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Lampert-Weissig, Lisa

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Sarah Perry's *Melmoth* and the Implications of Gothic Form

Lisa Lampert-Weissig 

Department of Literature, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA, U.S.A

ABSTRACT

I read Perry's *Melmoth* through the lens of memory scholar Michael Rothberg's 2019 *The Implicated Subject*, which provides a conceptual framework for moving beyond the victim/perpetrator binary when considering responsibility for historical violence and its legacies. I argue that in *Melmoth*, Perry uses gothic forms such as the tale and the found manuscript in ways that allow the reader to experience the moral and ethical dilemmas raised by the acts of violence and genocide that the novel references, including the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust. At the same time, however, I argue that Perry's innovative revision of another gothic convention, the Wandering Jew legend, reinforces or even extends problematic representations of Jewish-Christian relations found in Charles Maturin's 1820 novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*. By reimagining Melmoth's "sin" as failure to bear witness to the truth of Christ's resurrection, Perry's narrative unwittingly re-inscribes the Christian supersessionism that so deeply informs Maturin's work.

In her 2018 novel *Melmoth*, Sarah Perry explicitly engages the Gothic tradition through her homage to *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) by [Charles Maturin](#), to whom Perry dedicates her work. *Melmoth* emulates the earlier novel's matryoshka-like structure of tales, which Perry connects using epistolary form, rhetorical address and shifting narrative point of view. In the tales that comprise *Melmoth*, characters' acts of witness inspire shame and terror as well as bravery and good will. Perry's literary technique does more, however, than just invite the reader to observe these characters. The novel's formal elements draw the reader into experiencing the events of the novel, which touch upon some momentous acts of historical violence, including the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide. The formal elements of Perry's novel stimulate "the emotional and psychological involvement of the reader," a characteristic of the Anglophone Gothic since its first wave.¹ Perry uses gothic forms in *Melmoth* to generate visceral engagement with the ethical problems the novel explores. Indeed, because the novel positions the reader as witness, the reader becomes implicated in the novel's events. By having the reader engage so actively with historical violence and its aftermath, Perry's novel participates in a notable trend in contemporary Gothic fiction since the 1960s. This "revisionist approach" deploys "well-known tropes to highlight modern ideas and preoccupations, often connected to the rise of identity politics in social activism and literary criticism" ([Reyes](#) 12).

My argument about *Melmoth* is two-fold. First, I will show how the novel's use of gothic forms implicates the reader in the events of the novel, inviting the reader to engage deeply with the ethical challenges raised by the historic violence that the novel treats. Second, I will argue that while Perry's treatment of the gothic tale and the "found document" enhance the ethical purpose and power of her novel, her use of another gothic convention, the legend of the Wandering Jew, brings with it ethical limitations.² The Wandering Jew tradition has been from its origins shaped by Christian supersessionism, the idea that Christianity is the true and rightful fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. As they adapt the Wandering Jew legend, [Maturin](#) and Perry both depart significantly from its original details

CONTACT Lisa Lampert-Weissig  llampert@ucsd.edu  Department of Literature, University of California, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla, San Diego, CA ,92093-0410 U.S.A

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(and from each other). In both novels, however, the dominant function of the Wandering Jew – to serve as sign of a Christian truth – still shapes the narratives, especially in these gothic novelists’ portrayals of mortal Jewish characters. In Perry’s *Melmoth*, Jewish characters serve the narrative not as fully realized individuals, but as objects of encounter. In a novel about the importance of the act of witness, these Jewish characters are witnessed by others rather than bearing witness themselves.

In this essay I will first discuss how Perry uses the gothic forms of the tale and the found document as the building blocks of her novel, deploying them to situate the reader as witness and to thereby implicate the reader in the novel’s events. I will then provide close readings of several moments in the novel in order to show how Perry uses narrative voice, rhetorical address, complex orchestration of imagery and strategic deployment of minor characters to further engage the reader in the position of witness. This positioning of the reader as witness implicates the reader in the moral conflicts that the novel explores. Finally, I will show how Perry’s reimagining of the Wandering Jew legend, while innovative, retains the supersessionist form that has shaped the dominant strain of the Wandering Jew tradition. It is clear that illuminating the evils of antisemitism is an ethical goal in *Melmoth*. The novel’s retention of supersessionist form undermines this goal.

Perry’s Gothic Forms

In *Melmoth*, Perry uses gothic forms to explore the ethics of responsibility. As a student of the Gothic, Perry is keenly aware of the way that “gothic conventions” can be used to “exercise” readers’ imaginations and emotions (Perry, *Confusion* 219–20). Indeed, Perry writes that her study of the Gothic tradition for her doctoral thesis led her to a more “self-conscious” understanding of her process as a writer and of the “shared experience of the novel” (Perry, *Confusion* 317). In *Perry Melmoth*, she deploys the gothic tale and the trope of the found manuscript, both of which explicitly nod to Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Perry also employs forms of rhetorical address that we can trace back to *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (1816) among other works.³ Perry’s use of these gothic conventions invites the reader to partake in the moral challenges and failures of the characters in the novel.⁴ This engaged reading implicates the reader in these moral frameworks. The novel’s form asks the reader to ponder: am I a reader, an archivist, a witness, a victim, a “sinner”? Perry’s literary craft allows the novel to probe the distinctions between victim and perpetrator as well as between those who are complicit and those whose actions, including the act of witness, implicate them in events.

