

## The genesis of "Gothic" fiction

The attachment of the term *Gothic* to the literature of terror is quite a recent development – and almost entirely accidental. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* is generally regarded as the first Gothic novel, but when it was published on Christmas Day 1764 it was subtitled simply *A Story*. The preface puts forward an elaborate counterfeit origin for the text, presenting it as an Italian work printed in 1529 and speculating that it may have been written between 1095 and 1243, at the time of the Crusades, when the story is set. But "Gothic" is nowhere mentioned. It was only when Walpole published a second edition in April 1765 and confessed that it was in fact a modern concoction that the word *Gothic* was added to the title: *The Castle of Otranto: a Gothic Story*. The addition was a flippant paradox chiefly intended, one infers, to annoy stuffy critics who objected to the experiment. After all, how could a Gothic story have a modern author?

For Walpole's contemporaries the Gothic age was a long period of barbarism, superstition, and anarchy dimly stretching from the fifth century AD, when Visigoth invaders precipitated the fall of the Roman Empire, to the Renaissance and the revival of classical learning. In a British context it was even considered to extend to the Reformation in the sixteenth century and the definitive break with the Catholic past. "Gothic" also signified anything obsolete, old-fashioned, or outlandish. *Otranto* may have been set in Gothic times, but the term does nothing to describe what was ground-breaking and influential about the novel, and Walpole does not use it again in his preface to the second edition, which constitutes a manifesto for a "new species of romance." After *Otranto* the only significant work in which "Gothic" appears in a subtitle was Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron*.<sup>1</sup>

The "Gothic novel" is thus mostly a twentieth-century coinage.<sup>2</sup> The most obvious justification for its employment as a literary term was by analogy with the Gothic Revival in architecture, which also began in the mid-eighteenth century. In addition, histories of the literature of terror written from the 1920s onwards routinely identified Walpole as the progenitor of a

- Magazine and then as a preface to *The Castle of Otranto*. See also *ibid.*, pp. 168–71. The same distinctions were best reinvoked for recent critical discussion in the 1969 essay by Robert Hume.
- 5 The highly pre-Freudian nature of Poe's work was established most forcefully by Marie Bonaparte in *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (1933), trans. John Rodker, introduced by Sigmund Freud (London: Hogarth, 1949). The presagings of psychoanalysis in nineteenth-century French fiction have been discussed in Joan Kessler, *Demons of the Night: Tales of the Fantastic, Madness and the Supernatural from Nineteenth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. xi–li.
- 6 See the chapters by Paul O'Flinn, Chris Baldick, Anne K. Mellor, Margaret Homans, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *New Casebooks: Frankenstein*, ed. Fred Botting (London: Macmillan, 1995).
- 7 For the best histories of the female Gothic, see Julianne Fleenor, ed., *The Female Gothic* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983); Kate Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Eugenia DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: a Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: a Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Susan Wolstenholme, *Gothic (Re)visions: Writing Women as Readers* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993); Diane Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism: the Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988); and Susanne Becker, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) (in recommended order of reading).
- 8 See Wollstonecraft's *Mary* and *The Wrongs of Woman*, ed. Gary Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 75–81.
- 9 See Daniel P. Watkins, "Social Hierarchy in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*," *Studies in the Novel* 18 (1986): 115–24.
- 10 This definition of sublimation is indebted to Stuart Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 33–49.
- 11 See Mark Madoff, "The Useful Myth of Gothic Ancestry," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 8 (1979): 337–50. My sense of the counterfeit is also heavily indebted to Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), especially pp. 50–61.
- 12 Here I am beholden to pp. 259–60 of Paul Frankl's, *The Gothic: Literary Sources and Interpretations Through Eight Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960) a book which provides a definitive genealogy of *Gothic* as an aesthetic term.
- 13 See Madoff, "Useful Myth"; Samuel Klinger, *The Goths in England: a Study in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952); Clery in this volume; and Susie I. Tucker, *Protean Shape: a Study in Eighteenth-Century Vocabulary* (London: Athlone Press, 1967), pp. 149–55.

genre, and hence the maverick subtitle *A Gothic Story* began to gain academic weight. Interesting work has been done on the etymology of "Gothic" and most monographs on "Gothic" as a genre have something to say on the matter, but when determining what is distinctive or innovative about eighteenth-century fiction in the terror mode it is essentially a red herring. During the 1790s the mode acquired a number of categorizing names, none of them involving "Gothic."<sup>3</sup> In the period dealt with here (the mid to late 1700s), the earliest experiments were universally referred to as "romances."

The novel in its "realist" form evolved in the first half of the eighteenth century in reaction to the romance tradition that had flourished up to the late seventeenth century. Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding all made the claim for the originality and relevance of their fiction by distinguishing it from otherworldly, outdated "romance." In Richardson's novels the worst accusation leveled at the heroines is that they are readers of romances; in other words, fantasists and time-wasters. Fielding devoted the introductory chapter of book 8 of *Tom Jones* (1749) to a satire of the use of the marvelous in fiction. The "novel" means literally "the new," and it marked itself off as a new, more credible and progressive genre of fiction for an enlightened age by denigrating "the old," the romance. The classical keystones of this attitude were Aristotle, who in the *Poetics* insisted on probability in the drama, and Horace, whose dictum "*incredulus odi*" ("what I cannot believe disgusts me") from the *Art of Poetry* is a cliché of neoclassical criticism. Only if a fiction is true to life can it become the vehicle of useful instruction or moral improvement.

