

3

GOTHIC FORMS

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

(Anon., *Terrorist Novel Writing*, p. 229)

Other staple Gothic ingredients could be added to the recipe offered by an anonymous critic in an essay entitled ‘Terrorist Novel Writing’ (1797): dark subterranean vaults, decaying abbeys, gloomy forests, jagged mountains and wild scenery inhabited by bandits, persecuted heroines, orphans, and malevolent aristocrats. The atmosphere of gloom and mystery populated by threatening figures was designed to quicken readers’ pulses in terrified expectation. Shocks, supernatural incidents and superstitious beliefs set out to promote a sense of sublime awe and wonder which entwined with fear and elevated imaginations. Though many devices and settings were repeated, they were inflected differently. A hybrid form from its inception, the Gothic blend of medieval and historical romance with the novel of life and manners was framed in supernatural, sentimental or sensational terms. The consistency of the genre relied on the settings, devices and events. While their project was the production of terror, their repeated use turned them into rather hackneyed conventions and then into objects of satire. Indeed, sublime aspirations often veered towards the ridiculous.

Detailing the absurdities, confusions and silly artifices of Gothic novels, satirical judgements regarded them negatively for their failure as representations of human life and manners and their lack of moral instruction. Like romances before them, Gothic novels were irrational, improper and immoral wastes of time. What was worse, however, was that they were popular as T.J. Matthias observes in *The Pursuits of Literature* (1796): ‘The spirit of enquiry which he

[Horace Walpole] introduced was rather frivolous, though pleasing, and his Otranto Ghosts have propagated their species with unequalled fecundity. The spawn is in every novel shop' (p. 422). Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) was recognised as the origin of this new, popular and prodigious species of writing.

Though it was the blueprint for a new mode of writing, the framework that was established by the *The Castle of Otranto* underwent a number of significant changes in the hands of later writers, under pressure from different historical circumstances. The relative consistency of Gothic settings and plots, however, in conjunction with the romance tradition from which it drew, enabled the Gothic novel to be recognisable as a distinct type of fiction and also exposed it to the attacks of literary satirists. Framed as another manifestation of the romance form or as a pastiche of the productions of uncivilised ages, Gothic novels could be readily criticised by the literary establishment. The tone, however, of the criticism became increasingly ambivalent: ridicule serves to reinforce social and literary values while simultaneously acknowledging some degree of anxiety. Indeed, the increasing popularity of the genre exacerbated the neoclassical fear that all romances and novels could produce antisocial effects and lead to social disintegration. Despite being associated with literary and moral impropriety, many Gothic novels set out to vindicate morality, virtue and reason. They were thus caught between their avowedly moral and conventional projects and the unacceptably unrealistic mode of representation they employed. This tension produced the ambivalence internal to the novels themselves as well as the critical reception they received. It also contributed to the subsequent changes in narrative strategy and setting.

While a certain ambivalence characterises both the structure of Gothic narratives and their relation to the literary codes of the time, it is an ambivalence that cannot be restricted to the sphere of literature itself. What literature was, its nature and function, was undergoing significant revision. This can be seen in the shifting attitude to non-classical texts, in the way 'Gothic' began to be positively associated with nature, feeling and the expansiveness of the individual imagination. Fiction was becoming less a mode of moral instruction, a guide to proper behaviour, a way of representing society as natural, unified and rational, and more an invitation to pleasure and excitement, a way of cultivating individual emotions detached from the obligations of the everyday world. While it freed the writer from neoclassical conventions, it also imaginarily liberated the reader from his or her place in society.

