

PALGRAVE GOTHIC



THE GOTHIC CHILD

Margarita Georgieva

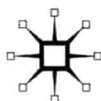


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Margarita Georgieva



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Introduction

‘The man who never tried the companionship of a little child,’ wrote Caroline Norton, ‘has carelessly passed by one of the great pleasures of life’ (*The Myrtle*, 1:128). An early feminist and author promoting women’s rights to child custody, Norton also wrote novels on the margin of the gothic (*Stuart of Dunleath*, 1851) and advocated responsible, non-authoritarian fatherhood. Her opinion was in line with the view voiced by Elizabeth Bonhote, a sentimental and gothic author from the small town of Bungay who purchased a gothic castle and later breathed life into the decaying building through her fiction. A century earlier than Norton, Bonhote maintained that ‘the delightful satisfaction’ (*Olivia*, 13) of embracing a child is not exclusively reserved for females. In this same vein Norton composed the poem *Child of the Islands* (1845). The socio-political implications of her verses do not become immediately obvious, but when she writes that

Nature’s sweetest fount, through grief’s excess,
Is strangely turned to gall and bitterness;
When the deserted babe is left to lie (Norton, 10)

her rhymes are built on the solid foundation of a long sentimental and gothic heritage which gave importance to orphaned or abandoned child characters. ‘Excess’ and feelings of ‘bitterness’ prevail in the eighteenth-century literary scene when ‘babe[s]’ are ‘deserted’ by their immoral, neglectful, infanticidal parents, frequently fathers. Concern for the child, its destiny and social integration, are often considered proper to nineteenth-century authors like Dickens, when the Industrial Revolution struck down the homeless and poor. But the roots of this practice go further back in time.

The anonymous, and only, Amazon.com review of the likewise anonymous gothic novel *St. Margaret’s Cave* (1814) offers one of the earliest tales of child abuse of the early chapters, qualifying it as ‘rather unusual for the period’. In this statement, there are two very important tendencies that need to be clarified – anonymity and the allegedly ‘unusual’ appearance of the child. Anonymity is the hallmark of gothic. It was usually employed to alleviate authorial fear of criticism. For this reason many authors, as well as many critics from the early period, still remain

in the shadows, as do some of the defining features of the gothic genre. The child is one of these long-neglected characteristics of gothic. In fact, it is a central concern of novels from first-wave of gothic, but as a concept it has remained curiously untouched by scholarship to this day. And it is in this respect that the review of *St. Margaret's Cave* is worthy of note. It illustrates very accurately how both expert and amateur critical opinions acknowledge the presence of the child only to negate the importance of the concept in early gothic, sometimes dismissing it as a rare manifestation. In *The Gothic in Children's Literature* (2007), Anna Jackson, Karen Coats and Roderick McGillis justly define what seems to be the newest literary genre, a genre which has been developing during the last two or three decades – children's gothic literature. However, the child as a character, figure and symbol has been present in gothic for centuries and on more than one level in any given work. The anonymous *St. Margaret's Cave* is a case in point. Its authorship was later attributed to Elizabeth Helme, a translator, novelist and teacher who began publishing didactic, gothic and children's fiction from 1787 (incidentally, this is also the publication date of Bonhote's *Olivia; or, Deserted Bride*). Helme's novel not only mentions child abuse in the opening chapters but focuses on two generations of abandoned, killed, orphaned legitimate and illegitimate children; on childhood trauma, adopted infants and hidden siblings, ideas likewise present in the work of Bonhote.

