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# ISABELLA KELLY AND THE MINERVA GOTHIC CHALLENGE

*Yael Shapira*



HOW SHOULD A GOTHIC SCHOLAR APPROACH Isabella Kelly's *The Ruins of Avondale Priory*, published by the Minerva Press in 1796? Or perhaps we first have to ask: *should* a gothic scholar read this novel? Judging by common accounts of gothic literary history, Kelly's book belongs to the wave of 'imitations' that glutted the British fiction market in the 1790s and early 1800s, prompted by the enthusiastic reception of Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) and especially *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and by the scandalous success of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). Nothing about the external appearance of Kelly's novel would seem to refute this assumption: as book-historical analyses of the period have made us aware, the word 'ruins' in the title is a marketing cue, announcing the novel's kinship to the gothic best-sellers of the day and thus locating it within an emerging system of generic classification meant to direct library patrons to 'types' of works they already liked.<sup>1</sup> Once we turn the page, enough of what we find in *Avondale Priory* will indeed appear familiar: there is a heroine fleeing various persecutors, attempted rapes, abductions, murders, a long-buried family secret coming to light. All of these, moreover, take place among 'the magnificent ruins of an ancient Priory' or in the nearby castle, where the heroine finds herself in a 'blackened turret', its 'rugged and damp' walls seeming to 'freeze her blood by their petrifying chill'.<sup>2</sup>

The verdict, then, seems clear enough: we must be in the company of one of Radcliffe's 'servile imitators', as Sir Walter Scott called them—that is, those many now-forgotten authors who, encouraged by Minerva's enterprising owner William Lane and prompted (in many cases) by their own financial necessity, produced one Radcliffe or Lewis knock-off after another to stock library shelves and meet the demands of an avid readership.<sup>3</sup> And if that is the case, perhaps we really would do better to skip *Avondale Priory*: after all, why waste time on what seems an obvious member of that class of gothic novels that have been variously described by critics as an 'unappetizing gallimaufry of earlier stories', 'tame, sentimental rehashes of Radcliffe's Female gothic romances' or simply 'trash, of little interest today save to antiquarians, bibliophiles, and literary historians'—and, judging by the amount of serious attention paid to such fictions, not of much interest to them, either?<sup>4</sup>

Considering the special issue in which this essay appears, it will come as no surprise that I do not endorse this assessment of *Avondale Priory*, or of Minerva

gothics more broadly. Rather, I join a recent wave of criticism in arguing that to ignore Minerva Press novels is to accept significant blind spots in our view of Romantic literary history—and more specifically, in this case, in our understanding of Romantic gothic fiction. As scholars have recently demonstrated, there is a substantial cost to gothic scholarship's all-but-exclusive focus on what Frederick Frank has called 'the official circle of critically acceptable Goths created by literary historians—the gothic constellation of Walpole, Reeve, Beckford, Radcliffe, Lewis, Maturin, and Mary Shelley'.<sup>5</sup> Isolating the works of the authors on Frank's list as 'originals' and dismissing the rest as 'imitations' that deserve only a passing nod, most histories of the gothic trace a relatively clear genealogy that runs from Walpole, by way of Reeve and Beckford, through the 'male' and 'female' strands of Radcliffe and Lewis to the Romantic gothic's alleged decline around 1820, with Mary Shelley and C. R. Maturin marking its final flowering. Yet these tidy narratives of the gothic's evolution have what Christina Morin calls an 'unfortunate—if largely unintended—homogenizing effect' on a far broader, messier and more diverse history of fiction writing, while 'consign[ing] to oblivion whole swathes of outlying literary production'.<sup>6</sup> When those 'swathes'—the many novels long written out of gothic literary history—are written back in, we discover not a clear line of descent that runs through a handful of novels, but a diffuse and vibrant scene of fictional experimentation that unfolds across dozens of titles.

As recent work on the Minerva Press has compellingly shown, the critical payoff of this broader view extends beyond the rediscovery (important in itself) of forgotten works: it makes certain long-held tenets of gothic scholarship newly debatable.<sup>7</sup> One of these tenets, as I discuss in more detail below, is the common view of Romantic gothic as neatly bifurcated into 'Radcliffean' and 'Lewisian', 'male' and 'female' schools. But Minerva novels also reactivate other critical conversations, such as the already vexed discussion of what even constitutes a 'gothic novel'—a term that, as various scholars have reminded us, is itself a retroactive critical coinage, implying a generic cohesion not actually found in the fiction that now bears this name.<sup>8</sup> Numerous and deeply heterogeneous, Minerva novels prove even more frustrating than canonical gothics (themselves already famously hybrid) for the critic who desires a clearly defined object of study. Their sheer number and diversity validate Gary Kelly's description of 'the "gothic romance"' as 'not so much a coherent and authentic genre as an ensemble of themes and formal elements which could be taken over and adapted in whole or part by other novelists'.<sup>9</sup> Informed by this debate, the term 'gothic' in what follows is used to name components rather than novels—that is, those formal and thematic elements that Romantic observers foregrounded as the hallmark of the new fictional trend: settings such as castles or abbeys; plotlines involving extreme and fearful events (haunting, murder, rape); images such as bloody corpses and spectres, skeletons and demons. Rather than tackle the largely irresolvable question of how and when such elements suffice to define a 'gothic novel', my discussion is interested in the circulation and mutation of

the components themselves—dominant or marginal, persistent or occasional, darkly earnest or tongue-in-cheek—and in pursuing a gothic literary history that encompasses their varied manifestations.

But while (to return to my opening question) fewer scholars now wonder if Lane's contributions to the gothic *should* be read, the issue of *how* to read them still requires thought. Can we take Minerva novels seriously without ignoring their uneven quality or over-reading what often *is* repetitive, bathetic or downright ludicrous? Do such recurrences of familiar motifs necessarily spell 'imitation'? Is every case of the explained supernatural or every lascivious Catholic cleric we run across unproductive to study, because Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis used them more skilfully or conspicuously? And when Minerva authors do repeat components of more famous novels, is this the 'servile', mindless duplication denounced by Romantic critics, and further denigrated by modern ones? Are there ways we might approach such repetition that will yield other, more productive conclusions? In short, what kinds of interpretation, theorisation and contextualisation will best illuminate these forgotten novels, account for their distinctive features as well as those they share with other works of their time, and help us understand their place in the gothic's history?

