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‘HISTORICAL ANECDOTES ARE THE
MOST PROPER VEHICLES FOR THE
ELUCIDATION OF MYSTERIES’
The ‘Historical Gothic’ and the Minerva Press, 1790–99

Victoria Ravenwood



DESPITE THE SUCCESS ENJOYED BY THE MINERVA PRESS in its time—evident in the fact its works were widely circulated and read by many—critics derided the publishing house and its proprietor, William Lane. Along with representing Lane as only capable of publishing throwaway literature, critics also portrayed his press as proliferating a violent breed of gothic novel thought to have a corrupting effect on its readers, especially young women. For some commentators, reading in general ‘was dangerous because it could distract from domestic duties or transgress the limits of a private sphere.’¹ Most notably, it was the gothic novel, with its ‘cast of extreme characters, unnatural settings and perverse plots’, that ‘played a significant part in late eighteenth-century debates over the moral dangers of reading.’² However, writers at the Minerva Press had their own ideas about how their texts should be interpreted, wanting both to respond to public tastes for the popular gothic and to frame their works as beneficial. Picking up on the fact that ‘women had long been encouraged to eschew reading romances and novels in favour of reading histories’, since they were ‘thought to offer more suitable models of virtue to imitate and vices to avoid’, this essay explores the ways in which Minerva authors exploited histories to shape their own ‘historical gothic’ mode, thereby allowing them to write violent gothic novels yet avoid the opprobrium of their numerous critics.³

Montague Summers may have coined the phrase ‘historical gothic’ in *The Gothic Quest* (1969), but Minerva writer Anna Maria Mackenzie (*fl.* 1782–1809) revealed her reasons for characterising her gothic works as ‘historic’ or ‘historical’ much earlier than this.⁴ She argued that her own use of the gothic, founded ‘upon historical facts’ and with subjects chosen ‘for instruction’s sake’, offered sufficient portrayals of ‘virtue’, alongside the ‘bold and horrible images’ prerequisite to the genre, that her readers would be inspired to emulate the good rather than the bad.⁵ Mackenzie was no stranger to the negative perception held by critics of gothic works since her novel *The Neapolitan* (1796) was lambasted for its ‘detached scenes of horror, cruelty, and revenge’, its ‘disgusting if not unnatural horrors’ and its ability to harrow the reader ‘almost to phrensy’—all of which left one reviewer with feelings of ‘loathing and disgust’ towards the

female author and her work.⁶ Likewise, other female Minerva writers such as Eliza Parsons were criticised for their ‘common error’ in employing ‘horror [...] crowded upon horror’, until the sympathy of the reader is exhausted by excessive ‘faintings, death, and madness.’⁷ Effectively, Mackenzie manipulates the popular critical reception of novels and novel reading as corrupt, so as to avoid critique of her own work. In her discussion of the revolt against novels and their injurious effects on female readers, Jacqueline Pearson has illuminated how the eighteenth century saw ‘the rise of history as a discipline’, with the topic taking a ‘central role’ in women’s education, as well as enjoying considerable status generally.⁸ Critics of the novel turned instead to recommending histories, with the likes of Hannah More, Sarah Green and Sarah Pennington championing the virtues of ‘fact, and not wit’, as well as the ‘instructions only truth can give’, and declaring the ‘plain and unornamented narrative’ of histories far more suitable for female readers since they could not possibly ‘mislead the judgement’ or ‘inflamm[e] the passions.’⁹ For women, then, the function of history was primarily moral: it provided examples of virtue from which to learn, as opposed to examples of vice found in the novel. Thus, reasoned Mackenzie, the historical gothic was a way for writers to ‘escape the censure’ ordinarily attracted by the genre, instead allowing them to put forward works with which ‘ladies’ might be ‘interested and improved, without being terrified’ (I, x and xv). Explicitly then, Mackenzie had a female audience in mind, and felt the need to defend her work in terms of its beneficial effect on this group. The result of Mackenzie’s efforts to keep readers ‘interested and improved’ can be seen in her particular blend of historical details and sensationalised scenes of gothic violence for which the Minerva Press was to become famed, the combination of which saw the ‘virtues’ of one outweighing the ‘vices’ of the other.

This article argues that what Minerva authors were doing was combining gothic sensationalism with historical fact, thereby allowing Lane’s press to gain popularity by catering to the fashion for violent gothic novels while simultaneously responding to rhetoric about the corrupting influence of such violence on female readers. Three novels will be discussed in particular: Anna Maria Mackenzie’s *Danish Massacre, an Historic Fact* (1791); E. M. Foster’s *The Duke of Clarence. An Historical Novel* (1795) and Agnes Musgrave’s *Edmund of the Forest. An Historical Novel* (1795). While other scholars have discussed these works as they illustrate women’s historical writing, a fresh approach is provided when considering them as products of female historical gothic writing.¹⁰ As I argue, the selected novels adopt the tropes of historical fiction and yet contain scenes of violence which seem far more gothic than historical. Many have argued that the gothic has always been historical in the sense that eighteenth-century writers understood the term to mean a very particular relationship to the past. For example, Christina Morin draws attention to the fact that contemporary perceptions of the genre suggest it was ‘evocative of the past, its people, and its traditions’, thereby implying an ‘overlap of historical and gothic literary modes.’¹¹ My distinction in this essay is between what is actual historical fact,

