Melmoth the Wanderer

1820

CHARLES ROBERT MATURIN (1782–1824) was an Irish playwright and novelist, born in Dublin. A contradictory figure, Maturin was both a friend of Lord Byron and a Protestant cleric. His play *Bertram* so scandalised London that the Church punished Maturin by blocking any further career advancement, forcing him to live by his pen. He was also the great-uncle of Oscar Wilde, who renamed himself Melmoth while in exile as a tribute to his forebear. *Melmoth the Wanderer* is Maturin's best-known novel and is considered to be a classic of gothic literature.

Melmoth the Wanderer

1820

Charles Robert Maturin

With a new introduction by
Sarah Perry

This edition published in 2018 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD
www.serpentstail.com

Introduction © Sarah Perry, 2018

First published 1820

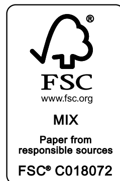
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP record for this book can be obtained from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78816 158 9
eISBN 978 1 78283 495 3

Typeset in Garamond by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



INTRODUCTION

Readers of the *Quarterly Review* in 1821 were warned that a certain 'unhappy patient' had exceeded his past 'ravings' in the 'folly and indelicacy' of his third novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Resorting to capitals to convey the depth of his outrage, the reviewer spoke of the novel's 'BLASPHEMY', 'BRUTALITY' and 'OBSCENITY', delineating at length all the ways in which the writer had revolted against social propriety, proper religious feeling and artistic integrity. 'If Melmoth had only been silly and tiresome,' he wrote, 'we should gladly have treated it with silent contempt; but it unfortunately variegates its stupidity with some characteristics of a more disgusting kind.'

The author who occasioned this response was the Reverend Charles Maturin, the Protestant vicar of the Galway town of Loughrea. He was fond of dancing, despite being of a Calvinist bent; his sermons were heartfelt, compassionate, and much admired; though finely dressed in public, a visitor to his home might well encounter him in rags. His life was one of financial calamity: his father had been dismissed from his Post Office employment on suspicion of corruption, leaving Charles to bear the financial burden of the family, not least those of his bankrupt brother, while the church – viewing Maturin's early efforts as a novelist with disfavour – barred him from advancement, so that he was reliant on a miserly stipend. The success of an 1816 play, *Bertram*, which starred Edmund Kean and earned Maturin no less than £1000, was all too brief: the money was swallowed up in debt, and the play itself moved Samuel Taylor Coleridge to observe that its popularity was little but 'melancholy proof of the depravation of the public mind'.

It was under these circumstances that Maturin wrote what is one of the crowning achievements of the Gothic, and a novel which few can rival for complexity, cunning and horror. On the one hand he was motivated by a grinding poverty from which there seemed no escape,

and peevishly prefaced the novel with a declaration that he could not 'appear before the public in so unseemly a character as that of a writer of romances' without 'regretting the necessity' that compelled him to it. On the other, he held a mischievous desire to push the Gothic novel to the furthest extent of imagination and excess. In a letter to Sir Walter Scott – an admirer who wrote of his friend's ability to excite 'a very deep though painful interest' in the reader – Maturin declared that he would 'out-Herod all the Herods', plainly stating his ambition to plumb greater depths of transgression and sensation than any novelist before him.

It is doubtful that Herod himself could have summoned up the baroque parade of physical horrors and mental shocks that constitute *Melmoth the Wanderer*. I came to it as a seasoned reader of Gothic and horror fiction, well-versed in historical and Biblical atrocities, my imagination enlarged and my constitution hardened by a diet of Stephen King, Mary Shelley, James Herbert and James Hogg. Nonetheless I often found myself so appalled by its contents that on occasion I pressed my hand to the page to cover the words, like a child viewing a film through her fingers. It opens with the young John Melmoth, an impecunious student of Trinity College, Dublin, attending his dying uncle in his disintegrating home. Here he encounters, by dim lamplight, the portrait of an ancestor, with eyes 'such as one feels they wish they had never seen'. John's uncle explains that here is a distant relation, long vanished, who ought to be dead, but who still lives. Gradually the bewildered young man begins to comprehend that this ancestor has, by some mysterious pact, sold his soul to the devil for immortality, and that he has since roamed the earth for 150 years, seeking someone to take his place, earning the name of Melmoth the Wanderer.

What follows is a novel whose complexity of structure, embedded tales-within-tales, 'dissolved, obliterated, muddled' manuscripts and maddened narrators resembles nothing so much as the labyrinthine crypt beneath a Gothic edifice (and, like anyone lost in the passages of a crypt, readers may find themselves longing for more light). Melmoth's malign presence is traced through the narratives of a shipwrecked Spanish sailor, of doomed lovers, of a young monk at the mercy of the Spanish Inquisition; he is 'for ever exploring the mad-house, the jail,

or the Inquisition, – the den of famine, the dungeon of crime, or the death-bed of despair'. He is the descendent of the Wandering Jew, a legend which began in the thirteenth century and made its way across Europe; in that legend a cobbler was said to have tossed a shoe at Christ as he laboured beneath the cross on the way to Calvary, and has ever since wandered the earth seeking redemption for his sin. Melmoth is a creature of apparently irreconcilable contradictions: absolutely human in his misery and desperate longing for freedom from the devil's bargain, but supernatural and satanic in his powers, persuasiveness and rage. He is repellent in his wickedness, but there is a terrible seductive quality to him: when the innocent and child-like Immalee, whom Melmoth loves and therefore destroys, declares 'Wed me by this light, and I will be yours forever!', the reader may well pause to wonder if they, too, might have surrendered to Melmoth's violent longing.

