



HORACE WALPOLE

THE CASTLE
OF OTRANTO

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

HORACE WALPOLE

The Castle of Otranto
A Gothic Story

Edited by

W. S. LEWIS

With a new Introduction and Notes by

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E. J. C.

INTRODUCTION

The Castle of Otranto originated in a dream; or so its author claimed:

I waked one morning in the beginning of last June from a dream, of which all I could recover was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story) and that on the uppermost bannister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening I sat down and began to write, without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate. The work grew on my hands, and I grew fond of it—add that I was very glad to think of anything rather than politics—in short I was so engrossed in my tale, which I completed in less than two months, that one evening I wrote from the time I had drunk my tea, about six o'clock, till half an hour after one in the morning, when my hand and fingers were so weary, that I could not hold the pen to finish the sentence, but left Matilda and Isabella talking, in the middle of a paragraph.¹

A 'very natural dream': for no man was better qualified to lose himself in a fantasy of the Middle Ages. The third son of the great Whig statesman Sir Robert Walpole, Horace Walpole was made financially independent by the bequest of a political sinecure. In 1747 he purchased a small villa in Twickenham on the outskirts of London, as a retreat from the hurly-burly of the capital, and over the next twenty-five years proceeded to transform it into a gothic² castle in miniature, filled with art objects, curios, and rare books. Others before him had toyed with decorative garden ruins or pinnacled fireplaces, but never had the Gothic style in

¹ The Yale edition of *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis et al., 48 vols. (New Haven, 1937-83), hereafter referred to as *Walpole's Correspondence*; 1. 88 (letter to William Cole, 9 Mar. 1765).

² I have used 'gothic' with an initial lower case to refer to the historical period; 'Gothic' with an initial capital refers to the 18th-c. aesthetic movement.

architecture been so thoroughly or passionately revived as at Strawberry Hill. In planning the alterations, Walpole pored over ancient folios, took notes on the genuinely gothic cathedrals and castles visited on summer tours, and set up a 'Committee of Taste' consisting of himself and two antiquarian friends to deliberate over every detail. But at the same time he freely admitted the artificiality of the enterprise: his inner vision was realized with wood, plaster, and *trompe-l'œil* wallpaper.

It was in the pleasing 'gloomth' of Strawberry Hill that Walpole fell asleep on that night early in June 1764 and had a nightmare; and it was there, surrounded by old tomes and suits of armour, the light filtering through stained-glass windows, that he began to write *The Castle of Otranto*. The novel has often been described as a spontaneous, almost unconscious, extension of the dilettante's activities. This idea, along with the bizarre, dream-like quality of the narrative itself, led André Breton and the French Surrealists to claim Walpole as one of their own. Paul Éluard, in his introduction to a 1943 translation of *Otranto*, paid the ultimate compliment of comparing the opening scene of the novel to a famously surreal image from Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror*: with the incident of Conrad "dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers", we already have the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella'.³ There have also been attempts to apply Freud's methods and analyse *Otranto* as a dream rather than as a work of literature—an exercise which predictably enough has revealed a welter of incestuous and parricidal desires behind the smooth façade of the eighteenth-century man of letters.⁴

³ Cit. Maurice Levy, *Le Roman 'Gothique' anglais 1764-1824* (Toulouse, 1968), 109; my trans.

⁴ See Harfst and Kallich in the Select Bibliography.

And yet, the dream-origin of *The Castle of Otranto* has been mentioned more often as an explanation for its shortcomings, than as a cause for enthusiasm. From the start, its wildness invited derision. One friend of Walpole, Gilly Williams, wrote to another, George Selwyn, complaining of *Otranto's* tedious outlandishness: 'He says it was a dream, and I fancy one when he had some feverish disposition in him.'⁵ Walpole himself was sometimes inclined to dismiss it as a piece of whimsy, and in the twentieth century critics have tended to agree. The story has been regularly censured for wooden characterization, and the amateurish self-indulgence of its supernatural effects.

