

# **THE PERCEPTION OF EVIL AND DESIRE**

IN THE GOTHIC VERSE OF  
ANNE BANNERMAN AND SARAH PEARSON

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#### A list of abbreviations used in references and footnotes

BW	<i>The Burgomaster's Wife</i> by Sarah Pearson
MU	<i>The Mysteries of Udolpho</i> by Sarah Pearson
OI	<i>Ode I: The Spirit of Air</i> by Anne Bannerman
OII	<i>Ode II: The Mermaid</i> by Anne Bannerman
P	<i>Prologue</i> by Anne Bannerman (as the only poem taken from <i>Tales of Superstition and Chivalry</i> )
SV	<i>Sonnet V: To the Owl</i> by Anne Bannerman
SVI	<i>Sonnet VI: To the Ocean</i> by Anne Bannerman
TD	<i>Tale of Donica</i> by Sarah Pearson
VSM	<i>The Vigil of St. Mark</i> by Sarah Pearson

## I. An Introduction to Gothic Verse

### 1. Motivation and Methodology

As only little has been said or written about Gothic verse as of yet, I will discuss evil and desire in Gothic verse, more specifically in the poetry of Anne Bannerman and Sarah Pearson. I will study and then compare their interpretation of what the Gothic means for poetry and how the aspects 'evil' and 'desire' in particular manifest themselves in the work of Bannerman and Pearson. Therefore, the value of this paper to current research lies in its modest steps towards a better understanding of Gothic verse.

I will build up the theoretical backbone using studies of Gothic prose on the one hand and studies of 'traditional' poetry on the other. For my background reading concerning Gothic prose I chose the work of David Punter as a starting point. I will also rely heavily on works as *The Ode* by J.D. Jump in order to create a sturdy theoretical basis to discuss aspects of poetry as for example form.

Using the information I gathered from i.a. the aforementioned works, I will provide the reader with a theoretical basis on what the Gothic is and briefly introduce the reader to Bannerman and Pearson in the first section. In the second section, I will explore the metaphors for death and explain the concept of 'desired evil'. Thirdly, I will write about the evildoer and the linked concept of 'forceful evil'. In the fifth section, I will focus on evil in desire, with the femme fatale in the focal point. Lastly, I will evaluate how Bannerman's and Pearson's approach differ from (or correlate to) each other and offer a view on how both poets contribute to the Gothic frame.

## 2. The Gothic

In *The Literature of Terror*, David Punter emphasises three points: the presence of paranoia, the importance of the barbaric, and the question of taboo<sup>1</sup>. The first point refers to the ambiguity of the character's attitude towards the danger threatening him/her, and the ambiguity into which the reader is persuaded to indulgence. The second point indicates the Gothic's relation with the past and "the relative nature of ethical and behavioural codes" which the barbaric challenges. Lastly, the third point denotes mostly topics of hierarchy. This hierarchy can concern (sexual or socio-psychological) relationships between men, women, and men and women, but also "the hierarchy of natural and divine life."<sup>2</sup> According to Punter, the Gothic always returns to these three concepts to achieve 'the terrifying' and realises them through narrative complexity, and drawing on diverse literary modes. Punter points out that the Gothic lends its notion of vehement emotions from the tragedy and its tendency towards –or at least suggestion of– the supernatural from folklore<sup>3</sup>.

To concretise the aforementioned points, the fragmented narrative contributes to the idea of an ambiguous narrator and creates a sense of ambiguity and paranoia<sup>4</sup>. The Gothic writer also attempts to evoke an atmosphere which contributes to the sense of ambiguity and blurs the lines of morality. This can be done by introducing impetuous feelings which surpass rationality and by featuring supernatural (or initially inexplicable) events, or even by using the right words, especially those corresponding to Edmund Burke's aspects of

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<sup>1</sup> Punter, David, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1980) 404-405.

<sup>2</sup> Punter, David, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1980) 405.

<sup>3</sup> Punter, David, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1980) 403.

<sup>4</sup> Botting, Fred, *Gothic* (London: Taylor and Francis e-library, 2005) 1-2.

the sublime, as for instance terror, obscurity (or ambiguity), power, vastness, &c<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, Fred Botting mentions that certain motifs, such as corpses, nuns, and spectres, occur in desolate, bewildering settings to enhance the terror-striking atmosphere<sup>6</sup>. Amongst the bleak settings, ruined abbeys hold a special position as they refer to “a feudal past associated with barbarity”<sup>7</sup>; it is no wonder that Jane Austen chose it for the setting of her Gothic-satire *Northanger Abbey*. Transgressing taboos is accomplished by displaying criminal behaviour, illicit satisfaction of one’s carnality, and acts of superstition, as for example murder, rape, or treading the “unhallowed ground of necromancy and arcane ritual”<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless, instead of advocating these forms of ethical misbehaviour, the Gothic often warns the reader for its consequences by presenting it as dark and fearful as possible; terror is used for its cathartic effect<sup>9</sup>.

Another important aspect of the Gothic, and one of the foci of this paper, is the stock characters with which the Gothic deals. Examples include the tyrannical father, the fainting heroine, the evil aristocrat, and madmen<sup>10</sup>. The stock figures I discuss here, are the Gothic villain or the evildoer, and the femme fatale.

### 3. Anne Bannerman and Sarah Pearson

Anne Bannerman (1765–1829) belonged to the Edinburgh poetic circle. Her work was published in *Edinburgh Magazine*, as well as in magazines as *Monthly Magazine* and *Poetical*

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<sup>5</sup> Burke, Edmund, ‘A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful’ ([n.p.]: Digireads.com, 2009) 3.

<sup>6</sup> Botting, Fred, *Gothic* (London: Taylor and Francis e-library, 2005) 2.

<sup>7</sup> Botting, Fred, *Gothic* (London: Taylor and Francis e-library, 2005) 2.

<sup>8</sup> Botting, Fred, *Gothic* (London: Taylor and Francis e-library, 2005) 4.

<sup>9</sup> Botting, Fred, *Gothic* (London: Taylor and Francis e-library, 2005) 5.

<sup>10</sup> Botting, Fred, *Gothic* (London: Taylor and Francis e-library, 2005) 2.

*Register*<sup>11</sup>. For her first poem collection, *Poems* (1800), she received praise despite its modest commercial success<sup>12</sup>. Discussed poems by Bannerman are taken from this collection. Her second poem collection, *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* (1802), was received less enthusiastically. In 1807, a volume containing old and new poems, *Poems: A New Edition*, was published, yet commercial success would not follow. After 1829, Sir Walter Scott lauded her verse, and until now she is best known for her “Gothic ballads, as well as for her innovative sonnet series and her bold original odes.”<sup>13</sup>

Sarah Pearson of Sheffield, a multifaceted poet who “experimented with [...] genres and developed her own lyric-elegiac mode”<sup>14</sup>, published two volumes of poetry in her lifetime: *Poems, dedicated, with permission, to the Right Honourable the countess Fitzwilliam* (1790) and *Poems on Various Subjects* (1800, from which the discussed poems are taken). Pearson also published a novel in 1794, namely *The Medallion*. Her poetry was acknowledged in *Sheffield Register* with two verse tributes<sup>15</sup>. Pearson’s take on the Gothic is conservative and prefers Christian faith over rationalism to defeat superstition. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*<sup>16</sup>, Pearson glorifies Radcliffe’s writing, which she recognises as inspiring virtue rather than terror<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Adriana Craciun, ‘Bannerman, Anne (1765–1829)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/1/101001312/>, accessed 14 May 2013].

