, for now, the highly influential 1672

translation of the Icelandic *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (The Saga of Hervar and Heidrik) by the Swedish scholar Olaus Verelius (1618-82), which included the much vaunted heroic poem that became known in English circles as 'The Waking of Angantýr', it was both national politics and the often deeply personal rivalry between the Dane Thomas Bartholin the Younger (1659-90) and the Swede Olof Rudbeck (1630-1702) that coloured scholarly judgements.

Olof Rudbeck's four-volume, three thousand page treatise *Atlantica* (Swedish: *Atland eller Manheim*), which he began in 1679 and continued to work on until his death in 1702, was clearly inspired by the theories of Johannes and Olaus Magnus, and, indeed, Ole Worm. Rudbeck argued that Sweden was the cradle of civilisation named by Plato as 'Atlantis' and that the Swedish language was inherited from Adam and was, therefore, the forerunner of Hebrew. The logic of this, insisted Rudbeck, is that Greek and Roman mythology had originated in Atlantian Sweden. The proof for Rudbeck is to be found in the *edda*s, which, in painstaking detail, he interpreted as an allegorical code, one that Plato had cleverly remodeled. So it is, for example, that when Plato refers to elephants, what is actually being signified are Swedish wolves (Malm 1994, 12).

Thomas Bartholin's response to Rudbeck was to ignore any distinction between the Swedish and the Danish past and refer to all Scandinavians as Danes. As for Rudbeck's *Atlantica*, Bartholin was an unsparing critic, accusing him of 'having no more purpose in all the heap of his work than to attack the history of the Danes' and adding, 'Oh, wretched condition of the History of the Northern Lands, if, indeed, upon the testimony of the Greek poets it shall stand or fall', which conveniently ignored Bartholin's own tendency to do likewise when it suited his argument (Bartholin 1689, 324-26: author's own translations). Nonetheless, here again, while the Swedes were obliged to resort to extravagant theorising in order to assert their ancestral superiority over their Scandinavian neighbours, the Danes had the benefit of far greater manuscript resources.

As had been the case with Ole Worm, Bartholin was highly dependent on the Icelanders in order to substantiate his views. In Bartholin's case, it was his highly industrious assistant Árni Magnússon (1633-1730), who collected together and translated thousands of pages of Icelandic manuscripts. Notably, Árni also acquired the entire manuscript collection of his deceased countryman Þormóður Torfason (1636-1719), whose Latin translations of Icelandic sagas concerning Viking settlements across the North Atlantic, including the eastern seaboard of North America, had a major impact on many Catholic-averse North Americans during the

nineteenth century (Barnes 2001). Bartholin's use of this material was to focus was on Viking machismo and derring-do. His *Antiquitatum danicarum de causis contemptae a Danis adhuc gentilibus mortis* (Danish Antiquities Concerning the Reasons for the Danes Disdain for Death) of 1689, adduces as much evidence as was then available to highlight the nobility of Danish mentality, which, Bartholin suggests, was directly inherited from the Vikings and their devotions to the Norse gods.

Inevitably, as the title of Bartholin's study indicates, it was the death-defying Ragnar Lodbrok who epitomised Bartholin's lionisation of the Danish past. In effect, what Bartholin was ultimately set on validating was the manly virtue of that individual who, through no fault of his own, had not benefited from the revealed faith of Christianity but who nonetheless lived according to the principles of a blame-free precursor to Christian conversion. This rehabilitation of the Scandinavian pagan, mooted in the works of Worm and his Icelandic informants, marked another significant step toward Romanticist interpretations of Norse myth and legend that would come to dominate enthusiasm for the Old North.

Despite the tendency toward patriotically overwrought 'medievalisms' from both the Swedes and the Danes, the wealth of manuscript information they collectively gathered together and translated, both into Latin and their native tongues, gave many scholars and literary artists throughout Europe access to the Old Norse legacy. During the early eighteenth century, with theories of a Rudbeckian nature now largely dismissed, less nationalist and better informed studies emerged in both Denmark and Sweden, although euhemerisation continued to be regarded as essential when it came to any discussion of the origins of Norse paganism.

