

ULRR

Mapping Melmoth: Maturin in/ and the World Republic of Letters

Item Type	Article
Authors	Morin, Christina
Citation	Gothic Studies – Special Issue on ‘Melmoth’s Afterlives’, 2024, 26, (2)
Publisher	Edinburgh University Press
Download date	2026-05-08 14:27:32
Item License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/
Link to Item	https://doi.org/10.34961/researchrepository-ul.28675541

Mapping *Melmoth*: Maturin in/and the World Republic of Letters

Christina Morin

University of Limerick

Abstract:

This article offers a transnational mapping of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) that links fictional narrative both to the contexts of its production and dissemination in a global literary marketplace and to its network of influence, and more particularly, its reputation and afterlife within what Pascale Casanova has influentially called ‘the world republic of letters’. It first considers *Melmoth*’s internal geography and the novel’s use of space in relation to Maturin’s quest for ‘literary capital’.¹ It then expands upon, in Casanova’s terms, *Melmoth*’s ‘*littérisation*’, namely, the process by which, in spite of its often-unfavourable contemporary reception, *Melmoth* was transformed from a state of ‘literary inexistence to existence’ via translation and adaptation. Finally, it explores Northern Irish Big Telly Theatre Company’s 2012 dramatic adaptation as evidence of *Melmoth*’s *littérisation*.²

Keywords: world literature, adaptation, translation, literary marketplace

2020 marked the 200th anniversary of the publication of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), the most famous novel written by Anglo-Irish clergyman, playwright, and novelist Charles Robert Maturin (1780-1824). Often described as a Gothic masterpiece, *Melmoth* nevertheless occupies a rather strange and anomalous position in literary histories of both Irish and Gothic literatures: on the one hand, it is dismissed as a belated imitation of ‘first wave’ Gothic fictions, particularly those popularised in the 1790s predominantly by English authors such as Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823) and Matthew Lewis (1775-1818). On the other, it is lauded as the premature inauguration of ‘Irish Gothic’, a form or mode more often associated with the late nineteenth-century works of Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-73), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), and Bram Stoker (1847-1912). Recent research has demonstrated the misguidedness of both of these positions, charting the continued influence of Gothic fiction in the first half of the nineteenth century, long after its supposed ‘heyday’, and uncovering a much longer and richer history of Irish Gothic literature than the timeline of *Melmoth*, *Uncle Silas* (1872), *Dorian Gray* (1892), and *Dracula* (1897) would suggest. Still, however, *Melmoth*’s ambivalent position remains. While the novel itself has been frequently reprinted and translated since its first publication, *Melmoth* has not become a byword for horror in the way that *Frankenstein*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, and *Dracula* have, as Sarah Perry has observed.³ Unlike these well-known figures, *Melmoth* has yet to inspire a major motion picture, TV adaptation, video game, or Netflix series. Nevertheless, the novel’s impact continues to exert itself in diverse and colourful ways. In 2012, for instance, the Big Telly theatre company (based in Portstewart, Northern Ireland) produced a compelling adaptation of *Melmoth*. In 2018, British author Sarah Perry published her third highly acclaimed novel *Melmoth*, which she dedicated to Maturin and in which she re-imagines the wanderer as a spectral woman preying upon

individuals haunted by hidden crimes in a largely twentieth-century context. That same year, she provided the introduction to a new popular edition of *Melmoth the Wanderer* published by Profile Books. Shortly after, Florida-based Four Stacks Brewing introduced a new sour IPA called Melmoth the Wanderer, while in 2020, British composer Cheryl Frances-Hoade premiered her song-cycle *Six Songs of Melmoth* at the Oxford Lieder Festival.

These recent manifestations of *Melmoth*'s very real cultural legacy build upon a long history of adaptation and allusion that attest to the novel's 'radiance', to use Joep Leerssen's terminology.⁴ There may be no Hollywood blockbuster version of *Melmoth*, but the novel's influence can be felt far and wide from the nineteenth century to today. Elsewhere, I briefly explore *Melmoth*'s literary inheritance, arguing that Melmoth and his creator remain 'unearthly presence[s] haunting the works of countless authors, contemporary and otherwise'.⁵ From Balzac to Baudelaire, James Clarence Mangan to John Banville, Nathaniel Hawthorne to Edgar Allan Poe, Cristina Rossetti to Elizabeth Bowen, *Melmoth* has been a vital, enduring, and perhaps most interestingly – transnational – source of inspiration, fascination, and creative revelation. These notable literary and cultural references to *Melmoth* speak to the novel's enduring currency, positioning it at the nexus of a global network of allusions, adaptations, and translations that accentuates its function as world literature, or, in other words, its 'ability to transcend the boundaries of the [culture] that produced [it]'.⁶ In an attempt to understand the nature, if not the full extent, of *Melmoth*'s lasting resonance, this article first explores the transnational element of the novel itself, offering a kind of mapping of the text that links fictional narrative to the contexts of its production and dissemination, on the one hand, and, on the other, to its network of influence, and more particularly, what we might call its afterlife. To do this, I draw on Franco Moretti's theorisation of the 'geonarrative system[s]' of novels as well as his emphasis on the need for quantitative not just qualitative readings of fiction – 'distant reading', as he calls it.⁷ I also employ Pascale