<sup>12</sup> Crone-Romanovski, Mary, ‘Biography of Anne Bannerman’, *Anne Bannerman*, The Ohio State University, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080307102506/http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/croneromanovski1/bannerman.htm>, accessed data of 11 September 2008 on 19 May 2013].

<sup>13</sup> Adriana Craciun, ‘Bannerman, Anne (1765–1829)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/1/101001312/>, accessed 14 May 2013].

<sup>14</sup> Jung, Sandro, ‘Sarah Pearson’s Gothic Verse Tales’, *Women’s Writing* 16.3 (December 2009) 393.

<sup>15</sup> Jung, Sandro, ‘Sarah Pearson’s Gothic Verse Tales’, *Women’s Writing* 16.3 (December 2009) 395.

<sup>16</sup> Pearson, S., *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: S. Low, Berwick Street, 1800) 26-27.

<sup>17</sup> Jung, Sandro, ‘Sarah Pearson’s Gothic Verse Tales’, *Women’s Writing* 16.3 (December 2009) 394.

## II. Metaphors for Death; or, Desired Evil

### *Sonnet V – To the Owl (Anne Bannerman)*

#### 1. Introduction

Death is a recurrent motif in Gothic fiction, and consequentially in Gothic verse. As one of the objectives of the Gothic is to familiarise the unfamiliar, this comes as no surprise, as one can scarcely think of something more unfamiliar than there where no man has gone before – and returned to tell the tale. Interesting, however, is that the perception of death in Gothic fiction is not necessarily negative.

As the ambiguous perception of traditionally negative concepts is not uncommon in Gothic verse, I make a distinction betwixt ‘desired evil’ and ‘forceful evil’, the first denoting a positive connotation to traditionally negative abstractions and the latter betokening a usually destructive, unwanted force (i.e. an abstraction of the Gothic villain). In this section of my bachelor paper, I will look at *Sonnet V: To the Owl* by Anne Bannerman and its relation to death and ‘desired evil’.

#### 2. Phrasings for Death

*Sonnet V: To the Owl* relies heavily on the image of the owl as a messenger of death and the affinity of the lyrical I to this function. The image of the owl in *Sonnet V* is the first thing to contribute to a gloomy atmosphere as it usually is a bird of ill-omen (or, death). The idea that the owl is closely linked to death develops mainly in the second stanza where the screeching of the owl and the howling of the wind “mingle” (l6, SV) (note how “owl”

resonates in “howlings”; l5, SV) and subsequently links the owl to destruction. The last line of this stanza offers a clear reference to death (“eternal rest”; l8, SV) and pronounces the owl as messenger of death (who “call[s] the sufferer to eternal rest”; l8, SV). However, as the verbs “may” and “seem” in line 7 indicate, this is only an impression.

Bannerman builds up the gloomy atmosphere surrounding the owl one word at the time, using a high concentration of Gothic vocabulary. Words suggesting terror<sup>18</sup> and death<sup>19</sup> refer to the owl in six cases out of nine, which supports the interpretation that the owl is intimately linked to death (and therefore terror-inspiring). Words expressing isolated stillness; “rest” (l8, SV) and “[s]pirit” (l9, SV), but also “melancholy” (l1, SV) and “lonely” (l3, SV) counter the strong emphasis on the negativity of the link betwixt the owl and death, thus adding another shade to the meaning of the owl. Regardless of its (traditionally) negative connotation, the presence of the owl here is seen as “soothing” (l2, SV) and the lyrical I urges the owl to nest close (l3-4, SV) and it is due to these connotations that I call the owl a token of ‘desired evil’. It is not merely an omen, but also offers an escape route for the lyrical I, away from the turbulent tides of his thoughts.

The interpretation of the storm as irrationality in thought stems from the reading of the owl as an aspect of the poet’s identity. By having the owl nestle close to his “dwelling” (l4, SV), the lyrical I closes the gap. That the lyrical I hears the owl in the middle of the storm<sup>20</sup>, implies an even closer relation, especially considering the ambiguous use of ‘still’ in the last line (implying either a continuing trend or referring to the vociferation).

<sup>18</sup> i.e.: ‘cry’ (l2), ‘wailings’ (l4), ‘howlings’ (l5) ‘scream’ (l6), ‘sufferer’ (l8, all SV).

<sup>19</sup> i.e.: ‘owl’ (title), ‘funereal’ (l2) ‘eternal rest’ (l8), ‘graves’ (l11, all SV).

<sup>20</sup> “loud, and louder still, the tempest raves;--/ And still I hear thee from the dizzy steep.” (ll13-14, SV).

### 3. The Form of *Sonnet V: To the Owl*

As a sonnet in the English tradition, *Sonnet V: To the Owl* can be read as an elegy. In the words of Stanley B. Greenfield, an elegy is “a relatively short reflective or dramatic poem embodying a contrasting pattern of loss and consolation, ostensibly based upon a specific personal experience or observation, and expressing an attitude towards that experience [or observation].”<sup>21</sup> The desolate scenery of a tempestuous sea, the hints of transience, loss and consolation, and the observational air all point in the direction of an elegy. The observant air is evident in the focus on the lyrical I. The setting against an uneasy ocean becomes clearer in the last stanza, with phrasings like “the deep” (l9, SV), “stormy waves” (l10, SV), and “wat’ry graves” (l11, SV). Both a notion of transience as well as one of loss is marked with words like “melancholy” (l1, SV), “funereal” (l2, SV), “eternal rest” (l8, SV), and “wat’ry graves” (l11, SV). Additionally, it puts the owl forward as an omen of death. Even so, the presence of the owl is a sorrow-alleviating one, soothing and omnipresent (as its cry is still audible over the turbulence of the wind and sea, cf. l14, SV). All these elements tied together make a good case to read this poem as an elegy.

Yet over and above, *Sonnet V* is a love poem as is traditional in its Italian origin<sup>22</sup>. The poem marks the affinity of the lyrical I with death, not an unusual occurrence in Gothic verse. Describing the owl’s cry as “funereal” and “soothing” at the same time, and linking love with cheerlessness and “melancholy” (l1, SV) are the most obvious examples which support this attraction to death. The owl is also described as a mitigator to the “sufferer” (l8, SV) bringing relief in the form of death (“eternal sleep”, 8). That the rhyming scheme diverts

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<sup>21</sup> Stanley B. Greenfield, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature*, (New York: New York University Press, 1966) 143.

<sup>22</sup> Fuller, John, *The Sonnet*, ed. by Jump, John D. (Norfolk: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1972) 7.

from the traditional 'abba cddc effegg'<sup>23</sup>, directs our attention to the last stanza, where the triumph of the owl over the wind becomes clear ("loud, and louder still, the tempest raves;-- / And still I hear [the owl] from the dizzy steep", ll13-14, SV). Taking these things into account, this sonnet is not merely a declaration of love to the owl (and death), it is also a justification of this love.

#### 4. Conclusion

As I mentioned above, the imagery of the owl is the key image in *Sonnet V: To the Owl*. The owl as a bad omen, together with the stormy setting, is therefore the main source of the sonnet's caliginous atmosphere. The peculiarity of the owl-image shows in the vocabulary Bannerman uses. By attributing words denoting terror and/or death to the owl, she succeeds in capturing its negative connotation, but the interesting facet is yet to come; Bannerman does not limit the owl to only its negative connotations. By mentioning its function of "bringer of eternal rest" and its "soothing" qualities to the lyrical I, the owl evolves from a mere omen to an image of escapism, and therefore a token of 'desired evil'.

