

In between the publication of the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* and the second edition of April 1765, Walpole wrote to his friend, the Reverend William Cole, the following lines:

Dear Sir,

I had time to write but a short note with *The Castle of Otranto*, as your messenger called on me at four o'clock as I was going to dine abroad. Your partiality to me and Strawberry have I hope inclined you to excuse the wildness of the story. You will even have found some traits to put you in mind of this place. When you read of the picture quitting its panel, did not you recollect the portrait of Lord Falkland all in which in my gallery? Shall I even confess to you what was the origin of this romance? I waked one morning in the beginning of last June from a dream, of which all I could recover was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story) and that on the uppermost bannister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening I sat down and began to write, without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate. The work grew on my hands, and I grew fond of it—add that I was very glad to think of anything rather than politics—In short I was so very engrossed with my tale, which I completed in less than two months, that one evening I wrote from the time I had drunk my tea, about six o'clock, till half an hour after one in the morning, when my hand and fingers were so weary, that I could not hold the pen to finish the sentence, but left Matilda and Isabella talking, in the middle of a paragraph. You will laugh at my earnestness, but if I have amused you by retracing with any fidelity the manners of ancient days, I am content, and give you leave to think me as idle as you please. (Horace Walpole to William Cole, 9 March 1765, *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, edited by W. S. Lewis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-1983), vol. 1, p. 88)

There is much to remark upon in this letter, but I want us to focus on a few of its most salient bits: first, that the Gothic, as it was inaugurated by Horace Walpole, took shape initially in a dream, one in which Walpole's own Gothic Castle at Strawberry Hill seemed to feature heavily. The portrait of Lord Falkland to which he refers, for instance, is the following image on the screen, Marcus Geeraerts the younger's 'Portrait of Henry Cary, First Viscount Falkland' of c. 1603, which Walpole owned and displayed in his splendid Gallery at Strawberry Hill.

Secondly, the reference to his dream-vision of a 'gigantic hand in armour' that appears on the 'grand staircase' undoubtedly references the elaborate bannister outside the armoury in Strawberry Hill, an image that is directly replayed in the novel when the servant Bianca, referring to the presence of the giant in the castle of Otranto, claims to have seen 'upon the uppermost bannister of the great stairs a hand in armour as big, as big—' before she breaks off (p. 95). Thirdly, I want us to think about the phrase 'Gothic story': Walpole claims that his head was 'filled with Gothic story' while composing *The Castle of Otranto*. This is an important phrase, I think, and one that takes us straight into the second edition of the text, published for the first time in April of 1765 with the subtitle 'A Gothic Story'.

What did Walpole mean by this phrase 'A Gothic Story'? It's worth returning, in this regard, to the writing of another vitally important person in the eighteenth-century Gothic Revival, namely the figure of Richard Hurd, most well-known, today, for his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762). Though Walpole was, consciously, no fan of Hurd – his letters indicate that he found his writing turgid and stylistically inept, though not without intellectual merit – this publication is important because it helps us to understand a little more about Walpole's aims in *Otranto*. Richard Hurd's argument in *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* calls for a major reassessment of the art and cultural by-products of the so-called 'Gothic' past. What he means by 'Gothic', I think, is the period of what the eighteenth century termed the 'middle ages', or what we now refer to as the 'medieval period', although, as Hurd's literary examples show, the eighteenth-century sense of the 'Gothic' past extended into that period that we now designate as the renaissance, that is, the time of Edmund Spenser and Shakespeare and even John Milton. Hurd's claim is that contemporary letters and literature have been stifled by a dogged adherence to the literary models of ancient Greece and Rome – remember that, at the time of writing, British art fell strongly under the rules and principles of neo-classicism, a revived interest in the ideals of classical art and sculpture. But Hurd's argument is that the art and culture of the Gothic past held a certain imaginative appeal, a certain richness of imaginative and fanciful reserve, that is truly lacking in contemporary writing. And what he tries to do in *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* is defend the virtues of 'Gothic' literature, systematically pitting them against what he takes to be the full and moribund turns of classicism-influenced literature. Crucial to this endeavour is his recuperation of romance, the literary 'spark', he says, that kindled and kept alive the ancient flame of chivalry. By the term 'romance' he has in mind the romance epics of the Italian writers Ludovico Ariosto in *Orlando Furioso* and Torquato Tasso in *Jerusalem Delivered*, respectively, but also the writings of such English figures as Shakespeare (in plays such as *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, and even the writings of the young John Milton – although he would later defect to the classicist cause with the epic form of his *Paradise*