Casanova's work on 'international literary space' in order to consider how *Melmoth's* narratological world might replicate or reflect an extradiegetic geo-political perspective on literary exchange and the negotiation of literary value on the contemporary marketplace.⁸ By first considering *Melmoth's* geography, in keeping with Moretti's argument that '[s]pace is not the "outside" of the narrative [...] but an internal force, that shapes it from within', this article argues that the novel quite deliberately links Ireland to distant topographies through a concentration on the sea and the mutable affordances and dangers it offers.⁹ It then suggests, by focusing on the figure of storytellers who help bridge the geographical divides between the novel's inset tales, that Maturin knowingly positions his writing within what Casanova calls 'the world republic of letters'.¹⁰ In so doing, Maturin forcefully links the novel's use of space as well as national and international settings to his own quest for 'literary capital' while also gesturing toward the flow of people characteristic of globalgothic, as explored in more detail in the introduction to this special issue.¹¹ Finally, my discussion expands on, in Casanova's terms, *Melmoth's* consecration or *littérisation*. A sign of the achievement of literary capital, consecration occurs through 'recognition by autonomous critics' and 'signifies the crossing of a literary border' by way of 'a sort of transformation' in which a text experiences 'a passage from literary inexistence to existence, from invisibility to the condition of literature'.¹² Central to this process of ontological conversion, as Casanova argues, is translation and adaptation. Accordingly, the final section of the article considers the manner in which, despite its often unfavourable reception by Romantic-era British critics, *Melmoth* was consecrated in the works of writers inspired by Maturin's novel.

The Geography of *Melmoth*

To begin, it is worth considering the complex geography of Maturin's novel and the ways in which the distant locations of the work's inset tales contribute to the creation of an

overarching sense of global connectedness that begins in or emanates from Ireland. The central positioning of Ireland as the origin of a freshly conceived world order begins early in the novel with the frame narrative's attention to the teenaged John Melmoth and his witnessing of a devastating shipwreck off the coast of Wicklow. A vivid description of the storm that causes the vessel to founder, as well as the ill-fated struggles of passengers and crew to reach the safety of shore, occupies several pages of the novel, providing a grim portrait of what was a common enough occurrence in nineteenth-century Ireland as it was, of course, in other countries with coastal and marine environments.¹³ The narrative first prepares readers for the catastrophe to come by describing the extreme weather conditions that precipitate the events to follow:

It was now the latter end of Autumn; heavy clouds had all day been passing laggingly and gloomily along the atmosphere [...] Not a drop of rain fell; the clouds went portentously off, like ships of war after reconnoitring a strong fort, to return with added strength and fury. The threat was soon fulfilled; the evening came on, prematurely darkened by clouds that seemed surcharged with a deluge. Loud and sudden squalls of wind shook the house from time to time, and then as suddenly ceased. Towards night the storm came on in all its strength; Melmoth's bed was shaken so as to render it impossible to sleep.¹⁴

John soon after finds reason to quit his bed, when an alarm signals that a ship off the nearby coast is in trouble. What John discovers on reaching the shore is a truly affecting scene, the distress of which both urges him to action and seems to mock the very efforts he makes to be of assistance:

Melmoth caught a full view of the vessel, and of her danger. She lay beating against a rock, over which the breakers dashed their foam to the height of thirty feet. She was half in the water, a mere hulk, her rigging torn to shreds, her main mast cut away, and every sea she shipped, Melmoth could hear distinctly the dying cries of those who were swept away, or perhaps of those whose mind and body, alike exhausted, relaxed their benumbed hold of hope and life together, – knew that the next shriek that was uttered must be their own and their last. (64)

This scene is worth dwelling on, not least because it recurs in at least two slightly different iterations later in the novel. Beyond that, though, it serves several important narratological purposes. In the first instance, the storm and shipwreck provide a suitably cataclysmic atmosphere for a work frequently understood as the culmination of the late eighteenth-century Gothic novel. Critically, the disaster furthers the narrative's plot of Gothic atrocity, allowing for a decisive encounter between John Melmoth and his otherworldly ancestor, the wanderer himself, while also introducing Alonzo Monçada, the ship's only survivor, whose story – narrated to John over the course of some 400 pages – not only consumes the rest of the novel but also contains the majority of its interpolated tales. However, despite the shipwreck's centrality to the novel's romance (in the sense of fantasy), it also grounds Maturin's sensational tale in – if not realism – at least a realistic depiction of Ireland, which becomes the central, if sometimes forgotten, geographical reference point even as the nested tales seem to lead us farther and farther away from John's Co. Wicklow home, Melmoth Lodge.¹⁵