It may seem strange that a work which has received a good deal of negative criticism nevertheless continues to attract so much attention, and indeed, after close to a hundred editions in many languages, continues to be reprinted in paperback form today. The main reason, both for the criticism and for the resilience of this work, is surely that *The Castle of Otranto* is never judged purely on its own merits, but rather as the founding text of a genre that has flourished, through various permutations, up to the present. Walpole never wrote another novel, but his example was followed by others in increasing numbers until by the 1790s an identifiable mode of 'modern romance' or 'terrorist fiction' was taking the book market by storm. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 'Gothic' has diversified into many sub-genres, including historical romance, science fiction, and detective fiction. The slender tale of *Otranto* might well appear as insubstantial as poor Conrad beneath the weight of such a legacy. That it is still read, and read with interest, is something of a tribute to Walpole's foresight, as well as to his imaginative powers.

Walpole was the first to propose establishing a modern 'Gothic' style of fiction, and it was a proposal that at the

⁵ Walpole's *Correspondence*, 30. 177 (19 Mar. 1765).

time required considerable audacity. For when he introduced the subtitle 'A Gothic Story' in the second edition of *Otranto*, he was overturning some cherished assumptions. The precise nature of this challenge to orthodoxy will require a little untangling, in order to avoid a simplistic formula of revolutionary romanticism versus neoclassical stagnation. For much of the century, 'gothic' was a term used synonymously for 'uncouth' or 'barbaric' when referring to art or manners. Artefacts of the Middle Ages, because of their extravagance and irregularity, fell foul of the established standards of aesthetic propriety. But by the 1750s there was a new interest in the gothic inheritance. This applied first to architecture, and was extended to literature by two important works of criticism, *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser* (1754) by Thomas Warton and *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762) by Richard Hurd, both arguing that gothic writing should be appreciated on its own terms, as the product of other times.

Hurd was also among those who 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. The currency of this notion does something to explain the curious manner of appearance of one of the great publishing successes of the century, the Ossian epics, *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763). These 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, intent on providing Britain with a rival to Homer. There was debate over their antiquity, but most admirers, until well into the next century, preferred to take them as irrefutable evidence of gothic genius. (Walpole was an exception; while he appreciated the poems, he was convinced they were fake.) Issues of Scottish nationalism were an important factor in the 'Ossian' phenomenon, but the fraud itself was in large part the product of two conflicting

pressures: on the one hand a growing enthusiasm for the superstitious fancies of the past; and on the other, a sense that this kind of imaginative freedom was forbidden, or simply impossible, for writers of the enlightened present.

The same pressures doubtless played a part in Walpole's decision to present *The Castle of Otranto* to the public in the guise of an ancient manuscript, recently discovered. In the Preface to the first edition, which was published on Christmas Eve 1764, he assumes the persona of a translator, 'William Marshall, Gent.', and offers learned speculations about the date of the text, the Italian in which it was originally written, and the author's propagandist aims, as well as some cheeky words of praise for the 'beauties' of his 'adopted work'. To his delight, many readers took the bait, including a reviewer in one of the most prestigious periodicals of the day, the *Monthly Review*. His friend the Revd William Mason later wrote to assure Walpole that he himself had been entirely duped: 'When a friend of mine to whom I had recommended *The Castle of Otranto* returned it me with some doubts of its originality, I laughed him to scorn, and wondered he could be so absurd as to think that anybody nowadays had imagination enough to invent such a story.'⁶ But rather than maintaining the pretence, as Macpherson did with 'Ossian', success encouraged Walpole to publish a second edition in April 1765, with a new Preface confessing his authorship. 版权

The significance of *Otranto* for literary history lies as much in the two Prefaces and their alternative constructions of the text as antiquity or innovation, as it does in the novel itself. Readers of the first edition had been led to believe that it was written by a scheming priest, bent on encouraging superstition 'in the darkest ages of christianity'; now, with the initials 'H.W.' added to the second edition, it was discovered to be the work of a living Member of Parliament

⁶ Walpole's Correspondence, 28. 5 (14 Apr. 1765).

and prominent figure in fashionable society. Walpole could have passed the ruse off as a joke, but instead he chose to make the second Preface a manifesto for a new kind of writing, a 'blend' of the 'imagination and improbability' found in ancient romance, and the accurate ^{imitation} of nature that is the hallmark of the modern novel. *Otranto*, having been a dream and a counterfeit, was now reconstructed as a 'new route' for 'men of brighter talent to follow'.