Maturin spares the reader no detail of human suffering, both physical and psychological: to read the novel is to be, like Immalee, degraded by a pitiless display of man's inhumanity to man. Which is not to say Maturin is either humourless or amoral. On the contrary, the novel is grimly funny – Melmoth himself is much given to laughter, and the novel's excesses are often described with a kind of deadpan detachment that gives the reader permission to grin with disbelief as much as grimace in distaste (the scene in which an immured man, insane with hunger, takes a bite from his lover's shoulder and finally from his own hand, is so appalling as to be very funny indeed). And it is vigorously, even bitterly moral, as must be expected from a preacher who instructed his congregation to consider the plight of Ireland's poor and acknowledge: 'Are you not answerable for this?' The righteous indignation of its satire on organised religion generally and Catholicism in particular is palpable, as is its condemnation of the political and financial practices that left such a significant proportion of the Irish population in abject poverty. Like Melmoth himself, the novel is composed of a thousand contradictions, as the unstoppable force of Maturin's Gothic imagination meets the immovable object of history – it is ridiculous, gleefully and consciously so, but it is also deeply serious, and a profound commentary on personal, religious and political transgression. Cunningly, Maturin elides the border between fact and fiction: the

novel is peppered with footnotes attesting to the veracity of certain episodes, such as that of the pauper whose son sells his blood to surgeons to keep the family from starvation ('Fact: it occurred in a French family not many years ago').

It is not possible to understand *Melmoth the Wanderer*, nor to account for its power, without considering the nature of the Gothic. Few literary conventions are as subject to analysis and misinterpretation, perhaps because its nature lies not in the deployment of certain tropes and motifs, but in evoking and exploiting a particular kind of feeling. The Gothic is not a genre so much as a sensation, and it is telling that deep within one of Melmoth's tales there is the line, italicised for emphasis, '*emotions are my events*'. Because it is not the torture, madness, misery and suffering that constitute the great events of this novel, and of all Gothic fiction at its most effective, but the emotions experienced by the reader. Gothic feeling is that sensation of being deliciously caught between repulsion and attraction, unable to distinguish between a feeling of censure or pleasure at acts of transgression. As Edmund Burke says, it is the sublime, since 'whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime'. A writer may pepper a novel with as many manuscripts and candlesticks as they please, and send half-a-dozen maidens in nightgowns running down half-a-dozen subterranean passages, but unless the reader finds themselves as bewildered, appalled and pleasantly corrupted as the characters between the pages, the Gothic is not truly present.

Maturin died four years after the publication of his masterpiece, having achieved neither fame nor financial security. He was forty-two. *Melmoth the Wanderer* met with greater success in France than elsewhere, and it is telling that so disruptive and transgressive a figure found welcome in a nation that had undergone a traumatic upheaval of political, social and religious norms. Balzac resurrected Melmoth in his novel *Melmoth Reconciled*, in which the Wanderer strikes a bargain with a banker, and Baudelaire wrote at length of the quality of Melmoth's devilish laughter, 'the necessary resultant of his own double nature, which is infinitely great in relation to man, and infinitely vile and base in relation to absolute Truth and Justice'. If Melmoth failed to

achieve the ubiquity of other titular monsters – Dracula, Frankenstein, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde – nonetheless the name echoes on, persistently, the Wanderer not yet at rest. Oscar Wilde, a great-nephew of Maturin's by marriage, called himself Sebastian Melmoth on his release from jail; Nabokov's Humbert Humbert named his blue car Melmoth; the Cerebus series of graphic novels includes a volume entitled *Melmoth* and features a character modelled on an ageing and dissipated Wilde. Some years after first reading Maturin, I found I could no longer ignore the indistinct female figure that seemed always to be watching me with an intent and unblinking gaze; and in due course found that I knew her name, and that she, too, was Melmoth; and so I sat down to write. In this way the impoverished Irish vicar's legacy persists, and Melmoth goes on wandering, arousing in readers that sensation which is most purely and most dangerously Gothic: pity and contempt for ourselves, and sympathy for the devil.

Sarah Perry
Norwich, 2018

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The text is that of the first edition of 1820, with the following exceptions:

Misprints and obvious slips have been corrected.

In the 1820 edition, the chapter numbering went wrong in Volume III; after Chapter XVI came XIV, XVII (twice) and then XVIII–XX. The chapters after Chapter XVI have therefore been renumbered so as to run consecutively.

The 1820 edition was divided into four volumes (bound in two volumes) but this was for the convenience of the publishers; the volume divisions had no connection with the structure of the narrative. Indications of the division into four volumes have therefore been removed, as they are no longer relevant when the novel is printed in a single volume and the chapter numbers run consecutively throughout.