The target of attack was a somewhat amorphous entity. A common view of medieval romance can be found in Tobias Smollett's preface to *Roderick Random* (1748): "when the minds of men were debauched by the imposition of priest-craft to the most absurd pitch of credulity, the authors of romance arose, and losing sight of probability, filled their performances with the most monstrous hyperboles." By this light, romance was a Roman Catholic imposition. Another was derived from Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615), which satirizes chivalric romances like *Amadis de Gaul*. Here the object was seen as a perversion of the educative function, unfitting the reader for life in the real world. But hostile judgments were unlikely to be based on first-hand knowledge of pre-1600 literature. When critics and writers condemned romance, they had in mind above all the French heroic romances such as *Cassandre* (10 vols., 1644-50) by La Calprenède and *Le Grand Cyrus* (10 vols., 1659-63) by Madeleine de Scudéry, which were for a time enormously popular. Most of these in fact contained no supernaturalism, but were characterized by artificial diction, numerous coincidences, the promiscuous mixing of history and fiction, absurd idealism, and over-the-top heroics. It

might seem surprising that their spell was regarded as potent enough still to require exorcism in Charlotte Lennox's satire *The Female Quixote* (1752). But the novel *needed* romance as the measure of its own achievements; there was a dialectical relation between the two, an interdependency.<sup>4</sup>

It follows that in spite of the rhetoric the dividing line between novel and romance was not absolutely clear-cut. Novelists quibbled over the boundaries of probability and attempted to balance the demands of instruction and entertainment. Moral messages would be useless if not joined to compelling narratives that stirred the emotions of the reader. Some of the most successful works contained episodes that would not be out of place in Gothic fiction. The imprisonment and madness of Richardson's *Clarissa* looks back to the melodramatic "she-tragedies" of Nicholas Rowe and forward to Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1783-85). The scene from Smollett's *Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753) in which the Count finds himself trapped in a bandit's den with a fresh corpse was undoubtedly a source for a similar adventure in *The Monk*, and later enthusiasts for the terror mode praised it as an extraordinarily effective example of "natural horror" (Clery and Miles, *Gothic Documents*, pp. 129, 162). But natural horror was as far as novelists were prepared to go at this stage: there could be no appeal to the imagination that went beyond rational causes.

*The Castle of Otranto* was presented to the public, especially in the preface to the second edition, as an outright challenge to this orthodoxy. Romances had been called improbable; now Walpole accused modern fiction of being too probable: "the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life" (p. 9). The chief enemy of fancy in his view was Samuel Richardson (p. xiii), whose narrative practices had been raised to the level of absolute moral prescription by Samuel Johnson in a well-known essay in the journal *The Rambler* (no. 4, 31 March 1750). In order to carry out its true function of instructing the young, fictions should "exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world." The novel must be exemplary, and "what we cannot credit we shall never imitate" (Johnson in Clery and Miles, *Gothic Documents*, p. 175). In his fiction Walpole flouts this principle by bringing divine punishment to bear on the heir of a usurper through the intervention of a vengeful ghost and assorted gargantuan pieces of armour. By no stretch of the imagination could the tale offer a useful lesson for real life. The moral, as Walpole observes himself, is scarcely very edifying: "that *the sins of the fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation*" (p. 7). Walpole's business is not instruction, but the pleasures of the imagination.

Walpole was uniquely well qualified to spearhead a revival of romance. He was the son of the late Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, Earl of Orford,

and had a patrician's disregard for common opinion. He could also afford to be controversial. His income came largely from government sinecures, not from writing. He was even able to set up his own independent printing press at his home, Strawberry Hill, a modest villa remodeled as a feudal castle in Twickenham near London. His days were spent in dilettante antiquarianism, some light politicking at the House of Commons (he was an MP from 1741 to 1768), arduous socializing, and voluminous letter-writing (the modern edition of his correspondence stretches to 48 volumes). He had the maverick nature required to champion a lost cause and the status to make the public take note of the enterprise. When he came forward as author of *Otranto* in 1765, he carefully presented the "rules" for "a new species of romance" that would otherwise be dismissed as a piece of eccentric whimsy (Walpole, *Castle of Otranto*, p. 14). The story was "an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern" (note the delicate insistence that modern fiction, in spite of its probability, remains romance); it also subsumed the opposition by "leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, [hence] of creating more interesting situations" while making the characters "think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions" (pp. 9-10). In other words, Walpole wanted to combine the unnatural occurrences associated with romance and the naturalistic characterization and dialogue of the novel. Just as the novel contained traces of romance, so Walpole's experiment drew on the innovations of realist and sentimental fiction. The formula was offered as a "new route" for "men of brighter talent to follow" (p. 10).

The rules laid out by Walpole accurately describe the method of *Otranto's* narrative from the opening pages. In the first paragraph a wedding is overshadowed by a troubling ancient prophecy. In the second, the supernatural intervenes in the form of a giant helmet which crushes the bridegroom to death. The next few pages are devoted to the reactions of various characters: the horror and inexplicable anger of the father, Prince Manfred, the grief of the mother, Hippolita, the daughter Matilda's eagerness to comfort others, the sympathy of the bereaved bride Isabella combined with relief, and the nervous panic of the crowd. The fluctuations of rage, hysteria, and crafty manipulation in Manfred's dealings with the mob are detailed at length, with the narrator playing the active part of an astute but slightly baffled observer. Yet the representation of feelings and motives will seem primitive to a reader of today, and the lightly archaic dialogue does not improve matters. What is required is a leap of imagination and a sense of context. According to the critic of the *Monthly Review* (23 February 1765), "the disquisitions into human manners, passions, and pursuits, indicate the keenest penetration,

and the most perfect knowledge of mankind" at that time (p. xvii). Consequently, this novel provides the template for all future fictions of supernatural terror, including film. The credible emotions of the characters connect us to incredible phenomena and events and allow terror to circulate via processes of identification and projection.