Modern authors had, in fact, already been experimenting with some of the romance elements to be found in *Otranto*. As early as 1706 Daniel Defoe, better known for his realist novels, had written a ghost story, *A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs Veal*. It became a familiar item in literary anthologies; yet the flat, journalistic style reveals its true purpose: to confront doubters with documentary evidence of the immortality of the soul—an aim shared by other religious writers, particularly Dissidents. Most good Anglicans, however, eschewed belief in ghosts as popish nonsense. Edward Young in *Night Thoughts* (1742–5) and Robert Blair in *The Grave* (1743) used macabre imagery, without any actual apparitions, to enhance serious reflection on mortality, and in doing so launched the 'Graveyard School' of poets. Tobias Smollett introduced a similar mood of supernatural terror into popular fiction in some scenes from *Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753), but here it was subordinate to satire of contemporary society. Conversely, Thomas Leland's *Longsword* (1762) was set in the gothic past, but without any hint of the marvellous or the morbid.

The writers who came closest to defying contemporary expectations, prior to *The Castle of Otranto*, were probably William Collins and Walpole's close friend Thomas Gray, in a number of odes dealing with fear and superstition. Gray's 'The Bard: A Pindaric Ode' was first published in 1757 at Walpole's private Strawberry Hill Press, and in-

volves, like *Otranto*, a tyrant, a prophecy, and ghosts demanding vengeance. The poem met with a frosty reception from the critics, and the notorious difficulty of Gray's system of allusion stood in the way of wider appreciation. This failure, illustrating the conservatism of the literary establishment, may well have been in Walpole's mind when he wrote his polemical second Preface.⁷ His 'Gothic Story' had proved a success in its antiquarian disguise, and he could afford to annoy the critics. Making a pre-emptive strike at the prevailing mode of realist fiction, he declares: 'The great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life.' He seems to have had in mind chiefly the example of Samuel Richardson, author of *Pamela* and *Clarissa*; in a letter to Elie de Beaumont he explains that he is sated with run-of-the-mill sentimental novel-writing and finds Richardson's realist fictions 'insupportable'. His own creation would serve as an antidote: 'a god, at least a ghost, was absolutely necessary to frighten us out of too much senses [*sic*].'⁸

Two years later Walpole was still revelling in the pose of the inspired subversive: 'of all my works, it is the only one which has pleased me; I gave rein to my imagination; visions and passions heated me. I did it in spite of rules, critics, and philosophers.'⁹ But although the novelty of *Otranto* is undeniable, the rhetoric of originality Walpole employs belongs to a strand in literary criticism which had long formed a counterpoint to neo-classical insistence on decorum. Joseph Addison, for instance, had written with some enthusiasm about fantasy literature in his essays on *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1712). While admitting that success in this mode depended on a 'very odd turn of Thought' and

⁷ It is interesting to note Walpole's remark that originally *Otranto* 'met with too much honour by far, for at last it was universally believed to be Mr. Gray's'; *Walpole's Correspondence*, 38. 525-6 (letter to Hertford, 26 Mar. 1765).

⁸ *Ibid.* 38. 379 (18 Mar. 1765).

⁹ *Ibid.* 3. 260 (to Mme Du Deffand, 13 Mar. 1767).

'an Imagination naturally fruitful and superstitious', and that such writing could not appeal to everyone, Addison nevertheless gave it the credit of Englishness ('the *English* are naturally Fanciful'), and presented Shakespeare as the great exemplar.¹⁰ Over the next half-century, more elaborate justifications for rule-breaking were developed, above all the ideas of original genius and the sublime. Edward Young in *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) contrasted the divine ability of genius to inspire and elevate, with the mundane achievements of the 'meddling ape, *Imitation*'. Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) was immediately influential, and favourably contrasted the powerful sublime, illustrated by passages from Homer, Shakespeare, and Milton, with the merely beautiful, linked with social pleasures and imitation.

In every case, Shakespeare emerged as that paradoxical thing, the model of 'untutored genius', the pattern of originality. Walpole was by no means unique in submitting his plea for imaginative liberty under shelter of the Immortal Bard; his second Preface is a notable contribution to the emerging cult of Shakespeare. There, he pursues a fairly standard strategy of identifying the constraints of neo-classical criticism with France; but the assault on Voltaire was the most thoroughgoing that had yet appeared. The great *philosophe* had had the temerity to find fault with the unorthodox dramatic practice of Shakespeare, while applauding the correct but bland productions of his countrymen. Accordingly, Walpole's fanciful tale takes on the appearance of a nationalist enterprise; and breaking the rules of literary decorum by including a few phantoms, or mixing comedy and tragedy, becomes almost a patriotic duty. Although *The Castle of Otranto* was published in the year following the conclusion of the Seven Years War

¹⁰ D. F. Bond (ed.), *The Spectator*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1965), No. 419, 'Fantasy: writing wholly out of the poet's own invention', pp. 570, 572.

against France, it is clear that hostilities on the aesthetic front had not yet ceased.

