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# Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764): The Gothic Paradigm

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Lecture Series  
Introduction to Literary Studies  
University of Tuebingen  
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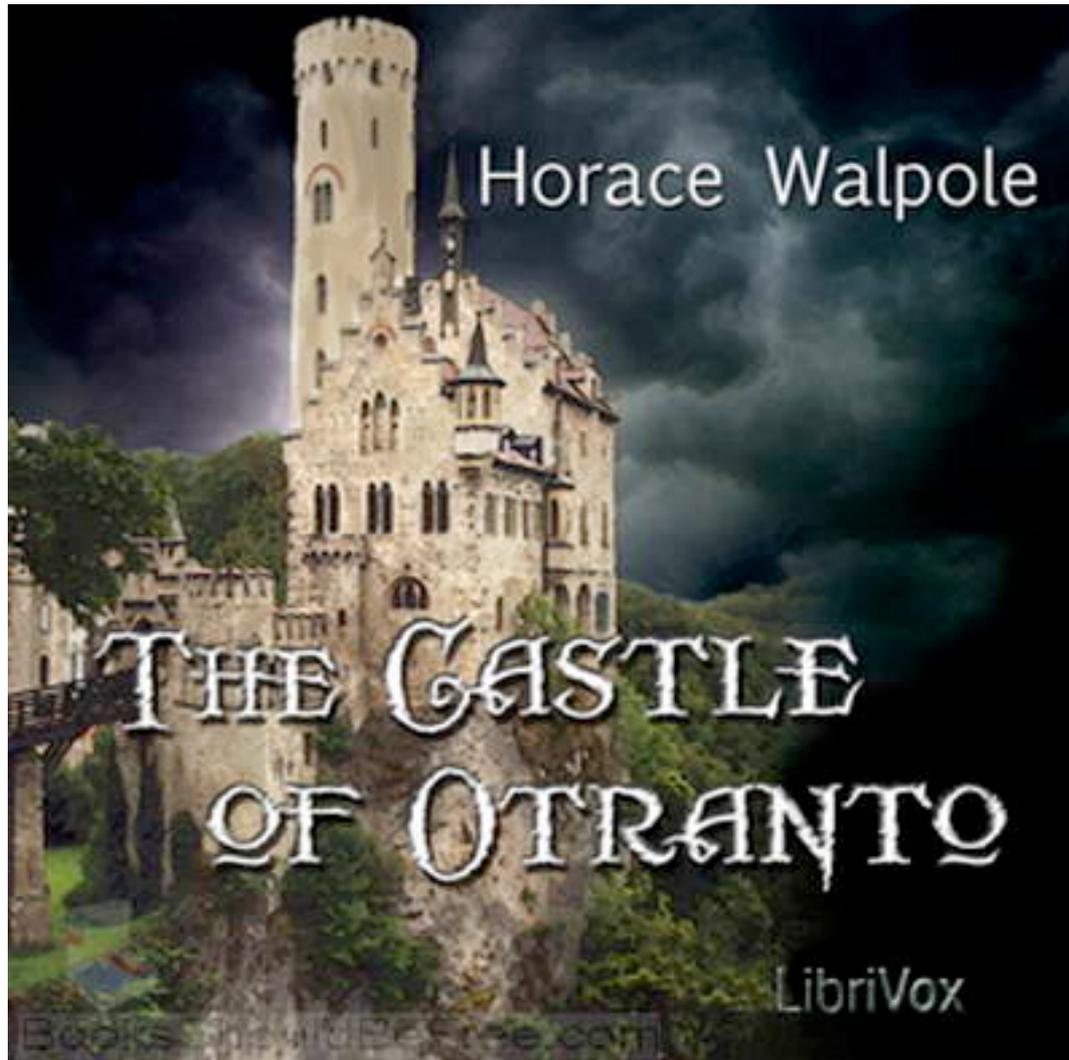
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“The Entry of Frederick into  
the Castle of Otranto” /  
“Procession in the Castle of  
Otranto”

by  
John Carter, 1790 (sold to  
Horace Walpole by the  
artist)



