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“More and More Fond of Reading”: Everything You Wanted to Know about Transgender Studies but Were Afraid to Ask Clara Reeve

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Abstract: Clara Reeve’s (1729–1807) Gothic novel *The Old English Baron* is a node for contemplating two discursive exclusions. The novel, due to its own ambiguous status as a gendered “body”, has proven a difficult text for discourse on the Female Gothic to recognise. Subjected to a temperamental dialectic of reclamation and disavowal, *The Old English Baron* can be made to speak to the (often) subordinate position of Transgender Studies within the field of Queer Studies, another relationship predicated on the partial exclusion of undesirable elements. I treat the unlikely transness of Reeve’s body of text as an invitation to attempt a trans reading of the bodies within the text. Parallel to this, I develop an attachment genealogy of Queer and Transgender Studies that reconsiders essentialism—the kind both practiced by Female Gothic studies and also central to the logic of Reeve’s plot—as a fantasy that helps us distinguish where a trans reading can depart from a queer one, suggesting that the latter is methodologically limited by its own bad feelings towards the former.

Keywords: Clara Reeve; Female Gothic; trans; queer; gender; embodiment



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The “literary offspring of the Castle of Otranto” had, and continues to have, something of a difficult birth.¹ In its first year of life, the text was christened twice (titled *The Champion of Virtue* in 1777, then *Old English Baron* in a revised 1778 edition); described alternately as a transcription, a translation, a history, a romance, and (most enduringly) a “Gothic story”; attributed to “the editor of the PHOENIX” and then to Clara Reeve; and subjected to extensive cosmetic surgery to standardise its spellings and punctuation. Of course, a frictional or tentative entry into the world could hardly be said to be uncommon of original works of fiction written by women in the late eighteenth century. The “distinctively female anxieties of authorship”, the “necessary [. . .] evasions and concealments” born of the “fear and dis-ease” experienced by turn-of-the-century women writers, have been detailed at length by the seminal feminist criticism of the 1970s (Gilbert and Gubar 2000, pp. 73–75). Fraught or cautious beginnings are likewise acknowledged to be customary for early Gothic novels. *The Old English Baron*’s arrival even seems patterned on that of its self-supposed progenitor, *The Castle of Otranto*, which was passed off as an anonymous translation of a found manuscript, before Horace Walpole owned his authorship in the second edition.

However, whereas the women-authored texts enumerated in Gilbert and Gubar’s seminal study have found their way slowly but inexorably into a relatively stable canon of (white, Anglo-American) women’s literature, and whereas Walpole’s novel has historically been universally recognised as the archetypal Gothic novel, the history of *Baron* has been shaped by the difficulties of its reception as much as its production. It has proven as difficult to read as it seems to have been for Reeve to write. First in the roll call of Reeve’s many dissatisfied interlocutors was Walpole himself, who cattily declaimed his paternity of “the most insipid dull nothing you ever saw”, in a 1778 letter to William Cole, shortly after the release of the second edition of *Baron* (Cunningham 1906, sec. 7, p. 111). However, if these two consecutive, “genealogical” (because both are “concerned with the assertion of dynastic claims” (Miles 2002, p. 101)) Gothic texts are not parent and child, how else are we to figure their relation?

Perhaps *Baron* is not *Otranto*'s prodigal son, but rather its evil twin, condemned to exist now only within the confines of specialist academic discourse on the Gothic, where it occasionally and briefly gives scholars pause before they make statements about what the early Gothic novel was: set in Catholic medieval Europe, its plot enlivened by unexplained and marvellous supernatural occurrences, etc. Alas, even here Reeve's book is seldom more than an interesting piece of trivia, deployed to gesture at a flimsy pre-Radcliffean tradition of Female Gothic authorship or to contextualise Walpole's greater artistic and commercial achievement. If *Baron* is *Otranto*'s evil twin, then it might as well have been eaten in the womb by its heavyweight Gothic sibling.

This gruesome analogy recollects another familial relationship marked by an uneven distribution of readerly willingness to read, ergo *to know*, generously: the genealogy that contains Queer and Transgender Studies. Susan Stryker used the evil twin trope to elucidate the sometimes-combative relationship between these two fields during the 1990s; more recent trans scholars have questioned whether, in the light of trans's widespread capitulation to queer theory's methodologies (devastating Foucauldian or Butlerian interventions) and motivations (playfulness, antinormativity, troubling), it would not be better to say that the transgender twin, like (perhaps) *Baron*, was engulfed by its big sister in the womb.

The fact that the figure of the unfortunate foetus, engulfed by its privileged twin, can analogue both Reeve's novel and Transgender Studies does not in turn necessitate that the latter two also approximate each other. The task of this essay is not to provide a phenomenological account of the ways in which a late-eighteenth-century novel and contemporary Transgender Studies are alike each other. Rather, I want to exploit the positional similarity of these genealogically disenfranchised entities to pose questions about what Transgender Studies can and should do and what literary analysis (i.e., reading) can contribute to the broader political, activist project of making trans lives more liveable. At stake will not be a reclamation of a borderline-forgotten author or text as trans, queer, antinormative—the modus operandi of a great deal of excellent queer literary criticism—but rather a reconsideration of the way even seemingly very unqueer texts can become opportunities for us to reattune our methods of recognising and knowing bodies and genders, normative or otherwise.

Through reading *Baron*, I will seek to nuance what exactly a trans reading can do, as distinct from a queer reading. In so doing, I will offer two attachment genealogies, using the ambiguous "body" of text that is *Baron* to contextualise the ongoing investments of discourse on the Female Gothic and then using the bodies within the text of *Baron* to ponder the (sometimes) trans-exclusionary attachments of Queer Studies. These two discourses, Female Gothic and Queer Studies, have sometimes been at methodological loggerheads: with the former delighting in clear, successful transpositions of womanhood from writer to text and the latter explicitly concerning itself with transgressive and failures to embody normal genders and sexualities. Transgender-inflected Gothic scholarship (collected recently under the new coinage "TransGothic"), like a great deal of existing trans literary scholarship, has tended to align more closely with queer methodologies. Given that the eighteenth-century archive is virtually void of self-defined transness in the word's twenty-first-century sense, it is unsurprising and forgivable that trans scholarship would lean on a queer, catch-all concept of "trans" as denoting transgression rather than specifically *gender transition*, to extrapolate a larger corpus of texts for critique and celebration. The Gothic, with its numerous transgressive failures, has donated generously to such a corpus; novels such as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* and Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*, with their ostentatiously transgressive cast and instances of what Marshall Nowell calls "transtextuality" (a "narrative strategy" that occurs "when authors transition characters from one gender to another to safely evoke same-sex desire" (Marshall 2018, p. 27)), have proven ripe for the TransGothic picking. The queerness of these texts has already been well established, and a TransGothic reading insists that we recognise these transgressions as explicitly *trans* instead of, or as well as, queer. However, as Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke have

recently pointed out, this sort of “terminological churn” often threatens to become “an end in itself, rather than an emancipatory tool” (Gleeson and O’Rourke 2021, p. 2). Is a sanctimonious redressal of nomenclature the utmost a TransGothic approach can offer? This essay offers *Baron* as a site for pondering where it can go further. As I will suggest, this furthering can consist precisely in an unlikely mediation between the impulses of Female Gothic and Queer Studies. Ultimately, I will attempt to offer TransGothic as a vessel that can, paradoxically, contain both the essentialising attachments of the former and the anti-essentialist investments of the latter.

1. The Old English Baron and the Female Gothic

On first glance, *Baron* seems unambiguously to satisfy the predominant criterion for membership in the cohort of Gothic novels appellated “female”: it is written by a woman. Ellen Moers, after all, coined the term “Female Gothic” to describe “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called ‘the Gothic’” (Moers 1985, p. 90). The irony of so relativistic a definition of genre sitting in tight juxtaposition with such an essentialist definition of gender has not gone unnoticed by Moers’s critics, who have taken her to task for presuming a reliable causality proceeding from the possession of a female body towards the production of female literature. Later Gothic feminist criticism wrested the locus of femaleness away from authorial anatomy and replanted it in textual effects themselves, with Anne Williams extrapolating a formulaic binarism of (male) horror writing and (female) terror writing and Alison Milbank commenting on the frequency with which authors traversed this distinction by writing in a mode antithetical to their actual, embodied gender (Williams 1995 and Milbank 1998). Still more recent scholarship has reappraised Moers’s concept of Female Gothic as the product of a self-consciously proprietary turn in feminist criticism. This turn entailed a politics of territorial expansionism into the male-dominated landscape of English letters, or a “feminist possessive individualism” that paired an insistence on women’s ownerships of their own bodies with “its claims for women’s less literal ownership of a literary tradition” (Fitzgerald 2004, p. 10). Ellen Ledoux has explicated this proprietary bent in relation to what Gayatri Spivak has called feminism’s “strategic essentialism”, arguing that “for pragmatic reasons, second-wave feminists were required to define narrowly women’s contribution to Gothic writing” (Ledoux 2017, p. 3). Because they came with reputations already valorised by the male critical establishment, writers such as Ann Radcliffe made attractive targets for feminist reclamation. This allowed feminist scholars to make a rigorous and effective claim for ownership of a female writing tradition, even if “[t]hey did not have the luxury, early on, of questioning what it meant to be female” (Ledoux 2017, pp. 3–4). Fitzgerald and Ledoux’s informed lenity towards the seemingly essentialist word “female” is commonplace for academic discussion. A general scholarly awareness of the politically progressive attachments and alliances that this term has served as adhesive for (an awareness of what Sara Ahmed would call its stickiness) perhaps explains its continued popularity. The fact of the ongoing self-reproduction of discourse on the Female Gothic suggests that this concept has weathered the deconstructive, de-ontologising storm of poststructuralism. Seemingly, for all its contradictions and detractors, it continues to offer a robust and appealing framework for criticising works of Gothic literature.

