Delightful Cannibal Feasts: Literary Consumption in *Melmoth the Wanderer*

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Often recognised as the last gasp of a dying Gothic form, Charles Robert Maturin's fifth and most famous novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), is a complicated maze of interwoven tales. It opens with a frame narrative centring on the eponymous Wanderer's nineteenth-century descendant, John Melmoth. A student at Trinity College Dublin, John travels to his wealthy uncle's Wicklow home to find him dying literally "of a fright".(1) Haunted by his immortal ancestor, the elder Melmoth charges his nephew with the destruction of the sole remaining reminders of the Wanderer – a seventeenth-century portrait and an aged manuscript documenting the Wanderer's temptation of an Englishman named Stanton. The first of many interpolated tales in the novel, the 'Tale of Stanton' follows its hero as he encounters Melmoth first in Spain, then again in Restoration England, and finally in the mental asylum where Stanton's friends have committed him due to his strange fascination with the mysterious Wanderer. Appearing to him amongst the ravings of lunatics with his unspeakable offer, Melmoth promises Stanton deliverance from his inevitable descent into insanity: "Is not your situation very miserable? […] I have the power to deliver you from it". Met with Stanton's continued resistance, Melmoth taunts him with the future that awaits him:

[W]here be your companions, your peaked men of countries, as your favourite Shakespeare has it? You must be content with the spider and the rat, to crawl and scratch round your flock-bed! I have known prisoners in the Bastile [sic] to feed them for companions, – why don't you begin your task? I have known a spider to descend at the tap of a finger, and a rat to come forth when the daily meal was brought, to share it with his fellow-prisoner! – How delightful to have vermin for your guests! Aye, and when the feast fails them, they make a meal of their entertainer! – You shudder – Are you, then, the first prisoner who has been devoured alive by the vermin that infested his cell? – Delightful banquet, not 'where you eat, but where you are eaten!'(2)

Ultimately, Stanton denounces Melmoth's temptations, secures his own liberation, and avoids the gruesome fate Melmoth has predicted for him. The imagery of perverted gastronomic consumption, however, continues to emerge throughout the novel. In particular, depictions of cannibalism, both literal and metaphoric, prove pervasive. While such imagery is hardly surprising in a Gothic text, in *Melmoth* it arguably takes on an added dimension associated with Maturin's understanding of authorship as an essentially cannibalistic undertaking. Writing within a market economy and ostensibly driven by financial need, Maturin clearly saw himself as producing commodities to be consumed by readers and critics. Objects of consumption, Maturin's novels bow to the demands of the audience, whether or not these sit well with the author's aesthetic tastes and literary aspirations. As Maturin wrote in his preface to *The Wild Irish Boy* (1808), for instance, the "hope of being read" compelled him to cater to the public demand for illustrations of fashionable high society even if that meant "sacrific[ing] his inclination and habits".(3) Maturin's continuingly disastrous attempts at literary success, however, demonstrate that such sacrifice was very rarely rewarded. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Maturin often evinces an ambivalence about authorship largely proceeding from his bitterness towards the thankless demands and constraints of literary consumption. While Maturin ultimately succumbs to the exigencies of the literary marketplace in many of his texts, his discomfort with the commodification of his literature is clear.

In *Melmoth*, this unease manifests itself most obviously in the frequent depiction of cannibalistic activity. Like Maturin's texts themselves, the characters in *Melmoth* are uniformly transformed into commodities

to be consumed by others. Melmoth himself, with his desire for a replacement, a sacrificial victim to assume the onus of his long-ago crime, essentially seeks to cannibalise those he tempts. For him, these helpless individuals are simply commodities to be bought, sold, and traded for his benefit. That he finally fails in his satanic mission suggests Maturin's underlying anxiety about his works as cultural commodities.(4) Similarly, the text's dominant imagery of hunger, starvation, and cannibalism attests to Maturin's concerns as a clergyman-author torn between his apparently irreconcilable professions. Further, it emphasises Maturin's central authorial conflict between his fundamental desire to achieve literary fame as well as financial security and his resentment towards an audience that scorned him even as he pandered to its debased taste for literature.

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Born in Dublin in 1780, Maturin cherished literary, or at least dramatic, ambitions from an early age. A voracious reader and amateur actor throughout his childhood, the young Maturin intended to continue his dramatic career into adulthood. His family's increasingly impoverished condition, however, forced him to give up his dreams of acting to undertake a more financially secure career in the Church of Ireland. Ordained in 1803, shortly after his marriage to the celebrated singer and socialite, Henrietta Kingsbury, Maturin first served in Loughrea, County Galway, but, finding himself unsuited to small town life, very soon returned to Dublin, where he served as curate of St. Peter's parish in Aungier St. This was a position he would maintain, without further preferment, until his death in 1824. Although Maturin was apparently "universally loved" by his parishioners, it seems he was ill-suited to clerical life, or at least, "the necessary restrictions" it placed on activities such as authorship.(5) Subjected to elevated standards of decorum and morality, clerical authors in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries were expected to set an example and demonstrate "the refinements of a correct taste".(6) As the case of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) had proven, the creation of literature containing levity, not to mention lewdness and suggestiveness, offended propriety and transgressed the demands of a clergyman's religious profession.