Strawberry Hill, Twickenham/London, built by Horace Walpole 1749-76



Henry Fuseli, "The Nightmare" (1781)



Ken Russell (dir.), *Gothic* (1986)



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# Outline

**1) Introduction**

**2) The Rise of the Novel**

**3) Walpole's Reaction**

**4) Reading *The Castle of Otranto***

**5) The Gothic Paradigm**



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## 2) The Rise of the Novel

### Classic study:

Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957)

- romance vs. novel
- formal realism
- individual experience > common sense, sympathy
- the rise of the middle class/reading public
- larger context: enlightenment rationalism



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## Early Novels:

Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (1605/15)

Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave* (1688)

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719),

*Moll Flanders* (1722)

Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* (1740),

*Clarissa* (1747/51)

Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* (1742),

*Tom Jones* (1749)

Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67)



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### 3) Walpole's Reaction

***The Castle of Otranto: A Story. Translated by William Marshall, Gent. From the Original Italian of Onuphrio Muralto, Canon or the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto (published anonymously, 1764)***

#### **Preface to the 1<sup>st</sup> Edition:**

The following work was found in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England. It was printed at Naples, in the black letter, in the year 1529. How much sooner it was written does not appear. The principal incidents are such as were believed in the darkest ages of Christianity; but the language and conduct have nothing that savours of barbarism. The style is the purest Italian.



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If the story was written near the time when it is supposed to have happened, it must have been between 1095, the era of the first Crusade, and 1243, the date of the last, or not long afterwards. There is no other circumstance in the work that can lead us to guess at the period in which the scene is laid: the names of the actors are evidently fictitious, and probably disguised on purpose. (...)



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I cannot flatter myself with having done justice to my author in this respect: his style is as elegant as his conduct of the passions is masterly. It is a pity that he did not apply his talents to what they were evidently proper for—the theatre.



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I will detain the reader no longer, but to make one short remark. Though the machinery is invention, and the names of the actors imaginary, I cannot but believe that the groundwork of the story is founded on truth. The scene is undoubtedly laid in some real castle. The author seems frequently, without design, to describe particular parts. “The chamber,” says he, “on the right hand;” “the door on the left hand;” “the distance from the chapel to Conrad’s apartment:” these and other passages are strong presumptions that the author had some certain building in his eye.



## **Preface to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, subtitled *A Gothic Story* (1765):**

THE FAVOURABLE manner in which this little piece has been received by the public, calls upon the author to explain the grounds on which he composed it. But, before he opens those motives, it is fit that he should ask pardon of his readers for having offered his work to them under the borrowed personage of a translator. As diffidence of his own abilities and the novelty of the attempt, were the sole inducements to assume the disguise, he flatters himself he shall appear excusable. He resigned the performance to the impartial judgement of the public; determined to let it perish in obscurity, if disproved; nor meaning to avow such a trifle, unless better judges should pronounce that he might own it without blush.



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It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former, all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life. But if, in the latter species, Nature has cramped imagination, she did but take her revenge, having been totally excluded from old romances. The actions, sentiments, and conversations, of the heroes and heroines of ancient days, were as unnatural as the machines employed to put them in motion.



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The author of the following pages thought it possible to reconcile the two kinds. Desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations, he wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak, and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions.




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He had observed, that, in all inspired writings, the personages under the dispensation of miracles, and witness to the most stupendous phenomena, never lose sight of their human character: whereas, in the productions of romantic story, an improbable event never fails to be attended by an absurd dialogue. The actors seem to lose their senses, the moment the laws of nature have lost their tone. As the public have applauded the attempt, the author must not say he was entirely unequal to the task he had undertaken: yet, if the new route he has struck out shall have paved a road for men of brighter talents, he shall own, with pleasure and modesty, that he was sensible the plan was capable of receiving greater embellishments than his imagination, or conduct of the passions, could bestow on it. (...)