However, amid the fluctuations in the sense and scope of the category “Female Gothic” glossed above, two notable exclusions have remained consistent. One is the word “Female’s” unspoken—perhaps unconscious, though not inconspicuous—exclusion of trans women. Despite Ardel Haefele-Thomas’s observation that the Gothic, and the queer Female Gothic in particular, “thrives on complications and constantly throws what we think we know and believe into confusion” (Haefele-Thomas 2016, p. 170), there seems to be a revenant desire among scholars to return to uncomplicated, unconfusing—and consequently essentialist—understandings of “Female”. This desire is voiced by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik in the introduction to their recent collection, when they state that

“the main focus of *Women and the Gothic* is unashamedly on women: women characters within texts; women as Gothic authors; women as readers; women as critics; women as theorists” (Horner and Zlosnik 2016, p. 2). Although the word “women” seems to shrug off some of the biologically essentialist connotations of “female”, such statements, and such desire, cannot help but privilege socially sanctioned and historically well-indexed forms of womanhood, sacrificing potentially difficult transfem (and smoothing over transmasculine) for the sake of safer, more recognisable, resolutely cis women.

Another of the Female Gothic’s ongoing exclusions, its constitutive negations, is *The Old English Baron*. Given that it was denigrated by two of the twentieth century’s most influential Gothicists, Montague Summers and Devendra P. Varma, it is perhaps unsurprising that feminist scholars would make a tactical omission of Reeve’s text in order to extrapolate a tradition of women’s Gothic writing that was already validated by pre-existing criticism.² However, even during feminism’s 1990s poststructuralist period, when Female Gothic discourse moved away from authors’ bodies and into the bodies of texts themselves, *Baron* was left largely behind. The gravitational pull of Reeve’s biography proved too strong to allow deconstructive readings to flourish. Thus, although Reeve is widely known as “the author of *The Old English Baron*”, her actual text itself—like transness—has proven harder for Female Gothic discourse to know and welcome.

So challenging has it been for the Female Gothic to recognise *Baron*, that in the late 1990s, Alison Milbank even identified it as an example of the *male* Gothic, despite the fact that the novel does not exhibit any of those features (horrifying sublimity, graphic misogyny) said to betoken male Gothic textuality. Although she began her 2004 study of *Women’s Gothic* with a chapter on Reeve and Sophia Lee, E. J. Clery offers little more than a plot summary of *The Old English Baron*. It is not clear if anything beyond Reeve’s own womanhood qualifies her book for inclusion in Clery’s canon of Female Gothic. However, neither has this (undisputed) womanhood been enough to earn her much mention in the more recent wave of crypto-essentialist Female Gothic scholarship. Her name does not appear in *Women and the Gothic*, nor does her work.

A name that does appear frequently in this book is Ann Radcliffe, whose *Romance of the Forest* was in fact praised by contemporary reviewers for its resemblance of *Baron*—an ironic inversion of the hierarchy of value posited by “strategic-essentialist” Female Gothic discourse. For Ledoux, “*Baron*’s emphasis on maintaining a relative sense of realism and an atmosphere of moral instruction are key elements in the formation of Radcliffe’s style, which will later be termed the ‘Female Gothic’” (Ledoux 2017, p. 7). Yet, this same didactic realism led Clery to call *Baron* “Pamela in fancy dress” (Clery 1995, p. 86), a moniker that implies that the text is neither female nor Gothic, but rather a displacement from a well-established male realist genre. Under this reading, *Baron* re-emerges as the production of a woman (Reeve) imagining herself as a man (Richardson) imagining himself as a woman (Pamela), except now in fancy dress as—what exactly?³ If we limit the scope of discourse on the Female Gothic to having the last word on whether a text is or is not exactly female, we shut ourselves off to the frisson of defamiliarisation that comes with leaving the question posed by this chain of contiguous gender identifications open ended. A trans reading knows the euphoria, and the dysphoria, that can result from inhabiting this difficulty.

2. Reading an Undressed Transsexual, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual

Reeve’s novel has not only proven difficult to read into the Female Gothic tradition, but, like transness, has been difficult to read, period. A recalcitrance to being read does not, on its own, dictate that a text be understood as trans. However, it is an early indicator that trans might offer salubrious conceptual habitation for a text such as *Baron* that baffles binaristic classification—an indication supported by Reeve’s own reading of the actual material body of her text. In a letter to Maria Bridgen appended to the 1780 edition, we read “You cast an eye of favour upon *his* first appearance, under all the disadvantages of an incorrect and very faulty impression. You took *him* out of this degrading dress, and encouraged *him* to assume a graceful and ornamental habit” (Reeve 2008, p. 140, my italics). Referring

to the standardisations of spelling and punctuation made at Bridgen's instigation, Reeve implicitly understands the material of her text as a sexed body that can be thought of as clothed correctly or dissonantly depending on its grammatical arrangement on the page. The word "impression" connotes at once the material genesis of the text (in the printing press) and the reader's sensorial response to the book as a badly attired body. With this single term, Reeve delineates a readerly tendency to react books on the same terms as we would react to human bodies, as variably stylised entities with an underlying, sexed materiality—thus anticipating our latter proclivity to classify Gothic novels as "male" or "female".⁴

This tendency is well known to trans communities, who face a prurient media pre-occupation with their clothed and unclothed selves. As trans poet Theis Anderson distills it, "My own undressing bores me/ but it does not bore you" (Anderson 2018). A fetish exists around the disclosure of the undressed trans body (see, for example, "that scene" in *The Crying Game*). This fetishism is often recapitulated by the sensationalist marketing of trans autobiographies, whose front and back covers (i.e., whose "habit") seem designed to induct readers in a methodology of gawking. To accept Reeve's suggestion that we receive books in the same way we receive human bodies is implicitly to acknowledge that a trans reading methodology will be equipped to undress bodies of text more sensitively than a feminist discourse that has sometimes seen the assignation of gender as the end rather than the beginning of analysis.

By emphasising the nature of her text as a sexed body correctly *habited*, Reeve draws a parallel, not only between reading books and reading people, but also between her book-as-physical-object and its content, which narrates the gradual but inexorable recognition of one particular body (as high-born though low-bred) and its instalment in the correct *habitation* (the father's usurped estate, which plays so prominent a role in early Gothic fiction). That Reeve is evidently able to conceive of her text as partaking in the bodily-ness of the characters represented within it anticipates Marie Mulvey-Roberts's view that "[o]ur experience of the world is through the transitory experience of embodiment, which has been expressed in the more durable form of the written word. Text and flesh entwine within the semantic derivation of 'corpus', 'corporeality' and 'corpse'" (Mulvey-Roberts, p. 1). Since at least the eighteenth century, we have been prone to construing texts as corporeal suites akin to those we ourselves inhabit, complete with all mod cons, such as sex and gender.

A historiography of *Baron's* difficult encounter with the reader might justly borrow the term "wrong-body narrative" from trans parlance. This term signifies a medico-discursive imperative for trans people to narrate themselves as inhabiting the wrong body in order to justify transitioning into the right one. It also attests to the centrality of reading to trans self-actualisation; the wrong-body narrative solicits a certain reading of the body's inside in order to sanction changes that manifest on the body's outside. Something about the body of *Baron* has evidently both enticed and frustrated dyadic assignations of gender. Despite the fact that Reeve clearly understood her novel as "he", and despite the cosmetic procedures (re-"habitation") "he" underwent early in "his" life to smoothen his reception, *Baron* has been tugged back and forth between claimants arguing for the novel's true but misrecognised embodiment of either maleness or femaleness.

If *Baron* is wrong-bodied, we could view its textual-corporeal transness in at least two different lights. Insofar as it facilitates the transmutation of a female persona (Reeve's) into a newborn male body (whether this maleness results from it being the "offspring" of the male Walpolean Gothic or the male, Richardsonian realist novel), we might understand him as a female-to-male (FTM) transsexual body (of text). Alternately, because the text can in hindsight be seen (for example, by Ledoux) as introducing a prototypical femaleness into a recognisably and (at the time of writing) exclusively male form, we could equally conceptualise her as the first male-to-female (MTF) Gothic body, a prototype even for Matthew Lewis's Rosario/Matilda. A further case could be made for Reeve as practising an inverted form of the transvestism that Madeleine Kahn sees the eighteenth century's

great male novelists as exploiting. Although, like the terms “MTF” and “FTM”, the word “transvestism” does not appear until the twentieth century, it is much easier to conceive of Reeve as having cognitive access to the concept of cross-dressing, than that of MTF or FTM transsexualism, writing as she does in the knowledge of a long theatrical tradition of gender swapping and cognisant of (in)famous contemporary crossdressers such as Charlotte Charke and the Chevalier D’Éon. However, this is emphatically not to say that Reeve could not imagine and react (anxiously or excitedly) to the possibility of a more thoroughgoing material mutability of the sexed human body; Reeve’s ignorance of medically valorised concepts for describing transsexuality need not prevent her from addressing concerns about sexed/gendered embodiment that are of ongoing interest to trans scholarship.