Although the fusion of the probable and the improbable is the most vital aspect of the narrative, Walpole also brought to his "new species of romance" a curious assemblage of elements which owed more to the fashionable tastes of his day than to any very strict definition of the romance genre as it had previously been understood and criticized. Among the contemporary developments that became intertwined with the revival of romance were revisionist accounts of medieval culture, the aesthetics of original genius and the sublime, and the growing cult of Shakespearean tragedy.

An earlier work by Walpole, *Catalogue of Royal and Noble Authors* (1758), is evidence that he had read some genuine early romances, but *Otranto* bears little relation to them. Early apologists for ancient romance were mainly concerned with identifying the principles of composition for a text like *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser, which seemed lacking in internal connection and overburdened by detail. They often reached for an analogy with Gothic architecture, especially cathedrals, where the proliferation of forms nevertheless obeyed a certain hierarchy. But this issue is irrelevant to Walpole, who is at pains to note in his first, counterfeiting preface that the story seems to obey the theory of the "three unities" laid down by Aristotle, where representation of action, time, and place is simplified in the interests of coherence: "There is no bombast, no similes, flowers, digressions, or unnecessary descriptions. Every thing tends directly to the catastrophe" (p. 7). Although *Otranto* was first published as a translated romance and fooled at least one critic, it has more to do with new theories about the social origins of medieval literature than with actual imitation of them.

Two important works of literary history appeared in the decade preceding *Otranto*: *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser* (1754; enlarged edition 1762) by Thomas Warton and *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762) by Richard Hurd. Both stressed that medieval romances should be seen as the product of their times and both took a particular interest in the customs of chivalry as a foundation for romance. Warton interpreted the fanciful and supernatural elements in romance as allegories of social realities, a point also taken up by Hurd. Thanks to the appearance of St. Palaye's historical study *Mémoires de l'Ancienne Chévalerie* in 1759, Hurd was able to provide a detailed account of feudal society and manners and argue, more persuasively than any previous commentator, the relativist point that Gothic

literature was as valid a form of artistic expression as Grecian art when seen in context.<sup>5</sup>

The historicist approach of Warton and Hurd informs Walpole's treatment of the relation between the medieval setting and manifestations of the supernatural. Hurd had speculated that tales of enchantment "shadowed out" the class conflict of their times; "oppressive feudal Lords" were imaginatively transposed by the peasantry into fictional giants, "and every Lord was to be met with, like the Giant, in his strong hold, or castle."<sup>6</sup> In *Otranto*, too, exaggerated fantasy is the natural outgrowth of the violent appropriation of power.<sup>7</sup> The benevolent Prince Alfonso, we discover, was murdered by his chamberlain Ricardo, the line of succession has been perverted, and two generations later Alfonso has returned as a spectral giant to reclaim the property for his own descendant. The castle is central to the fable and seems to have a life of its own. It traps and conceals; its walls frame almost all the main events with a specificity on which Walpole prided himself ("The scene is undoubtably laid in some real castle" he fibbed in the first preface, p. 8, though some have drawn comparisons with his own house Strawberry Hill). Its alien modes of ingress and egress give rise to the prototypical scene of Isabella's desperate flight from the villain through an underground tunnel and to the display of chivalric pageantry when Prince Frederick arrives at its gates incognito to challenge Manfred, accompanied by a large entourage of harbingers, heralds, pages, foot-guards, liveried footmen, and "an hundred gentlemen bearing an enormous sword, and seeming to faint under the weight of it" (p. 65). In *Lives of the Novelists*, Walter Scott praised Walpole's attention to "the costume of the period."<sup>8</sup>

In the counterfeiting first preface, the inclusion of ghosts and miracles is justified with the claim that the tale is "faithful to the *manners* of the time" (p. 6). If chivalry and feudalism provide one explanatory context, the dominance of the Catholic Church in medieval times provides another. Walpole (posing as translator) initially suggests that the original story was written to reinforce "the empire of superstition" when the growth of learning threatened to dispel it: "such a work as the following would enslave a hundred vulgar minds beyond half the books of controversy that have been written from the days of Luther to the present day" (pp. 5-6). A factor in the dismissal of ancient romance was the association with Catholic superstition. The disenchanting novel was felt to be the appropriate fictional mode for an enlightened Protestant culture. Hence the outrage of one reviewer when the true authorship of *Otranto* was revealed: "It is, indeed, more than strange that an Author, of a refined and polished genius, should be an advocate for re-establishing the barbarous superstitions of Gothic devilism!"<sup>9</sup> Nearly thirty years later, Radcliffe was to introduce the device of the "explained

supernatural" in order to reconcile Protestant incredulity and the taste for ghostly terror. Walpole's "authentic" representation of medieval ghost beliefs is ambivalent. On the one hand the church effigy with a nosebleed and the uproarious reaction to every supernatural phenomenon of the benighted ser-vants and peasants have the quality of spoof; it is notable that the "noble" characters, Manfred and the hero Theodore, retain their skepticism almost to the end. On the other hand Father Jerome is represented by and large as a man of integrity, Manfred and Hippolita finish by seeking redemption in holy orders, and the climactic incarnation of the giant ghost shaking the castle to its foundations is undeniably real. Ultimately, therefore, Walpole eschews irony and takes the radical option of reviving discredited beliefs for the entertainment of a modern audience.<sup>10</sup>

The revisionist view of medieval culture did not stop at historical analysis. To grant that medieval Gothic literature had its own unique character was to grant that it had its own virtues; dissection made way for enthusiasm. Warton and Hurd suggested that the Gothic age, precisely because of its relative barbarity, was especially conducive to the free play of imagination and that what the modern era had gained in civility it had lost in poetic inspiration. Historicism in literary studies shaded into primitivism, a questioning of the certainty that civilization meant progress.<sup>11</sup> And once a sense of loss had been acknowledged, it was only another small step to take the view that modernity must learn from the uncivilized past and aspire to imitate it.

