

One of the persistent concerns of Gothic is the relationship between the past and the present. Isolate and discuss two different treatments of this topic in Gothic literature or film.

In the eighteenth century many writers and readers regarded their contemporary present as 'modern' and enlightened and favoured a realist literature. As a consequence, Walpole (1986: 43) argues in his second Preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, "the great resources of fancy have been dammed up"; or to put it in Clery's (2006: 27) words "what the modern era had gained in civility it had lost in poetic imagination". One way to bring life back into the culture of this time was to re-establish the connections with a barbaric, mythical and unenlightened age. In particular, the Gothic age¹ with its name referring to the Goths², was seen by contemporary readers and authors as a time of barbarism that "stood for the old-fashioned as opposed to the modern; the barbaric as opposed to the civilised; crudity as opposed to elegance; old English barons as opposed to the cosmopolitan gentry" (Punter 1996: 5). These and similar characteristics of a forgotten age became "invested with positive value" and were perceived as "representing virtues and qualities that the 'modern' world needed" (Punter and Byron 2006: 7).

The aim of this paper is both, to locate and compare the relationship of the past and the present in Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* and Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest*, but also to investigate the ambivalent nature of this relationship. Since the Gothic is by definition "about history and geography" (Mighall 1999: xiv), I will highlight the significance of the feudal and catholic past for early Gothic writing in analysing the texts' settings and the authors' use of the

¹ The Gothic age was "dimly stretching from the fifth century AD...to the Renaissance and the revival of classical learning" (Clery 2006: 21).

² The Goths were one of several Germanic tribes who "destroyed classical Roman civilization and plunged the civilised world into centuries of ignorance and darkness" (Markman 2003: 22).

supernatural. In doing so, I will show that, on the one hand, the past was idealised but on the other hand, also served as the barbaric 'Other' to the enlightened present. Hence, this essay engages with one of the underlying questions of some early Gothic texts asking "which is darker, the murky past or an apparently enlightened present"? (Cavallaro 2002: 39).

The setting of a Gothic text fulfils an important function by conjuring feelings of anxiety and terror within the reader (Punter a. Byron 2006: 179). The castle in Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* embodies the repressed and buried sin of usurpation, it symbolises the feudal order with its desire for oppression and it is pictured with dungeons as well as secret passages that imply tyranny. In short, Otranto's castle compresses the memories of centuries of history into one single, dark image (Punter a. Byron 2006: 259). Although the castle exists in the present it holds a past power of control over its inhabitants (Punter 2007: online, p. 11). The buried and repressed sins are predestined to re-emerge out of the castle's memories and influence the present as well as direct the future. The end of Manfred's rule and the re-establishment of the right line³, goes hand in hand with the collapse of the castle's walls, which are "thrown down with a mighty force" (Walpole 1986: 145).

Apart from preserving the secrets and sins of the inhabitants, the castle is also a signifier for the "old, dark, feudal order" (Miles 2006: 46). A social order, where a character like Manfred is not legally prosecuted for murdering his daughter. An age where chivalry has not yet gone⁴, as exemplified in the character Theodore, who repeatedly states that he would die in the heroine's defence, be it Isabella or Matilda. Hence, it can be argued that Walpole attempts to reinvent or reconstruct history or a version of history, which is in contrast with the contemporary present of the reader. Although, he idealises the past by referring to the tradition of chivalry, his

³ Theodore's line is "because even older – the original, uncontaminated order" (Kilgour 1995: 20).

⁴ Referring to Burke E. (1790), *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

representation of the past as a barbaric dark age prevails. Referring to Botting's argument (2000: 5) that early Gothic texts function as a mirror of 18th century values, Walpole's reconstruction of the feudal age presents the virtue, enlightenment and reason of contemporary society in a brighter perspective. However, in Kilgour's (1995: 11-15) point of view, the barbaric past with its castles can also be seen "as closer to nature than the present" (15), a past "of organic wholeness" (11) where individuals are bound "by a symbolic system of analogies and correspondences to their families, societies, and the world around them" (11).