These changing attitudes to literature were part of wider shifts in the mode of literary production and consumption. Markets for and access to texts of all kinds were expanding as a result of cheaper printing processes and the emergence of circulating libraries. The growing reading public included larger numbers of readers from the middle class, especially women, and reflected a change in the distribution of power and wealth from an aristocratic and landed minority to those whose interests lay in a mercantile economy. Writing, too, was becoming

less a pursuit associated with those who could afford leisure and more a professional activity. While this meant that individual writers were bound to sell their work, it also made them dependent on the market that consumed fiction. The popularity of the Gothic novel highlights the way that the control of literary production was shifting away from the guardians of taste and towards the reading public itself, much to the chagrin of those interested in maintaining an exclusive set of literary values. Women constituted an important part of this market, and not only as avid consumers of fiction. An increasing proportion of novels were written by women, often in order to maintain themselves and their families.

These shifts in the class and gender composition of readers are linked to social and political changes as well as economic ones. Industrialisation, urbanisation and the shifts of political power manifested in the American Revolution's rejection of imperialism (1776), and the French Revolution's overthrow of absolutist monarchy (1789), constitute the most general markers of changing notions of government, social organisation and individuality. All areas of British society were rendered unstable, as were its ways of representing and regulating itself according to rational and moral principles. While much Gothic fiction can be seen as a way of imagining an order based on divine or metaphysical principles that had been displaced by Enlightenment rationality, a way of conserving justice, privilege and familial and social hierarchies, its concern with modes of representing such an order required that it exceed the boundaries of reason and propriety. It is in this context that Gothic fiction can be said to blur rather than distinguish the boundaries that regulated social life, and interrogate, rather than restore, any imagined continuity between past and present, nature and culture, reason and passion, individuality and family and society.

THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO

Many of the main ingredients of the genre that was to be known as the Gothic novel can be found in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. While other novels, like Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753), used feudal customs and settings or characters, it was Walpole's text that condensed features from old poetry, drama and romance and provided the model for future developments. In the preface to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, Horace Walpole both situated the novel in relation to romances and novels and justified its project in terms of the move away from neoclassical aesthetic values. The novel, he states, 'was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the antient and the modern' (p. 7). The mixing of medieval romance and realistic novel tries to overcome the perceived limitations of both: the latter's insistence on realistic representation of nature and life cramps the imagination while the former is too unnatural and improbable. Wanting to let fancy roam freely in 'the boundless realms of invention and create 'more interesting situations', Walpole also states his intention to preserve rules of probability and have his characters 'think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women

would do in extraordinary positions'. The story, however, inclines more to the presentation of marvellous events than to human characterisation and realistic action.

In the second preface Walpole appeals to new ideas about writing. Inspiration, individual artistic genius and imaginative freedom overstep the boundaries of neoclassical taste. The originality and genius of Shakespeare legitimates imaginative licence as well as being cited as a major influence on the novel's dramatic, even melodramatic, contrasts of figures, its pace, dialogue and the effects of its setting and its use of supernatural events. Despite these justifications for this 'new species of romance', the preface maintains a certain distance, aware of its transgression of certain aesthetic norms. Written in the third person, the preface, though acknowledging authorship, tries to negotiate a compromise as well as distance the writer from any impropriety that might be detected. Novels and romances were far from being completely acceptable pastimes for a member of polite society. Indeed, it was only the success of the first edition of the novel, published anonymously, that led to Walpole's admission of authorship.

For the development of the Gothic novel, the significance of anonymous publication is more than the recognition of impropriety associated with authorial disavowal. The first edition had a preface that became a crucial device in Gothic narratives: it was itself a fiction, a fiction, moreover, with pretensions to historical authenticity and veracity. The antiquarian tones of the preface declare *The Castle of Otranto* to be a translation of a medieval Italian story printed in 1529 and written at the time of the Crusades. Everything, from the Gothic script in which it is printed to the feudal customs and miraculous incidents it presents, conspires to give it an air of truth as a production of the barbarous and superstitious dark ages. Its moral, questionable to the eighteenth-century 'translator'—that 'the sins of the fathers are visited on their children'—also establishes a foundation for later stories. Doubting whether 'ambition curbed its appetite of dominion from the dread of so remote a punishment', the 'translator' judges an avowedly superstitious past in the terms of his present. The historical distance that is opened up by the device of the discovered manuscript returns readers to the neoclassical strictures and produces an uncomfortable interplay between past and present that both displaces and confronts contemporary aesthetic and social concerns. Historical distance also acknowledges cultural difference: English Protestant culture is distinguished from the southern European, and thus Catholic, background which is constructed as both exotic and superstitious, fascinating but extreme in its aesthetic and religious sentiments.

