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Sydney, May 1834. A rapidly growing metropolis on the edge of the British world, and the site of a largely forgotten episode in the history of Romantic drama. Edward Smith Hall, editor of the radical Sydney Monitor, is sitting in his office, when the twenty-year-old Charles Harpur enters brandishing a manuscript. A few days later, Hall describes the incident with some bemusement: ‘[Harpur] held in his hand a play of his own composing; and not a play only, but a tragedy; and not a tragedy only, but a tragedy composed in blank verse!’ It was indeed ‘the first tragedy in blank verse composed on this side the equator, which we ever heard of.’

The play was The Tragedy of Donohoe, one of the earlier, and certainly one of the best plays written in Australia during the nineteenth century. Hall was impressed by the young author’s first attempt, commending it publicly to Barnet Levey and Joseph Simmons, proprietors of the city’s only licensed theatre. This play was ‘superior to half the stuff that “His Majesty’s loyal servants of the Theatre Royal Sydney,” have performed there, and will continue to perform there.’ Messrs Levey and Simmons seem to have been unmoved by this snide recommendation. Neither they, nor indeed anyone else, has ever professionally produced this early Australian drama. Hall did give Harpur some more practical help, publishing substantial excerpts of the play in his paper over five issues in 1835.

Undeterred, Harpur set to work on another, altogether more ambitious play. King Saul was to be a biblical tragedy of the highest order. It would depict Saul’s rise to the throne, the corruption and madness of power, and his final destruction at the Battle of Gilboa. For whatever reason Harpur appears to have abandoned the project in 1838. He wrote out a fair copy of some of the completed scenes, and excerpted a song or two for separate publication, but the play remained incomplete and apparently unrevised among his papers at his death. There it has lain, unperformed and essentially unstudied, until now. Some years later, however, Harpur did revisit The Tragedy of Donohoe, when he revised it substantially for the press, publishing it in 1853 as The Bushrangers.

These two plays, The Bushrangers and King Saul, are remarkable texts that challenge our ideas about Romantic tragedy. In Australia, Harpur is often seen as the founder-poet of a distinctive Australian Romanticism, though he was also one of the first writers to question whether an original Australian literature was even possible. Outside Australia he is unrecognised as a Romantic poet. Full
study of Harpur has been hampered in the past by a lack of quality texts, but this problem has recently been eliminated with the publication of the Charles Harpur Critical Archive, the first full critical edition of his poetry. In what follows, I make the case for these plays as original, thought-provoking examples of the tragic genre in the Romantic period. In the first section, I describe the literary and theatrical scene in Harpur’s New South Wales. In the second, I offer a description of Romantic tragedy and briefly explain its place in the genre-system of Romantic theatre. In the final three sections, I consider three aspects of these plays that set them apart. In an age when plays were increasingly allegorical and exotic, Harpur’s were topical and direct (Section III). Apparently fearless of censorship, Harpur satirised his contemporaries in The Bushrangers, and in King Saul, he boldly reworked a controversial story from the most ideologically sensitive book of his time. Secondly, these plays were radical (Section IV): both advocated an egalitarian society, where the right to rule could come only from inborn talent and self-cultivation. Finally, these plays were mystical (Section V): Harpur was deeply invested in mystical ideas, and with their supernatural elements, The Bushrangers and King Saul pose deep questions about the possibility of mystical experience for the modern mind.

I. Writing Life in Harpur’s Australia

Harpur was born in 1813 in the small town of Windsor, northwest of Sydney. His parents were convicts: his Irish father Joseph had been transported for highway robbery in 1800, his mother Sarah for larceny in 1805. In Australia they flourished—when Harpur was born his father was the local schoolmaster and parish clerk. Windsor itself is a pretty Georgian township on a hill overlooking Deerubbin, the winding estuarine river that curls around Sydney’s north and west, and which the settlers renamed the Hawkesbury. The rich alluvial soils on either bank fed the colony in its early years, but they were dangerously flood-prone, and we will see how the water, with its terror and its beauty, flows through Harpur’s plays. By 1834 at the latest, Harpur had moved to Sydney. He began to publish in newspapers, and appears to have had a short and ignominious acting career at Sydney’s new Theatre Royal.

Theatre had come to the colony with the First Fleet in 1788. In 1789, the first-known theatrical performance took place, when a group of convicts performed The Recruiting Officer (1706) for King George III’s birthday. It was only in 1833, however, that the colony received its first permanent licensed theatre, in the form of Barnett Levey’s Theatre Royal. The colony of New South Wales was still a tiny society, though it was growing fast. The First Fleet had brought 1480 men, women and children ashore; by the time Harpur published the first extracts of The Tragedy of Donohoe in 1835, there were nearly 72,000 settlers in New South Wales, and Sydney had become an energetic port town. More and more free settlers were arriving, and respectability was becoming a key virtue in the increasingly urban Sydney. Theatre in the early years had been largely a convict affair. Temporary playhouses popped up all over the colony, normally
supported by wealthy landowners but usually with a cast and crew entirely drawn from the convicts. This changed abruptly in 1833, when the Governor of NSW ceased to permit such rowdy entertainments and the Theatre Royal was licensed with the explicit proviso that no convict was to tread the boards. Censorship was strict. The Colonial Secretary—the chief minister in the colony—personally licensed every play for performance until the 1850s. The preference was for sound British drama, imported from the metropolis.

Harpur was thoroughly exposed to current trends in the theatre and to the poetry of the preceding generation. As a child, he could well have seen plays at the convict theatre in nearby Emu Plains, where the latest Romantic melodramas were performed. A ‘Mr Harpur’ is listed as an actor in three plays at the Sydney Theatre Royal in October 1833, including two melodramas: Douglas Jerrold’s *The Mutiny at the Nore* (1830) and Isaac Pocock’s gothic classic, *The Miller and his Men* (1813). We cannot be sure this ‘Mr Harpur’ was Charles Harpur, but it is likely. He was of course a great reader, and in the 1830s already had a deep knowledge of the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton and Byron. The local newspapers, including the *Monitor*, *Australian*, *Sydney Times* and *Currency Lad*, fostered local literature by publishing poets and prose writers. Harpur may have been writing on the far edge of the European world, but he was immersed in the literature and the theatre of home and abroad, as both his plays demonstrate.

*The Bushrangers* was a gothic tragedy in the tradition of Schiller’s *Die Räuber* (1781), about a rebellious band of outlaws in the woods. His hero was originally based on the real-life bushranger Jack Donohoe, whom Harpur transformed into a Byronic hero rebelling against a snobbish colonial order. In the 1853 book version, he changed not only the title but aspects of the plot and many of the characters’ names, including that of the protagonist. In this and all later versions of the play, the real ‘Donohoe’ became the fictional ‘Stalwart’. At the beginning of the play, Stalwart is riding high: his gang is on the loose, and the Windsor magistrates, led by the craven Roger Tunbelly, are powerless to stop him. Accordingly Dreadnought, the chief constable from Parramatta, arrives in the district to quell the disturbance. He injures Stalwart in a firefight and leaves him for dead. Stalwart creeps off into the bush, where he is nursed back to health by the innocent Ada. As he recuperates, he lusts after her, eventually murdering her fiancé Abel in a fit of jealous rage and catapulting himself towards his final, fatal confrontation with Dreadnought. Harpur tinkered with the play to the end of his life, leaving at least two further complete versions in manuscript. Neither of these was published until 1987, when a critical edition of the final 1867 version appeared, with the 1835 newspaper extracts included.