In this sense, the medieval buildings can paradoxically also represent "a place of womblike security, a refuge from the complete exigencies of the outer worlds" or "a site of domesticity" where ordinary life is able to carry on (Punter a. Byron 2006: 261). This is true for Radcliffe's characters the La Motte family and their ward Adeline, who find refuge in "the Gothic remains of an abbey" (Radcliffe 1999: 15). The family preferring the "solitary security of the spot" (25), which suites their wish of concealment, decides to stay in the abbey for several months and endeavours to live a 'normal' life.

Nevertheless, similar as Walpole's castle, the abbey signifies and evokes a forgotten past because it embodies the memories of a different regime and past order. Although the story itself is not situated in a past age but plays mostly in contemporary France, Radcliffe, by setting the text in a catholic country, evokes the medieval past; "eighteenth century itself became medieval when the setting was a Catholic country" (Tarr M. cited in Mighall 1999: 21). Foreign catholic countries, especially Italy, were regarded as in direct continuance with the Gothic past (Mighall 1999: 17).

The ruined abbey itself preserves the memories of Catholicism, which relies on 'unenlightened' superstitions such as miracles. When entering the abbey La Motte proclaims:

And these walls, he said, where once superstition lurked, and austerity anticipated and earthly purgatory, now tremble over the moral remains of the beings who reared them! (Radcliffe 1999: 16)

This passage is explicitly referring to contemporary beliefs that Catholicism equals the dark ages with its belief in miracles and the power of the Inquisition. Mighall (1999: 6) points out that the representation of Catholicism as backwards reinforces Protestant identity but also "evokes the frisson of confrontation" that structure various early gothic writings. According to Miles (2006: 55-56) Catholicism is the archenemy of Protestantism: "the enemy of reason and modernity". Using these two critics the repressed fear "that the ruination of older powers [e.g. Catholicism] will haunt us all" (Hogle 2006: 5) serves as an underlying framework of terror in *The Romance of the Forest*. In the walls of the abbey the Catholic past is preserved and demands to be released. In point of fact "the past survives into and threatens the civilized present" (Mighall 1999: xxiii), which in many Gothic texts takes the form of supernatural occurrences.

In the *Romance of the Forest*, Adeline has prophetic dreams after recovering a manuscript that tells a story of imprisonment and murder. In these dreams a voice (possibly her fathers) warns her of coming danger. As it turns out, the voice is referring to the Marquis de Montalts' endeavours of the incestuous rape of Adeline. Although, Radcliffe attempts to explain these supernatural occurrences away, in implying that Adeline only dreamt and imagined that she "saw spectres, and heard wondrous noises" (144), the notion that a supernatural power is "operating for the

retribution of the guilty" (141) is a very strong one. Radcliffe implies that Adeline's murdered father returns from the dead in order to watch and help his innocent daughter. Consequently the spectre provides a "source of comfort and defence" (Kilgour 1995: 133).

In this sense, as Cavallaro (2002: 81) suggests, the return of ghosts is not always motivated by revenge but also "by their determination to right wrong". Adeline's father was a victim of his brother, the Marquis de Montalt, who murdered him in order to "possess his brother's wealth" (Radcliffe 1999: 343). By warning Adeline of her dangers and foreshadowing in her dreams the way to the manuscript, the voice of the dead father lays the foundation for the later discovery of the sins of the Marquis. Hence, in the *Romance of the Forest* the supernatural occurrences, if seen as supernatural, are motivated by a desire for justice. In addition symbols, such as the dagger, the skeleton and the manuscript, serve to recover and recall the buried crimes and constantly confront the present with its repressed past.

