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Title: Introduction: Melmoth's Global Afterlives

Abstract

In this Introduction to the special issue, the editors read Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and its circuitous afterlives through the lens of recent, revised critical understandings of globalgothic. Driven by its striking depiction of evil, its eccentric narrative structure, and its atmospheric intensity, *Melmoth the Wanderer's* cultural impact reverberated across nineteenth- and twentieth-century literatures and visual media, an influence which continues to evolve to this day. Significantly, for a text preoccupied with the problematics of translation, transcription, and transliteration, *Melmoth's* network of global influence is fraught with anomalies and complications. From its first appearance in nineteenth-century Russia in French translation to its rediscovery in twentieth-century Latin America, the global afterlives of *Melmoth* expose the vagaries and idiosyncrasies of transnational textuality, both in Maturin's era and our own. The introduction ends with an overview of the essays collected in this volume – the first scholarly study dedicated to tracing the many afterlives of Maturin's *Melmoth*.

Keywords: Charles Robert Maturin, Melmoth, Gothic, Gothic romance, globalgothic, afterlives.

In November 1820, just a month after its initial publication, Charles Robert Maturin's (1780-1824) *Melmoth the Wanderer* was subject to a mixed review in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. On the one hand, the review recognises Maturin as a writer of 'dark romance' who 'can make the most practiced reader tremble as effectively as Mrs Radcliffe, and what is better, he can make him think as deeply as Mr Godwin'.¹ On the other, the reviewers direct Maturin to 'correct a good deal more' of a series of compositional faults that, if left unattended, may doom his work to be forgotten, and 'shut him out altogether, or nearly so, from the knowledge of posterity'.² This early warning about the future reception of Maturin's work can now be said to be at least partially misjudged. It is an impressive feat of survival that his work has garnered some significant reappraisals in twenty-first-century literary scholarship, including Christina Morin's *Charles Robert Maturin and the Haunting of Irish Romantic Fiction* (2011) and Jim Kelly's *Charles Maturin: Authorship, Authenticity and the Nation* (2011). Testifying to this critical rehabilitation, Julia M. Wright suggests that 'Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* is conventionally invoked as a gothic *tour de force*, a defining moment in the genre of the gothic novel'.³ While Julian Moynahan goes as far as to argue that *Melmoth* 'is probably the greatest of Gothic romances in English, and it is certainly a major work of Anglo-Irish literature.'⁴ Indeed, the villainous characterisation and Faustian plight of Maturin's Melmoth has influenced writers and artists transnationally since its publication, as exemplified in Honoré de Balzac's (1799-1850) *Melmoth Reconciled* (1835), Oscar Wilde's (1854-1900) adoption of the moniker 'Sebastian Melmoth' while in exile in France, and Sarah Perry's (1979-) recent rewriting *Melmoth* (2018).

Yet, as Christina Morin has noted, Maturin spent much of his literary life reconciling himself to 'the problem of recognition'.⁵ *Melmoth the Wanderer* and his five-act play *Bertram; or, The Castle of St. Aldobrand* (1816) aside, much of Maturin's oeuvre made little impact upon the late Romantic world of letters. On his death, critical obituaries of Maturin

characterised him as a writer who indulged ‘in the extravagancies of an over-weaning imagination’ rather ‘than in the refinements of a correct taste or the coherency of intellectual power’. Recalling the language of the 1820 review of *Melmoth* in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, the obituaries tended to position his writing as unruly and improper, with Maturin as ‘a man of genius’ whose eccentricities of style rendered his fiction somewhat underwhelming.⁶ Yet, it is Maturin’s very excesses of style, setting, and rhetoric that would give birth to the transgressive and infernal character of Melmoth: a figure who would come to endure across time as a representation of the wandering Faustian outcast seeking a new bearer of his curse: a Faust made Mephistopheles.⁷