*Lost.* On the slide, you'll notice an outline of the primary points in Richard Hurd's argument:

A Summary: Richard Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762)

- A turn away from Classicism, and an embrace of the art and culture of the 'Gothic' or medieval past
- A recuperation of the highly imaginative spirit of romance
- Romance: the only remnant of the noble institution of chivalry, and the vehicle of supreme imaginative powers
- The category of 'Gothic writers' that he celebrates comprises Ludovico Ariosto in his epic romance *Orlando Furioso* (1532), Torquato Tasso in *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581), the plays of Shakespeare (particularly those with supernatural and fanciful content), Edmund Spenser's epic romance *The Faerie Queene* (1590–1596), and the writings of the younger John Milton.

Hurd's writings are useful in understanding what Walpole meant by the addition of the subtitle 'A Gothic Story' to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto* in 1765. Here, Walpole is self-consciously aligning himself with the imaginative writers of the 'Gothic' or medieval past, hoping, through this, to import into his fiction the fancies, enthrallments, enchantments and delights that, he claims, have been lost in contemporary fiction. It is in the second edition of *Otranto*, you see, that Walpole not only reveals himself to be the novel's author, but also provides a very important articulation of his objectives in penning the tale.

It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romances, 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, conversations, of heroes and heroines of ancient days were as unnatural as the machines employed to put them in motion. (Preface, p. 9)

What is Walpole, now identifying himself as the author, saying here? He is saying, along with a writer such as Richard Hurd, that 'modern' literature – by which he means the modern realist novel as epitomised by the novels of Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding – has become dull, moribund, too concerned with portraying a 'likeness' to common life or nature. The 'great resources of fancy', he says, have been 'dammed up' by a 'strict adherence to common life', and what he aims to do is to reinvigorate, and reignite, modern literature through introducing into it the marvels and the splendours

of ancient Gothic romance. Remember that, in the period in which he is writing, 'romance' is a by-word for the imagination, for fancy, for plots and scenarios that are marvellous, supernatural, enchanted, and which defy the workings of reason. This is what he intends with *The Castle of Otranto*: to fuse together fact and fancy, the modern novel and the ancient romance, prose and poetry, and create what he terms in this Preface 'a new species of romance'.

As you read through the second Preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, you would, no doubt, have noticed numerous references to Shakespeare. Indeed, you might well have picked up certain Shakespearean allusions and echoes when you read the narrative itself. What is happening here? I think it's important to remember that Walpole's text is, in part, a defence of the 'genius' of Shakespeare, our 'national' or 'Gothic' Bard, as Elizabeth Montagu, a friend of Walpole, would later dub him. This takes us back to territory we covered last week: Shakespeare for the likes of Walpole and Montagu was the 'Gothic' bard insofar as he lived and wrote in what they thought of as 'Gothic' times – the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – and also because he was national, local, and English. This historical situatedness of Shakespeare also means that his imagination was, in a sense, Gothic – that is, characterised by a penchant for the wild, the imaginative, the fanciful, a penchant seen, for instance, in the ghostliness in a play such as *Hamlet*, or the witches in *Macbeth*, or the imaginary, elfin beings and fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Walpole's novella is, self-consciously, a defence of this native 'Gothic' tradition of English supernaturalism. 'I had higher authority than my own opinion for this conduct', the second Preface notes; 'That great master of nature, Shakespeare, was the model I copied'. Towards the end of the Preface, he returns to this, noting that 'The result of all I have said, is to shelter my own daring under the cannon of the brightest genius this country, at least, has produced'. As his use of the word 'cannon' indicates, there is little less than a state of national warfare at stake here. Why? Well, as other aspects of the second Preface reveal, Shakespeare had fallen out of favour with the French critic, Voltaire, and other writers and commenters in France who were influenced by Voltaire's views. For these critics, Shakespeare's 'Gothicism' – that is, his wildness, his supernaturalism, his occasional uncouthness, his refusal to subscribe to the Aristotelian principles of unity – made him unbearable and boorish. Some French dramatists of Walpole's day had even gone so far as to stage productions of *Hamlet* without its resident ghost. Walpole, like others in his circle, was appalled by this, and responds with *The Castle of Otranto*, a tale of weirdness and supernatural activity that flaunts its 'Gothic' credentials in its subtitle, *A Gothic Story*.