My understanding of how *Melmoth* implicates its reader draws upon *Michael Rothberg’s The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (2019), which attempts to move beyond simple dichotomies between those who are victimized by acts of violence and injustice and those who carry them out. *Rothberg* seeks to develop a more nuanced conceptualization of the differences between culpability, complicity, and implication. The “implicated subject” serves as “an umbrella term that gathers a range of subject positions that sit uncomfortably in our familiar conceptual space of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders” (Rothberg 13). The implicated subject is someone who participates in and perpetuates injustice and the legacies of injustice not as a perpetrator, but indirectly, for example by benefitting from past wrongs committed by one group against another. Analyzing the role of the implicated subject in sites ranging from the Warsaw ghetto to Gaza, Rothberg’s work, like Perry’s, complicates the victim/perpetrator dichotomy.

Through readings of artworks across a range of media, Rothberg shows how artists’ most “powerful contributions to conceiving and responding to implication emerge not primarily from their content but from their form” (23). This insight is proved out in how Perry uses gothic forms in *Melmoth* to explore deeply the ethical complexities of individual and social responsibility. *Melmoth* depicts tales of transgressions both intimate in scale, like the abandonment of a disabled partner, and massive, as in the Armenian genocide. Perry implicates the reader in these events by having the reader’s understanding of them develop at the same time as that of novel’s characters.⁵ Piecing together “evidence” alongside the novel’s characters, the reader is placed in a position of uncovering evidence of past wrongs and of their impacts.⁶

The Tale and the Found Document

The novel's present-day frame focuses on Helen Franklin, an Englishwoman who lives in self-imposed exile in Prague, and on her friends, Karel, a Czech professor, and his partner, Thea, a retired English barrister. The novel's action is initiated when Karel discovers the elderly Josef Hoffman dead at his desk in the National Library. Along with Hoffman's body, Karel finds "The Hoffman Document," a narrative of the Second World War in which Hoffman confesses that as a boy he fatally betrayed a Jewish family. This transgression and Hoffman's remorse have led to his haunting by Melmoth the Witness.

Perry's Melmoth the Witness stalks those on the edge of despair, attempting to lure them to join her in order to ease her own lonely, miserable existence. As in Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, the presence of Perry's immortal Melmoth serves to connect all of the novel's disparate tales. Melmoth appears not only in "The Hoffman Document," but also in other materials that Karel begins frenetically and obsessively to gather after taking possession of Hoffman's papers. The reader encounters several of these materials as found documents. These materials provide evidence of the haunting of Alice Benet, a young sixteenth-century English Protestant, who chooses a life with Melmoth over burning at the stake by persecuting Catholics. Melmoth appears as well in "The Testimony of Nameless and Hassan." In this tale, two brothers are bureaucratic cogs in the Ottoman machine that perpetrated the Armenian genocide. Their lives are shattered when they witness first-hand the devastating crimes that they have facilitated and then learn that they are actually Armenian by birth, but were raised as Turks for their own protection. Confronted with these truths, Hassan takes his own life. Nameless, and Anna Marney, the Englishwoman whose diary preserves "The Testimony of Nameless and Hassan," become bound up in Melmoth's witnessing of horrors.

Perry shapes her novel so that the reader encounters these tales along with Helen as she reads through the documents that Karel has gathered. This narrative technique replicates the act of encountering primary source documentation in a book or an archive. Through Perry's technique, reading these "sources" also becomes a form of witness. The sources and the novel as a whole reveal that how witnesses react to what they see can vary greatly. Hassan takes his own life. Alice Benet betrays her faith. In contrast, Karel escapes Melmoth by using her example of witness as the impetus to what he believes is right: "it was Melmoth, in the end, who roused in him the belief that justice demanded he stand witness."⁷ Karel takes the leap from bystander to activist and joins a group of young Londoners who champion the rights of asylum seekers.

Like Karel's, Helen's story centers around the ethics of action and inaction. Helen's failing was not that she took action by killing a suffering woman at the woman's request. Helen's true failing was that she allowed her lover, Arnel, to go to prison for the mercy-killing rather than facing its consequences herself. Helen confesses her deeds in a section of the novel entitled "The Sin of Helen Franklin." Helen's confession is conveyed not through a document, but by the (as yet) unnamed narrator, Melmoth. The reader listens along with Helen's friends. At the end of the novel, Helen finds a form of resolution and redemption through Arnel, who clearly still loves Helen and has sought her out in Prague after serving two decades in a Manila prison for her crime. Arnel's act of forgiveness enables Helen to turn away from Melmoth and serves to close the novel's contemporary narrative frame.

Helen's story is not the only way, though, that Perry frames her novel. Like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, *Melmoth* opens with a letter, presented without any explanatory framing. The letter, from Hoffman to Karel, entrusts Karel with "The Hoffman Document," an act specifically said to make Karel a "witness" (1). After the salutation, the letter's first line is "How deeply I regret that I must put this document in your hands, and so make you the witness to what I have done!" (1). The novel then shifts to an unspecified narrator who exhorts the reader to "Look!" at Helen Franklin as she makes her way through a wintery Prague evening. In the novel's final paragraphs, this narrator reveals herself to be Melmoth. She implores the reader to join her:

Oh, and I saw what you did when you shouldn't have done it—I know what thoughts plague you most, when you cannot keep hold of your mind—I know what you cannot confess—not even alone, when all the doors are bolted against your family and friends! I know what a fraud you are, what an imposter—you never had me fooled: I know how vain you've been—how weak and capricious and cruel! What might they all say, if they knew?

And don't you know that you were born to sadness, as surely as sparks fly up from the fire? I have already seen it! I've seen how sorrow will break your bones! But my love, I won't leave you here to bear it on your own—I have walked to you on bleeding feet: who else could want you like this?