Text

Asterisks, etc. indicate the author's notes at the foot of the page. Archaic or obsolete spellings such as 'stupify', 'indispensible', 'faulter', 'choaking', 'atchievements', 'strait', 'haram', 'groupe', etc., and grammatical mistakes such as 'neither/or', sentences without a verb, etc., have been left in deliberately, as they are part of Maturin's characteristic headlong style. Corrections have only been made where they were necessary to make the sense clear.

PREFACE

The hint of this Romance (or Tale) was taken from a passage in one of my Sermons, which (as it is to be presumed very few have read) I shall here take the liberty to quote. The passage is this.

At this moment is there one of us present, however we may have departed from the Lord, disobeyed his will, and disregarded his word – is there one of us who would, at this moment, accept all that man could bestow, or earth afford, to resign the hope of his salvation? – No, there is not one – not such a fool on earth, were the enemy of mankind to traverse it with the offer!

This passage suggested the idea of 'Melmoth the Wanderer'. The Reader will find that idea developed in the following pages, with what power or success *he* is to decide.

The 'Spaniard's Tale' has been censured by a friend to whom I read it, as containing too much attempt at the revivification of the horrors of Radcliffe-Romance, of the persecutions of convents, and the terrors of the Inquisition.

I defended myself, by trying to point out to my friend, that I had made the misery of conventual life depend less on the startling adventures one meets with in romances, than on that irritating series of petty torments which constitutes the misery of life in general, and which, amid the tideless stagnation of monastic existence, solitude gives its inmates leisure to invent, and power combined with malignity, the full disposition to practise. I trust this defence will operate more on the conviction of the Reader, than it did on that of my friend.

For the rest of the Romance, there are some parts of it which I have borrowed from real life.

The story of John Sandal and Elinor Mortimer is founded in fact.

The original from which the Wife of Walberg is imperfectly sketched is a living woman, and *long may she live*.

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?

Dublin
31 August 1820

Melmoth the Wanderer

1820

CHAPTER I

Alive again? Then show me where he is;
I'll give a thousand pounds to look upon him.

Shakespeare

In the autumn of 1816, John Melmoth, a student in Trinity College, Dublin, quitted it to attend a dying uncle on whom his hopes for independence chiefly rested. John was the orphan son of a younger brother, whose small property scarce could pay John's college expences; but the uncle was rich, unmarried, and old; and John, from his infancy, had been brought up to look on him with that mingled sensation of awe, and of the wish, without the means to conciliate, (that sensation at once attractive and repulsive), with which we regard a being who (as nurse, domestic, and parent have tutored us to believe) holds the very threads of our existence in his hands, and may prolong or snap them when he pleases.

On receiving this summons, John set immediately out to attend his uncle.

The beauty of the country through which he travelled (it was the county Wicklow) could not prevent his mind from dwelling on many painful thoughts, some borrowed from the past, and more from the future. His uncle's caprice and moroseness, – the strange reports concerning the cause of the secluded life he had led for many years, – his own dependent state, – fell like blows fast and heavy on his mind. He roused himself to repel them, – sat up in the mail, in which he was a solitary passenger, – looked out on the prospect, – consulted his watch; – then he thought they receded for a moment, – but there was nothing to fill their place, and he was forced to invite them back for company. When the mind is thus active in calling over invaders, no wonder the conquest is soon completed. As the carriage drew near the Lodge, (the name of old Melmoth's seat), John's heart grew heavier every moment.

The recollection of this awful uncle from infancy, – when he was never permitted to approach him without innumerable lectures, – *not to be troublesome*, – not to go too near his uncle, – not to ask him any questions, – on no account to disturb the inviolable arrangement of his snuff-box, hand-bell, and spectacles, nor to suffer the glittering of the gold-headed cane to tempt him to the mortal sin of handling it, – and, finally, to pilot himself aright through his perilous course in and out of the apartment without striking against the piles of books, globes, old newspapers, wig-blocks, tobacco-pipes, and snuff-cannisters, not to mention certain hidden rocks of rat-traps and mouldy books beneath the chairs, – together with the final reverential bow at the door, which was to be closed with cautious gentleness, and the stairs to be descended as if he were 'shod with felt'. – This recollection was carried on to his school-boy years, when at Christmas and Easter, the ragged poney, the jest of the school, was dispatched to bring the reluctant visitor to the Lodge, – where his pastime was to sit vis-à-vis to his uncle, without speaking or moving, till the pair resembled Don Raymond and the ghost of Beatrice in the Monk, – then watching him as he picked the bones of lean mutton out of his mess of weak broth, the latter of which he handed to his nephew with a needless caution not to 'take more than he liked,' – then hurried to bed by daylight, even in winter, to save the expence of an inch of candle, where he lay awake and restless from hunger, till his uncle's retiring at eight o'clock gave signal to the gouvernante of the meagre household to steal up to him with some fragments of her own scanty meal, administering between every mouthful a whispered caution not to tell his uncle. Then his college life, passed in an attic in the second square, uncheered by an invitation to the country; the gloomy summer wasted in walking up and down the deserted streets, as his uncle would not defray the expences of his journey; – the only intimation of his existence, received in quarterly epistles, containing, with the scanty but punctual remittance, complaints of the expences of his education, cautions against extravagance, and lamentations for the failure of tenants and the fall of the value of lands. All these recollections came over him, and along with them the remembrance of that last scene, where his dependence on his uncle was impressed on him by the dying lips of his father.

