

DARK IMAGININGS

GOthic TALES of WONDER

In 18th-century Europe a revolutionary shift in literary and artistic expression took place that became known as 'the Gothic'. Nightmarish images of barbarity, oppression and the supernatural were abstracted from an earlier medieval (or 'Gothic') age and fused with a Romantic focus on imagination and emotion, resulting in works of frightening and thrilling originality. Leading exponents of the gothic set their creative works in dark and claustrophobic spaces or wild, threatening landscapes, and infused them with melancholy, gloom and fear.

Dark imaginings: Gothic tales of wonder explores the expression of the gothic from the mid-18th to the end of the 19th centuries.

Cold, damp, lone

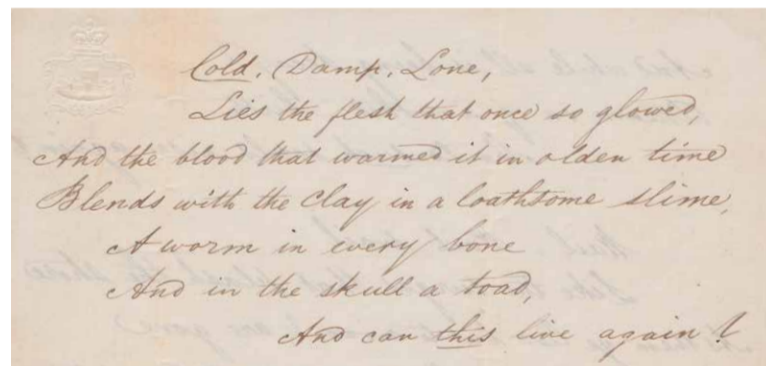
Cold, Damp, Lone,
Lies the flesh that once so glowed,
And the blood that warmed it in the olden time,
Blends with the Clay in a loathsome slime,
A worm in every bone
And in the skull a toad,
And can this live again?

Sleep, Sleep, Sleep—
Not as thou once hast slept
When the mind that moved thee to ill or good
Waked with thee, slept with thee, as thou would—
And in such a sleep as thou
Perchance it is sleeping now
Can that mind ride again?

Fade, Fade, Fade,
Atoms that crawl the earth,
While your weak frame fails in its puny powers,
And the thing you call soul, itself devours,
And while all is being decayed
Dream on of another birth
Should such souls rise again?

Wail, Wail, Wail,
Like the surges that plash the shore,
As them ye live but to moan – & are gone
And the next short lived waves are moaning on,
And the moaning shall not fail,
Till the Sea itself be no more,
Why live & wail again?

This unattributed handwritten graveyard poem is an interesting example of Victorian-era gothic verse. The paper is blind stamped De La Rue & Co with a crest featuring a crenellated castle at the centre. While this would not have been the crest of the anonymous poet—the De La Rue company was a successful manufacturer of elaborate stationery in London from the 1830s on—the medieval castle adds a nice gothic flourish to the manuscript. The graveyard poets of the early to mid-18th century reflected a taste for "mournful piety" and were characterised by a melancholic reflection on mortality. This writer from a later period, however, is neither pious nor melancholic. *Cold, Damp, Lone* is characterised by confronting imagery ("loathsome slime"), a crisis of faith ("the thing you call soul") and existential questions (Why live & wail again?).



Anon, *Cold, Damp, Lone* (manuscript). England, ca 1840. Ink on letterhead.

Photographing phantoms

Early in the development of photographic technology, practitioners wondered whether cameras might be able to record evidence of the paranormal—the spirit world, and 'haunted' photographs began to appear. In reality, ingenious photographers developed techniques of inserting images of would-be apparitions into their photographs. In the 1850s when glass-plate negatives became universal, photographers realised that composite images could be made by sandwiching two or more negatives together. Thus, a faint image of a 'dearly departed' could be made to hover in the background of a family studio portrait.