The elegiac form of the sonnet supports the interpretation of the owl as a desired evil, as its juxtaposition of privation and solace reflects the two-folded function of the owl (as messenger or bringer of death and as comforter). Reading *Sonnet V* in a sonnet's function as a love poem amplifies the celebration of the owl, since it emphasises the link between love and melancholy.

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<sup>23</sup> The rhyming scheme of *Sonnet V* is 'abba cddc effefe'.

### III. The Evildoer; or, Forceful Evil

*Sonnet VI – To the Ocean; Sonnet V – To the Owl; Ode II – The Mermaid  
(Bannerman) and The Burgomaster’s Wife; The Vigil of St. Mark (Pearson)*

#### 1. Introduction

In Gothic fiction, tradition desires a victimiser, who is typically male and possesses prodigious powers. The Gothic villain is cunning, corrupted, and manipulative, but may also possess heroic traits. Another characteristic is “the dark features of the villain”<sup>24</sup> in complexion, dress, and/or behaviour. Despite the villain’s initial collected composure, his passionate, even aggressive nature soon reaches the surface. Other important characteristics are obsessive, controlling behaviour and a tendency towards perversion and avarice. Some Gothic villains are entirely evil, yet some seek redemption.

As I have already mentioned in ‘II. Metaphors for Death; or, Desired Evil’, I make a distinction between on the one hand ‘desired evil’ as the positive perception of traditionally negative concepts and ‘forceful evil’ on the other hand, as the evildoer, a destructive, unwanted force –be it in its abstract or concrete form. As Bannerman’s poetry deals with ‘forceful evil’ in a more abstract manner, and Pearson casts the evildoer in a tangible form, I discuss their poetry separately. I will pay particular attention to the narrative, the vocabulary, and the imagery of *Sonnet VI: To the Ocean*, *Sonnet V: To the Owl* and *Ode II: The Mermaid* (all three by Anne Bannerman), and *The Burgomaster’s Wife* and *The Vigil of St. Mark* (both by Sarah Pearson). Then I will discuss the form of *Sonnet V* in particular and lastly I will offer a synopsis of my findings thus far.

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<sup>24</sup> Botting, Fred, *Gothic* (London: Taylor and Francis e-library, 2005) 4.

## 2. The Portrayal of the Evildoer

Relevant poems by Bannerman are *Sonnet VI: To the Ocean*, and –albeit to a lesser extent– *Sonnet V: To the Owl* and *Ode II: The Mermaid*, as these three poems have the imagery of a tempestuous ocean and a destructive wind in common. As the wind –in combination with the ocean (ergo, a storm) or as two separate entities– is always presented as destructive, as is the ocean, they are variants of the same motif. As for Sarah Pearson’s poetry, *The Burgomaster’s Wife* and *The Vigil of St. Mark* offer the most interesting insights in this respect.

### a. Sonnets by Anne Bannerman

The atmosphere Bannerman creates in *Sonnet VI* is one of turbulence, chaos, and death centred around the ocean as the evildoer one encounters in Gothic novels. The ocean is initially presented as a dormant, lurking danger<sup>25</sup>, serene on the surface<sup>26</sup> but murmuring underneath<sup>27</sup>. The difference between the dormant danger on the one hand and the raging tempest on the other lies in an external factor. Scilicet, it is the wind which initiates the storm<sup>28</sup>, even though the wind was still “genial” (l2, SVI) in the first stanza. The ocean’s destructive tendency is already hinted at in the first line (“thy stormy waves, tempestuous main!”) and forms a consistent leitmotiv throughout the poem (“destructive”, l5; “ruthless”, l13, both SVI<sup>29</sup>). Furthermore, the uproarious sea also finds a concretisation in the many

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<sup>25</sup> “hush’d” (l1, SVI).

<sup>26</sup> “so calm, so fair” (l8, SVI).

<sup>27</sup> “danger lurks within” (l3, SVI).

<sup>28</sup> “when the whirlwind’s sweep/ along thy bosom” (ll7-8, SVI).

<sup>29</sup> Other examples include the following: the lurking danger in line 3, “unpitying” (l9), and “whelm’st in” (l11, both SVI).

exclamation marks<sup>30</sup>. As the first stanza contains a concentration of exclamation marks, it is clear that Bannerman either uses them to build up the turbulent atmosphere or to offer a contrast with the –initially- hushed ocean. The ocean’s controlling behaviour and the movement from composed surface to aggressive outbursts are typical characteristics of the evildoer.

Furthermore, once impelled, the ocean acquires the attributes of a human being; it evolves from an abstract force of nature into an active felon who drives the ship on a rock and overwhelms the seafarers (respectively l10 and l11, SVI). The active verbs and verbal adjectives used in accordance to the ocean<sup>31</sup> also point towards reading the ocean as a personification rather than an abstract force, especially when considering those phrases alluding to the ocean’s mouth<sup>32</sup> which strengthen the emphasis on the engulfing character of the ocean. In addition to verbs and verbal adjectives, “bosom” (l8, SVI) and “breast” (l11, SVI) are used to explicitly refer to the ocean’s body parts. By alluding to the ocean’s physicality, Bannerman ameliorates its potential to fulfil a role usually assigned to concrete, human characters.

Even in its function as lover (cf. below; ‘3. The Form of the Sonnet’), the ocean has a morbid twist. As in *Sonnet V*<sup>33</sup>, words denoting death are omnipresent, but in less straightforward phrasings than for instance “wat’ry grave” (l11, SV). Instead, Bannerman implies the presence of death through a tumultuous setting and words like “despair” (l6,

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<sup>30</sup> Namely in lines 1,2, 3, 5, 13, and 14 in SVI.

<sup>31</sup> Examples include the following: “thy [...] aspect [...] reminds me” (ll6-7), “thou driv’st the fated bark” (l10), and “[w]helm’st in thy wat’ry breast” (l11, all SVI).

<sup>32</sup> Examples include the following: “thy murmu’rings seem to say” (l4), “[t]hy smiling aspect” (l6), and “[thou] smil’st” (l12, all SVI).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. ‘II. Metaphors for Death; or, Desired Evil’, ‘2. Phrasings for Death’, ‘a. *Sonnet V: To the Owl* by Anne Bannerman.’

SVI), “unpitying” (l9, SVI), “fated” (l10, SVI), and “dreadful” (l13, SVI)<sup>34</sup>. As the ocean inspires these words in the lyrical I and the sailors –while keeping the ocean’s destructive force in mind- it is not only a possessive lover, but also a fatal one. Like Venus’s love in *Venus & Adonis* by William Shakespeare, the ocean is blind to the sufferings of its victims and forcefully obtrudes itself to them. Similar to Venus in her pretence-fit, the ocean seems “so calm, so fair” (l8, SVI) on the surface, yet differs from Venus as it directly causes the deaths of the sailors and is set in motion by an external source (the wind), rather than an internal one (i.e. Venus’s lust for Adonis).