'John, I must leave you, my poor boy; it has pleased God to take your father from you before he could do for you what would have made this hour less painful to him. You must look up, John, to your uncle for every thing. He has oddities and infirmities, but you must learn to bear with them, and with many other things too, as you will learn too soon. And now, my poor boy, may He who is the father of the fatherless look on your desolate state, and give you favour in the eyes of your uncle.' As this scene rose to John's memory, his eyes filled fast with tears, which he hastened to wipe away as the carriage stopt to let him out at his uncle's gate.

He alighted, and with a change of linen in a handkerchief, (his only travelling equipment), he approached his uncle's gate. The lodge was in ruins, and a barefooted boy from an adjacent cabin ran to lift on its single hinge what had once been a gate, but was now a few planks so villainously put together, that they clattered like a sign in a high wind. The stubborn post of the gate, yielding at last to the united strength of John and his barefooted assistant, grated heavily through the mud and gravel stones, in which it left a deep and sloughy furrow, and the entrance lay open. John, after searching his pocket in vain for a trifle to reward his assistant, pursued his way, while the lad, on his return, cleared the road at a hop step and jump, plunging through the mud with all the dabbling and amphibious delight of a duck, and scare less proud of his agility than of his 'sarving a gentleman.' As John slowly trod the miry road which had once been the approach, he could discover, by the dim light of an autumnal evening, signs of increasing desolation since he had last visited the spot, – signs that penury had been aggravated and sharpened into downright misery. There was not a fence or a hedge round the domain: an uncemented wall of loose stones, whose numerous gaps were filled with furze or thorns, supplied their place. There was not a tree or shrub on the lawn; the lawn itself was turned into pasture-ground, and a few sheep were picking their scanty food amid the pebblestones, thistles, and hard mould, through which a few blades of grass made their rare and squalid appearance.

The house itself stood strongly defined even amid the darkness of the evening sky; for there were neither wings, or offices, or shrubbery, or tree, to shade or support it, and soften its strong harsh outline. John,

after a melancholy gaze at the grass-grown steps and boarded windows, addressed himself to knock at the door; but knocker there was none: loose stones, however, there were in plenty; and John was making vigorous application to the door with one of them, till the furious barking of a mastiff, who threatened at every bound to break his chain, and whose yell and growl, accompanied by 'eyes that glow and fangs that grin,' savoured as much of hunger as of rage, made the assailant raise the siege on the door, and betake himself to a well-known passage that led to the kitchen. A light glimmered in the window as he approached: he raised the latch with a doubtful hand; but, when he saw the party within, he advanced with the step of a man no longer doubtful of his welcome.

Round a turf-fire, whose well-replenished fuel gave testimony to the 'master's' indisposition, who would probably as soon have been placed on the fire himself as seen the whole *kish* emptied on it once, were seated the old housekeeper, two or three *followers*, (i.e. people who ate, drank, and lounged about in any kitchen that was open in the neighbourhood, on an occasion of grief or joy, all for his honor's sake, and for the great rispict they bore the family), and an old woman, whom John immediately recognized as the doctress of the neighbourhood, – a withered Sybil, who prolonged her squalid existence by practising on the fears, the ignorance, and the sufferings of beings as miserable as herself. Among the better sort, to whom she sometimes had access by the influence of servants, she tried the effects of some simples, her skill in which was sometimes productive of success. Among the lower orders she talked much of the effects of the 'evil eye', against which she boasted a counter-spell, of unfailing efficacy; and while she spoke, she shook her grizzled locks with such witch-like eagerness, that she never failed to communicate to her half-terrified, half-believing audience, some portion of that enthusiasm which, amid all her consciousness of imposture, she herself probably felt a large share of; still, when the case at last became desperate, when credulity itself lost all patience, and hope and life were departing together, she urged the miserable patient to confess '*there was something about his heart*'; and when this confession was extorted from the weariness of pain and the ignorance of poverty, she nodded and muttered so mysteriously, as to convey to the bystanders, that she had had difficulties to contend with which

were invincible by human power. When there was no pretext, from indisposition, for her visiting either 'his honor's' kitchen, or the cottar's hut, – when the stubborn and persevering convalescence of the whole country threatened her with starvation, – she still had a resource: – if there were no lives to be shortened, there were fortunes to be told; – she worked 'by spells, and by such daubry as is beyond our element'. No one twined so well as she the mystic yarn to be dropt into the lime-kiln pit, on the edge of which stood the shivering inquirer into futurity, doubtful whether the answer to her question of 'who holds?' was to be uttered by the voice of demon or lover.