One central challenge for scholars of Minerva gothic is the label of 'imitation' itself, which needs to be interrogated rather than allowed to continue dictating the boundaries of what we study. As both Hannah Doherty Hudson and Elizabeth Neiman have compellingly argued, the derogatory notion of 'imitation' as an innate property of Minerva novels is a legacy of Romantic critics, who anxiously gave this word a newly negative currency as they tried to come to terms with a sudden surge in commercial fiction publication. This inherited bias, Hudson and Neiman demonstrate, may keep us from seeing such important qualities of Minerva novels as the pronounced self-awareness with which they use shared fictional tropes, or their participation in the very debates over literary value that eventually gave rise to their wholesale forgetting.<sup>10</sup> Minerva novels not only (as Hudson, Neiman and Morin all note) respond playfully, at times parodically, to their own clichéd materials, but engage with canonical novels in more serious and meaningful ways as well, adapting the materials they borrow to insightful and sometimes critical ends.<sup>11</sup> From the particular vantage-point of gothic scholarship, I would add, the term 'imitation' is reductive: it renders invisible webs of nuanced connections between novels, a dialogue which is itself a vital part of the history of gothic fiction. As I will show, it is precisely the reproduction-with-a-difference of recognisable pieces from other works, rather than their mindless replication, that renders a text such as *Avondale Priory* more complex, interesting and idiosyncratic than the generic 'marketing cue' in its title might suggest.

Detecting such intertextual play, however, requires that we pay close attention to Kelly's novel, which brings me to the second methodological conundrum with which my essay is concerned: the dilemma of scope, or—to use the dominant scholarly metaphor—of 'distance'. This methodological question leads us back

to Franco Moretti's well-known speculations about the value of 'distant reading' over traditional methods of reading closely:

the trouble with close reading [...] is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon. [...] you invest so much in individual texts only if you think that very few of them really matter [...]. And if you want to look beyond the canon [...] close reading will not do it. It's not designed to do it, it's designed to do the opposite.<sup>12</sup>

The possibilities Moretti outlines seem particularly relevant for the study of Minerva gothics, given the large number of as yet unread novels and, conversely, the truly tiny canon on which all attention has been focused until now. However, the kind of binary choice he poses—either the close reading of a canon that ignores larger patterns or a distant reading in which the individual text goes unread—is neither warranted nor desirable here: unlike the tens of thousands of European novels that Moretti proposes as his dataset, Minerva's gothic titles *can* be read, and there are strong arguments in favour of both close and distant scrutiny. On the one hand, the new engagement with these novels aims to question precisely the belief that only a few texts out of the much larger corpus 'really matter', because the rest—or so the claim went—are derivative trash: reading individual Minerva gothics closely—as Angela Wright, for example, has done for fiction by Minerva authors Francis Lathom and Eliza Parsons, Dale Townsend for the work of T. J. Horsley Curties and Diane Long Hoeveler for that of Regina Maria Roche—not only adds to our knowledge of the gothic, but helps counteract the assumption that novels of this type do not reward close investigation.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, to isolate particular Minerva Press gothics from the mass of which they form part is to ignore basic information about their origins and purpose, a context helpfully reconstructed in the more 'distant' accounts of Anthony Mandal and Edward Jacobs.<sup>14</sup> Nor does the focus on one or two novels allow us to see the illuminating webs of connection that tie different Minerva novels to each other and to canonical works of their time, as recent scholarship by Franz Potter, Hudson and Neiman has indeed suggested.<sup>15</sup> In short, factoring Minerva gothics into our accounts of gothic literary history is not a matter of choosing between the close and the remote: both are needed, as are studies seeking a middle ground that allows for what Susan S. Lanser calls a '*large* reading, poised between the close and the distant'.<sup>16</sup>

In this essay, I wish to connect the two methodological issues outlined above—the question of 'imitation' and the dilemma of 'scope'—by showing how a combination of close and more remote perspectives can illuminate the use of familiar gothic tropes in Minerva novels. My discussion thus approaches Kelly's work, and specifically *The Ruins of Avondale Priory*, from two complementary vantage points. The first section offers a wide-angle view of Kelly's career with Lane, charting the patterns formed by gothic elements in her fiction across her intensive years of Minerva authorship. As we will see, Kelly's deployment of gothic tropes is marked by variety as much as by repetition: she plays with gothic materials throughout her Minerva titles, varying their dosage, tone and

narrative function. Beyond illuminating an underexplored aspect of Romantic gothic authorship—namely, how gothic elements multiplied and evolved in the hands of authors producing novel after novel for trade presses like Lane’s—this section offers what I am calling the ‘semi-distant’ view of Kelly’s work. While not delving very deeply into any one novel in this cluster, my account of them is based on detailed familiarity with their contents, so that they become not data points but interlocutors with which, as I go on to show, *Avondale Priory* is conversing. The second section begins by zooming in on *Avondale Priory* to see what exactly it is doing with the gothic tropes it shares with other novels. When not dismissed offhand on the basis of surface similarities and read attentively, the novel proves not so much an ‘imitation’—much less a mindless and mechanical one—of canonical gothics as one in a chain of adaptations to which the more famous works also belong. Moreover, Kelly’s take on their shared tropes is deliberate and self-aware: particularly striking is the strain between the novel’s frame—the familiar story of a haunting that announces the disruption of succession—and seemingly digressive or secondary episodes that persistently, almost obsessively, repeat the depiction of a woman’s grief over a dead lover. Bringing the broader perspective back in, I then follow Kelly’s particular twist on this gothic trope across her Minerva career, demonstrating the creative and even personal ways in which she turned a piece of gothic ‘formula’ into part of a distinctive fictional vocabulary.