The Castle of Otranto tells the story of Manfred, prince of Otranto by virtue of his grandfather's usurpation of the rightful owner, and his attempts to secure his lineage. His sickly son is crushed by a gigantic helmet on the day of his wedding to Isabella, daughter of another noble. The helmet comes from the statue of the original owner and, despite the physical impossibility, the credulous followers of Manfred blame and imprison a young peasant, Theodore, for its miraculous

transportation. Ambitious and unscrupulous as he is, Manfred decides that, though already married, he will have to wed Isabella in order to produce an heir. Repulsed at his advances, Isabella is saved by the sighing portrait of Manfred's grandfather. She flees from the castle, helped by a recently escaped Theodore, through subterranean vaults. The youth, however, is recaptured. At the same time, servants are terrified by the sight of a giant in armour and Manfred, jealous of an imagined attachment between Theodore and Isabella, threatens his life. A friar, Jerome, intercedes, and discovers the youth to be his long-lost son.

A troop of knights arrive at the castle carrying a gigantic sword (which matches the helmet) and the colours of Isabella's family. Suspicious of Manfred, the knights join the search for her. In the meantime, Theodore is helped to escape by Mathilda, Manfred's rejected daughter, and flees through the castle vaults to encounter Isabella among a labyrinth of caverns. There, to defend her honour, he defeats a knight in combat and discovers him to be Isabella's father, Frederic. Back at the castle, the conjugal problems are still unresolved. Theodore is attracted by Mathilda, as is Frederic. At the mention of this amorous interest, blood runs from the nose of Alphonso's statue. Manfred, finding the lovers in the chapel and believing Mathilda to be Isabella, stabs her in a fit of passion. His guilt and his forebears' guilt is discovered, Jerome and Theodore are revealed to be the true heirs to Otranto and, with a clap of thunder and a clanking of ghostly chains, the castle crumbles to ruin. The guilty die or incarcerate themselves in convents and proper lineage is restored with a warning about human vanities and with the eventual marriage of Theodore and Isabella.

While *The Castle of Otranto* sets out the features and themes for use in all later Gothic texts, it does so in a rather ambivalent way. The aristocratic order of primogeniture, property and patriarchy that it restores with such speed, and so many convolutions, stretches the bounds of credulity and reduces the basis of feudal society to a few of the more extravagant customs. Even as it associates virtue and character with breeding (Theodore is never anything but a knight in peasant's clothes) and seems to naturalise patriarchal and aristocratic values within a wider metaphysical order governed by supernatural manifestations of an eternal law, its mode of representation undercuts these links. For the supernatural manifestations of the restitution of an old order present a law that is at once violent and sublime, disproportionate and just, and founded as much on superstition as on power. Despite the comedy of the servants' superstitious fears, superstition is encouraged by the irrational and anti-Enlightenment manifestation of gigantic and supernatural justice.

Indeed, the novels style stimulates emotional effects rather than rational understanding, thereby emulating the vicious passions of the selfish and ambitious villain. The frenetic pace of the text is, in part, an effect of excitement and irrationality. In a letter to the Reverend William Cole (9 March 1765), Walpole describes how his own Gothic mansion and its decorations contributed to the dream he offers as the origin of the story. These factors centre the interest of the story on marvellous and threatening events and the terrors they produce