The present volume represents the first scholarly study dedicated to tracing the many afterlives of Maturin’s *Melmoth*, with our contributors locating this influence across a diverse range of national and regional cultures, including those of Ireland, France, Russia, and Latin America. Charting *Melmoth the Wanderer*’s global influence in this way resonates with recent and timely reconceptualisations of the parameters of globalgothic itself.⁸ In the introduction to her foundational edited collection *Globalgothic* (2013), Glennis Byron observed that ‘gothic has energetically participated in the cultural flows and deterritorialisations that characterise globalisation’, emphasising, in turn, the participation of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century Gothic in these movements.⁹ The view that Gothic reflects and is produced by an ease of flow of capital, people, and representation across borders has been challenged by the recent turn toward decolonising accounts of globalgothic, which instead recognise the Gothic’s tendency, as Rebecca Duncan puts it, to ‘dramatize the trauma’ of cross-border and cross-territory migrations and movements, where flow is replaced by struggle.¹⁰ Indeed, accounts of the globalgothic that focus predominantly on contemporary forms of capitalist production and hegemony obscure ‘a much longer transregional history of capitalism, in the context of which late-twentieth-century shifts

appear neither anomalous nor wholly unprecedented'.¹¹ Thus, globalgothic can 'make visible' the network of colonial connections that localised gothic may suppress and silence; it can interrogate 'from a certain regional perspective, the transregional dynamics and connections that give rise to the moments of social and environmental destabilization to which gothic responds'.¹² *Melmoth the Wanderer* is one of the rare Romantic Gothic texts of the first wave that engages overtly with the very 'transregional' dynamics globalgothic interrogates, especially in Maturin's tracing of European colonial expansion back to the seventeenth century. Long before modern globalisation truly emerged, capitalistic flows and the colonising forces connected to transnational movement were reflected in manifestations of Gothic writing, then, right from its so-called 'first wave' of novels in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.¹³

More specifically, Maturin's text situates Ireland's fraught colonial politics within a larger nexus of European imperialism. As a curate of the Anglican church in Ireland, Maturin was a member of the Protestant Ascendancy and thus a benefactor of Anglo-Irish hegemony in nineteenth-century Ireland. His fictional protagonist, Melmoth, is also anchored in this sectarian history. The Wicklow family estate to which he finally returns at the novel's denouement was first granted to his younger brother for his services as an officer during the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland.¹⁴ Melmoth's movements through space and across borders between colonised peripheries (Ireland, the Indian Ocean) and colonial centres (London, Madrid) suggest the coloniality of his character. But we may disentangle such connotations from those elements of Maturin's text that cohere with discourses of nationhood that locate Ireland itself as a colonised space. As Laura Doyle has articulated, the revolutionary strands of British and Irish Romantic gothic writing often operate at the troubling 'conjunction of a republican modernity and a violent barbarous coloniality, of freedom and enslavement' and they echo (and perhaps even act as a warning against) anticolonial uprisings of the period.¹⁵

Maturin's anti-Catholic rhetoric may echo the anti-Catholicism of eighteenth-century Gothic romance, but it is supplemented by Melmoth's excoriating critique of almost all religious systems in 'The Tale of the Indians'. A few passages later, the character's mordant satire on the 'breathless rapacity' with which 'European vessels' ravage and plunder indigenous resources further complicates the text's representation of European colonialism, equally indicting the global empires of both Britain and Spain.¹⁶ The novel's critique of colonial legacies is also embodied in its form. Doyle has argued convincingly that the Russian doll structure of *Melmoth*, with its many framed and embedded narratives, draws in part from 'the multiply framed tale-telling' of *One Thousand and One Nights*, which was first translated from Arabic into English in the early eighteenth century (1706–1721), and which Doyle suggests uses its a-synchronic structure to address 'inter-imperially shared practices of domination' across colonial and colonised sites.¹⁷

Maturin may be regarded in accounts of world gothic as being – alongside his Scottish contemporary James Hogg – on the 'Celtic fringe' of a Gothic romance genre intimately connected with Englishness,¹⁸ but the influence of *Melmoth the Wanderer* has been central to a range of national cultures, spanning Irish, French, Russian, and Mexican literature, film, and art. Such transmissions of *Melmoth* are far from straightforward. As Chris Baldick persuasively argues, one of the central paradoxes of Maturin's novel is that, on the one hand, its central wanderer fails to transmit and pass on the pact that binds him. Yet, however haphazardly plotted by Maturin, on the other hand Melmoth's *story* passes through numerous narrative voices in the text. The novel 'is secretly as much about transmission as it is about transgression,' Baldick suggests, 'but its very structure assumes a principle of transmissibility which its theology denies'.¹⁹ Inverting the paradox of their source text, the appropriations of *Melmoth* by various national literatures from the 1820s onward demonstrate hospitality towards the fiendish Melmoth, but not necessarily veracity to the text that birthed

him. Underlining the circularity of his wandering, in Maturin's novel Melmoth ultimately returns to the domestic and womb-like space in Wicklow where he claims he was born and where he expects to die. Pre-figuring his textual dispersal beyond Ireland after death, Melmoth meets his end on a precipice overhanging the Irish Sea: the 'wide, waste, engulfing ocean!'.²⁰ Sea has the capacity to engulf but this is no burial. Beyond the boundaries of Maturin's source text, Melmoth is carried outwards from the rocks of Ireland, landing first in France.