In *Female Husbands: A Trans History*, Jen Manion recognises that, because “[r]ecords were never meant to provide information” about queer sexualities and genders, the objective absence of archival evidence of transness does not necessitate the non-existence of transness (Manion 2020, p. 10). Equally, whatever evidence we do find we should refrain from co-opting into the narratives of transgender that we ourselves would like to tell. We therefore speak of a person’s transness “without claiming to understand what it meant to that person or asserting any kind of fixed identity on them” (p. 11). If the purpose of a trans reading is not to ascertain what exactly *Baron*’s textual transness is (MTF or FTM or transvestism), what can transness do for a text like *Baron*, and vice versa?

Viewed through the lens of Transgender Studies, Clery’s assertion that, of all the major Gothic novels written by women, *Baron* is “perhaps the most difficult to know how to read today” takes on a double significance (Clery 2004, p. 30). As Jay Prosser explains, “If the highest ideal of transsexuality is to pass, [then] its antithesis is to be read (in the lingo when a transsexual is read, she has failed to pass, she is taken for what she wishes most strongly not to be)” (Prosser 1998, pp. 129–30). A trans reading, then, is a contradiction in terms. A trans-friendly habitation for a text would precisely shelter it from being *read*. The paradoxical politics of reading has been a mainstay of debates in Transgender Studies from the field’s inception with the publication of Sandy Stone’s “Posttranssexual Manifesto” up until the recent edited collection, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Gossett et al. 2017). Scholars have weighed the virtues of *reading/being read* (i.e., raised awareness of actually existing trans people, furthering the good work of disarticulating felt gender from biological organisation in the imaginary of the unqueer masses) against the benefits (often necessities) of *passing* (i.e., safety from abuse, ease of everyday interactions). The terms of this debate can be mapped onto a dialectic that has constituted Transgender Studies from the beginning, one strand of which has pulled in the direction of trans liberation through gender abolition, while the other has more modestly moved to affirm even problematically binaristic trans identities. As I suggested in my introduction, the first strand—thanks to its assimilability to the reigning Foucauldian–Butlerian paradigm in Queer Studies—has generally been dominant.

More recently, however, and taking their cue from Kadji Amin’s concept of “attachment” genealogy, trans scholars have begun to query “what historical forms of relation must be forgotten, overlooked, or suppressed so that contemporary queer theory can sustain its key critical and political commitments and imaginaries?” (Amin 2017, p. 19). Amin’s genealogical inquiry into the attachments of Queer Studies reveals how the historically prevalent but ethically messy practice of pederasty became prey to queer studies remedial impulse, its desire to extract “good” queer history and expurgate the “bad”. An attachment genealogy of transgender studies might start by considering how the tendency to amplify the field’s queerest voices (those that, like Sandy Stone, advocate for public acts of gender subversion) has often meant gagging its less queer, transsexual ones (Prosser’s, for example). An attachment genealogy of Queer Gothic might involve questioning what a focus on texts with overtly queer features (boundary crossings, homoeroticism, gender ambiguity) has obscured from consideration.

Another scholar to have critiqued the attachments of queer research is Cameron Awkward-Rich, who, anticipating Jen Manion, challenges us to “do minoritarian studies without being driven by the desire to rehabilitate the subjects/objects of our knowledge” (Awkward-Rich 2017, p. 824). In riposte to the remedial reading methodology of many queer scholars, Awkward-Rich offers “Reading Like a Depressed Transsexual”. Depression enjoins the subject to pre-emptively anticipate the worst; it is as if the worst thing that could happen has already happened. Depression becomes a paradoxically freeing position to inhabit and can lead to reparation rather than pain. The depressed transsexual reader, upon regarding the “explicitly annihilatory portrayals of trans people in trans-exclusionary lesbian feminism”, is able to respond, “Yes, that is me—so what?” (ibid., p. 826) “[R]eading like a depressed transsexual”, Awkward-Rich explains, “makes this possibility of annihilation much less threatening” by asking us to distinguish between “feelings of annihilation” and “actually being annihilated” (ibid., p. 832). This lowering of the stakes has already done much to alleviate the discursive enmity between feminism and transgender studies; it is also, I think, a good way for queer and trans to inflect their readings of each other, for the Female Gothic and trans to inflect their readings each other, and indeed a good way for TransGothic Studies to attempt to read unqueer, politically conservative texts such as *Baron*.

Reading like a depressed transsexual—in contradistinction to readings that, in their zest for loud, proud revelations of transness, ultimately recapitulate the media’s scopophilia for undressed trans bodies—reminds us that bad feelings are “a precondition for relating at all” (ibid., p. 839). To accept bad feelings is to accept that transness need not be a threat to the Female Gothic’s renewed commitment to the lives and writings of women over the masquerade of textual femininity, just as the Female Gothic’s investment in binary femaleness need not be a threat to transness. Indeed, as Awkward-Rich explains, while “many forms of queer feminism seem to want from trans confirmation that there is no predictable, and thereby no fixed, difference between m and f”, trans is actually “quite attached to a version of m/f (why else the insistence that you use ‘my’ pronouns to address me?) but wants from feminism a way of interrupting the process by which m/f reproduces m > f” (ibid., p. 838).

By cross-examining *Baron* with its predecessor, *Otranto*, I will now attempt to establish Reeve’s understanding of classed bodies as materially essentialist, ergo highly unqueer. By handling the bad feeling generated by this class essentialism in the manner of a depressed transsexual (instead of what? A judgy queer, perhaps), I will proffer Reeve’s novel not as an unqueer failure but rather as the stage upon which we might allow a scene of transgender pedagogy to play out; an opportunity, through reading, to refine our understanding of what trans, and TransGothic, reading can do.

3. Reading Reading in *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Old English Baron*

Since its initial reception, *Baron* has fallen victim to its readers’ impulse to read—to insert the text, as we do human bodies, into a predetermined, rigidly binaristic framework for understanding and organising the world, or to ascertain its gender allegiance. The plot of *Baron* anticipates this hermeneutic imperative, preoccupied as it is with the reading of one very particular body within the narrative: that of its protagonist, the displaced nobleman Edmund Lovel. Although Reeve’s novel borrows from its progenitor, *The Castle of Otranto*, its plot of the gradual recognition and restoration of a dispossessed young heir, Reeve departs significantly from Walpole in the mechanism she deploys to set this restorative process in motion. The entrance of Walpole’s protagonist into the plot of the novel is predicated on him chancing to say the wrong thing in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not divine decree but earthly rumour is what draws Theodore from a neighbouring village to the scene of Conrad’s fresh demise, where, utterly randomly, he is the only person able to perceive the likeness between Conrad’s murder weapon and the helmet on the statue of Alfonso the Good in St. Nicholas’s Church. This is sufficient grounds to condemn Theodore in the eyes of the usurper Manfred. In addition—though his manner “discovered more jealously of innocence than dismay”—nothing—least of all any markers of his true

gentility—manifests in the youth's person (i.e., on his body) that prevents the “generality” of onlookers from according with Manfred's representation of him as a “Villain! Monster! Sorcerer!” (Walpole 2008, pp. 20–22) So meagre is his body's signifying prowess that the bare factuality of “how impossible it was for a youth, seemingly not twenty, to wield a piece of armour of so prodigious a weight” (ibid., p. 21) barely even registers.

Theodore's body retreats even further from conspicuousness throughout the remainder of chapter I of *Otranto*. Or put inversely, his subjecthood advances into disembodiment. First, in the “dark and dismal” passageways where he meets Isabella, he is experienced as the “submissive voice” of a nondescript “human form” (pp. 29–30). His encounter with Matilda is likewise void of all bodily specificity. Because he is speaking to the ill-fated princess from a chamber below her window, his speech is again made to do the work of representing the speaker's identity unassisted by somatic present-ness. Admittedly, this is enough for Matilda and her maid Bianca to observe that “his phrases were becoming a man of gentle birth” and that he “may be some prince in disguise” (pp. 45–46). However, the fact that Matilda is the only person to draw the comparison between Theodore and the portrait of Alfonso (his grandfather) when, shortly after this scene, the youth's body is put on full display at his trial for murder suggests that Matilda is endowed with detective insight far beyond that of the multitude, who blithely bay for Theodore's death. In either case, the truth of his birth and blood is not something that emanates irresistibly from Theodore's body. Matilda's and Bianca's speculations are based on his phrases; that is, a vocabulary and a manner of delivery acquired through elite education (which, paradoxically, Theodore could not actually have had). The second revelation of Theodore's nobility is rooted in Matilda's visual experience of his body, but arises through comparison with an affirmed representation of an acknowledged prince. Nowhere is his body able, independently and absolutely, to signify its true nobility, until—relevantly enough for my purposes—a scene of risky undressing. In an echo of the examples of transsexual undressing mentioned above, Theodore's “putting off his doublet and unbuttoning his collar” means violence is imminent: he is about to be executed. “As he stooped, his shirt flipped down below his shoulder, and discovered the mark of a bloody arrow. Gracious heaven! cried the holy man [father Jerome] starting, what do I see? It is my child! my Theodore!” (p. 57) Handily, Theodore's body transpires to be marked with an undisputable sign of his noble parentage. However, the fact that both noble father and noble heir were able to go “stealth” for so long prior to this point, by living undetected as priest and peasant, respectively, is a reminder that, although their bodies may bear the signs of their class identities, the ability of these bodies to project this signification is strictly limited to states of undress.