This article seeks not to confirm conventional psychoanalytical readings of Irish Gothic fiction as inherently about Ireland even when set elsewhere and involving non-Irish characters.¹⁶ Instead, in keeping with more recent readings of Irish Gothic and of *Melmoth*

itself, it argues that the shipwreck underlines the novel's transnational perspective on Ireland, one that sees it interconnected with all of the geographical locations visited over the course of the novel via its maritime economy and the movement of people and things, but particularly stories and storytellers. Note, in particular, the precise details the narrative provides as to the vessel's sinking: although the ship is never named, we are given its nationality, its destination point, the fate of all crew and passengers, and, crucially the exact date on which it sank: 19 October 1816. These details do not appear to correlate to an actual wreckage, but they certainly recall the tragedy of the *Sea Horse*, a transport ship that foundered in Tramore Bay, Waterford on 30 January 1816, killing 363 passengers and crew. The tragedy was reported widely in Irish newspapers, including the *Freeman's Journal* (3 February 1816; 23 February 1816) and the *Belfast Newsletter* (6 February 1816), and Maturin may have also read about it in J. J. McGregor's account of the wreck *Narrative of the Loss of the Sea-horse Transport* (Waterford: John Bull, 1816). This, of course, was not the only tragedy on Irish seas in 1816, in part thanks to extreme weather conditions that led to the infamous summer without sun that birthed *Frankenstein* (1818).¹⁷ Nevertheless, it is worth considering how the shipwreck described at the start of *Melmoth* helps to create what Elaine Freedgood usefully refers to as the 'colonial effect', placing Ireland, diegetically and – via Maturin's oft-commented upon footnotes – extra-diegetically at the heart of a kind of global world order from which its marginal/dependent status in the nineteenth century is usually seen to preclude it.¹⁸ Indeed, this shipwreck and the related discourse of travel by sea, naval engagements, and maritime trade become a recurring motif throughout the novel, acting, in effect, as the pre-eminent symbol of the narrative's interest in a process of 'worlding' by which, as Katarzyna Bartoszyńska argues, *Melmoth* 'expand[s] the geographies of [its] time period in important ways [...] offer[ing] a strikingly modern – or even postmodern – image of the world as an interconnected space of cultural multiplicity and dialogue', at the centre of which is Ireland.¹⁹

Significant to *Melmoth's* assertion of Ireland's global geopolitical importance is the fact that the ship wrecked at the start of the novel is described as 'bound for Wexford or Waterford' (70). The reference conjures the prominence of Irish ports to nineteenth-century systems of trade and migration, reminding us that Waterford rivalled Cork as the principal port of the Irish south coast, as Peter M. Solar has pointed out, and acted as a central starting point for Irish emigration, particularly to Newfoundland.²⁰ None of the characters in *Melmoth* takes this route. However, the novel's attention to international and transnational interconnections becomes clear when we consider the striking parallel shipwrecks that occur over the course of the narrative. In addition to that pivotal wreckage by which John Melmoth is introduced to Monçada, for instance, there is a second, crucial shipwreck in the 'Tale of the Indians'. Having made his wealth in the East Indies, the wealthy Spanish merchant, Don Aliaga, sends for his infant daughter and her nurse back in Spain. On the way to join Aliaga in the East Indies, however, their ship founders and baby Immalee is left to fend for herself on an isolated island near the mouth of the Hoogly River:

The nurse and infant were supposed to have perished in a storm which wrecked the vessel on an isle near the mouth of a river, and in which the crew and passengers perished. It was said that the nurse and child alone escaped; that by some extraordinary chance they arrived at this isle, where the nurse died from fatigue and want of nourishment, and the child survived, and grew up a wild and beautiful daughter of nature. (502-3)

Later, another 'vessel in distress' rescues Immalee and restores her to her family in Spain, where she is known as Isidora (503). Like the novel's introductory shipwreck, these accidents at sea, though described in less detail, are significant in terms of narrative progression. It is

because of the seclusion and innocence forced upon Immalee by her survival of the sinking of her ship to the East Indies, for instance, that she first attracts Melmoth's attentions. His aim to convince Immalee to swap places with him founders when he falls in love with her and, despite his need to find a replacement, renounces her 'forever' in the midst of a dramatic storm that recalls that which deposits Monçada in Ireland. The later shipwreck proves the means by which Immalee is discovered on her deserted Indian isle and returned to her family in Spain, where Melmoth once again encounters her, this time fatally.

Elsewhere in the novel, the centrality of shipwrecks, travel by sea, and other forms of maritime engagement is emphasised, as when, for example, Melmoth's own quest for forbidden knowledge is couched in the terms of sea travel: 'The power of the intellectual vessel was too great for the narrow seas where it was coasting – it longed to set out on a voyage of discovery' (498-99). Later, at the close of the novel, Melmoth disappears over 'a precipice which over-hung the sea', in a scene that purposely recalls young John Melmoth's early encounter with him in the midst of the dramatic shipwreck described at the start of this section (542). Overall, the thematic focus on this imagery creates a sense of commonality between disparate characters and stories, joining them together in one global network linked by maritime travel and trade.