and what are sensationalised horrors presented for the attention of the female reader—both of which were employed by Lane’s writers in order to ‘feed the demand of an undisciplined yet ever-expanding reading public’.¹² As we will also see, these Minerva novelists used popular conventions coined by other authors, such as Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole, albeit in a different way, thereby exemplifying Elizabeth Neiman’s statement that Minerva authors were making ‘constant and subtle modifications on and infractions to popular formulas’.¹³ Moreover, given that the gothic novel was to become less popular with readers and critics alike toward the end of the eighteenth century and historical fiction more popular in the nineteenth, this essay also suggests that the historical gothic can be seen to bridge the gaps between these two genres, with late eighteenth-century gothic writers basing their stories on historical events and settings, and nineteenth-century historical writers going on to adopt the tropes of the popular gothic.

Anna Maria Mackenzie published sixteen novels between 1782 and 1809, many ‘based on Historical Fact’ and most of them published by Lane at the Minerva Press. Her career exemplifies almost every trend of the period: she began with epistolary works before moving to third-person narratives; from contemporary settings she moved to the historical, and finally, to the gothic and then horror fiction. However, combining the historical facts surrounding a series of eleventh-century Danish invasions with the gothic elements of violence and the supernatural, it is Mackenzie’s *Danish Massacre* that best represents her own brand of historical gothic novel. It opens with an epigraph, intended to suggest its theme, from an English Restoration play, *Venice Preserv’d: or, a Plot Discovered* (1682), by Thomas Otway:

Think thou already hear’st the dying screams
Of harmless infants,
Think thou see’st their sad distracted mothers
Kneeling before thy feet, and begging pity.

Behold the furious and unpitying soldier
Pulling his reeking dagger from the bosoms
Of gasping wretches; death in ev’ry quarter,
With all that sad disorder can produce,
To make a spectacle of horror.¹⁴

Otway’s play was considered one of the most significant tragedies of the English stage in its time, enjoying revivals until the 1830s and making it likely therefore that Mackenzie’s readers would have been familiar with the work. Despite claiming in *Mysteries Elucidated* her desire to write ‘for instruction’s sake’, with the intention of leaving female readers ‘interested and improved, without being terrified’, Mackenzie here warns that her work will in fact contain such ‘spectacle[s] of horror’ as the ‘dying screams | of harmless infants’, ‘sad and distracted mothers’ and ‘furious and unpitying soldier[s]’. Her historical gothic novel is thus filled with shocking scenes of violence (such as the murder

of three young children in front of their agonised mother) and horror (in her gratuitous depictions of death on the battlefield) bound to terrify. Such violent subject matter seems contradictory to the writer's proposed aim, particularly as it is weighted heavily against the female reader, singling out 'mothers' and those with 'infants', and suggests that Mackenzie embraces what was popular at her time of writing.

Following an epigraph that promises violent delights, *Danish Massacre* opens, as is typical of the genre, with an example of the Radcliffean 'explained supernatural': in a framing narrative, an elderly man and his son are out walking in the Welsh hills and from nowhere hear a 'deep and awful groan' (I, 8–9). Despite being 'almost frantic with fear', they advance, all the while speculating that this 'strange phenomenon' is the sound of a 'vapour of the earth' and that they approach 'the resort of evil spirits' (I, 10). The supposed supernatural is swiftly explained, however, as they happen upon 'the emaciated figure of a man apparently lifeless' (I, 12). This figure is revealed to be the wicked and treacherous Duke of Mercia, who gives the old man and his son a manuscript that—much in the style of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764)—is supposedly the novel itself. Like Walpole, when Mackenzie uses the trope of the 'found narrative' she panders to the mid-eighteenth-century fad for medieval antiquity despite glaring fictionality. However, she identifies her novel as 'historical' and not, like Walpole, 'gothic'. Like Walpole, Mackenzie frees herself of her authorial responsibility, but *her* use of the trope suggests that this supposedly 'found narrative' contains the true and unornamented events of the past, possibly to deflect any untoward criticism that might otherwise be levelled at her.

Similarly, in her preface to *Corfe Castle; or, Historic Tracts* (1793), a novel that fictionalises the same Danish invasion as Mackenzie's *Danish Massacre* but published two years later, Anna Millikin calls 'the cold and historic facts which form its basis' the only thing recommending her novel 'to the notice of the world'.¹⁵ Millikin relies heavily on popular gothic tropes, beginning with her choice of titles; still she chooses to signal her novel as 'historic' through its subtitle. This signalling implies that authors such as Mackenzie and Millikin were aware of the transgressive plot content of their works and therefore use the term 'historic' as a form of defence and/or disguise. From this, their comparable reliance on historical fact as a cover for their violent gothic novels, along with the fact that *Danish Massacre* and *Corfe Castle* are written in similar modes, on the same obscure invasion, and targeted at the same readers, one might conjecture the influence of Mackenzie's historical gothic mode on writers both within and outside of the Minerva Press.