Melmoth the Wanderer was abridged in two early French translations of 1821, namely Mme E. F. Begin's *L'Homme du Mystère, ou Histoire de Melmoth le Voyageur* and Jean Cohen's (1781–1848) *Melmoth ou L'homme Errant*. As demonstrated by Catherine Lanone, the figure of Melmoth had lasting influence in nineteenth-century French letters. Honoré de Balzac's ironised sequel *Melmoth Réconcilié* (1835) ends with the extinguishment of Melmoth's curse after it is exchanged between Parisian financiers and then trickled down amidst the working class. Resurrections of the curse follow in the writings of Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), Comte de Lautréamont (1846–1870), and Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849). It is important to note, however, that prior to these literary responses to *Melmoth*, the text had already been translated into the visual arts by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) in his 1831 painting *Interior of a Dominican Convent in Madrid*. Arguably inspired by the complex ekphrastic manoeuvres of Maturin's text, in which the description of Melmoth's portrait is limned via a quotation from Robert Southey's *Thabala the Destroyer* (1801), Delacroix's painting depicts a scene from *Melmoth*'s interpolated 'Tale of the Spaniard'. More specifically, Delacroix's painting evokes the lurid and oppressive gloom of the Madrid convent in which Monçada, one of Melmoth's intended victims, is imprisoned as a young man. Given their mutual desire to traverse the medial boundaries of the visual and literary arts, it is unsurprising that Baudelaire was as fascinated by Delacroix as he was intrigued by

Maturin. Certainly, it was Delacroix's ability to meld the textual and the visual that inspired Baudelaire to describe him as 'a poet in painting'.²¹

[Insert Image]

Figure 1: Eugène Delacroix, *Interior of a Dominican Convent in Madrid* (1831).
(Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with the W. P. Wilstach Fund, 1894, W1894-1-2.)

In the twentieth century, the intermedial potentialities of Maturin's text continued to accrue new saliences across both Europe and the Americas. *Melmoth's* temporal transgressions, its hallucinatory and dream-like qualities, made it an important touchstone in surrealism's case for privileging Gothic over realist forms, an influence that André Breton (1896–1966) articulated most forcefully in his renowned preface of 1954. Lanone notes that Breton's rich description of *Melmoth the Wanderer* as a 'meteorite flashing' amidst its contemporaneous Gothic novels, which produces 'an endless shower of ashes' cascading down in the wake of its numerous narrative transgressions, can itself be read as an image of the dispersion of the novel's influence.²² H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937) recognised the 'directness and vitality' that Maturin's prose could achieve, presenting an existential evolution of the British and Irish Romantic Gothic novel in which, in Lovecraft's words, 'fear is taken out of the realm of the conventional and exalted into a hideous cloud over mankind's very destiny'.²³ These descriptions of *Melmoth the Wanderer* as transcendent, mutable, and extramundane emphasise the dynamism of the novel's legacies.

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue provide the most sustained account in scholarship to date of *Melmoth the Wanderer's* lasting, but hitherto underappreciated, dispersion across, and influence upon, a diverse range of national and transnational contexts. Beginning our discussion of these afterlives in this special issue, Christina Morin's fresh intervention articulates the novel's global influence by drawing from

Pascale Casanova's conceptualisation of 'the world republic of letters'; that is, the 'long historical process', as Casanova frames it, 'through which international literature – literary creation, freed from its political and national dependencies – has progressively invented itself'.²⁴ In its intertwining of two methods of investigation, the intertextual and the postcolonial, Casanova's study provides an apt jumping off point for addressing some of the questions raised by the global legacies of *Melmoth*.²⁵ Beginning with Morin's response to Casanova, this special issue of *Gothic Studies* not only highlights and geo-historically locates *Melmoth the Wanderer*'s influence in and beyond gothic forms, but also reveals the spontaneous, shifting, and fluid networks of transnational cultural exchange in which the text participates. One important strand in the complexity of *Melmoth the Wanderer*'s afterlives and the 'literary capital' it has achieved since publication lies, as Morin argues, in the prominence that storytellers themselves are given in the novel's dizzying interlacing of narratives. Drawing from and expanding upon Regina B. Oost's work on the novel, Morin reminds us that Maturin's representation of authorial figures such as Bidy Brannigan and Adonijah forms part of his tactic of indulging and frustrating readerly expectations, revealing the author's own disillusionment at the literary hierarchies that shaped late-Romantic cultures of writing and reception.