The same cannot be said of Edmund's body in the opening pages of *Baron*. The scene for Edmund's introduction is set by the return of Sir Philip Harclay from the Crusades to his native England, where a journey to the seat of his childhood friend Lord Lovel provides ample opportunity for ruminations on the nature of nobility. The theme of environment emerges when Sir Philip is obliged to rest at a peasant's abode. The peasant, anxious that Harclay's surroundings should correspond to his rank, is reluctant “to let such a man lye at our cottage, where he could neither be lodged or entertained according to his quality” (Reeve 2008, p. 9). This implies a potentially formative role for environment in constituting nobility. Although it transpires that “the good Knight slept as well in Wyatt's cottage as he could have done in a palace” (p. 11), being “accustomed to lodge fare and hard” (p. 9) from his soldiering days, Harclay's adaptability to his surrounds nevertheless leaves the question of situatedness somewhat open, as we know he has earned his rank through crusading fame and is not a nobleman by blood. A second case is made for rank as the result of education. Sir Philip and Wyatt muse on the happy societal equilibrium between “fellow creatures of the same natural form and endowments, though different kinds of education had given a conscious superiority to the one, a conscious inferiority to the other; and due respect was paid by the latter, without being exacted by the former” (p. 9). The fact that the new Lord Lovel, Baron Fitz-Owen, “thinks nothing too much to bestow on [his children's] education” (p. 12) seems to confirm education's function of instigating and

maintaining a class differential. Neither the education hypothesis nor the environment one is explicitly denounced. However, the fact that Wyatt's (who is very obviously a rustic peasant and nowhere close to noble) "kindness and hospitality might shame a man of higher birth and breeding" (p. 8) is an early hint that nobility must be properly located in something more essential than learned forms of behaviour; that acquired behaviour might even be a fraudulent and potentially embarrassing simulation of nobility.⁵

This hint is compounded by the appearance of Edmund Twyford. The significance of Edmund's visual appearance is anticipated by Wyatt, who emphasises that "he is sure to be as fine a youth as *ever the sun shone upon*" (p. 12, my emphasis), a statement that plays up the contrast between the full and daylight visual disclosure of Edmund's body, and Theodore's shadowy, disembodied encounters in *Otranto*. "As [Edmund] drew near, Sir Philip fixed his eyes upon him, with so much attention, that he seemed not to observe his courtesy and address" (p. 13). In other words, those learned behaviours that have been the outcome of Edmund's two-year education alongside the sons of noblemen, seemingly count for nothing in Sir Philip's appraisal of him. Not only Sir Philip but "all who knew him" have been struck by Edmund's "uncommon merit, and gentleness of manner" (p. 14), Baron Fitz-Owen explains—character traits that must have preceded his internship in the latter's household. It emerges that Philip was particularly struck by a physical similarity between Edmund and the late Lord Lovel. Edmund's "manner resembles [Lovel] as much as his person, and his qualities deserve that he should be placed in a higher rank" (p. 15), Sir Philip informs Baron Fitz-Owen. It should be noted that neither man brooks the possibility of Edmund actually being related to Lord Lovel, who is believed to have died heirless. Rather, Sir Philip is postulating a generic (not genetic) upper-classness that is inscribed on Edmund's very body—on his person and manners—and likewise embodied by Lord Lovel, but that (unlike Theodore's nobleness) seems to manifest itself independently of this comparison, as Sir Philip is obviously not the first to be impressed by his appearance. Edmund evidently does not exhibit the "same natural form and endowments" as his lowly "fellow creatures". He seems instead to attest to an essential and insurmountable difference in the bodies of high-borns and low-borns, which ensures (more watertightly than education) that no amount of *kindness and hospitality* will ever allow a peasant like Wyatt to displace a nobleman like Sir Philip.

The subsequent plot gradually attests to the correctness of Sir Philip's hunch. War in France and a sojourn in a supposedly haunted wing of Baron Fitz-Owen's estate give Edmund occasion to prove the acuity of the knight's character assessment of the boy. Edmund's demonstrated valour in both a foreign and domestic setting is enough to confirm his good character and justify his elevation from his lowly origins, but not enough to secure his place in the Fitz-Owen household, where his overt merit has made him enemies among the Baron's kin. It is during Edmund's stay in the haunted west wing that, in an echo of *Otranto*, his long-anticipated identity as a nobleman's heir is verified through comparison with a portrait of his father. A visit to his adoptive mother then reminds us that, unlike in *Otranto*, long prior to the revelation of similitude between father and displaced son, Edmund's body yielded evidence of its true gentility. His stand-in mother, Margery, recalls that "[a]s Edmund grew up, he grew sickly and tender, and could not bear hard labour", then one day an "old pilgrim", who was also a scholar and former soldier, taught Edmund to read and told him "histories of wars, and Knights, and Lords, and great men" (p. 53). It is likely that this coincidental visit of the pilgrim-scholar-warrior is the explanation for Edmund's strikingly knightlike self-conduct and mannerisms; but even before he chances to acquire the tutelage that enables this behaviour, he exhibits clear corporeal signs that his body is a fertile ground for the implantation of higher ideas. Robert Miles is correct to point out that "[a]lthough Edmund's superiority over the peasants is based on superior nurture, this nurture discovers itself within Edmund as an irrepressible impulse towards education, to reading the chivalrous romances that build his character" (Miles 2002, p. 101). Edmund's behaviour is acquired, but his body seems pre-programmed for this acquisition.

In addition, the symptom of this pre-programming is an impulse to read that seems to be located deep down in the very matter of his body.

That specifically the *body* of low-born Margery (her “milk was troublesome to [her]” and she was “glad to be rid of it” (p. 53)) appears to have made way for the arrival and nurture of Edmund’s high-born body attests to Reeve’s belief in class identity as something inimical to bodies, and to which other bodies mechanistically react. Even in the sentimental marriage subplot—an oil Reeve massages almost imperceptibly lightly into the main plot in order to lubricate simultaneously the happy restoration of Edmund and his reunion with the dispossessed Fitz-Owens—Edmund’s behavioural merit does not hold a monopoly on his representation. It is his “fine person” as well as his “qualities” that his lover Emma has “incessant view”⁶ of (p. 19). Here we witness again the inextricability of Edmund’s deeds from the *visually* remarkable body that performs them. Indeed, there is also evidence of behaviour, or performance, misfiring in its representation, as when Edmund’s “manly spirit” is “misconstrued into pride”, his “generosity” into “imprudence”, and his “humility” into “hypocrisy” by his envious peers (p. 27). The signification effectuated by behaviour is clearly liable to contortion. Conversely, when the noble body is contorted, this does not subvert but rather enhances its God-given capacity to encode itself, as in the conclusive example of the corpse of Edmund’s father, whose mangled state is a boon to its recognition.

In her sustained engagement with *Baron*, Abby Coykendall understands Edmund as emblematising the values of a monied and upwardly mobile upper-middle class—the class to which the titular Baron Fitz-Owen (whose estate and title are purchased), Sir Philip Harclay (who buys his fame with blood in the Holy Land), and Reeve herself belong. Coykendall sees Reeve as travestying one genealogy (the relationship of her novel to its generic progenitor, *The Castle of Otranto*) in order to buttress another (the Lovel lineage). Reeve waters down the two principal innovations of Walpole’s text—a richly imagined historical setting and an unprecedented intrusion of supernatural occurrences into the plot—to the extent that *Baron* often reads more like a realist novel à la Samuel Richardson than a Gothic novel set in the Middle Ages.

It is this gentle admixture of Gothic (or Romance) and realist elements that led Clery to dismissively call *Baron* “Pamela in fancy dress”; for Coykendall, however, this formal hybridity is a strategic coup d’état in the furtherance of Reeve’s ideological aims. She points out that supernatural elements primarily intrude in the form of harmless and seemingly providential coincidences. The hand of God descends, more or less on call, to nudge the prayerful Edmund (along with, for good measure, Father Oswald, who joins his prayers with Edmund’s as if to emphasise their absolute lack of recourse to any other technology) towards the crucial clue in the crucial location that will lead to the discovery of Edmund’s parentage.⁷ That Baron Fitz-Owen, ignorant of Edmund’s discovery, asserts “if Heaven discloses the guilt of others, I ought to adore and submit to its decrees” (p. 66) affirms that supernatural occurrences in the novel can only be attributable to divine—ergo benevolent, unlike the supernatural of *Otranto*, which functions more in the manner of a violent *deus ex machina* from a revenge tragedy—intervention.