Old Norse reception in England in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries

For a number of English scholars during the seventeenth century, knowledge about the pre-Christian Germanic practices, which became available through the publications of Worm and Bartholin particularly, stimulated several studies aiming to shed further light on the Anglo-Saxon past. Even before the Scandinavian material impacted on English antiquarians, William Camden (1561-1623) had perceived the ethnic and religious similarities between Bede's eighth-century description of pre-conversion Anglo-Saxons and Adam of Bremen's description of Scandinavian pagans (Quinn and Clunies Ross 1994, 189-90). Adding to this, in 1605, was Richard Verstegen (*c*. 1550-1640), an English-born Dutch national whose *A Restitution of decayed Intelligence in Antiquities, concerning the most Noble and Renowned English Nation*

had somewhat censoriously offered as detailed a study as was then possible of ancient Saxon beliefs.

Once vastly more documentary evidence came to light, the term ‘rune’ came under particular scrutiny by Sir Henry Spelman (*c.*1562-1641), who having corresponded at length with Ole Worm and been sent a copy of his *RUNIR*, deduced that in Old English the significance of ‘rune’ (*rún*) was ‘a secret’ or ‘a mystery’, a point that Worm noted in his future studies. Expanding on this was Robert Sheringham (1602-78), who, having read Resen’s translations of the *edda*s, particularly ‘Hávamál’, commented insightfully on Odin’s mastery of runes and also cited two verses from Worm’s ‘Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrok’ in Latin, including, of course, the mistranslation made by Magnús Ólafsson. Clearly influenced by Sheringham, Aylett Sammes (*c*. 1636 - *c*. 1679) in his compendious account of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse beliefs, the first to be published in English translation, also cites the egregious ‘Death-Song’ verse, the key lines of which he renders, perhaps with deliberate drollery, as, ‘There we shall Tope our bellies full / Of Nappy-Ale in full-brim’d Skull’ (Sammes 1676, 436; Fell 1992, 88-89; also Fell 1996, 29-35). Adding further insight into the ideological significance of Old Norse poetry were the essays ‘Of Heroick Virtue’ and ‘Of Poetry’ published in 1690 by the British diplomat Sir William Temple (1628-99) (Omberg 1976, 18-20).

While none of the scholars noted above could read Old Norse and were therefore reliant on Latin translations, a basis had been formed for a more rigorous and philologically accomplished approach. This was delivered by George Hickes (1642-1715), whose *Linguarum vett. septentrionalium thesaurus grammatico-criticus et archæologicus* (Treasury of the Old Northern Language, 1703-05) included the first English translations made directly from Norse poetry. Although making good use of Bartholin’s work, it was Hickes’s translation of ‘The Waking of Angantýr’, which he took from Olaus Verelius’s edition of 1672, that would come to rank alongside Ragnar’s ‘Death-Song’ in the fascination it held for scholars, poets and novelists of the latter half of the eighteenth century and beyond. This poem tells of the shield-maiden Hervor visiting the haunted grave of her ‘berserker’ father, Angantýr, in order to retrieve his magical but cursed sword, Tyrfing. Despite Angantýr’s warning that the sword would bring Hervor nothing but misfortune, he reluctantly gives it to her. Ghosts, magic swords and supernatural curses were the very ingredients to excite the Romantic imagination.