*The Castle of Otranto* was one of various attempts around this time to cut a new path in literature by looking back to the past; the poets William Collins, Edward Young, Walpole's friend Thomas Gray, and the fabricator of "Ossian," James Macpherson, were all important innovators of this kind. In every case there was impatience with the limitations of neoclassical taste and an investment in alternative theories about art and its reception, human nature, and the workings of the mind. These did not always relate directly to romance but they helped to create a climate of opinion favorable to revival. The concept of the sublime originated in a classical text, the treatise *On the Sublime* (*Peri hupsous*) attributed to Longinus. In 1674 this text was translated into French by Boileau, and the resulting account of the "grand style" of writing which provokes powerful emotion became immediately influential. Writers and critics from John Dryden to John Dennis began using this classical concept to counter other classical concepts, most notably *mimesis*, the imitation of nature. The inclusion of supernatural or fantastical beings in a drama was justified as a means of stimulating the sensation of "transport" that Longinus commended. Joseph Addison acknowledged that traditional tales of ghosts and fairies arouse "a pleasing kind of Horrour in the Mind of the Reader" and are an excellent resource for a poet. He cited Shakespeare

in evidence, but warned that "it is impossible for a Poet to succeed in it, who has not a particular Cast of Fancy, and an Imagination naturally fruitful and superstitious."<sup>12</sup>

As if in answer to Addison's challenge, the poem "A Night Piece on Death" (1721) by Thomas Parnell launched the so-called "Graveyard school," which had its heyday in the 1740s with Edward Young's *The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1742-45), Robert Blair's "The Grave" (1743), and James Hervey's prose *Meditations Among the Tombs* (1746-47). All used superstitious suggestion to raise the mind to a pitch sufficient to embrace the idea of mortality, but without representing a "real" ghost. It was a critical balancing act: the differentiation between the rational beliefs of Protestantism and irrational Catholicism was at stake. William Collins went much further in embracing the aesthetic possibilities of the supernatural with two poems, "Ode to Fear" (1746) and "Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland" (written 1749, published 1788). It struck some observers as entirely in keeping that he lapsed into insanity soon after. Samuel Johnson's judgment on Collins after his early death was strict: "He had employed his mind chiefly upon works of fiction, and subjects of fancy; and, by indulging some peculiar habits of thought, was eminently delighted with those flights of imagination which pass the bounds of nature, and to which the mind is reconciled only by a passive acquiescence in popular traditions."<sup>13</sup>

But towards the end of the 1750s the case for expanding the imagination was strengthened. Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) was the most ambitious and methodical consideration of the sublime yet published. It presented imaginative transport not only as desirable – one rhetorical option among others – but as a necessity, mentally and even physiologically. Burke begins by outlining the problem of indifference, a state of mental lethargy brought about by a steady diet of the familiar. Positive pleasure, the type of novelty associated with beauty, is one way of relieving the problem, but it is only a mild and temporary cure. Far more effective is a peculiar kind of pain mixed with delight, "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable [of feeling]" (Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 36; also in Clery and Miles, *Gothic Documents*, p. 113). The sublime is an apprehension of danger in nature or art without the immediate risk of destruction; it is a "state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" and "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other" (*Enquiry*, p. 53; *Documents*, p. 113). Just as the muscles of the body must be kept in tone, so the imagination must be "shaken and worked to a proper degree" by images and ideas of the terrible sublime (*Enquiry*, p. 123; *Documents*, p. 121).

The relevance of Burke's *Enquiry* to Walpole's experiments with romance is twofold. First, there is the emphasis on terror as the "ruling principle" of the sublime. Walpole picks up the idea in the first preface to *Otranto*: "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" (p. 6). After all, like Burke's theory, *Otranto* originates in the problem of boredom and satiety. They are both products of a commercial society in which stability, leisure, and plenty lead to a demand for artificial excitements, and most appositely, in which the rapid growth of the reading habit in the middle class breeds obscure longings for novelty. Burke contributed to a mounting sense of crisis in literary culture, an increasing impatience with borrowed forms and mere social utility. He was forcefully seconded by Edward Young in *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759): "We read *Imitation* with somewhat of his languor, who listens to a twice-told tale; Our spirits rouse at an *Original*; that is a perfect stranger, and all throng to learn what news from a foreign land" (cited in Clery and Miles, *Gothic Documents*, p. 122).

In spite of this pressure in favor of originality, the path of innovators did not necessarily run smoothly. There was still strong resistance from the literary establishment. A case in point was that of Thomas Gray, a close friend of Walpole, who like Collins was deeply versed in folklore and mythology, admired Spenser and Shakespeare above all poets, and revived the Pindaric ode, the most irregular and thus "sublime" of metrical forms. His *Odes* were the first volume to be published at the Strawberry Hill press in 1757, and one of the poems, "The Bard," contains several of the ingredients later to be found in *Otranto*: a tyrant, a prophecy, and ghosts demanding vengeance. It is based on the tradition that after his conquest of Wales, Edward I condemned to death the bards for reciting seditious stories. Gray's treatment brought together primitivism and the natural sublime and has been credited with launching the "Celtic revival" in literature.<sup>14</sup> In the figure of the Poet, the bard who confronts Edward, curses him, and commits triumphant suicide, Gray also created a potent emblem of the resistance of the spirit of imagination to tyrannical laws, aesthetic and political. But in the short term the *Odes* met with a frosty critical reception and sold badly. By contrast, the next import from the Celtic fringe just five years later, the "Ossian" epics – *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763) – became one of the publishing phenomena of the century. The prose poems were presented to the public as the work of a Gaelic bard of the fourth century AD, but were actually concocted by James Macpherson. There was debate over their authenticity but most admirers, until well into the next century, preferred to take them as irrefutable evidence of primitive genius. There seems little doubt that Walpole's initial

decision to disguise *Otranto* as an ancient manuscript was informed by his comparing the reception of "The Bard" with that of "Ossian."