No one knew so well as she to find where the four streams met, in which, on the same portentous season, the chemise was to be immersed, and then displayed before the fire, (in the name of one whom we dare not mention to 'ears polite'), to be turned by the figure of the destined husband before morning. No one but herself (she said) knew the hand in which the comb was to be held, while the other was employed in conveying the apple to the mouth, – while, during the joint operation, the shadow of the phantom-spouse was to pass across the mirror before which it was performed. No one was more skilful or active in removing every iron implement from the kitchen where these ceremonies were usually performed by the credulous and terrified dupes of her wizardry, lest, instead of the form of a comely youth exhibiting a ring on his white finger, an headless figure should stalk to the rack, (*Anglicè*, dresser), take down a long spit, or, in default of that, snatch a poker from the fire-side, and mercilessly take measure with its iron length of the sleeper for a coffin. No one, in short, knew better how to torment or terrify her victims into a belief of that power which may and has reduced the strongest minds to the level of the weakest; and under the influence of which the cultivated sceptic, Lord Lyttleton, yelled and gnashed and writhed in his last hours, like the poor girl who, in the belief of the horrible visitation of the vampire, shrieked aloud, that her grandfather was sucking her vital blood while she slept, and expired under the influence of imaginary horror. Such was the being to whom old Melmoth had committed his life, half from credulity, and (*Hibernicè* speaking) *more than half* from avarice. Among this groupe John advanced, – recognizing some, – disliking more, – distrusting all. The old housekeeper

received him with cordiality; – he was always her 'white-headed boy,' she said, – (*imprimis*, his hair was as black as jet), and she tried to lift her withered hand to his head with an action between a benediction and a caress, till the difficulty of the attempt forced on her the conviction that that head was fourteen inches higher than her reach since she had last patted it. The men, with the national deference of the Irish to a person of superior rank, all rose at his approach, (their stools chattering on the broken flags), and wished his honor 'a thousand years, and long life to the back of that; and would not his honor take something to keep the grief out of his heart;' and so saying, five or six red and bony hands tendered him glasses of whiskey all at once. All this time the Sybil sat silent in the ample chimney-corner, sending redoubled whiffs out of her pipe. John gently declined the offer of spirits, received the attentions of the old housekeeper cordially, looked askance at the withered crone who occupied the chimney corner, and then glanced at the table, which displayed other cheer than he had been accustomed to see in his 'honor's time.' There was a wooden dish of potatoes, which old Melmoth would have considered enough for a week's subsistence. There was the salted salmon, (a luxury unknown even in London. *Vide* Miss Edgeworth's Tales, 'The Absentee').

There was the *slink-veal*, flanked with tripe; and, finally, there were lobsters and *fried* turbot enough to justify what the author of the tale asserts, 'suo periculo,' that when his great grandfather, the Dean of Killala, hired servants at the deanery, they stipulated that they should not be required to eat turbot or lobster more than twice a-week. There were also bottles of Wicklow ale, long and surreptitiously borrowed from his 'honor's' cellar, and which now made their first appearance on the kitchen hearth, and manifested their impatience of further constraint, by hissing, spitting, and bouncing in the face of the fire that provoked its animosity. But the whiskey (genuine illegitimate potsheen, smelling strongly of weed and smoke, and breathing defiance to excisemen) appeared, the 'veritable Amphitryon' of the feast; every one praised, and drank as deeply as he praised.

John, as he looked round the circle, and thought of his dying uncle, was forcibly reminded of the scene at Don Quixote's departure, where, in spite of the grief caused by the dissolution of the worthy knight, we

are informed that 'nevertheless the niece eat her victuals, the housekeeper drank to the repose of his soul, and even Sancho cherished his little carcase.' After returning, 'as he might,' the courtesies of the party, John asked how his uncle was. 'As bad as he can be;' – 'Much better, and many thanks to your honor,' was uttered in such rapid and discordant unison by the party, that John turned from one to the other, not knowing which or what to believe. 'They say his honor has had a fright,' said a fellow, upwards of six feet high, approaching by way of whispering, and then bellowing the sound six inches above John's head. 'But then his honor has had *a cool* since,' said a man who was quietly swallowing the spirits that John had refused. At these words the Sybil who sat in the chimney corner slowly drew her pipe from her mouth, and turned towards the party: The oracular movements of a Pythoness on her tripod never excited more awe, or impressed for the moment a deeper silence. 'It's not *here*,' said she, pressing her withered finger on her wrinkled forehead, 'nor *here*, – nor *here*,' and she extended her hand to the foreheads of those who were near her, who all bowed as if they were receiving a benediction, but had immediate recourse to the spirits afterwards, as if to ensure its effects. – 'It's all *here* – it's all *about the heart*;' and as she spoke she spread and pressed her fingers on her hollow bosom with a force of action that thrilled her hearers. – 'It's all *here*,' she added, repeating the action, (probably excited by the effect she had produced), and then sunk on her seat, resumed her pipe, and spoke no more. At this moment of involuntary awe on the part of John, and of terrified silence on that of the rest, an unusual sound was heard in the house, and the whole company started as if a musket had been discharged among them: – it was the unwonted sound of old Melmoth's bell. His domestics were so few, and so constantly near him, that the sound of his bell startled them as much as if he had been ringing the knell for his own interment. 'He used always to *rap down* for me,' said the old housekeeper, hurrying out of the kitchen; 'he said pulling the bells wore out the ropes.' The sound of the bell produced its full effect. The housekeeper rushed into the room, followed by a number of women, (the Irish præficae), all ready to prescribe for the dying or weep for the dead, – all clapping their hard hands, or wiping their dry eyes. These hags all surrounded the bed; and to witness their loud, wild,

and desperate grief, their cries of 'Oh! he's going, his honor's going, his honor's going,' one would have imagined their lives were bound up in his, like those of the wives in the story of Sinbad the Sailor, who were to be interred alive with their deceased husbands.