Oh my friend, my darling – won't you take my hand? I've been so lonely! (271)

Perry's final narrative twist uses the second person to draw attention to the reader's own subject position. Perry has crafted her novel so that the reader shares with Helen the experience of reading "documentation" of the stories of Josef Hoffman, of Alice Benet, and of Nameless and Hassan, all of them accounts of historical atrocities. The tales of Josef Hoffman and of Nameless and Hassan blur the lines between perpetrator and victim, raising ethical questions for both Helen and for the novel's reader. Like Helen, like Karel, the reader becomes a witness and is thereby implicated into the novel's events, leading Melmoth to address the reader directly.

Perry's use of the found document intensifies the sense that the reader's search for answers parallels that of the characters. This effect is further heightened through yet another found document, Karel's bibliography, "Melmoth the Witness: Primary Sources" (74–5). These "primary sources" include actual literary works, Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Theodor Storm's 1880 novel *Der Schimmelreiter* are listed together with the tales Perry creates for the novel, "The Hoffman Document," and the account of Alice Benet in the "Letter from Sir David Ellerby to his wife Elizabeth [29th September 1637, original in National Trust archives, UK]" (74). Also included is the novel's section entitled *The Cairo Journals of Anna Marney*, which contains "The Testimony of Nameless and Hassan." The novel's presentation of this last "source" includes "Editor's Notes" that frame Marney's journals. As part of this "edition" the reader also sees the 1889 letter from their father to their uncle which shatters the world of Nameless and Hassan by revealing their true identities.⁸ The bibliography's mixture of actual sources, like the novels by Maturin and Storm, with the novel's fictional "sources" underscores how *Melmoth* further positions the reader as fact-finder and witness.

The Reader as Witness in *Melmoth*

I will now turn to a lengthy passage in order to show how Perry's use of form to implicate the reader in the events of *Melmoth* occurs not only at the level of the tale and the found document, but also through the techniques she uses to guide the reader through these elements as part of a seamless narrative experience: narrative voice, rhetorical address and complex orchestration of imagery. After the reader has concluded the first part of the "Hoffman Document" and after the break of a blank page (53) that emphasizes the material nature of this "found document," the novel continues in the voice of the unnamed, but now familiar narrator:

Here ends the portion of the document that Karel Pražan gave to Helen Franklin. She is weary. The ink on the page thickens: begins, it seems, to seep toward the margins as if it might very well dip down and stain her clothes beneath the desk. But what is there here to account for Karel's altered appearance, his gaunt cheek? She ponders that name which has become familiar in the passing of an hour or so: Melmoth, or Melmotte, or Melmotka; ponders a woman questioned by men, and refusing them; ponders the justice of the sentence meted out. It is easy enough to summon up this watcher, this witness: to imagine, say, a hag, black-clad, stooped, unblinking, baleful; to summon up also the pricking sensation of an implacable eye fixed on a bare neck. She finds herself unwilling to raise her head to the window, as if she might see beyond the glass a face with an expression of loneliness so imploring as to be cruel. (And since *she* will not look, *you* must—there, beyond the railing—no, a little further still: between that parked car and this—wait, and grow accustomed to the dark; and yes, there you have it, do you not? Against the beech hedge with its burned leaves, something unmoving, and yet distinct; the night's fabric thicker. A figure in—yes!—black; slender, and not tall; looking steadfastly at the bare bulb burning five floors up.) (55)

This passage opens by positioning the reader and Helen as both having just completed reading a portion of "The Hoffman Document." The narrative focus then shifts to Helen's experience as told by this unnamed speaker. At the novel's conclusion, when this narrator is revealed to be Melmoth herself, the reader has already, through Melmoth's frequent exhortations, been linked to her without being aware of it.

Perry deftly reinforces Melmoth's mythic nature by having Helen ponder her various names across cultures: "Melmoth, or Melmotte, or Melmotka" (55). This catalog evokes the legend of the Wandering Jew, known by multiple names across regions and over time.⁹ The passage also reveals Perry's variation on the Wandering Jew tradition: her Melmoth is cursed because she refused to bear witness to Christ's resurrection. The punishment for Melmoth's denial of what she saw is an endless lifetime of witness. This curse is also the mechanism that affords Melmoth (and the reader) insight into Helen's consciousness as Helen finishes reading Hoffman's account. Melmoth seems to understand Helen not through omniscience, but through long experience, as is implied in her description of Helen's mental vision of a young Joseph Hoffman, who wears "shorts perhaps" (55).

Melmoth's compulsion to witness is the essence of her curse. That Helen ponders "the justice of the sentence meted out" resonates with other references to legal justice throughout the novel. Melmoth has been witness to events that led to some of the most significant, and infamous, legal proceedings of modern times. The titling of the novel's fictional tales as "Document" and "Testimony" evokes the witness statements used in judicial proceedings, including tribunals, commissions and government inquiries, such as the one over which ex-barrister Thea once presided (14).

Melmoth the Witness demands that others bear witness as well, as evidenced through the second-person exhortation in this passage. Because Helen will not face Melmoth, the narrator implores, indeed, commands the reader to do so: "And since *she* will not look, *you* must" (55). The emphatic "*you* must" becomes a moral imperative. The unspeakable must be faced and so must Melmoth. And by directly asking the reader to "imagine say, a hag," the narrator doesn't so much describe as conjure (55). The narrative voice guides the reader as through a meditation exercise. Such an exercise, of course, doesn't just ask the reader to "look"; such instruction requires the reader's active involvement.