The relatively marginal influence of Norse aficionados on mainstream English culture of the time was in many ways reflected in the generally poor reception that all things Gothic were given by English literary artists of the Enlightenment establishment. Andrew Marvell (1621-78) in his poem 'A Letter to Doctor Ingelo' (1653), ostensibly a tribute to Queen Christina of Sweden, nevertheless notes the 'sins the Goth … committed against the liberal arts' (Donno, ed. 1983, 123, l. 71). Similarly, John Dryden (1631-1700) in his 'To the Earl of Roscommon' (1684) suggests that Gothic travesties 'Debas'd the majesty of Verse to Rhymes' (Hammond, ed., 1995, Vol. II, 219, l. 12), and in his 'To Sir Godfrey Kneller' (1694) that 'Goths and Vandals, a rude Northern race, / Did all the matchless Monuments deface' (cited in Omberg 1976, 86). However, judging from his 'Epistle to Dr Charleton' (1663), Dryden had not always been so critical of Germanic antiquity, for when it came to celebrating King Charles II allegedly taking refuge at Stonehenge in 1651, he evidently subscribes to Ole Worm's view, via Charleton (see Charleton 1663), that Stonehenge was built by the Danes, a people, says Dryden, of 'mighty visions' (Hammond, ed., 1995, Vol. I, 74, l. 56). Far less equivocal about the Gothic past and, in this case specifically, the scholarship of Ole Worm was Alexander Pope (1688-1744), who, in 1742, published the third of four versions of 'The Dunciad'.[1] The following deliberately archaised lines from it reveal exactly what Pope thought about such matters:

> But who is he, in closet close y-pent,
> Of sober face, with learned dust besprent?
> Right well mine eyes arede the myster wight,
> On parchment scraps y-fed, and Wormius [Ole Worm] hight.
> To future ages may thy dulness last,
> As thou preserv'st the dulness of the past!
>
> (Rumbold, ed. 1999, Bk 3, pp. 243-44, ll. 185-90)

If nothing else, Pope's ridicule does, at the very least, suggest that Worm's work was of sufficiently high profile to be worth an eminent English satirist's attention. Yet, while the

[1] The previous two versions of the 'The Dunciad' were published in 1728 and 1729, and the final version in 1743. In the two earliest versions, the same lines were targeted at the English antiquarian Thomas Hearne (1678-1735).

impact of Scandinavian efforts to rehabilitate their past remained merely latent in England, matters were about to change and when they did so, the outcome was nothing short of dramatic.

Mallet's *Histoire de Dannemarc* and Macpherson's Ossianic poetry

Underlying the Romantic Revival were three interrelated oppositions: northern or, more precisely, Germanic Europe versus Latinate southern Europe; Protestantism versus Catholicism; and the medieval versus the Classical. At the heart of these matters were issues concerning ethnic, religious and national identity, which, for Protestant countries, entailed establishing a cultural lineage to rival that of Greco-Romanism. While tensions between Denmark and Sweden had subsided by the mid eighteenth century, Scandinavians continued to resent anti-Gothic sentiments that still prevailed elsewhere in Europe. Determined to correct this was King Frederick V of Denmark (r. 1746-66), who commissioned the Swiss pedagogue and historian Paul Henri Mallet (1730-1807) to produce a new history of Denmark, one, as it turned out, that would also offer an aesthetic perspective.

Written in French and therefore much more accessible to Europe's bourgeoisie, Mallet published the initial fruits of his research in 1755 as *Introduction à l'Histoire de Dannemarc, où l'on traite de la Religion, des Loix, des Moeurs et des Usages des Anciens Danois*. In 1756 he published an expanded edition as *Monumens de la Mythologie et de la Poésie des Celtes, et particulièrement des anciens Scandinave, pour server de supplement et de preuves à L'Introduction à l'Histoire de Dannemarc'*, and in 1763 he published his comprehensive *Histoire de Dannemarc* in six volumes, this last having considerable impact in Britain. Mallet draws on all previous research in Denmark and Iceland but disdains unsubstantiated theorising, referring to Swedish scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as 'pretended guides' (Percy, trans, 1809, vol. 1, 39). Sections are devoted to the legal, military, and religious beliefs and practices in the Old North, and, in this last respect, include his French rendition of Peder Resen's Latin translation of Snorri Sturluson's 'Gylfaginning', an interrogation of Odin's wisdom by a certain King Gylfi, as contained in *The Prose Edda*.