Already viewed with suspicion by his religious superiors for, in Maturin's terms, his "high Calvinist" beliefs,(7) but also, one suspects, his noted "affectation" and "eccentricity",(8) Maturin wisely chose to publish his first three novels under a pseudonym – the "vulgar and *merely* Irish sounding" Dennis Jasper Murphy.(9) With the successful production of his Gothic melodrama, *Bertram; or the Castle of St. Aldobrand* (1816), however, Maturin was forced to reveal his authorship and accordingly suffered the consequences. Although he did not actually lose his position at St. Peter's as one reviewer erroneously believed,(10) he did receive the censure of his religious superiors and literary critics, both of whom agreed on the impropriety and indecency of Maturin's works. In response to the repeated accusations of clerical misconduct directed at him, Maturin vehemently, if somewhat insincerely, maintained that financial need was his only motivation. In a letter to his friend and mentor, Sir Walter Scott, for example, Maturin declared that he would be happy to publish a book of sermons "if it was only to prove I can do something beside write Romances, and *never did that voluntarily*".(11) By the time of *Melmoth*'s publication, this claim of authorship by necessity had become a kind of mantra, despite Maturin's evident desire for fame as well as profit. Tellingly, *Melmoth*'s preface contains an apology of sorts for Maturin's repeated literary endeavours:

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 the choice?(12)

Obliged by a profession that failed to provide adequately for his family and his needs, Maturin tells us, he simply had to write. Yet, while Maturin presented himself as the victim of an unjust system and 'jealous' religious superiors,(13) he undoubtedly caused much of his own distress precisely through his continued authorship of 'distasteful' and 'indecorous' novels and plays. As J.W. Croker wrote in his vitriolic attack on *Melmoth*:

We, and all the world except Mr. Maturin, can see very good reasons why his profession will not afford him the *means of subsistence* – he designates himself as the *author of Bertram*, a play; we hear of his sermons only as the foundation of an *unseemly* novel, and then, forsooth, this labourer for the stage and the circulating library, wonders that the Church does not provide subsistence for him!(14)

Emphasising the role Maturin's continued authorship played in his failure to progress in the Church, Croker argued that Maturin himself was to blame for his financial insolvency. Despite seeing himself as leading "an unoffending life",(15) Maturin clearly placed himself at odds with the Church with his continued authorship. As a result, instead of "assiduous[ly] cultivat[ing] […] some other profession" in addition to authorship, as Scott had advised, Maturin came to rely almost exclusively on the returns of his novels and plays. Unfortunately, true to Scott's predictions, literature ultimately proved "a wretched crutch".(16) In fact, with the notable exceptions of *Bertram*, which was performed at Drury Lane in May 1816 with overwhelming success, and *Melmoth*, Maturin's works were generally considered failures, critically and financially. Of this, Maturin was all too aware. As he lamented in the preface to his fourth novel, *Women; or Pour et Contre* (1818), "none of [… my previous works] arrived at a second edition; nor could I dispose of the copyright of any but of the 'Milesian', which was sold to Colburn for 80£ in the year 1811".(17)

Faced with such failure, Maturin must have wondered if the professional sacrifices he had made were worth it. Clearly, he resented a reading public that refused to award him the accolades and attending monetary returns he felt he deserved. Yet, he also realised how dependent he was on these readers who held so much power over him. Seeking to 'dispose' of his failed novels – distasteful objects that had proven ineffective as commodities – Maturin signaled his keen awareness of this dependence. The most important readers, of course, were the critics, a majority of whom evidently sided with the religious hierarchy and generally dismissed Maturin as a poor author. Unsurprisingly, Maturin's ire was very often directed towards critics such as Croker. In the 'Dedication' to his third novel, *The Milesian Chief* (1812), for instance, Maturin first bitterly lamented the negative reviews his previous two novels had received, and then disparaged the critics who had so roundly castigated him. They informed him, Maturin wrote, that he was "a bad writer" but refused to say "why, or how, or in what manner [he] was to become better". In so doing, they "graciously" left to Maturin the matter of his improvement as a novelist.(18) The sarcasm evident in Maturin's comments poignantly reveals his resentment towards his critics, an animosity that would feed into an intense desire to resist his subordination to critics and the demands of the literary marketplace. Even if he was "a disappointed Author", as he wrote shortly after the publication of *The Milesian Chief*, this was due less to his own authorial skills and more to the debased tastes of readers and critics: "as to my talents (if I possess any) there is no excitement, no literary impulse in this Country", Maturin explained to Scott, "my most intimate acquaintances scarcely know that I have written, and they care as little as they know".(19)

The fact is, however, Maturin continued to write. That he did so, despite his evident disdain for his readers and critics as well as his persistent lack of returns, suggests his firm belief in the literary talents he so self-effacingly refers to in his letter to Scott. It further emphasises what Regina B. Oost has identified as the "simultaneous need to perform and urge to resist" characterising Maturin's literary career. As Oost persuasively argues, Maturin's predominant feeling towards authorship proves to be an "ambivalence born of his desire for both money and social respectability, and of his knowledge that audiences of his day were not likely to bestow both upon clergymen who wrote Gothic romance".(20) In *Melmoth*, Oost contends, Maturin's central ambivalence about authorship emerges in authorial characters such as Biddy Brannigan – the "withered Sybil" who tells John Melmoth the story of his ancestor – and the "stranger" who narrates the 'Tale of Guzman's Family',(21) who "simultaneously perform for and resist their audience". Like Maturin himself, these characters are driven by a consciousness of their economic dependence on their audiences, but are nevertheless determined to defy the consumers who hold so much power over them.(22) What's more, Oost maintains, *Melmoth*'s intricate structure itself attests to Maturin's underlying desire to perform and resist. The seemingly endless multiplication of narratives and insistent ambiguity about *Melmoth* evince an authorial "strategy of resistance" involving the simultaneous engagement with and frustration of readers' expectations. As familiar with the typical conventions of the Gothic novel as his readers were, Maturin knew what they would have expected with *Melmoth*. But, rather than fulfill these expectations, Maturin deliberately frustrates them. Oost therefore proposes that a probable reason for the text's complex and oftentimes bemusing narrative is Maturin's "determination to resist as much as possible the expectations of an audience from whom he needs money, yet whom he knows will stigmatize [sic] him".(23)

