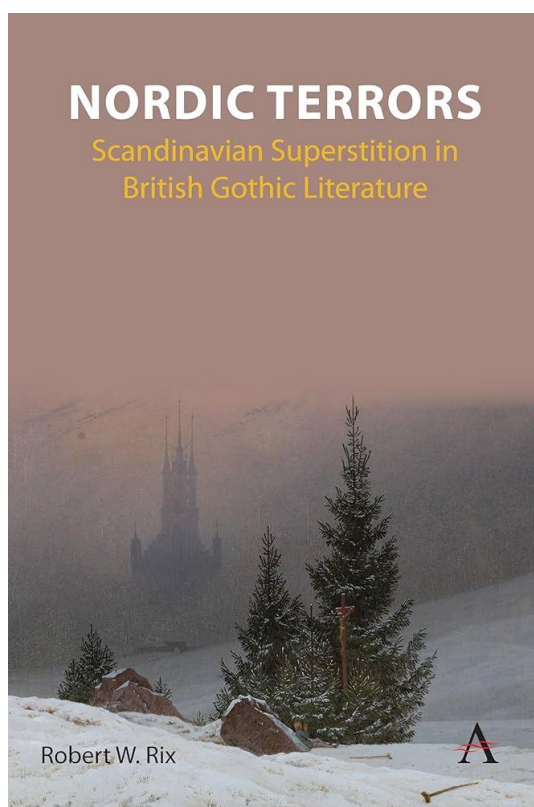


**WINTER IS HERE: THE INFLUENCE OF SCANDINAVIAN IMAGINATION ON
BRITISH CULTURE**

**O INVERNO ESTÁ AQUI: A INFLUÊNCIA DA IMAGINAÇÃO ESCANDINAVA
SOBRE A CULTURA BRITÂNICA**



RIX, Robert William. *Nordic Terrors: Scandinavian Superstition in British Gothic Literature*. London: Anthem Press, 2024.

Alexander Meireles da Silva¹

Written by Robert William Rix - professor at the University of Copenhagen - and published by Anthem Press in 2025, *Nordic Terrors: Scandinavian Superstition in British Gothic Literature* stands as a significant contribution to the field of Anglophone Gothic studies. The

¹ Full Professor of English Language Literatures at Universidade Federal de Catalão, Brazil. E-mail: alexmeireles@ufcat.edu.br Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2742-2209>

book examines how Scandinavian cultural elements were appropriated, re-elaborated, and disseminated within British Gothic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On this basis, it is important to note that this brief volume is not a compendium of supernatural motifs or folkloric origins, but rather an investigation into the cultural, political, and identity-based movements that sustained such dialogue. It reveals how British Gothic deployed Nordic imagery to project narratives of cultural cohesion, ancestry, and ethnic affinity.

From a perspective that integrates literary criticism, cultural history, and studies of national identity, Robert William Rix uncovers how Northern European folk traditions, legends, and superstitions did not simply serve as exotic imports from Scandinavia into Anglophone literary production. Rather, they played a specific role in the construction of a British genealogy that, by seeking to ground itself in Nordic origins, reinforced a distinct identity vis-à-vis the classical Mediterranean and continental Europe. Gothic literature, in this framework, emerges not merely as an aesthetic centered on ruins and the supernatural, but as a symbolic arena in which questions of belonging and heritage were contested.

Rix's research can be situated within a well-established yet constantly evolving twenty-first-century field: Gothic studies that intertwine literary aesthetics with national imaginaries. Since the foundational analyses of David Punter in *The Literature of Terror* (1996) and Fred Botting in *Gothic* (1996), criticism of this mode of the fantastic has expanded to address intersections with race, gender, class, and nationality. With regard to Scandinavia, however, there remains a relative scarcity of studies that systematically examine the circulation of Nordic motifs within British literature, despite the well-known importance of the rediscovery of the *Edda* and the Icelandic sagas in the late eighteenth century.

Nordic Terrors: Scandinavian Superstition in British Gothic Literature thus aligns itself with two scholarly traditions. On the one hand, it contributes to the analysis of "Northern Gothic," which highlights frozen landscapes, northern ruins, and the fascination with the "boreal sublime" as a counterpart to Mediterranean settings. On the other, it engages with scholarship on cultural reception and appropriation, particularly the ways in which British authors projected images of themselves onto Scandinavia. This dual positioning underscores the importance of Rix's study in presenting a broad panorama of how Scandinavian superstitions were transformed into literary material for the Gothic imagination.

Historically, the analysis encompasses a period of crucial transformation for European culture: the second half of the eighteenth century and the entire nineteenth century. This was the era of the Gothic Revival, antiquarianism, the translation of Scandinavian sagas, the circulation of popular ballads, and the growing valorization of Northern European cultural heritage. It was also a time when the British Empire sought explicit narratives of historical legitimacy that would distinguish it both from Southern European Catholicism and from the political revolutions of the Continent. In this sense, Scandinavia—with its legends of enchanted swords, trolls, spirits, and portents—provided not only aesthetic material but also an alternative mythology that could be integrated into Britain’s project of identity.

Structurally, *Nordic Terrors* is organized into thematic chapters that trace Scandinavian presences in British Gothic literature. Robert William Rix opens with a methodological introduction justifying the comparative approach, emphasizing that the study goes beyond identifying Nordic motifs to examine the logic of cultural appropriation.