Mallet, however, did not entirely abandon earlier religious cautions, for despite finding Snorri's euhemerised introduction to his *edda* to be absurd, he nonetheless gives his own tendentious explanation for the origins of an Odinnic cult. This, he argues, had its beginning in the first century BC, when King Odin of Scythia – a territory which lay between the Black Sea and the Caspian – had fled north in the face of advancing Roman legions. Moreover, one obvious shortcoming of Mallet's research was his inability to distinguish between the Celtic

and Nordic peoples, a confusion that would not be put right until Bishop Thomas Percy (1729-1811) published his *Northern Antiquities* in 1770, an English translation of *Histoire de Dannemarc*. Nonetheless, Mallet's *Histoire* chimed well with the dawning spirit of Romanticism and did more to bring respectability to early Scandinavian history than anything previously written. Informing and giving credibility to Mallet's later editions of his *Histoire* were Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of the 'noble savage' (1754), an idea that Bartholin had hinted at almost a hundred years previously, and Edmund Burke's notion of the 'northern sublime' (1756), a boreal challenge to a perceived Greco-Roman monopoly when it came to describing nature's wonders (Clunies Ross and Lönnroth 1999, 15). It is, then, not a little ironic that a good deal of the interest that Mallet's work stimulated in the Germanic past arose from what might rightly be called one of the greatest literary frauds ever perpetrated.

In 1760, the patriotic Scot, James Macpherson (1736-96), published his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language.* Two years later came the sequel *Fingal* and, in 1763, the concluding volume *Temora*. These allegedly authentic verse epics concerned the lives, beliefs and tribulations of the Highland tribes as told by the blind bard Ossian, a Caledonian Homer. Set, wholly improbably, in the third century AD, Ossianic poetry tells of the wars between the Celts and the barbarous sea-borne Scandinavians, who were worshippers of the brutal god Loda, a deity that Macpherson equated to Odin. What is more, said Macpherson, he had the manuscripts to prove it, although despite repeated requests, he never produced them, the simple reason being that they did not exist.

Delivered in a form to suit eighteenth-century tastes, Ossianic poetry was the first literary creation in the English language to pay any significant attention to the ancient Scandinavians, albeit that Macpherson's grasp of Old Norse mythology was at best superficial. Although Macpherson claims familiarity with Mallet's work, citing it on several occasions, it is most likely that he was getting his Scandinavian material second-hand from Hugh Blair (1718-1800), Professor of Rhetoric and *Belles Lettres* at the University of Edinburgh. It was Blair who wrote the preface for *Fragments* and published his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* in 1763, which Macpherson read in 1762, thus prior to publishing *Temora*. In whatever case, Macpherson both misrepresents and misreports Mallet's studies. It is also apparent that 'The Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrok' played an increasingly large role in Macpherson's descriptions of the Scandinavians and this he most certainly sourced from Hugh Blair's translation of Worm's text. Blair, however, was no great fan of Old Norse poetry, which

when compared to Ossianic poetry, he thought to be ‘like passing from a savage desart [sic] into a fertile and cultivated country’ (Omberg 1976, 31-32; Hall 2007, 14, *fn*. 50).

The impact of Macpherson’s fraud cannot be underestimated, for despite it being identified as such by a number of eminent critics, including Dr Samuel Johnson (1709-84), it became a literary sensation across Europe, for example, in Germany, serving as an inspiration for the *volkspoesie* enthusiasms of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) (see Gaskill 2003, 95-116). Set together, Mallet’s *Histoire de Dannemarc* and Macpherson’s Ossianic poetry established much of the literary basis and inspiration for the Romantic Revival and, as will now be examined, for the Gothic novel.

Gothicism and Horace Walpole

The ‘frenzied enthusiasm for “antique poetry”’ (Wawn 2007, 326) that began in England in the early 1760s included two major figures, both spurred on by Ossian and Mallet: the celebrated poet Thomas Gray and the industrious antiquarian Thomas Percy, noted above for his translation of Mallet’s *Histoire* in 1770.