*Isabella Kelly’s Career in Minerva Gothic: View from a Semi-Distance*

Kelly worked with William Lane from 1794 to 1801, publishing seven novels and becoming one of the press’s ‘particular and favorite authors’, as announced in a 1798 publicity prospectus.<sup>17</sup> Her first novel, *Madeline; or, the Castle of Montgomery* (1794), appeared anonymously, as did *The Abbey of St Asaph* (1795); by the publication of *The Ruins of Avondale Priory* the following year (1796), Kelly was signing her name to her books, and her later Minerva novels—*Joscelina: Or, the Rewards of Benevolence* (1798), *Eva* (1799) and *Ruthinglenne, or the Critical Moment* (1801)—were all identified on their title pages as the work of ‘Isabella Kelly’ or ‘Mrs Kelly’, while *Edwardina* was published in 1800 under the pseudonym of ‘Catherine Harris’.<sup>18</sup> After *Ruthinglenne*, Kelly and the Minerva Press parted ways. *The Baron’s Daughter* (1802) was published by Joseph Bell, though Minerva did undertake a second edition; two subsequent novels, *A Modern Incident in Domestic Life* (1803) and *The Secret* (1805), went to Philip Norbury of Brentford; and a final work of fiction, *Jane de Dunstanville* (1813), was printed privately for the author. In 1805, Kelly also published a French grammar book for children, and her sporadic output in her later years would include a book of instruction for youth and a memoir of a relative’s life.

Surveying Kelly’s fiction for Lane as it developed over time allows us to see an aspect of gothic literary history not visible in the standard, canon-based accounts of its unfolding: that is, Romantic fiction’s diverse uses of gothic tropes, which the professional writers responsible for Minerva’s rapid output combined,

recombined, reworked and sometimes subverted as they wrote their many novels. In concocting her fictions, Kelly weaves together gothic, sentimental, domestic and even satirical components, demonstrating the difficulty of dividing Minerva novels into distinct subtypes since, as McLeod writes, 'more often than not, [they] do not conform to such simplistic categorizations'.<sup>19</sup> Kelly's seven novels for Minerva feature numerous sentimental set pieces of languishing distress, tearful reunions, miraculous discoveries of noble origins; there are scenes that take place in salons and assemblies, exposing and mocking the foibles of modern society; and finally—most importantly for my purposes—there are sojourns in crumbling castles and abbeys, where dark family secrets turn up hidden in dungeons, night-time noises announce the possibility of ghosts and human remains make shocking appearances. Kelly, in other words, wrote much and she wrote fast, echoing the successful models of her time as she did, but also enjoying considerable leeway in choosing how to engage them. In her hands, gothic materials prove more malleable and tonally diverse than the traditional objects of gothic scholarship have taught us to expect.

Looking over the entirety of Kelly's career with Lane, we can follow her gothic components as she plays with them, varying their usage, dosage, location and tone in moving from one novel to the next. In her first two novels, *Madeline* and *The Abbey of St Asaph*, Kelly makes rather limited use of the gothic—an interesting fact, given that both appeared after Radcliffe's enormously successful *Mysteries of Udolpho*. Even when faced with such a temptingly proven precedent, it seems, Kelly still had her own preferences about how much space to give to the type of materials Radcliffe had made famous. In these two early novels, Kelly employs isolated gothic episodes to draw her stories to a close, having spent the first half of both books involving the reader in the financial straits, personal losses and romantic upheavals of the heroines and heroes—primarily Madeline Montgomery and her sister Ellen in *Madeline*, and siblings Lionel and Elinor Douglas and their mother's young ward Jennet in *St Asaph*. Since Madeline, Ellen and Elinor all marry midway through the story and face a range of conjugal challenges (abandonment, jealousy, estrangement), the two novels establish Kelly's particular interest in marriage as a site of discord, another significant deviation from Radcliffe: concluding courtship plots early in her works, Kelly then plumbs the exquisite miseries involved in the breakdown of matrimonial relations.<sup>20</sup> In *Madeline*, it is marital unhappiness that leads the plot towards gothic territory in the third volume, albeit briefly and rather comically: the paragon heroine's flighty sister Ellen is whisked off by her husband to the crumbling Castle of Glomart for an oddly humorous 'taming of the shrew' episode, thanks to which they live happily ever after. In *St Asaph*, marital misery is Elinor's fate, treated with great earnestness before the introduction of a gothic subplot focused on Jennet in the novel's latter half. While serving as companion to an heiress at a castle near the eponymous abbey, Jennet spends some terrifying hours in the burial vaults and discovers a secret prisoner: the



true lord of the castle and (of course) her long-lost father, who restores her to her original name, title and property.

Kelly is at her most concertedly gothic in her third novel, *The Ruins of Avondale Priory*: the complicated plot (discussed in detail below) follows Ethelinde St Clair, her husband Athwold, his sister Juliet and the young Lord Avondale through a preponderance of adventures involving alleged hauntings, attempted murders, frightening-yet-atmospheric rambles among gothic ruins and a number of dramatic deaths. After *Avondale Priory*, Kelly goes back to working gothic episodes into longer narratives dominated by other generic components. She makes relatively sparing use of the gothic in *Joscelina*, a Burney-like blend of social satire and sentimentality, whose heroine spends a brief while in the last volume near a supposedly haunted castle, where secret documents help her regain her wealth and status. Gothic components have somewhat greater weight in *Eva*, clustering this time mainly in the first volume, where the heroine's father confines her in a gloomy nunnery in order to coerce her into an unwanted marriage. In *Edwardina*, gothic tropes are once again used to wrap up the plot rather than launch it: recounted in the letters they exchange, the adventures of close friends Edwardina and Arabella in and around two gothic piles play a crucial role in restoring the lost fortune of Edwardina's family. Finally, *Ruthinglenne* uses the gothic to negotiate pivotal moments midway through the novel: strange lights, quivers in the ground and a spectral voice warn the heroine Benigna not to marry her determined suitor, and a similar supernatural agitation later prevents her rape by the novel's villain.