instead of moral resolution. The style of writing itself works against reason and propriety and led critics of the time to balk at its absurdities, lack of morality and false taste. The story's pretence to historical veracity exposed the artifice of its representations for an audience judging by neoclassical standards. Its extravagant depictions of passions and incredible events and the thinness of its cautionary ending leaves, as the 'translator' notes in the first preface, an eighteenth-century reader suspicious of its supposed morality. But its contrast of distinct aesthetic impulses leaves the text itself in an uncertain position between offering a serious purpose or a subversive play. Its evocations of terror and superstition can be seen to advocate a sense of awe at supernatural power and its restitution of justice, or can render such a notion of justice comic and suggest that the orders which depend on such superstitious notions are quaintly unrealistic. If ideals of chivalrous virtue and honour depend on spectral appearances and supernatural wrath to preserve them then they, like the castle itself, may be destined for ruin. Chivalry and honour, indeed, are like ghostly incarnations of an old order that have no place in the enlightened eighteenth century. Mere superstitions, these ideals, while underpinning aristocratic and patriarchal culture, have no power against the cunning and tyranny of the selfish and ambitious individual. Virtue, too, is helpless in the face of tyrannical fathers interested only in the preservation of a law of primogeniture. Confronted with indifference, forced marriage and death, their lot, it seems, is to suffer and be sacrificed to the persecutions of patriarchal power with only the occasional knight fighting for their honour. Indeed, the predominance of arms and armour presents a culture founded on a violence that is constructed as both metaphysical and individual. But it is not, in eighteenth-century terms, natural.

In this respect, *The Castle of Oranto* can be seen as a reinforcement of eighteenth-century values, distinguishing the barbaric past from the enlightened present. None the less, eighteenth-century culture still depended on notions of virtue and honour. Nor did it witness the total disappearance of an aristocratic order, of which Walpole, later to become Earl of Orford, was a part. From the position offered by the second preface, however, with its advocacy of imagination and original genius and its privileging of individualist values, the novel appears as a text that examines the limitations of reason, virtue and honour in the regulation of the passions, ambitions and violence underlying patriarchal and family orders. Despite their significant interrelation, distinctions between terms and values are left unresolved. *The Castle of Otranto* displays the tensions and contradictions traversing eighteenth-century society's representations of itself. It was ambivalently received by reviewers in the 1760s. For one, not knowing whether the translator 'speaks seriously or ironically', the absurdity of its contents and wretchedness of its conclusion were not sufficiently compensated for by the 'well marked' characters and the 'spirit and propriety of the narrative'. For another, the Gothic machinery is entertaining, the language is accurate and its representations of character, manners and humanity 'indicate the keenest penetration'. Its 'principal defect', however, is its lack of any moral but

the Very useless' one concerning the sins of the father. In contrast to reviews that noticed, and approved of, eighteenth-century shapings of character, another reviewer criticised 'the foibles of a supposed antiquity' and went on to declare that '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!' (McNutt, pp. 163–4).

The ambivalent reactions produced by *The Castle of Otranto* partake of a wider ambivalence concerning the eighteenth century's relation to its Gothic past and its changing present. The function of literature in representing a rational and natural social order and guiding readers in proper modes of conduct and discrimination is also questioned: in failing to offer an overriding and convincing position, *The Castle of Otranto* leaves readers unsure of its moral purpose. Its uncertain tone and style, between seriousness and irony, is perhaps the novel's cardinal sin and one that is visited in various forms on all its literary offspring. Rending the homogenising correspondence of representation and reality, Gothic fancy and invention was able to construct other worlds that dislocated boundaries between fact and fiction, history and contemporaneity, reality and fantasy. The loosening of rational and moral rules for writing facilitated by the idea of the individual imagination, and the indulgence of emotions and pleasures, also entailed evocations of anxiety—evinced by figures of darkness and power—that any form of justice or order, whether natural, human or supernatural, had itself become spectral.