In *Sonnet V: To the Owl*, it is the storm which carries out the role of the victimiser, overwhelming the lyrical I with its immense power and potential for demolition. Words referring to the storm denote force as well as imply a lack of control<sup>35</sup>, which confirms its interpretation as a Gothic villain. An interesting contrast with *Sonnet VI* is that the storm is not personified. Even more, the allusions to “[s]pirit” (l9, SV) and “[a]erial forms” (l12, SV) suggest an interpretation of the wind as restless contemplations; howling, shroudless, dizzying.

b. *Ode II: The Mermaid* by Anne Bannerman

In *Ode II: The Mermaid*, the imagery is again focused on and around the ocean and the wind as the perpetrators, in the first place because they physically isolate their ‘victim’ (Ajut is out

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<sup>34</sup> Other examples include the following: “danger” (l3), “beware” (l4), “destructive” (l5), and “luckless” (l11, all SVI).

<sup>35</sup> I.e.: “blast” (l5), “roarings of the stormy waves” (l10), “sweep” (l12), “loud, and louder still, the tempest raves” (l13, all SV).

on the sea to look for her lover) an biologically (as she slowly transforms into a mermaid). In comparison with *Sonnet V* and *Sonnet VI*, the wind is deadly and violent from the first line<sup>36</sup> and is specifically identified as “demons of the gulf” (l3, Oll). The ocean is presented as a more distinctively negative entity from the first mention (“death-fraught whirlwinds”, l1; “demons of the gulf”, l3, both Oll). It is “raging” (l9), “desolating” (l10, both Oll), icy<sup>37</sup>; it is “the dark and angry deep” (l31, Oll). Mark how the ‘dark’ otherness of the evildoer is reflected in the ocean, as well as his aggressive nature. In addition, Ajut vituperates the ocean for “unbounded waste of seas” (l17, Oll), which indicates another characteristic of the Gothic villain, namely avarice, on the ocean’s part.

Notwithstanding the ocean’s importance in *Ode II*, there is also a second figure open for discussion, namely the allegory Vengeance. His appearance is brief (Vengeance appears in only one of the seven stanzas), yet decisive, as he ensnares Ajut into completing her transformation to femme fatale (cf. ‘III: The Femme Fatale; or, Evil in Desire’)<sup>38</sup>. This manipulative identity differs from the type of villainy the ocean and wind commit, yet is still one of the main characteristics of the Gothic villain. Combined with the violence into which he urges Ajut, these elements validate the interpretation of Vengeance as an evildoer.

### c. *The Burgomaster’s Wife* by Sarah Pearson

In *The Burgomaster’s Wife*, a concrete, tangible character functions as the evildoer: the sexton. He is an archetype of the Gothic villain in his own way. Firstly, the Gothic anticlerical attitude has its influence on the depiction the sexton, even in conservative Gothic poetry

<sup>36</sup> “dead-fraught whirlwinds” (l1, Oll).

<sup>37</sup> “Heap’d by the gelid hand of frost” (l16, Oll).

<sup>38</sup> “When Vengeance bears along the wave/ The spell [...] On me the gifted wizard calls” (ll41-44, Oll).

which recommends Christian faith<sup>39</sup>. Secondly, the sexton isolated his victim (the Wife) from the rest of the world.<sup>40</sup> Thirdly, he opens the tomb under the cover of night<sup>41</sup> to rob the Wife from her “crosses, beads, and rings,/ Locketts, and such-like curious things,/ As usually she carried” (ll10-12, BW). This cupidity can be interpreted as greed for material things, or, taking Botting’s words (“the erotic [...] tendencies of Gothic villains”<sup>42</sup>) into account; as carnality, considering the nature of the nightly visit and the Wife’s reaction<sup>43</sup>.

#### d. *The Vigil of St. Mark* by Sarah Pearson

In *The Vigil of St. Mark*, Sarah Pearson explores the other end of the spectrum by putting an abstract force in the role of the evildoer. The poem puts us before what initially seems a not so clear-cut choice between ‘desired’ or ‘forceful evil’. It is mainly the presentation of the main character as “ancient” (l9, VSM)<sup>44</sup> –thus implying wisdom- and the suggestive language<sup>45</sup> which sets the reader on the wrong track. Even so, the attentive reader recognises the forceful nature of the “unknown Power” (l27, VSM) to which the main character falls prey.

The presageful undertone of the poem shows already in the opening stanza, where dark elements (“Storms”, l1 and “Midnight”, l3, both VSM) interpose spring (l2, VSM), with allusions to something hidden (or “veil’d”, l4, VSM), and the mention of gloom (even if juxtaposed with “lighter”, l4, VSM). By alluding to the creek in stanza two as a serpent

<sup>39</sup> Jung, Sandro, ‘Sarah Pearson’s Gothic Verse Tales’, *Women’s Writing* 16.3 (December 2009) 392.

<sup>40</sup> “Within [the] vault the Corse interr’d [...] The Sexton kept the key.” (ll19-24, BW).

<sup>41</sup> “When midnight clos’d all eyes” (l27, BW).

<sup>42</sup> Botting, Fred, *Gothic* (London: Taylor and Francis e-library, 2005) 3.

<sup>43</sup> “Her strength reviv’d by fear;/ The chilling crape aside she tost,/ And springin upright as a post,/ Call’d loudly on her Dear./Her hands the robber’s fingers clasp” (ll33-37, BW).

<sup>44</sup> The reader learns only from line 29 onwards that the curse dates from “his frolic youth” (l29, VSM).

<sup>45</sup> “courts” (l9), “[he] wakes [...] to wonder, watch, and weep” (ll11-12), “Impell’d by some resistless cause” (l13, all VSM), &c.

(which “[s]low[ly] amongst the cowslips creeps”; l5-6, VSM) and by presenting an isolated environment<sup>46</sup>, Pearson continues the faint suggestions towards ‘forceful evil’. More hints in this direction follow in line 25, where the main character is no longer an “ancient Swain” (l9,VSM), but an “old, reluctant Seer”<sup>47</sup>. The flashback in stanza 8 to 14 tells us that the choice to affront this “unknown Power” (l27, VSM) was entirely his own<sup>48</sup>, but also marks his regrets<sup>49</sup>. Only after this explanatory passage, the directing power is referred to in dictatorial terms<sup>50</sup>.

### 3. The Form of *Sonnet VI: To the Ocean*

As described in ‘II. Metaphors for Death; or, Desired Evil’, the sonnet is a love poem. *Sonnet VI* being the most interesting in this respect, I will focus on the influence of form on this poem in particular.

The ocean acts as an all-engulfing entity, as for example in line 11: “[Thou] whelm’st in thy wat’ry breast the luckless crew.” The break in the succession of iambic feet with “whelm’st” (l11, SVI) and the emphasis on words like “bosom” (l8, SVI) and “breast” (l11, SVI) in the context of the ocean’s embracing aspect implies a reading of the ocean as a possessive lover, an interpretation supported by the poem’s form, namely that of a sonnet, or love poem. As the unit ‘adjective plus “main”’ in the first line<sup>51</sup> is repeated in the second to last line<sup>52</sup> and in the rhyme “main”-“pain” (resp. l1, l13, and l14), I interpret the rhyme

<sup>46</sup> “[where] no light is seen, no sound is heard,/ And all the Hamlet sleeps” (ll7-8, VSM).

<sup>47</sup> l25, VSM; even though ‘seer’ implies a certain degree of choice, the adjective ‘reluctant’ overthrows this.

<sup>48</sup> “He wish’d to prove the tale” (l30, VSM).

<sup>49</sup> “But of the wish’d his hardy mind/ Had never led him there” (ll37-38, VSM).