While Oost's arguments about the authorial figures in *Melmoth* are persuasive, her conclusions about the deliberate nature of the text's structure require some caution. By insisting that *Melmoth*'s peculiarly disrupted and disruptive narrative is intentional, Oost ignores the circumstances in which the novel was written, just as many critics before and after her have done. In fact, as Sharon Ragaz has recently demonstrated, Maturin's intentions for the final structure of his novel were vague and unclear at the best of times. First proposed in April 1818, *Melmoth* was originally envisaged as a four-volume series of tales to be published serially in the *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany* before being issued in volume form. This serialisation, however, was eventually aborted in the course of what proved to be a "precarious, protracted and difficult" composition and publication process.(24) Plagued with compositional difficulties, Maturin's conceptualisation of his work remained hazy from beginning to end. Tellingly, as late as September 1819, Maturin had yet to provide a title for his novel, attesting to his continued confusion and lack of clarity about his own text.

In the end, Maturin's publisher, Archibald Constable, supplied his own title – 'Melmoth' – for what he understood as the first tale of the series, but Maturin's copy increasingly failed to organise itself according to ordered tales of a similar length. Faced with short pieces of copy sent to him irregularly and haphazardly, Constable necessarily pieced everything together as best he could. As a result, while he may not have "intervened directly with suggestions about the conduct of the narrative", as Ragaz suggests, Constable certainly had a considerable hand in the final published version of *Melmoth*.(25) In fact, the structure of the finished novel might be seen to derive from the work Constable and his printer, John Pillan, undertook to amalgamate the fragments of manuscript sent by a geographically distant author without a clear understanding of his intention for the work. Maturin himself would only have proofed small sections at a time, meaning that he never actually saw a final version of his novel before it was published. As a result, any effort he could make "to regain control" of his text or "to identify an overall design according to Constable's wishes" would have been necessarily abortive.(26) While this

publication history does not necessarily preclude critical analysis and interpretation of *Melmoth*'s structure, it does recommend a certain hesitation.

If, however, we might doubt that the novel's entire structure is devoted to Maturin's 'strategy of resistance' as Oost claims, *Melmoth*'s strange conclusion certainly deserves attention. Returning to Ireland after his various unsuccessful attempts to secure a replacement, Melmoth promises John a full disclosure of his mysterious existence. Before he can do so, however, he disappears, apparently, but never unequivocally, condemned to final damnation. Left only with "the last trace of the Wanderer"(27) – a handkerchief he had worn around his neck – the reader remains fundamentally confused and bewildered. For over five hundred pages, the novel's dauntingly elaborate narrative structure has undermined any sense of clear comprehension. In the last two pages, with an explanation both desired and expected, it finally denies that satisfaction, insisting instead on continued ambivalence. Unlike the typical Radcliffean Gothic, to which Maturin directly refers in his preface, or even Lewisean Gothic, also alluded to throughout the text, *Melmoth* refuses explanations, denying closure. Although the reason behind *Melmoth*'s unsatisfactory inconclusiveness may well owe something to Maturin's disdain for and resistance to his reader, as Oost claims, a more probable, if mundane, answer lies in Maturin's understanding of the potential financial gains to be made from a never-ending series of tales. From the very beginning, indeed, it seems that Maturin was planning *Melmoth*'s sequel. Even as he struggled to complete the smallest portions of script requested by Constable, in fact, Maturin continued to propose extensions and continuations of his as yet unfinished, and indeed, barely begun, novel. By early 1820, when Maturin was still struggling to complete his novel and Constable's patience was wearing dangerously thin, the publisher was forced to send an angry reply to Maturin's request for five volumes rather than the agreed-upon four: "[T]he book *will not do in any way in five Volumes* – we have more than once declined to bring out *five volumes* by the Author of Wavereley! even with two Tales – the fact is – it is too much and will not sell".(28) Thoroughly disappointed with this rejection as with Constable's later refusal to take on a second *Melmoth* ostensibly because of "his Engagements with the Author of 'Waverley'", Maturin complained bitterly and pointedly to Scott: "Who is this author who was born for the enrichment of booksellers, and the ruin of his humble contemporaries? […] I wish this great writer could [be] prevailed on to say to me […] there is room enough in the world for us both". Possibly already aware of Scott's secret authorship, Maturin implores Scott (as if he had the power), to allow him to earn his bread. Even fools and knaves, he writes, "must eat, and truly my wishes are not ambitious of more".(29)