EARLY REVISIONS

Walpole's excessive use of supernatural and irrational impulses, however, was tempered in subsequent Gothic works. In 1777 *The Champion of Virtue. A Gothic Story* was published anonymously in the guise of a translated old manuscript. This device itself acknowledges the influence of *The Castle of Otranto*. In 1778 the preface to the second edition, in which Clara Reeve declared her authorship and changed the title to *The Old English Baron*, outlined criticisms of Walpole's text. Its ability to engage the reader's sympathy is praised but 'the machinery is so violent, that it destroys the effect it is intended to excite' (p. 4). As a result the novel exceeds the limits of probability and credibility, disappointing instead of interesting readers: 'when your expectation is wound up to the highest pitch, these circumstances take it down with a witness, destroy the work of the imagination, and instead of attention, excite laughter' (p. 5). In the light of these criticisms *The Old English Baron* attempts to reduce the ambivalent effects of Gothic fiction, and restore a balance between marvellous and supernatural incident and the natural life and manners of eighteenth-century realism.

Ghostly machinations are kept to a minimum and, though the customs and settings of feudal times are invoked, they are contained by eighteenth-century sentiments. One contemporary critic observed that the book's claim to Gothic

status arose primarily from the architectural descriptions (McNutt, p. 171). Although other critics gave relatively favourable reviews of the novel, Walpole was less than impressed by its claims to be a Gothic story: 'Have you seen "The Old English Baron", he wrote in a letter to Reverend William Mason (8 April 1778), 'a Gothic story, professedly written in imitation of *Otranto*, but reduced to reason and probability? It is so probable that any trial for murder at the Old Bailey would make a more interesting story!' (*Old English Baron*, Introduction, 1977, p. viii). For Walpole, Reeve's text elided the excitements of a very different past by framing it in the terms of a neoclassical present. *The Old English Baron* establishes a historical continuity maintained by the imposition of eighteenth-century rules and morality. Differences between Walpole and Reeve, moreover, implied disagreements that were not solely concerned with the purpose and place of literature. Unlike the aristocrat, Walpole, Reeve came from an educated middle-class background, her father being a curate in Ipswich. This social position is reflected in the novel's highlighting of gentility and merit, dissociated from social position. The hero's virtues, for instance, are not solely related to his high birth, since he was raised by a peasant family. His courage, kindness and generosity of spirit qualify him as one deserving of his advantages rather than merely inheriting them. Gothic devices and setting are subordinated to the social and domestic proprieties of the emerging middle class of the eighteenth century.

Set during the reign of Henry VI, the novel tells the story of a foundling, Edmund, of ostensibly peasant birth, who distinguishes himself in social and military skills. He is steward to the sons of Baron Fitz-Owen whose family inhabit a castle owned by a relation, Lord Lovel. The castle has a decayed set of apartments that have been mysteriously locked for years. Edmund's past is linked to these apartments. After his talents have excited rivalries in the Baron's family, he is sent to the apartments to spend the night. There, groans and strange lights lead to a dream in which he sees a knight in armour and a lady who address him as their child. Consequently, Edmund attempts to discover the truth of his parentage, gathered from diverse local anecdotes. After a feudal combat, the sins of Lord Lovel are brought to light and Edmund is established as the rightful heir to the castle and estates. Propriety as well as property is restored. The usurper is punished and Edmund is allowed to marry the Baron's daughter, thus harmonising family relations. Morality, too, is restored: 'All these, when together, furnish a striking lesson to posterity, of the over-ruling hand of Providence, and the certainty of RETRIBUTION' (p. 153). Not only do virtue, morality and social and domestic harmony prevail, they are, so the cautionary ending declares, divinely sanctioned and protected.

