

I now want to turn to consider some of the other meanings that the term 'Gothic' assumed, this time, during that period of history that we now know as the 'renaissance'. We now understand the renaissance in Europe as involving, at least to some extent, the revival of interest in ancient Greece and Roman culture – from whence, of course, we get the term 'renaissance' or 'rebirth'. Again, this term post-dates the eighteenth century, our period under discussion, but it is nonetheless useful to see the meanings that the term 'Gothic' mobilised in the work of the Italian writer, Giorgio Vasari, in his celebrated anthology of artists' biographies, *Lives of the Artists* (1550; revised 1569). Throughout this influential tome, Vasari uses the term 'Gothic' in a negative way, as a synonym for barbarism and barbarity, the unenlightened, the monstrous and deformed. His anti-Gothic stance is pitted primarily against architects from the medieval period, marauding masons who, having demolished the elegant Classical buildings of ancient Rome during the sacking, built their own misshapen piles with their characteristically pointed arches. So, in Vasari, the term 'Gothic' is enlisted in a general renaissance rejection of the darkness and barbarism of the medieval past. Gothic, in other words, implied that which was monstrous, uncouth and uncivilised. This set of meanings persisted well into the eighteenth century, not least of all in the work of the Classical architect Sir Christopher Wren, the architect probably best remembered today for his classical remodelling of St Paul's Cathedral, London, in the fashionable Gothic style after the Great Fire of London. In Sir Christopher Wren's *Parentalia*, for instance, compiled and edited by his son and published in London in 1750. Throughout the *Parentalia*, in fact, 'Gothick', as a term of architectural description, becomes a synonym for barbarity and untamed wildness, meanings that are actively cultivated and exploited by Wren in such throwaway references to the [SLIDE ON SCREEN] 'Gothick Rudeness of the old design' and 'crude Gothick Innovations, far from the good Examples of the Ancients'. Intent upon asserting the superiority of Roman and Italianate renaissance designs over those of the medieval tradition, Wren in *Parentalia* continuously draws unfavourable comparisons between the medieval 'Gothick' pile and what he emphatically regards as 'a better Manner of Architecture', one that substitutes the simple elegance of the cupola for the distinctively Gothic features of lanterns, lofty spires and porticoes. As Wren at one point somewhat mischievously observes, the term 'Gothick' as applied to architecture might, itself, be a misnomer, since, as history teaches us, the Goths 'were rather Destroyers than Builders'.

Thus far, we've covered the notion of the ancient Goths, their perceived relationship with English history, and the different meanings accreting around the term 'Gothic' from the end of the eighteenth-century onwards. Let's summarise this briefly, through the following points on the slide:

Gothic: an ancient Germanic tribe that, because of its connections with English history, came to signify British antiquity, a sense of 'home', a sense of an original, native culture that was quite at odds with the Rome and Greece-derived spirit and style of Classicism. As opposed to these imported political and artistic traditions, Gothic signified that which was native and original to Britain.

But 'Gothic' also signified an untamed wildness, a certain roughness and irregularity, a certain otherness, even in those seventeenth and eighteenth-century writers who sought to use the term positively. From Vasari onwards, 'Gothic' was used pejoratively, as a way of dismissing the 'monstrous' architectural formations of the medieval past.

Perhaps the main meaning of the term 'Gothic' that we have yet to explore is literary. How, in other words, did the eighteenth century apply the term 'Gothic' to literature? There are several ways of approaching this topic, and we will explore it in more detail next week, when we begin to devote our attention specifically to Gothic literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But consider, for a moment, the following quotation on the screen from Alexander Pope's 'Preface' to his six-volume edition of *The Works of Shakespear* [sic] in 1725:

I will conclude by saying of *Shakespeare* that, with all his faults, and with all the irregularity of his *Drama*, one may look upon his works, in comparison of those that are more finish'd and regular, as upon an ancient majestick piece of Gothick Architecture compar'd with a neat Modern building: the latter is more elegant and glaring, but the former is more strong and solemn. It must be allow'd that in one of these there are materials enough to make many of the other. It has much the greater variety, and much the nobler apartments; tho' we are often conducted to them by dark, odd, and uncouth passages. Nor does the whole fail to strike us with greater reverence, tho' many of the Parts are childish, ill-plac'd, and unequal to its grandeur. (Alexander Pope, Preface to *The Works of Shakespear* [1725], p. 35)

What is striking about this passage? Do you notice how Pope employs an architectural metaphor, that of a 'Gothick' building, to express his sense of Shakespeare's plays? What do we make of this passage? Well, Pope, we know, is the great Classicist poet of the eighteenth century, one who was very much drawn to, and influenced by, classical or Roman- and Greek-derived forms of literature, such as the epic. But let's look carefully at this passage again: do you see how Pope's Classical biases are barely disguised, here? Notice the references to the 'dark and uncouth passages' that are to be found within the 'Gothic' building that is Shakespeare; look, too, at his sense of aspects of Shakespeare being 'childish and ill-placed'. And yet the major tenor of his argument is positive: after all, he has just produced a major edition of the Bard's works. I think we might sum it up as follows: even though Shakespeare's imagination is 'Gothic' – that is, non-symmetrical, supernatural in places, highly imaginative, monstrous, somewhat crude and barbaric, or rough around the edges – he is worthy of appreciation and respect nonetheless.