<sup>50</sup> “A force [...] compels him” (ll62-63, VSM).

<sup>51</sup> “tempestuous main” (l1, SVI).

<sup>52</sup> “ruthless main” (l13, SVI).

scheme as aba'b cbc b dede aa (instead of the more conventional abab cbc b dede ff). The repetition of the '-ain' sound suggests a circular movement from the end back to the beginning, and consequently supports the enclosing aspect of the ocean. Important to note as well is the evolution from a "tempestuous main" (l1, SVI) to a "ruthless main" (l13, SVI); it not only invites the reader to restart reading the poem, it also implies an evolution from a 'neutral' destructive power to one regardless of its victims.

That both the two first and the two latter lines end with an exclamation mark, reinforces the circular movement of the sonnet (as discussed previously) and links the relative peace and quiet in lines 1 and 2 to the wanton destruction in lines 13 and 14. The thus built up tension is also reflected in the sonnet's form. The douzain (ll1-12) prepares the reader for the gemell (last couplet), in which Bannerman offers the interpretation of the ocean as a sadistic evildoer on a silver platter<sup>53</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

The evildoer is one of the stock figures in Gothic fiction and verse, but a stereotypical presence does not necessarily equal a stereotypical representation. As seen above, Anne Bannerman and Sarah Pearson employ the same concept in fundamentally different ways; Bannerman approaches the evildoer in an abstract manner, whereas Pearson also employs the Gothic villain as a concrete character.

*Sonnet VI: To the Ocean* offers insight in the abstraction of the Gothic villain. Here, it is the ocean which is personified and presented as 'forceful evil', especially in combination with the wind. The ocean, which needs the wind as an initiator, soon grows destructive and

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<sup>53</sup> "Such are thy dreadful trophies, ruthless main!/ What are thy triumphs – but another's pain!" (ll13-14, SVI).

thus displays the 'passionate', aggressive outbursts which typifies the Gothic villain. This tendency towards excess also comes forward in the enthusiastic use of exclamation marks in the first and last stanza. Besides emphasising the ocean's outbursts, the exclamation marks also emphasise the form of the sonnet. In *Sonnet V: To the Owl*, Bannerman attributes the same role to the storm; that of a ruthless victimiser. In *Ode II: The Mermaid*, the storm serves a similar purpose, even though the finality of the storm's destruction is emphasised. The contrast between the unbounded storm on the one hand and the (initial) checked behaviour of Ajut on the other augments the storm's fatality. The appearance of the allegory Vengeance in *Ode II* adds another shade to Bannerman's representation of the evildoer, as it shows the manipulative traits of the evildoer.

Whereas Bannerman stays in the middle with the use of personifications and allegories, the evildoer in Pearson's poetry covers the extremes of the spectrum. In *The Burgomaster's Wife*, the evildoer is the sexton, a concrete character. As a clerical figure with the tendencies of a sexual predator who traps his victim (the Wife) in an isolated setting, the sexton is a stereotypical Gothic villain. In *The Vigil of St. Mark*, the other end of the spectrum is shown; an abstract power features as the 'evildoer'.

#### IV. The Femme Fatale; or, Evil in Desire

*Ode I – The Spirit of the Air; Ode II – The Mermaid (Bannerman) and The Burgomaster’s Wife; Tale of Donica (Pearson)*

##### 1. Introduction

As mentioned before, the Gothic relies on stock characters<sup>54</sup>, one of which is the femme fatale. The femme fatale is a concept that unites both ‘evil’ and ‘desire’; she is a seductress who ensnares her object of desire with her sexuality, which often leads to a fatal –or at least displeasing– outcome or, in the words of Rebecca Stott, the femme fatale is “a powerful and threatening figure, bearing a sexuality that is perceived to be rapacious, or fatal to her male partners.”<sup>55</sup> Eroticism is an important aspect of the Gothic, as David Punter reminds us as well, and expressing sexuality only through conventions causes “Eros [to return] in the form of violence and threat.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, Gothic writers see sexuality as the result of broiling evil, according to Punter<sup>57</sup>.

Evident examples of the femme fatale in Gothic verse can be found in Anne Bannerman’s *Ode II: The Mermaid*, but also *Ode I: The Spirit of the Air*. Sarah Pearson, on the other hand, offers an interesting contrast with her depiction of the Wife in *The Burgomaster’s Wife* and the reversal of conventions in *Tale of Donica*. Firstly, I will discuss the development of the femme fatale in these four poems and I will take a look at the vocabulary and imagery and how they reinforce (or weaken) the concept ‘femme fatale’.

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<sup>54</sup> Punter, David, *Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1980), 11.

<sup>55</sup> Stott, Rebecca, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (London: MacMillan, 1996) viii.

<sup>56</sup> Punter, David, *Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1980), 411.

<sup>57</sup> Punter, David, *Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1980), 411.

Secondly, I will draw in the influence of the form of Bannerman's poems and lastly, I will concisely recapture my points.

## 2. The Development of the Femme Fatale

*Ode I: The Spirit of the Air*, *Ode II: The Mermaid* (both by Anne Bannerman) and *The Burgomaster's Wife* (by Sarah Pearson) each bring forward an interesting development of the femme fatale (or lack of development). In *Ode II*, the lyrical I undergoes a mythical metamorphosis from virtuous lover to seductive mermaid, whereas the lyrical I in *Ode I* moves in the opposite direction. *The Burgomaster's Wife* shows a different representation of the female character; the Wife is a passive figure with less conscious control over her surroundings than either of the aforementioned has. In *Tale of Donica*, also by Pearson, we see an allusion to the reversal of gender roles.

### a. *Ode II: The Mermaid* by Anne Bannerman

*Ode II: The Mermaid* was inspired by publications in *The Rambler* (n°186 and n°187), which related the courtship between the virtuous Greenlandic lovers Anningait and Ajut. As related in *The Rambler*, Ajut was changed into a mermaid during the search for her lover. Bannerman develops this mythical metamorphosis from virtuous lover to devious femme fatale in the form of a mermaid in a subtle manner throughout the poem.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Mark that Ajut undergoes the same development from semi-passive to active as the ocean in *Sonnet VI*. Another fascinating peculiarity is that Bannerman personifies the ocean in the process, but alienates Ajut from her fellow-humans.

Even though the first attributes to Ajut in *Ode II* are those of isolated observation<sup>59</sup>, which would suggest detachment, she is identified with the ocean at an increasing rate<sup>60</sup>. In the first place as the ocean physically isolates her from the mainland and causes the metamorphosis which biologically isolates her from her people. In the second place as Ajut celebrates the ocean as her lover's grave<sup>61</sup>. Moreover, by describing Ajut's tears as "streaming eyes" (l14, OII), Bannerman suggests a link on the basis of the likeness in substance (i.e. salty liquid) and the semi-homonymy between 'streaming' and 'stream'. This is done in line 28 as well, where Ajut "pours the siren-song." Again, the choice of the verb implies an association between the lyrical I and the ocean. Even more, as it is an active verb, it further hints at a growing affinity between Ajut and the ocean. This identification to the ocean is important to her function of seductress, as Ajut was stated to be "so much distinguished by [her] beauty"<sup>62</sup> and thus have the appeal, but not yet the menace of the femme fatale. The closer linked to the ocean, the more malignant she becomes.