From the 1794 *Madeline* to the 1801 *Ruthinglenne*, then, Kelly's gothic materials shrink and expand, move backwards and forwards in plots, open stories or bring them to a close. Moreover, the remote view allows us to see that Kelly varies not only the narrative placement and function of her gothic storylines, but their tone as well. In some cases, she plumbs gothic scenarios for their horrific import, piling on both gruesome description and fervent emotion. Beauvais, an Englishman who barely escaped the Revolutionary mob in France, describes finding the buried body of his wife: 'I looked down into the cold, damp grave, would have descended, and once more pressed her in my trembling arms, but [...] already had corruption seized the fairest and most faultless form, that ever graced the works of bright creation' (*Avondale Priory*, III, 13). Elsewhere, by contrast, Kelly's use of the gothic is mischievous, occasionally self-parodying. In one of the few studies of Kelly's fiction, Tenille Nowak points to her startling use of humour in the final scenes of *St Asaph*, seeing it as expressing 'an astute (albeit somewhat clumsy) understanding of the fine line that often exists between humor and fear'.<sup>21</sup> Surveying Kelly's entire Minerva corpus reveals various other instances of this blend: Ellen's stay at the Castle of Glomart in *Madeline*, mentioned above, includes fearful noises that turn out to be caused by a stray kitten, and the episode ends with a rather indelicate set of jokes about the way Ellen has inadvertently allowed a stranger into the castle (that is, she and her husband are expecting a new baby). The gothic ordeals of *Edwardina's*

Arabella, an adventuress undaunted by mystery, are likewise narrated in a lighthearted tone: sword in hand, she swashbuckles her way through the castle to the fortuitous ending.

Taking in the whole of Kelly's *Minerva oeuvre* and its gothic materials allows us to see how hard it is to fit her—like other *Minerva* novelists—into the gendered subcategories of gothic that critics have conceptualised around the influential examples of Radcliffe and Lewis. The sharp divergence of tone and style between the two premier gothic novelists of the 1790s, combined with their opposed approaches to the supernatural, have long formed the basis for distinctions between the so-called male and female gothic traditions, defined not simply by their authors' genders but (critics have claimed) by their distinctly gendered perspectives on the sources and experiences of fear in patriarchal culture. Within such accounts, prominent differences between Radcliffe and Lewis are broadened into 'types' of gothic and given a gendered cultural rationale. Thus, 'female gothic' has been linked to an emphasis on a heroine's fearful experiences, a preference for terror over horror and the eventual triumph of rationality over superstition. By contrast, blunt bodily horror (especially that involving female flesh), graphic violence and the unabashed use of ghosts have been placed on the 'male' side of the divide.<sup>22</sup>

Kelly's fiction, however, combines components from both sides of this assumed split. Her novels emphasise young women's initiation into a dangerous world, and she opts for the 'explained supernatural' throughout most of her *Minerva* career. But if these traits seem to place Kelly's fiction in the 'Radcliffean' camp, in *Ruthinglenne* she suddenly allows Benigna's dead father to intervene from beyond the grave and save his daughter from incest and rape. Throughout her novels, moreover, Kelly shows a stylistic preference for horror: as described above, there is considerable brutality as well as a penchant for gore in her gothic scenes.<sup>23</sup> Seeing Kelly manoeuvre this way between components of the male and female formulae strengthens what Wright and Hoeveler have also suggested in recent readings of non-canonical women's gothic: that generalisations long based on Radcliffe and Lewis alone need to be rethought, along with some of our previous conclusions about the links between gender, authorship and gothic narrative.<sup>24</sup> Rather than replicate a formula offered by any one author, Kelly navigates between multiple influences, borrowing what suits her and changing it further as needed. While doing so, as the next section will show, she recombines familiar materials into an idiosyncratic shape, thus offering her own particular—and, I will suggest, personally resonant—twist on the gothic tale in which a woman comes face to face with what which she most fears.

*Avondale Priory Up Close: Formulae and Red Herrings*

Like Kelly's other novels, *The Ruins of Avondale Priory* is a dense concoction of storylines and characters, the focus being Ethelinde St Clair and her husband Athwold, who have been separated by the schemes of his ambitious mother. Ethelinde takes shelter with her infant twins near Avondale Castle under an

assumed name, though she reveals her true identity to Lord Avondale when he courts her. After surviving an assassination attempt by her mother-in-law, Ethelinde is reunited with Athwold; together with his sister Juliet, who loves Lord Avondale, they spend the final part of the novel confronting the mysteries of the Avondale family, which turn out to be intimately connected to Ethelinde's own history.

The overarching narrative that holds together Kelly's tangle of subplots and digressions is that of the 'haunting' of Avondale Castle: 'there is no denying that something is wrong', Mrs Barlowe, the housekeeper, tells Ethelinde, 'and never [...] will the unquiet spirit rest until its secret is disclosed' (1, 148). If we are looking for a formula Kelly is following, one thus immediately suggests itself, though its obvious sources are not Radcliffe and Lewis, but rather Horace Walpole and Clara Reeve. The secret of Avondale, like those of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1778), involves a rupture in the line of succession, announced by a series of uncanny events that end when rightful inheritance is restored. '[S]ome say [...] that my beloved Lady, for some reason is unquiet', says Mrs Barlowe, and while the housekeeper dismisses the rumours as 'a great many silly tales [...] by many too much credited' (1, 135) and Kelly herself makes sure to provide a naturalistic explanation for everything that happens, the plot ultimately confirms that the late Lady Avondale had good reason to rest uneasily. After her husband was killed in a riding accident, we eventually learn, the grief-stricken Lady Avondale died too, but not before giving birth; her husband's sister, Lady Glenroy, concealed the delivery and sent the infant off to be killed, thus securing the inheritance of Avondale for her own son, the present Lord. As the novel winds its convoluted way towards the end, Ethelinde, Athwold and their friends obtain a piecemeal account of what really happened on the night of Lady Avondale's death, capped off by Lady Glenroy's confession. Meanwhile a fortuitous birthmark turns up to identify Ethelinde as Lord and Lady Avondale's lost daughter, and her inheritance is further facilitated by the death of young Lord Avondale, accidentally killed during his mother's attempt to have Ethelinde murdered.