In what follows I focus on the 1853 edition, the earliest complete version of the text. *King Saul* is a biblical drama apparently inspired by Byron’s *Cain: A Mystery* (1821) (see Section 111, below). In the manuscript, preserved in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, Harpur claims to have finished work on the play in 1838, but there is no corroborating evidence, and it is not clear when Harpur wrote out the fair copy in which this date is given. At any rate, we can be sure the play
was a product of his youth, when he was a bachelor, a jobbing writer and a member of Sydney's radical circles. In Harpur's version of Saul's story, the prophet Samuel is a radical republican, who believes monarchy is an unnatural form of government, and Saul is a man destroyed by his own wealth and power. At the beginning of the play, Samuel is alone in his house, and receives the prophecy of Saul's coronation. Saul arrives and Samuel proclaims him king. Time passes, and Saul becomes increasingly power hungry and paranoid: he forsakes Druma, his early love, becoming obsessed with the idea that his young courtier David will take his crown, and as war engulfs Israel, he begins to lose the support of the elders. Eventually, as in the Bible, Saul is slain at the Battle of Gilboa. In the event, Harpur only completed about a third of the play, although the fragments do add up to about 1200 lines of verse, and he left behind two 'Plans' of his overarching design.

With these plays Harpur hoped to conquer the stage and prove himself a poet. In some ways he was a provincial British author with his eyes on London. In other ways he was a Romantic nationalist. Like his contemporaries Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset, Adam Mickiewicz and Aleksandr Pushkin, he aimed to create a new national theatre. Like them, he drew heavily on Shakespeare. Like them, he felt tragedy was the crucial genre for the reform of the stage. Like them, he created passionate, Byronic characters. Unlike them, however, he was a colonial subject of uncertain nationality, and had a profoundly ambivalent attitude towards Britain and its traditions. He was a nationalist who spoke a foreign tongue. These ambivalences give his early plays a raw and searching quality not normally associated with the highly conventionalised world of Romantic tragedy.

II. Characteristics of Romantic Tragedy

Popular theatre and literary drama diverged in the Romantic period. For literary playwrights, tragedy 'present[ed] the highest phases of creative art', as Harpur's friend Dan Deniehy put it. While Romantic poets strove to write austere tragedies, however, a different kind of play, the melodrama, was sweeping the theatre. Like other literary playwrights of the day, Harpur responded to the rise of melodrama by adopting and transforming many of its elements.

It was the age that Jane Moody describes as 'the theatrical revolution'. Theatres began to transform and proliferate. The old patent theatres of London were rebuilt on a larger scale. There were ever more new 'illegitimate' theatres, which operated without a licence and could not stage spoken drama. All these new theatres demanded new kinds of drama: 'tragedy and comedy' gave way to "illegitimate" forms such as burletta, extravaganza, pantomime and melodrama. It was a rapid and dramatic shift, as Figure 1 (overleaf) shows. Figure 1 uses data from the Eighteenth-Century Theatre database to display the shifting genresystem of Romantic theatre. It shows the number of tragedies, comedies and melodramas submitted to the English Inspector of Plays, for licensing between 1737 and 1823. Since all plays performed in London's patent theatres had to be
submitted for censorship, this collection gives us a rich, though incomplete, view of what kinds of plays were being written or produced in Britain across the period. The plays have been categorised according to their subtitles: plays with ‘tragedy’ or ‘tragic’ in the subtitle have been classed as ‘tragedies’; plays with ‘comedy’ or ‘comic’ are ‘comedies’; and plays with any combination of ‘play’, ‘drama’, ‘romance’ or ‘melodrama’ in the subtitle have been placed in the third category. Of course, a subtitle alone does not reveal the actual content of a play; a playwright or promoter could rename a ‘sentimental comedy’ a ‘grand romance’ if it would draw the crowd. But the changing subtitles do reveal how theatre professionals’ attitudes towards the different genres changed over the period.

![Fig. 1. Number of plays submitted for inspection, 1737–1823. Source: Adam Matthew Digital.](image1)

![Fig. 2. Percentage of submitted plays in each category, 1737–1823. Source: Adam Matthew Digital.](image2)

The data bring into question Moody’s claim that tragedy and comedy were displaced by the new melodramas—the truth is subtler. When Harpur turned to write his two tragedies in the 1830s, tragedy was as popular (or unpopular) as ever, but melodrama had replaced comedy as the main alternative to it. By 1823, less than 5 per cent of submitted plays were subtitled ‘comedy’, while nearly a
quarter were labelled as melodramas. If melodrama was the theatre of freedom and escape, Romantic tragedy was the theatre of entrapment, of what Jeffrey Cox calls ‘frustrated development’.\(^{21}\) To portray such frustrated development, writers of tragedy drew on many major tropes of contemporary melodrama: the mixture of genres and styles,\(^{22}\) the distant and exotic settings,\(^{23}\) and the recourse to the supernatural.\(^{24}\) Beyond these more superficial similarities, however, there were two deep affinities between tragedies and melodramas, which can help us to see Harpur’s achievement in perspective.

Firstly, as Burwick has argued, Romantic melodramas in Britain had a pervasive ‘duality’.\(^{25}\) They took place in foreign lands, but clearly represented Britain. They featured marvellous or impossible events, but their sets and special effects were convincingly realistic. Critics demanded a more natural style of acting, but actors were celebrities who won the crowd with grand, stylised gestures.\(^{26}\) Burwick never theorises ‘duality’, but it emerges from his examples that ‘duality’ is an opposition between nature and artificiality, between a theatrical, imagined world and the real one hidden behind the scenery. This is a compelling idea. The early nineteenth century was a febrile period of war, class politics, strict censorship, and intense competition in the theatre industry. To appeal to a divided audience and escape the censor, playwrights and theatre managers erected a gorgeous screen of spectacle between their plays and the world. Many writers of tragedy adopted the same tactic. Although Friedrich Schiller and Joanna Baillie, for example, raised controversial issues of individual liberty, national liberation and the constitution of crown and church in their plays, they nearly always set them in a distant, theatrical location: eighth-century England, fourteenth-century France, ancient Rome, pagan Sicily. As we will see, Harpur took a different approach—despite the censorship of the Colonial Secretary and the wide divisions of his convict society, he chose to represent his controversial content directly on stage.