People wanted to believe in the authenticity of spirit photography, a phenomenon born from obsessive mourning practices typical of the Victorian age. However, in contrast, there was also a growing tendency to create humorous spirit photographs. This albumen print of a carefully composed tableau shows a diaphanous apparition ascending garden stairs to the sheer terror of two villagers. Scrutiny of the sitters' clothing suggests they may have been recruited from the local countryside or manor, but the melodrama they enact suggests they were wholly complicit in the diversion they were helping create. Dating from the 1860s this photograph may have been taken for commercial reasons, but could also have been executed by a gentleman landowner for his personal amusement.

See Jen Cadwallader, "Spirit photography and the Victorian culture of mourning", *Modern language studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (Winter 2008), pp. 8–31.



Anon, Untitled photograph. England: mid to late 19th century. Albumen print.



Robert Burns, *Tam O'Shanter*, [Edinburgh]: For the members of the Royal association for the promotion of the fine arts in Scotland, 1855.

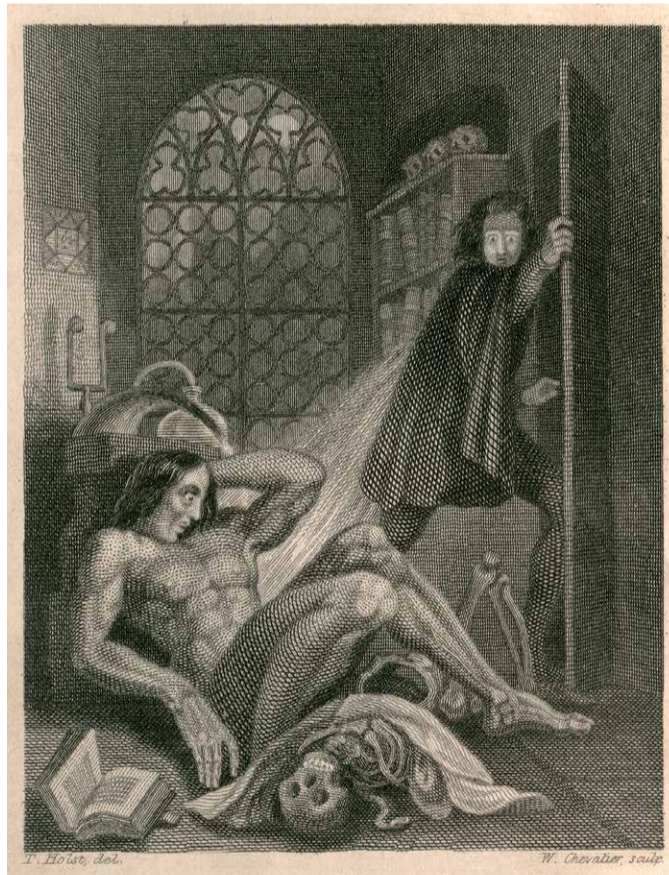
Frankenstein's creature revealed

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (first published in 1818) is arguably the best-known work of English language gothic fiction, rivalled only by Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). It came into being near Geneva in 1816, when Lord Byron issued Mary and Percy Shelley and John William Polidori with a challenge to write a "ghost" (or supernatural) story. Polidori's *The Vampyre* is the other enduring creation that resulted from the challenge.

The third edition of *Frankenstein* is the first published edition to include a visual representation of Frankenstein, together with his unnamed "creature". This 1831 edition was part of a new, single-volume "Standard Novels" series, which included two illustrations per volume. Theodor von Holst (1810–1844), a young protégé of Henry Fuseli, was chosen to illustrate Frankenstein, and what he depicted, paired with an epigraph and convenient page number, is the very moment the creature's eyes have opened and his creator flees the room in terror.

Von Holst's illustration is no simple realisation of the scene as Frankenstein relates it in the book. Ian Haywood, in a multi-layered analysis of the image, identifies, for example, striking elements not directly derived from the text, from the beam of light expanding across the image and the gothic vaulted window, to the scientific glassware and set of galvanic electrodes in the background. And then there is the way the creature himself is portrayed: Von Holst's realisation is just one of an endless panoply of images inspired, rather than prescribed, by Mary Shelley's book.