In his article 'Nightmare on Sesame Street: or, The Self-Possessed Child', Stephen Bruhm explains that

the Gothic has traditionally transferred the home [...] into a fantastical and phantasmatic slaughterhouse, portraying it as a microcosm of the political, social, and religious tyrannies of (usually) fathers. This is no less true of today's Gothic, but now there seems to be a startling emphasis on children as the bearers of death – from Stephen King's novels to mainline media's 'kids who kill'. (Bruhm, 98)

Bruhm's article sets what he terms the 'Gothic child' in a specifically twentieth-century context in reference to murderous children. Indeed, analyses of the child in post-modern and contemporary gothic fiction or film abound. However, the birth of the gothic child took place long before the twentieth century. The archetype of this child has taken many forms since and these forms have spread to a variety of contemporary subgenres. Murderous or vampirised children are recent manifestations of a complex characterisation system that authors developed

through the centuries, a system which originates from the founding works of gothic. The quest for the birth of gothic has taken scholars to the Italian castle of Otranto. Its recesses, dungeons and passages conceal memories and desires of children. This particular usage of the child (as an idea, a concept, a memory) in the literature of the second half of the eighteenth century establishes intricate ties between works that may seem very different from one another at a first glance. It is very important to examine these links and their appearance and expansion in gothic for, by the nineteenth century, the usage of the child in a variety of genres is already a recurrent practice. And the literature of the nineteenth century was heavily influenced by the solid foundation eighteenth-century gothic authors gave to the child's character and role. An examination of the child in early gothic can thus provide us with invaluable information about the development of child characters since that time.

What primary sources from the first wave of gothic (1764–1824) reveal is a gradual emergence of a new concept of the child. In early gothic, children and childhood narratives appear regularly, whether from a child's point of view or in the words of adults, looking back in time, remembering. The texts reveal a very rich network of family ties and parent–child relationships, of suffering children, dead babies, abandoned heirs who survive and fight to further the gothic family line. The domestic nature of some novels has become a point of agreement between scholars but few have paid full attention to the child within the gothic family or in the political and religious structures of the gothic world from its origins. This study aims to fill this niche and to provide a new outlook on early gothic. It also accounts for the later development and expansion of child characters, especially in film, by comparing the tendencies that regulate the development of children from 1764 to 1824. Its main purpose is to investigate gothic children who are used as primary or secondary characters, as metaphors or figures of style or as elements of the gothic text. One of the principal objectives is to trace their development and progress through the gothic novels of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the work of as many authors as possible. It is important to look at the role of the child in early gothic both structurally and thematically, in relation to the major subjects treated by these authors. The genre's principal areas of interest in relation to the child are religion, domesticity, politics, sublimity and architecture. They form the more important bases for analysis and are all addressed in succession. The first aim of this study is to describe the persona of the gothic child, its character, function and

meaning, as it was established by the founding fathers and mothers of gothic fiction. The second goal is to link the figure of this child to some of the leitmotifs specific to the gothic narrative – ambiguity, mystery, liminality, violence and monstrosity. The accumulation of these essential features helps distinguish between the character of the gothic child and other child characters in fiction. The demonstration that the child is present on multiple levels and in various forms in the gothic text, from its conception to its commercial distribution, and both as a reader and writer, is another objective addressed here. Finally, the migration of gothic child characters from early gothic fiction to the cinema of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is traced in order to provide a literary and historical background for the contemporary development of most child-related themes in the genre.

The timeline of this study begins with the year 1764 and the publication of *The Castle of Otranto*, and ends with the year 1824. All time frames in literary history are permeable and the gothic genre did not pass away overnight. Indeed, it thrives in various forms to this day. However, there are several reasons for the 1824 time limit. The year of Byron's and Sophia Lee's deaths – 1824 – is a year that portends the passing away of the first wave of gothic fiction. It marks the publication of Maturin's *Albigenses* and the death of the author. At the same time, one of the less well known authors of gothic, Sarah Wilkinson, is diagnosed with breast cancer. In letters from that time, she mentions a significant decline in the book trade, her increasing poverty and the subsequent attempts to alleviate it by multiplying the quantity of gothic bluebooks. Even though 1824 is a very rough frontier, all these events seem to mark the end of an era and the advent of a new one with the birth of Wilkie Collins, the growing popularity of Scott's historical romances and the changing tastes of readers. Two words define the year 1824 – 'death' and 'birth'. Both words define the nature and *raison d'être* of the gothic child who is confined between the birth chamber and the grave during babyhood only to be confronted with omnipresent loss throughout childhood.