Mackenzie's own historical gothic describes the reign of King Ethelred of England (AD 978–1016), for whom the chief problem was an ongoing conflict with the Danes. After several decades of relative peace, Danish raids on English territory began in earnest in the 980s, leading to what became known as the 'St Brice's Day Massacre', when on 13 November 1002 Ethelred ordered the slaughter of all Danish men in England. Mackenzie's *Danish Massacre* is based

on the 'historic fact' surrounding this event and consequently does not make frequent use of gothic conventions such as the supernatural (explained or otherwise), instead generating feelings of terror and horror in its reader through depictions of 'diabolical impiety', 'barbarous cruelty' and the 'horrors of war' (I, 19, 24 and 30–1).

Mackenzie uses 'terror' and 'horror' interchangeably—where typically the former is thought to draw the reader in and the latter to repel them—and yet her 'horrors' seem decidedly gothic, and moreover purposely targeted at a female reader: for example, in one scene a helpless infant is torn from its agonising mother and brandished aloft upon a bloody spear; other 'horrible' images are also presented to the female 'imagination', such as the 'mangled limbs of [a woman's] beloved children wantonly scattered upon the field of battle by a barbarous foe' (I, 68). Equally, Mackenzie's male characters (most of whom are soldiers) are glorified through depictions of their barbaric violence, with one carrying 'a drawn sword in one hand, in the other a lady', and another proudly bearing 'his armour, deeply indented with various cuts, and disfigured with blood and dust' (I, 65 and 137). While these may be accurate and unfiltered portrayals of the horrors of war, we are reminded by the writer that such scenes are nonetheless 'calculated to agonise the feelings of a woman', and that the female characters are made to feel 'apprehensions so poignant, sorrow so excessive, [and] fatigues so inimical to virgin delicacy' (II, 127 and 168). The emphasis then lies not so much in the depictions of the men themselves, nor on the horrors of war from an historical perspective, but rather in the effects they have on the women around them—Mackenzie's female characters, and by extension her female readers, are 'agonise[d]' by these brutish displays of masculinity, all of which are intrinsically linked to violence (mostly against women and children), as well as being made to feel 'apprehension', 'sorrow' and 'fatigue' by the 'horrors' with which the writer assaults them.

Although the novel begins with the wicked and treacherous Duke of Mercia and is punctuated throughout with portrayals of the cruelty of his soldiers, a central figure is a Danish woman, Athela, whose family he has persecuted. Athela's suffering serves to highlight the Duke's ruthless treatment of the Danes and culminates with the novel's conclusion when, after her husband's death, she appeals to King Ethelred and his men for 'justice' (I, 223). However, the 'widowed mother' and her children, rather than being objects of pity to the Duke, become instead 'the affecting objects' of the Duke's 'unprecedented hatred' (II, 220 and 223). In the bloody scene that follows—reminiscent of the violent epigraph from Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*—Athela is forced to watch as her children are murdered by the Duke of Mercia.

The Duke is first described in the 'atrocious act' of killing 'the sweet Adelina', Athela's daughter: he 'darted forwards' and 'fixed his eye upon her like the vulture intent on his prey' (II, 221, 224 and 225–26). The use of simile here to portray the Duke as a carrion-eating creature suggests the predatory, vampiric position of men—a larger theme addressed by Mackenzie, who repeatedly offers

examples of the ruthlessness of men at war. In this instance, the Duke's cruelty is further heightened by Mackenzie's use of a male narrator to relay the scene: 'a warrior', he admits he is so 'inured to deeds of death' that he is 'unequal' to the task of describing them (II, 226). As a result, he deliberately neglects to mention any 'explicit' details, and instead tells the reader/listener how the Duke 'seiz[ed] those beauteous locks that adorned [Adelina's] ivory neck' (II, 226). This male narrator's fixation on Adelina's beauty eroticises the scene of her death; he highlights the attractiveness of her hair, the fair white colour of her skin and the delicacy of her neck, and in doing so implies the fragility of the female form while also reducing Adelina to nothing more than an image of beauty and femininity even in her final moments.

Despite Athela's harrowing cries of 'spare my child' and 'save my Adelina', the 'fatal blow' is delivered and readers are left with the tragic depiction of a mother's grief (II, 226–27):

The business of death was not complete; the innocent children ran back to their mother, who was now in a state of furious insanity—she started up, let fall her precious burthen who had just then resigned her breath, and putting them behind her, fixed her hands in her own dishevelled locks, and looking wildly around [...] and tearing off large ringlets of her hair, she threw them on the ground, practising various acts of madness. (II, 229–30)

In the emotional aftermath of her daughter's death, Athela's feelings are denied by the male narrator, with her expressions of heartache dismissed as 'insanity' and 'madness' and her behaviour likened to that of a 'wild' animal. While the Duke takes a 'malignant pleasure' in thus 'contemplating her sorrows', King Ethelred demands that someone 'bear her off' since he 'cannot look upon her grief' (II, 229–30). As the onlooking men do nothing, the reader is 'suffered to wait the issue of this horrid tragedy' (II, 228). After murdering Adelina, the Duke turns on Athela's two remaining children, a son and second daughter, before finally finishing his slaughter with the mother herself.