When Ajut admits her change<sup>63</sup>, she first attributes an observational role to herself, then openly owns to her role as femme fatale for the first time<sup>64</sup> and voices her increasing part in the storm<sup>65</sup>. Nevertheless, the distant observation<sup>66</sup> and making the ship an active participant in its own downfall<sup>67</sup> temper Ajut's actions. Only towards the end of the poem does she start to accept her new identity; her transformation from virtuous lover to seductress is complete when Ajut welcomes "th'embodied spirits [...] Avenging ministers of

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<sup>59</sup> "I hear you"; "My solitary watch I keep,/ And listen" (resp. l4 and ll7-8, OII).

<sup>60</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of the ocean in *Ode II*, cf. 'III. The Evildoer; or, Forceful Evil.'

<sup>61</sup> "Eternal world of waters, hail!" (l11, OII).

<sup>62</sup> *The Rambler*, n°186.

<sup>63</sup> "Yes! I am chang'd" (l21, OII).

<sup>64</sup> "I watch the bark [...] To lure the sailor to his doom" (ll24-26, OII).

<sup>65</sup> "I lend new fury to the blast" (l36, OII).

<sup>66</sup> "I mark each hardy cheek grow pale" (l37, OII).

<sup>67</sup> "Till the vessel drinks the surging waves" (l39, OII).

wrath" (ll50-52,OII) and offers her help<sup>68</sup>. The mention of the volcano Hecla<sup>69</sup> suggests an interesting parallel with Ajut's passionate love for Anningait and –later on– her function as femme fatale. The first parallel can be made because her love extinguishes her purity, as it is the main cause of her metamorphosis. The second parallel is legitimate for similar reasons, as it concretises how the heat of her passion melts her virtue. The completion of her deterioration is marked most clearly in the last stanza as the focus moves to herself as one who "scatter[s] death" (l61, OII) and she ultimately embraces her destiny<sup>70</sup>.

b. *Ode I: The Spirit of the Air* by Anne Bannerman

In *Ode I: The Spirit of the Air* we find a reversed development. The Spirit of the Air incipiently presents herself as an omnipotent being<sup>71</sup>. Unlike the more reserved Ajut, the Spirit boasts about her abilities<sup>72</sup> and thus makes for a more pronounced femme fatale. In the third stanza, she even announces herself as the navel of the storm<sup>73</sup>. Also mark the high number of 'elevated' vocabulary in *Ode I* in comparison to *Ode II*<sup>74</sup>, which reflects how narcissistic the Spirit is.

The Spirit's aggressive attitude towards men becomes clear in the second stanza<sup>75</sup> and continues until the sixth stanza, where "the suffocating blast descends/ In clouds of fluid

<sup>68</sup> "To aid your toils, to scatter death" (l61, OII).

<sup>69</sup> "Hecla's flames the snows dissolve" (l55, OII).

<sup>70</sup> "To lead the victims to their fate [...] And lure, in seraph-strains, unpitying, to destroy" (ll68-70,OII).

<sup>71</sup> "My will supreme [...] The earth, the air, the sea obey [...] O'er all the prostrate world my power extends" (ll5-9, OI).

<sup>72</sup> "My glance pervades the realms of space;/ Each hidden spring this arm can trace" (ll7-8, OI).

<sup>73</sup> "What form is that, half-hid in air,/ Round whose pale brow the torrents roar?/ 'Tis Freedom!" (ll21-23, OI).

<sup>74</sup> - l1, 3, 4, 31, 55, 72,81 &c in *Ode I*. l1, 23, 73, &c in *Ode II*.

- "hush'd" (l1), "o'er" (l2, 9,40, 73,95), "'Tis" (l13, 23), "beck'ning" (l40), "thro'" (l41, 56, 82), "tow'ring" (l101) &c in *Ode I*. "Heap'd" (l16), "Thro'" (l17, 67), "black'ning" (l23), "o'er" (l57), &c in *Ode II*

<sup>75</sup> "I come [...] To crush the oppressor's giant crest,/ To hurl destruction on his breast" (ll15-18, OI).

fire" (ll 59-60, OI) on "[t]he Arab [and] his daring band" (ll43-44, OI). Women, on the other hand, she commiserates<sup>76</sup>. This biased attitude is also illustrated in the third stanza, when the Spirit calls on the (male) crew to spare a mother who tried to save her son<sup>77</sup>. Enraged by their dismissal, she plans to punish them<sup>78</sup>; the Spirit will alleviate their journey home but warns the sailors: "[C]urb their joy [as] I will meet you there" (l36,OI). That the nature of her punishment is psychological rather than physical<sup>79</sup>, suggests a higher level of a *femme fatale's* artfulness.

Then, contrary to *Ajut* in *Ode II*, the Spirit moves from an active to an observant role<sup>80</sup>. Where *Ajut's* observational air in *Ode II* was always chaperoned by aggressive tendencies<sup>81</sup>, the observation here seems to prelude a sense of sympathy for men. The Spirit's vehemence crumbles when she laments the death of sailors<sup>82</sup>, but the disquieting undertone of the following words<sup>83</sup> could be interpreted as victorious utterances of an individual set out to annihilate all (male) life around her, which corresponds with the image the Spirit evokes of herself. Regardless of the ambiguity in the intermediate stanzas<sup>84</sup>, the development continues from destructive domination to acceptance of (instead of boasting about) her identity<sup>85</sup>, yet there are two possible approaches to interpret her level of viciousness. If stanza eight and nine are interpreted ironically, the Spirit remains destructive

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<sup>76</sup> "I come [...] To cheer the wretch, whom fetters bind" (ll15-16, OI).

<sup>77</sup> "I see the mother clasp her child [...] Spare, monsters, spare her agonies" (ll26-28, OI).

<sup>78</sup> "[t]hen, as your friends, your infant race,/ Rush wildly to your fond embrace,/ Before your eyes a gashtly form shall stand,/ And o'er her infant weep, and wave her beck'ning hand." (ll37-40, OI).

<sup>79</sup> The Spirit will not kill the men, but summons a horrid apparition when they think themselves safe at home.

<sup>80</sup> "I see the living current freeze;/ As horror grasps each fainting form" (ll67-68, OI). Note that, in the beginning of the poem, the Spirit proclaimed "I lock [the tremendous deep] in eternal frost" (l4,OI).

<sup>81</sup> "I watch the bark [...] To lure the sailor to his doom"; "I lend new fury to the blast;/ I mark each hardy cheek grow pale" (resp. ll24-26 and ll36-37, OII).

<sup>82</sup> "My harp shall join in solemn strains;/ My voice shall echo to the waves" (ll76-77,OI).

<sup>83</sup> "Blest be the gloom, that wraps each sacred head,/ And blest th'unbroken sleep, and silence of the dead!" (ll79-80, OI).

<sup>84</sup> I.e. stanza eight and nine.

<sup>85</sup> "I waft from heaven the balmy breeze,/ that sighs along the sleeping seas"; "I smile at danger's threat'ning form;/ I mock destruction [...] And leave the roaring winds, contending at my feet." (ll87-88 and ll100-103, OI).

and becomes even more malicious. Otherwise, the hailing of death as a blessing<sup>86</sup> contributes to the sense of moral development manifested throughout the poem, as it implies that the Spirit allows the dead peace.

c. *The Burgomaster's Wife* by Sarah Pearson

A third relevant poem is *The Burgomaster's Wife* by Sarah Pearson. This poem makes for an interesting contrast with Bannerman's interpretation of female characters and Pearson's religious, conservative interpretation of the Gothic creeps into her depiction of the woman. Whereas Ajut and the Spirit are both ferocious with a sexual undertone<sup>87</sup>, the Burgomaster's Wife is a passive figure. She is so passive even, that she is mistaken to be dead<sup>88</sup>.