Unlike Macpherson, Walpole quickly confessed his authorship, but when he did so in the second preface, he chose "to shelter [his] own daring under the cannon of the brightest genius this country, at least, has produced" (Walpole, *Castle of Otranto*, p. 14). With this stratagem we come to the third, and arguably the most significant, added factor in Walpole's romance formula. It would be impossible to overestimate the importance of Shakespeare as touchstone and inspiration for the terror mode, even if we feel the offspring are unworthy of their parent. Scratch the surface of any Gothic fiction and the debt to Shakespeare will be there. To begin with there are the key scenes of supernatural terror that are plundered by Walpole and then by many other fiction writers: the banquet scene, the vision of the dagger, and the visit to the cave of the three witches in *Macbeth*; the phantasmagoria of the tent scene in *Richard III*; and above all, the ghost scenes from *Hamlet*. In Walpole's time these episodes had already acquired autonomous fame in the theatre through the thrilling naturalism of David Garrick's acting style, capable of persuading a skeptical audience that they too witnessed the supernatural (see Clery, *Rise of Supernatural Fiction*, pp. 37-46). When Walpole in the first preface talks of the "inspired writings" of the past that serve as his model, in which "witnesses to the most stupendous phenomena, never lose sight of their human character" (Walpole, *Castle of Otranto*, p. 10), he is thinking primarily of Shakespeare's tragedies and Garrick's interpretations of them.

Shakespeare had a very specific value for the romance revival in Britain. Historically, he was situated on the cusp between Gothic and enlightened times. His plays were believed to combine the benefits of Protestantism and Renaissance learning with ready access to the resources of popular folklore and Popish superstition, so conducive to the imagination. Even his language was regarded as striking a perfect balance between ancient and modern. Hurd suggested that the English language was at its best in the age of Elizabeth, "somewhere between the rude essays and uncorrected fancy, on the one hand, and the refinements of reason and science, on the other."<sup>15</sup> Ideologically, Shakespeare also played an important part in the nationalist myth surrounding the reign of Elizabeth. It was no accident that the cult of the Immortal Bard intensified during the period of the Seven Years' War, 1756-63, when France's living national poet Voltaire chose to launch an attack on the English dramatic tradition. Walpole's second preface, partly addressed to Voltaire, was a notable contribution to the war of words and a ringing defense of one aspect of Shakespeare's practice that remained controversial even in Britain: the inclusion of comic scenes in the tragedies. Walpole adopted this practice in *Otranto*, and it was to remain a

feature of Gothic romance through to Ann Radcliffe, "Monk" Lewis and beyond.

For several years, however, no other contenders appeared to capitalize on the possibilities of a modern romance genre. Walpole himself turned his attention to drama. The design of *The Mysterious Mother: a Tragedy* (1768) was as rebellious in its way as *Otranto* had been. The Countess of Narbonne, maddened by learning of the death of her husband, secretly and in disguise committed premeditated incest with her son, bore a child from that union, and in spite of attempts to expiate the sin through good works, has suffered years of inner torment before killing herself when father/son and daughter/sister unwittingly fall in love and the truth is exposed. With this story Walpole aimed to create a character "quite new on the stage."<sup>16</sup> The play in fact never reached the stage: even in print, it was suppressed by its author and withheld from public sale until 1791. The problem was the nature of the crime, which many of those who read it felt was too revolting to be offered as part of an entertainment and unredeemable by any kind of moral counterweight in the drama.

Walpole was happy enough to impose self-censorship for a while, but he stubbornly resisted attempts by a well-meaning friend to get him to water down the plot.<sup>17</sup> It was vital to his purpose to maintain the stark contrast between the manifest goodness and nobility of the heroine and the enduring stain of a moment of passion. *The Mysterious Mother* is set "at the dawn of the Reformation" and is in the historical sense anti-Gothic. A large part of the Countess's heroism lies in her resistance to the superstitious "mumming" of the devious Catholic priests Benedict and Martin, who seek to frighten her into a confession of her secret and then appropriate her estate.

In spite of its notoriety and long suppression, the play had a growing underground reputation. Ann Radcliffe cites it on three occasions in *The Italian*. As an example of natural horror and an investigation of the extremes of human nature, it was unquestionably influential on a developing strand of psychological Gothic, distinct from supernatural fiction, found in the work of William Godwin, Joanna Baillie, Mary Shelley, Lord Byron, and the Americans Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe.

In the meantime *Otranto* was gradually achieving the recognition Walpole sought for it as a hybrid "new species." The eminent man of letters William Warburton praised it for going beyond its setting "in *Gothic Chivalry*" and putting into "effect the full purpose of the *ancient Tragedy*, that is, to *purge the passions by pity and terror*, in colouring as great and harmonious as in any of the best Dramatic Writers."<sup>18</sup> In 1773 brother and sister John and

Anna Laetitia Aikin published *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose*, which included in its subjects "The Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror." They draw the connection between Shakespearean tragedy and traditional tales of the marvelous, whether "old Gothic romance" or eastern fable, "with their giants, enchantments and transformations." *Otranto* is identified as "a very spirited modern attempt upon the same plan of mixed terror ["the terrible joined with the marvelous"], adapted to the model of Gothic romance." For an explanation of the pleasure in fictions of the terrible, they reiterate Burke's theory of the sublime: "A strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch; and where the agency of invisible beings is introduced, of 'forms unseen, and mightier far than we,' our imagination, darting forth, explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to its view, and rejoices in the expansion of its powers" (the Aikins in Clery and Miles, *Gothic Documents*, p. 129).