Consequently, this quotation, I think, sums up quite well a sense of the Gothic as it was applied to the literary imagination, even before Horace Walpole penned his famous *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. The Gothic was non-Classical: Shakespeare was non-Classical insofar as his plays failed to conform to the Unities of time, place and action as laid out in Aristotle's *Poetics*, in much the same way that Gothic or medieval architecture paid no heed to the Classical architectural principles of uniformity, rhythm and proportion. If, to use Pope's analogy, the Classical was a 'neat', finished' and 'regular' building, the Gothic was an organically shaped, non-symmetrical, highly ornamented and 'irregular' Gothic pile. Pope's reference to the 'childish' aspects of Shakespeare's work is important too, I think, and takes up directly to the work of another important eighteenth-century writer in whom we see a similar sense of the 'Gothic imagination' developing. Earlier, in July 1712, the English essayist, poet, playwright and politician Joseph Addison had contributed an article on what we now describe as the 'Gothic' literary imagination to *The Spectator*:

There is a kind of writing, wherein the poet quite loses sight of nature, and entertains his readers' imagination with the characters and actions of such persons as have many of them no existence, but what he bestows on them. Such are fairies, witches, magicians, demons, and departed spirits. This Dr Dryden calls 'the fairy way of writing', which is, indeed, more difficult than any other that depends on the poet's fancy, because he has no pattern to follow in it, and must work together out of his own invention. (Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, Tuesday 1 July 1712)

Dryden had used the phrase 'the fairy way of writing' in relation to Shakespeare, so this passage is closer to the one by Pope that we've just looked at. Addison's article proceeds to explore this 'fairy way of writing' throughout the essay, and although he never specifically names it as 'Gothic', the essay demonstrates what the eighteenth-century deemed a 'Gothic imagination'. This type of writing, Addison goes on, is characterised by high levels of fancy and imagination, and in order to succeed in it, he claims, the writer ought to be 'well versed in legends and fables, antiquated romances, and the traditions of nurses and old women, that he may fall in with our natural prejudices, and humour those notions which we have imbibed in our infancy'. This mention of childhood takes us back to Pope's comments on Shakespeare: the Gothic imagination, this highly imaginative form of writing, was associated before it took literary form with an oral tradition in story-telling, with old wives' tales of the supernatural told to wide-eyed child-listeners gathered before her at a winter's fireside. The contents of this form of storytelling was invariably supernatural. Here is Addison again, on the screen:

These descriptions raise a pleasing kind of horror in the mind of the reader, and amuse his imagination with the strangeness and novelty of the persons who are represented in them. They bring up into our memory the stories we have heard in our childhood, and favour those secret terrors and apprehensions to which the mind of man is naturally subject. (Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, Tuesday 1 July 1712)

Do you notice Addison's references to the experiences of horror and terror? Perhaps most significantly, Addison in this essay notes that this tradition in story-telling is non-Classical, and English in origin.

New SLIDE:

The Ancients have not much of this poetry among them, for, indeed, almost the whole substance of it owes its original to the darkness and superstition of later ages, when pious frauds were made use of to amuse mankind, and frighten them into a sense of their duty. Our forefathers looked upon Nature with more reverence and horror, before the world was enlightened by learning and philosophy, and loved to astonish themselves with the apprehensions of witchcraft, prodigies, charms and enchantments. There was not a village in England that had not a ghost in it, the churchyards were all haunted, every large common had a circle of fairies belonging to it, and there was scarce a shepherd to be met with who had not seen a spirit. (Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, Tuesday 1 July 1712)

Do you see, here, how, without ever using the term, Addison is theorising a sense of the 'Gothic' imagination? Like the ancient Gothic tribe, it is non-Classical; it is associated with Englishness and English tradition and ancestry; it delights in

witchcraft, prodigies, charms, enchantments and ghosts. From this description, you can see why Shakespeare was regarded as 'our Gothic Bard' in the eighteenth century. He was Gothic not only because his plays, like *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, contained ghosts and ghouls, but because he was natively English, 'old' to the eighteenth century, and resistant to the constraints of Classical aesthetics.