The Reevean supernatural resides in neither gigantic, motile armour nor animate portraits, but rather in the providential revelation of Edmund’s true genealogy. This allows Edmund to simultaneously to represent the values of a polite middle class (humility, self-cultivation, diligence, plain dealing—unadulterated by self-interest and cupidity), and to miraculously all along have been the flesh-and-blood vessel of true aristocratic status. Genealogy is thus a kind of technology, a prosthesis appended to the plot to legitimise the conscientious paternalism of the propertied gentry’s signal representatives, Sir Philip and Baron Fitz-Owen, while—in a supremely conservative gesture—simultaneously implying that true gentility and merit is never dissociated from true aristocratic status.

This legitimisation of the upper-middle class retroactively justifies all the less “noble” behaviours that have contributed to the rehabi(li)tation of the true nobleman, Edmund; a rear-guard ideological manoeuvre that vindicates the activities of Reeve’s increasingly colonialist and capitalistic contemporaries. This includes venial sins such as bribery, men-

dacity, the writing of intimidating letters, and duelling, all of which are required to facilitate Edmund's restoration. More perniciously, it also covers the rapacious appropriation of wealth and resources that goes on at the margins in order to feather the nest at the centre—expansionist wars in Europe and the Holy Land. Reeve's narrative sleight of hand is the way she uses providential fiat to polish over the dirty work done to ensure Edmund's restoration. The smoothness with which the castle doors automatically fly open upon Edmund's return to the Lovel estate at the novel's end seems to confirm that his reinstallation has been divinely prescribed.

In transmuting the signature ordnance of Gothic (medieval setting and supernatural happenings) into a realist-inflected narrative where the class relations are recognisably those of her late-eighteenth-century context, Reeve is able, in a single stroke, to annex the "cultural cachet" of aristocracy to a "non-titled, yet conspicuously wealthy" upper-middle class and to use the glitter of the supernatural occurrences that effectuate this merger to draw attention away from the rapacious materialism that sustains both classes (Coykendall 2005, p. 449). Coykendall suspects that "without any aristocratic prerogatives to which to lay claim, the gentrified and professional middle classes can only point to education as the factor that sets them above the servants who perform their labour" (ibid., p. 478). However, in a rebuttal of the education hypothesis put forward by Harclay and Wyatt, Coykendall concludes that performativity—the (re)citation of the pre-established conventions of nobleness—is never fully adequate to confer true status, unless accompanied by the fantastic power of genealogy. Not education but affiliation, or assimilation, is the only strategy to which non-aristocrats such as Baron Fitz-Owen and Sir Philip have recourse to ensure that their worthiness (their noble behaviour) and indeed their worth (their material riches) ultimately translates into genuine status (into nobility). Rather than direct blood relation, it is "[m]etonymic relationships such as matrimony and adoption", relationships dependent "on semblance and supplement rather than substance", that function to engineer the new upper-class imago" (p. 459). However, to emphasise the relationships of *semblance and supplement* that fortuitously (almost providentially) bud of their own accord (Sir Philip's attraction to Edmund and Edmund's to Emma, the resultant guardianship and marriage) is to forget the very particular *substance* that undergirds this all: the actual stuff of Edmund's body.

4. Bodies That Matter (More than Others)

While Coykendall is right to interpret Reeve as simultaneously propounding middle-class values and shoring up aristocratic genealogies, she fails to appreciate the extent to which Reeve's providential supernatural is only ever capable of affirming a fact that we as readers have known, or at least strongly suspected, all along. Namely, that though Edmund *embodies* middle class virtues, he has the unmistakable *body* of a nobleman. The trajectory that the hand of God ushers Edmund and company along leads directly back to the materiality of bodies. In fact, providence plays a relatively superficial and secondary role in the identification of true nobleness next to the signifying power of the soma.

After all, it is Father Oswald's and (the elderly retainer) Joseph's unexplainable physical attraction towards and deference for Edmund's person that causes them to come to his assistance in the castle's west wing. In addition, the subsequent discoveries made by the trio all hinge on the tenaciousness with which noble bodies self-signify. The absent body of the murdered Lord Lovel is first suggestively adumbrated by the exoskeleton of his armour, which transpires to be stained with his blood—a transposition of depth onto surface, of the true "essence" of a body onto the artificial exterior, which inverts the movement of undressing in *Otranto* and in scenes of trans unmasking, by flipping the positions of clothing and flesh. It is then suggested that Lovel's bones—the most persistent markers of human corporeality—are buried beneath the floor. Shortly afterwards, Edmund's foster mother Margery testifies to a similar doughtiness on the part of his birth mother's remains, which, following her death by drowning, linger long enough to suggest Edmund's high birth. Lovel's bones finally resurface at the end of the novel as the final

and most indisputable piece of evidence in favour of Edmund's restoration: "Behold, said Edmund, the bones of him to whom I owe my birth! The priest from Lord Graham's advanced.—This is *undoubtedly the body of Lord Lovel*" (p. 116, my emphasis).

Although in both cases, these bodies do not do their signifying work unassisted (the fine clothes of his mother, and the contorted physical arrangement of his father's bones are also vital clues), *Baron* seems to express Reeve's faith in the ability of noble bodies to persistently evince their own nobleness. The noble body may not be enough on its own (a whole machinery of clandestine activity must be built up around it), but as the privileged site for signifying nobleness, it does provide an ineradicable material support for Edmund's restoration. Not the providentiality of ghostly encounters and self-opening doors, but the God-given capacity of high-born bodies to monolithically, irresistibly, and (for most of Edmund's life) unsolicitedly signify their quality is the true fantasy at the core of this novel. In addition, it is a fantasy that seems to have been too bold even for the imagination of Horace Walpole, who requires spectacular intrafamilial, misogynist violence in addition to proof of noble lineage to overcome his usurper's resistance to Theodore's claim. The bodies that matter most in Reeve's fictional lifeworld register their importance in the very matter from which they are constituted.

Although this propensity to visually materialise one's status appertains exclusively to the material of *classed* bodies in *Baron*, it is not difficult to see why the fantasy of a self-signifying body should strike a chord with trans readers. Especially when so monolithic a body is found in a text whose own "body" has so frequently baffled attempts to assign gender to it. Although Edmund's gender identity is never at stake, his is the story of a person raised to accept and enact a model of personhood that does not correspond to his underlying, "true" identity. Fortunately for Edmund, who is spared feelings of dysphoria or distress through being ignorant of any dissonance, his body does the work of revealing this identity for him. In a way, this is the inverse of the "body" of text in which he appears, which, as we saw, needed to be "correctly habited" by Maria Bridgen—and which, despite this rehabilitation, provokes contention over its identitarian allegiances to this day. The haggling of authority figures over Edmund's body in the later plot of *Baron* uncannily mirrors the proprietary contestations of Gothic scholarship, which has seen the novel slalom in and out of a "Female" Gothic tradition. For all the lucidity it brings to the question of Reeve's attitudes towards class, Coykendall's analysis is forced to concede that "even the most tolerant 'Female Gothic' approach fails to accommodate *Baron* in the canon; that "[t]he more charitable that methodological lens, the more hermaphroditic" Reeve becomes; and that Reeve ultimately "appears an anomaly not only in relation to the great Gothic grandsire Walpole but also in relation to the preponderance of women Gothicists who soon succeed her" (Coykendall 2005, pp. 447, 449).

Reeve's anomalousness has, in no small part I think, directly to do with her representation of Edmund's aristocratic body. In showcasing the way Edmund's body conveys highly noticeable information about Edmund's genealogy and status, Reeve realises the "dream of a transparent body" that Corinna Wagner views the Gothic fictional tradition as burgeoning in opposition to. Wagner recounts how nascent human sciences such as phrenology and physiognomy were "underwritten by the belief that the body shapes—if not determines—character, behaviour and intelligence" (Wagner 2012, p. 75); Ludmilla Jordonova agrees that these sciences were founded on the belief that "the human body gave rise to signifiers, which systematically led to the signified" (Jordanova 1993, p. 125). If, "in contrast to scientific faith in the transparent body, late eighteenth-century gothic novels often represent the body as an *untrustworthy* source of information about the self" (Wagner 2012, p. 75), then Reeve's class essentialism locates her against the curve of the genre that she envisions her "Gothic story" as a contribution to, and in support of, a scientific outlook that held bodily exteriors to semaphore interior truths. A polite education and a substantial income may, as it does for the Fitz-Owens, simulate nobility, but true status can only—and will always—be indexed by the body. It is with the Lord and the bourgeois as it is with

the citizen and the criminal as it is with the male and the female: the bodily difference separating them is, supposedly, absolute and irreducible.