Secondly, subjectivity was a key theme of both popular melodrama and literary tragedy in the period. This may seem a striking claim. It is commonly argued that melodramas paid little heed to subjectivity or ‘character development’ at all.\(^{27}\) But even Michael Booth admits that the mental ‘agony’ of the gothic villain was a key theme of melodrama in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,\(^{28}\) and Paul Ranger has demonstrated how melodramas used music to heighten emotion.\(^{29}\) Writers of melodrama were fascinated by the dark passions of the human mind—a fascination that carried over to the tragic playwrights of the period. No critic has ever denied the subjectivity of Romantic tragedy. Indeed, since Hegel, the ‘principle of subjectivity’ has been considered central to the genre.\(^{30}\) Earlier tragedies had depicted a religious world of objective meaning, but in the Romantic world-view, meaning could only come from the mind: the Romantics ‘close[d] the doors of hell’;\(^{31}\) they portrayed a universe ‘without the gods’;\(^{32}\) they wrote for a ‘mental theater’;\(^{33}\) they invented the tragedy of ‘self-awareness’ or of ‘pure consciousness’;\(^{34}\) they advocated a ‘closet drama’ of intimacy, privacy and sympathy.\(^{35}\) It is undeniable that gothic passion and
complex subjectivity were key themes of Romantic drama, but this great tide of criticism does tend to overlook the public and religious quality of many Romantic plays, including Harpur’s. He certainly did not close the doors of hell—both Saul and Stalwart end up there. In what follows, we will see how Harpur brings into question both the duality and the subjectivity of Romantic drama.

III. ‘Directness’

Harpur’s plays rent the screen of duality in different ways: *The Bushrangers* was a satirical play about a controversial news item and satirised living people, whereas *King Saul* worked out the moral and political implications of a difficult Bible story. These plays were direct, and, instead of erecting a screen of theatricality to separate their fictional worlds from reality, they were to confront Harpur’s Australian audience with their most pressing anxieties. To prove the ‘direct’ nature of these plays, I compare them to two contemporary examples, Douglas Jerrold’s *The Mutiny at the Nore* (1830) and Byron’s *Cain* (1821).

Harpur later claimed that it was *The Bushrangers*’ controversial subject matter that made it impossible to stage. He was probably right, though there is no evidence that the play ever made it to the Colonial Secretary’s desk. In 1844, the Secretary would disallow *Jackey Jackey the N.S.W. Bushranger*, and few other bushranger plays made it to the stage before the end of the century. Moreover, two of Harpur’s villains, Roger Tunbelly and Wealthiman Woolsack, were thinly veiled caricatures of Windsor worthies, and the Secretary was known to ban plays that satirised important members of society, as when he disallowed *Life in Sydney* (1843). It is unlikely that Harpur’s satire would have passed unnoticed. In Britain it was actually quite common to stage ‘docudramas’ about real-life criminals. But such melodramas took a very different approach to Harpur’s, carefully shielding the audience from unpleasant ramifications. We can see this by comparing *The Bushrangers* to *The Mutiny at the Nore*, a docudrama Harpur appears himself to have acted in. There are striking parallels. Both Stalwart and Richard Parker (the lead mutineer) are innocent victims of tyranny who are driven to murder: ‘we have risen against the tyrant, what heed we then of the bully?’ cries Parker to his erstwhile captain. Stalwart the bushranger explains himself in more detail:

A villain’s dupe at first, I found myself
An exile, and a tyrant’s bondman;—one,
Who for some reason I could never learn,
Both feared and hated me;—and who, with all
The petty fretfulness of power so placed,
Was wont to solace the meanness of his hate,
And mask its utter cowardice, the while,
With hourly hurling the opprobrious term
Of convict in my teeth! (1853, p. 20)

Both Parker and Stalwart become killers, but the tyrannies they suffer are different: Parker decries the abstract tyranny of ‘the tyrant’ and ‘the bully’, whereas
Stalwart decries the everyday tyranny of the particular society he occupies, in which a whole class of people are ‘exiles’, held as ‘bondmen’ by free settlers, who are in turn ‘so placed’ that power embitters them. It is a society where a great mass of the population are convicts or their descendants, and yet the very word ‘convict’ is an ‘opprobrious’ taboo. Through the 1830s and 40s, Sydney was indeed becoming increasingly snobbish, as more free settlers arrived who found the colony’s convict heritage shameful. Harpur’s play documented what they would rather forget.

While Harpur made clear that the world of his play was the real world, Jerrold strove to remove his play from reality. Nore premiered in 1830, thirty-three years after the actual mutinies at Spithead and on the Thames. By contrast, bushranging and convict transportation were raging topics in Harpur’s Sydney. Nore’s main authority figure, Arlington, is a shadowy character with only few lines, and defends himself stoutly: ‘I acted but according to my duty. Even when I punished, I did not wrong you.’ (p. 33) Tunbelly, the main authority figure in The Bushrangers, is verbose, lazy and self-centred, and complains endlessly about insubordination in woozy pentameters: ‘But seriously, these underlings are all | A-wanting in respect.’ (p. 34)

In Nore, Parker repents of his crimes as he patriotically climbs the scaffold: ‘I have been a mutineer, my name will be stained with rebellion—murder! I leave to my king and country my child, my only child. From this moment he is England’s.’ (p. 44) Stalwart never repents, and dies in hellish remorse after a stormy gunfight with the police: ‘Guilty! Guilty! | I do not plead Not Guilty! Mercy!’ (1853, p. 59) He is the violent, lurid, morally ambiguous consequence of the colony’s unequal society.

King Saul is direct and provocative in a different way. Biblical themes were common in the theatre of the preceding century—but the story of King Saul was not. Not one play in the Larpent collection has ‘Saul’ in the title. Saul is a bad king, possessed by an ‘evil spirit’, yet he is also God’s anointed. His legitimate succession is usurped by a rebellious shepherd, David, who is also God’s anointed. Harpur’s play lays bare the contradictory implications of this story. In this way King Saul resembles Cain, one of Byron’s most controversial works: both plays are literal retellings of Old Testament narratives embellished with philosophical speeches that make their meaning plain.

Cain’s reception can give us an indication of how King Saul might have been received had Harpur finished and published it. Byron’s play broke like a thunderclap in the polite drawing rooms of England: ‘a more direct, more dangerous, or more frightful production, than this miscalled Mystery, it has never been our lot to encounter’, wrote one reviewer. ‘This is unquestionably one of the most pernicious productions that ever proceeded from the pen of a man of genius’, wrote another. John Galt thought ‘boldness’ the play’s key characteristic. Tom Moore was enthusiastic: ‘Cain is wonderful—terrible—never to be forgotten. […] while many will shudder at its blasphemy, all must fall prostrate before its grandeur.’ It was still controversial thirty years later, when Charlotte Brontë cautioned that though the play was ‘magnificent’, it was also unreadably wicked.
What these readers found ‘direct’, ‘bold’ or ‘blasphemous’ about Byron’s play was the character of Cain, who questions God’s order and pays heed to Lucifer. Byron embellished the story, of course: Lucifer does not appear in Genesis—but Cain’s transgression is the Bible’s literal truth.

Harpur too laid a literal Bible-truth before his readers. God is a cruel punisher of wealth, power and monarchy. Like Byron, he took this straight from the text:

And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.