Kelly, then, patterns her main storyline after those of Walpole and Reeve; but looking closely at her use of these well-known materials, I would argue, is precisely what raises questions about the relevance and usefulness of the label 'imitation' for *Avondale Priory*. Yes, Kelly is retelling a familiar story, but so were Reeve and Walpole; Reeve was openly and declaredly revising Walpole's novella, and both were riffing on—or is it ripping off?—Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. *Avondale Priory* belongs to an entire line of Romantic gothic novels (including Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest*) that found in *Hamlet*, as Dale Townshend claims, 'a blueprint or set of dramatic instructions' for unfolding tales in which the secret violence of the past unsettles the present until the old crimes are brought to light and their victims properly mourned.<sup>25</sup> Given the wealth of scholarship devoted to the complex engagement of canonical gothics with Shakespeare, and specifically with *Hamlet*, there seems to be no question that

Walpole's, Reeve's and Radcliffe's Shakespearean borrowings can support a rich and meaningful critical exploration; their reliance on a common reservoir of themes, plotlines and images has not automatically precluded the possibility that such shared materials might be put to individually significant use. Can we say the same, though, about *Avondale Priory*? Yes, I would argue—a close look at the novel, sensitive to both sameness and difference, exposes something far more interesting than cookie-cutter replication. Such scrutiny reveals that Kelly's usurpation-and-haunting plot possesses a playful self-awareness, but also that the novel is a deeper, more deliberate and meaningful reworking of conventional elements than a surface inventory of formulaic pieces can reveal.

*Avondale Priory* confirms Hudson's insight that 'the form and function (in terms of readership) of Minerva's gothic novels stems from their collective identity: each gothic novel is produced and consumed specifically as one of many'.<sup>26</sup> Rather than reduce the interest of each novel, this self-aware multiplicity actually accounts for its pleasures: *Avondale Priory* is fun to read not although but *because* it constructs itself out of well-known pieces, whose potential combinations are held out tantalisingly for the reader to consider. One way in which Kelly plays this game is by leaving the reader guessing until the last minute whether she will follow Walpole and Reeve and produce a male successor to the Avondale line or opt, like Radcliffe, to turn the dispossessed heir into a young woman. To render this uncertainty palpable, she keeps the sex of the baby born to Lady Avondale a secret till the very end, while providing two 'red herrings' in the form of possible male heirs. One is the current Lord Avondale, who at one point happens to meet the brother of the late Lady Avondale, his aunt by marriage; the brother, Mr Menville, is surprised to find that the young man bears, as he puts it, 'a manly resemblance to my charming sister' (III, 61). Might Lord Avondale then be the infant the Lady delivered before dying? A second, more sustained false path is set down when the central characters meet a young curate who 'in form, in feature, and in voice [...] bore a perfect resemblance of the late Lord Avondale' (III, 64). As though to make sure we do not miss his possible role, Kelly piles on the intertextual clues: the young man's name is Edmund—the same as Reeve's hero—and during one dramatic scene he startles young Lord Avondale into believing that he has met the ghost of his late uncle, much as Manfred in *The Castle of Otranto* is frightened to see Theodore, the exact replica of the murdered Alfonso. Though Mrs Barlowe claims he is the illegitimate son she bore Lord Avondale in her youth, there is thus still the possibility that 'the blooming modest Edmund, the long reputed child of a youthful indiscretion, would turn out the legal heir of Avondale, cherished by Mrs. Barlowe through her faithful love and adherence to the ill-fated parents' (III, 123). For a reader of gothic, such a narrative option is entirely imaginable, and Kelly leaves it open before us until nearly the novel's end.

But the usurpation-and-haunting formula as a whole, I would further suggest, is itself something of a red herring—a conventional frame that, because of its familiarity and the sense of telos it imposes on the plot, can distract our

attention away from the novel's deeper thematic investments. In fact, while the story of Lord and Lady Avondale's deaths and their daughter's disinheritance provides a loose frame for the novel, there is one small, particular piece of it that *Avondale Priory* repeats and amplifies with almost obsessive persistence. Tellingly, it is not the part that involves what would seem the crux of the formula—the criminal diversion of succession from its rightful path—but rather one of the seemingly random circumstances that make the usurpation possible: the death of Lord Avondale and, particularly, its effect on his wife. As the young Lord tells Ethelinde, his uncle, 'returning from a hunt, was thrown from his horse in view of his Lady, and expired on the spot [...] being at the time of her beloved Lord's death far advanced in her pregnancy, the shock proved too severe for her enfeebled spirits' (I, 106). The same scene is later retold in Mrs Barlowe's harrowing account of how she arrived at the castle to find 'the beloved Lord Avondale' with

every lineament of his beauteous manly countenance bearing the pale impressions of approaching death [...] Unhappily the sad catastrophe had reached the ear of his wife, she flew wildly to the gates, and met the attendants bearing his bleeding body, and as I entered the apartment, she had been supported insensible from it. (III, 79)

After the Lady is carried out, Mrs Barlowe lingers over the corpse of her one-time lover: 'his face was wan, his hands were cold [...] and the warm gentle heart [...] the icy hand of remorseless death was chilling now for ever' (III, 80). Her bereaved exclamations over his body cause the other servants to stare in horror, as they 'believed them arising from a temporary madness' (III, 81).