Melmoth became part of literary Europe's Faustian iconography in the nineteenth century, appropriated particularly in French and Russian fictions. In her reading of Alexander Pushkin's (1799-1837) reimagining of Melmoth, and the 'mini-Melmoths' that appear in the work of Pushkin's contemporaries, Muireann Maguire charts the 'transcreation' of Maturin's text, a concept that she adopts from Translation Studies. Maguire, then, explores the 'process of assimilation, ironization and absorption' that shapes Melmoth's afterlives in Russia, from when Pushkin first read Jean Cohen's 1821 French translation of the novel in 1823, to twentieth-century reimaginings. The novel's critical location as an endpoint, often being

referred to as ‘the last great gothic novel of the Romantic era’ is continually challenged in this special issue.²⁶ Colin Azariah-Kribbs, for example, persuasively articulates the influence of Maturin’s text upon ‘global necromanticism’ in the late Romantic period, which is particularly evident in Mary Shelley’s (1797–1851) *The Last Man* (1826). Azariah-Kribbs sees the reflection of Maturin’s critique of the limitations of language at work in Shelley’s own ambiguous depiction of the figure of the wanderer. As Jim Kelly points out in his essay on the circumlocutory dimensions of Maturin’s style, the novel, the surrealists’ admiration aside, is rarely praised for its repetitions and lack of formal symmetry. Kelly explores and locates Maturin’s novel as a touchstone in transnational debates around the ‘concision and prolixity’ of literature, finding even that the ‘modern’ Baudelaire conjures his own ‘circumlocutory aestheticism’ in his drawing from Maturin and Poe. Kelly further suggests that British suspicions of ‘Irish eloquence’ may have marginalised Maturin’s influence upon anglophone nineteenth-century literature. As we may expect, the legacies of *Melmoth* are keenly felt in Irish writing, a thread which Madeline Potter follows across generations of Irish Gothic from the *fin de siècle* to modern and contemporary fiction. Potter traces Maturin’s influence well beyond the work of his great nephew Oscar Wilde to the doubling and ‘mirrored reversals’ of Bram Stoker (1847–1912), (who, like Maturin before him, would research for hours at a time in Marsh’s Library, Dublin), and John Banville’s (1945–) not-quite-Gothic novel *Mefisto* (1986). Potter’s contribution considers the thematic work that the figure of the wanderer achieves in relation to discourses of nationhood, particularly its afterlives in an Anglo-Irish gothic tradition and beyond.

Lisa Lampert-Weissig’s contribution locates Maturin’s writing of *Melmoth* as one dimension of a troubling lineage of gothic anti-Judaism, which is still echoed today in modern and contemporary reimaginings of wanderers, including of Melmoth. In her argument, Lampert-Weissig situates a body of modern Hebrew Gothic, which appropriates

the figure of the wanderer, as potentially providing a response – and, indeed, a counterpoint – to gothic othering and the marginalisation of Jewish experience. Questions of exile (albeit in this instance self-imposed) are raised, too, in our own essay in the special issue, which considers the influence of Melmoth in twentieth-century Latin America via its complex engagement with European surrealism. This is a connection made flesh by the journey of the Spanish surrealist director Luis Buñuel (1900–1983) from continental Europe (via the United States) to central America, and his arrival into the melting pot of postwar Mexican cinema. A decade after his arrival in Mexico, Buñuel bonded with the Colombian novelist Álvaro Mutis (1923–2013) in 1956 – both men sharing a passion for the Gothic novel. Mutis repeatedly acknowledges *Melmoth the Wanderer*'s importance in the development of a 'Tropical Gothic', yet the text's influence across a diverse range of Latin American texts reveals the generic malleability of *Melmoth*'s Gothicism.