The massacre of Athela and her children, with which Mackenzie's aptly named historical gothic novel concludes, is intended to affect all those who read it, as is suggested through the rhetorical question posed by the novel's unnamed narrator: 'Who but [the Duke] could behold them unmoved!' (II, 222). This question suggests that an emotional response is expected of readers, and two models are arguably provided: first, the male witness to Adelina's death who cannot bring himself to describe the scene to its full extent and the King who cannot bear witness to the women affected as a result; and, second, the novel's unnamed narrator, who expresses feelings of empathy for the sufferer. Although we are ultimately spared the 'explicit' scenes of bloody violence of which critics of the Minerva Press and its gothic novels seemed so afraid, what we are left with instead is a frightening glimpse into the horrors of war and the world of men: a world where women, even in death, are either reduced to those traits found most desirable by men or simply removed from sight (II, 226). In this way,

Mackenzie can be seen to use the historical gothic to compose a different sort of gothic novel from the ones novelists like her were said to write. Rather than employing the gothic genre to write of ghosts and ghouls, or even to excuse her use of the supernatural, she utilises in particular the trope of sensationalised violence in order to contribute to historical discussions about war and its impact on women and children—she departs from her own argument on the use of history as the safeguarding of propriety to illustrate scenes of war, grief and loss that are calculated in such a way as to *truly* horrify women, and surely that is a far more terrifying picture for female readers of Minerva Press texts than the vice and superstition feared by critics.

The second writer to be examined here for her use of the historical gothic mode is E. M. Foster (*fl.* 1795–1817), a ‘shadowy figure’ about whom little is known, although she features on Peter Garside’s list of the most productive authors for producing ten novels (totalling twenty-five volumes) between 1795 and 1803.¹⁶ Foster’s *The Duke of Clarence. An Historical Novel* is similar to Mackenzie’s earlier work in that it likewise features violent and bloody battles, and centres itself on the feelings of its female characters. In its opening lines, Foster sets the historic scene: it is ‘the year 1422, about a twelvemonth after the decease of our fifth Henry’, as well as establishing the theme of war with a story from the protagonist’s adoptive father, the Baron de Clifford:

Edgar took great delight in hearing the histories and achievements [*sic*] of great warriors. To these he would listen, with the most unfeigned attention; and, whilst the Baron would fight over the battles of his youth, his countenance would become animated; his young heart would beat high, with youthful ardour and impatience, to become an actor in those scenes of glory! whilst the Baroness, with her eyes filled with love, and female softness, would shudder at the dangers, her lord had encountered; and, pressing to her maternal bosom the young Elfrida, would inwardly rejoice, that her sex exempted her from such dangers.¹⁷

Just as in *Danish Massacre*, the sentiment conveyed is that war is no place for women; as we see above, even the simple act of telling tales relating to the theme of historical violence impinges on the Baroness’s ‘female softness’. In this sense, the act of recounting violent historical events is represented as comparable to enacting actual violence upon women, forcing them to encounter the horrors of the battlefield in imagination if not in actuality. Although they do not necessarily travel to scenes of battle, warfare is brought to them and their domestic surroundings, so that the Baroness feels the need to protect her young daughter even within the safe confines of the home.

Other examples of violence in *Duke of Clarence* that are heightened through sensationalism and seem to target the female reader include Foster’s description of the Hundred Years War (1337–1453), which serves as the historical setting for the novel. An older Edgar takes part in these scenes, realising his aspirations of ‘glory!’ from boyhood by perpetrating such ‘horrid violence’ as ‘[cleaving]

the head of the Scottish general in sunder' (I, 108–09). Nonetheless, the male protagonist finds he is not immune to reciprocal acts of violence, receiving a dreadful blow 'which almost crushed to atoms his uplifted arm' (I, 108). Likewise, the Earl of Salisbury, along whose side Edgar fights, is mortally wounded by a cannon ball, much to the 'infinite grief and horror' of all those who bear witness to what remains of his 'mangled corpse' (I, 133–34). Finally, once the fighting is over, the English soldiers, 'meeting with the corpse of the Viscount of Narbonne, they hung it upon a gibbet, from the contempt they felt for his crimes' (I, 110). Later on, the female narrator reflects upon these 'horrors' and the 'horrid descriptions' thereof, feeling their victory is in fact 'small compensation for the blood of so many heroes, which had been shed!' (II, 77 and 226–27). The real 'cruelty' of war, she laments, is that it allows men 'to commit the most horrid depredations, on a harmless people!' and is 'the cause of rendering fatherless a numerous family,—of widowing a doating wife,—of bereaving of its only hope a fond parent' (II, 77–78 and 210). History tells us that men fight, incur horrid injuries and perhaps die, but it is the 'widow and orphan' left behind who suffer most, with war leaving them 'a prey to poverty, and sorrow!' (II, 201). Such reflections act to feminise the experience of war, reading deeds of violence through the impact they have on the home and family. Furthermore, the female narrator views the wounds inflicted on men at war as tantamount to wounds on herself, as they cast a threat to her position in society as imagined through the roles of wife, mother and child. Here the notion of history, specifically in Foster's novel the period of the Hundred Years War, is given a secondary role to the overarching experience of loss and violence, which can likewise be felt by the reader of any period. Moreover, this presents a connection between Minerva authors and other Romantic women writers who were likewise using gothic conventions so as to enter into contemporary debate about war and how it was represented.¹⁸ In this sense, the historical is gothicised so as to include experiences *not* represented in routine history, with the feelings of terror and horror as experienced by the women and children left behind prioritised over the factuality of the battles fought.