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## 4) Reading *The Castle of Otranto*

### Opening of Chapter 1:

MANFRED, Prince of Otranto, had one son and one daughter; the latter a most beautiful virgin, aged eighteen, was called Matilda. Conrad, the son, was three years younger, a homely youth, sickly, and of no promising disposition; yet he was the darling of his father, who never showed any symptoms of affection to Matilda. Manfred had contracted a marriage for his son with the Marquis of Vicenza's daughter, Isabella; and she had already been delivered by her guardians into the hands of Manfred, that he might celebrate the wedding as soon as Conrad's infirm state of health would permit.



Manfred's impatience for this ceremonial was remarked by his family and neighbors. The former, indeed apprehending the severity of their prince's disposition, did not dare to utter their surmises on this precipitation. Hippolita, his wife, an amiable lady, did sometimes venture to represent the danger of marrying their only son so early, considering his great youth, and greater infirmities; but she never received any other answer than reflections on her own sterility, who had given him but one heir. His tenants and subjects were less cautious in their discourses: they attributed this hasty wedding to the prince's dread of seeing accomplished an ancient prophecy, which was said to have pronounced, that



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*the Castle and Lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it.* It was difficult to make any sense of this prophecy; and still less easy to conceive what it had to do with the marriage in question. Yet these mysteries, or contradictions, did not make the populace adhere the less to their opinion.



## Plot:

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- Conrad is crushed by a gigantic helmet
- Manfred decides that he will marry Isabel himself after divorcing Hippolita
- Isabel escapes with the help of Theodore, a peasant
- Isabel finds shelter in Friar Jerome's church
- Manfred locks up Theodore and orders his death. When Jerome recognises him as his lost son, Manfred has him choose between giving up Isabella or his son
- foreign knights arrive, looking for Isabella
- Theodore is freed by Matilda. Defending Isabella, he wounds knight Frederic who turns out to be Isabella's father
- Frederic falls in love with Matilda, a deal with Manfred seems possible, but supernatural omens become increasingly portentous
- Suspecting Theodore of meeting Isabella, Manfred mistakenly stabs Matilda and is left to repent.
- Theodore turns out to be the true heir of Otranto and becomes king, marrying Isabella



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## Narrative Technique:

- authorial narration / heterodiegetic narration with zero focalisation
- theatrical presentation of spectacular scenes (the gigantic helmet, the bleeding statue of Alphonso etc.) in combination with an experimental exploration of character's emotions becomes the novel's "principal mood-creating agent" (Brown 2005, 30)



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Walpole's greatest originality lies in the parts of his book to which the least attention has been paid, and in which the least appears to happen. Hamlet, the Shakespearian drama to which much of Walpole's preface is devoted, is distinguished, among other things, by the dramatic monologues in which characters' thoughts and motivations are brought into the open. These monologues, too, are reflected in the novel. But they are converted back into narrative. [...] That device [...] – the direct transposition into third-person narrative of the immediate thought processes of the characters – becomes all-pervasive in *The Castle of Otranto*. (Brown 2005, S. 30f.)



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Yet her own situation could not help finding its place in her thoughts. She felt no concern for the death of young Conrad, except commiseration; and she was not sorry to be delivered from a marriage which had promised her little felicity, either from her destined bridegroom, or from the severe temper of Manfred, who, though he had distinguished her by great indulgence, had imprinted her mind with terror, from his causeless rigour to such amiable princesses as Hippolita and Matilda. (Walpole 1964, S. 18)




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*Yet where conceal herself! How avoid the pursuit he would infallibly make throughout the castle! As these thoughts passed rapidly through her mind, she recollected a subterraneous passage which led from the vaults of the castle to the church of saint Nicholas. Could she reach the altar before she was overtaken, she knew even Manfred's violence would not dare to profane the sacredness of the place; and she determined, if no other means of deliverance offered, to shut herself up forever among the holy virgins, whose convent was contiguous to the cathedral. (Walpole 1964, S. 24f., my emphasis)*



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## 5) The Gothic Paradigm

### The Gothic Novel (in the narrow sense)

Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764/65)

Clara Reeves, *The Old English Baron* (1777)

Anne Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest* (1791)

*The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794)

*The Italian* (1797)

Matthew Lewis, *The Monk* (1796)

Charles Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820)

### Early Parody

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1798/99, publ. 1818)



## Terrorist Novel Writing

*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.*

[lat. *quantum sufficit* ,as much as suffices’]

Noises, 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.