Combined with the figure of the wanderer himself, the 'liquid' motifs of the novel forefront the similarities, rather than the differences, between the narrative's nested tales.²¹ Nevertheless, the many geographical routes and destinations of individual stories can occasionally become murky as the novel progresses. Thus, it is worth rehearsing exactly where the narrative – and we, as readers – travel over the course of the text. The frame narrative begins, of course, in Dublin, as John sets out to join his uncle at the Melmoths' ancestral home in Co. Wicklow. It then moves – metaphorically at least – to Spain, specifically 'the plains of Valencia', and on to London as John reads the manuscript

concerning Stanton and his encounters with Melmoth (28). With the perusal of the manuscript completed, narrative focus returns to Wicklow and the devastating shipwreck that kills all but Monçada, whose tale transports John and the reader back to Spain, this time to Madrid, and then onwards, first to the mouth of the Hoogly River and Madrid in the ‘Tale of the Indians’; then to Seville in ‘The Tale of Guzman’s Family’; to Shropshire, England in ‘The Lover’s Tale’; to Spain again for the conclusion of Immalee/Isidora’s history before returning, finally, to Ireland and Wicklow, which have re-inserted or re-asserted themselves periodically throughout the narrative via John and Monçada’s commentary and interjections as well as Maturin’s footnotes concerning Irish history. Other key locations referenced include the East Indies and Germany, though the narrative spends little time in these places.

Maturin’s Cartographic Imagination and its Contexts

The various locations foregrounded in *Melmoth* invite a consideration of the novel’s transnationalism as a convergence of different types of mapping – the geo-narrative system just discussed but also a more meta-textual consideration of Maturin and the contemporary literary marketplace. Accordingly, this second section of the article returns to that central question posed earlier: how does *Melmoth*’s narratological world replicate or reflect an extradiegetic geo-political perspective on literary exchange and the negotiation of literary value in the Romantic-era public sphere? Like many Gothic novels by now mostly overlooked Irish contemporaries and near-contemporaries of Maturin, including Regina Maria Roche (c. 1764-1845) and Henrietta Rouvière Mosse (d. 1834), *Melmoth* evidences a deep ‘cartographic consciousness’ that reproduces in important ways the Romantic literary marketplace while also anticipating the ‘literature-world’ proposed by Casanova.²² I have written elsewhere of the ways in which Roche’s novels, in particular, engage with what

Casanova speaks of as ‘the specific economy of the world of letters’, and Roche offers a helpful comparison to Maturin.²³

Roche’s publications benefited from the innovative and market-savvy approach of her publisher, the Minerva Press, whose proprietor, William Lane, astutely cultivated a global readership for his critically debased but widely read popular fictions by both fostering the circulating library system and establishing lucrative trade partnerships with printers and booksellers outside of Britain. Roche herself made little money from the dissemination of her novels, but her fictions were nevertheless remarkably widely read.²⁴ Maturin, in contrast, published *Melmoth the Wanderer* with the respectable and well-established Edinburgh-based firm, Archibald Constable, having been introduced there by Walter Scott, who had urged Constable to publish Maturin’s 1818 novel *Women; or, Pour et Contre*. Theoretically, publication with Constable should have given Maturin the edge over Roche, at least in respectability stakes. Constable was, after all, the publisher of the Waverley novels and a brand of fiction that was, while still popular in the sense of being marketed to, and read by, the era’s newly burgeoning general reading public, also accepted or approved by critics interested in the demarcation of ‘high’ and ‘low’ literatures. Nevertheless, Maturin did not enjoy anything like the circulation that Roche did. Whereas her 1796 bestseller *The Children of the Abbey* was re-issued and translated at an almost staggering rate worldwide over the course of the nineteenth century, *Melmoth the Wanderer* performed comparatively poorly, with only a handful of re-prints and translations appearing in the same time period.

There are many potential reasons for the notable differences in circulation, dissemination, and translation of these two novels. *Melmoth the Wanderer* was a controversial novel, published at a very different historical moment than *The Children of the Abbey*. Like Maturin’s wildly successful but contentious play *Bertram; or the Castle of St. Aldobrand*, staged at London’s Drury Lane Theatre in 1816, *Melmoth* evokes sympathy for a

fiendish figure whose quest, if not to conquer the world, at least to traverse it in continued search of a victim, surely recalled the single-minded pursuits of Napoleon Bonaparte. John Wilson Croker identified the hero of the novel as '*the Devil himself*' and condemned the work in the strongest terms, writing in *The Quarterly Review*, 'our respect for good manners and decency obliges us to denounce' the novel.²⁵ *Melmoth*, Croker further declared, unites 'all the worst particularities of the worst modern novels. Compared with it, *Lady Morgan* is almost intelligible – the *Monk*, decent – *The Vampire*, amiable – and *Frankenstein*, natural.'²⁶ Of particular concern to Croker is Maturin's profession as a clergyman; he cautions his readers to remember that 'the work under notice is a romance written by a *clergyman*' and expands upon the potential 'mischief' to be done, even by a novel he describes specifically as 'trash', to unsusceptible and uninformed readers.²⁷ Accusation succeeds accusation, and in the course of his review, Croker indicts Maturin for contravening decency, for offending the rules of verisimilitude, for writing unoriginal nonsense, for betraying base ignorance, and for voicing both obscenity and blasphemy. Admittedly, Croker's review was more vitriolic than others, but it ably sums up the generally dismissive and occasionally actively outraged response evoked by *Melmoth*. If, therefore, Roche's *The Children of the Abbey* was objectionable, as critics had it, for being just another cookie-cutter Gothic from the Minerva Press, Maturin's *Melmoth* added sacrilege, the disgusting excesses of Lewisean horror, and the reification of a devilish character – unsurprisingly, *Melmoth* is specifically linked to Milton's Satan in the novel – to base unoriginality, an accusation that dogged Maturin's literary career.