However, the Wife's passivity is not absolute; when the sexton tries to rob her supposed corpse, for example, the Wife rises and clutches him firmly<sup>89</sup> instead of fainting as the typical Gothic heroine would. The sexual connotation of a man visiting a woman to "take a private view,/ When midnight clos'd all eyes" (ll26-27, BW) in her (albeit last) resting place (and definitely when she reacts by grasping his hands) is obvious, but whereas in Bannerman's poetry, the femme fatale takes sexual initiative, the Wife merely reacts to an exterior factor (i.e. the sexton's cupidity, whether it symbolises carnality or not)<sup>90</sup>. On top of this nightly encounter, the Wife prevents her husband from remarrying for seven years, until she positively dies and her husband thus regains his freedom<sup>91</sup>. Nevertheless, this avoidance only comes forth from the Wife's passive existence, not her actions. Furthermore, the

<sup>86</sup> "blest th'unbroken sleep, and silence of the dead!" (l80, OI).

<sup>87</sup> Ajut as a former lover who turned "[t]o lur[ing] the sailor to his doom" (l26, OII) and the Spirit who takes on a dominating attitude towards men.

<sup>88</sup> "a Burgomaster's Wife/ Departed, as 'twas thought, this life" (ll7-8, BW).

<sup>89</sup> "The Sexton of the trinkets knew,/ And went to take a private view, [...] Lift up the [coffin's] lid, and seize the hand,/ When – Madam tries to rise!"; "Her hands the robber's fingers clasp,/ He vainly tries to quit her grasp" (resp. ll25-30 and ll37-38, BW).

<sup>90</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the sexton, cf. 'III. The Evildoer; or, Forceful Evil.'

<sup>91</sup> "In seven years time she ceas'd her motions [... and] left him free to marry." (ll116-120, BW).

vocabulary used to describe the restraint she exercises on her husband, is marked by passivity<sup>92</sup>. As she does not move from passive figure to active seductress, the Wife –unlike Ajut and the Spirit– is a passive, flat character.

The Wife's insistence on returning home, the only active undertaking on her part, could be put forward as a critique on a passive interpretation. Even though the first thing on her mind is returning to her husband<sup>93</sup> and in spite of her perseverance when she raps at his door, the Wife's goal is merely to rejoin her husband (instead of seducing him, as a femme fatale would do), which renders the argument feeble.

a. *Tale of Donica* by Sarah Pearson

Lastly, I will discuss *Tale of Donica*, a poem inspired by Robert Southey's ballad *Donica*<sup>94</sup>. Southey's ballad talks of a damsel Donica, "[a]s fair as air might be"<sup>95</sup>, who died and became possessed by the devil. Her fiancé does not notice her change in behaviour, and presses her to marry immediately. When he takes her hand before the altar, "[t]he livid corpse fell dead."<sup>96</sup>

Pearson's poem uses this narrative as a basis to offer a humorous intake on marriage. The married couple whose utterances make up the poem retells Southey's story; the

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<sup>92</sup> "tarry" (l117, BW); the Wife does not speak; even when imprisoned by her husband, the Wife continues her duties as a spouse (e.g. by spinning linen; "A web of linen, fine and clean,/ Which this fair lady spun;/ Long after her dear Spouse had trust/ Her soul was number'd with the just,/ And all her work was done.", ll109-114, BW) without too much protest ("However decent in her notions", l115, BW).

<sup>93</sup> "Springing upright as a poft [?],/ Call'd loudly on her Dear" (ll36-37, BW).

<sup>94</sup> Southey, Robert, *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Southey* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1851) 436.

<sup>95</sup> Southey, Robert, *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Southey* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1851) 437.

<sup>96</sup> Southey, Robert, *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Southey* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1851) 438.

“married coxcomb” (I3, TD) mockingly comments that many young women who marry were possessed by the devil, to which Lady Anne full-heartedly agrees<sup>97</sup>. Interesting in respect to the femme fatale figure is that conventions are turned around, as the young woman who is supposed to ensnare a prosperous man, in *Tale of Donica*, is presented as the one inveigled (or, more specifically, possessed by the devil<sup>98</sup>). By referring to her wedding as the day when she lacked the reason to prevent her now husband to usurp her freedom, Lady Ann alludes to her husband as a male ‘femme fatale’; a seducer who ensnares his object of desire which leads to a displeasing outcome (i.e. marriage)<sup>99</sup>.

### 3. The Form of the Ode

The ode is a formal, noble poem “of fair length” which contains a “serious reflection upon [strong] feelings”<sup>100</sup>. The long classical tradition in which the ode is founded would intuitively make for an obstacle to employ it in Gothic verse, as the Gothic is a reaction against the classical. Bannerman, however, manipulates the form with skill and succeeds in evoking both a Gothic atmosphere as well as respecting the grave style of the ode.

The most obvious characteristic which suggests reading *Ode I: The Spirit of the Air* and *Ode II: The Mermaid* as odes, is their title. By terming her poems odes with subtitles, Bannerman steers the reading in the direction of the ode. The division in stanzas numbered with Roman lettering and the relative length (102 lines for *Ode I* and 70 lines for *Ode II*) further attribute to that line of thought. The grand setting of a tempestuous sea and the

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<sup>97</sup> “I was possess’d that fatal day,/ When spite of Reason’s plainest Rule,/ I gave my freedom to a fool.” (II18-20, TD).

<sup>98</sup> “this devil [...] rest[s]/ Within a bride’s ambrosial breast” (II4-5, TD).

<sup>99</sup> Cf. the introduction to this section.

<sup>100</sup> Both; John D. Jump, *The Ode* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1974), p 37.

powerful characters which figure in it, certainly aid its interpretation as an ode, along with the elevated, dignified vocabulary; repeated use of ‘ye’, ‘thee’, ‘thine’, ‘yon’, and ‘ere’<sup>101</sup> and abbreviated forms<sup>102</sup>. The grammatical peculiarities, such as inversions<sup>103</sup>, combined with the vocabulary makes for a strong case in favour of the ode.

Despite the lack of a straightforward “reflection upon [strong] feelings” and a “theme of acknowledged importance”<sup>104</sup>, the implications of the poems’ formal qualities (namely that they *are* odes) reflect on their content and lend the narrative the necessary distinction. Bannerman uses the noble atmosphere attributed to odes to evoke a link with past glory, as is costume to the Gothic.

#### 4. Conclusion

The femme fatale is another stock figure on which the Gothic relies. This figure unites evil and desire; she seduces her object of desire and leads him (or her) to fatality. The selected poems show different representations of the same concept, and remind us that sexual repression leads to sexually tinted violence.

Ajut, the lyrical I in *Ode II: The Mermaid* by Anne Bannerman, evolves from virtuous lover to devious femme fatale. Her increasing identification with the ocean and her growing involvement in the acts of violence end with Ajut finally recognising her “destiny” as a

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<sup>101</sup> L1, 3, 4, 31, 55, 72,81 &c in *Ode I*. L1, 3, 12, 23, 73, &c in *Ode II*.