What seems to be a thoroughgoing essentialism on Reeve's part stands in sharp contrast to the beliefs of one of queer theory's earliest and most influential thinkers. Judith Butler's first book, *Gender Trouble*, made a well-known case for gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being" (Butler 2006, p. 45). Gender for Butler is not reflected in but rather produced by the reiteration of behavioural norms that retroactively give the impression of being the result of an ineffable material substratum that undergirds them (i.e., anatomical "sex"). Butler's second book, *Bodies That Matter*, further specified that this supposedly neutral materiality is not in fact the politically innocent truth of the human body, but rather is always pre-inflected by hegemonic (heterosexist) discourse prior our arrival at it. Consequently, bodies that most materialise the norms of heterosexuality (i.e., cisgendered, fully able ones) are the bodies that are seen to matter most.

Although Reeve's essentialism pertains explicitly to class and not gender, it is easy to see how the basic structure of her somatic differential, where absolute class difference is produced by the presence or absence of a noble heritage, maps onto the structuration of gender in which Butler's work intervenes, where difference is constituted by the having or the insurmountable lacking of a binary value, maleness, which goes under the sign of the phallus. Butler goes to lengths to show that the sign of the phallus is just that: a sigil that enables politically specious privileges to masquerade as the prerogatives of biological reality. Reeve, as we have seen, continually installs the substance of the body at the centre of her plot, using the corporeal legibility of Edmund's class identity to motivate the action, and the stubborn signifying capacity of his parent's corpses to clinch his restoration. Reeve's *non-performative* essentialism seems to be confirmed by a passage in which Edmund confronts his foster mother. Edmund observes of his foster father's disdain towards him that it is uncommon "for a parent to hate his first-born son without his having deserved it. That is true, said Oswald; *it is uncommon, it is unnatural; nay, I am of the opinion it is almost impossible.* I am so convinced of this truth that I believe the man who thus hates and abuses Edmund cannot be his father" (p. 49, my emphasis). Each declarative in the triptych of remarks made by Father Oswald here seems to supersede the one before it, such that what is common hinges on what is physically possible. Certain forms of behaviour ultimately cannot be imagined to proceed from certain kinds of body; nature informs culture. This is an exact reversal of Butler's view, which understands our conception of what is physically possible, what is natural, to be nothing more than the phantasmatic sedimentation of norms that have been frequently cited over time.

5. Two Evil Twins

It is therefore easy to see why *Baron* has been roundly ignored by recent Queer Gothic scholarship. Indeed, we would be hard pressed to construe a text that can only imagine the supernatural (the scourge of the nuclear, patriarchal family in *Otranto*) as functioning to consolidate upper-class male paternalism, as queer in any obvious sense of the word. If we take Sedgwick's famous definition of queer as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick 1993, p. 8), it is easy to see why critics have been more interested in queering works such as Walpole's *Otranto*, with its high-camp villain, and his polymorphously perverse sexuality, its gigantic master's tools, and its self-destructing master's house.

I have noted above how influential the concepts and Foucault-indebted methodologies of the queer theory advocated by Sedgwick and Butler have been for the younger field of trans studies. Susan Stryker pays homage to the fruitful cross-pollination of queer and Transgender Studies in the foreword to the first of two seminal *Transgender Studies*,

where she cites both *Gender Trouble* and *History of Sexuality* in her account of the growth of Transgender Studies during the 1990s. “Transgender phenomena invite Queer Studies[. . .] to take another look at the many ways bodies, identities and desires can be interwoven.” The Butlerian lens through which this second look is taken is affirmed when Stryker explains that a transgender critical theory “takes aim at the modernist epistemology that treats gender merely as a social, linguistic, or subjective representation of an objectively knowable material sex” (Stryker and Whittle 2006, p. 8).

In her introduction to *TransGothic in Literature and Culture*, Jolene Zigarovich deferentially acknowledges that the intention of trans is not to depose queer from its sovereign position in the broad field of gender and sexualities studies. Rather, “Transgender, like queer, functions as an umbrella term that can be capacious and flexible” (Zigarovich 2018, p. 7).⁸ Zigarovich also states that a trans-inflected approach to the Gothic (for which she coins the term “TransGothic”) “acknowledges ‘trans’ as connoting unstable, transient, or in-between, but also offers ‘trans’ as development, creativity, reorganisation and reconstruction” (ibid., p. 4). The first part of this statement does little to suggest how TransGothic will be different from tried-and-tested Queer Gothic methodologies; the second part, rather than moving towards a distinction, reads more like a dynamic rebranding of trans for a 2018 audience, using lexica that feels closer to start-up culture than to a transgender seminar room.

This is a punishing comment to make of a volume that it would be no exaggeration to describe as groundbreaking. *TransGothic* is a spearhead for a small but significant wave in recent Queer Gothic and eighteenth-century scholarship that vocally and unashamedly owns transness as its object and modality. Indeed, the first chapter in the collection, by Nowell Marshall, explicitly exhorts Gothic scholars to go “Beyond [the] Queer Gothic” through an appraisal of the overlooked or occluded transgender aspects of major Gothic novels, such as Lewis’s *The Monk* and William Beckford’s *Vathek and Other Tales*. Marshall coins the term “transtextuality” to admonish “queer readings of texts that marginalise and efface the lived transgender experience at the heart of those texts” by treating cases of transed gender as narrative devices enabling the safe expression of gay desire (Marshall 2018, p. 26). In place of queering, Marshall aims as a nonteleological re-evaluation of characters like Rosario/Matilda and Firouz/Firouzkah that addresses their “transgender subjectivity” on its own terms, rather than as a front for queer male desire. Although Marshall’s chapter offers a needed correction to both scholarship on these texts and to Queer Gothic scholarship more widely, his insistence on recovering “transgender subjectivity” and “transgender experience” limits his transtextual corpus to a very small number of texts featuring characters who explicitly transition away from their assigned gender. In contrast, Zigarovich’s offering of “trans” as a concept that, like the word “queer” (etymologically rooted in a sense of “athwart” or “across”), blurs the boundary between transition and transgression opens our critical lens to a far greater range of objects than transition in the rigid sense of moving from one gender to another does. To some extent this essay—which both makes connections between a strangely gendered *book* and discourses about the gendering of *people* and asks a novel about the embodiment of class identity to speak to contemporary debates about the structure of gender—is indebted to *TransGothic*’s widening of the scope of trans beyond cases of clear-cut, distinctly human gender transition. However, the wholesale conflation of trans with transgression of all, or at least many, kinds may risk a recapitulation of queer methodologies and investments that Marshall warns against.

Zigarovich’s move to valorise a multitude of boundary transgressions as partaking in the same political antinormativity as that enacted by transgender bodies is a rousing thought, but not an original one. Antinormativity is a currency whose value has remained consistently high for the readership of queer theory, situated as it generally is in elite academic institutions that cannot always be said to be bastions of genuine radicality, and as a result where antinormative attitudes and behaviours lend themselves to romanticisation. Statements like Zigarovich’s can come across as playing to the gallery of Queer Studies—a gallery that, for all the purchase it makes on the antinormative, is often, ironically, highly

consensus driven. Among the most perceptive of queer theory's internal auditors is Annamarie Jagose, who attempts to historicise Queer's penchant for the antinormative in a special 2015 issue of *Differences*: "Queer theory's commitment to antinormativity as its signature gesture is legible in part as a strategy for avoiding the fate of those earlier political projects, for revitalizing and making viable a platform for political action and intervention that does not set in motion a series of unintentional exclusions of subjects who might properly expect to find representative recognition in the foundational category—in short, to authorize itself via a series of apparently self-effacing, non-territorial gestures that are always open to the future and hence not vulnerable to being ruled redundant in turn" (Jagose 2015, p. 34).

Seen in this light, queer's attachment to transgression *qua* transgression must be understood as a strategic ploy for alliance building across lines of the lines of difference that had thwarted identity-based political/theoretical movements of the past (the gay- and lesbian-dominated campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s). In other words, antinormativity facilitated a pragmatic *anti*-essentialism in Queer Studies, one tactically similar though inverse to the strategic essentialism of Female Gothic scholarship. Strategically prioritising some attachments over others (antinormative behaviour over gay identity in queer theory's example, Ann Radcliffe over Clara Reeve in the Female Gothic's) allowed these new and disparate fields to consolidate themselves, but this consolidation sacrificed some of the more "disturbing attachments" of transgender scholars. As Cael M. Keegan explains, "[i]n valuing trans phenomena largely when they subvert gender norms, Queer Studies has historically sorted, cited, and disciplined some portions of trans into itself while rejecting others as retrograde or conformist (crossdressing, genderqueer, and androgyny are welcome, transsexuality is not)" (Keegan 2020, p. 391). The centrality of antinormativity has meant, and may continue to mean, the ascendancy of what Jules Gill-Peterson lampoons as "the thou doth protest too much chorus of brave gender warriors who proclaim that they don't ever, under any circumstance, want to pass, and that somehow makes their queerness holier than thou, mortal transsexual woman" (Gill-Peterson 2021). Well-intended, strategically minded gestures of deference towards, or supplementation of, queer theory from scholars working on trans topics such as Stryker's and Zigarovich's thus ironically tend to oust some of trans's longest-standing investments, such as the figure of the transsexual herself, from Stryker's "pangender" umbrella.