Four of them wrung their hands and howled round the bed, while one, with all the adroitness of a Mrs Quickly, felt his honor's feet, and 'upward and upward,' and 'all was cold as any stone.'

Old Melmoth withdrew his feet from the grasp of the hag, – counted with his keen eye (keen amid the approaching dimness of death) the number assembled round his bed, – raised himself on his sharp elbow, and pushing away the housekeeper, (who attempted to settle his night-cap, that had been shoved on one side in the struggle, and gave his haggard, dying face, a kind of grotesque fierceness), bellowed out in tones that made the company start, – 'What the devil brought ye all here?' The question scattered the whole party for a moment; but rallying instantly, they communed among themselves in whispers, and frequently using the sign of the cross, muttered 'The devil, – Christ save us, the devil in his mouth the first word he spoke.' 'Aye,' roared the invalid, 'and the devil in my eye the first sight I see.' 'Where, – where?' cried the terrified housekeeper, clinging close to the invalid in her terror, and half-hiding herself in the blanket, which she snatched without mercy from his struggling and exposed limbs. 'There, there,' he repeated, (during the battle of the blanket), pointing to the huddled and terrified women, who stood aghast at hearing themselves arointed as the very demons they came to banish. 'Oh! Lord keep your honor's head,' said the housekeeper in a more soothing tone, when her fright was over; 'and sure your honor knows them all, is'n't *her* name, – and *her* name, – and *her* name,' – and she pointed respectively to each of them, adding their names, which we shall spare the English reader the torture of reciting, (as a proof of our lenity, adding the last only, Cotchleen O'Mulligan), 'Ye lie, ye b—h,' growled old Melmoth; 'their name is Legion, for they are many, – turn them all out of the room, – turn them all out of doors, – if they howl at my death, they shall howl in earnest, – not for my death, for they would see me dead and damned too with dry eyes, but for want of the whiskey that they would have stolen if they could have got at it,' (and here old Melmoth grasped a

key which lay under his pillow, and shook it in vain triumph at the old housekeeper, who had long possessed the means of getting at the spirits unknown to his 'honor'), 'and for want of the victuals you have pampered them with.' '*Pampered*, oh Ch—st!' ejaculated the housekeeper. 'Aye, and what are there so many candles for, all *fours*, and the same below I warrant. Ah! you – you – worthless, wasteful old devil.' 'Indeed, your honor, they are all *sixes*.' 'Sixes, – and what the devil are you burning sixes for, d'ye think it's *the wake* already? Ha?' 'Oh! not yet, your honor, not yet,' chorussed the beldams; 'but in God's good time, your honor knows,' in a tone that spoke ill suppressed impatience for the event. 'Oh! that your honor would think of making your soul.' 'That's the first sensible word you have said,' said the dying man, 'fetch me the prayer-book, – you'll find it there under that old boot-jack, – blow off the cobwebs; – it has not been opened this many a year.' It was handed to him by the old gouvernante, on whom he turned a reproaching eye. 'What made you burn sixes in the kitchen, you extravagant jade? How many years have you lived in this house?' 'I don't know, your honor.' 'Did you ever see any extravagance or waste in it?' 'Oh never, never, your honor.' 'Was any thing but a farthing candle ever burned in the kitchen?' 'Never, never, your honor.' 'Were not you kept as tight as hand and head and heart could keep you, were you not? answer me that.' 'Oh yes, sure, your honor; every *sowl* about us knows that, – every one does your honor justice, that you kept the closest house and closest hand in the country, – your honor was always a good warrant for it.' 'And how dare you unlock my hold before death has unlocked it,' said the dying miser, shaking his meagre hand at her. 'I smelt meat in the house, – I heard voices in the house, – I heard the key turn in the door over and over. Oh that I was up,' he added, rolling in impatient agony in his bed, 'Oh that I was up, to see the waste and ruin that is going on. But it would kill me,' he continued, sinking back on the bolster, for he never allowed himself a pillow; 'it would kill me, – the very thought of it is killing me now.' The women, discomfited and defeated, after sundry winks and whispers, were huddling out of the room, till recalled by the sharp eager tones of old Melmoth. – 'Where are ye trooping to now? back to the kitchen to gormandize and guzzle? Won't one of ye stay and listen while there's a prayer read for me? Ye may want it one

day for yourselves, ye hags.' Awed by this expostulation and menace, the train silently returned, and placed themselves round the bed, while the housekeeper, though a Catholic, asked if his honor would not have a clergyman to give him *the rights*, (rites) of his church. The eyes of the dying man sparkled with vexation at the proposal. 'What for, – just to have him expect a scarf and hatband at the funeral. Read the prayers yourself, you old –; that will save something.' The housekeeper made the attempt, but soon declined it, alleging, as her reason, that her eyes had been watery ever since his honor took ill. 'That's because you had always a drop in them,' said the invalid, with a spiteful sneer, which the contraction of approaching death stiffened into a hideous grin. – 'Here, – is not there one of you that's gnashing and howling there, that can get up a prayer to keep me from it?' So adjured, one of the women offered her services; and of her it might truly be said, as of the 'most desartless man of the watch' in Dogberry's time, that 'her reading and writing came by nature; for she never had been at school, and had never before seen or opened a Protestant prayer book in her life; nevertheless, on she went, and with more emphasis than good discretion, read nearly through the service for the 'churching of women;' which in our prayer-books following that of the burial of the dead, she perhaps imagined was someway connected with the state of the invalid.