When the Aikins speak of "passion and fancy co-operating" to "elevate the soul to its highest pitch," they echo Walpole's central doctrine, the combination of the natural and the supernatural. And like Walpole they set aside the issue of moral justification. They argue that there are no moral feelings involved in the response to this type of fiction, in contrast to the sympathetic response to scenes of distress in novels of sensibility. To demonstrate the effect, a short fragment "Sir Bertrand" (also 1773) was included in the Aikin volume. It consists of a series of astonishing and horrific occurrences undergone by a lone knight, unsubordinated to any overarching narrative logic or didactic message.<sup>19</sup> The fragment offers instead pure sensation, and, with its freedom from the conventional moral rubric of the novel, it is as much a founding text of the terror mode as *Otranto*.

The return of romance to eighteenth-century fiction needs to be seen in economic context, as a symptom of the vicissitudes of the publishing industry and a response to the search for novelty. As a consequence of Ian Watt's landmark study, we are accustomed to the idea of the "rise of the novel" and the corollary that it never looked back. Works such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-41) and *Clarissa* (1747-48), Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie; ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) were not only huge publishing successes, but "media events" that launched numerous spinoffs such as journalistic responses, spoofs, theatrical adaptations, print engravings, and sermons, as well as a host of imitators. But by the 1770s the lack of new and original contenders was sending the novel into what appeared to be a terminal decline. Between 1776 and 1779 an average of seventeen new novels per year were published, a slump from a high of sixty in 1771 (see

Garside, et al., *English Novel 1770-1829*, I, 26-27). There were no doubt various factors at play, including the contingencies of war in the American colonies and changes in copyright law, but it seems likely that generic exhaustion was much of the problem. For years would-be heirs to Richardson and Sterne had been churning out feeble imitations. The reading public were beginning to tire of these, and publishers and booksellers were becoming discouraged. The arrival of Frances Burney's *Evelina* in 1778 helped to reverse the fortunes of the novel form and created another wave of imitations. But it was also precisely at this point that Clara Reeve decided to take up Walpole's challenge to develop a "new route" in fiction and wrote *The Old English Baron* (first published in 1777 under the title *The Champion of Virtue*). It was her well-timed initiative that turned Walpole's half-serious novelty into a viable commercial mode.<sup>20</sup>

Clara Reeve was a specialist in romance. In 1772 she published a translation of John Barclay's seventeenth-century romance *Argensis* from Latin, and in 1785 she was to produce a substantial work of criticism, *The Progress of Romance*, which I will discuss shortly. Between these two, *The Old English Baron: a Gothic Story* appeared and, as her preface puts it, brought the technique introduced in *Otranto* "within the utmost verge of probability" (p. 4). Reeve presented her own slightly revised formula for combining "the ancient Romance and modern Novel": "a sufficient degree of the marvellous to excite the attention; enough of the manners of real life, to give an air of probability to the work; and enough of the pathetic, to engage the heart in its behalf" (*ibid.*).

In practice, she takes a story very similar to that of *Otranto*, of a young peasant discovered to be the rightful heir to a usurped estate. She reduces the supernatural element, expands the description of everyday actions and events, and develops the emotional bonds among the different characters in relationships of friendship, patronage, and family piety (the villain scarcely registers, though the suffering of his victims does). A notable instance of her revisionism comes early in the narrative, when the hero Edmund, like Walpole's Theodore, undertakes to sleep in a reputedly haunted chamber. The scene is set more thoroughly than in Walpole, with detail of the bed "devoured by the moths, and occupied by the rats" (p. 42). There is a hint of supernatural rustling in the hall, but fear is immediately quashed by the hero's fortifying prayers. A visitation by the ghosts of his parents seems like a pleasant dream. What is gained by this method is an extension of the aim of moral improvement to embrace a degree of the marvelous; what is sacrificed is terror and sublimity.<sup>21</sup> As far as the "Gothic" nature of the story is concerned, Reeve went to some trouble to evoke the age of chivalry, with a battle scene, a joust, and the device of interruptions to the tale caused by a

fragmented manuscript. A critic at the time observed that it was set too late (in the fifteenth century) to be strictly "Gothic."<sup>22</sup>

Due to our own anachronistic usage of "Gothic" and unwillingness to take into account the contemporary term "modern romance," the 1780s have been almost universally misrecognized as a fallow period before the boom of the 1790s. In fact this is a decade of escalating debate on the origins and character of romance, which had an immediate bearing on innovative fictions. Through the 1760s and 1770s, rival theories had been taking shape: the eastern theory (with William Warburton at its head), arguing that romances derived from eastern tales imported to Europe at the time of the Crusades—or earlier, during Moorish rule in Spain; the northern theory (championed by Thomas Percy) locating the source of romance in the Norselands, with the Normans as disseminators; and a Celtic theory put forward by the Welsh antiquarian Evan Evans.<sup>23</sup> In line with the universalist assumptions of neo-classical criticism, all schools of thought presumed there must be a single source, though Hurd's more historicist approach opened the way for an alternative view that romance develops out of native social structures, not through migration. In *The History of English Poetry* (1774–81), Thomas Warton argued strongly for an eastern origin for what he called "Romantic fiction." In doing so, he ran counter to the previous northern trend represented by Percy and Gray and the Celtic revivalism of James Macpherson and Hugh Blair, chief apologist for the authenticity and greatness of "Ossian." Warton's theory was matched by orientalist elements in *Otranto* and *The Old English Baron* (both with Crusade contexts) and the Aikins' singling out of *Arabian Nights* for its "many striking examples of the terrible jointed with the marvellous" (cited in Clery and Miles, *Gothic Documents*, p. 129).