(1 Samuel 8. 7; my emphasis)

SPIRIT OF THE LORD. […] But, having rejected God
As their sole Sovereign, what merit they
Of good in this their King? (King Saul, p. 586)

God loathes monarchy, so when Israel request a king, he curses the man he raises to the office. Druma describes the young Saul as a man who would ‘sit in some green shade | And wind his fingers in [Zillah’s] golden hair’ (p. 594). After becoming king, however, loathly passions consume him, and he is alienated from the God that crowned him: ‘I cannot lift my thoughts as thou wouldst have me | To God above’ (p. 575). To a respectable audience, who were virtuous Christians and loyal subjects of the Crown, Saul’s cruel fate would have made for disturbing viewing.

Harpur’s two plays, in their different ways, are direct and provocative. The Bushrangers represented contemporary society directly, and showed its seamy underside. King Saul was a highly literal portrayal of the Bible that made no attempt to hide or smooth its contradictions. They are plays of ‘radical instability’, as Veronica Kelly puts it. Harpur did not resolve this instability by displacing his dramas into a theatrical, morally consistent world, as Jerrold did. Instead, in Byron’s manner, he portrayed the colony and its most important book directly and without compromise. These plays could never have passed the censor, which is perhaps why Harpur abandoned playwriting in the 1830s. When The Bushrangers was finally published as part of Harpur’s 1853 collection, the reaction was almost universally negative: ‘Mr. Charles Harpur’s great Play, (upon words!) “The Bushranger” [sic] has had an effect upon the younger portion of the community similar to that caused by Schiller’s “Robbers.” Several juveniles have “taken to the road”—to get out of the way of it.” Even Harpur’s friend Deniehy thought it his weakest work. Twenty years after its original composition, it seems that Harpur’s first play could still make for unpleasant reading.

IV. Radicalism
Harpur’s plays were not only designed to provoke: they also put forward positive ideas about what would make for a just society. Harpur was an elder statesman of the New South Wales republican movement, which achieved full male suffrage
in the colony in 1858 (at least in theory). Both *The Bushrangers* and *King Saul* espouse Harpur’s egalitarian beliefs by portraying different kinds of authority figures. True authority derives from subjectivity, from talent and imagination. His plays vigorously satirise the authority of wealth and status, and suggest that legitimate authority can only derive from mental acquirements which are open to anyone.

We have already encountered the main malign authority figure in *The Bushrangers*, Roger Tunbelly. His keyword is ‘respect’—Tunbelly advocates a society of simpering condescension, in which the lower orders fawningly ‘respect’ their betters. Harpur quite luridly satirises this notion. Tunbelly’s favourite constable is brave Ned Bomebard, ‘for Ned is not wanting in proper respect’ (1853, p. 4), but when we meet Bomebard, we discover that he is nothing more than a boasting, brown-nosing snob:

> Well then, to show yous that I ain’t too proud o’ my dig-nitty, I don’t care if I takes a dram with the pair o’ yous—purwiding one o’ yous stands flat. I’ve been on the $free$ all night myself, my dymons o’ goold, though I am a hofficer. But what then? A hofficer is a mortal man, and mu$h git drunk now and then, like a man o’ mortality—mu$tn’t he? (1853, p. 16)

Tunbelly and Bomebard are both bureaucratic authoritarians, whose power derives from the ‘dig-nitty’ of their office. Bomebard’s energetic language shows how unreal their worldview is: he cannot complete a sentence without contradicting himself; he is not ‘too proud’ of his dignity, but demands that the carpenter and shoemaker buy his drinks; he is a respectable ‘hofficer’, but perfectly entitled to be drunk in the street. This false worldview debases the English language. Bomebard stitches together colloquial expressions and legalistic jargon in an attempt to impress, but winds up actually saying very little at all. Most critics in the last 150 years have dismissed Harpur’s satirical characters. Deniehy argued that Tunbelly and Bomebard were ‘incongruities’ who demonstrated the play’s lack of ‘fusion’, while Leslie Rees finds them poor imitations of Shakespeare’s comic-relief characters. But they serve an important purpose: Harpur had a keen sense of the social aspects of language, and the clichéd, jargonistic speech of Tunbelly, Bomebard and their ilk contrasts strongly with the terse, philosophical poetry of legitimate authority.

Stalwart’s authority over his men derives from his mental power, as one of his men admits: ‘He has that hold of me I cannot but follow’ (1853, p. 55). He is intelligent, able and self-reflective. He cultivates himself, carefully sifting through the contents of his mind: ‘Now, methinks, | Could I but see my villain face, it were | Enough to shame me hence.’ (p. 23) And most importantly, he rules democratically: when the band think Stalwart is dead, they decide to ‘vote freely’ for his successor (p. 36). The only other figure who wields this kind of authority in the play is Dreadnought, the visiting constable from Parramatta. He is a brave and effective warrior, and sees straightaway that Bomebard is ‘a mere
braggadocia’ (p. 14). He and Stalwart respect one another, and it is Dreadnought who finally tracks and kills the bushranger.

Mental power is also the source of Samuel’s authority in *King Saul*. What makes Samuel powerful is his ability to see God’s purposes: ‘for even now, within my soul | The shadow of his purpose lengthens out’ (p. 585). Samuel feels prophecy ‘within his soul’, through the power of his own imagination. When the Spirit of the Lord comes with a message, He does not deliver it. Instead, He requests Samuel to ‘Look forth now in the vision of thy soul, | And tell me what thou seeest. (after a pause) What seeest thou, Samuel?’ (p. 586) All the meaning of the prophecy is encapsulated in Samuel’s vision, and the Spirit simply helps him to interpret it. Like Stalwart, Samuel is introspective and perceptive. He speaks clearly:

> Man was not made for Kingship; let him dream,  
> Dream only that he is a King, and lo  
> That dream denatures him: he is no more  
> A man; no longer human in his thoughts,  
> Nor will, nor virtue. (p. 593)

Samuel speaks the language of the cultivated intellect. The aphoristic opening phrase, the repetitions of ‘no’ and ‘nor’, even the placement of colons and semicolons, all give the impression that he is a calm and careful thinker. By contrast, Saul’s language becomes increasingly irrational and contorted when he is crowned:

> A hateful dream, yet happily a dream,  
> Hath play’d the ramping lion in my brain,  
> And all my senses scatter’d, like a flock  
> Of weanling kids, that on the borders graze  
> Of the drear wilderness:—’twas strange! and yet  
> I’m proud to find it but a dream—yet fear  
> This dream portendeth much!—even too much. (p. 560)

Like Bomebard, Saul toggles between contradictory views of things, marked in this case by the conjunction ‘yet’. The humble Samuel’s visions are clear and meaningful. Saul’s imagination, diseased by grandeur and ambition, tortures him with meaningless noise.