However disingenuous, Maturin's comments to Scott are intriguing, if only because of their illustration of a starving author desperate to earn his living. Throughout his correspondence with Scott, Maturin rather melodramatically relies on such imagery to describe his impoverished situation. In a letter written in February 1813, for instance, Maturin asserts his desire to avoid "eat[ing] the Bread of idleness" and his willingness to undertake any "humble and laborious" situation necessary in order to survive.(30) Later, specifically constructing his literary works as commodities, Maturin claims not to feel "the vanity of authorship" because

the possible profit of any thing I undertake is the only object in my calculations, and I have been so long a stranger to commendation or notice, that I begin to be indifferent about them – like the Character in one of Lillo's plays who after trying to feed his mind with the lofty morality of some heathen author, gives the Book to his wife with the emphatic words 'take it and buy us Bread'.(31)

Despite this apparent indifference towards critical opinion, however, Maturin clearly felt the effect of his unpopularity: "[W]ill it not shock *you* to hear, what none of my *countrymen* care about, that the only real evil of life is coming fast upon me – horrid actual want is staring me in the Face […] is it not a shame to my Country that I should be left to starve[?]"(32) Written at a time during which Maturin's literary activity was slow, this letter evinces its author's increasing desperation with his financial situation, as well as his bitter disdain for a society that so little regarded him. 'Left to starve' by his countrymen, Maturin comes to fear "the Hour in which the Heart of Man is tried above any other, the Hour in which your children ask you for Food, and you have no answer".(33) Shortly after *Melmoth*'s publication, Maturin would again turn to an image of starvation to describe his situation: "My circumstances are these – I am to receive £500 for my next romance which will be published in spring, but in the interval I and my family are – almost starving –". Requesting money to save his family "from actual want of food", Maturin explains, "hope will not feed me".(34)

The plaintive tone of Maturin's letters to Scott, although sometimes grating in its histrionic excess, poignantly emerges in *Melmoth* in the words of another storyteller – the stranger narrating the 'Tale of Guzman's Family'. Interrupting his story of the almost starvation of a musician and his family, the stranger asks,

Is all the energy of intellect, and all the enthusiasm of feeling, to be expended in contrivances how to meet or shift off the petty but torturing pangs of hourly necessity? Is the fire caught from heaven to be employed in lighting a faggot to keep the cold from the numbed and wasted fingers of poverty[?] Pardon this digression, Senhor […] but *I had a painful feeling, that forced me to make it*.(35)

An author "preparing for the press a collection of facts relative to that person [Melmoth]", the stranger laments the fact that his talents have gone to waste in the pursuit of mere subsistence. Much like Maturin himself, the stranger understands himself unappreciated and scorned by an audience ignorant of and indifferent towards his skills. The story he narrates is apparently taken directly from the book he has written but which has been rejected for publication because "the government, in its wisdom, thinks [it] not fit to be perused by the eyes of Catholics, or circulated among a Christian community".(36) Condemned by the ruling religious system – Catholicism not Protestantism in this case – the stranger is understood as equally immoral and indecorous as Maturin was.

These similarities between Maturin and his text's internal narrator are striking, as are those between the tales they tell. As Oost has observed, just as Maturin's frame narrative centres on a young man dependent on an extremely wealthy but also greedy uncle for his future subsistence, so too do the Walberg family rely on their Uncle Guzman for financial security and eventual financial independence. Given this narrative mirroring, Oost concludes that "the interior Walberg story appears to be a miniature version of the novel as a whole". This is because the 'Tale of Guzman's Family' "thematically duplicate[s]" *Melmoth*'s frame narrative, but also because it "recreates the circumstances under which the novel is produced: both the novel and the embedded Walberg tale are texts created by men facing financial difficulty".(37) Such parallelism, however, extends further than the facts of each text's composition to their actual content. Indeed, the situation in which the patriarch of the Walberg family finds himself mirrors that of both the stranger narrating his tale and Maturin himself. Married quite young to his Catholic wife, Ines, the Protestant Walberg takes her to Germany from her native Spain after her wealthy brother, Guzman, disinherits her over her ill-advised marriage. A gifted musician, with apparently "highly appreciated" talents, Walberg nevertheless lives "with the utmost frugality" as he labours daily to provide his family with mere "subsistence".(38) Suddenly, however, the Walbergs are recalled to Spain by an

ailing and conscience-stricken Guzman, who establishes them in considerable wealth and luxury. He even revises his will so that his considerable wealth will go to his sister and her children, rather than to the Catholic Church, upon his death. But, when he dies, the new will is hidden by Church authorities, and the Walberg family is left destitute. All too aware of the hardship that awaits his family, Walberg is inconsolable, tortured by "the thought that the hands that clasp ours so fondly cannot earn for us or themselves the means of another meal, – that the lips that are pressed to ours so warmly, may the next ask us for bread, and – ask in vain!"(39)

Mirroring Maturin's image of his children begging him for food, Walberg's depiction of his family demanding bread which he cannot provide emphasises the similarities between Maturin and his fictional character. What's more, this parallel is continued throughout the Walberg story. As his situation becomes increasingly desperate, for instance, Walberg decides to "offer his talents as a musical teacher"(40), much as Maturin established himself as a tutor for young students attending Trinity College Dublin. Walberg's lack of Spanish, however, results in his inability to find work as a tutor, an occupation that was, as Maturin knew too well, inconsistent at best.(41) In these circumstances, Walberg laments the "subservience of [his] talent to necessity, [when] all its generous enthusiasm [is] lost, and only its possible utility remembered or valued".(42) Again echoing Maturin's own sentiments as expressed to Scott – 'the possible profit of anything I undertake is the only object in my calculations' – Walberg ably voices Maturin's representation of his authorship as both a scorned talent degraded by its pandering to the corrupt tastes of its audience and simply a tool for financial gain. Understanding their talents and, in Maturin's case, his novels, as mere commodities, both Walberg and his author see themselves as selling themselves for bread.