Though it reduces the incidence and effects of supernatural powers, the story none the less invokes heavenly might as a guarantee of the tale's moral. While its subjects are aristocratic and its world is feudal, the story keeps superstition in check with its emphasis on virtuous character, individual merit, human vanities and domestic order. Returned to a distinctly eighteenth-century framework, the

fiction absorbs and rewrites the past in a manner which privileges the neoclassical present. In this respect, the relationship between history and fiction highlighted by Gothic tales is more complicated than the novel's preface acknowledges: 'history represents human nature as it is in real life;...romance displays only the amiable side of the picture' (p. 3). Unlike Walpole's version of a wild and irrational feudal past, Reeve's romance renders history itself as an amiable picture of eighteenth-century nature and life which in turn discloses them as somewhat unreal. Disturbing the boundaries between past and present, however, became an inevitable feature of Gothic fiction, even though the manner in which the two were articulated differed from writer to writer. History, like nature, the supernatural and the passions of individuals, became a contradictory site for both imaginative speculation and moral imposition.

In Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1783–5) the interweaving of history and Gothic romance is complicated further. The novel situates its fictional heroines in a world populated by real figures and events from the Elizabethan age. Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Francis Drake and the Earl of Leicester as well as Elizabeth I all contribute to the plot. Spicing fiction with fact, however, did not lend the tale greater veracity. For one critic it detracted from the narrative. History was employed 'too lavishly', leaving the mind 'ever divided and distracted when the fact so little accords with the fiction, and Romance and History are at perpetual variance with one another' (*The Recess*, Introduction, p. xxiii). Romance, however, to use Reeve's distinction, does not win out in painting the real life of history in an amiable light. For several critics the novels melancholic and gloomy tones were at odds with the romance form. Historical accuracy, indeed, is not a primary concern of the novel in which fictional licence freely alters events and their chronology. In many ways it serves as the backdrop for the representation of eighteenth-century concerns. Critics noted the novels 'neglect of the peculiar manners of the age' while appreciating it as an instructive and interesting text (Introduction, pp. xxi–xxii). Gothic elements feature as part of the wider plot of a historical narrative that owes much to the extravagant composition of seventeenth-century French romances. Ruins, underground vaults and heroines' terrified flights are blended with romantic adventures ranging over a wide geographical area. Picturesque descriptions of natural scenery and accounts of domestic happiness, sufferings and tensions, however, maintain a thoroughly eighteenth-century perspective.

The use of history in *The Recess* introduced some important new directions for the Gothic model derived from Walpole. Like Reeve, it reduced the incidence of the supernatural and also gave new impetus to the historical romance, a form in which past events are liberally recomposed in fictional narrative. Unlike both Reeve and Walpole, however, the action of the novel centres on the lives of two women. They are the daughters of Mary Queen of Scots who have to be hidden from society and the court of Elizabeth in order not to suffer the same fate as their mother. They grow up in secret in the subterranean chambers of a ruined abbey. The novel charts their entry into the world under assumed names and

their marriages to Lord Leicester and the Earl of Essex. Society and marriage offer only brief moments of happiness until the secret of their identity is disclosed. The disclosure leads to the death of one sister and the flight of the other, powerless against the political intrigues and violent passions of the Elizabethan world.

The world at large presents the greatest terrors for the young heroines. Rather than the imaginary threats of supernatural powers it is the accounts of pursuit and persecution by noblemen, female courtiers and hired bandits that constitute the major instances of fear. In contrast, domesticity, represented by the sentimental attachments of the sisters in their hidden, underground habitation, offers love and security. However, the novel suggests that there is no refuge in secrecy, hidden recesses or domesticity itself. The outside world invades the private, domestic sphere, turning a refuge into a place of dark menace. In its focus on female virtue, *The Recess* seems to take a pessimistic position in regard to its primary location in domestic space. Virtuous women continually confront suffering and persecution, their ideals leaving them both powerless and unrewarded. Neither virtue nor the security of domestic space forms an adequate defence and itself becomes a prison rather than a refuge, a restricted space confined by a system of values that privileges the male and active world beyond the family. At the same time romances marked a putative and contradictory attempt to offer access to worlds other than the domestic and family spheres that constituted the real life and manners of the majority of middle-class women. At home they could read tales that, while reinforcing ideals of female virtue and propriety, offered some escape from domestic confinement through fictional adventures even if, in the fictions, the impulse came from external violence. Foregrounding confinement, virtue in suffering, and a threatening external world, fiction none the less attempted to articulate the contradictory requirements of propriety and excitement. The resulting ambivalence only entwines the realms of women's reality and fantasy. The novel, by a successful writer and headmistress of a girls' school in Bath, is traversed by these contradictory impulses: the moral and social imperative to inculcate female virtues and domestic values conflicts with the fact that working in the world involves some transgression of the accepted position and role for women. In its highlighting of problems in ideals of female virtue and domesticity *The Recess* establishes an important direction for the Gothic novel.