Alongside the historical theme of war, *Duke of Clarence* is peppered throughout with gothic conventions. For example, in the relationship that develops between the Baron's two children, Elfrida and Edgar, Foster introduces the theme of incest, and it is this 'fatal passion' that propels the plotline of the novel (I, 56). She also incorporates the supernatural, such as ghosts. In addition to such supernatural sightings, both Edgar and Elfrida suffer from violent visions of their own or the other's death: Elfrida imagines the 'variety of horrors' that might befall her lover in his absence, such as his being 'dashed against a rock' at sea, and left a 'mangled frame' to die in a 'watery grave, in the unfathomable deep!' (I, 253). Meanwhile, Edgar dreams of the moment they will be reunited, only to awake to find 'an armed hand plung[ing] a dagger in his breast' (II, 79). Horrors such as these, both real and imagined, are found throughout *Duke of Clarence*. The supernatural threat is never fully dismissed, presumably leaving

the reader to wonder whether the ghostly sightings are real, and rendering the novel more gothic than historical by calling into question the factuality of Foster's writing. In this way, Foster's historical gothic reads differently than Mackenzie's *Danish Massacre*, which follows Radcliffe's model of the 'explained supernatural' by only hinting at ghosts. Perhaps consequently, a critic for the *Monthly Review* disputed Foster's historical foundation, claiming that *Duke of Clarence* had 'slender title to the character of an historical novel'.¹⁹ Still, other critics overlooked Foster's gothic conventions, as evident by this glowing recommendation in the *English Review*:

The novel exhibits a good picture of ancient times and manners, and, in not a few instances, abounds with pathetic and interesting events. The language is easy and elegant. The story is too complicated for us to give an account of it, as it would take up more space than is allotted to productions of this kind; but we recommend it as well calculated to amuse a leisure hour, without either endangering the morals or offending the eye of the reader.²⁰

Although this is a very typical kind of statement in the reviews, and notwithstanding that it is the view of only one person and could well have been a 'puff piece', it is interesting to note that the novel is praised in particular for not 'endangering the morals or offending the eye of the reader'. Anna Maria Mackenzie likewise praises the novel in her Preface to *Mysteries Elucidated*, citing the 'success' of Foster's work as 'prov[ing] the utility' of the 'historical Gothic' mode (I, x). Mackenzie's use of the noun 'utility' here reinforces the belief held by critics that historical works were beneficial—their 'utility' being that they provided an education to women novel readers above that to be gleaned from other circulating-library fiction at that time. It seems then that *The Duke of Clarence* was able to pass as 'exhibit[ing] a good picture of ancient times and manners', as these reviews focus on its supposed historical accuracy, and the extent to which it conveys some kind of useful lesson about the past, rather than on its gothic obscenity.

Further examples of the historical gothic, as the mode was repeatedly employed and shaped by writers at the Minerva Press, include the works of Agnes Musgrave (fl. 1795–1808). Though little is known about the author herself, we do know that she 'was popular in her own day on the strength of more than one historical novel and others of contemporary life', with her first and best-known work, *Cicely; or, the Rose of Raby* (1795), quickly becoming a Minerva best-seller and enjoying reprints up to 1874.²¹ Musgrave went on to publish another two novels with Lane's press, *Edmund of the Forest. An Historical Novel* and *The Solemn Injunction* (1798), and though all three novels mentioned here contain both gothic and historical elements, this combination is most striking in her second published work.

Despite its claiming to be 'an Historical Novel', *Edmund of the Forest* is in fact an extravagant gothic tale set in medieval Scotland and featuring mouldering buildings, supernatural incidents, mysterious characters and vague historicism.

In an introduction, Musgrave excuses her ‘marvellous’ writing and ‘giddy flights of imagination’ by attributing them to history, as she declares the story is not her own, but rather is derived from an external source—in this case ‘from letters’.²² Like other female authors at the Minerva Press, including Mackenzie and Foster, Musgrave draws on the ‘historical’ to justify or disguise her gothic plot. As mentioned, these Minerva novelists follow Walpole’s example of the ‘found manuscript’ but in their case, to reconcile their sensationalist combination of gothic and historical elements. Musgrave goes on further to argue that since she ‘claim[s] not merit’, she does not ‘deserve censure,’ thereby reinforcing my argument that the ‘historical’ subtitle was used as a cover for the gothic and its violent and sensationalist plotlines which might otherwise have drawn criticism (I, i). Musgrave does however admit to finding ‘some difficulty in connecting the story without adding to it’, thus justifying her ‘dividing it into chapters, and affixing to each a motto applicable to the subject’ (I, ii). The use of chapter ‘mottoes’, or epigraphs as we now refer to them, is a technique employed by others and which would go on to be used in the historical novels of the nineteenth century, but for Musgrave they retain their early moralising function, not only connecting her work to that of more notable writers, but also commenting upon the narrative through the use of familiar quotations and lending it credibility. Finally, the writer asks that her readers be ‘aware that we are now free from the shackles of superstition’, but to remember that ‘such a period existed’ when this was not the case, and thus ‘not to condemn Edmund too hastily’ (I, iii). In this way, Musgrave guides her readers as to how her writing should be interpreted: this, she says, is a tale of historical fact and should be taken as such, though she also pre-emptively aims to deflect the criticism of her detractors by reminding them that she cannot be blamed for the superstitious beliefs of former times.