The aim here is not to find and examine the subdivisions and undercurrents of the gothic but to bring unity and coherence into it by defining a common characteristic within the genre. The primary sources are both well-known and less explored texts, without distinction between male, female, Irish, Scottish, Welsh or English gothic. To separate the gothic movement into sub-currents would mean to disregard one of its founding principles – that of heterogeneity. When calling the movement 'heterogeneous', it is useful to bear in mind John Ruskin's opinion

of the gothic, even though it was originally meant to define architecture, that

the principal difficulty [in defining the nature of gothic] arises from the fact that every building of the Gothic period differs in some important respect from every other; and many include features which, if they occurred in other buildings, would not be considered Gothic at all; so that all we have to reason upon is merely [...] a greater or lesser degree of Gothicness in each building we examine. (Ruskin, 1–2)

The universality of Ruskin's statement equally applies if a 'novel' takes the place of a 'building'. And if we compare the concept of the child in the novels by Norton, Bonhote and Helme, it becomes obvious that even when all three share common points of view on parenthood, their ideas of how the child evolves in gothic are different. Thus the 'Gothicness' of a structure, in architecture as well as in literature, is characterised by its being 'made up of many mingled ideas, and can consist only in their union' (Ruskin, 1–2). Indeed, all gothic creations are rich, fanciful and variegated, consisting of a thousand elements that give them unique power and life. Consequently, the true essence of the gothic movement should lie in the coming together of its many, sometimes contradictory features, and it is necessary to add to these features the gothic child.

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1

First Steps

To understand the concept 'gothic child', the notion 'child' itself has to be cleared of its present-day meanings. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, it is a necessary step that needs to be taken in order to avoid confusion and amalgamation by taking into account the changing face of childhood today and transposing it into a period which may have had a different conception of childhood, especially as concerns the age, rights and responsibilities of the child. Secondly, the rediscovery of this concept, as it is reflected in the gothic writings of the period 1764–1824, is hardly possible without taking into consideration the reality of the times. For instance, today's readers may be shocked if an author refers to the child with the pronoun 'it'. But it was not unusual in the eighteenth century and there are numerous reasons for the practice. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a recent development and it is important to remember that in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century worldview, it is the adult (parent or guardian) who decided on these rights. What is more, what we call 'rights' today was then referred to as 'obligations' or 'duties' and these were integrated into a broader, religiously inflected outlook on the child's role.

When the word 'child' is used in the following pages, it always points to the meaning that can be elicited from the gothic genre from 1764 to 1824. All concepts pertaining to the semantic field of 'child', including words used as synonyms and meronyms within the works listed in the bibliography, have been used for this study. The singulars and plurals of 'infant', 'babe' and 'baby', 'boy' and 'girl', 'daughter' and 'son', 'youth' and in some cases 'great youth' or 'very young' when they refer to childhood or to the experience and state of being someone's child have all been included, alongside 'childhood', 'infancy', 'childish', 'boyish', 'like a child' and 'childlike'.

The first issues that need to be addressed are linked to the identity, place and representation of the child in the gothic novel. Who is called a 'child'? How is the word used? Is it applied to young persons only and if so, what is their age? Are there any other meanings attached to it? This chapter begins with an analysis of the term 'child' and its usage and then continues with a discussion of the child's place within the gothic narrative. The second part of the chapter intends to define the function of the child within the gothic plot and the last part deals with the appearance, representation and characterisation of the child in gothic.