In 1761, having absorbed himself in not only Mallet’s early studies of Old Norse literature but also the studies of Bartholin and, via Bartholin, the Latin translations of Þormóður Torfason, Gray wrote embellishments of two ‘odes’ derived from *eddic* poetry, with plans, later abandoned, to write more from these sources. The first was ‘The Fatal Sisters’, which had been included in the medieval Icelandic *Njáls saga* as *Darraðarsljóð* (The Lay of Dörruð [or Battle]). The setting is the Battle of Clontarf in Ireland in 1014, where, as the Vikings enter combat, a group of supernatural females, who Gray identifies as Valkyries, are depicted seated and chanting, while weaving the guts of the slain on a loom laden with severed heads. The second was ‘The Descent of Odin’ which was based on the poem known both as *Baldrs draumar* (Baldr’s Dreams) and *Vegtamskviða* (Vegtam’s, i.e. Odin’s, Lay). This tells of Odin’s journey into the realm of the dead to question a certain prophetess (*völva*) about the future of his knowingly ill-fated son, Baldr (Lonsdale, ed., 1969, 210-28; see also Finlay 2007, 1-20).

While Gray was toying with further sorties into the realms of Old Norse poetry, Thomas Percy was preparing his own Mallet-inspired Nordic miscellany, *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, which he, too, put together in 1761 but delayed publication until 1763. This included two poems that had already found favour with English scholars: firstly, ‘The Incantation of Hervor’, for which he credits both Hickes’s ‘The Waking of Angantýr’ and Hickes’s own source, Olaus

Verelius; secondly, 'The Dying Ode of Regner Lodbrok', for which he credits Worm and, as a consequence, replicates Magnús Ólafsson's error regarding drinking vessels in Valhalla.[2]

The question, then, is this: how much of the increasing fashion for Old Norse literature impressed itself on Horace Walpole, as between June and September 1764, prompted by a nightmare, he wrote *The Castle of Otranto*? Firstly, it is worth noting that Walpole clearly did not share Giorgio Vasari's contempt for Gothic architecture, having spent several decades and a small fortune painstakingly restoring Strawberry Hill, his country seat, in flamboyant Gothic style (see Miles 2007, 11). Significantly, Walpole regarded Strawberry Hill as a place where he was 'always impatient to be back with my own Woden and Thor, my own Gothic Lares' (Vol. 21, 433. To Horace Mann, 28 August, 1760).[3] Secondly, as Gray's close friend, often acting as his amanuensis, there was no possibility of Walpole being ignorant of Gray's fascination with the literary products of Germanic antiquity. Yet Walpole does not appear to be appreciative of Gray's efforts, for in a letter to George Montagu in 1761, he writes, 'Gray has translated two noble incantations from the Lord knows who, a Danish Gray, who lived the Lord knows when' (Vol. 9, 364. 5 May, 1761). Moreover, in another letter to Montagu in 1768, the same year that Walpole's Strawberry Hill printing press published Gray's odes, he declares that, although they are 'grand and picturesque', unlike his other poetry, they are 'not interesting' and 'do not touch any passion.' He concludes, 'Who can care through what horrors a Runic savage arrived at all the joys and glories they could conceive, the supreme felicity of boozing ale out of the skull of an enemy in Odin's Hall?' (Vol. 10, 255. 12 March, 1768).

Yet, in later years, Walpole was not consistent in these views, perhaps either because he no longer prized a literary flourish and wit over critical objectivity or because the untimely death of Gray now obliged greater respect. Whatever the reason may have been for Walpole's apparent *volte-face*, in 1776 he wrote to William Mason, who, apparently, had delivered him a drawing of 'The Fatal Sisters', saying, 'I hope you will draw *The Descent of Odin*, too, which I love as much as any of Gray's works' (Vol. 28, 271. 20 May, 1776). Similarly, in another letter to Mason in 1784, wherein Walpole expresses broad approval of a recent collection 'on the doctrines of the Scandinavian bards', he nonetheless adds that the author 'seems to have kept *The Descent of Odin* in his eye, though he had not the art of conjuring up the most forceful

[2] The three other poems Percy included in his *Five Pieces* are 'The Ransome of Egill the Scald', 'The Funeral Song of Hacon' and 'The Complaint of Harold'.