Musgrave’s novel is set around the same time period as Foster’s *Duke of Clarence* and yet the events of the Wars of the Roses (1455–87) are secondary to the supernatural incidents with which the story is concerned. Edmund is the eponymous ‘hero of the tale’, and readers are presented with his journey from forest to castle to seek his destiny (I, iii). Along the way, he encounters witches in ‘possession of spells and charms’ (II, 77); suffers from terrifying visions, such as his being ‘sacrifice[d]’ by ‘fantastic form[s]’ or ‘pressed’ to the ‘bosom’ of ‘a lifeless corpse’ (I, 239; II, 88–89); and is ‘haunted’ throughout by ‘spectre[s]’, ‘apparition[s]’, ‘phantom[s]’, ‘unquiet spirits’ and ‘beings of another world’ (I, 12, 55, 57, 63 and 64). In particular, the inclusion of witches is notable as, like Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1606), it pays homage to the King of Scotland’s own superstitious beliefs. When travelling through the forest, Edmund and the King discover ‘three hags’, one of whom ‘touched the arm of the intrepid youth with her wand, and the dagger dropped from his hand, which was suddenly benumbed’ (I, 185). Musgrave does not simply hint at the supernatural, nor does she rely on the ‘explained supernatural’, but rather her historical gothic narrative brings its characters face-to-face with what they fear most, and in this description, it appears that the witches are real. Following this scene, there is a note from the

'editor', in which Musgrave, 'afraid of incurring the laugh of ridicule', excuses her own writing of such 'horrors' by again attributing them to 'history'—specifically, 'the history of James the Third of Scotland' (1, 190). She reasons therefore that it would have been wrong to exclude such supernatural horrors as witches from her novel simply because contemporary readers would have been unlikely to credit them. A notice in the *Critical Review* focuses heavily on this scene, as well as on Musgrave's reliance on gothic tropes more generally, and is dismissive of the novel's historical accuracy as a result:

The story is supposed to have happened in the reign of James III of Scotland; and the agency of witchcraft is introduced in compliment to that monarch's credulity. [...] The scene is, indeed, a copy from Macbeth's visit to the witches; but it wants the additional charm of Shakespeare's genius. With such helps as witches, ghosts, caverns, and ruined castles, we should be too scrupulous in expecting probability: but there are bounds even to fiction.²³

Unlike *Cicely, Edmund of the Forest* did not go on to a second edition, though it appeared in French in 1798/99 and an extract entitled 'The Adventures James III of Scotland had with the weird Sisters' was published in *Gothic Stories* (1799). That more than one reprinting of this collection appeared in the early nineteenth century implies some success, as well as suggesting that it was for its gothic horrors, and not its historical authenticity, that audiences read the excerpt from Musgrave's work. As Frederick S. Frank further brings to light, the novel's 'extensions of Reeve's *The Old English Baron* also furnished [Ann] Ker with material for her forest-to-castle plot in *Edric the Forester; or, The Mysteries of the Haunted Chamber*', so while *Edmund of the Forest* itself may not have been reprinted in English, still its influence persists.²⁴

Such supernatural content is evidently central to Musgrave's historical gothic romance, and yet even she calls its veracity into question by portraying her protagonist as someone prone to fancy as a result of his own 'horrid' reading. Musgrave dedicates one entire chapter to the content of Edmund's reading: one night, he takes up 'the book he had been reading the preceding evening, began where he had left off, and found the story proceeded thus' (11, 101). The 'strange and romantic' story that is subsequently narrated has all the marks of an historical gothic novel. Following the tale of two brothers forced to seek shelter in a dreary castle, it is filled with violence: 'bloody marks', 'crimson stains' and 'a superb chamber, whose floor was slippery with blood' (11, 104); the suggestion of 'murder' (11, 105); and the supernatural: 'they observed somewhat glitter on the first landing, Egbert stopped, it was a sword, firmly grasped in a hand devoid of flesh, nought remaining but the bones, which, as he touched, gently pressed his fingers, then fell and left the weapon in his grasp' (11, 103–04). And finally, as the brothers delve deeper into the castle and its mysteries, the chapter draws to a frightening close: 'hark! that groan. It was deep and deadly, yet they saw not whence it proceeded, but fresh horrors were prepared for them; for casting their eyes on the bed, they saw a human body whose—' (11, 109). Here, Edmund is so


overcome with disgust that he actually ‘threw the book from him with violence’, and vehemently denounces the habit of reading horrid novels, declaring he ‘will read no further,’ since such works are surely crafted more to ‘alarm than amuse’ (II, 110). The damage is already done however, as the result of ‘his fancy, heated by reading’ is that ‘strange visions flitted through his brain, and phantoms of murdered strangers haunted his slumbers’, a recurring event throughout the novel (II, 111–12). The inclusion of this chapter, and Edmund’s subsequent reaction to his reading, suggests that Musgrave was familiar not only with the tropes of the gothic novel, but also with the popular critical view of such texts. Her own historical gothic work is not all that different from Edmund’s (since both employ the supernatural alongside sensationalised scenes of violence) and so her metareference to novel reading here suggests that Minerva authors were aware of the criticism attracted by the genre, and thus sought to circumvent it while still writing popular gothic tales. It also offers some explanation as to why she was so keen for her works to be viewed as ‘historical’ rather than purely gothic.