Neither virtue nor propriety were a particular concern of William Beckford's *Vathek*, published in French in 1782 and translated into English in 1786. Frequently cited as a Gothic novel, *Vathek* remains distinct from the genre, though its influence can be traced in later and more obviously Gothic texts. One of the main connections is that its author, the extremely wealthy Beckford, built an extravagant and costly Gothic building, Fonthill Abbey. Like Walpole and his Gothic mansion at Strawberry Hill, he thought of the intricate and sublime architecture of Fonthill as a source of inspiration for his novel, comparing it to the hall of Eblis in *Vathek*. There are many evocations of sublimity in the natural and supernatural descriptions of the novel. The hero-villain, Caliph Vathek, is an

Eastern tyrant whose violent actions and passionate temper can inspire terror and horror among his subjects. Vathek is also a sensualist, building great palaces in order to indulge his carnal pleasures. Adept in the arts of astrology and magic, the Caliph fervently pursues forbidden knowledge, until he is finally damned.

Though many antiquarians believed that the romance tradition originated in Arab or Eastern countries, *Vathek* is part of a different tradition of eighteenth-century writing. Translations of Arabian stories led to a vogue for Oriental tales and a love of the exotic. The East constituted another space in which the expanding imagination could freely roam. Indulgence in descriptions of excessive passion, irrational violence, magical events and sensual pleasure was acceptable, as many critics of *Vathek* seemed to agree, because they demonstrated the disastrous consequences of those forms of behaviour. *Vathek's* ending aligns itself with this code: describing how Vathek will wander eternity in anguish, the concluding moral declares that 'such was, and should be, the punishment of unrestrained passions and atrocious deeds!' (p. 120). Ironically, and perhaps as a satire on eighteenth-century orientalism, this warning against excess comes at the end of a story that has flagrantly indulged in imaginative and descriptive excess.

The ending, like the uncomfortable identification with the hero-villain throughout the tale, refuses to affirm in the manner of romances any stable boundary line between good and evil. Vathek is the villain and also the victim of his ambitions and passions. Like Faust, having overvaulted his quest for knowledge and power, he incurs damnation at the hands of a violent supernatural order. The moral tone of the ending, as in *The Castle of Otranto*, remains unconvincing. Like Walpole's novel, *Vathek* makes no concessions to reason or probability, indulging in the imaginative pleasures of supernatural and fantastic events for the sublime emotions they produce rather than the morals they present.

In the connections and contrasts manifested in the writings of Walpole and Beckford, on the one hand, and Reeve and Lee on the other, two of the major strands of Gothic fiction are displayed. Despite differences of historical and geographical setting, the male writers of Gothic, of a more aristocratic class position, lean towards representations of irrationality and the supernatural, exercising the privileges and freedoms conferred by gender and class position. The female writers, usually more solidly middle-class in origin, remain more concerned with the limits of eighteenth-century virtues, careful to interrogate rather than overstep the boundaries of domestic propriety which, because of their gender, were more critically maintained. Though darkness, ruin, superstition and human passion are objects of fascination and sublimity in both strains, their significance and effect is shaped by the very different ends of the narratives. The Gothic fictions that dominated the 1790s introduced certain changes into the genre but the basic pattern of the narratives, as well as the conventional settings, can be directly identified with these two strategies of indulging or rationalising imaginative excess.