Maturin's awareness of his need to defend himself against potentially career- and reputation-destroying critics in his competition for readers is very clear in *Melmoth*. Maturin had previously addressed critics in his publications, perhaps most notably in *The Milesian*

Chief (1812) and *Women; or, Pour et Contre*, but in the preface to *Melmoth*, Maturin includes a poignant reminder of his precarity as an author:

I cannot again appear before the public in so unseemly a character as that of a writer of romances, without regretting the necessity that compels me to it. Did my profession furnish me with the means of subsistence, I should hold myself culpable indeed in having recourse to any other, but – am I allowed a choice? (6)

Maturin here refers specifically to his lack of preferment in the Church of Ireland, but the irony, of course, is that his attempts to earn ‘the means of subsistence’, as he puts it, via his writing were no more secure than his position in the church. Indeed, despite all his efforts, Maturin never obtained the wealth or acclaim he desired as an author. Twice towards the end of his life, he was forced to apply to the Royal Literary Fund for assistance, and his correspondence with Walter Scott, who acted as a friend and patron, evidences his real bitterness over his failures in the literary marketplace. On Constable’s refusal to work with Maturin after the protracted and laborious process of preparing and publishing *Melmoth*, about which Sharon Ragaz has written so compellingly, Maturin plaintively wrote to Scott:

[Constable] states his Engagements with the Author of ‘Waverley’ &c. as his reason, but surely this tremendous Author that comes on careering on his war-steed and bearing down all before him, might be content with kicking my caballus out of the [w]ay for a time, without actually laming him and me for life--- [...] Who is this author who was born for the enrichment of booksellers, and the ruin of his humble contemporaries?²⁸

In *Melmoth*, Maturin explicitly explores the struggles and inequalities of the contemporary literary marketplace through story-telling and authorial figures who represent the precariousness of authorship and the varying availability of what Casanova calls ‘literary capital’.²⁹ It is in the nineteenth century, Casanova points out, that ‘literary capital [...] became national and popular, its acquisition and accumulation supposedly open to all’.³⁰ The reality was, however, that the pursuit of literary capital – what Casanova defines as ‘the power and authority granted to a writer by virtue of the belief that he has earned his “name”’ – was far from even, constituted as it was by a hierarchy linked to language and, through it, to place.³¹ There is, then, Casanova writes, a ‘literary geo-politics’ in which authors from dominated or peripheral nations – like Ireland – are disadvantaged in comparison to those from the dominant, metropolitan, economically-advantaged spaces in which evolving notions of literary value are shaped and defined.³²

That Maturin had a keen understanding of this inequality as well as an internalised sense of the literary hierarchy of which Casanova speaks is suggested by the authorial figures he presents in *Melmoth*. There is the ‘withered Sybil’, Bidy Brannigan, for instance, who informs John who the wanderer really is; later, Monçada becomes the central storyteller, narrating his own tale and the stories, including Immalee’s, contained within a manuscript that he translates for Adonijah, the aged Jewish man with whom he takes refuge from the Inquisition. Within Monçada’s narration, there are several more storytellers, including the ‘stranger’ who recounts the ‘Tale of Guzman’s Family’ and is later found dead, his apparent murder dismissed by authorities because he was simply ‘a writer, and a man of no importance in public or private life’ (439). The Wanderer himself also becomes a storyteller, attempting to warn Aliaga about himself by telling him ‘The Lovers’ Tale’. Regina B. Oost has convincingly argued that Maturin uses these authorial figures as part of a ‘strategy of resistance’ in which, driven by consciousness of his economic dependence on his readers but

also determined to defy their power over him, he simultaneously engages with and frustrates his readers' expectations.³³ The characters thus become evocative illustrations of a literary hierarchy in which Maturin felt disenfranchised.

Yet, despite their apparent 'minor' public status, the storytellers in *Melmoth* are, in fact, the major figures of the novel – not just because without them the narrative would not proceed but also because they link everything and everyone together. This is a feature noted by Kasia Bartoszyńska, who argues that *Melmoth* draws a specific association between the global 'interconnected cultural space' it constructs 'and the act of storytelling'; *Melmoth*'s world, in other words, is 'an inter-subjective realm of shared stories, endlessly multiplying, that enfold geographically distant locals and overlapping temporalities'.³⁴ Building on Bartoszyńska's arguments, I suggest that *Melmoth* plays with the notion of 'literary capital' and its acquisition, mapping Maturin's own experiences of creative marginalisation onto a fictional world which is, in one important respect, different from the reality that Maturin evokes in his correspondence with Scott. In other words, despite these authorial figures' representation of the inequalities of the literary marketplace and 'literary capital', they actually do possess agency; their storytelling, as Bartoszyńska suggests, effects change, producing 'new world views' linked to an 'articulat[ion] [of] a sense of a vast and interconnected world, one that is very much in keeping with the rise of globalization and cosmopolitanism'.³⁵