'If Melmoth failed to achieve the ubiquity of other titular monsters – Dracula, Frankenstein, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,' Sarah Perry, author of *Melmoth*, writes, 'nonetheless the name echoes on, persistently, the Wanderer not yet at rest'.²⁷ Exploring the circuitous routes by which Maturin's text traversed Europe and the Americas, the articles in this special issue collectively attest to the multidirectional flow of transnational transmission, with Melmoth's legacy both informing and informed by the diverse cultural contexts through which he continues to circulate. The publication of this special issue by Edinburgh University Press, however, returns Melmoth to the city where he was first transmitted to the reading public over two hundred years ago, when the Edinburgh publisher Archibald Constable printed the first edition of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, as championed by one Sir Walter Scott. Spatially and temporally, then, Melmoth continues to circle back in the twenty-first century, not as a mere repetition, but adding fresh layers to his legacies and scholarly afterlife, within and beyond the globalgothic frame.

¹ ‘*Melmoth the Wanderer, &c.*,’ *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 8, no. 44 (Nov 1820): 168.

² *Ibid.*, 161.

³ Julia M Wright, *Ireland, India and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 146.

⁴ Julian Moynahan, *Anglo-Irish: The Literary Imagination in a Hyphenated Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 116.

⁵ Christina Morin, *Charles Robert Maturin and the Haunting of Irish Romantic Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2011), 2.

⁶ ‘Obituary of Maturin,’ *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (January 1825): 84–85. Cited as part of ‘Ragged, Livid & On Fire: The Wanderings of Melmoth at 200,’ an exhibition curated by Dr Christina Morin (University of Limerick) and Dr Jason McElligott (Marsh’s Library), Marsh’s Library, Dublin, July 2022.

⁷ Chris Baldick, ‘Introduction,’ in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, ed. Douglas Grant (Oxford: Oxford UP), xvi.

⁸ The field of globalgothic studies emerged from a research network led by Glennis Byron at the University of Stirling in 2008.

⁹ See Glennis Byron, ‘Introduction,’ in *Globalgothic*, ed. Glennis Byron (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013), p. 3.

¹⁰ Rebecca Duncan, ‘Introduction: Decolonising Gothic,’ *Gothic Studies* 24, no. 3 (2022): 221.

¹¹ Rebecca Duncan, ‘Introduction: Globalgothic beyond Globalisation,’ in *The Edinburgh Companion to Globalgothic*, ed. Rebecca Duncan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2023), 2.

¹² Duncan, ‘Globalgothic,’ 13.

¹³ See Rictor Norton, ed. *Gothic Readings: The First Wave, 1764–1840* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000).

¹⁴ Charles Robert Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, ed. Douglas Grant (Oxford: Oxford UP, [1820] 2008), 26.

¹⁵ Laura Doyle, “At World’s Edge: Post/Coloniality, Charles Maturin, and the Gothic Wanderer,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 65, no. 4 (2011), 525.

¹⁶ Maturin, *Melmoth*, 300.

¹⁷ Laura Doyle, *Inter-imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2020), 92.

¹⁸ James Kelly, ‘Gothic and the Celtic Fringe, 1750–1850,’ in *The Gothic World*, eds. Dale Townshend and Glennis Byron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013), 47–48.

¹⁹ Baldick, ‘Introduction,’ xii.

²⁰ Maturin, *Melmoth*, 542.

²¹ Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Salon of 1846,’ in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 65.

²² Catherine Lanone, ‘Verging on the Gothic: Melmoth’s Journey to France,’ in *European Gothic: A Spirited Exchange, 1760–1960*, ed. Avril Horner (Manchester: Manchester UP), 71.

²³ H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1973), 23.

²⁴ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.D. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004), xii.

²⁵ Since 2011, three articles published in *Gothic Studies* have read *Melmoth the Wanderer* by focusing on the ways in which the text reflects, challenges, and gothicises ethical and religious systems of its period. See Nathaniel Leach, ‘The Ethics of Excess in Melmoth the Wanderer,’ *Gothic Studies* 13, no. 1 (2011), 21–37; Dermot A. Ryan, “‘This Vast Machine’”: Catholicism

as System in Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*,' *Gothic Studies* 16, no. 2 (2014), 20–32; Keith M. C. O'Sullivan 'His Dark Ingredients: The Viscous Palimpsest of Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*,' *Gothic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016), 74–85.

²⁶ Clive Bloom, *Gothic Histories: The Taste for Terror, 1764 to the Present* (London; New York: Continuum, 2010), 81.

²⁷ Sarah Perry, 'Introduction,' in *Melmoth the Wanderer* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2018), viii–ix.