[3] All correspondence to and from Walpole has been accessed via *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University Library, online site http://images.library.yale.edu/hwcorrespondence/

feelings as Gray has done in a subject in which there is so much of the terrible' (Vol. 29, 331. 2 February, 1784).[4]

As for whether Walpole read Percy's *Runic Poetry,* the quote noted above regarding 'boozing ale out of the skull of an enemy' is likely to have been prompted by Percy's translation of Ragnar's 'Death-Song'. Indeed, Walpole was much enamoured of Percy's folkish antiquarianism, as seemingly was Percy of Walpole's interest. Accordingly, on the publication of Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765, Percy instructed his publisher, James Dodsley (1724-97), to send Walpole a copy, on receipt of which Walpole wrote to Percy thanking him and expressing his pleasure in reading the contents (Vol. 40, 372. 5 February, 1765). However, it is also quite possible that Walpole derived his knowledge of Ragnar's 'Death-Song' from reading extracts of early editions of Mallet's *Histoire*, which, as already noted, Gray had studied and would, therefore, almost certainly be known to Walpole (Omberg 1976, 36-47). Nevertheless, when Walpole read the 1763 edition of Mallet's *Histoire*, which he did in 1765, he found it something of a chore:

> I have been … buried in Runic poetry and Danish wars … written by one Mallet, a Frenchman, a sensible man, but I cannot say he has the art of making a tiresome subject agreeable. There are six volumes, and I am stuck fast in the fourth.
>
> (Vol. 10, 148. To George Montagu, 19 February, 1765)

While Walpole may have been equivocal about 'Runic poetry' in the early 1760s, his influence on the emerging Gothic scene in England was not only manifest in terms of his architectural enthusiasms but also in terms of the effect that his creative imagination had on Gothic-inspired visual arts. In 1763, a year in which many of the elements of Gothicism came together in England, is also marked by the arrival in London of the young Henri Fuseli (1741-1825), a painter who would go on to become the most celebrated, indeed, controversial artist of Gothic 'otherness' in the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. According to one anecdote, Fuseli declared that Walpole was 'the first patron I ever had', the commission in question being a scene from Boccaccio's Theodore and Honorio (Spooner 1853, Vol. 2, 72), and in 1797, along with William Blake (1757-1827), he was commissioned to illustrate a new

[4] The work referred to by Walpole is Edward Jerningham, *The Rise and Progress of Scandinavian Poetry: A Poem in Two Parts* (1784). The poem is dedicated to Walpole.

edition of Gray's poetry, including his Gothic odes (O'Donoghue 2007, 120-21). It is, then, curious that Walpole considered certain of Fuseli's paintings to be disturbingly excessive. One instance of this is apparent from Walpole's scribbled note in the margins of his 1785 exhibition catalogue that judged Fuseli's exhibit 'The Mandrake: A Charm' to be 'shockingly mad, madder than ever: quite mad'. This verdict, as one recent critic has pointed out, 'Coming from the author of … a phantasmagorian Gothic novel inspired by a bad dream … was a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black' (Blanning 2010, 68-69). Indeed, it seems very likely that Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* was, either directly or indirectly, an inspiration for many of Fuseli's wilder imaginings, most notably his vision of sexual terror 'The Nightmare' (1781).

There can, however, be no doubt that both Gray and Walpole were utterly enthralled by Ossianic poetry and, at least in the first place, convinced of its authenticity, as the following letters from 1760-61 indicate: Walpole corresponds with the Scottish historian Sir David Dalrymple (1726-92) on behalf of Gray, asking him to supply more information about Macpherson's 'Erse' poems and quoting Gray as saying, 'Is there any more to be had of equal beauty, or at all approaching it?' (Vol. 14, 106. *c.* April, 1760); Gray asserting elsewhere, 'I am gone mad about them … I am resolved to believe them genuine, spite of the Devil and the Kirk' (To Thomas Wharton, July, 1760, in Mitford, ed., 1835, 249); and Walpole's report to Dalrymple that, for clarity's sake, he has advised Macpherson to 'have the names prefixed to the [poem's] speeches' and adding, 'My doubts of the genuineness are all vanished' (Vol. 15, 71-72. 14 April, 1761). In this respect, and despite their later circumspection about Macpherson's sincerity, Walpole and Gray were very much of their time.