See Ian Haywood at <https://romanticillustrationnetwork.wordpress.com/2016/11/26/image-of-the-month-theodor-von-holst-frankenstein-1831/> (posted 26 November 2016) and Martin Myron, *Gothic nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic imagination*. [London]: Tate Publishing, 2006, p. 71.



Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The modern Prometheus*, 3rd edition. London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831.

"A horrid spear of darkest jet"

Robert Thornton's *Temple of flora* (part of *A new illustration of the sexual system of Linnaeus*, 1799–1810) features illustrations of plants in dramatically Romantic, and sometimes allegorical settings. In his description of the Dragon arum, Thornton ventures into gothic territory in his description, which begins:

She came peeping from her purple crest with mischief fraught: from her green covert projects a horrid spear of darkest jet, which she brandishes aloft; which she brandishes aloft: issuing from her nostrils flies a noisome vapour infecting the ambient air; her hundred arms are interspersed with white, as in the garments of the inquisition; and on her swollen trunk are observed the speckles of a mighty dragon: her sex is strangely intermingled with the opposite! confusion dire! – all framed in horror.

There are notable variations between the different iterations of the print. While the print from the University's collection is tonally

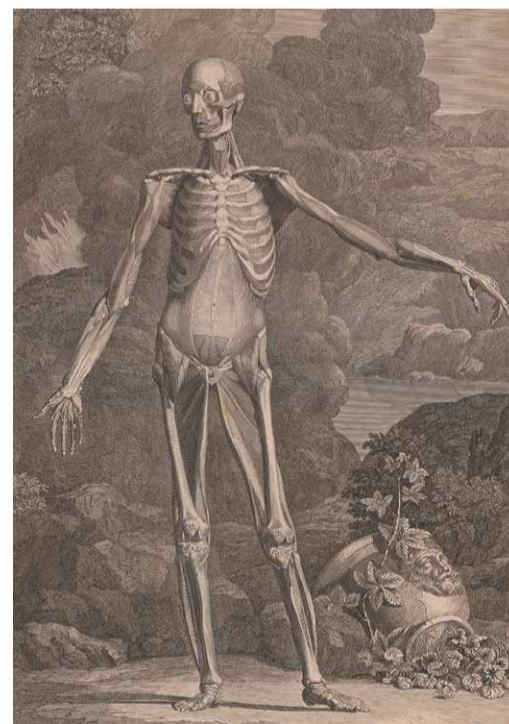


William I. Ward and Peter Henderson, *The Dragon arum*. London: Published by Dr. Thornton, 1801. Mezzotint.

Death in Venice

The widespread interest in gothic fiction after early works by Horace Walpole and others was in part fuelled by new trends in publishing. Gothic "bluebooks", for example—a variation on the chapbook, originally sold by travelling "chapmen"—were very popular in the early 19th century. These were small, of standardised numbers of pages and most cost only six pennies, including up to two engraved illustrations. Unlike chapbooks they were available from bookshops. These books illustrate the early gothic's pre-occupation with medieval times. Castles and dungeons figure frequently and plots often involve imprisonment or murder and, almost always, the supernatural. Percy Shelley, as a schoolboy, was said to have been a devotee. Apart from middle and upper class young men, the readership seems to have been drawn from the ranks of literate servants.

Thomas Tegg's publication, *The Daemon of Venice: an original romance* (1810), attributed only to "A lady", belongs to the class of bluebook that condenses a much longer novel—here Charlotte Dacre's novel, *Zofloya* (1806)—down to the essentials of plot and action. The names of Dacre's protagonists have all been changed. The story is set in the 15th century and is relentlessly violent. Most shocking at the time would have been the



Bernhard Siegfried Albinus, *Tables of the skeleton and muscles of the human body*. London: Printed by H. Woodfall for John and Paul Knapton, 1749.