Supernatural elements aside, as my examples have illustrated, Minerva authors’ use of gothic violence was not simply to entertain, but also to portray the horrors of war and its impact on women and the domestic space. Indeed, as Anne H. Stevens argues of *Edmund of the Forest*, the overarching purpose of Musgrave’s novel is that it ‘emphasises the costs of civil conflict’.²⁵ Thus much the same as in both Mackenzie’s *Danish Massacre* and Foster’s *Duke of Clarence*, Musgrave’s historical gothic work brings to light the acute cost of violent historical warfare for those left behind, with the novel’s most affecting passages being those that immediately represent the cost of war to the domestic, the familiar and the personal—namely, women left bereaved of fathers, husbands, brothers and children. At one point, the narrator refers to the Wars of the Roses as those ‘fatal wars which have destroyed, and swept away whole families’, highlighting the fact that the domestic front was not immune from violence, unrest and the effects of conflict (II, 63). The novel, like many others of this period, makes clear that war was an insistent presence in the lives and writing of women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Likewise, the male characters (and perhaps readers along with them) come to realise the futility of such events, as one laments: ‘how anxiously do we anticipate the age, the hour, which gives us to scenes of action; ah! those scenes so wished, what bring they to view but inquietude and misery’ (II, 10). Musgrave’s protagonist Edmund is much like Edgar in Foster’s *Duke of Clarence*, as he too spends his childhood ‘fired at the idea of glory, for from father Lawrence he had oft heard of battles and sieges, and hoped, young as he was, to signalise himself’ (I, 17). However, upon joining the army of Queen Margaret and at the battle of Wakefield, Edmund ‘shrunk with horror as he viewed the carnage of the day, and wept the untimely fate’ of those soldiers fallen around him, as well as feeling ‘revolted from the dire scenes of blood and devastation he had witnessed’ (I, 18). Later, ‘another bloody engagement ensued’, which further highlights the violent nature of war, as the stream of the River Wharf becomes ‘choaked by the dead bodies, [and] ran red

with blood for some succeeding days' (1, 19). The most obvious cost of war is the loss of human life, the 'cruelty' of which causes Edmund to question: 'why did I listen with greedy ear to the tales you told of heroic deeds, of the gay and courtly scenes you hand mingled in?' (1, 20). These thoughts on the part of the protagonist demonstrate a preoccupation with the physicality of war, while simultaneously critiquing the abstract concepts used to justify military engagements. Moreover, Edmund considers the wider impact of war as he comes to pass over a country 'that bore the marks of constant warfare to which it was exposed', the land, he finds, is 'almost destitute of inhabitants', such is the loss of life, and the once 'fertile lands of England' are left carrying nothing but the marks of 'ruin, terror, and desolation' (1, 73). Stevens has highlighted how, 'as Britain stood on the brink of civil war and faced the threat of invasion from abroad, stories about earlier periods of civil conflict appealed to British readers'.²⁶ In this way, historical gothic novels such as this one allowed readers to explore conflict, and the feelings of loss that resulted, without necessarily having to experience them at first hand. This was particularly the case for women readers, as previously explored in *Danish Massacre* and *Duke of Clarence*, who would not have had to fight, but who would have been left to suffer the loss of their children and/or the men on whom they depended.

Taken together, the use of historical facts alongside gothic tropes in Minerva Press works allows for a confident evaluation of the formation of an historical gothic mode. As this essay has argued, the novels of Mackenzie, Foster and Musgrave offer paradigmatic examples of how late eighteenth-century writers combined violent gothic sensationalism with historical manners, characters and events, in order to supposedly benefit their readers while avoiding critics' censure. In addition to this, at a time when historical writing was not showcasing the horrors of war that women were experiencing, the use of gothic conventions when writing of historical conflicts allowed women writers to give their own perspective on the horrors of war and what this looked like for them. Sir Walter Scott later took pains to distance his work from early examples of historical fiction such as these, wanting to cleanse prose fiction of its 'horrid' (that is, gothic) sensationalism. Scott's choice to prioritise the historical over the gothic elements of the genre, as employed by preceding writers, could be seen to enact an erasure of the important breakthrough they achieved in forming a medium for the discussion of violence and women's experience thereof. And yet, just as these late eighteenth-century writers used historical settings to position their violent narratives, so too did historical writers of the nineteenth century employ sensationalist gothic tropes to add flavour to their antiquarian works. Even Scott's own narrative about the innovativeness of his historical fiction—one largely bought into by subsequent criticism—is now recognised as suspect, as is the neat division of gothic and historical forms/modes in the Romantic period. In this way, the historical gothic mode as employed by Lane's writers can be seen to bridge the gap between the two genres that writers like Scott sought to create. The formation and use of an historical gothic mode by Minerva writers

thus adds to our understanding of the historical novel and its development in the late eighteenth century.