She read with great solemnity, – it was a pity that two interruptions occurred during the performance, one from old Melmoth, who, shortly after the commencement of the prayers, turned towards the old house-keeper, and said in a tone scandalously audible, 'Go down and draw the niggers of the kitchen fire closer, and lock the door, and let me *hear it locked*. I can't mind any thing till that's done.' The other was from John Melmoth gliding into the room, hearing the inappropriate words uttered by the ignorant woman, taking quietly as he knelt beside her the prayer-book from her hands, and reading in a suppressed voice part of that solemn service which, by the forms of the Church of England, is intended for the consolation of the departing.

'That is John's voice,' said the dying man; and the little kindness he had ever shewed this unfortunate lad rushed on his hard heart at this moment, and touched it. He saw himself, too, surrounded by heartless and rapacious menials; and slight as must have been his dependence on

a relative whom he had always treated as a stranger, he felt at this hour he was no stranger, and grasped at his support like a straw amid his wreck. 'John, my good boy, you are there. – I kept you far from me when living, and now you are nearest me when dying. – John, *read on*.' John, affected deeply by the situation in which he beheld this *poor man*, amid all his wealth, as well as by the solemn request to impart consolation to his dying moments, read on; – but in a short time his voice became indistinct, from the horror with which he listened to the increasing hiccup of the patient, which, however, he struggled with from time to time, to ask the housekeeper if *the niggers were closed*. John, who was a lad of feeling, rose from his knees in some degree of agitation. 'What, are you leaving me like the rest?' said old Melmoth, trying to raise himself in the bed. 'No, Sir,' said John; 'but,' observing the altered looks of the dying man, 'I think you want some refreshment, some support, Sir.' 'Aye, I do, I do, but whom can I trust to get it for me. *They*, (and his haggard eye wandered round the groupe), *they* would poison me.' 'Trust me, Sir,' said John; 'I will go to the apothecary's, or whoever you may employ.' The old man grasped his hand, drew him close to his bed, cast a threatening yet fearful eye round the party, and then whispered in a voice of agonized constraint, 'I want a glass of wine, it would keep me alive for some hours, but there is not one I can trust to get it for me, – *they'd steal a bottle, and ruin me*.' John was greatly shocked. 'Sir, for God's sake, let *me* get a glass of wine for you.' 'Do you know where?' said the old man, with an expression in his face John could not understand. 'No, Sir; you know I have been rather a stranger here, Sir.' 'Take this key,' said old Melmoth, after a violent spasm; 'take this key, there is wine in that closet, – *Madeira*. I always told them there was nothing there, but they did not believe me, or I should not have been robbed as I have been. At one time I said it was whiskey, and then I fared worse than ever, for they drank twice as much of it.'

John took the key from his uncle's hand; the dying man pressed it as he did so, and John, interpreting this as a mark of kindness, returned the pressure. He was undeceived by the whisper that followed, – 'John, my lad, don't drink any of that wine while you are there.' 'Good God!' said John, indignantly throwing the key on the bed; then, recollecting that the miserable being before him was no object of resentment, he

gave the promise required, and entered the closet, which no foot but that of old Melmoth had entered for nearly sixty years. He had some difficulty in finding out the wine, and indeed staid long enough to justify his uncle's suspicions, – but his mind was agitated, and his hand unsteady. He could not but remark his uncle's extraordinary look, that had the ghastliness of fear superadded to that of death, as he gave him permission to enter his closet. He could not but see the looks of horror which the women exchanged as he approached it. And, finally, when he was in it, his memory was malicious enough to suggest some faint traces of a story, too horrible for imagination, connected with it. He remembered in one moment most distinctly, that no one but his uncle had ever been known to enter it for many years.

Before he quitted it, he held up the dim light, and looked around him with a mixture of terror and curiosity. There was a great deal of decayed and useless lumber, such as might be supposed to be heaped up to rot in a miser's closet; but John's eyes were in a moment, and as if by magic, rivetted on a portrait that hung on the wall, and appeared, even to his untaught eye, far superior to the tribe of family pictures that are left to moulder on the walls of a family mansion. It represented a man of middle age. There was nothing remarkable in the costume, or in the countenance, but *the eyes*, John felt, were such as one feels they wish they had never seen, and feels they can never forget. Had he been acquainted with the poetry of Southey, he might have often exclaimed in his after-life,