Dead men walking

The anatomical atlas *Tables of the skeleton and muscles of the human body* (originally *Tabulae sceleti musculorum corporis humani*, 1747) is a remarkable collaboration between Dutch anatomist Bernard Siegfried Albinus and artist and engraver Jan Wandelaar. Twelve of its engravings (featuring three skeletons and nine "muscle men") have elaborate natural settings. The most dramatic image is shown here: a man, with third-order musculature and eyeballs in place, stands in front of an erupting volcano. The best-known—a front view with fourth-order musculature—is identically posed, but the man's background is dominated by a rhinoceros. These settings, and the realism of the way the figures are posed, give rise to the illusion that the dead have been re-animated—itself a gothic trope; another illustration features the skeleton, in back view, as it peers into an open sarcophagus.

Albinus himself was responsible for the selection, preparation, arrangement and suspension of the skeleton. It had tendons, ligaments and cartilage attached and was thus susceptible to decay. Wandelaar produced his initial drawings in three phases, using nets with square webbing (a grid) for accuracy and to avoid distortion. In order to draw the muscles, a succession of cadavers was necessary. This led to the creation of an "adaptation formula" so that the muscles would "fit" the existing drawings of the skeleton.

The rhinoceros calls out for some additional explanation. She was "Clara", still a calf at less than 3 years old, and the first of her kind to visit Europe. Somewhat chillingly, hers is the only image in the volume drawn from "life".

See Linda Wilson-Pauwels, "Jan Wandelaar, Bernhard Siegfried Albinus and an Indian rhinoceros ..." *The Journal of Biocommunication* vol. 35 (2009), no. 1.

The devil plays bagpipes

Tam O'Shanter by Scottish poet Robert Burns has been identified as gothic, though its defining tone is one of gentle humour. A narrative poem, first published in 1791, it charts an evening in the life of a farmer who frequents the local public house, neglecting his wife. During a fierce storm, a worse for wear Tam sets out for home on his horse, Meg, stopping to investigate a ruined church which is unaccountably lit up. Still seated, he peers in and sees warlocks and witches dancing in wild abandon, accompanied on bagpipes by the devil in the form of a dark "beast".

Gothic clichés tumble over one another as Tam sees both the "undead" in open coffins, holding lit candles aloft, and a profusion of evidence of violent death and horror strewn over the altar (omitted in John Faed's illustration here):

A murderer's banes in gibbet airns;
Two span-lang, wee, unchristen'd bairns;
A thief, new-cutted frae a rape
Wi' his last gasp his gab did gape;
Five tomahawks, wi' blude red-rusted;
Five scymitars, wi' murder crusted;
A garter, which a babe had strangled;
A knife, a father's throat had mangled...

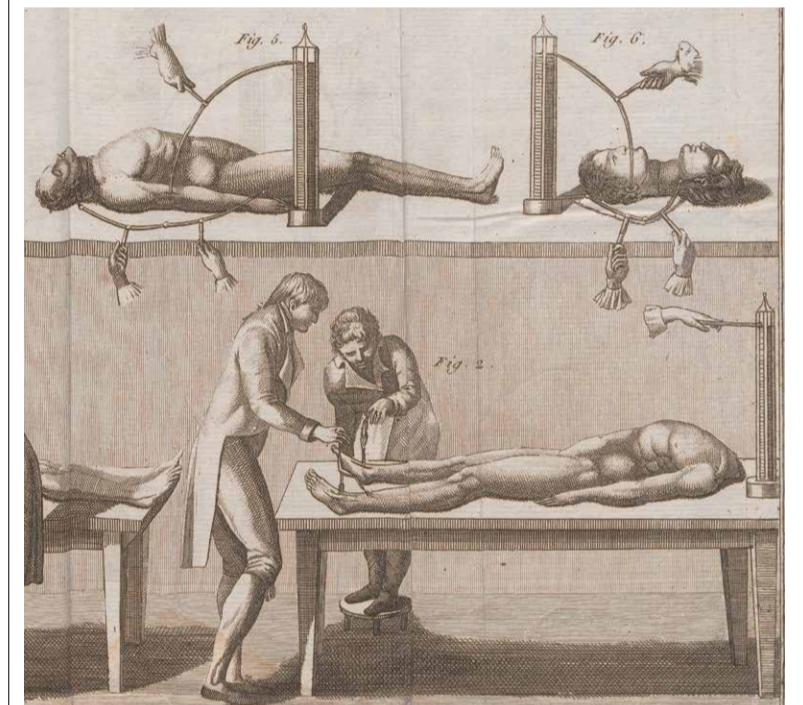
Tam watches unobserved until his appreciation of the short night-shirt ("cutty-sark") worn by a young witch gets the better of him and he calls out "Weel done, Cutty-sark!". The "hellish legion" follows as he hides off, losing him only when he crosses water and they cannot follow.