This deep readerly engagement is further enhanced through rich sensory detail. The passage's window glass reverberates with myriad instances of glass imagery throughout the work: the glassmaking trade of Hoffman's ancestors, Karel's scholarly investigation of historical glass, and the pieces of moldavite that Hoffman loses and that Thea wears. Glass windows figure importantly in the novel's action. Hoffman remembers the glass display window of his family's store and that of the Jewish family he betrays after spying on them through it. In the novel's climactic final scene, a café window cracks after being repeatedly struck by the jackdaws that haunt *Melmoth*. Melmoth herself lurks outside this café, her eerie black garments dripping "like spilled ink into the gutters" (261). The ink ties back to Helen's perception of ink thickening on the Hoffman manuscript page. This symphonically coordinated imagery emphasizes the physicality of Hoffman's confession as a "found document." Perry uses such rich imagery, as well as rhetorical address and carefully crafted narrative perspective to connect the novel's gothic tales and the "documents" in which they are "found." These formal elements work in concert to allow the reader to partake in the experiences of the novel's characters.

The Bystander

I want to turn now an earlier passage in *Melmoth* that reveals the novel's preoccupation with acts of witness, even by very minor characters. Helen and Karel sit in together in a café. Karel is about to give Helen a section of "The Hoffman Document."

Karel pauses: lights another cigarette. The file is on the table between them. Outside, a group of girls in white tengallon hats go arm-in-arm along the cobbled alley. Snow has begun again to fall, sifting down against the kerb. The last girl—lagging behind, her feet sore in new shoes perhaps, or slowed by heaviness of heart—looks up at the window as she passes, and sees there a man and a woman, silent, grave, gazing down at something out of sight. They're entirely unlike, these two, but something in the cast of their faces—say, a kind of melancholy exhilaration—makes them seem cut from the same stone. The girl shrugs—moves on (a lovers' tiff, perhaps?)—and never thinks of them again. (24-25)

At first glance, this passage appears to serve as a mere descriptive moment, one among several glimpses of Prague's festive Advent atmosphere. But what of Perry's choice to have the reader view Helen and Karel through the eyes of "the last girl," who speculates briefly about the somber pair she glimpses through a window? The girl wonders if she is viewing a "lovers' tiff," and then "never thinks of them again." This passage describes an act of witness but the witness is unsure what she has seen. The "last girl" with her silly ten-gallon hat has not seen a quarreling couple, but rather a pair of friends haunted by Melmoth and the guilt, despair and knowledge of evil that she embodies. The girl in the ten-gallon hat, unaware of the truth of what she views, creates her own fiction about it, which she then quickly forgets. Perry's portrayal of the girl as witness invites us to consider the very commonplace act of making up a story about strangers as well as to consider the limits of our understanding about everything that we think we witness.

The passage about the girl in the hat is followed by one that drops the reader into a conversation between Helen and Karel discussing the latter's discovery of Hoffman's body:

'Still,' says Helen. 'Is it so bad, after all? Sorry, of course, for your loss; and the dead, they—' There is a pause so slight it passes Karel by. 'It's an affront. The sight of it. It is *unbelievable*.' (25)

Helen's almost imperceptible pause hints that "the dead" to which she refers include not only Josef Hoffman, but others from a backstory not yet revealed. Helen, who has been presented as unremarkable from the novel's outset, has witnessed the "unbelievable." Karel, however, fails to notice this pause. For him, Helen misses the point. He is not troubled by finding Hoffman dead but by "what came later" (25). In order to show her what he means, Karel hands Helen part of "The Hoffman Document": "And you take this – then you'll see" (25). What will Helen "see" in reading these papers? What kind of witness will she be? Because the mystery surrounding "The Hoffman Document" is still unfolding, the reader will "see" alongside of Helen. What kind of witness will the reader prove to be?

This entire sequence—from the girl in the ten-gallon hat to the exchange of "The Hoffman Document"—highlights the act of witness and subtly lures the reader into experiencing that act as well. Indeed, the reader, guided unknowingly by the voice of Melmoth herself, can perceive the truth of what is unfolding more clearly and accurately than an "eyewitness" like the girl in the ten-gallon hat. A cursory reading makes it likely that one might dismiss the figure of the girl in the hat as descriptive ornament. Perry's presentation of this figure, however, with its shifting not-quite glimpses into her interiority, involves the reader, who is, like Melmoth herself, witness to the entire scene more deeply than mere description. Like the girl in the ten-gallon hat, the reader has the choice to take in what is observed and to use it, perhaps for something good. Or the reader can ignore or even forget what has been seen. This is a set of choices that we all, to some extent, constantly face as we exist among our fellow human beings, experiencing the world as passersby, as readers, as witnesses.

Perry explores the ethics of how we react to what we see through another fleeting figure who appears in "The Hoffman Document" itself. The Germans have lost Prague and the city's residents of Czech-descent are taking retribution on fellow residents of German-descent, including Hoffman's family, for collaboration with the National Socialist regime. The young Hoffman, who has done harm to the Bayer family, now experiences harm himself. His father dies at the hands of Czechs; his mother is abused and mutilated and Hoffman himself ends up at Theresienstadt, the very place where the Jewish twins Franz and Freddie Bayer died because Hoffman exposed them as Jews. Just before Hoffman and his mother are parted, a crowd has gathered around Novák, the policeman to whom Hoffman informed on the Bayers. Hoffman sees Novák being beaten by a crowd. As Hoffman is being herded off to Theresienstadt, he chooses to save Novák by publicly branding him as a traitor to the Germans. The crowd that has gathered disperses. Perry highlights a single figure:

Only one woman remained—young and very pretty, she wore a blue scarf in her hair. She stood beside Novák where he'd fallen and stirred at him with her foot as if he was just a pile of abandoned clothes. (144-145)

Like the girl in the ten-gallon hat, this young woman is a witness, although to a very different type of scene. Her choice to stir at Novák with her foot makes her complicit in his mistreatment. We observe her and her callous actions through young Hoffman's eyes in what is also his account of his last memory of his mother. The woman in the scarf witnesses this final separation between mother and son, an event that has great import in Hoffman's life, but none in hers. In contrast to her sketch of the girl in the ten-gallon hat, Perry does not provide a glimpse into the interiority of the young woman with the scarf. Is the young woman a bystander, a perpetrator, a victim? Her ambiguity embodies the difficulty of establishing these roles in any fixed way in the context of a place like Prague during the Second World War. The scene begs the question: is it possible to witness such a situation without being implicated in it? The novel implies that such detachment is impossible in such a context, perhaps in any context.