Many Romantic poets extolled the power of the imagination. What makes Harpur radical is the way he extolled the imaginative power of ordinary people: Stalwart is a convict; Samuel lives in a humble house in the desert. We can see how significant this is if we consider the most famous gothic bandit of French literature, the eponymous hero of Victor Hugo’s *Hernani* (1829):

> I am Juan of Aragon, Grandmaster of Aviz, born  
> In exile, the outlawed son of an assassinated father—  
> Under your sentence, King Carlos de Castile!  
> Murder, between us, is a family matter.  
> You have the scaffold, we have the sword.  
> So heaven made me a duke, and exile a mountain-dweller.55
Hernani and Stalwart are extremely similar, exiles who blame law and authority for their loss of honour. But while Hernani defines himself by his birth and parentage and heaven-given rank, Stalwart has no heritage to defend: ‘at first’ he was not a duke but ‘a villain’s dupe’. Hernani wants his wealth and titles back; Stalwart only wants to be ‘free’ (1853, p. 20). In Harpur’s radical vision, self-conscious, imaginative power is available even to the most humble and downtrodden. Stalwart and Samuel are not wise idiots like Wordsworth’s peasants, but the wielders of righteous authority.

Stalwart and Samuel wield mental authority. Tunbelly and Saul wield monarchical or aristocratic authority. There is a third kind of authority in Harpur’s plays, which we might call ‘feminine’ authority. Stalwart’s sweetheart, Mary Fence, wields it:

Mary. I ask not what you are: to me you seem
Only unhappy, like myself; and very—
Yes, very gentle—at least to me; and this
Aye makes me weep to think on when you are gone.

Stalwart. This kindness kills me! (1853, p. 8)

Deniehy argues that Mary’s power derives from her ‘gentleness’ and ‘pathetic helplessness’. It would be more accurate to say that her power derives from empathy; rather than wielding mental power like a prophet, she draws people in by seeing herself in them. In both his plays, Harpur suggests that such feminine authority is weak: Mary cannot persuade Stalwart to ‘reform’ (1853, p. 9); nor, later on, can Ada. In King Saul, Saul’s childhood sweetheart Zillah is unable to warm his heart once he is crowned, and he turns her away. At first, the gentle David can dispel the ‘haughty gloom’ of the king with his song (p. 595), but later Saul turns on him in envious rage. In both these plays, feminine authority is crushed: Mary Fence, Ada and Zillah die, and David is transformed from songster to warlord. Indeed, it seems that women are more powerful dead than alive: Stalwart is tortured in his final moments by the memory of his female victims, and we can be sure that if Harpur had finished King Saul, Saul would have died with the spurned Zillah on his mind.

Despite his democratic faith, it may appear that Harpur was no feminist. As Michael Ackland observes, in Harpur’s poetry women are usually ‘a regenerative ideal’, rather than ‘genuinely autonomous’ people. One character stands out as an exception—Mrs Fence, who owns the house in The Bushrangers where Stalwart and his gang carouse, and is Mary’s mother. Both Stalwart and Mary call her a vicious parent, but she is a robust character with an attractively realistic worldview:

Mrs. Fence.—Well; ’twas his fate, as the saying is, and has been the fate o’ many a good man afore him. Ods! gal—(to Mary) you do nothing but mope, an’ hang your head, an’ ’stare when you’re s’poked to! What the dickens! was he the only man i’ the world? Have a good hearty cry, and ha’ done with it. (1853, p. 22)
She lacks the empathy of other female characters, telling Mary to stop ‘moping’ when her lover seems to have died. Instead, she has something of the clear vision and masterful persona of a Stalwart or Samuel. Though she speaks in rough-and-ready prose, she is no Bombard, and steps logically from her notion of ‘fate’ to her advice for Mary. Her husband admires her potency: ‘You can do it, old oman; you’re the one that can do it, and no mistake’ (p. 10). She enforces the bushrangers’ honour code, deciding when it is ‘proper’ to perform certain rituals (p. 22). Grace Karskens has written about the role convict women had in the early rural settlements, not only managing their households, but sheltering runaways, running brothels and distilling illegal liquor. Harpur recognised, even if he did not fully condone, this kind of female working-class freedom, just as he recognised the male working-class freedom of bushranging.

The other limit to Harpur’s radicalism is race. Elsewhere, Harpur wrote movingly about the plight of Aboriginal men and women coping with the invasion. But in The Bushrangers, the only Aboriginal people are the ‘dusky savages’ whom the white characters mention from time to time. It is also significant that Harpur includes only Israelites in King Saul, and never characters from among their conquered foes. In these early plays, Harpur’s dream of democracy had a national—perhaps an ethnic—boundary. Nonetheless, the dream of democracy is there: Harpur’s criticism of the class system is powerful, and his concept of mental authority, embodied by Stalwart and Samuel, is potentially universal, even if his early plays do not achieve the universality of later masterworks like ‘Aboriginal Death Song’ (1858) or The Witch of Hebron (1867).

V. Mysticism
The final remarkable element of Harpur’s Romantic tragedies is their mysticism. Magic, prophecies and supernatural beings are common in Romantic drama. What is striking about Harpur’s plays is how deliberately he works through the problems of mystical experience in a secular age. What are the sources of such experience? How should we relate our dreams to our lives? These problems are especially urgent in Harpur’s plays, because as we have seen, he suggests that mental or mystical power is the only source of legitimate authority in a free society.

The debate about the possibility of mystic experience is more obvious in King Saul, because the characters have the debate out loud. When Saul dreams of David taking his crown, Ziba argues that dreams merely express our anxieties:

[...] [dreams are] but
The vap’ish steam of an o’er-heated brain,
In which the toil-drows’d, yet half-conscious mind’s
Refracted glances paint its apprehensions,
In dim-drawn scenes, incongruous, and yet mask’d:—
Nay, ofttimes, with an undertouch of such
Significance, in that each wild effect
Seems faithful to its own prefigur’d cause
So rationally sequent, as might well
Engage belief in sob’rest minds. (p. 560)
Ziba argues that dreams have a purely psychological meaning; they are ‘mask’d’ allegories of the mind’s ‘apprehensions’. If a dream seems to be prophetic, it is not because it is a divine message of truth, but because it has a compelling internal logic. Ziba’s theory seems at first to be borne out. David is not plotting against the paranoid Saul: the dream is a self-fulfilling prophecy, driving Saul to commit the foul deeds that will cause David to rebel and his monarchy to crumble. We could likewise interpret Samuel’s vision from the beginning of the play as a self-fulfilling prophecy: he dreams a young man will come to him and be crowned, so he makes Saul king. Nonetheless, according to his ‘Plan’, Harpur intended to show Saul being possessed by an ‘Evil Spirit’ before his dream, as in the biblical text (p. 587), and we have seen how a Spirit of the Lord visits Samuel in the opening scene. In any case, if dreams can be so ‘rationally sequent’ that they do predict the future, then what is truly the difference between dream and prophecy? The play is deeply ambivalent.