***Melmoth*'s 'Consecration'**

Bartoszyńska's notion of *Melmoth* as providing insights into global connectedness echoes David Damrosch's conceptualisation of world literature, of which, he argues, a 'crucial feature ... is that it resolves always into a *variety* of worlds'.³⁶ World literature, Damrosch further contends, relies on a process of double-refraction that links people and places across

traditional geographical, linguistic, and temporal divides: ‘Works of world literature can very well be understood as windows on the world, as long as we understand that they serve as windows on two worlds at once: the world beyond us, and our own world as well.’³⁷ In its original form, but also in translation, adaptation, and cultural afterlife, *Melmoth* embodies Damrosch’s sense of world literature. In its attention to storytellers and the act of storytelling, it narratologically anticipates its function as world literature – to provide ‘windows on two worlds at once’.³⁸ One crucial, if subtle, feature of the narrative also highlights the centrality of translation to world literature’s ability to reflect various realities at the same time that it gestures towards translation’s importance to the process of consecration discussed by Casanova: the interpolated stories within Monçada’s tale of his own life come to us via his translation of the manuscripts that Adonijah thrusts upon him, urging him to make known the stories of the dead, all inextricably bound to him across space and time by their experiences with the wanderer. On this task, Monçada reports, ‘As my eyes fell listlessly on the manuscripts, I saw they contained only *the Spanish language* written in *the Greek characters*’ (270). His task is now to make these characters legible and meaningful to a wider audience, in part by demonstrating the connectedness of a motley cast of characters separated by time and space.

Diverse authors in the wake of *Melmoth*’s publication seem to have taken Monçada’s task to heart. Tellingly, while the novel did not enjoy the same kind of expansive reprint history that Roche’s *The Children of the Abbey* did, it was almost immediately translated into both French and German, with two competing French translations appearing successively in 1820 and three further French translations in 1821. Another French translation appeared in 1867. In Casanova’s terms, this translation history arguably signifies *Melmoth*’s movement from the margins to the centre, especially given Paris’s centrality to the process of consecration Casanova defines. In this respect, it is noteworthy that it is via French

translations and the novel's reception in France that *Melmoth* frequently assumes prominence in a transnational context, as is cogently outlined in the analysis of the wanderer in Latin America in this special issue. Today, readers might enjoy the novel in an impressive variety of foreign language translations, including French, Italian, German, Spanish, Czech, Russian, Japanese, and Chinese.

Beyond translations of *Melmoth*, the novel's visibility in the world republic of letters – or, in Damrosch's terminology, as world literature – might be gauged by its afterlife, famously exemplified in Balzac's sequel to *Melmoth*, *Melmoth Reconcilié* (1835); Oscar Wilde's alias Sebastian Melmoth and his reworking of central themes and ideas from *Melmoth* in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*;³⁹ and repeated allusions to *Melmoth* in texts by, amongst others, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Sheridan Le Fanu, James Clarence Mangan, Edgar Allan Poe, and Anthony Trollope. Nor was this influence simply a nineteenth-century one; there are, in fact, many striking twentieth- and twenty-first century examples. James Joyce's *oeuvre* makes a number of important references to *Melmoth*, for instance. The novel is also arguably a key inter-text in the title story of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Demon Lover* (1945) and, nearly seventy years later, Claire Kilroy's fictional treatment of Celtic Tiger Ireland, *The Devil I Know* (2012). In between, Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) subtly reveals Maturin's influence, with Professor Humbert calling his car 'Melmoth', and *Melmoth* emerges frequently in the works of John Banville, including *Birchwood* (1973) and *The Book of Evidence* (1989). More recently, Sarah Perry's *Melmoth* (2018) adapts Maturin's tale to produce a compelling commentary on social, political, and private trauma and its legacy in the modern era, while Joseph O'Connor's *My Father's House* (2023) gently nods to *Melmoth* with a character who takes as his code name, 'Robert Melmoth'.⁴⁰

As suggested by these examples, and as enumerated and expanded upon in the introduction and elsewhere in this special issue, *Melmoth* can boast of a truly transnational

and transhistorical literary legacy that demonstrates the novel's consecration, despite the rather anomalous cultural position the novel continues to hold today. A final instance drives home *Melmoth*'s enduring currency – a word purposely used here to suggest both its contemporary presence and the economic language of Casanova's 'literary capital': Big Telly Theatre Company's 2012 theatrical adaptation, *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Written by Nicola McCartney, directed by Zoë Seaton, and first performed in February 2012 at the Riverside Theatre, Coleraine, the play adapts Maturin's novel by focusing on key tales, specifically those involving the Guzman family and Immalee/Isidora.⁴¹ It does so using a limited cast – two women and three men – and a variety of theatrical props and techniques, including a Greek-style chorus, improv, masking, puppetry, slapstick comedy, and musical interludes, producing what one critic called a 'fast, edgy, provocative take on Maturin's novel'⁴² and another – favourably – '*Godspell* on acid'.⁴³ Staged to mark Big Telly's twenty-fifth anniversary, *Melmoth* inspired confusion in some reviewers apparently unfamiliar with the original text⁴⁴ and encouraged others to wish for a more faithful adaptation.⁴⁵ Still others, however, emphasised the play's appeal independent of its origins. Tara Isabella Burton, for instance, wrote, '[The play] makes no sense – after two days, I'm still not sure I followed the plot. But it doesn't matter.'⁴⁶ For Burton, the play transcended the source text and the specific historical, social, and cultural contexts of its production to highlight a kind of all-encompassing and collective truth – the importance of storytelling:

Melmoth is driven by love – by a gleeful enthusiasm for the power of theatre to transform simple objects (a wardrobe, say) into whole worlds (an insane asylum). The actors are clearly overjoyed to be there, overjoyed to be sharing their wild, wonderful story with their audience.⁴⁷

Writing for the *Irish Theatre Magazine*, Terry Blain hinted at a similar universality. McCartney's choice of 'representative stories' allows them to become 'archetypes of [...] the book's central thematic preoccupation: the nature of evil, and how it can suddenly irrupt in any one of us, given the right (that is, wrong) circumstances'.⁴⁸ Blain nevertheless simultaneously geo-locates the play very specifically in Ireland and Irish literary history, complimenting the crew and director Zoë Seaton for imbuing the drama with so much quintessentially Irish humour:

Monty Python, Morecambe and Wise, and *The League of Gentlemen* are among the comic antecedents referenced, but it's fascinating to note also how squarely this *Melmoth* sits within the peculiarly zany, surreal tradition of Irish humour exemplified by Swift, Sterne and Flann O'Brien, among others.⁴⁹

Philip Orr similarly frames the production as one that speaks specifically to Irish contexts – historical and more contemporary, writing, 'Big Telly's production took the varied, interlocking narratives of this sprawling text and mapped out upon its surface some of the darkest fears and dilemmas of contemporary Ireland.'⁵⁰ The end result, Orr argues, is 'a dizzy, comedic, ghastly, and spiralling journey downwards through the gyre of Irish history, in which irrational dread, vapid ignorance, cupidity, greed, superstition, and an atavistic fear of otherness spread corruption in the human heart'.⁵¹

Channelling specifically Irish historical concerns and legacies, on the one hand, and voicing universal, transnational, and transhistorical truths, as it both reflects its source material and functions as a radical new text in its own right, Big Telly's production of *Melmoth* perfectly encapsulates the translational quality of Maturin's novel and of world literature more widely. Two hundred years after *Melmoth*'s publication, there may not be a

major motion picture adaptation, nor is it likely that the novel will soon be optioned for an HBO or Netflix original series. However, this is arguably both unnecessary and irrelevant. Judging by the novel's active and thoroughly international afterlife, as explored in brief here, it has achieved literary consecration. Moreover, to borrow Damrosch's analogy, it continues to offer compelling windows into diverse worlds.

Acknowledgements

Versions of this paper were delivered as lectures at the 2020 French Society for Irish Studies (SOFEIR) Conference hosted by the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne and the 2020 Melmoth's Afterlives series hosted by Manchester Metropolitan University. My thanks to the organisers and attendees of both events.

¹ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. D. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), xii, 17.

² *Ibid.*, 126.

³ Sarah Perry, 'Introduction', *Melmoth the Wanderer* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2018), viii–ix.

⁴ Joep Leerssen, 'Irish Literary History and the Problem of Canonicity,' Irish Fiction 1650-1900 Seminar, Keough-Naughton Notre Dame Centre, Dublin, 20 October 2006.

⁵ Christina Morin, *Charles Robert Maturin and the Haunting of Irish Romantic Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 184.

⁶ David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature*, 2nd ed. (2017; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 2.

⁷ Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1998), 15. On 'distant reading' see Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary*

History (2005; London: Verso, 2007) and Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54-68.

⁸ Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, xii. My application of the term 'geo-political' here is anachronistic but apt. See Julia M. Wright's discussion of the use of similar terminology from the late eighteenth century; "'The Policy of Geography': Cavour's Considerations, European Geopolitics, and Ireland in the 1840s', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* 48 (2007): 1-23, <https://doi.org/10.7202/017442ar>.

⁹ Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*, 70.

¹⁰ Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, xii, 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 126, 127.

¹³ On the history and frequency of shipwrecks in Ireland and, in particular, off the Wicklow coast, see Karl Brady, *Shipwreck Inventory of Ireland: Louth, Meath, Dublin and Wicklow* (Dublin: Stationary Office, 2008). See also the discussion of 'blue tragedy' in Claire Connolly, Rita Singer, and James L. Smith, 'Public Humanities EcoGothic at the Coast in Ireland and Wales', *Gothic Nature: Haunted Shores* 3 (2022).

¹⁴ Charles Robert Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, ed. Douglas Grant, introd. Chris Baldick (1820; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 61. All subsequent quotations are from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets in the text.