The pieces of himself that Maturin sells are his books, but for Walberg they are literally his body and, at least indirectly, those of his children. Desperate for food, Walberg's children contribute to the daily effort to secure their next meal. For Walberg's daughter, this involves near-prostitution, but, where she is finally unable to stomach marketing herself, Walberg's eldest son, Everhard, is more successful. Soon after he and his family begin to face the very real possibility of starvation, Everhard returns home "with an unexpected supply of provisions". Refusing to explain how he has obtained these provisions, Everhard exhorts his family to partake in the "manna-meal" he has provided, while he stands by "look[ing] exhausted and dreadfully pale". Soon after, Walberg and his wife find an unconscious Everhard bleeding profusely from the "opened veins" of both his arms. Described by Ines as resembling "[a] St. Bartholomew flayed […] a St Laurence, broiled on a gridiron", Everhard is imaged as a human sacrifice but also, more poignantly, as a martyr killed in a most cannibalistic manner. As he was being 'broiled' to death, St. Laurence reportedly enraged his persecutors by directing them to turn him over for even roasting. Allegedly refusing to relinquish the Church's material wealth to his tormentors, Laurence surrenders himself instead, and, in the process, transforms himself into a commercial product, a mere slab of meat. Similarly, in the 'Tale of Guzman's Family', Everhard voluntarily offers himself as an expendable commodity to provide for his family. Selling his blood to the local "barber-surgeon",(43) Everhard literally barters his body for food.

Although not quite as spectacularly or as successfully as his son, Walberg too contemplates selling himself for food to feed his family. Visited frequently by Melmoth, the "enemy of man", Walberg finds himself sorely tempted by the offer placed before him. As he explains to Ines, "Want and misery are not naturally fertile in the product of imagination, – they grasp at realities too closely. No man, who wants a meal, conceives that a banquet is spread before him, and that the tempter invites him to sit down and eat at his ease". Desperate for the 'banquet' presented by Melmoth, Walberg seriously considers selling his

eternal soul. Ultimately, of course, Walberg refuses Melmoth's offer, but not before he has overheard Everhard's "horrible secret" and kept quiet, or before he has viciously attacked his elderly father for eating but not earning. Eventually restored to wealth and plenty when Guzman's real will is discovered, Walberg nevertheless continues to remember with horror "the hour of his adversity". Although he and his family rest secure in their newfound "wealth" and "importance", the memory of starvation and the extremes it drove him to continue to haunt Walberg.(44)

In this preoccupation with hunger, need, and starvation, Walberg is not alone. Instead, a concern with food and the ability to obtain it runs throughout *Melmoth*, thematically replicating itself in many of the novel's other embedded tales. Even where characters appear unworried about the provenance of their next meal, as with Stanton, there is a striking reliance on the imagery of food, starvation, and, in extreme instances, cannibalism. Alonzo Monçada, for instance, the Spanish man who narrates to John Melmoth most of the novel's many embedded tales, describes mealtimes in the monastery in which he was unjustly confined as hours in which the monks "banquet on the little scandal of the convent" as they "swallow their meal". Whilst they feed on the miseries of others – "Who was late at prayers? Who is to undergo penance?" – Monçada receives his punishment for desiring escape: "food, which famine itself would have shrunk from".(45) Later, having entrusted himself into the care of a parricide promising to help him escape, Monçada listens to him as he narrates a story of almost inconceivable horror: a young man forced to enter the monastery under extreme duress soon developed an oddly intense relationship with a novice who had arrived at the monastery shortly after he had. When the two are discovered embracing and the novice's identity is revealed as the young man's disguised female lover, the Superior decided to punish the pair by allowing them to believe they can escape. Assisting with the Superior's evil plans, the parricide guided the lovers through the monastery's subterranean passages, but, instead of securing their release, trapped them in a small underground chamber. As he sat outside the barred door, the parricide waited and listened until he finally heard "the shriek of the wretched female, – her lover, in the agony of hunger, had fastened his teeth in her shoulder; – that bosom on which he had so often luxuriated, became a meal to him now". Laughing at their fate, the parricide explains his contempt:

One hour of hunger undeceived them. A trivial and ordinary want, whose claims at another time they would have regarded as a vulgar interruption of their spiritualised intercourse, not only, by its natural operation, sundered it for ever, but, before it ceased, converted that intercourse into a source of torment and hostility inconceivable, except among cannibals.

Driven by "the rabid despair of famine", the young lovers become nothing more than brutish cannibals.(46)

Such imagery is clearly linked to Maturin's fear of Catholicism and its apparently cannabilistic beliefs and practices. Although accused of the basest savagery, the young lovers are actually victims of a religion in which their love is seen as deviant, akin to "the horrible loves of the baboons and the Hottentot women, at the Cape of Good Hope" or the "unnatural and ineffable union[s]" between South American snakes and their human victims. Much to the parricide's chagrin, however, the two never actually commit the crime of which they are accused. In fact, the only visible sign of the pair's apparent savagery is "a slight scar" on the young woman's shoulder – hardly evidence of cannibalism at all.(47) Accused of a cannibalism they have not committed, the young lovers essentially reverse the accusation. The literal cannibalism they supposedly engage in becomes the metaphoric cannibalism of the Catholic Church.(48) Through these young lovers, *Melmoth* suggests that the savagery lies not with the couple but with a Church that had become a monstrous and unnatural entity. Something similar might be said about the 'Tale of Guzman's