The doubling already packed into this moment—the bloodied form of a dying man; one loving woman losing consciousness, another raving with grief—would not seem significant if not for the fact that *Avondale Priory* is virtually littered with variations on this scene. A manuscript found by Ethelinde contains a ballad, 'The Fate of Athwold and Elfrida', which tells of a young woman seduced and abandoned by her lover. On the night before he is set to marry another she sees him by her bedside, an appearance that foretells their joint doom shortly afterwards:

How deadly pale thou look'st, my love,  
I fear thou art not well,  
Speak to me, life, I'll call my maids,  
I'll ring the chamber bell.  
[...]  
She ran to meet her Earl so dear,  
She met him at the door,  
A pale corpse ta'en from the Derwent stream,  
And not a smiling woer.

They bore the body on a bier,  
They laid it by her side:

She look'd, she sigh'd, she kiss'd his cheek,  
 And look'd, and shriek'd, and dy'd. (I, 145)

Oddly enough, although the manuscript containing the ballad belongs to the Avondale family, its title—'THE FATE OF ATHWOLD AND ELFRIDA'—points not to Ethelinde (herself an Avondale, as we will eventually learn) but rather to her husband, who shares a first name with the ballad's hero. What ties the Earl of St Clair to the mysteries of Avondale is not some secret blood connection—no such link between the families is ever revealed—but rather, it seems, the peculiar destiny threatening men in this novel: a premature death that incapacitates or outright kills the women who love them. Introduced early in the book, the ballad thus offers itself as a possible prophecy, much like a dream that (as Mrs Barlowe recounts) Lady Avondale had before her death, in which a spectral figure informed her that '[e]ven now the fates prepare a work of woe [...] husband's blood will stain these antique walls, a widow's tears soon fade thy blooming cheeks' (III, 75). Though Ethelinde and Athwold do live happily ever after in the end, their preceding adventures include not one but two incidents in which Ethelinde believes her husband dead—first when his ship back to England is reported missing, and then again much later, when Lady Glenroy's henchman tells her that 'not two hours since I crushed your Athwold to the dust; this arm, this dagger, reached his heart, behold, his blood still reeks upon my hands' (III, 49).

Though the 'prophecy' of Athwold's death is not fulfilled, the novel does not so much refute as redirect it: Ethelinde does faint at the sight of 'the mangled body of a youth' in whose 'bosom appeared a gaping wound, from which the vital stream had issued' (III, 53–54), but it turns out to belong to young Lord Avondale, her one-time suitor. Though it spares Ethelinde the grief of widowhood (and, as noted above, smooths her path to inheritance), Lord Avondale's accidental murder still causes the seemingly unavoidable repetition of the fates of Elfrida (the girl in the ballad) and Lady Avondale, since once again there is a passionately devoted woman waiting in the wings to grieve to death: Juliet, who refuses to leave the dead body of the young nobleman, 'clasp[ing] the murdered form of him she so much loved' (III, 106). When he is laid out in state, 'notwithstanding the silent horror of the awful scene, the disconsolate Lady Juliet left it neither night or day' (III, 112–13), till she becomes a kind of living corpse herself, 'her every feature [...] moulded by the icy hand of death', and finally keels over: 'she respired not, for her heart was broke, and her fair form reposed within the chilling arms of death' (III, 169–70).

What are we to make of this odd pattern inside *Avondale Priory*—the familiar arc of the plot and beneath it, in the novel's depths of detail, the relentless reverberation of one scrap of narrative? Clearly, this image of a woman confronting the graphically rendered corpse of her lover attracted Kelly's attention, and the odd urgency of her repetition shifts the thematic emphasis of her novel from the restoration of the heroine's identity and property to the prospect of a devastating loss that she only narrowly escapes. While the surface of *Avondale Priory* might

lead us to conclude that it is, in important ways, 'just like' *Otranto* or *Romance of the Forest*, its internal rhythm says otherwise, especially when considered in light of Kelly's other novels. If we look at the whole of Kelly's career, we discover versions of this image of a woman wracked by her grief over the body of a man she loves from Kelly's first novel, *Madeline*, through to her final Minerva work, *Ruthinglenne*. In some cases, the dead man is a father or guardian, but it is lovers and especially husbands who die the most vivid deaths, their remains then captivating the senses of the women who love them and driving them to distraction and beyond.

Some hint of this preoccupation is already present in *Madeline*, when Ellen, finally free to leave her husband if she wishes, is stopped by her own imagination: 'She beheld him pining in languor and sickness—on a lonely bed, regretting her who had abandoned him. [...] She beheld his eyes close. Tortured fancy could bear no more.'<sup>27</sup> *The Abbey of St Asaph* the following year makes the death of a beloved mate both anxious fantasy and horrific reality. Having dreamed repeatedly of her husband on the field of battle, 'pale, wounded and bleeding', Lady Douglas travels to join his unit only to find him dying, a 'gaping wound in his breast', leaving her bent 'in speechless agony over the pale yet still adored countenance'.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps somewhat exorcised by her concerted use of it in her third novel, *Avondale Priory*, this image becomes less central in Kelly's subsequent fictions, but it does not disappear. When the heroine's father in *Joscelina* is killed in battle, she lies motionless beside him until prompted by the arrival of a friend to 'rais[e] her pale cheek from the yet paler face of her lifeless father'.<sup>29</sup> In *Eva*, the scenario is again focused on a lover, though at something of a remove from the main action: one heroine hears her father describe how he killed the man she married without his permission—'he fell to glut my vengeance! covered with wounds, he fell!'—while a minor character in an inset tale swoons when her husband is attacked and awakens to find him dead, after which 'the wildest delirium ravaged her frame, and her brain in a short time became the dreary abode of gloomy distraction!'<sup>30</sup> By *Edwardina*, Kelly is back to the sentimental death of a father—one of the heroine's letters is written by his coffin—though we do share in one more imagined lover's death, that of Arabella's husband Horace, away in the West Indies: 'An engagement daily expected! and is it not possible that my Horace may now be numbered with the braver dead?—stretched on a foreign shore!'<sup>31</sup> *Ruthinglenne*, somewhat unusually, opts not to describe the death of the heroine's beloved guardian—a chapter break moves us from the 'before' to the 'after'—though we do get another inset tale in which a minor character recounts the loss of her husband: 'She threw herself on her knees, and folded the cold form of him she had so loved, to her faithful heart'.<sup>32</sup>