There are many echoes of Shakespeare in *Otranto*, but although certain scenes and devices may be derivative, this does not undermine the novel's central claim to innovation. For whereas previous defences of gothic writing and 'irregular' imagination had served to increase appreciation of works by authors of the past, such as Spenser and Shakespeare, Walpole's idea was to write using the same devices in the present, but in a style adjusted to contemporary tastes. Hence the resonance of the new subtitle to the second edition: it was at precisely the moment that *Otranto* was revealed to be a modern work that the adjective 'gothic' was first applied to it. There is a dislocation: 'Gothic' is no longer a historical description; it marks the initiation of a new genre.

For the reader of today, coming to *Otranto* after more than two centuries of Gothic writing, many of its elements will appear instantly, if not uncannily, familiar. To begin with there is the castle which dominates the narrative as both a physical and a psychological presence, and rightly assumes its place in the title. Few critics have failed to make the point that the gothic castle is the main protagonist of the *Otranto*, and that the story of usurpation, tyranny, and imprisonment could be seen as an extension of the mood evoked by the setting. All of the action takes place either in or near the castle, and its layout is described with precision. But more important than physical immediacy is the atmosphere of oppression created by the place, and the way it emphasizes the powerlessness of the characters, manipulated by forces they only dimly comprehend. Architecture becomes the embodiment of fate, and it is entirely in keeping that it should feature so dramatically in the grand finale.

The effect of the story as a whole depends on vivid, static images, rather than a gradual build-up of suspense.

Fragmentation is the order of the day, and the stage properties are vital. The prominence of 'claptrap' has been seen as a flaw, but it undoubtedly had a powerful impact on readers of the time. One of the earliest imitations of *Otranto*, 'Sir Bertrand. A Fragment', which appeared in *Miscellaneous Laetitia Writings* (1773) by John and Anna Letitia Aikin, abandons narrative coherence altogether in favour of a kaleidoscopic succession of Gothic effects: a knight on horseback, a ruined mansion, a blue flame, a shriek, and a disembodied hand on a banister (in homage to Walpole's original dream-image); after which the text breaks off abruptly. One scene from *Otranto* especially captured the imaginations of contemporaries, thanks to setting and props. Isabella desperately fleeing through a subterranean passage by candlelight was the image that launched a thousand similar flights. Blake responded with 'Fair Eleanor', a poem in which the heroine is glimpsed,

like a ghost, thro' narrow passages
Walking, feeling the cold walls with her hands.
(ll. 11-12)

Jane Austen in turn offered her tribute to the candle that blows out at the crucial moment, in her affectionate parody of the Gothic mode, *Northanger Abbey* (1818). Indeed, satires of Gothic, which begin to appear from the 1790s, are a good indication of the relative importance of *things* (as distinct from character, plot, or dialogue). They were often presented in the form of 'recipes':

Take—An old castle, half of it ruinous.

A long gallery, with a great many doors, some secret ones.

Three murdered bodies, quite fresh.

As many skeletons, in chests and presses.

An old woman hanging by the neck; with her throat cut.

Assassins and desperadoes, '*quant. suff.*'

Noise, whispers, and groans, threescore at least.

Mix them together, in the form of three volumes, to be taken at any of the watering places before going to bed.¹¹