Transgender Studies is of course a highly minoritarian field with a very limited catchment of interest; to register its tendency to pander to the needs of a vocally antinormative Queer Studies in order to increase its institutional legitimacy as a discipline is therefore certainly not to condemn trans scholarship. Under the circumstances, however, the language of "development", "creativity", and "reorganisation" cannot help but feel like a surrender to the demands of what Jagose terms "product differentiation" and durational strategy—holding desirable, binary-trouncing transgender aloof from antiquated, bad-faith transsexuality (Jagose 2015, p. 34).

Though he is cited far less frequently than his opponent, Jay Prosser sounded a challenge to the dominance of Butler's model of performativity in gender and sexuality studies with his 1998 book *Second Skins*. Prosser gratefully acknowledges that, by singling out transgender as an exemplar of public gender insubordination, Butler "made it possible to begin articulating the transsexual as a theoretical subject" (Prosser 1998, p. 60). However, he also demonstrates how Butler's denigration of the notion of a materially accessible human body as a bad-faith delusion can have transphobic implications: "There is much about transsexuality that must remain irreconcilable to queer: the specificity of transsexual experience; the importance of the flesh to self; the difference between sex and gender identity; the desire to pass as 'real-ly-gendered' in the world without trouble; perhaps above all[. . .] a particular experience of the body that can't simply transcend (or transubstantiate) the literal" (ibid., p. 59).

Prosser draws on examples from literature, psychology, and photography to show that the liveability of transsexual lives (i.e., lives that depend on material intervention

into the physical structuration of the body in order to become bearable. In other words, lives that are related to but distinct from the—for gender abolitionist thinkers—highly laudable notion of transgender lives as existences that concretely prove the extricability of sex and gender from anatomical arrangement by effectuating MTF or FTM transition *without* surgical or hormonal intervention) has always depended on the casting of trans people's accounts of their own bodily materiality as trustworthy. Such accounts, for the Butler of *Gender Trouble*, can never be more than delusional adherence to the dictates of a heterosexist matrix. Hence Queer Studies may “value trans* studies for its ability to demonstrate gender as performative [i.e., insofar as trans people are able to inhabit the norms of another gender to the one they were born into, and successfully be recognised as being that new gender], but may struggle to hear its specifically gendered or materially embodied claims as *real*” (Keegan 2020, p. 392).

At the root of Prosser's break from Butler is his divergent reading of a particular moment in *The Ego and the Id* when Freud articulates the ego as “not merely a surface entity, but[. . .] the projection of a surface”. Butler's “emphatically occularcentric” interpretation of this statement led her towards “a notion of the body as that which can be seen, the body as visual surface” (Prosser 1998, p. 43). For Butler, there is no question of what gender or sex a person *is* at a deep interior or material level, because our bodies are never known to us except phantasmatically as egoistic projections of a surface. Rather the question is, what gender does one *look like* or *seem to be*? This had the effect of collapsing any meaningful difference between sex and gender, as neither could be anything more than materially groundless extrapolations from the bodily surfaces we encounter. Prosser, by contrast, offers a thoroughly tactile model of embodiment where gender is *felt* rather than seen: “[t]he transsexual doesn't necessarily *look* different differently gendered, but by definition *feels* differently gendered from her or his birth-assigned sex” (p. 43). In Prosser's rereading of Freud, the ego is a result of the feeling one gets from one's body, rather than the body being a phantasmagoria projected by the ego. Prosser's theory of transsexual realness replaces Butler's occularcentrism with an unequivocal affirmation of the trans person's ability to feel their own identity. Trans men are men not because they occupy the discursive norms of maleness correctly but because they feel themselves to be men.

The question of whose reading of Freud is more correct, and which is more politically helpful, remains undecided in the field of transgender studies. While the Prosserian emphasis on trans self-knowability has served as the theoretical grounding for arguments and interventions in trans healthcare, others have suggested that the claim to have privileged and innate knowledge of something as highly mediated and tenuous as gender must be made in bad faith.⁹ Yet perhaps, Prosser's most important intervention was to demonstrate how necessary bad-faith, essentialist accounts (including both naive and unselfconscious, and wilful and self-aware ones) of embodiment are for guaranteeing trans people's comfort and safety, by contextualising transsexuality as a *classed* phenomenon distinct from the wilful gender insubordination by (for example) performance artists and radical professors in relatively safe and supportive academic or artistic environments. Prosser underscores the risk that trans people have historically run—especially given that prostitution has been a disproportionately high source of income for trans people, who, for a variety of reasons concerning legal status and aesthetic expectations, are generally more rebarbative to “normal” employment than their cisgender peers—by failing to pass convincingly. Put simplistically, Butler is interested in the political potential of “girls who *look like* boys and boys who *look like* girls to illustrate gender performativity, whereas Prosser is interested in validating the feelings of trans people for their own sake, thus justifying the wishes of (trans) girls to *look like girls* and (trans) boys to *look like boys*.

Although Prosser has never been in vogue in Queer Studies, a younger generation of outspokenly transsexual scholars has recently advocated for a return to his thought. Andrea Long Chu and Emmet Harsin Drager have lambasted the tendency of Queer Studies to privilege the figure of the transgender person at the price of the transsexual, whose attachment to medically facilitated sex change appears inauthentic and outdated next

to transgender's visible unmooring of gender and sex from bodily matter. Chu would agree with Keegan that Queer Studies' tendency to "understand gender, sexuality, and identity as effects of normative power" can "erode the bases by which trans* studies might legitimately claim gender as felt or innately experienced, thereby replicating the denial of transgender experience also found in stigmatizing medical and political discourses" (Keegan 2020, p. 391). Both Chu and Keegan challenge scholars in the "evil twin" discipline of Transgender Studies to hold Queer Studies to account for nourishment it stole from its intrauterine snack, as well as valorising anew the gristle (i.e., the transsexual) it left behind.

There is a distinct echo of Marshall here, whose chapter in *TransGothic* was published around this time and who also centres Prosser in his critique of Queer Gothic's co-option of transgender subject matter—an appropriation that "show[s] a lack of understanding of key concepts in trans studies and a lack of awareness of trans issues". Queer Gothic scholars tend to fall into the trap of assuming "that cross-gender behaviour[. . .] is queer (as in camp or drag) and somehow not lived transgender experience" (p. 37). However, in his eagerness to right the wrongs of Queer Studies, Marshall devotes little space to considering what transgender subjectivity and transgender experience—key terms that recur throughout his essay and seem to motivate the intervention—look and feel like, beyond being immanent to any instance of gender crossing. Surely trans literary studies, a trans reading, can do more than insisting that trans phenomena be paired with explicitly trans lexica. Beyond acknowledging transgender features of texts using the correct terminology, could we also ask texts to tell us something about the assumptions and desires that structure (trans)gender identification? If a text like *The Monk* can remind us to call gender crossings trans, what can *Baron*, with its zero gender transitions and a protagonist whose body communicates an identity he does not know he has, do—or be made to do—for us?

For Chu, "Transness requires that we understand, *as we never have before*, what it means to be attached to a norm—by desire, by habit, by survival" (Chu and Drager 2019, p. 108). Chu and Drager push back against the case made influentially by Sandy Stone in her 1991 "Posstranssexual Manifesto" for refusing to "go stealth" (i.e., for refusing to pass, by wearing one's transness on one's sleeve, as it were), reminding us that the existential aspirations of most trans people outside of academia are structured more by practical desires (for example, to have breasts, to fit into men's shirts) than by high-theoretical ambitions (for example, to become the site of parodic display that robs compulsory (cis)heterosexuality of its claims to naturalness and originality, as Butler might have it. The sharpness of their insights coupled with the bluntness of their prose strong-arms us into a recognition of the fact that, very often, the conceivability of a trans existence has as its fulcrum the outmoded—and arguably even outright transphobic—fantasy of sexed embodiment, of having one's anatomical appearance correspond to one's felt sex, of being precisely that which Butler thinks one can never be: unproblematically and untransgressively cisgender. Whatever antinormativity is contained by transition is, for Chu and Drager, predicated on eventually reinhabiting a norm.

For Butler, gender is "a norm that can never be fully internalized; 'the internal' is a surface signification, and gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody" (Butler 2006, p. 141). However powerful a norm is, it is also—by the fact of being a norm—the blueprint for its own undoing. As a norm that can explicitly never be fully internalised, gender ironically liberates us from the burden of ever actually fully being one gender or another. As Jagose reminds us, "For all their much bruited-regulatory force, they turn out never to be arrived at but only approached asymptotically" (Jagose 2015, p. 39). From this perspective, queer theory's post-Butler creed of antinormativity is actually based on a misreading of Butler. We would be better to say that neither the Foucauldian Butler nor the resolutely Prosserian Chu is against norms per se; rather Butler is in favour of the failed embodiment of gender norms; Chu conversely is an apologist for the successful inhabitation of them.