Harpur significantly revised the mystical aspects of The Bushrangers. In the published extracts of The Tragedy of Donohoe, he had included two supernatural scenes. In one, ‘Mary O’Brien’ (Ada in the 1853 version) dreams that Donohoe has killed ‘William’ (Abel) on the very night he does so: ‘Pray heaven my fears | Prove phantasms, and not presentiments!’ (1835, p. 100). In the other supernatural scene, the Furies descend during a storm to announce that Donohoe/Stalwart will be punished for murdering William/Abel. Unlike Macbeth’s witches, however, these Furies never communicate with humans:

**Furies.** Thus we carry darkness with us,
Hiding us from mortal ken;
Thus in hellish dance we writhe us,
When we’d touch affairs of men. (1835, p. 106)

What makes Mary’s dream and the Furies so striking is their ambiguity. Is Mary’s prophetic dream a mere coincidence? What place do these ‘hiding’ and ‘hellish’ Furies have in the order of things? We are never told the provenance of Mary’s dream, and Harpur suggests that these Furies are simultaneously good and evil, simultaneously the source of truth and yet utterly invisible and unknowable.

The problem in The Bushrangers and King Saul is the classic Romantic problem of subjectivity. If there is another, spiritual, meaningful world, then our senses are likely too gross and material to perceive it. Harpur came to feel that the Furies and Mary’s dream were crude symbols of this problem. He deleted the supernatural scenes from The Bushrangers, and the dark energy of the Furies returned in the form of metaphor:

**Stalwart.** But I ever was,
And ever shall be, the accursed slave
Of lawless passion!—She has given me health
And liberty, but with those gifts evoked
Desires iniquitous, that from their dark
Impulsive depths, like monstrous sea-swells, keep
Blindly upworking [...] (1853, p. 28)
Now, the ‘hellish’ and ‘hiding’ Furies have buried themselves in the human mind,
in the ‘lawless’, ‘impulsive’, ‘dark’ and ‘blind’ depths of our own natures. Perhaps
these ‘monstrous sea-swells’ harken back to the terrible floods of Harpur’s early
childhood, when the tidal Hawkesbury repeatedly broke its banks and engulfed
the district’s farmland. Certainly Stalwart’s water imagery contrasts with Abel’s
description of this same ‘shining river’ in another scene:

[…] Then, my fairest,
We’ll mark the spangled fishes throng about
In happy revel, and compare them well
To swarms of brilliant love-lights flashing through
The silver vision of some glorious Bard,
When, flowing forth in everlasting verse,
It greens the course of time. (1853, p. 24)

_The Bushrangers_ presents humanity as a ‘battleground of contradictory impulses’,
argues Ackland.59 On the one hand are the ‘monstrous sea-swells’ that sweep up
from the deaths and drive men like Stalwart and Saul to madness. On the other
hand is the ‘silver vision’ of Abel when he gazes on the water. These impulses
remained mysterious. Harpur was sure that we could reach a ‘cloudier region of
[the] soul’ (1853, p. 49), but could never settle on a theory of how such mystical
experience was possible. Even in the late 1850s, when revising ‘The Tower of the
Dream’, he was still asking whether dreams are just ‘the thin disjoining shades’
of memory, or whether they are ‘glimpses oft, though vague, of some wide sea |
Of mystic being’ (h642c, ll. 2, 10 and 22–23).

What is remarkable is how explicitly Harpur worked through these problems
in his plays. The plays repudiate the ‘duality’ of Romantic theatre in all their
aspects. Reality was their subject. They would portray the literal truth of colonial
New South Wales or of Biblical history, regardless of censorship or the demands
of respectable opinion. Their ghosts and dreams and strange coincidences were
not allegorical or theatrical, but were careful attempts to work out whether
mystical experience was possible in the real world. With their melodramatic
elements, _King Saul_ and _The Bushrangers_ may not seem so realistic today, but
it may be remembered that in Harpur’s world, the Bible was still factual and
gothic bandits actually did range the bush. Like other Romantic tragedies,
these two were highly subjective; the language was tuned to reveal different
styles of thought, from the ideological ramblings of Tunbelly and Bomebard,
to the passionate raving of Saul and the powerful reflections of Stalwart and
Samuel. Harpur believed that all persons had equal subjective capabilities, and
his plays look forward to a just society where wealth and privilege no longer
shackle the human mind. But they were not ‘subjective’ plays in the way theo-
rists of Romantic tragedy often use the word: there is an underlying vision of
the ‘mystic sea’ of human impulse that gives meaning to the characters’ words
and deeds. Harpur spent his life trying to chart this sea, and was never sure he had finally succeeded.

Harpur hoped all his life to be published in London, and to be recognised internationally as the founder of his nation’s literature. He was extremely conscious of his place in the literary tradition, and it is perhaps for this reason that in his first major works he took such a bold and inquiring approach to tragedy, the most prestigious literary genre of his time.

Notes
2. Ibid.
6. Charles Harpur Critical Archive <http://charles-harpur.org> [accessed 31 July 2018]. Each version of each poem has a unique h-number, which I will use to refer to them.
13. These advertisements can be found in the Sydney Gazette for 3, 8 and 10 Oct 1833, which are freely available on the National Library of Australia’s Trove database <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.
14. Charles Harpur, Stalwart the Bushranger, with the Tragedy of Donohoe, ed. by Elizabeth Perkins (Sydney: Currency Press, 1987). I refer throughout this essay to the play’s various versions by year and page number. ‘1835’ refers to the original newspaper publication of The Tragedy of Donohoe, which appeared in instalments from 7 to 28 Feb 1835 in the Sydney Monitor. I refer to Perkins’s reprint rather than the original newspaper version, though the originals are freely available on Trove. ‘1853’ refers to the the book version published in Sydney in 1853—which is,
at the time of writing, freely available on Google Books. ‘1867’ refers to the final manuscript version printed by Perkins as the main text of her edition.

15. Sydney, Mitchell Library, Charles Harpur Manuscript Volumes (c. 1837–1868), A87-2, f. 359. All the fragments of King Saul appear in MS vol. A87-2, so hereafter I simply give the page number. Harpur’s manuscripts can be viewed for free at the Harpur Critical Archive—see n. 6, above.


23. Booth, English Melodrama, ch. 3.


25. Ibid., pp. 2 and 91.

26. Ibid., ch. 4.


28. Ibid., p. 80.


36. Harpur, ‘Note to Stalwart the Bushranger’, in Stalwart, ed. by Perkins, p. 84.

40. Burwick, Romantic Drama, pp. 69–79.
43. Bushranging was endemic in the Sydney region till at least the 1840s (ibid., p. 306).
44. 1 Samuel 16. 14, 15, 23; 18. 10; 19. 9.
45. ‘Cain, a Mystery’, Literary Gazette, 22 Dec 1821, pp. 808–12 (p. 808; my emphasis).
56. Deniehy, ‘Review’, p. 120.

Referring to this Article

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Notes on Contributors

Angela Aliff is an independent researcher with interests in epistemology, English reformist writing, women’s writing and the digital humanities. Her doctoral thesis finds that early modern women writers justify their ideological authority using the instability in epistemic shifts within religious belief and practice. Formerly a Livingstone Online research assistant with contributions to design and user experience, Angela is now a commercial project manager and mother of an endlessly curious toddler.