Kelly, then, spent her entire Minerva career experimenting with the uses of a central gothic trope: the shocking encounter with the dead body. Yet, she seems to have been particularly interested in one specifically gendered variation of this trope, which her fiction represents over and over again, while varying it somewhat in detail, centrality and tone. Surveyed over time and multiple titles,

her use of this image offers yet more evidence of how little the term ‘imitation’ does for us in attempting to describe the composition of Minerva novels and their relations with the gothic canon. Not only varied within her own fiction, Kelly’s distinctive, poignant portrayal of the confrontation with the corpse is intriguingly *unlike* the influential examples of Radcliffe and Lewis. St Aubert’s deathbed scene in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* certainly seems a likely model for some of the paternal deaths in Kelly’s fiction: Emily, too, gazes at her father’s body ‘with a mixture of doubt and awful astonishment’, though Radcliffe seems determined to locate the horror Emily feels in her distraught mind, not in her father’s ‘placid and serene features’, whereas Kelly is unstinting in graphic description even where saintly fathers are concerned.<sup>33</sup> But Kelly seems far more interesting in death scenes containing a romantic or even erotic tremor, and the truly interesting contrast, to my mind, emerges when we read her next to Lewis. As has been amply discussed, dead women in *The Monk* are either ghastly icons of mortality and decay or, in the case of Antonia’s faked death, a pornographic object served up to the man who covets her; both, arguably, are images infused with the none-too-subtle misogyny that runs through Lewis’s novel. Kelly, by contrast, explores the affective potential of dead *men*, who in her hands become objects of a female gaze filled with love and longing, but also fear and horror. It is interesting to note here that Kelly was already using such images in *Madeline* and *St Asaph*, published before *The Monk*; after Lewis’s novel came out, however, her emphasis on the lover’s dead body became stronger, but her reversal of Lewis’s gendering of the moment suggests that she was not replicating his successful model, but rather adapting it to suit her own needs.

Though I do not wish to reduce Kelly’s long-time experimentation with this trope to a simplistic biographical explanation, the relevance of this particular gothic scenario to her personal situation is too suggestive to ignore. As Stephen Behrendt notes, it is not clear when Robert Kelly died. Though some have assumed that it was sudden widowhood that prompted Kelly—like fellow Minerva novelist Eliza Parsons—to begin her career with Lane in 1794, there are indications that her husband was still alive at least as late as 1797, and the *Dictionary of National Biography* dates his death to 1807.<sup>34</sup> Even if not yet a widow when she began working for Lane, the years Kelly spent writing Minerva novels were years in which she watched Robert (as she would describe it years later in a letter) struggle—and fail—to support their ‘infant family’, until eventually he ‘accepted an offer to go to the West Indies with a civil appointment; he lived only ten days after his arrival, and his dust now rests in Trinidad’.<sup>35</sup> Though perhaps not already a reality, widowhood was certainly a dreaded possibility for Kelly when she began her career in fiction; at the very least, the Kellys’ life in the 1790s would have made Isabella keenly aware that marriage offered only an uncertain defence against desperation and heartache—not to mention poverty, a chronic condition she shared with other Minerva novelists and frequently represented in her fiction as well.<sup>36</sup>



Even if Kelly did adopt gothic storylines and images from the better-known works of her day, then, she filtered them through her own particular interests and sensitivities. Maybe she preferred to write about dead husbands than St Aubert-style dying fathers because this particular variation on the gothic/sentimental set piece of the deathbed scene felt more intimate and relevant to her. Maybe she imagined women going mad or collapsing dead over their lovers' corpses because she sympathised with them, or—and I find this possibility more suggestive—because she herself could not afford to do either: there were, after all, children to support. Are the deaths of Juliet, Elfrida and Lady Avondale, then, an expression of her deepest fear, or a pained fantasy about a release and freedom open to gothic heroines, but not to the working mother of young children?

Whatever the answers—at which we can only guess—both *The Ruins of Avondale Priory* and the broader view of Kelly's career have demonstrated, I hope, why the dialogue between Minerva novelists and the gothic canon consists of far more than 'imitation'. Kelly pursued success as a professional novelist with great persistence, but also with considerable creativity; and it is this last quality that, to my mind, makes her Minerva gothics rewarding to study, as it gives a unique colouring precisely to those materials we might otherwise be prone to dismiss as *simply* formulaic or clichéd. Kelly's heroines may fear and flee and suffer and weep as do the heroines of other gothic novels, but they do so in specific ways and under specific circumstances that Kelly privileges above others, at times in sharp divergence from the example of her more famous contemporaries. 

## NOTES

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1. Robert Miles discusses the use of gothic 'marketing cues' in 'The 1790s: The Efulgence of Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), pp. 41–62 (p. 42); on gothic as part of an emerging genre system in circulating libraries see Edward D. Jacobs, *Accidental Migrations: An Archeology of Gothic Discourse* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2000), ch. 5.
2. Isabella Kelly, *The Ruins of Avondale Priory*, 3 vols (London: Minerva Press, 1796), I, 12 and III, 42. Further references to this edition are given in the text.
3. Sir Walter Scott, 'Prefatory Memoir to Mrs Ann Radcliffe', in *The Novels of Mrs Ann Radcliffe [...] to Which Is Prefixed, a Memoir of the Life of the Author* (London: Hurst, Robinson & Co., 1824), p. ix.
4. Edith Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance* (London: Constable, 1921), p. 73; Carol Margaret Davison, *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature 1764–1824* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 109; David Richter, *The Progress of Romance: Literary Historiography and the Gothic Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), p. 1.
5. Frederick S. Frank, *The First Gothics: A Critical Guide to the English Gothic Novel* (New York: Garland Press, 1987), p. xiv.
6. Christina Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland, c. 1760–1829* (Manchester: MUP, 2018), p. 2.