'Child' in 1764–1824 Gothic

In the novels belonging to first-wave gothic, the term 'child' is applied to an immense array of characters – it is a mark of filiation; it denotes states of dependency (affective or financial); it is applied to persons of unstable perception and understanding as well as to characters of both sexes lacking affective maturity; to those who are vulnerable or helpless; to those who are under legal guardianship; and to those subjected to parental will and authority regardless of their age. When calling someone 'child', the narrator usually takes into account that person's innocence or lack of knowledge, their potential for development or their intellectual pliability. It appears that everyone can be a 'child' in gothic at any given point in the narrative. In fact, the period of childhood frequently extends to cover adulthood, as we find in the arguments of the Cambridge latitudinarian Thomas Rutherforth. In *Institutes of Natural Law* (1754), he '[makes] use of the word childhood in a more loose sense, than is commonly used, to signify all the time of a persons [*sic*] life, that passes, whilst his parents are living' (Rutherforth, 161). Thus, when we are not dealing with babies and young children, we are dealing with someone's child (a daughter or a son) or with an adult's reminiscences of childhood. And most gothic heroes and heroines remain children until that moment of inexorable certainty when they are forced to look at a parent's dead body. This is precisely what happens in Summerson's *Martyn of Fenrose* (1801) when two soldiers decide whether the body of the father should be presented to his son:

'Oh, it will be too much for the gentleness of his nature! Spare him [...] from a sight so distressing.'

'[I] have prepared him for the occasion [...] when I bring him to the body of Alwynd, and point out his many gashes, the tempest of the soul will vent itself freely, and probably be soon succeeded by a calm of long continuance.' (Summerson, 84)

The child is thus supposed to mourn by carefully observing the bruised corpse. Instead of trauma, the narrator sees in this an occasion to ensure a peaceful adult life for the descendants. Similarly, Bonhote, Carver, Lathom and Ireland present readers with scenes of distress where children of all ages attend funerals, sleep next to corpses or witness the deaths of their parents. A striking example is young Laura, in *Oakendale Abbey* (1797), whose parents are murdered in India. Adopted, she sees the head of her second father on a spike, carried by a crowd of bloodthirsty revolutionaries. Another example is the orphan Huberto in Ireland's *Gondez* (1805) who is imprisoned at the age of seven; he watches over his dying stepmother and sleeps on her corpse. This is how the gothic child grows up. Contemplation of parental death and the observation of public or private mourning or execution rituals constitute a rite of passage for the child and are thus encouraged.

But even after that rite of passage, at the approach of adulthood, the usage of the word 'child' remains vastly extensible. Accordingly, examples range from the helpless babe metaphor to the childlike innocence of the heroine and the childish capricious villain. The gothic novel also pays considerable attention to adult children in relation to the legal, social and religious status of their parents. Often, the child is a projection, an idea or a memory in the adult's mind. The child's age is therefore variable and frequently difficult to determine. Very few authors mention the exact ages of those they choose to call children. From the unborn child, through early babyhood to adolescence and adulthood, 'child' becomes an epithet, applied to both young and old, to signify belonging, to mark social status and the state of subordination or to stress age differences. Furthermore, the word 'child' has both positive and negative connotations in a variety of contexts, and some of them coexist (frequently in the same novel) in apparent contradiction. To some narrators the child is a burden. For others it is a blessing. Some authors confer to the concept a transcendental dimension and situate it high or low on the spiritual scale; they see in the child an angel or a demon, and in many cases transform the figure into a potent metaphor. Many authors use the child to analyse domestic, social or political matters. For some, the child obeys and is subordinate to the father. For others, the child rebels and overthrows the rule of the father. Thus, the figure of the child in gothic is both a subject and a ruler, subordinate and subordinating. The child can be a small, insignificant, weak element of the plot but it can also govern all events and determine the behaviours, decisions and actions of adult figures. And if there is a clear-cut rule about the nature of the child in gothic,

it is that the child will invariably appear in every novel. Often, this is done in such a way as to leave it partly in the shadows. Frequently, one has to seek the child between the lines and in the hazy margins of the text in order to find it.