The "romance wars" of the 1780s took place both at the level of theory and practice, and there was considerable interchange between the two. James Beattie and Clara Reeve produced major critical works on the genre. Novice fiction writers Sophia Lee (*The Recess*, 1783–85), Charlotte Smith (*Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle*, 1788), and Ann Radcliffe (*The Castles of Athlyn and Dunbayne*, 1789) all to a greater or lesser extent embraced the Celtic revival, while William Beckford with *Vathek* (1786) produced the first full-fledged orientalist tale of terror. Although the latter work figured in the notable anthology *Three Gothic Novels* (1968) edited by Mario Praz, it has been omitted from most recent surveys of the terror mode. This is a loss; a sense of the diversity of experiments in modern romance at this stage throws into relief the remarkable convergence of motifs that took place in the 1790s.

James Beattie's essay "On Fable and Romance" in *Dissertations Moral and Political* (1783) is a strange hotchpotch of derivative ideas (mainly Hurd's)

but also shows the impact that the success of modern romance was having on the thinking of critics. He repeats the common view of *Don Quixote* as a romance-buster: "This work no sooner appeared, than chivalry vanished, as snow melts before the sun. Mankind awoke as from a dream" (Beattie in Clery and Miles, *Gothic Documents*, p. 92). But his account of chivalric romance sounds just like the "Gothic stories" of Walpole and Reeve, with castles in an eternal state of delapidation, complete with wind-revolving passages, secret haunted chambers, and creaking hinges, and narratives revolving around tyranny, rapine, and the ravishing of maidens. In other words, literary history had become infected with present-day fantasy. The revival of romance seems to have encouraged Beattie to apply the term freely, as Walpole did, to every kind of modern fiction including the works of Richardson and Fielding. This, however, does not save the genre from a final unexpected condemnation: "Let not the usefulness of Romance-writing be estimated by the length of my discourse upon it. Romances are a dangerous recreation . . . and tend to corrupt the heart, and stimulate the passions."<sup>24</sup>

Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance* (1785) was a campaigning work. The very idea that "romance" could "progress" was contentious; the two words had not previously been used together. The work is presented as a series of adversarial dialogues between a woman of letters, Euphrasia (Reeve herself), and Hortensius, a rather facetious strawman of conventional opinions, while Sophronia arbitrates from the sidelines. Euphrasia delivers a knock-out blow in the first round by demonstrating that the prized epics of Homer and Virgil were really a species of romance, comparable to the *Arabian Nights*. After that she is easily able to carry her main point, that "Romances are of universal growth, and not confined to any particular period or countries."<sup>25</sup> Reeve's terminology is distinctive. She distinguishes clearly between romance "which treats of fabulous persons and things" and the novel as "a picture of real life and manners."<sup>26</sup> The "modern romance" describes the heroic romances of La Calprenède and Scudéry. She slides the contemporary revival of romance in through the back door by creating a wholly new category, "Novels and Stories Original and Uncommon," to encompass *The Castle of Otranto* alongside whimsical and fantastical fictions like *Tristram Shandy*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and even *Robinson Crusoe*. *Contra* Beattie, she finds no difficulty in declaring them all "of moral tendency."<sup>27</sup>

Originality, not a medieval setting, is the vital component of the evolving literature of terror. What such texts share is a revolt against the representation of common experience and familiar situations. A case in point is Sophia Lee's *The Recess: a Tale of Other Times* (1783–85). Set in the reign of Elizabeth I, it concerns the tumultuous lives of the fictive twin daughters of Mary Queen of Scots, secretly raised in an underground habitation. Some critics were



by now primed to respond to the promise of romance with swooning anticipation. Samuel Badcock writes in the *Monthly Review*, "*The Tale of Other Times* is a romantic title. It awakens curiosity; it sets us at once on *fairy land*—while Fancy, equipped for adventure, sallies forth in quest of the castle, the giant, and the dragon." He confesses disappointment that the fiction turns out to be founded on fact.<sup>28</sup> The *Critical Review* was more receptive to the mixture of fiction and history and excited about its novelty: "This little volume is full of surprising and yet not improbable events. The author, Miss Lee, properly observes, that the age of Elizabeth was that of romance, and she has accordingly chosen it for the era of her heroines . . . It is new; it is instructive; it is highly interesting; and we wish that this mode of writing were more frequent."<sup>29</sup>

*Vathek* renewed the claims of the Spanish—eastern theory by reminding the public of the unparalleled imaginative freedom of the genuine oriental tale (it was first published under the title *An Arabian Tale*). William Enfield writing on *Vathek* in the *Monthly Review* indicates he had a contrast with Gothic romance in mind when he echoes the language of Reeve's preface to *The Old English Baron*, a work he had reviewed eight years earlier: "it preserves the peculiar character of the Arabian Tale, which is not only to overstep nature and probability, but even to pass beyond the verge of possibility, and suppose things, which cannot be for a moment conceived."<sup>30</sup> Earlier British versions of the oriental tale, such as Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759) and Frances Sheridan's *The History of Nourjahad* (1767), had been subject to a didactic imperative as strict as that of the realist novel. Although Beckford gestured toward this model, it was not a wholly convincing gesture. The eponymous villain and his equally loathsome mother Carathis burst the bounds of moral instruction with their extravagant desires and grotesque cruelty, and there is no divine tempering of the magic powers of the genii. Like Walpole, Beckford attempts a Shakespearean contrast of comedy and terror, but instead of interweaving the two, the black humor of the major part of the tale is finally overtaken by a scene of extraordinary tragic power. *Vathek* discovers that the reality of the ultimate empire, for which he has committed so many crimes, is an eternity of aimless wandering among a multitude of lost souls in the vast domains of the devil Eblis.