7. See Morin, *Gothic Novel in Ireland*; Deborah Anne McLeod, 'The Minerva Press' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Alberta, 1997), pp. 59–86; Hannah Doherty Hudson, 'The Myth of Minerva: Publishing, Popular Fiction, and the Rise of the Novel' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Stanford University, 2013), ch. 1.
8. See e.g. E. J. Clery, 'The Genesis of "Gothic" Fiction,' in *Cambridge Companion to Gothic*, ed. by Hogle, pp. 21–40; James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict 1764–1832* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).
9. Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789–1830* (London: Longman, 1989), p. 49.
10. Hudson, 'Myth of Minerva'; Elizabeth Neiman, *Minerva's Gothics: The Politics and Poetics of Romantic Exchange, 1780–1820* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019).
11. See Yael Shapira, 'The Gothic Novel beyond Radcliffe and Lewis,' in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic, Volume I: The Long Eighteenth Century, 1680–1820*, ed. by Angela Wright and Dale Townshend (Cambridge: CUP, 2020).
12. Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature,' *New Left Review*, 1 (2000), 54–68 (p. 57).
13. Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Regina Maria Roche's *The Children of the Abbey*: Contesting the Catholic Presence in Female Gothic Fiction,' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 31 (2012), 137–58; Angela Wright, 'Disturbing the Female Gothic: An Excavation of the Northanger Novels,' in *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, ed. by Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 60–75; Dale Townshend, 'Royalist Historiography in T. J. Horsley Curties' *Ethelwina, or the House of Fitz-Auburne* (1799),' *Gothic Studies*, 14.1 (2012), 57–73.
14. Anthony Mandal, 'Gothic and the Publishing World, 1780–1820,' in *The Gothic World*, ed. by Glennis Byron and Dale Townshend (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 159–71; Jacobs, *Accidental Migrations*, ch. 5.
15. Hannah Doherty Hudson, 'Sentiment and the Gothic: Failures of Emotion in the Novels of Mrs Radcliffe and the Minerva Press,' in *The Sentimental Novel in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Albert J. Shapiro (Cambridge: CUP, 2019), pp. 155–72; Neiman, *Minerva's Gothics*; and Franz J. Potter, *The History of Gothic Publishing: Exhuming the Trade* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
16. Susan S. Lanser, *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565–1830* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 21.
17. Dorothy Blakey, *The Minerva Press, 1790–1820* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1939), Appendix IV. The most comprehensive resource on Kelly's life and work is the entry devoted to her in *Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present* <<http://orlando.cambridge.org>> [accessed 1 July 2018].
18. *Edwardina* is included in a list of Kelly's published works that was appended to her appeal to the Royal Literary Fund in Aug 1832. See *Archives of the Royal Literary Fund, 1790–1918*, 145 reels (London: World Microfilms, 1981–84), case 632: item 10.
19. McLeod, 'Minerva Press', p. 58. For a recent discussion of this generic blending in the works of Minerva novelist Elizabeth Meeke (1761–1826?) see Anthony Mandal, 'Mrs Meeke and Minerva: The Mystery of the Marketplace,' *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 42 (2018), 131–51 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/00982601-4384591>>.
20. Yael Shapira, 'Beyond the Radcliffe Formula: Isabella Kelly and the Gothic Troubles of the Married Heroine,' *Women's Writing* (2015), 1–19 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2015.1110289>>.
21. Tenille Nowak, 'Isabella Kelly's Twist on the Standard Radcliffean Romance,' *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, 2.2 (2012), 4–13 (pp. 7–8) <<https://studyingothicfiction.com>>.

- weebly.com/uploads/2/2/8/8/22885250/studies\_v2\_issue\_2.pdf> [accessed 1 Aug 2018].
22. See especially Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
  23. On Kelly's stylistic choices in these scenes compared to Radcliffe's, see Yael Shapira, *Inventing the Gothic Corpse: The Thrill of Human Remains in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 158–67.
  24. Wright, 'Disturbing the Female Gothic', pp. 70–73; and Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Sarah Wilkinson: Female Gothic Entrepreneur', in *Gothic Archive* (Marquette University, 2015), pp. 1–20 (pp. 1 and 2) <[http://epublications.marquette.edu/gothic\\_scholar/7](http://epublications.marquette.edu/gothic_scholar/7)> [accessed 1 July 2018].
  25. Dale Townshend, 'Gothic and the Ghost of *Hamlet*', in *Gothic Shakespeares*, ed. by John Drakakis and Dale Townshend (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 60–97 (p. 73).
  26. Hudson, 'Myth of Minerva', p. 30.
  27. [Isabella Kelly], *Madeline; or, the Castle of Montgomery, a Novel*, 3 vols (London: Minerva Press, 1794), III, 218.
  28. [Isabella Kelly], *The Abbey of St Asaph*, 3 vols (London: Minerva Press, 1795), I, 17 and 22–23.
  29. Isabella Kelly, *Joscelina: Or, the Rewards of Benevolence*, 2 vols (London: For the Author, 1797), I, 18–19.
  30. Isabella Kelly, *Eva*, 3 vols (London: Minerva Press, 1799), I, 176 and II, 16.
  31. 'Catherine Harris' [i.e. Isabella Kelly], *Edwardina*, 2 vols (London: For the Author, 1800), II, 72.
  32. Isabella Kelly, *Ruthinglenn, or the Critical Moment*, 3 vols (London: Minerva Press, 1801), II, 252.
  33. Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), ed. by Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford: OUP, 1998), p. 83.
  34. Stephen C. Behrendt, *Isabella Fordyce Kelly—c. 1759–1857* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2002), in *Scottish Women Poets of the Romantic Period*, ed. by Nancy Kushigian and Stephen Behrendt <<http://lit.alexanderstreet.com/swrp/view/1000197486>> [accessed 3 May 2016].
  35. Letter to Joseph Snow, 25 Oct 1832, *Archives of the RLF*, case 632: item 12.
  36. On poverty as a central theme of Minerva gothics by women see Edward Copeland, *Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790–1820* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), pp. 40–47.

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