<sup>102</sup> “hush’d” (l1), “o’er” (l2, 9,40, 73,95), “’Tis” (l13, 23), “beck’ning” (l40), “thro’” (l41, 56, 82), “tow’ring” (l101). &c in *Ode I*. “Heap’d” (l16), “Thro’” (l17, 46, 67), “black’ning” (l23), “o’er” (l57), &c in *Ode II*. It is remarkable that the quantity of dignified vocabulary is higher in *Ode I*, where the Spirit boasts of her abilities, than in *Ode II*.

<sup>103</sup> l8, 9, 55-56, 65-66, 71, 80, 92, &c in *Ode I*. l7, 12, 18, 27-8, 44, 47, 50, &c in *Ode II*.

<sup>104</sup> Both; John D. Jump, *The Ode* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1974), p 37.

temptress. The ocean functions as the evildoer in this poem as it isolates her both physically and biologically (Ajut transforms into a mermaid and can't leave the ocean)<sup>105</sup>.

*Ode I: The Spirit of the Air* by Bannerman displays a reversed progression. The character of the Spirit develops from an overly confident tyrant with narcissistic tendencies to a figure who harmonises with her identity (including that identity's negative aspects). Unlike what her untempered aggression towards men would suggest, the Spirit is not irrational; her affinity towards women and her preference for psychological rather than physical punishment show her as a sophisticated femme fatale, who is fully aware of her actions. Notwithstanding the severity of that unbounded aggression, the Spirit seems to calm down when she sees a fleet of sailors drown. A crucial passage is the one following this event. The eighth and ninth stanza can be interpreted either ironically, in which case it would add to her shrewd artfulness, or truthfully, in which case it contributes to the sense of moral development on her part.

To offer a contrast to these active seductresses, I added *The Burgomaster's Wife* to the discussed poems. She opposes Bannerman's portrayal of the femme fatale as she is a rather passive figure. Nevertheless, the Wife's passivity is not absolute, for example her reaction when the sexton penetrates her tomb<sup>106</sup>. That the femme fatale does not necessarily have to be a woman becomes apparent in *Tale of Donica*, where two spouses bicker over marriage. The woman remarks that her reason had vanished at the moment that she wedded her husband, and that he took her freedom with her vows. The suggestion of manipulation ushers the reader towards an interpretation of the husband as someone who traps his object of desire, or; a femme fatale.

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<sup>105</sup> Cf. 'III. The Evildoer; or, Forceful Evil.'

<sup>106</sup> The Wife grasps his hands, instead of fainting like a proper Gothic heroine would.

## V. Conclusions

In the previous sections of this paper, I took a closer look at the verse of Anne Bannerman and Sarah Pearson, two Gothic writers who both published a volume in 1800. In spite of the common grounds between them (both lived in the United Kingdom, in the same time period, are women poets who received modest praise for their Gothic verse yet never achieved wide success, and are now nearly forgotten), Bannerman's and Pearson's poetry greatly differ from each other.

In his article *Sarah Pearson's Gothic Verse Tales*<sup>107</sup>, Sandro Jung indicates that Bannerman describes her notion of Gothic poetry in the prologue to *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* (1802)<sup>108</sup> in the form of a sonnet. The sonnet affirms the impression that terror plays an important role in her poetry, and simultaneously emphasises the importance of elegance in form<sup>109</sup>. According to Bannerman, Gothic poetry has to "[l]ead [the reader's] footsteps back to ages past" (l2, P) and voice the "prophetic" "long-lost Spirit of forgotten times" (resp. l7 and l8; P).

In the same article<sup>110</sup>, Jung points out that Pearson describes her view on the Gothic with a poem as well, namely with *Mysteries in Udolpho*, a poem included in *Poems on Various Subjects* (1800). Here, Pearson lauds Ann Radcliffe's novels (*The Mysteries of Udolpho* in particular) for:

Her moon-light mountains, her tempestuous skies,

The deep-wrought mystery of the pathless wood;

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<sup>107</sup> Jung, Sandro, 'Sarah Pearson's Gothic Verse Tales', *Women's Writing* 16.3 (December 2009) 394.

<sup>108</sup> Bannerman, Anne, *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* (London: Vernon and Hood, 1802).

<sup>109</sup> "Blending with terrors wild, and legends drear,/ The charmed minstrelsy of mystic sound" (ll11-12, *Prologue*).

<sup>110</sup> Jung, Sandro, 'Sarah Pearson's Gothic Verse Tales', *Women's Writing* 16.3 (December 2009) 394.

The solemn strain that on the night-wind dies,  
 Firing the fancy as it chills the blood (ll5-8, MU)<sup>111</sup>,

but also “[h]er gloomy castles of chivalric days” (l9, MU). Nevertheless, what is important in comparison to Bannerman’s poetics is that Pearson advocates “Virtue bending from her radiant throne,/ Hail[ing] scenes to love, and truth, and fancy dear” (ll15-16, MU) rather than “terrors wild” (l11, P).

This difference in poetics is reflected in their poetry. Whereas all Bannerman’s poems are set in hostile, violent areas, Pearson’s poems –though often set at night– lack the destructive hostility which is so typical to Bannerman’s settings. Moreover, Pearson’s notion of evil and desire are more or less conservative. In *Tale of Donica*, Pearson emphasises the undeniable power men of her time had over women, in spite of the humours tone of the poem. The curse in *The Vigil of St. Mark* warns the reader against superstition, as formulated in *The Burgomaster’s Wife*:

From [superstition] to infidelity  
 Unfetter’d spirits madly fly,  
 And hence confusion breeds:  
 Hence Suicides and Murders rise,  
 And in their robes of dreadful dies,  
 A crowd of hideous deeds. (ll139-144, BW)

Even though Pearson at first seems to undermine her own conservative Gothic with an anti-clerical image of the sexton, she concludes the poem with the following lines:

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<sup>111</sup> As quoted in: Jung, Sandro, ‘Sarah Pearson’s Gothic Verse Tales’, *Women’s Writing* 16.3 (December 2009) 394.

May pure Religion's powerful hand,  
 From thee protect my native land,  
 And fill each pious mind  
 With faith, which soars on Seraph's wings,  
 With hope, which heav'nly prospects brings,  
 And love to all mankind. (ll145-150, BW)

Pearson's use of the word 'Seraph' allows a seamless continuation to my findings concerning Bannerman, as she brings *Ode II: The Mermaid* to a close with the words "[I, Ajut shall] lure, in seraph-strains, un pitying, to destroy" (l70, OII). Bannerman, however, uses the term to refer to Ajut, who by the end of the ode has transformed to a mermaid-femme fatale, which is a context of an entirely different nature than Pearson's urging call for piety. Whereas Pearson employs the word earnestly, Bannerman manipulates it in an ironical manner.

Nevertheless, Ajut is not the only guileful woman figure in Bannerman. In *Ode I: The Spirit of the Air*, the Spirit also fits the description of a femme fatale, and she manages to surpass the former's treachery. Bannerman's portrayal of the femme fatale is marked by such manipulative malevolence, that she could almost be exchanged for 'desired evil'. Other instances of this 'desired evil' can be found in Bannerman's *Sonnet V: To the Owl*, with the owl as an ill omen (as the bringer of death) but also a symbol for escapism (and therefore positive). A less nuanced notion can be found in the 'forceful evil' of the storm in *Sonnet VI: To the Ocean* and *Ode I*, where the combination of ocean and wind answers an abstracted description of the evildoer, or the Gothic villain.

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