That ghosts are often motivated by their wish for justice can also be seen in the *Castle of Otranto*. In this text, an ancient prophecy evokes a giant ghost that aims to re-establish the true and rightful heir Theodore. Yet, the supernatural forces or the past crimes respectively, start to haunt and assert their "power within the present" (Punter a. Byron 2006: 179). For Manfred, the return of Adolpho or his look-a-like double Theodore is a source of deep terror and refers to his repressed anxieties. Although the occurring bits and pieces of the giant knight in arms, serve a higher cause, the knights' monstrosity imply that he is evil and diabolical (Cavallaro 2002: 40). Even though Theodore's rightful establishment in Otranto "suggests one positive return of the past" (Kilgour 1995: 31), there is an underlying notion that the past symbolised through the supernatural, will always attempt to rise against the present (Punter 1996: 47). Thus, in this text Walpole plays with various, historically related

contemporary fears, explicitly “the fear of the archaic, the irruption of chaos into an ordered world” (Punter 1998: 123).

In this context, the first preface to the *Castle of Otranto* is of significance. It implies that the text may have been written as early as 1095 by Onuphrio Muralto, a catholic priest. In representing the text as a historical artefact Walpole achieves an interesting effect. He distances the supernatural occurrences, the feudal hierarchy, and the rather un-useful moral message in an archaic past. In doing so, he emphasises that this barbaric age of superstition and feudal violence has nothing in common with the present day where such beliefs have been outdated by the preceding epoch of Enlightenment. Therefore the text’s message, that eternal forces work together to re-establish the true and original dynastic line, and the moral, that the “sins of fathers are visited on their children”, became acceptable for the modern reader, simply because “the principal incidents are such as were believed in the darkest ages of christianity” (Walpole 1986, Preface to the 1st edition: 39-41). Consequently, Walpole demonstrates “how far society has progressed since the days of execution, torture and belief in the supernatural” (Punter 1996: 158). Yet, it is important to point out that the text is in truth the cultural product of the 18th century, and as such Walpole’s writing is influenced by 18th century understandings of aristocracy and feudalism.

However, having analysed the Gothic settings and the supernatural occurrences to illustrate the persistent relationship between the past and the present, I will now briefly look at Radcliffe’s and Walpole’s ‘borrowing’ of other authors as a means to reconnect with the past. Quotations and allusions to Shakespeare’s work, for instance, can be found in both texts. In Stevens (2000: 48) view this ‘borrowing’ in Gothic texts is due to the authors wish to “add literary weight and prestige to the work itself” and also to “amplify a particular aspect of the story”. In the second preface to

Otranto, Walpole (1986: 44) states “Shakespeare, was the model I copied” and on the title page of *The Romance of the Forest* a quote of Macbeth can be found. For Kilgour (1995: 21) the borrowing of Shakespeare refers to an idealised past in which imaginative British aesthetic freedom still existed - “before the tyranny of neoclassicism with its rules and unities set in”. Yet, it can also be argued that the authors’ repeated allusions to Shakespeare’s work, originates in their wish to reconnect with the native English literary tradition (Chard 1999: xxii). However, the persistent borrowing shows that not only the texts themselves are constantly relating to the past but also the authors in their process of writing.

In conclusion, as this analysis has shown, the Gothic relationship with the past is, although always present, rather ambiguous. In my argument about the setting and supernatural occurrences, I have provided textual evidence that the present is never able to detach itself from its past. The borrowing of the authors shows that the Gothic genre cannot be separated from its literary predecessors and neither can the Protestant English middle class be separated from their Catholic and feudal ancestors whom it likes to demonise (Kilgour 1995: 37). Even when Radcliffe depicts a contemporary time frame, her setting revokes the ‘barbaric’ past.

On the one hand, the past equals buried sins and repressed fears often symbolised through the supernatural, which aim to haunt the present. On the other hand, the past serves as an idealised contrast of continuity to the corrupt, modern present, as shown on Walpole’s reference to the age of chivalry, which needed to be recovered. This results in the ambiguity of early Gothic texts always reflecting on the “uncertainty of history, the loss of the past as both desired and feared” (Punter 2007, online, p. 1).

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