Jennie Batchelor is Professor of Eighteenth-Century Studies at the University of Kent where she teaches and publishes on women’s writing and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century periodicals, as well as visual and material culture. Her most recent books include Women’s Periodicals and Print Culture, 1690–1820s, co-edited with Manushag N. Powell (EUP, 2018) and (with Alison Larkin) Jane Austen Embroidery (Pavilion, 2020). She is currently completing her third monograph, The Lady’s Magazine (1770–1832) and the Making of Literary History.

Johnny Cammish is a PhD Student and Research Associate at the University of Nottingham, working on the concept of ‘Literary Philanthropy’ in the Romantic Period. He works on the philanthropic efforts of Joanna Baillie, James Montgomery, Elizabeth Heyrick and Henry Kirke White, particularly in relation to charitable collections of poetry, works lobbying for the abolition of slavery and chimney sweep reform, and posthumous editing of work in order to preserve legacies.

Carmen Casaliggi is Reader in English at Cardiff Metropolitan University. Her research interests include Romantic literature and art, the relationship between British and European Romanticism, and Romantic sociability culture. She has published widely on the long nineteenth century and her books include: Ruskin in Perspective: Contemporary Essays (Cambridge Scholars, 2007) and Legacies of Romanticism: Literature, Culture, Aesthetics (Routledge, 2012), both co-edited with Paul March-Russell); and Romanticism: A Literary and Cultural History (Routledge, 2016), with Porscha Fermanis). She is currently working on a new book-length study entitled Romantic Networks in Europe: Transnational Encounters, 1786–1850 for EUP and she is guest editor for a special issue on ‘Housing Romanticism’ for the European Romantic Review. She was a Visiting Fellow in the Arts and Humanities Institute at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (2019–20) and is recipient of a fully funded Visiting
Fellowship awarded by the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University (2020–21).

**Daniel Cook** is Head of English and Associate Director of the Centre for Scottish Culture at the University of Dundee. He has published widely on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and Irish literature, from Pope to Wordsworth. Recent books include *Reading Swift’s Poetry* (2020) and *The Afterlives of Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (2015), both published by CUP.

**Eric Daffron** is Professor of Literature at Ramapo College of New Jersey, where he teaches gothic literature and literary theory. He has published widely on those and other topics.

**Colette Davies** is an AHRC M4C PhD candidate at the University of Nottingham. Her research explores novels published by the Minerva Press written by a range of neglected professional women writers. These works shed light on how women writers responded to an era of transformation in the literary marketplace and to a socially turbulent context through their works of fiction. Colette is one of two Postgraduate Representatives for the British Association for Romantic Studies and co-organised the BARS 2019 International Conference, ‘Romantic Facts and Fantasies’ and the BARS 2020 ECR/PGR Conference, ‘Romantic Futurities’. She is a co-contributor for the ‘Romantic Novel’ section of the *Year’s Work in English Studies* and has published blogs with *Romantic Textualities* and the British Association for Romantic Studies.


**Michael Falk** is Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century Studies at the University of Kent, and an Adjunct Fellow in Digital Humanities at Western Sydney University. His key interests include digital methods, the global aspects of Romanticism and the Enlightenment, and the literary history of the self. He has published on Maria Edgeworth, Charlotte Smith, John Clare and Charles Harpur; co-edits the Romantic Poetry section of *Year’s Work in English Studies*; and has work forthcoming on the problem of Artificial Stupidity and on eighteenth-century Swiss book history. He is a keen digital humanities educator, and has run workshops on coding and other skills across the UK and Australia. He is currently at work on his monograph, *Frankenstein’s Siblings*, a digital study of contingent selfhood in Romantic literature.
Peter Garside taught English Literature for more than thirty years at Cardiff University, where he became founding Director of the Centre for Editorial and Intertextual Research. Subsequently, he was appointed Professor of Bibliography and Textual Studies at the University of Edinburgh. He served on the Boards of the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels and the Stirling/South Carolina Collected Edition of the Works of James Hogg, and has produced three volumes apiece for each of these scholarly editions. He was one of the general editors of the bibliographical survey *The English Novel, 1770–1829*, 2 vols (OUP, 2000), and directed the AHRC-funded *British Fiction, 1800–1829* database (2004). More recently, he has co-edited *English and British Fiction 1750–1820* (2015), Volume 2 of the Oxford History of the Novel in English; and forthcoming publications include an edition of Scott’s *Shorter Poems*, along with Gillian Hughes, for the Edinburgh Edition of Walter Scott’s Poetry.

Michael John Goodman is a postdoctoral researcher based at Cardiff University’s Centre of Editorial and Intertextual Research. He is the director of the Victorian Illustrated Shakespeare Archive, an online open-access resource that contains over 3000 illustrations taken from Victorian editions of Shakespeare’s plays. He is currently writing his first monograph, *Shakespeare in Bits and Bytes*, which explores how the digital can help students and the general public engage meaningfully with the humanities.

Hannah Doherty Hudson is an Assistant Professor of English at Suffolk University in Boston. Her publications focus on the popular print culture of the long eighteenth century, on topics ranging from magazine biography to gothic fiction. She is currently completing a book on the Minerva Press and fictional excess in the Romantic period.

Matthew C. Jones is a Lecturer in the English Department at William Paterson University of New Jersey. His research focuses on Welsh literatures and cultures of the long nineteenth century, and changing English attitudes toward Wales in state and popular literature from the later Enlightenment into the mid-Victorian era.

Aneta Lipska holds a PhD from the University of Silesia and has recently taught at the State University of Applied Sciences in Włocławek, Poland. She is the author of *The Travel Writings of Marguerite Blessington: The Most Gorgeous Lady on the Tour* (Anthem Press, 2017). Her main research interests include travel literature of the nineteenth century, Anglo-Italian literary and cultural relations, and literature didactics.

Simone Marshall is Associate Professor in English at the University of Otago, New Zealand. Her research platform, *A World Shaped by Texts*, concerns how our understanding of the world around us is directly shaped by texts: religious, scientific, literary, legal and historical. Her research programmes include race, women, medievalisms and anonymity, as well as a specific focus on Chaucer. Marshall’s research programme on Chaucer and his afterlives includes attention on the continuations of *The Squire’s Tale*, an examination of an edition of John Urry’s 1722 Chaucer located in Auckland City Library, as well as cross-cultural comparisons between Chaucer’s *The Parliament of Fowls* and Sufi poet Farid Ud-din Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds*. Marshall’s research has been featured in the media, including *The History of Anon*, a BBC Radio 4 series on the history of literary anonymity, broadcast 1–4 January 2013, as well as interviews on Radio New Zealand National in 2010 and 2013 on the 1807 Chaucer. Further details can be found at https://simonecelinemarshall.com/.

