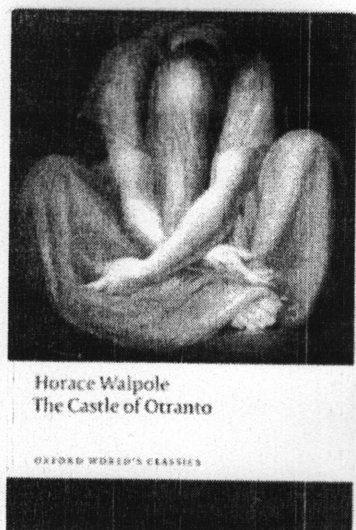
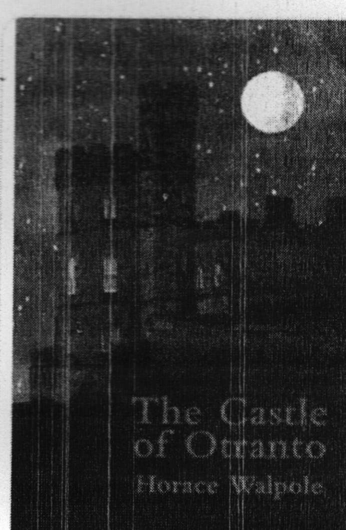
Into horror with Walpole

There is a long association between Christmastime and stories of the supernatural. For our Christmas issue, Jeremy Black explores the 'original' Gothic novel.





'Terror, the author's principal engine, prevents the story from ever languishing; and it is so often contrasted by pity, that the mind is kept up in a constant vicissitude of interesting passions'.[1]

Widely presented as launching the Gothic novel in 1764, Horace Walpole (1717–97), 4th Earl of Orford from 1791, assaulted established practices by breaking with the existing conventions of the novel and its emphasis on realism, a theme he was to make explicit in his preface to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto*. Instead, Walpole deliberately emphasised the need to employ 'fancy', a form of imagination which included strangeness and uncertainty. In this novel, mystery was underlined by manifestations of the supernatural; and the reader, like the protagonist, was repeatedly unclear about what was happening. This lack of clarity was heightened to a nightmarish character by the accounts of menace, danger, pursuit and assault.

The Gothic novel did not emerge from nowhere. Instead, it developed from the sentimental novel, and, more generally, brought to the fore many of the emphases seen in previous English novels, a process that was to continue with the later 'Sensation Novel'.

Walpole was not the originator of novels set with a medieval background. Indeed, although located in the present, Launcelot Greaves, the protagonist of Tobias Smollett's novel of that title (1760–1), was a medieval figure, but in the Don Quixote tradition of Gothic romance and with a gentle humour rather than horror. Already in 1758, the anonymous *The History of Amanda. Written by a Young Lady* had offered a version of Gothic fiction. It was reprinted in Dublin in 1760 as *The Adventures of Miss Sophia Berkley*, an early instance of the role of piracy in the print culture of Gothic fiction.[2] This role was scarcely unique to Gothic novels, but was to be particularly the case with them. *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury: An Historical Romance* (1762) by Thomas Leland was an historical novel set in the reign of Henry III (1216–72),

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[1] From the Preface, *The Castle of Otranto*

[2] Christina Morin, '*The Adventures of Miss Sophia Berkley*. Piracy, Print Culture, and Irish Gothic Fiction,' *Irish University Review*, 49 (2019), pp. 229–44

lacked any particular bite, and, despite such action as kidnapping and trial by combat, and troubling sites as the dungeons of a castle, reads without gripping, as in:

> 'In the religious house to which Oswald had retired, was a monk called Reginhald, whose mind but ill-suited his profession, or his residence in a seat of piety. He was brother to Grey, and by his interest had not been long since admitted into the monastery, and promoted to some degree of dignity and authority. His manners were equally brutal with those of Grey, but less disguised by art' (IV, i)

and so on.

Walpole wrote in a radically different fashion, one that captured his wide-ranging cultural interests, his mastery of a number of literary genres, the power of his eclectic intellect, and his delight in being distinctive and using his writing to establish his otherness of context, pose and content. Unlike Leland's work, there was the supernatural, which made the uncertainty of the developing plot more acute and open to authorial intervention. In *The Castle of Otranto*, Walpole gave an expression to his highly subjective portrayal of history.