Ultimately, what the novels explored and analysed here all share is their use of the historical gothic mode, combining the fact and realism of the historical novel with the sensationalism of the popular gothic, in order to cater to the late eighteenth-century fashion for 'horrid' novels, while defending against the opprobrium typically met by the genre. By flavouring the most fantastic sensationalism with frequent dashes of realism, these historical gothic novels are set apart from other works of their time (as well as from later historical works) by the use of violence, with the mode allowing writers at the Minerva Press to present popular gothic horrors under the guise of accurate and informative historical fiction. In her Preface to *Mysteries Elucidated*, Mackenzie shares the belief that 'historical anecdotes are the most proper vehicles for the elucidation of mysteries' (I, xiii). This statement suggests that while 'historical' settings are the vehicles inside which her novels can take place, the driving force is actually a violent gothic mystery, complete with a host of supernatural passengers. Though Mackenzie's didactic theorising on the nature of 'licentious novel[s]' and how to write instead 'for instruction's sake' may seem at odds with the violent scenes depicted in her own works, such as in *Danish Massacre*, her use of the historical gothic mode was 'received with much favour', with her novels considered to be 'of a species somewhat superior to the generality of the fongous [*sic*] productions of that literary hot-bed' (referring to the Minerva Press), and her name even appearing in Lane's Prospectus of 1798 under the heading of 'particular and favourite Authors'.²⁷ As explored here, the historical gothic mode as conceived by Mackenzie thus went on to be adopted by later Minerva writers and into the nineteenth century, ultimately testifying to its success and value as a subgenre of the gothic. Moreover, that its tropes, modes and writing styles continued to be used leaves us with an understanding of the lasting influence of the Minerva Press, even as the gothic (and the press itself) became less popular. 

NOTES

1. Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750–1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 2.
2. Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 6.
3. Crystal B. Lake, 'History Writing and Antiquarianism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing in the Romantic Period*, ed. by Devoney Looser (Cambridge: CUP, 2015), pp. 88–100 (p. 88).
4. Carol M. Davison credits Summers with the conception of the phrase 'historical gothic' in *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature 1764–1824* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 256.
5. Anna Maria Mackenzie, *Mysteries Elucidated, a Novel*, 3 vols (London: Minerva Press, 1795), I, ix, xi and xiv. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the main body of the essay.

6. Review of Anna Maria Mackenzie's *The Neapolitan; or, the Test of Integrity* (1796), *Critical Review*, 2nd ser. 21 (Oct 1797), 229–30.
7. Review of Eliza Parsons's *The Voluntary Exile* (1795), *Critical Review*, 2nd ser. 14 (July 1795), 352–53.
8. Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain*, p. 49.
9. Qtd in *ibid.*, p. 50.
10. See Anne H. Stevens, *British Historical Fiction before Scott* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); and Fiona Price, *Reinventing Liberty: Nation, Commerce and the Historical Novel from Walpole to Scott* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2016).
11. Christina Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland, c. 1760–1829* (Manchester: MUP 2018), p. 28.
12. James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict, 1764–1832* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), p. 8.
13. Elizabeth A. Neiman, 'A New Perspective on the Minerva Press's "Derivative" Novels: Authorizing Borrowed Material', *ERR*, 26 (2015), 633–58 (p. 635) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2015.1070344>>.
14. Anna Maria Mackenzie, *Danish Massacre, an Historic Fact*, 2 vols (London: Minerva Press, 1791), I, title page. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the main body of the essay.
15. Qtd in Anne H. Stevens, 'Learning to Read the Past in the Early Historical Novel', in *Reading Historical Fiction: The Revenant and Remembered Past*, ed. by Kate Mitchell and Nicola Parsons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 19–32 (p. 23).
16. Peter Garside, 'Authorship', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Volume 2: 1750–1820*, ed. by Karen O'Brien and Peter Garside (Oxford: OUP, 2015), pp. 29–52 (p. 33).
17. E. M. Foster, *The Duke of Clarence. An Historical Novel*, 2 vols (London: Minerva Press, 1795), I, 10. Subsequent references are from this edition of the text and are given parenthetically in the main body of the essay.
18. See Stephen C. Behrendt's 'Women Poets during the War Years', in *British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), pp. 78–114.
19. Qtd in Montague Summers, *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel* (London: Fortune Press, 1969), p. 174.
20. 'Art. xxvi: The Duke of Clarence; a Novel', *English Review*, 25 (1795), 233.
21. Dorothy Blakey, *The Minerva Press, 1790–1820* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1939), p. 61.
22. Agnes Musgrave, *Edmund of the Forest. An Historical Novel*, 4 vols (London: Minerva Press, 1797), I, i–ii. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the main body of the essay.
23. 'Monthly Catalogue: Novels', *Critical Review*, 2nd ser. 21 (Nov 1797), 354–56 (p. 355).
24. Frederick S. Frank, 'Bibliography', in *Horror Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide*, ed. by Marshall B. Tymn (London and New York: Bowker, 1981), pp. 34–175 (p. 122).
25. Stevens, *British Historical Fiction*, p. 87.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Summers, *Gothic Quest*, p. 172; David Rivers, *Literary Memoirs of Living Authors of Great Britain* (London: Faulder, 1798), p. 9—qtd in Blakey, *Minerva Press*, p. 61.

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