Kelsey Paige Mason is a PhD candidate at Ohio State University interested in nineteenth-century transatlantic literature, futurity and utopianism. She analyses nineteenth-century primary texts from ideological and repressive spaces (such as prisons and plantations), as well as from utopian communities and draws correlations between these primary texts and utopian/dystopian fiction. She is interested in how published and unpublished narratives portray the utopian impulse towards the future, including questioning which populations are excluded from future speculation. Her recent publications include ‘Writing Revolution: Orwell’s Not-So-Plain Style in Animal Farm’ and ‘A Lifetime Sowing the Blues: The Diary of Lucius Clark Smith, 1834–1915’.

Kurt Edward Milberger serves as Coordinating Editor in the College of Arts & Letters at Michigan State University. His work has appeared in *Jonathan Swift and Philosophy*, edited by Janelle Pötzsch (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), and in *From Enlightenment to Rebellion: Essays in Honor of Christopher Fox*, edited by James G Buickerood (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018). With Margaret Doody, he has edited Susannah Gunning’s *Barford Abbey*, which is forthcoming from Broadview Press.

Amy Milka is a researcher in eighteenth-century history, literature and culture at the University of Adelaide. She is the author of several articles on law and emotions, including: (with David Lemmings) ‘Narratives of Feeling and

**Christina Morin** lectures in English literature at the University of Limerick, where she is also course director of the MA in Global Irish Studies. She is the author of *The Gothic Novel in Ireland, c. 1760–1829* (MUP, 2018), which won the prestigious Robert Rhodes prize in 2019, and *Charles Robert Maturin and the Haunting of Irish Romantic Fiction* (MUP, 2011). She has also edited, with Marguérite Corporaal, *Traveling Irishness in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2017) and, with Niall Gillespie, *Irish Gothics: Genres, Forms, Modes and Traditions* (2014), both published by Palgrave Macmillan. Current projects include a monograph on Irish writers and the Minerva Press and a 200th anniversary celebration of the publication of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) in collaboration with Marsh’s Library, Dublin.

**Elizabeth Neiman** is an Associate Professor of English and also Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Maine. Her monograph, *Minerva’s Gothics: The Politics and Poetics of Romantic Exchange, 1780–1820* (UWP, 2019) shows that popular literary conventions connect now canonical male poets to their lesser-known female colleagues, drawing them into a dynamic if unequal set of exchanges that influences all of their work. A second book project explores what Minerva and other popular women’s novels reveal when read for glimpses of the personal. Deathbed scenes are a convention in women’s Romantic-era novels, but does this make the heroine’s expression of grief impersonal, generic—her lamentations the language of cliché? Neiman is also currently writing a memoir that explores grief, love and loss, though from the distance of sister.

**Lauren Nixon** is a researcher in the gothic, war and gender, and was recently awarded her PhD from the University of Sheffield. She is the co-organiser of the academic collective Sheffield Gothic and the ‘Reimagining the Gothic’ project.

**Megan Peiser** (Choctaw Nation) is Assistant Professor of 18th-Century Literature at Oakland University, just north of Detroit, MI. She is currently completing her monograph, *The Review Periodical and British Women Novelists, 1790–1820* with accompanying database, *The Novels Reviewed Database, 1790–1820*. Peiser and her collaborator, Emily Spunaugle, are the principal investigators on *The Marguerite Hicks Project*. Peiser’s research and teaching focus on women writers, periodicals, book history and bibliography, Indigenous sovereignty, and digital humanities. She is President of the Aphra Behn Society.
for Women in the Arts 1660–1830, and an executive board member for the Modern Language Association’s Bibliography and Scholarly Editing forum.

**Victoria Ravenwood** is an English teacher at Simon Langton Grammar School for Boys in Canterbury, Kent. She recently completed, at Canterbury Christ Church University, a Research Masters titled ‘William Lane’s “Horrid” Writers: An Exploration of Violence in the Minerva Press Gothic, 1790–1799’, which examines the trope of violence and its many manifestations in Minerva works, and aspires to continue her research into the gothic more widely at doctoral level. Her interests include the formation of the gothic genre, its efflorescence during the late eighteenth century and its enduring impact in the popular imagination and classrooms of today.

**Matthew L. Reznicek** is Associate Professor of Nineteenth-Century British and Irish Literature at Creighton University, where he also teaches Medical Humanities in the School of Medicine. He has published widely in the field of nineteenth-century Irish women’s writing, including *The European Metropolis: Paris and Nineteenth-Century Irish Women Novelists* (Clemson University Press/Liverpool University Press, 2017). His second monograph, *Stages of Belonging: Irish Women Writers and European Opera*, is under contract with SUNY Press.

**Yael Shapira** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English Literature and Linguistics at Bar-Ilan University in Israel and the author of *Inventing the Gothic Corpse: The Thrill of Human Remains in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Her work has appeared in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, *Narrative*, *Women’s Writing* and elsewhere. Her current research focuses on forgotten Romantic-era gothic fiction and the challenge it presents to established narratives of gothic literary history. Essays from this project are forthcoming in the first volume of CUP’s *The Cambridge History of the Gothic*, edited by Angela Wright and Dale Townshend, and *Lost Legacies: Women’s Authorship and the Early Gothic* (UWP), edited by Kathleen Hudson.

**Sarah Sharp** is a lecturer in Scottish Literature at the University of Aberdeen and Deputy Director of Aberdeen’s Research Institute for Irish and Scottish Studies. Her work focuses on the relationship between death and ideas of nation in nineteenth-century Scottish writing.

**David Snowdon** completed his PhD at Newcastle University in 2008. He was Associate Lecturer at the University of Sunderland where he primarily taught on Victorian Literature. He has had academic articles published in journals such as *Romanticism on the Net*, *The Historian* and *wordsworth.org.uk*. His first book, *Writing the Prizefight: Pierce Egan’s ‘Boxiana’ World* (2013), was
awarded the prestigious British Society of Sports History Aberdare Literary Prize in 2014. He continues, in an independent capacity, to undertake further scholarly research in the field of nineteenth-century literature and maintain a Pierce Egan related website (www.pierce-egan.co.uk). His most recent book, *Give Us Tomorrow Now* (2018) focuses on 1980s’ football history.

**Christopher Stampone** is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Bethel University in McKenzie, Tennessee, where he is developing cutting-edge literary and compositional modules for asynchronous learning. His work has recently appeared in *Studies in American Fiction*, *Studies in the Novel* and *ANQ*. He can be reached at StamponeC@BethelU.edu.

**Joanna E. Taylor** is Presidential Fellow in Digital Humanities at the University of Manchester. Her work intersects digital and environmental humanities via nineteenth-century literature, spatial poetics and cartographic history. She has published widely in leading literary studies, digital humanities and geographical information science journals on these topics. She is co-director of the AHRC-funded network Women in the Hills, and her next research project explores connections between women’s nature writing and environmental policy. You can find her on Twitter: @JoTayl0r0.

**Katherine Voyles** lectured at the University of Washington, Bothell from 2010 to 2020. She holds a PhD in English from the University of California, Irvine.

**Mischa Willett** is author of two books of poetry as well as of essays, translations and reviews that appear in both popular and academic journals. A specialist in nineteenth-century aesthetics, he teaches English at Seattle Pacific University. More information can be found at www.mischawillett.com.