The book was deliberately written, as, in 1767, he informed his close friend Madame du Deffand, 'in defiance of rules, critics, and philosophies',[3] *The Castle of Otranto* was very much an attempt to create a new genre, not least by bringing the supernatural into history, and as part of a use of mystery, imaginative terror, and a shock tactic of suspense. This model gave what was to be much later called the Gothic novel, but was then generally referred to as romances, a distinctive character and particular opportunity. The model also created a challenge for others writing later in what became a genre or, at least, a pattern and to a template.

The first edition came out as a spoof, one that reflected Walpole's interest in authorship and sense of satire, an interest more generally seen in this period. Linked to that, there was in Walpole's spoof an irreverent tone that can be seen as subversive but that operated as a joke at a number of levels. The preface provided a totally fictional account of the origins of the work, saying that it was printed at Naples in 1529 and found in the library of an old Catholic family in northern England. The dating of the original text is given as probably thirteenth century and the episode described is dated between 1095 and then. Walpole then moved on to consider a change in culture and therefore literature:

> 'Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events, are exploded now even from romances. That was not the case when our author wrote.... Belief in every kind of prodigy was so established in those dark ages, that an author would not be faithful to the *manners* of the times who should omit all mention of them.'

This was a use of an historical setting in order to provide an opportunity to offer a radically difficult mental world. Moreover, Walpole offered a defence for doing so, instead of extrapolating modern views, notably what Walpole termed '*this* air of the *miraculous*,' upon the past.

The first chapter of *The Castle of Otranto* begins energetically and with a rapid setting, one in which a dire ancient prophecy appears in the very first paragraph. In the second, in which there is an interrupted marriage, a key instance of both dynastic breakdown and of tragedy, there is a powerful sense of action off, with a servant 'running back breathless, in a frantic

[3] Stephen Gwynn, *The Life of Horace Walpole* (London, 1932), p. 191.

manner, his eyes staring, and foaming at the mouth'. When asked the matter, he points 'towards the court-yard,' crying out 'the helmet! the helmet!'

Manfred, Prince of Otranto, discovers his son, Conrad, destroyed 'under an enormous helmet', one hundred times larger than one for any human. This helmet is identified as like that on a statue of Alfonso the Good, a former prince, which leads Manfred to fury. The helmet was indeed missing from the statue. Walpole then puts the readers in their places as many would have felt like the Otranto 'mob, who wanted some object within the scope of their capacities on whom they might discharge their bewildered reasonings'.

Manfred significantly seeks the darkness that was to be a feature of Gothic novels – 'Take away that light'. He then, in an echo of the murderous Richard III of England (r. 1483–5), a Shakespearian villain, in a play that also has a quasi-incestuous element, presses his case on Isabella, his once-putative daughter-in-law in a bid to keep his line going. The last was a frequent theme of Gothic novels, for many of which dynasticism was to the fore in context, narrative and assumptions.

Manfred is warned off first by the sight of the plumes on the helmet, and, secondly, by the portrait of his grandfather uttering a deep sigh and heaving its breast, before descending onto the floor and beckoning him away, Manfred vowing to follow 'to the gulph of perdition'. This was really the language of an atheist who had rejected morality and overturned mortality. As such, Manfred was a far more profound villain than those in any sentimental novel. Isabella, whom Manfred had pursued, in contrast, implores the assistance of 'every saint in heaven'; while the valiant peasant cites Providence against Manfred; only for Manfred to scorn Providence. This scorn is an aspect of the pride that the villains tend to have.

The castle itself was a powerful presence, notably when, in a vivid passage, Isabella sought to flee from Manfred through the subterranean passage from its vaults to the church of Saint Nicholas, where she hoped for sanctuary at the altar. The description was one of menace:

> 'The lower part of the castle was hollowed into several intricate cloisters; and it was not easy for one under so much anxiety to find the door that opened into the cavern. An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions, except now and then some blasts of wind that shook the doors she had passed, and which grating on the rusty hinges were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness….. a ray of moonshine streaming through a cranny of the ruin above shone directly on the lock they sought…. the trap-door … beneath appeared some stone steps descending into a vault totally dark…'

In specific terms, subterranean and other passages were a frequent setting for Gothic novels, one made more dangerous by pursuit, thus producing a very different tempo to the conventional novel.

