

The *Castle of Otranto* induced both terror and contempt. Thomas Gray, one of its first readers, reported from Cambridge that 'it engages our attention here, makes some of us cry a little, and all in general afraid to go to bed o'nights'.²⁵ Ann Yearsley, a still more responsive reader, wrote a long poem recording her tremulous reactions (No. 24). For Walpole's friend Gilly Williams, in contrast, it was 'such a novel, that no boarding-school Miss of thirteen could get half through without yawning' (No. 18a); for an anonymous critic in the *Critical Review*, 'the publication of any work, at this time, in England composed of such rotten materials, is a phenomenon we cannot account for' (No. 19a); and for Clara Reeve, a rival Gothic novelist, 'the machinery is so violent, that it destroys the effect it is intended to excite' (No. 23).

After Walpole's death, *Otranto* continued to divide the critics. Thomas Green's *Diary*, published in 1810 but written in 1797, records his disappointment with Walpole's Gothicism in contrast to that of Ann Radcliffe, who 'out of possible contingencies, evokes scenes of far more thrilling horror, than are attained by the supernatural and extravagant machinery' of *Otranto* (No. 26). John Dunlop, a very hostile reader, finds *Otranto* 'a most feeble attempt to excite awe or terror' (No. 29), and for Hazlitt it is 'dry, meagre, and without effect' (No. 30). Anna Barbauld, a cautious admirer, admits that it is a 'slight performance', but written 'with the and without effect' (No. 30). Anna Barbauld, a cautious admirer, admits that it is a 'slight performance', but written 'with the richness and wildness of poetic fancy' (No. 27). Walter Scott's essay of 1811 (No. 28), extensively revised in 1823, is one of the most enthusiastic readings *Otranto* has ever received; it is still being reprinted in popular editions, and is almost as well known as the novel itself.

WILLIAM HAZLITT

The ' ' Castle of Otranto "

(which is supposed to have led the way to this style of writing) is, to my notion, dry, meagre, and without effect. It is done upon false principles of taste. The great hand and arm which are thrust into the court-yard, and remain there all day long, are the pasteboard machinery of a pantomime ; they shock the senses, and have no purchase upon the imagination. They are a matter-of-fact impossibility ; a fixture, and no longer a phantom.

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Book Review: "The Castle of Otranto" (1764), Horace Walpole

Often credited as the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* has all the ingredients you'd expect: mistaken identities, ghosts, incest, women running through dark hallways in a billowing nightgown... And it is (unintentionally?) hilarious. In the opening paragraphs, the prince of Otranto is dashed to pieces when a gigantic helmet falls from the sky and crushes him to death. *Of course!*

Sadly, the hilarity wears off after a while and you're left with a book that may have spawned an entire genre, but doesn't have much more to offer than that. Walpole said that he used Shakespeare as his model for this and it shows: there are traces of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* all over the text. However, *Otranto* is nowhere near as complex, emotional, or well-written. Walpole all but shoves his symbols in your face and then underlines them three more times with a bright red pen for good measure.

I will give him some credit though: Walpole initially managed to fool people into thinking that this was a translation of a recently resurfaced ancient manuscript. He even wrote an introduction, pretending to be *Otranto's* translator and praising his own work for its excellent writing!

If you're interested in the humble beginnings of the gothic novel, this is a must-read and a quick one at that (my edition has 119 pages). You can play Bingo with all the familiar genre tropes and giggle at the absurdity of certain plot twists. If this doesn't like a fun night in to you, feel free to skip it.

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The Castle of Otranto by Horace Walpole

By turns lurid, sensational and amusing, this 18th-century gothic romance remains a tour de force, says Sophie Missing

Politician and man of letters Horace Walpole was a trendsetter. His house in Twickenham kick-started a revival in gothic architecture, and the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 sparked the vogue for gothic romance in English literature.

The preface to the first edition of the novel (published under a pseudonym) stated that it was a translation of a 16th-century Italian manuscript recounting a story dating back to the Crusades. As a literary hoax it was a success, although the revelation of Walpole's forgery exposed his novel, with its unapologetic zest for the supernatural, to the "censure to which romances are but too liable".

The only son of Manfred, lord of Otranto, is crushed to death by a mysterious giant helmet falling on him moments before his wedding. Connecting this event to a prophecy that the castle will pass from his line, Manfred resolves to banish his wife to a convent and marry his son's intended bride. But his

desire to produce an heir has tragic consequences, proving the dour moral that "the sins of fathers are visited on their children".

Walpole famously declared: that "the world is a tragedy to those who feel, but a comedy to those who think". It's a sentiment that resonates when reading *The Castle of Otranto*: although undeniably melodramatic, it is saved from absurdity by its playful tone. It established both the stock characters of the genre (evil tyrant, virtuous maiden, noble peasant) and its motifs (the supernatural, incest, mistaken identity). By turns lurid, sensational and amusing, it remains an imaginative tour de force.

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A Mountain of Sable Plumes

By Dan Piepenbring January 22, 2014 ARTS & CULTURE

STRAWBERRY HILL, WALPOLE'S GOTHIC REVIVALIST MANOR, IN TWICKENHAM.

Earlier this week, to commemorate Edgar Allan Poe's birthday, Flavorpill found ten Gothic short stories for our delectation, and I must say, they're really hitting the spot. January is especially well suited to the tint of the Gothic mindset—nothing helps you settle into the winter doldrums like an unceasing parade of bloodied knives, thousand-yard stares, disemboweled corpses, creaking doors, and shrieking virgins. It's enough to make you want to sunder a frilled shirt and drink rancid port from a tarnished silver chalice, muttering all the while about the gloaming, the gloaming, the gloaming...

And let's not forget the funereal knell of church bells. You'll want those, too.

If you really want to whip yourself into a Gothic froth, I recommend *The Castle of Otranto*, Horace Walpole's 1764 novel, widely regarded as the forebear of the Gothic proper. It's not "good," exactly—you won't find independent booksellers foisting it on you as a forgotten classic—but it packs a lot of senseless murk into a slim volume, and it features one of my favorite opening scenes in all of literature: a homely young man is crushed to death by a giant helmet, which seems to have fallen from the sky. His father, Prince Manfred, comes upon the disaster:

The first thing that struck Manfred's eyes was a group of his servants endeavoring to raise something that appeared to him a mountain of sable plumes. He gazed without believing his sight.

"What are ye doing?" cried Manfred, wrathfully; "where is my son?"

A volley of voices replied, "Oh! my Lord! the Prince! the Prince! the helmet! the helmet!"

Shocked with these lamentable sounds, and dreading he knew not what, he advanced hastily,—but what a sight for a father's eyes!—he beheld his child dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers.

The horror of the spectacle, the ignorance of all around how this misfortune had happened, and above all, the tremendous phenomenon before him, took away the Prince's speech. Yet his silence lasted longer than even grief could occasion. He fixed his eyes on what he wished in vain to believe a vision; and seemed less attentive to his loss, than buried in meditation on the stupendous object that had occasioned it. He touched, he examined the fatal casque; nor could even the bleeding mangled remains of the young Prince divert the eyes of Manfred from the portent before him.

And so on. It's a turn that seems straight out of Terry Gilliam's Monty Python animations, but without the fart sounds. You can read all of *Otranto* here; it goes on to include ghosts, brazen trumpets, and walking portraits, among other oddities. If you're not engrossed, you may be, at least, instructively perplexed. And when, after a few hours in the hysteria and gloom, you raise your heavy eyes, the winter will be that much closer to its end.