Chu's specific citation of "habit" as one of the modalities through which we come to embody a norm finally returns us to that "correctly habited" body of text, *The Old English*

Baron. If on one level the novel's reception history thoroughly justifies Butler's belief in the fallibility of norms (its "correct" habiliment and its clear gendering as "he" by Reeve have continually failed to manifest the desired gender identifications in its readership), on another level the plot of *Baron* supplies us with the fantasy of a totally internalised norm. Although scholars such as Dale Townshend have argued for the gradual *palimpsestic* construction of identities in Gothic, a process whereby "subjects are rendered known and knowable to one another only once they have disclosed the formative events of their personal histories through time" (Townshend 2007, pp. 26–27), this view fails to account for the fact that, in *Baron*, the substratum of Edmund's noble essence is never fully obscured by the behaviours and identities (peasants' son, knight's pageboy) layered on top of it. Edmund embodies the norm of nobility deep beneath the epidermis of the palimpsest, beneath the level even of his skin.

Thus, while Clara Reeve's essentialism is hardly attractive to a twenty-first-century queer-theoretical readership, her highly conservative fantasy of the sheer, unambiguous (and admittedly classed rather than gendered or sexed) embodiment of a core identity is one that has a concrete relevance to the daily lived experience of most trans people. It analogises the fantasy of the pure cis body, a fantasy that for all its theoretical backwardness is nonetheless valid—because it is safe, because it is comfy, because it is simply something people desire, however problematic that desire might be. As Chu says of her own surgical transition, the crux of her desire is not becoming a woman, but rather "the mute simplicity of having *always been* a woman" (Chu 2018a)—to have been cisgendered from the start, to not have needed to be trans in the first place.

Edmund's history is a rare but resounding case of a *right-body* narrative—a stark contrast to the *wrong-body* storyline that trans people have historically been compelled to reproduced in order to access the means to transition medically. From birth, his body is the channel through which his true aristocratic identity is broadcast to the world. Because Edmund is unburdened with a consciousness of his heritage, he does not suffer from any dysphoria arising from the disjuncture between his felt sense of self and the way the world perceives him. Rather, his body can be depended upon to signify his identity to those who are capable of publicly ratifying it, i.e., those who can read it for what it is. That the literal *matter* of embodiment and the matter of legibility are so intertwined in Reeve's novel is another reason why this text is such a fit venue for thinking through contemporary trans-theoretical questions.

Early in the novel, Edmund poignantly states that "words are all my inheritance" (p. 21). We later find out that the early manifestation of bodily signifiers of his class identity (his sickness and delicacy) coincided with the realisation of his innate talent for reading ("[Edmund] grew more fond of reading and less of work" (p. 53)). As I have argued above, such thematizations of reading recall the word's double meaning for trans people, for whom to be read is to be unveiled as trans instead of passing as the gender one is presenting. Prosser emphasises that the principal daily activity of the trans subject is finding ways to render their gender in a "narrative form" that is legible to those they face embodied encounters with (whether these others are clinicians with the power to prescribe hormones or simply passers-by on a street—even in the seemingly innocuous latter instance, passing is a precondition of "passing by" safely), arguing that the trans subject continually "faces the question of how to make the transsexual story readable: a task that entails not simply making the life visible but making it processable" (Prosser 1998, p. 129).

How, considering the especial centrality of habits of reading to both the plot of *Baron* and to transgender scholarship, might we receive the alteration in the novel's title with which I began this essay? In changing the title of her work from "The Champion of Virtue" to "The Old English Baron", Reeve markedly shifts the emphasis from readable object to reader—a curious move, given that the majority of the novel's action revolves around Edmund (i.e., the Champion of Virtue) and not the old, English Baron Fitz-Owen. The change in title seems intended to remind us that the onus is on society, *on readers*, to

align their perception of Edmund with the truth of his body, rather than for Edmund to correct his body to corroborate people's impression of his lowly class origins. There is, then, at least one avenue of approaching into the text that allows us to connect Reeve's essentialist fantasy to one of contemporary Queer and Transgender Studies' more widely accepted tenets: that, ultimately, the biggest problem we have to encounter in our lives and researches is *them* rather than *us*. Whether or not we stake our claims to inhabiting one (or another) gender on a felt sense of material truth, or whether we simply (in)voluntarily fail to embody a phantasmatic norm with no grounding in material reality, the goal is still ultimately to be readable and consequently knowable to others.

The constitutive hunch of this essay is that, because its content is so overtly unqueer, *Baron* may have something to tell us about what exactly a trans—conceptualised in distinction from but never opposition to a queer—methodology might be capable of doing to, with, and for literature. A trans reading can recognise in Edmund a fantasy akin to that of the cisgendered body: a body that visibly and effortlessly corresponds to an innate identity, whose conferral upon him—though it depends on the constative statement “this is my [i.e., a nobleman's] son” rather than the performative “it's a boy”—is a condition of his birth. It can also recognise that, in the same way the fantasy of a pure, self-signifying, and perhaps providentially assisted upper-class body is the fulcrum for Reeve's vision of upper-middle-class empowerment and the coterminous valorisation of upper-middle-class values (polite, civic) and practices (capitalist, colonialist), so the highly normative fantasy of a body that cannot help but read as what it is, is core to the highly non-normative lives of many (but of course not all) trans people.

A trans reading might also steer us towards an appraisal of the fact that even so powerful a signifier as Edmund's body still needs recourse to highly artificial technologies such as duelling, bribery, and the exhumation of corpses to become formally recognised—an ethically fraught enterprise that suggests that even people born in the right bodies (cis people, and also trans people who do not feel the need to medically alter their bodies—a category of person that Prosser seems largely to overlook) still need to do a lot of work (in the latter example, changing their names on passports and ritually “killing” their past selves by obfuscating past photographs. Incidentally, these activities map onto the fraudulent and macabre acts undertaken by Edmund and his entourage—Edmund undergoes half a dozen name changes in the novel) in order for their identities to be read properly. Reeve's thematization of reading can be made to serve as a venue for thinking through problems that are still current in trans phenomenology, insofar as it raises the question of whether the trans subject or the world around the trans subject is responsible for producing the correct “reading”—a question that has implications for the kinds of medical resources trans people are given access to (on the one hand, it can be seen as gender-affirming to argue, as Reeve can be seen to do, that the world is responsible for seeing a trans person's gender the way the trans subject desires it to be seen without obliging the latter to change their body to satisfy the world's expectation of a correspondence between anatomy and gender; on the other, this very argument has been marshalled by insurance providers to deny trans and nonbinary people access to hormonal and surgical medical care). Most importantly, however, and prior to the recuperative twist that the change in title perhaps allows us to make, *The Old English Baron* is a venue for practising and honing a trans reading method that is able and willing to endure bad feelings and attachments that a text might engender, to stay with the bad trouble of essentialist fantasy as well as the good trouble of performativity. It is to remind ourselves that even half-eaten evil twins have complex lessons to impart.

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Notes

- ¹ The phrase is Reeve's own from her preface to the second edition, as it appears in the James Trainer–edited version for Oxford World Classics, 2008.
- ² For a summary of Reeve's reception history, see [Punter \(1980\)](#), p. 54.
- ³ I am indebted to Rebecca Anne Barr for helping me to phrase this.
- ⁴ The fact that eighteenth-century, and some subsequent, readers often conflate Pamela the girl and *Pamela* the book to the point of indistinguishability, to the extent that the book *Pamela* appears and acts in their lives in the same way Pamela appears in the lives of the other characters, is further evidence of this tendency.
- ⁵ A gendered parallel to this, one loaded with bad feeling, might be Germaine Greer's ex post facto humiliation of the "person in flapping draperies" with a copy of *The Female Eunuch* in "its enormous, knuckly, hairy, be-ringed paw" who, in an infamous anecdote, approached her after a talk and whose embodiment of femininity Greer read as an embarrassment (see [Chu 2018b](#)). Though Greer believes the joke to be on the other woman, it is of course actually on her (after all, how often has she failed to clock trans women at talks?), just as the joke would be uncomfortably on the thoroughbred nobility if people were able to successfully impersonate it en masse.
- ⁶ The ongoing emphasis on visual disclosure echoes the aforementioned scopophilia that transness generally meets with; its analogue could be specular technologies for regulating the circulation of transness in the world, such as reveal scenes and before-and-after pics.
- ⁷ A case of right body, right place, right time—emphasising Reeve's departure from the sheer dumb (bad) luck of Theodore in *Otranto*.
- ⁸ Echoes Stryker, "Transgender is [. . .] a 'pangender' umbrella term for an imagined community encompassing transsexuals, drag queens, butches, hermaphrodites, cross-dressers, masculine women, effeminate men, sissies, tomboys, and anybody else willing to be interpolated by the term[.]" ([Stryker and Whittle 2006](#), p. 4).
- ⁹ See, for example, [Gill-Peterson \(2018\)](#) recent work on the necessity of listening to and trusting transgender children's accounts of themselves, or, conversely, Gayle Salamon's phenomenologically inflected counterargument to Prosser in which she argues, "[a] reading of gender that focuses exclusively on the agency of the individual misses [the] entire matrix of power in which gender takes shape" ([Salamon 2010](#), p. 80).

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