The concluding chapter of *The Castle of Otranto* brings the return of horror in a revival of the drama at the outset: 'At that instant Bianca burst into the room, with a wildness in her look and gestures that spoke the utmost terror ... "It is come again! it is come again! ... Oh! the hand! the giant! the hand! … I am terrified out of my senses"'. Frederic is not impressed by Manfred's explanation that this is 'the delirium of a silly wench, who has heard stories of apparitions until she believes them', replying: 'This is more than fancy … her terror is too natural and too strongly impressed to be the work of imagination'. After hearing the rattling of armour, Bianca has seen an enormous hand in armour on the great stairs of the castle, an image that had come to Walpole in the nightmare in which his novel originated.

The idea of an enormous threatening limb, in this case 'a gigantic outstretched arm', was to be used by later Gothic novelists, notably Charles Maturin in the culminating nightmare in *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). The signs reported by Bianca convince Frederic 'that heaven declared itself against Manfred'. Subsequently, in a powerful image, in an oratory in the castle, Frederic:

> 'saw a person kneeling before the altar.... the figure turning slowly round, discovered in Frederic the fleshless jaws and empty sockets of a skeleton, wrapt in a hermit's cowl.'

Frederic is then admonished to forget his 'carnal' drive, and left 'in a conflict of penitence and passion'. This is a frequent tension in the Gothic novel, one that brings to the fore issues implicitly presented in earlier novels. Sexuality is rarely in the background with the Gothic novel; and some of these novels, notably *The Monk* and *Dracula*, pushed the bounds with which sexuality was discussed.

In the great church at night, by the tomb of Alfonso, Manfred kills his daughter Matilda, by mistake for Isabella, whom he thought unfaithful to his purposes. If this is a theatrical scene ready for the painter's brush, so also is the sequel, with the dying Matilda placed on a litter and carried by the monks from the church to the castle:

> 'Theodore supporting her head with his arm, and hanging over her in an agony of despairing love, still endeavoured to inspire her with hopes of life. Jerome on the other side comforted her with discourses of heaven, and holding a crucifix before her, which she bathed with innocent tears, prepared her for her passage to immortality. Manfred, plunged in the deepest affliction, followed the litter in despair'.

Delirious, Theodore tries to marry Matilda before she dies, 'she shall be mine in death,' only for Matilda to die too swiftly. If that is not enough for the night, in a novel in which lurid events follow in unprecedented sequence and speed, and one that was rarely to be successfully surpassed in this, Matilda's death is followed by a potent and conspicuous supernatural intervention:

> 'A clap of thunder at that instant shook the castle to its foundations; the earth rocked, and the clank of more than mortal armour was heard behind. Frederic and Jerome thought the last day was at hand. The latter, forcing Theodore along with them, rushed into the court. The moment Theodore appeared, the walls of the castle behind Manfred were thrown down with a mighty force, and the form of Alfonso, dilated to an immense magnitude, appeared in the centre of the ruins. Behold in Theodore, the true heir of Alfonso! said the vision: and having pronounced these words, accompanied by a clap of thunder, it ascended solemnly towards heaven, where the clouds parting asunder, the form of Saint Nicholas was seen; and receiving Alfonso's shade, they were soon wrapt from mortal eyes in a blaze of glory'.

Resigning himself to the will of heaven, and therefore the injunctions of religion, Manfred proclaims the whole 'a warning to future tyrants'. His grandfather's murder of Alfonso and usurpation of Otranto are laid bare. Manfred is convinced by the supernatural: 'the horrors of these days, the vision we have but now seen, all corroborate thy evidence beyond a thousand parchments'.

Jeremy Black

Jeremy's recent books include *Smollett's Britain*, *The Age of Nightmare*, and histories of the Cavalry, Artillery, the Pacific, and Railways