Only the eyes had life,
They gleamed with demon light. – THALABA

From an impulse equally resistless and painful, he approached the portrait, held the candle towards it, and could distinguish the words on the border of the painting, – Jno. Melmoth, anno 1646. John was neither timid by nature, or nervous by constitution, or superstitious from habit, yet he continued to gaze in stupid horror on this singular picture till, aroused by his uncle's cough, he hurried into his room. The old man swallowed the wine. He appeared a little revived; it was long since he had tasted such a cordial, – his heart appeared to expand

to a momentary confidence. 'John, what did you see in that room?' 'Nothing, Sir.' 'That's a lie; every one wants to cheat or to rob me.' 'Sir, I don't want to do either.' 'Well, what did you see that you – you took notice of?' 'Only a picture, Sir.' 'A picture, Sir! – the original is still alive.' John, though under the impression of his recent feelings, could not but look incredulous. 'John,' whispered his uncle; – 'John, they say I am dying of this and that; and one says it is for want of nourishment, and one says it is for want of medicine, – but, John,' and his face looked hideously ghastly, 'I am dying of a fright. That man,' and he extended his meagre arm towards the closet, as if he was pointing to a living being; 'that man, I have good reason to know, is alive still.' 'How is that possible, Sir?' said John involuntarily, 'the date on the picture is 1646.' 'You have seen it, – you have noticed it,' said his uncle. 'Well,' – he rocked and nodded on his bolster for a moment, then, grasping John's hand with an unutterable look, he exclaimed, 'You will see him again, he is alive.' Then, sinking back on his bolster, he fell into a kind of sleep or stupor, his eyes still open, and fixed on John.

The house was now perfectly silent, and John had time and space for reflection. More thoughts came crowding on him than he wished to welcome, but they would not be repulsed. He thought of his uncle's habit and character, turned the matter over and over again in his mind, and he said to himself, 'The last man on earth to be superstitious. He never thought of any thing but the price of stocks, and the rate of exchange, and my college expences, that hung heavier at his heart than all; and such a man to die of a fright, – a ridiculous fright, that a man living 150 years ago is alive still, and yet – he is dying.' John paused, for facts will confute the most stubborn logician. 'With all his hardness of mind, and of heart, he is dying of a fright. I heard it in the kitchen, I have heard it from himself, – he could not be deceived. If I had ever heard he was nervous, or fanciful, or superstitious, but a character so contrary to all these impressions; – a man that, as poor Butler says, in his Remains, of the Antiquarian, would have "sold Christ over again for the numerical piece of silver which Judas got for him," such a man to die of fear! Yet he *is* dying,' said John, glancing his fearful eye on the contracted nostril, the glazed eye, the dropping jaw, the whole horrible apparatus of the *facies Hippocratica* displayed, and soon to cease its display.

Old Melmoth at this moment seemed to be in a deep stupor; his eyes lost that little expression they had before, and his hands, that had convulsively been catching at the blankets, let go their short and quivering grasp, and lay extended on the bed like the claws of some bird that had died of hunger, – so meagre, so yellow, so spread. John, unaccustomed to the sight of death, believed this to be only a sign that he was going to sleep; and, urged by an impulse for which he did not attempt to account to himself, caught up the miserable light, and once more ventured into the forbidden room, – the *blue chamber* of the dwelling. The motion roused the dying man; – he sat bolt upright in his bed. This John could not see, for he was now in the closet; but he heard the groan, or rather the choaked and guggling rattle of the throat, that announces the horrible conflict between muscular and mental convulsion. He started, turned away; but, as he turned away, he thought he saw the eyes of the portrait, on which his own was fixed, *move*, and hurried back to his uncle's bedside.

Old Melmoth died in the course of that night, and died as he had lived, in a kind of avaricious delirium. John could not have imagined a scene so horrible as his last hours presented. He cursed and blasphemed about three half-pence, missing, as he said, some weeks before, in an account of change with his groom, about hay to a starving horse that he kept. Then he grasped John's hand, and asked him to give him the sacrament. 'If I send to the clergyman, he will charge me something for it, which I cannot pay, – I cannot. They say I am rich, – look at this blanket; – but I would not mind that, if I could save my soul.' And, raving, he added, 'Indeed, Doctor, I am a very poor man. I never troubled a clergyman before, and all I want is, that you will grant me two trifling requests, very little matters in your way, – save my soul, and (whispering) make interest to get me a parish coffin, – I have not enough left to bury me. I always told every one I was poor, but the more I told them so, the less they believed me.'

John, greatly shocked, retired from the bed-side, and sat down in a distant corner of the room. The women were again in the room, which was very dark. Melmoth was silent from exhaustion, and there was a death-like pause for some time. At this moment John saw the door open, and a figure appear at it, who looked round the room, and then

quietly and deliberately retired, but not before John had discovered in his face the living original of the portrait. His first impulse was to utter an exclamation of terror, but his breath felt stopped. He was then rising to pursue the figure, but a moment's reflection checked him. What could be more absurd, than to be alarmed or amazed at a resemblance between a living man and the portrait of a dead one! The likeness was doubtless strong enough to strike him even in that darkened room, but it was doubtless only a likeness; and though it might be imposing enough to terrify an old man of gloomy and retired habits, and with a broken constitution, John resolved it should not produce the same effect on him.

But while he was applauding himself for this resolution, the door opened, and the figure appeared at it, beckoning and nodding to him, with a familiarity somewhat terrifying. John now started up, determined to pursue it; but the pursuit was stopped by the weak but shrill cries of his uncle, who was struggling at once with the agonies of death and his housekeeper. The poor woman, anxious for her master's reputation and her own, was trying to put on him a clean shirt and nightcap, and Melmoth, who had just sensation enough to perceive they were taking something from him, continued exclaiming feebly, 'They are robbing me, – robbing me in my last moments, – robbing a dying man. John, won't you assist me, – I shall die a beggar; they are taking my last shirt, – I shall die a beggar.' – And the miser died.