Family'. Through its depiction of cannibalism, Walberg's story offers a searing commentary on the exploitative social and commercial relations by which the Catholic Church maintains its social dominance at the expense of the impoverished Walberg family. Such is the Church's power that the Walbergs are immediately aware that "a change of their heretical opinions" would be the only way to succeed in Spain. Guzman's death bears this truth out; despite "the ablest advocates" and proof of "undue influence, of imposition, and of terror being exercised on the mind of the testator", Walberg and his family are left with nothing.(49) This failure has everything to do with religious politics: "The chance of a heretic stranger, against the interests of churchmen in Spain, may be calculated by the most shallow capacity".(50) In the wake of this decision, the Walbergs become nothing more than heretical social climbers; those they appeal to refuse assistance out of jealousy for the "former splendour" in which Guzman had established them before his death. Even with their wealth restored upon the discovery of Guzman's true will, the Walbergs must return to Germany before they can enjoy "prosperous felicity".(51)

Such scenes are evidence of the anti-Catholicism both characteristic of the Gothic as a form and apparent in Maturin's life and works. Yet, as Robert Miles has recently argued, understanding *Melmoth* as "the high-water mark of Gothic anti-Catholicism and Europhobia" may do injustice to Maturin's imagery and its many layers of meaning.(52) The figure of "[t]he good and friendly priest", for instance, who assists the Walbergs despite their heretical tendencies, negates a simplistic equation of Catholicism and terrible depravation.(53) Nevertheless, Maturin's severity towards the Catholic faith should not be ignored. In his construction, it is a system of belief founded upon the idea of displaced penance: one person's sins are forgiven because of another person's sacrifice. It is a religion, as Monçada says, "which makes our aggravating the sufferings of others our mediator with […] God".(54) Monçada's own mother falls victim to these beliefs, sacrificing her son to the Church in exchange for her perceived sin – pregnancy out of wedlock. Similarly, the parricide who leads Monçada out of the monastery only to betray him firmly believes in his ability to excuse himself in the eyes of God through the deeds of others: "Every offender may purchase his immunity, by consenting to become the executioner of the offender whom he betrays and denounces".(55) In this way, *Melmoth* presents Catholicism as schooling its believers in essentially cannibalistic behaviour.

While the Church may attempt to displace such behaviour onto its sinful adherents, as suggested by the parricide's tale, it is seen to partake equally in these monstrous cannibalistic activities. In keeping with an implicit Protestant understanding of transubstantiation as fundamentally cannibalistic(56), Maturin frequently describes the Church and its authorities engaged in metaphoric, if not literal, flesh-eating. The Inquisition, for example, emerges in *Melmoth* as a program directly aimed at the maintenance of the Church's power through the sacrifice and consumption of its believers. Imprisoned for his questioning of Church authority, Monçada only barely escapes becoming a sacrificial victim and martyr to the Church's demand for obedience and mute compliance. Elsewhere in the novel, the terrors of the Inquisition become an effective check on apparent questioning of Church authority. In the 'Tale of the Indians', for instance, Don Fernan is frightened out of resistance to his family's confessor, Father Jose, by the suggestion of the Inquisition, "Mark me, I will use but one unanswerable argument […] The Inquisition at Goa knows the truth of what I have asserted, and who will dare deny it now?" Terrified by this prospect, Don Fernan's mother urges her son, "believe what the reverend Father has told you". Don Fernan, in turn, proclaims, "I am believing as fast as I can".(57)

Forcing compliance at the threat of torture and death, the Catholic Church in *Melmoth* is never content simply to feed off the souls of believers. Instead, Maturin suggests, it demands literal flesh and blood sacrifice. Such anti-Catholicism is striking and may be linked to the "ontological insecurity" Maturin

arguably felt as an Irish Anglican clergyman towards Ireland's Catholic population.(58) What interests me here, however, is the text's juxtaposition of the Catholic Church's cannibalistic behaviour with society's inhumanity in general. The greedy consumption and literal power-hungriness of the Catholic Church and its authorities is conspicuously compared to Maturin's understanding of a wider social callousness. When Immalee, a young and innocent castaway discovered on an isolated island off the coast of India, expresses horror "at the mention of animal food" just as "the most delicate European would at the mention of a cannibal feast", Melmoth offers a prolonged invective against the society from which Immalee has been such a stranger. Sympathising with her distaste for eating meat, Melmoth explains that "Some […] have a taste by no means so sophisticated". Yet, while these disparaged people happily eat the animals around them, in so doing, they actually aggravate the suffering of poorer, less fortunate members of society. Far better, Melmoth suggests, that the fortunate few, rather than eat pork and beef, actually eat the impoverished multitudes, "as human life is always miserable, and animal life never so, (except from elementary causes)". Melmoth therefore recommends cannibalism as "the most humane and salutary way of at once gratifying the appetite, and diminishing the mass of human suffering". He further observes, however, that notwithstanding the irrefutable logic and humanity of such a course of action, the wealthy "pique" themselves on being cruel, insisting on eating animal flesh and thereby "leav[ing] thousands of human beings yearly to perish by hunger and grief".(59)