Across four chapters, the author addresses different dimensions of his argument. The first chapter, “Norse Gothic,” investigates how Scandinavian traditions of superstition—ghosts, specters, folkloric creatures such as the *draugr*, and apparitions linked to snow and ice—were reinterpreted in British Gothic novels and tales, positioned, in Rix’s view, in competition with Ossianic poetry. Writers such as Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, and later Sheridan Le Fanu and William Morris serve as paradigmatic examples of this reception. Rix devotes particular attention to the construction of the Nordic space as a “familiar other”: simultaneously strange and close, remote yet ancestral. This ambivalence allowed Gothic authors to portray Scandinavia as both an exotic landscape of terrors and a repository of cultural authenticity reinforcing British identity. Another central focus is the analysis of collections of Nordic ballads and their translations, such as those by Thomas Percy and other antiquarians. These materials not only influenced the thematic repertoire of British authors but also legitimized the idea of a “shared bloodline” between Scandinavians and Britons. In this sense, the Gothic functioned as a literary vehicle for an ideology projecting a historical continuity from the North to the British Isles.

Focusing on Matthew Lewis—particularly *Tales of Wonder* (1801)—the second chapter, “Ballads across Borders – Terrors, Translations and Travesties,” examines the impact of Danish ballad translation and assimilation in constructing the image of Denmark as a land of terror.

This material fed into Gothic narratives as well as satirical and medievalist treatments. As Rix demonstrates, British interest in ballads developed throughout the eighteenth century. Works such as Allan Ramsay's *Tea Table Miscellany* (1723) and Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) prepared the ground for further collections. In 1779, for example, German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder translated several English ballads from Percy's anthology into his *Volkslieder*, while also including translations of Danish ballads—highlighting the transnational dialogue that would grow in subsequent decades.

Beginning with J. W. Goethe's *Erkönig*, inspired by Danish folklore, the third chapter, "The Danish Woods and Their Demons," explores how this German ballad was widely translated, spreading Scandinavian culture into British Gothic. Set in a fishing community, *Erkönig* portrays a village haunted by a forest demon that kills its inhabitants, dramatizing human impotence before ancestral forces of nature. The ballad also addresses the abduction of a maiden by a merman. In this same chapter, Rix examines the drama *One O'Clock! Or, The Knight and the Wood Daemon* (1811), which features a female version of a malevolent Scandinavian spirit.

The fourth chapter turns to British Gothic works explicitly rooted in Scandinavian superstition. While the writings of Ann Radcliffe, Walter Scott, and various poems reveal tensions between superstition and modernity, Rix demonstrates that superstition ultimately remained a vital component of British identity.

Methodologically, *Nordic Terrors* adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining textual criticism, intellectual history, and reception studies. As a result, its analysis extends beyond canonical literature: Rix also draws on pamphlets, travel narratives, antiquarian essays, and folklore translations, showing that the circulation of Nordic superstitions occurred not only in elite scholarly circles but also within popular print culture.

One of the study's major strengths lies in clarifying the strategic nature of this appropriation. Contrary to views of the Gothic as merely "cosmopolitan" or simply "exotic," Rix demonstrates that recourse to Scandinavia was driven by a desire to construct genealogical connections. In other words, British Gothic did not simply import supernatural motifs but reconfigured them to consolidate a narrative of national identity.

The central argument holds that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British Gothic transformed Scandinavia into a space of controlled alterity, whose superstitions could be

aestheticized without threatening but rather reinforcing British identity. This thesis is developed with considerable argumentative density and supported by extensive textual documentation.

Nonetheless, the methodology, privileging British reception and re-elaboration, devotes comparatively less attention to the internal complexity of Scandinavian traditions themselves. While this was not the book's primary objective, readers more familiar with Nordic folklore may miss a deeper engagement with the original cultural contexts of the superstitions.

Among the work's most notable contributions is the way Rix expands the understanding of British Gothic by moving it beyond a Mediterranean- or Catholic-centered perspective. By emphasizing Scandinavia as a source of inspiration, the author demonstrates the Gothic's adaptability and its capacity to engage with multiple cultural horizons. The study also provides a persuasive account of the relationship between literature, national identity, and cultural reception. By revealing how Scandinavian superstitions were instrumentalized to reinforce a British narrative of Nordic ancestry, Rix illuminates the Gothic's ideological dimension, countering reductive views that treat it merely as entertainment or escapism.

As for potential limitations, one might note the relative absence of a sustained dialogue with postcolonial criticism, which could have further enriched the analysis of cultural appropriation and identity formation. Likewise, the book could have explored in greater depth the internal tensions between representations of Scandinavia—as alternately a source of authenticity and a realm of barbarity. Even so, these issues do not diminish the scope of the work, which stands as a pioneering contribution to the study of Scandinavian presences in British Gothic.

Nordic Terrors establishes Robert William Rix as one of the innovative voices in cultural reception studies and Gothic literature. By examining the circulation of Scandinavian superstitions within British literature, the author not only offers a detailed panorama of sources and texts but also advances a critical interpretation of national identity, cultural genealogy, and aesthetic appropriation.

The book will appeal not only to specialists in Gothic literature but also to scholars of national identity, folklore, and cultural reception. Its principal merit lies in demonstrating that

British Gothic, far from being a mere importation of exotic motifs, consciously articulated a project of cultural rootedness that situated Britain in continuity with Northern Europe.

In sum, this is a fundamental work for understanding how Scandinavia became not merely a backdrop or inspiration but a constitutive element of the British Gothic imagination. Rix persuasively demonstrates that Nordic terror was also a mirror in which British writers projected their own anxieties and identity-based aspirations.

Bibliographical references

BOTTING, Fred. *Gothic*. London: Routledge, 1996.

PUNTER, David. *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*. (Volume 1). London: Routledge, 1996.

RIX, Robert W. *Nordic Terrors: Scandinavian Superstition in British Gothic Literature*. New York: Anthem Press, 2025