The generic importance of the castle of Otranto and its contents is well established, but there has been some dissent over Walpole's treatment of the inhabitants. In the first Preface, in the role of translator, Walpole took it upon himself to praise the delineation of the characters, and was promptly echoed by a reviewer: 'the characters are highly finished; and the disquisitions into human manners, passions, and pursuits, indicate the keenest penetration, and the most perfect knowledge of mankind'.¹² Both, it should be remembered, were judging the text as if it were a medieval manuscript. In the second Preface, there is a more modest proposal that the characters have been made to 'think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions'. In twentieth-century criticism, some enthusiasts have suggested that *Otranto* initiates a turn towards the exploration of new psychological depths. The claim has been countered by the accusation that eighteenth-century writers of Gothic in general, and Walpole in particular, are guilty of peopling their stories with mere ciphers.¹³ The perceived failure has sometimes been attributed to a lack of ability in the authors, sometimes interpreted as a symptom of the troubled times in which the novels were written. But in the most recent critical discussion, the problem of whether or not Gothic fiction achieves depth of characterization has been displaced by a new interest in surfaces.¹⁴ The rhetorical gestures, the moulding of

¹¹ 'Terrorist Novel Writing', in *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797* (London, 1798), 223-5.

¹² *Monthly Review*, 32 (Feb. 1765), 97-9.

¹³ See Kiely and Napier in the Select Bibliography.

¹⁴ See Henderson, Hogle, and Sedgwick in the Select Bibliography

physiognomy into hieroglyphs of rage or despair, the mysterious interchangeability of individuals suggested by frequent instances of mistaken identity, are all, according to this alternative ~~account~~ ^{point}, signs of a Gothic code of selfhood at odds with the 'three-dimensional' characters of realist fiction. In Gothic, the argument goes, identity is not determined from the inside out, but from the outside in; it is a matter of public interpretation rather than private expression, and to this extent the horror mode tells an important truth about the role of social convention in constituting subjectivity—one which 'common sense' would tend to deny.

At first glance, the novel seems to offer the basic stock of Gothic character-types, but closer attention suggests an ambivalence in each of them that verges on irony. There are two virtuous young ladies in distress, one of whom, Matilda, possesses the quintessential Gothic name. But the gravity of their plight is strangely undermined by a spat over their mutual love-object, Theodore. Theodore himself is a bland young hero; his role as a disinherited nobleman raised as a peasant was already a standard feature of romance, and would be used again in Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777), while Ann Radcliffe adopted the name for the hero of *The Romance of the Forest* (1791). But whereas Radcliffe's Theodore succeeds in rescuing the heroine, at least temporarily, from the hands of the villain, the only act of valour Walpole's Theodore performs is blunderingly to wound the father of Isabella. A sense of disappointment or bathos equally hangs over the rest of the cast. Father Jerome and Frederic, Count of Vicenza, introduced as staunch opponents of the tyrant Manfred, soon show signs of weakness that will contribute to the tragic outcome. Hippolita is the prototype of a long series of victimized wives, most notably, in the period, the wretched prisoners of Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) and Regina Maria Roche's *The Children of the Abbey* (1796). But her situa-

tion is never so affecting as theirs; she wanders freely if pathetically through the castle, her passivity a positive aid to Manfred's villainy.

'Manfred, prince of Otranto': these are the opening words of the novel, and Manfred is of all the characters the most developed. Only he fully appreciates the import of the prophecy that hangs over his family, and the plot is propelled by his frantic attempts to circumvent the inevitable outcome. Manfred's temperament, naturally humane we are told, has been brutalized by his fate; he is a draft version of the fascinating anti-hero which Byron would later perfect. But no Byronic hero ever had to deal with the degree of aggravation that Manfred endures. He is blocked at every turn not only by supernatural phenomena, but even more effectively by his own servants, whose panics, long-winded explanations, and compromising *faux pas* drive him into paroxysms of helpless fury. Walpole set great store by his inclusion of the servants as a light-hearted contrast to the central drama, and was no doubt delighted by the judgement of his friend Cole that Matilda's maidservant, Bianca, was 'very Nature itself',¹⁵ and by the indirect compliment paid by Radcliffe and Lewis when they imitated the device. Shakespeare is the precedent, but Elizabeth Napier is surely right in suggesting that whereas the humour of the Porter in *Macbeth* or of the Gravediggers in *Hamlet* augments the serious concerns of the plays, the servants in *Otranto* tend merely to undermine the woes of their masters, repeatedly bringing about a comic deflation. Manfred does his best as a tyrant in the mould of Macbeth, but his gravity suffers terribly at their hands. In Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* is described as ending 'in disappointment, vanity and vexation of spirit'. The judgement applies more truly to the conclusion of its Gothic precursor, *The Castle of Otranto*.

¹⁵ Walpole's *Correspondence*, I. 91-2 (17 Mar. 1765).