While the novel positions so many of its characters as well as the reader as witnesses, it also paints subtle differences between types of witness. A lovers' tiff is something, perhaps, that one can just pass by. But for characters like Anna Marney, the things she sees bestow upon her a heavier burden of responsibility. Young Anna learns of Nameless's role in the Armenian genocide after she has found him begging on a Cairo street. Clearly affected by her encounter, the adult Anna goes on to serve as "an official war artist" for the British during World War II. The "Editor's Notes" to her diary, which the novel presents as a document, reference in a footnote a "figure in black" on the edges of her drawings, editorially interpreted as "the artist herself as witness" (244). The reader knows that this figure is Melmoth, but it is equally true that Marney herself bore witness to the war through her art. By recognizing a layered truth that Marney's editor does not, the reader is revealed as even more entangled in Marney's story than this unnamed scholar. The reader becomes like a scholar or investigator, seeking truth in "sources." This search for the truth, so important to the workings of justice, is a form of witness. Knowledge of this truth carries responsibility.

Karel is explicit about the burden of witness in another of the novel's "documents," a letter, presented without framing from Karel to Thea. Driven nearly to madness by his encounter with Melmoth the Witness, Karel has fled Prague for London, where he ends up joining a group of refugee rights activists. Karel's choice to protest on behalf of asylum seekers is motivated by his witnessing a man being deported back to Kinshasa, where he faces persecution because he is gay. In this moment Karel has uses a vision of Melmoth, who can appear "even in the very bright concourse of a London airport" (152) as his inspiration to do "what was right" (153). Karel writes to Thea that "[T]here is no Melmoth, there is nobody watching, there is only us. And if there is only us, we must do what Melmoth would do: see what must be seen – bear witness to what must not be forgotten" (155-6). Karel's letter also seeks forgiveness from Thea for failing her as a partner once she has become disabled by a stroke. The moral ambiguity of the sum of Karel's choices exemplifies the complex ethics of *Melmoth*, in which the lines between perpetrator and victim, and between sinner and savior are frequently blurred. By having Karel convey his failings and his act of conscience in the form of a letter to Thea, Perry doesn't simply tell the reader that Karel is a complex person who has made both selfish and selfless choices. Rather her use of epistolary form positions the reader as the discoverer of a private correspondence. The reader may be tempted to judge Karel's actions, but is also forced to ask: in such a situation, what would I do? While Karel's failure as a partner is specific to his relationship with Thea, his activist protest of the treatment of asylum seekers engages a problem in which many of Perry's readers are likely implicated, in Rothberg's sense of the term, as citizens of wealthy nations. Perry uses literary form to reveal the reader as an implicated subject and to prompt the reader's reflection on this subject position.

In *The Implicated Subject* Michael Rothberg asserts that artists' most "powerful contributions to conceiving and responding to implication emerge not primarily from their content but from their form" (23). Perry's literary technique blurs the boundaries between history and fiction and,

importantly, between reader and text. Perry's contribution to our understanding of the ethics of the victim, perpetrator and implicated subject is accomplished through her crafting of gothic forms that have, since Gothic's first wave, aimed to involve the reader "psychologically and emotionally" in the text.¹⁰ Perry advances these formal innovations by using rhetorical address and imagery along with highly crafted use of narrative voice and perspective not merely to involve the reader, but to implicate them in the novel's events.

Melmoth the Witness and the Wandering Jew Legend

I've attempted to show how Perry uses gothic forms such as the tale and the found document to implicate the reader as witness in *Melmoth*. But what of the most striking gothic element in the text, its adaptation of the Wandering Jew legend via Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*?¹¹ Like her namesake, Melmoth the Witness has an unnaturally prolonged life, can penetrate any barrier, and can move across space with uncanny speed. As Maturin did in his *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Perry uses a supernatural figure to connect her novel's multiple tales. Maturin's Melmoth has been cursed through some vaguely intimated Faustian bargain.¹² In contrast, Melmoth the Witness is cursed for refusing to affirm her eyewitness of Christ's resurrection. As punishment for her cowardly failure, she is doomed to seek out "everything that's most distressing and most wicked, in a world which is surpassingly wicked, and full of distress. In doing so she bears witness, where there is no witness, and hopes to achieve her salvation" (37). Because she denied her witness of Christ's resurrection, Melmoth must bear eternal witness to the endless misery and suffering which human beings bring upon themselves and one another. As did her counterpart in Maturin's work, Melmoth the Witness seeks out those in despair, imploring them to join her in order to ease her endless loneliness. Melmoth sometimes appears not as a monstrous figure, but as a plain young woman named Adaya. Adaya, who has an unplaceable accent, always wears a simple cross about her neck. This is not the Cain-like mark emblazoned on the forehead of the first gothic Wandering Jew, who thunders across [Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* \(1796\)](#). This "cheap gold cross on a silver chain" serves nevertheless as a sign of that Adaya, like the Wandering Jew of legend, has been converted to Christian belief, something not at all clear about Maturin's Wanderer (113).