In conclusion, the significant extent to which matters runic and Ossianic were on Walpole's literary horizons when he wrote *The Castle of Otranto* seems undeniable. With this in mind, a plot involving a descent into secret chambers, the hostile presence of ghosts and giants, and the indefatigable, noble and manly hero seeking justice amid moribund Gothic 'gloomth', as Walpole was wont to call it, might well have been taken from the Icelandic *edda*s. Moreover, as Rix convincingly points out, that oversized sword that exhausted so many at Otranto was most likely to have been inspired by the sword Tyrfing in 'The Waking of Angantýr' (2011, 7). As Rix also demonstrates, beyond *The Castle of Otranto* English literary culture became fully aware of Old Norse literature as a resource for plot-lines and atmospherics, consciously and conspicuously so by the last decade of the eighteenth century, as is apparent in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) (Rix 2011, 13-15).

So deeply embedded and fashionable did the Old Northern worldview become that, by the end of the nineteenth century, Bram Stoker presents the Viking biological heritage as a worrying trait in respect of his most famous Gothic villain but as an admirable one in respect of his stalwart heroes. So it is that Dracula boasts of his descent from Icelandic 'Berserkers' (Auerbach and Skal, eds. 1997, Ch. 3, 34), in other words, those like Angantýr, while Quincy Morris is praised as 'a moral Viking' (Auerbach and Skal, eds. 1997, Ch. 13, 156), a gentlemanly Ragnar Lodbrok, maybe. Stoker's view that the Vikings had endowed their descendants with formidable doughtiness is again apparent his *The Gates of Life* (1908).[5] In this, the tellingly named young Harold An Wolf is lectured at length by his parson father, a man proud of his 'Gothic though the Dutch' ancestry (p. 32) and a keen student of Icelandic sagas:

> 'There never was, my boy, such philosophy making for victory as that held by our Vikings. It taught that whoever was never wounded was never happy. It was not enough to be victorious. The fighter should contend against such odds that complete immunity was impossible … Why, their strength, and endurance, and resolution, perfected by their life of constant hardihood and stress, became so ingrained in their race, that to this day, a thousand years after they themselves have passed away, their descendants have some of their fine qualities.'
>
> (p. 33)

As Stoker was born and raised in Clontarf, which, as previously noted, was the early eleventh-century scene of what, in effect, was the last gasp of Viking belligerence on Irish soil and the setting for the widely anthologised 'The Fatal Sisters', for example, Volume 2 of Matthew Lewis's *The Tales of Wonder* of 1801,[6] it likely that Viking fervour was instilled in him from an early age. Nonetheless, Stoker was far from unique among his contemporaries in this respect and few of his readers would have failed to appreciate what was being signified by his

[5] *The Gates of Life* is the US title of Stoker's *The Man*, which was initially published in the UK 1905. The full text of *The Gates of Life* can be found at https://archive.org/stream/gateslife00stokgoog#page/n42/mode/2up/search/Northern Accessed 25th November, 2014.

[6] For Lewis's *The Tales of Wonder*, see https://archive.org/details/taleswonder02scotgoog: 'The Fatal Sisters', pp. 347-51. 'The Descent of Odin' is also anthologised in this volume, pp. 352-57. Accessed 29th November, 2014.

references to Viking machismo. In certain respects, the Nordic past and Gothic fantasies had become tantamount to synonymous.

While Rix's study makes useful progress in reconnecting Gothicism with the Gothic novel, it is hoped that this survey of the emergence of Gothicism as a key presence in English literature helps by providing even more context. It nevertheless remains the case that opportunities for further research into the Gothicism of the Gothic are worthy of investigation.