Melmoth's description of cannibalism as an acceptable and welcome means of dealing with poverty and surplus population undoubtedly owes much to Jonathan Swift's similar recommendation in *A Modest Proposa*l (1729). Famously advocating the use of poor Irish children as food for "*Persons of Quality and Fortune*, through the Kingdom",(60) Swift's satire transformed the human body into "an object that, purified through the process of commodification, may be consumed acceptably as food".(61) It did so arguably in an attempt to suggest, as Jarlath Killeen has maintained, that the destitute poor offered for consumption "ha[d] [themselves] *surrendered* to starvation".(62) In this way, they had become victims of their own vices. In contrast, Maturin's imagery depicts the poor as willing participants in an activity presented as both necessitated and ultimately prevented by the rich.(63) Dwelling on the idea of victimisation, Maturin's illustration of society's "unequal division of the means of existence" contrasts the "industrious" poor with the idle wealthy. Immersed in "the wild and wanton excess of superfluous and extravagant splendour"(64), the fortunate disdain, scorn, and most importantly, ignore the poor and their plight. As a result, society's unfortunates are left 'to perish by hunger and grief' because of the selfishness and greed of the rich. Maturin's poor, therefore, are the casualties of an unjust society – condemned to a terrible life of want, despite their best efforts, with no possible egress simply because of the disregard of those around them.

That Maturin understood himself as one of these injured poor is clear both from his correspondence and his representation of himself in his texts. Given his understanding of himself and his place in society, it seems very likely Maturin was thinking of himself when he wrote of "the industrious, the ingenious, and the imaginative" being condemned to starve "while bloated mediocrity pants from excess".(65) At the very least, his depiction of authorial figures in *Melmoth* certainly finds inspiration in his own situation. In particular, the stranger who narrates the 'Tale of Guzman's Family' aptly encapsulates Maturin's understanding of his social standing. Shortly after finishing his tale, the stranger mysteriously dies, despite having promised a continuation of his tales. Although circumstances are suspicious, murder is immediately dismissed by the authorities because the stranger is counted only as "a writer, and a man of no importance in public or private life". The stranger's ignominious death highlights the derision and contempt encountered by authors and artists such as the stranger, Walberg, and Maturin himself. Combined with Melmoth's angry criticism of society, such representations of authorship satirically

suggest that it would have been better for society literally to eat authors rather than simply let them die from starvation and want. More practically, however, *Melmoth* proposes that readers and critics treat leniently and liberally with texts written by diligent authors driven by need. Rather than condemn their works "to moulder in the libraries of the curious […] scorned even by those who exhaust sums on their collection", readers could literally save authors such as Maturin from starvation through the consumption of their texts.(66) In a sense, then, despite his evident disdain for his readers and his fundamental ambivalence about authorship, Maturin continued to invite, and indeed, plead for his readers' cannibalistic consumption of his texts.

In this light, Melmoth's prediction for his eventual fate is especially telling. Likening his destiny to that of "Don Juan […] as he is represented in the real horrors of his destiny by the Spanish writer", Melmoth pictures himself as the guest of honour at "a feast". Here, Melmoth is to be confronted by "the spirits of those whom he has wronged and murdered, uprisen from their charnel, and swathed in shrouds […] call[ing] on him in hollow sounds to pledge them in goblets of blood".(67) Condemned to literal starvation due to the derision and contempt of his audience, Maturin suggests that his demanding but unrewarding readers face a similar fate to Melmoth: to be haunted by the authors they have 'wronged and murdered' by unjust condescension and ridicule. Maturin thus subtly registers his defiance of readers, who, when presented with the delightful feasts that were his works, refused to dine, thereby condemning him 'to perish by hunger and grief'.

1. Charles Robert Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, ed. Douglas Grant, introd. Chris Baldick (1820; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 18.
2. Ibid. 54, 55.
3. Charles Robert Maturin, *The Wild Irish Boy*, introd. Robert Lee Wolff, 3 vols. (1808; New York: Garland, 1979) 1:xi, x.
4. Ostensibly, Melmoth's failure is meant to prove that, as Maturin had argued in one of his sermons, no human being would ever "resign the hope of his salvation […] were the enemy of mankind to traverse it with the offer". Of course, Melmoth himself is a glaring contradiction to these terms, forcing us to look elsewhere for meaning; Maturin, *Melmoth* 5. For the sermon from which this argument is plainly taken, see Charles Robert Maturin, Sermons (London: Archibald Constable, 1819) 35-36.
5. 'Memoranda of Maturin', *Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine* 3 (1846): 130, 127.
6. 'Obituary of Charles Robert Maturin', *The Gentleman's Magazine* 95 (1825): 84.
7. Letter from Maturin to Scott, 11 January 1813, 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, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1937)10.
8. 'Obituary' 84.
9. 'Maturin', *Dublin and London Magazine* 2 (1826): 248.
10. 'Review of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, by Charles Robert Maturin', *Monthly Review*, 2nd ser. 94 (1821): 81-90, *British Fiction, 1800-1829 Database* 15 June 2006 <http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk/reviews/melm20-51.html>: 83.
11. Letter dated 17 July 1813, Ratchford and McCarthy 20; my emphasis.
12. Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer* 6.
13. According to Maturin, his advancement in the Church was prevented because his "high Calvinist […] Religious Opinions [… were] viewed with jealousy by Unitarian Brethren and Arminian Masters"; letter dated 11 January 1813, Ratchford and McCarthy 10.
14. J.W. Croker, 'Review of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, by Charles Robert Maturin', *The Quarterly Review* 24.48 (1821): 311.
15. Charles Robert Maturin, *The Albigenses; a Romance*, 4 vols. (London: Hurst and Robinson, 1824) viii.
16. Letter dated [?23 December 1812], Ratchford and McCarthy 8.
17. Charles Robert Maturin, *Women; or Pour et Contre*, introd. Robert Lee Wolff, 3 vols. (1818; New York: Garland, 1979) 1:iii.
18. Charles Robert Maturin, *The Milesian Chief*, introd. Robert Lee Wolff, 4 vols. (1812; New York: Garland, 1979) 1:iii.
19. Letter dated 11 January 1813, Ratchford and McCarthy 10.
20.Regina B. Oost, '"Servility and Command": Authorship in *Melmoth the Wanderer*', *Papers on Language and Literature* 31.3 (1995): 292.
21. Maturin, *Melmoth* 10, 399.
22. Oost 292.
23. Ibid. 306.
24. Sharon Ragaz, 'Maturin, Archibald Constable, and the Publication of *Melmoth the Wanderer*', *Review of English Studies* 57 (2006): 373.
25. Ibid. 372.
26. Ibid. 369.
27. Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer* 542.