Perry is not the first to depict an eternal wanderer as female, but she is the first to connect the reason behind the immortal's curse to gender discrimination: Melmoth the Witness is "a woman questioned by men" (52).¹³ Melmoth denies witnessing Christ's resurrection because she fears that she will not be believed because she is a woman. (52). In *Melmoth*, as well as in her 2016 novel [The Essex Serpent](#), Perry illuminates societal limitations placed on female agency and female speech and the effects of these structures.¹⁴ Her Melmoth the Witness also resonates with the biographical portraits she provides in her 2020 essay collection, *Essex Girls*. The "opinionated women" whose lives she sketches in *Essex Girls* range from contemporary celebrity Kim Kardashian, who has advocated for formal recognition of the Armenian genocide, to Rose Allin, a sixteenth-century English Protestant. Allin's martyrdom at the hands of Catholics is commemorated in Foxes' *Acts and Monuments*; Rose Allin's story is the clear inspiration for the tale of Alice Benet in *Melmoth* (Perry, *Essex Girls* 38–53).

But Perry's choice to make Melmoth a woman is actually not the most striking element of her adaptation of Maturin's novel. I see her revision of Maturin's source, the Wandering Jew legend, as even more remarkable. The Wandering legend dates back to at least the sixth century. According to its most influential early written source, Matthew Paris' thirteenth-century *Chronica majora*, a man named Cartaphilus refused Jesus's request for rest on the Via Dolorosa. Cartaphilus instead taunted Jesus to hurry on to his demise. For this abuse, Jesus cursed Cartaphilus to wait for him until the Second Coming. The immortal Cartaphilus, now converted and re-named Joseph, serves, Matthew Paris recounts, as a sign and wonder of the Christian faith. Having seen the truth of Jesus's divinity and been converted by it, the Wandering Jew shares this knowledge with all he meets. This medieval Wandering Jew is a kind of living relic of the Passion. His eternal witness proves the truth of

Christian belief.¹⁵ The Wandering Jew legend circulated for centuries as oral folklore in Europe and beyond. It also inspired hundreds of artistic works across media, including the visual and plastic arts, music, film and, of course, many literary works across genres, including Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*.

Perry's work departs from her source in Maturin by returning to the Wandering Jew legend's original setting in Jerusalem at the time of Christ. Perry, however, deviates significantly from the Wandering Jew tradition by focusing on the Resurrection rather than the Passion. The Wandering Jew's actions at the Passion were traditionally regarded as another example of alleged Jewish cruelty toward Christ and Christians. The Wandering Jew's legendary affront resonated with the charge that Jews are "Christ-killers," a calumny that informs antisemitic myths such as ritual murder accusation and the blood libel.¹⁶ Perry's alteration to the Wanderer's origin story transforms the immortal wanderer's sin from one of cruelty to a crime against the truth. This shift from Passion to Resurrection therefore connects Melmoth the Witness's failing to the central theological tension between Judaism and Christianity, the "truth claim" of Jesus's divinity.

We've seen above how Perry uses the gothic forms of the tale and the found document to great effect, crafting their presentation through artful use of rhetorical address, narrative perspective and imagery to implicate the reader in the novel's events and the ethical dilemmas raised by these events. What of her revision of the Wandering Jew legend? Perry's revision is a feminist one. Her explanation of Melmoth's sin, especially when read in light of other of her works like *The Essex Serpent* and *Essex Girls*, clearly aims to expose sympathetically the systemic challenges to equality that women face. In *Melmoth*, Perry has also clearly embraced another ethical purpose, to "shine a light on what has not been spoken about" and to expose as well the terrible consequences of prejudice and the violence it can provoke.¹⁷ Among these prejudices is antisemitism, described by the character Josef Hoffman as a "inherited disease" (35).

I would argue, however, that antisemitism is best understood not as a disease, but as a pattern of thought (Nirenberg). This way of thinking can include frightening and dehumanizing myths like ritual murder accusation or the alleged global conspiracy promulgated by *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It also includes intellectual and theological conceptions such as Christian supersessionism. Supersessionism, which positions Christianity as the true inheritor and fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, renders Jews and Judaism as both defunct and as stuck in time, forced to wait for prophesied release and redemption. The Wandering Jew, cursed with immortality for his offense against Christ and converted to Christianity thereby, personifies supersessionism (Lampert-Weissig, "The Time of the Wandering Jew" 180). Perry's adaptation of the Wandering Jew legend, with its shift in focus from the Passion to the Resurrection not only retains, but intensifies the supersessionist focus on Christian "truth" and its redemptive power, a focus that shapes much of the Wandering Jew tradition from its conception.¹⁸

At the conclusion of *Melmoth*, Perry uses the image of a candle to represent the hope of redemption. In the final café scene, when Helen refuses Melmoth and reconciles with Arnel, she has a Dantean vision of walking in a "dark wood" (268). The wood is "dense and deep and there is no light" (269). But then she catches glimpse of

something shining in the dark. It is a candle on a windowsill. It has burned so long the flame is small on its charred black wick—but it does burn, it does shine. It shines on David Ellerby holding Alice Benet's hand and commending her to God; it shines on Josef Hoffman, melancholy boy, and his sole act of virtue. It shines also on Arnel Suarez on his narrow bunk, refusing despair. (269)

These actions and others from the novel's many tales, actions of hope and of kindness are powerfully symbolized by the small but steadfast candle, reminiscent of the declaration that "God is light" from 1 John 1:5. The contrasting visions of the dark wood and the candle also resonate with the novel's dozens of images of light. Perhaps the most consequential of these is the image of the Bayer family's Shabbat candles, spied accidentally by young Josef Hoffman through their store-front window. Josef's witness leads to his betrayal of the Bayer family as Jews in hiding. This Shabbat scene is also the moment when the textual clues pointing to the Bayer family's Jewish identity are confirmed, placing the reader in the same position of discovery as Josef himself.