The eastern tale of terror had no immediate successor, but the example of *Vathek* was not wholly abandoned. It is evident that Matthew Lewis borrowed some of Beckford's ideas for the handling of his villain Ambrosio in *The Monk* and perhaps took encouragement from *Vathek* for scenes of sorcery beyond the now-standard spectral appearances found in romances of a medieval kind. In the short term, however, a new winning

formula for modern romance was coalescing. The heroine-centered adventures in atmospheric settings of Lee's *The Recess* and Smith's *Emmeline and Dunbayne* offered another. When they combined in the full-fledged "Radcliffe romance" of the early 1790s, the experiment begun by Walpole achieved unimagined levels of critical and commercial success. Beckford, a sore loser, remained a dissenting voice. His satires on Radcliffe in *Modern Novel Writing* (1796) and *Azemias* (1797) may be seen as postscripts to the era dealt with in this essay, when the creation of imaginary terrors was still an eccentric and highly speculative venture.

## NOTES

- 1 A handful of fictions feature "Gothic" in their titles after Reeve, including Richard Warner's *Netley Abbey: a Gothic Story* (1795) and Isabella Kelly's *The Baron's Daughter: a Gothic Romance* (1802). "A Romance" is by far the most common subtitle among writings of the period now described as "Gothic." See Alfred E. Longeul, "The Word 'Gothic' in Eighteenth-Century Criticism," *MLN* 38 (1923): 453–60 for a few rare early instances of the term being applied in a literary critical sense.
- 2 *Gothic* as a generic term appears in two literary overviews in 1899: Henry A. Beers, *History of English Romanticism in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Henry Holt) and Wilbur Cross, *The Development of the English Novel* (New York and London: Macmillan). It was established in Britain by Edith Birkhead in 1921, and in 1932 J. M. S. Tompkins followed suit with a chapter on "Gothic Romance." Cf. Montagne Summers, *The Gothic Quest: a History of the Gothic Novel* (London: Fortune Press, 1938).
- 3 See the chapter by Robert Miles in this volume.
- 4 See Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). For an often-cited discussion of novel vs. romance as a gendered opposition, see Laurie Langbauer, *Women and Romance: the Consolations of Gender in the English Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); but it should be noted that most heroic romances were written by men, and for the eighteenth century the archetypal romance reader was Cervantes' Don Quixote.
- 5 On Hurd and antiquarian discourse, see Mark Madoff, "The Useful Myth of Gothic Ancestry," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 8 (1979), and Harriet Guest, "The Wanton Muse: Politics and Gender in Gothic Theory After 1760" in *Beyond Romanticism*, ed. Stephen Copley and John Whale (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 118–39.
- 6 Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, Augustan Reprint Society, no. 101/02, 1st facsimile edn (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 28–29.
- 7 For political readings of *Otranto*, see Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing, 1750–1820* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 105–12, and E. J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 68–79.

- 8 Peter Sabor, ed., *Horace Walpole: the Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 92. Note also John Allen Stevenson, "The Castle of Otranto: Political Supernaturalism" in *The British Novel: Defoe to Austen* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990), pp. 90-109.
- 9 *Monthly Review* 32 (May 1765): 394.
- 10 For an interpretation of *The Castle of Otranto* focusing on religion and superstition, see Victor Sage, *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1988).
- 11 A related challenge to the Enlightenment narrative was simultaneously arising in the field of philosophy, most influentially in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1754).
- 12 *Spectator* 419 (1712) in E. J. Clery and Robert Miles, eds., *Gothic Documents: a Sourcebook, 1700-1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 105.
- 13 Samuel Johnson, *The Poetical Calendar* (1763), cited in Roger Lonsdale, ed., *Thomas Gray and William Collins: Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1877), p. xxii.
- 14 Sam Smiles, *The Image of Antiquity: Ancient Britain and the Romantic Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 18.
- 15 From "Dialogue III: on the Golden Age of Queen Elizabeth" in *Moral and Political Dialogues*, reprinted in Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance, with the Third Elizabethan Dialogue*, ed. Edith J. Morley (London: Henry Frowde, 1911), p. 71.
- 16 *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, 48 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-83), xxvii, 9.
- 17 On the publication history of the play, see E. J. Clery, "Horace Walpole's *The Mysterious Mother* and the Impossibility of Female Desire" in Fred Botting, ed., *The Gothic*, in the English Association Essays and Studies series (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), pp. 23-46.
- 18 *The Works of Alexander Pope* (1770), iv, 165-67, reprinted in Sabor, ed., *Walpole: the Critical Heritage*, p. 75.
- 19 This was written by John Aikin; see Lucy Aikin, ed., *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, with a Memoir*, 2 vols. (1825), 1, xiii-xiv.
- 20 For an illuminating investigation of the emergence of Gothic romance from changes in the publishing trade, see Edward Jacobs, both in "Anonymous Signatures: Circulating Libraries, Conventionality, and the Production of Gothic Romances," *ELH* 62 (1995): 603-29, and in *Accidental Migrations: an Archeology of Gothic Discourse* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press), pp. 157-235.
- 21 For recent readings of *The Old English Baron*, see James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre, and Cultural Conflict, 1764-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and E. J. Clery, *Women's Gothic from Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2000).
- 22 "[T]he title therefore seems a kind of contradiction in terms. The mistake seems to arise from the Gothic style in building, which then prevailed"; *Gentleman's Magazine* 48 (July 1778): 324-25.
- 23 René Wellek, *The Rise of English Literary History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), pp. 153-56.
- 24 Ioan Williams, ed., *Novel and Romance 1700-1800: a Documentary Record* (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 327.

- 25 Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance* in Gary Kelly, ed., *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738-1785*, 6 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), vi, 167.
- 26 *ibid.*, vi, 210.
- 27 *ibid.*, vi, 244.
- 28 *Monthly Review* 68 (May 1783): 455-56.
- 29 *Critical Review* 55 (March 1783): 233-34.
- 30 *Monthly Review* 76 (May 1787): 450.