¹⁵ Morin, *Charles Robert Maturin*, 129-53.

¹⁶ On the dangers of reading allegory in Irish Gothic where there arguably is none, see Richard Haslam, 'Irish Gothic: A Rhetorical Hermeneutics Approach', *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 1, no. 2 (2007): 3-26, <https://irishgothichorror.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/richard-haslam.pdf>.

¹⁷ There were, in fact, several, including two off the Dublin coast: the *Mersey*, which was wrecked in Dublin Harbour on 7 February 1816 and an unidentified brig, which sank near

Dublin Bay on 29 September 1816, with the loss of all its crew. See Brady, *Shipwreck Inventory*, 260, 393.

¹⁸ Elaine Freedgood, 'Fictional Settlements: Footnotes, Metalepsis, the Colonial Effect', *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 393-411. See also Laura Doyle, 'At World's Edge: Post/Coloniality, Charles Maturin, and the Gothic Wanderer', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 65, no. 4 (2011): 542.

¹⁹ Katarzyna Bartoszyńska, 'Constructing a Case: Reflections on Comparative Studies, World Literature, and Theories of the Novel's Emergence', *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 3 (2017): 282. See also the complementary arguments in Doyle, 'At World's Edge.'

²⁰ See Peter M. Solar, 'Shipping and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Ireland', *The Economic History Review*, n.s. 59, no. 4 (2006): 727.

²¹ I am borrowing this compelling idea of liquidity from Claire Connolly, 'Liquid Melmoth', paper delivered at the 'Ragged, Livid and On Fire: Melmoth at 200' symposium, Marsh's Library, Dublin 29 October 2021.

²² Christina Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland, c. 1760-1829* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 156-7; Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, xii.

²³ Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland*, 154-95; Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, 13.

²⁴ On the popularity of Roche's works, see Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland*, 154-95 and Christina Morin, 'Regina Maria Roche's *The Children of the Abbey* (1796): Its Literary Life and Afterlife,' in *Women's Authorship and the Early Gothic: Legacies and Innovations*, ed. Kathleen Hudson (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020), 197-219.

²⁵ John Wilson Croker, Review of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, *Quarterly Review* 24, no. 8 (1821): 304.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 305.

²⁸ Letter from Maturin to Scott, 3 May [1820], in Fannie E. Ratchford and Wm. H. McCarthy, Jr., eds., *The Correspondence of Sir Walter Scott and Charles Robert Maturin, with a Few Other Allied Letters* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1937), 98.

²⁹ See Regina B. Oost, “‘Servility and Command’: Authorship in *Melmoth the Wanderer*”, *Papers on Language and Literature* 31, no. 3 (1995): 291-312.

³⁰ Pascale Casanova, ‘Combative Literatures’, *New Left Review* 72 (2011): 124.

³¹ Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, 17.

³² *Ibid.*, 36.

³³ Oost, “‘Servility and Command’”.

³⁴ Bartoszyńska, ‘Constructing a Case’, 282.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

³⁶ David Damrosch, ‘What is World Literature?’, *World Literature Today* 77.1 (2003): 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ See Jim Hansen, ‘A Nightmare on the Brain: Gothic Suspicion and Literary Modernism’, *Literature Compass* 8/9 (2011): 637.

⁴⁰ Joseph O’Connor, *My Father’s House* (London: Harvill Secker, 2023), 169. Other key textual traces appear in the works of Baudelaire, Pushkin, Joyce Carole Oates, and Anne Rice, as noted recently by David Blake Knox. See David Blake Knox, ‘A Literary Terrorist’, *Dublin Review of Books* (October 2020). <https://drb.ie/a-literary-terrorist/>.

⁴¹ The play later toured throughout Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Ireland in 2012 before being re-staged at the 2013 Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

⁴² Terry Blain, Review of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, *Irish Theatre Magazine*, 16 February 2012. <http://itmarchive.ie/web/Reviews/Current/Melmoth-the-Wanderer.aspx.html#>

⁴³ Tara Isabella Burton, ‘Litro in Edinburgh: *Omega* and *Melmoth the Wanderer* at the Assembly Rooms’, *Litro Magazine*, 24 August 2013. <https://www.litromagazine.com/arts->

and-culture/litro-edinburgh/litro-in-edinburgh-omega-and-melmoth-the-wanderer-at-the-assembly-rooms/.

⁴⁴ Polly Davidson's condemnation of the play and its lack of clarity rather ironically suggests its accurate capturing of the confusion of Maturin's labyrinthine novel. Polly Davidson, 'Melmoth the Wanderer (Big Telly Theatre Company/Assembly Rooms)', *Three Weeks*, 31 August 2013. <https://threeweeksedinburgh.com/article/ed2013-theatre-review-melmoth-the-wanderer-big-telly-theatre-company-the-assembly-rooms/>.

⁴⁵ Philip Orr, Review of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, *The Green Book: Writings on Irish Gothic, Supernatural and Fantastic Literature*, 3 (2014): 85.

⁴⁶ Burton, 'Litro in Edinburgh'.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Blain, Review of *Melmoth the Wanderer*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Orr, Review of *Melmoth*, 84.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*