I linger on the details of Josef Hoffman's spying on the Bayers because his encounter with Jews in hiding resonates not just with *Melmoth's* complex imagery but with the novel's debt to Maturin's gothic *Melmoth the Wanderer*. In *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Maturin depicts an encounter between the Spaniard Alonzo Monçada and two Jews, Solomon and Adonijah, who live in hiding from the Inquisition in secret subterranean chambers. In *Melmoth the Wanderer* these Jews represent a kind of primitive faith, frozen in time, that contrasts with a corrupt Catholicism. Maturin uses footnotes to explain for his reader the arcane traditions of the Jews; his textual apparatus serves to anchor his portrayal of these exoticized figures in "reality" (Lampert-Weissig, "Monstrosity" 49–50). Put another way, the footnotes could be seen as anchoring fiction in a kind of "truth," although it is a particularly Christian truth, as Maturin, an Anglo-Irish prelate, uses a Protestant source to explain (inaccurately) a Jewish cultural tradition.¹⁹

Perry also uses footnotes in "The Hoffman Document" to ground her fiction in historical reality. At the bottom of the first page of "The Hoffman Document" we find a footnote in which Hoffman explains that Bohemian locations have names in both Czech and German. This includes the town of Terezin, which Hoffman says he "knew as Theresienstadt" (31). This reference to "Theresienstadt," coupled with Hoffman's birthdate of 1926, signals that the reader is perhaps reading a "document" of the Holocaust (31). The experience of reading this footnote imitates the work of a scholar unraveling the mysteries of an actual "found document." Perry generates this effect by harnessing the power that the names of the National Socialist concentration camps have come to hold in collective memory. The fictional footnote grounds the fictional story of Josef Hoffman in the actual history of the Second World War.

Hoffman's story serves to show how an individual can be both perpetrator and victim. Franz and Freddie Bayer have significance only in so far as they play a role in Josef Hoffman's story. Like Solomon and Adonijah in Maturin's *Melmoth*, they are Jews discovered by a Christian character. Franz and Freddie's narrative function is to serve Josef's tale and the Christian practice of confession itself. The only clue the reader receives to Franz and Freddie's interiorities comes, interestingly, during a vision created for Helen by Melmoth, after Helen has refused to join her. Helen sees "Josef Hoffman, and he is kneeling, and Franz and Freddie Bayer stand over him, and torment him with blows and with kicks" (267). This vision offers a shocking contrast to the twins' depiction in "The Hoffman Document," in which they offer Hoffman hospitality and friendship, as well as to another of Melmoth's visions, this time for Hoffman, of Freddie dying horribly of disease in Theresienstadt. Melmoth's vision for Helen shows a possible reaction to Hoffman's betrayal, but, again, it is one viewed from the outside, through a glass if you will. What would it mean to see Franz and Freddie through their own eyes? The novel does not provide this perspective. It shifts swiftly from the image of the twins beating Hoffman to the image of the candle, to the acts of kindness performed by other characters and to the hope of redemption, with which the candle is thereby associated.

The Bayer family appears in the novel in one additional scene, which imagines them memorialized through one of Gunter Demnig's Stolpersteine, or "stumbling stones." The Stolpersteine are brass plates inscribed with the names, birthdates and fates of those murdered or displaced during the Holocaust, installed where they once dwelled (Apperly). Helen encounters Freddie's Stolperstein as she walking with Adaya, whom she has just met for the first time. But this is not a chance encounter. Adaya, whose name is a variation on a Hebrew word meaning witness, is realized at the novel's end to be Melmoth herself. Adaya encourages Helen to "look" at the memorial, allowing her to make the connection to Freddie.²⁰ This Stolperstein scene reinforces the way in which the novel casts Jewish experience in the Holocaust as an object observed.

This perspective creates a contrast to the much more actively engaging forms of representation we have seen in other brief portrayals, such as with the girl in the ten-gallon hat. Even this fleeting depiction, as we have seen, demonstrates the great sensitivity and complexity with which the novel explores the subjectivities of perpetrators and perpetrator/victims, as well as the implicated subjectivity of the reader.

The subjectivities of Franz and Freddie Bayer, however, remain opaque throughout the novel. The reader encounters them through other characters and their interiority is inaccessible to the reader. Freddie and Franz serve a narrative about witness and redemption, but their own witness is beyond our reach.

Conclusion

Like so many imaginings of the Wandering Jew legend, *Melmoth* lacks representation of Jewish agency. A footnote from the second part of “The Hoffman Document,” for example, references the infamous Red Cross inspections of the Theresienstadt concentration camp, which were manipulated in order to vastly misrepresent camp conditions.²¹ Hoffman notes, “The camp was not overcrowded, they said. It was not, because ten thousand prisoners had been transported away the preceding week, to Auschwitz, where there was no witness” (130). The only witness to such horrific crimes that *Melmoth* permits us to imagine is that of Melmoth herself, a Jew become Christian. But, of course, there were witnesses to the atrocities of Auschwitz, including, of course, many Jewish witnesses, such as Elie Wiesel, whose 1966 short story, “Le Juif errant,” is set among Jewish refugees in France in the aftermath of the Second World War. Such actual witness is the historical reality that the footnotes in the Hoffman document reference, drawing the reader into the ethical dilemmas posed by actual acts of historical violence, including the Holocaust.