28. Letter from Constable to Maturin, dated 11 February 1820; quoted in Ragaz 369. This is after Constable had already rejected, in late November 1819, Maturin's proposal to extend his text to eight volumes rather than four.
29. Letter dated 3 May 1820, Rathcford and McCarthy 98.
30. Letter dated 15 February 1813, Ratchford and McCarthy 14.
31. Letter dated 15 October 1814, Ratchford and McCarthy 34.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid. 35.
34. Letter dated 1 October 1821, Ratchford and McCarthy 99, 100.
35. Maturin, *Melmoth* 418.
36. Ibid. 396.
37. Oost 301.
38. Maturin, *Melmoth* 400, 402.
39. Ibid. 415.
40. Ibid.
41. As Maturin informed Scott, "I found the greatest difficulty in procuring the few [students] I have, and almost equal difficulty in keeping them – it is impossible to describe the 'Variety of wretchedness' attendant on this line of life – the Caprices of parents, the dullness of Children, the Expectation that I am to make a Genius of him whom his Maker has made a dunce, [… etc.]"; letter dated 11 January 1813, Ratchford and McCarthy 9-10.
42. Maturin, *Melmoth* 419.
43. Ibid. 419, 422.
44. Ibid. 426, 423, 434.
45. Ibid. 151.
46. Ibid. 212-3, 213.
47. Ibid. 207, 213.
48. The parricide is also implicated in this reversed accusation. As Julia M. Wright has cogently argued, the parricide attends the starvation of these two lovers with a "noncorpreal appetite" that is only "one remove from literal cannibalism – it feeds on the famine that feeds on the lovers"; Julia M.Wright, 'Devouring the Disinherited: Familial Cannibalism in Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*', *Eating their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity*, ed. Kristen Guest (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001) 87-88.
49. Maturin, *Melmoth* 402, 412.
50. Ibid. 413-4.
51. Ibid. 417, 434.
52. Robert Miles, 'Europhobia: The Catholic Other in Horace Walpole and Charles Maturin', *European Gothic: A Spirited Exchange 1760-1960*, ed. Avril Horner (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002) 89.
53. Maturin, *Melmoth* 407.
54. Ibid. 147.
55. Ibid. 224.
56. For a discussion of the Catholic Church's historical belief in transubstantiation – the theological understanding that the Eucharistic bread and wine literally becomes the body and blood of Christ – see Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) 79-85. Maturin's belief in the cannibalistic horrors of transubstantiation is clear from a passage in his *Five Sermons on the Errors of the Roman Catholic Church* (1824). In the second of these sermons, Maturin argued that, if people were to believe in transubstantiation, they had to also believe that at the Last Supper "Christ held his own body in his hand, and ate and drank his own

body […] and his disciples also ate and drank that body which was then alive […] Let insanity, in its wildest ravings, exceed or equal this, if it can"; Charles Robert Maturin, *Five Sermons on the Errors of the Roman Catholic Church* (Dublin: William Folds and Son, 1824) 42.

57. Maturin, *Melmoth* 337, 337-8.

58. Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta Books, 2000) 72. Kiberd here is speaking of Jonathan Swift, but the ongoing conflict Swift felt as both a clergyman and an Irish Anglican seems equally applicable to Maturin.

59. Maturin, *Melmoth* 301.

60. Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal, Irish Tracts 1728-1733*, ed. Herbert Davis (1729; Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 111.

61. Margot Gayle Backus, *The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice, and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999) 87.

62. Jarlath Killeen, *Gothic Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005) 110.

63. Wright suggests that Maturin "rounds out" rather than diverges from Swift's premise: "that is, while Swift figures the rich as cannibals, feeding on the bodies of the poor indirectly through economic inequity, Maturin suggests that the economic inequity leads to bodies so starved that they duplicate, with even more directness, that violence". This is, as Wright contends, "the locus of the gothic horror" of *Melmoth the Wanderer* – the very real fear that someone who is starving will be driven to cannibalism knowing that it is produced by social institutions over which the individual has no control; Wright 90. As persuasive as these arguments are, they do not account for the ways in which Maturin, like the 'impoverished multitudes' Melmoth discusses, demands to be consumed. In terms of Maturin's perspective on his literary production at least, he seems less concerned with the extremes of consumption he may be driven to, i.e. cannibalistic behaviour, than he is with his audience's refusal to cannibalistically consume him and his literary works.

64. Maturin, *Melmoth* 302.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid. 439, 397.

67. Ibid. 537.