For instance, the titles of most gothic novels published in the period 1764–1824 give us no indication about the characters we may expect to find within. Titles like *Castle of Beeston* (1798), *The Castle of Santa Fe* (1805) or *Forest of Montalbano* (1810) refer directly to the building or the place name. The most obvious explanation is that this custom originated in the ruin exploration craze and the growing desire for historical exoticism and travel which seized eighteenth-century readers. Other titles were chosen with the aim of attracting amateurs of the horrific and supernatural with a touch of mystery and the promise of exciting love affairs. But upon a closer analysis of the dense body of gothic novels and romances published throughout the period, there can also be found authors who have used a child in the title or who refer to a child with an indirect mention of family relationships, parentage, filiation and heritage. Walpole's *Mysterious Mother* (1791), Parsons's *Girl of the Mountains* (1797), Roche's *Discarded Son* (1807) or Pickersgill's *Three Brothers* (1803) are among these. Authorial attachment and interest in exploring childhood, in studying the characters of parents and their children or in using the child as a symbol and metaphor are clearly revealed in titles like *The Children of the Abbey* (1796), *The Mysterious Pregnancy* (1797), the adaptation *Edmond Orphan of the Castle* (1799), *The Haunted Castle, Or, the Child of Misfortune: A Gothic Tale* (1801), *The Children of the Priory* (1802), *The Child of Mystery* (1809), *The Child of Providence; or, the Noble Orphan* (1820) and *Gwelygordd, or, The Child of Sin* (1820). One thing is especially interesting in the lengthily titled novel *The Gothic Story of Courville Castle; or, the Illegitimate Son, a Victim of Prejudice and Passion: Owing to the Early Impressions Inculcated with Unremitting Assiduity by an Implacable Mother; whose Resentment to her Husband Excited her Son to Envy, Usurpation, and Murder; but Retributive Justice at Length Restores the Right Heir to his Lawful Possessions* (1801). The word 'child' is not used but a whole network of images deal with one central issue, that is, an illegitimate child is begot. The title deals with family relationships and also opposes the 'right heir' to what one assumes is 'the wrong heir'. This corresponds to a binary opposition between the good child and the bad child, a conflict that we find at the heart of gothic from its very beginning.

Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777–78) contains good examples of the heterogeneous usage of 'child' and also of this very particular

confrontation between right and wrong heirs, and good and bad children growing up together. The novel has the merit of not being the first of its kind and, therefore, its author had ample time to think over the plot, the characters, the setting and the outcome. The use of children and heirs is, therefore, far from accidental. Reeve borrowed themes, motifs and character traits from Walpole and from Hutchinson's *Hermitage* (1772). In the attempt to improve what she thought imperfect, she modified the location and settings, and the family configuration; she combined the dramatic excess of the Continental *Otranto* with the chivalric Romanticism of the very British *Hermitage* and, meanwhile, made some mistakes herself. However, her decision to keep the idea of an extended family and develop issues of adoption, fratricide, sibling rivalry and usurpation by giving the leading role to an orphan and a twice-adopted child is the principal reason why Reeve's work is as gothic as those that precede it. No doubt, the setting is medieval, Romantic and gloomy, and there are forests, castles and secluded shacks. But these are not the objects of principal interest. It is the grown-up child and heir that becomes the object of central focus. The idea that the foundling can return and claim back his due defines the novel's action exactly as it did in *Otranto*.

A notable example from Reeve's text is the use of the expression 'big with child' (Reeve, 6, 49) instead of other conventional expressions such as 'pregnant', 'far advanced in her pregnancy', or even the frequently used 'situation' or 'condition'. Consciously or not, when referring to advanced stages of pregnancy Reeve lays the stress not on the mother but on the child, and on the portentous role attributed to this child. Further, Reeve uses 'child' interchangeably with 'my son', 'son', 'infant', 'babe' and 'offspring' well over a hundred times on a total of 263 pages – that is, on every other page. Reeve uses 'child' for young persons of the age of 17, 16 and for children of unknown age below 16. These 'children' are brothers, sisters and cousins, most of them related by blood and never portrayed in detail. And then there is the detailed portrait of the twice-adopted child – Edmund – whose mysterious resemblance to a late lord finally legitimises him as the lost heir of the House of Lovel. The boys in Reeve's narrative grow into men only after undergoing successive rites of passage – war, exploration and travel – which usually confront them with death. The lost Lovel heir, however, is constantly surrounded by adult men who protect him. He is continually referred to by the expression 'child of' (Reeve, 95, 144, 216) and 'offspring' (Reeve, 144) even in his adulthood. At first this is done to demean him in comparison to superior men of rank (he is a