(from *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797*)



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## Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817)

For as to the devotees of the circulating libraries, I dare not compliment their *pass-time*, or rather *kill-time*, with the name of *reading*.



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## The Gothic Tradition

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*  
(1818)

Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* (1847)

Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897)

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) etc.

### **plus genre fiction:**

ghost stories, horror stories, vampire stories, fantasy...

plus films

plus video games

plus ...

**> Gothic and gender, Gothic and queer, The Spatiality  
of Masculinity ...**



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# The Gothic Imagination between Popular Spectacle and Sublime Seriousness: Aesthetic Coordinates

## The Sublime:

WHATEVER is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.

Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757)



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## **Terror** (anxiety, fear) **vs.** **Horror** (shock, revulsion)

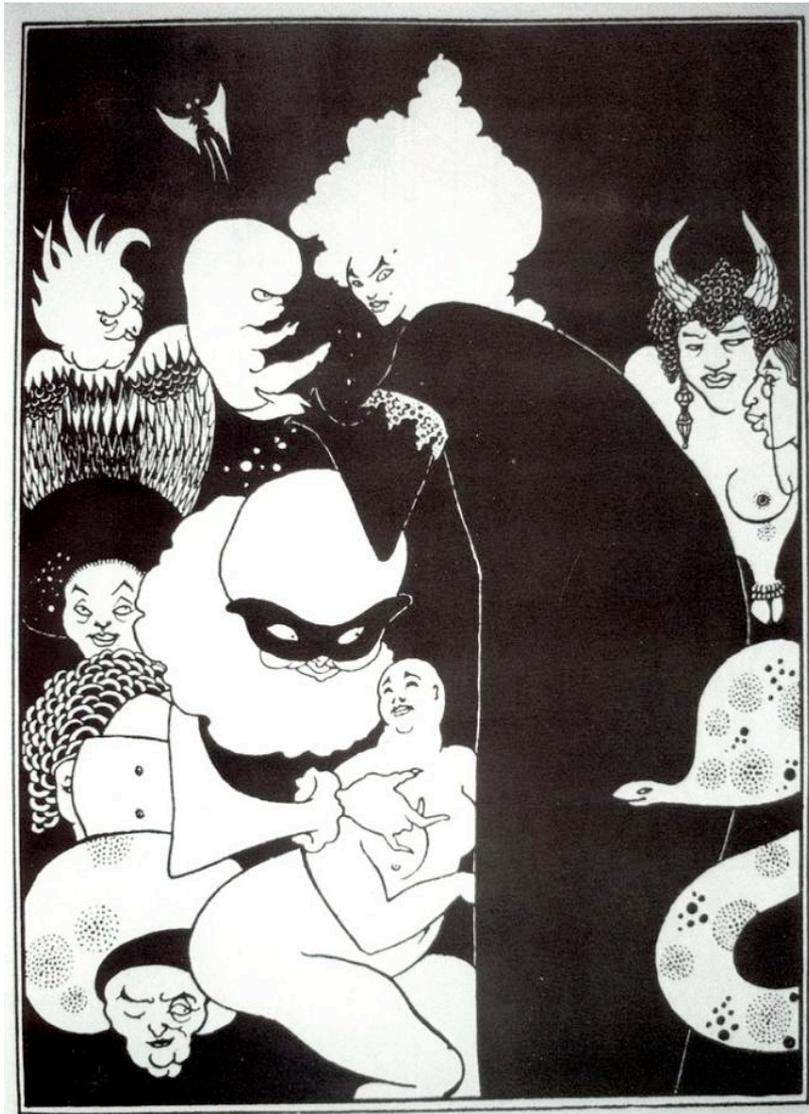
Terror and Horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend, that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one; and where lies the great difference between horror and terror, but in uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?