The spark of being

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's protagonist is a student of natural philosophy (especially chemistry) and anatomy. Frankenstein makes discoveries connected with "the principle of life" and after much "secret toil", he collects "the instruments of life" around him "that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing". His unnamed creature then comes to life.

At the time, the connection between electricity and life was widely propounded and demonstrated by Bologna professor Luigi Galvani (1737–1798) in experiments in what he called "animal electricity", which became known as galvanism. After his death, his nephew Giovanni Aldini toured Europe conducting high-profile demonstrations, including one in London in January 1803 on the body of George Forster shortly after he was hanged at Newgate in London. The witness accounts of contorted muscles, a single opening eye, and limbs in motion are resonant of Mary Shelley's description of the animation of her literary creation.

This was not the first time Aldini had experimented on recently deceased criminals. The image is an engraving of experiments conducted in Bologna in January–February 1802 on two men executed, presumably, by guillotine. His methods and results are explained in the text of his *Essai théorique*; figures 1 and 2 hark back to Galvani's experiments decades earlier, when "kicking" movements in dead frogs' legs were unexpectedly observed for the first time. Interestingly, Aldini employs a "voltaic pile" (a type of battery) here, the invention of Alessandro Volta, whose understanding of the nature of electricity was different than Galvani's own.



Giovanni Aldini, *Essai théorique et expérimental sur le galvanisme* ... (detail) Paris: De l'imprimerie de Fournier fils... 1804.

A gothic folly?

Fonthill Abbey, designed by architect James Wyatt (1746–1813) in 1796, was one of the most ambitious private gothic building projects undertaken in England. A vast structure with an octagonal tower measuring 85 metres high, it was the extravagant vision of gothic novelist, bibliophile and collector, William Thomas Beckford (1760–1844). The building was created in a so-called Abbey Style—an emulation of an ecclesiastical scheme that housed his collections of decorative arts and antiquities. Not unlike Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill, Fonthill Abbey, with its halls lined with recessed bookcases and studded with sculptures and exotic porcelains, was developed, in a sense, as an extensive cabinet of curiosities.

The topographer and printer John Rutter (1796–1851) received an invitation by Beckford to visit Fonthill Abbey, and in 1822, after many successive visits and strolls through the grounds, Rutter printed and published *Delineations of Fonthill Abbey and Domesne, Wiltshire*. The publication received a very enthusiastic response. For the first time, members of the public could examine the extraordinary world Beckford had constructed inside six miles of high fences. On the strength of his first guidebook, Rutter published the lavish *Delineations of Fonthill and its abbey* in 1823, ironically the same year Beckford was forced to sell his estate and collections to escape financial ruin.



John Rutter, *Delineations of Fonthill and its abbey* (detail). Shaftesbury, [Dorset]: J. Rutter, 1823.

Dark imaginings: Gothic tales of wonder

An exhibition presented in the Noel Shaw Gallery, Baillieu Library, 1 March to 31 July 2018
Exhibition curators: Susan Thomas and Dr Jen Hill
Poster concept and content: Dr Jen Hill and Brian Allison
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For more *Dark imaginings*, see the research resource on the exhibition website. This comprises individual, original contributions by scholars of the gothic, written to complement the 2018 Baillieu Library exhibition. A copy of this *Dark imaginings* poster is also available online. <http://library.unimelb.edu.au/darkimaginings>.