Melmoth is not a novel focused exclusively on the Holocaust, but it does use this event as a kind of limit case for “everything that’s most distressing and most wicked, in a world which is surpassingly wicked” (37). Dara Horn has written of how the Holocaust can be used to function as “a fancy metaphor for the limits of Western civilization” (*Dead Jews* 189). Horn has also noted a tendency for fictional treatments of the Holocaust in “non-Jewish languages” to be shaped by Christian forms, designed to “uplift” and to give a Kermodian “sense of an ‘ending’” that “isn’t universal at all. It’s Christian” (*Dead Jews* 73; 75).²² The influence of Christian narrative form that Horn reveals echoes the astute observations of Anthony Julius, who in his analysis of antisemitism in T.S. Eliot’s *oeuvre* argues convincingly that this antisemitism is not a kind of blemish in his poetry. Rather, he argues, we should understand Eliot as deploying his antisemitism “in the service of his art” (11).

In striking contrast to the bigotry of a writer like Eliot, Perry clearly aims to use her art to illuminate the dangers of antisemitism and other forms of hatred and bigotry. In *Melmoth* she skillfully deploys gothic forms to achieve this aim by implicating her reader in the text, thereby transforming the reader into a witness. At the same time, her adaptation of another gothic convention, the figure of the Wandering Jew, remains hindered by the supersessionist form of the original legend. If, as Simon Marsden has recently observed, contemporary Gothic has taken a “theological turn,” we would do well to consider how all aspects of Christian theology and belief, including Christian anti-Judaism, might inform and also limit how contemporary Gothic can advance the “oppositional, socially aware, and even politically minded” goals some attribute to it.²³

Notes

1. Analysis of first-wave Gothic fiction, usually designated as beginning with Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* (1764) and ending with Maturin’s *Melmoth* (1820), suggests that its “primary formal aim is the emotional and psychological involvement of the reader” (Hume 284, cited in Haggerty 18). On the Gothic “first wave,” see Reyes 3.
2. Hughes writes of the “Gothic genre’s obsessive (and arguably Protestant) preoccupation with documentation, testimony, and prefacing” (Hughes 217). The “found document” trope is not, however, exclusively Gothic. Reyes traces this literary device back to Cervantes (23). On the use of the found manuscript to deal with the memory of historical trauma in contemporary Gothic see Beville 55. On the Wandering Jew as a gothic convention, see Sedgwick 9.
3. See Haggerty 37–65.
4. In her reading of Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Perry writes that “the reader partakes of the horrors experienced by the agents in the narrative,” an effect she emulates in *Melmoth* (“Confusion” 24).

5. Slaughter uses the term “implicated reader” in his study of postcolonial Nigerian fiction (57). His readings are especially relevant to Perry’s use of second person address in *Melmoth*, although my usage of “implicated” draws on Rothberg’s more specific use in relation to historical violence and its legacies.
6. In this way Perry’s *Melmoth* bears resemblance to Kostova’s *The Historian*, which draws upon Stoker’s *Dracula* in its reimagining of a gothic monster and in its use of the found document form.
7. Perry, *Melmoth*, 265. Subsequent references to this print edition (2018b) will appear in the body of the text.
8. The “Editor’s Notes” and the 1889 letter appear on pages 244–6 in the cited edition. Formal features of *Melmoth* vary interestingly between print and digital editions. The novel’s ebook edition provides a table of contents that is not included in the paperback edition, with the “Editor’s Notes” linking back to this table of contents. Missing from the electronic edition is the use of blank pages between sections, such as that of page 54 of the paperback edition. This difference in formatting dilutes, in my opinion, the impact of Perry’s use of the “found document” in the electronic version of her novel.
9. On the many names of the Wandering Jew see; Baleanu.
10. Hume 284, cited in Haggerty 18.
11. On contemporary uses of Gothic myths as “intricate intertextual tapestries” see Reyes, 11. On the history of the Wandering Jew legend, see Anderson. On the Wandering Jew and the Gothic see Davison, especially 87–119; Railo 191–218; Rosenberg 187–205.
12. Maturin’s Faustian twist on the Wandering Jew legend borrows from William Godwin’s *St. Leon* (1800).
13. Other female Wandering Jews appear in Sue; Viereck and Eldridge, and Horn (2018).
14. On questions of gender in contemporary Gothic more broadly, see Wisker.
15. Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora*, volume 5, page 341. On Matthew’s account see Lampert-Weissig, “Wandering Jew as Relic.”
16. See Cohen. On these myths in the context of Gothic literature, see Mulvey-Roberts 130–178.
17. “Interview with Sarah Perry” 11–18-2020.
18. Not all of the tradition is Christian in orientation. On Jewish responses to the legend, see Hasan-Rokem.
19. On Maturin’s reference to the Ashkenazic atonement ritual of *kappores* see Lampert-Weissig, “Monstrosity” 49–50.
20. There is no Stolperstein memorial in Prague for a member of a Bayer family. Trevor Sage, director of Stolperstein Prague, personal communication, 17 December 2021.
21. On the Red Cross visits to Theresienstadt, see Adler.
22. In 2018 Horn, like Perry, published a novel that engages the Wandering Jew legend. In *Eternal Life*, Horn traces the story of a Jewish woman who must suffer immortality not because of a curse, but because of a vow she made to save her son’s life. Horn’s novel draws on a related but distinct Jewish tradition of the Wandering Jew legend that is rooted not in the Passion story, but the catastrophe of the Roman destruction (Hurban) of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.
23. Marsden’s study treats Christian theology almost exclusively.

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Notes on contributor

Lisa Lampert-Weissig is Professor of English Literature and Comparative Medieval Studies at UC San Diego, where she also holds the Jerome and Miriam Katzin Chair in Jewish Civilization. Her latest book, “Instrument of Memory: Encounters with the Wandering Jew,” is forthcoming with the University of Michigan Press.

ORCID

Lisa Lampert-Weissig  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7053-6738>

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