Anne Radcliffe, “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1826)



## Owens 2014:

The Gothic genre, it seems, has always been a channel for the expression of contemporary anxieties. Walpole's initial claim that the origin of *The Castle of Otranto* was a book "found in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England" speaks of an uneasy relationship with Catholicism – mistrust tinged with fascination. In the 1790s, the real Terror taking place in Paris resulted in an increase of fictional bloodthirsty cruelty. The Victorians ... dismissed the medieval past and situated the Gothic in the present day, finding ample subjects in the dark back streets of the contemporary city. By the *fin de siècle*, mounting fears about decadence and physical and moral degeneration were fuelled by Aubrey Beardsley's insolently assured drawings of smirking demi.mondaines and their sinister pimps.



Aubrey Beardsley,  
“Lucian’s Strange Creatures”,  
1894.



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## Owens 2014 cont'd:

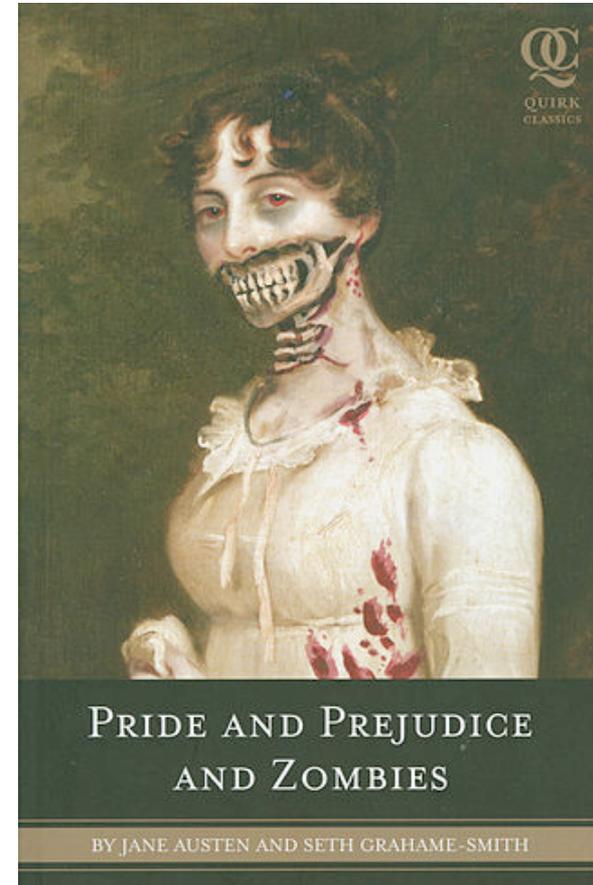
In contrast to the written word, Gothic visual culture is patchy and contingent. It has never been a very respectable genre, for which reason 'high art' has, on the whole, steered clear of its themes ... Gothicism allowed architectural fantasy to flourish on a grand scale, nowhere more extravagantly than in William Beckford's legendary Fonthill Abbey ... The 300-foot tower of this folly was so unstable that it collapsed more than once, finally, and aptly, transforming itself into a picturesque ruin ...



## Owens 2014 cont'd:

The final stages of the show ... amply demonstrate the sheer ubiquity of Gothickry in recent and contemporary culture.

Fan-fiction mash-ups, such as Seth Graeme-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, exemplify the playful transgression which has become a distinct aspect of the genre's character.





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## Useful Background Reading on the Gothic:

Brown, Marshall, *The Gothic Text*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005.

Byron, Glennis & Dale Townsend, eds., *The Gothic World*. London/New York: Routledge, 2014.

Hughes, William, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*. 2 Vols. Basingstoke: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Owens, Susan, “Dispatches from the Dark Side: From *The Castle of Otranto*, through *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, to *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies*.” *Times Literary Supplement* (Oct 24, 2014): 19.



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Thank  
you!