

In last week's session, we paid careful attention to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, first published in late 1764, but subtitled 'A Gothic Story' in its second edition of 1765. What I wish to do today is to give you some sort of insight into the Gothic fictions that were written and published in Britain in the wake of Walpole's influential text. We usually think of the late eighteenth century, particularly the decade of the 1790s, as the heyday of Gothic fiction in Britain, a time when the literary marketplace seemed to be 'flooded' by tales of horror and terror, some of them, but not all of them, self-consciously marketing themselves as 'Gothic Stories'. On the screen, you'll see a list of some of the fictions that self-consciously called themselves 'Gothic' in their subtitles or titles:

- Richard Warner's *Netley Abbey: A Gothic Story* (2 vols; 1795)
- Isabella Kelly's *The Baron's Daughter: A Gothic Story* (4 vols; 1802)
- Mary Tuck's *Durston Castle; or, The Ghost of Eleonora. A Gothic Story* (1 vol.; 1804)
- Eliza Ratcliffe's *The Mysterious Baron, Or the Castle in the Forest, a Gothic Story* (1 vol.; 1808)

It's worth pointing out that these are really exceptions to the norm in the publishing industry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: most novels that we today describe as 'Gothic' were marketed as, simply, 'romances' or 'modern romances' or 'modern novels', while other critics of a more suspicious bent referred to them as 'hobgobliana' or 'terrors of the German school'. In fact, what I want to speak about in this video is the problem of naming and describing Gothic fictions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Today, we tend to divide Gothic fiction of the period into two distinct strands, namely HORROR and TERROR, both categories incorporated into a broader category of the early Gothic romance. In today's MOOC though, I want to show you how anachronistic these terms are, really, to the fictions that they describe, and that they, like the term Gothic itself, were mainly retrospectively applied to fiction of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I want to begin this by looking at the following slide on the screen, an encyclopedia entry on the notion of 'Romance' from 1827:

There is another numerous and dull class of compositions, extending to some hundred volumes, with which we presume most persons who have inspected the old circulating libraries are sufficiently familiar; they might conveniently be called *horrible* romances. They are distinguished by perfect inattention to style, and considerable dependence upon former publications:—A dark and wicked man, usually a knight, pursues with amorous ardour a lady, whose purity and transcendental virtue are continually displayed by her aversion to ravishment. The knight has dungeons deep, fortified castles, assassins, bandits, and sometimes a treacherous priest, at command. The lady is assisted by some lover

as virtuous as herself, and, in the last emergencies, by a ghost. Mystery and horror are the ingredients of interest in these romances; and as these are the stimuli which most strongly affect the uninstructed, they have commonly had great popularity with young persons. Certainly the best of this terrific school are those of Mrs. Radcliffe, whose occasionally powerful language, and deep feeling, gave them an excellence her predecessors were unacquainted with. In our time this species has taken a new turn. The peculiar horrors of the German school has [sic] given it a novel aspect by the assimilation of modern characters and supernatural agents, and this preposterous union has not deprived them of interest. Witness the *Vampires, Frankenstein, &c.* ('Romance', *Encyclopædia Londinensis; or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, p. 210)

The views expressed here in the third decade of the nineteenth century were by no means exceptional. Dull, repetitive and conventional to the point of being formulaic, 'horrible romance' was, as at least one earlier commentator put it, the 'trash of the circulating library' and, for some, barely deserving of the name of 'literature' at all. Consumed avidly by the young, these were the fictions, or so the literati thought, of the immature and uninformed mind, the fevered consumption of which, for the poet Samuel Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), amounted more to a 'sort of beggarly day-dreaming' than an active and productive act of 'reading'. Gothic did not receive general critical approval in its day, though its popular appeal was immense. Trafficking in the emotions of mystery and horror, this was the writing of the supernatural, the spectral and the ghostly that was perceived as having arisen in the wake of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, and later galvanised and rendered more horrid by literary influences imported into Britain from Germany. Presided over in the 1790s by Ann Radcliffe, this literary 'school' was rejuvenated in the nineteenth century by such fictions as John Polidori's *The Vampyre: A Tale* (1819) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). So, what I am suggesting here is that the *Encyclopædia's* attempt at isolating the 'horrible romance' as a separate generic entity neatly encapsulates some of the crucial factors at stake when attempting to chart the rise of horror and terror as distinct literary sub-genres in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain: in 1827, they were yet to be generically formulated as such, and were quite unthinkable outside of the broader 'Gothic' mode in literature in which it first took shape.

As we argued last week, *The Castle of Otranto*, did much to bring the literature of horror and terror into being. As Conrad's 'disfigured corpse' is brought into view, for instance, the onlookers gathered in the castle's courtyard emit loud shrieks at the 'horror of the spectacle', but Manfred, utterly unmoved by the loss of his only son and heir, immediately turns to a more ghastly alternative: the securing of his wrongful rule to Otranto through the marriage of his intended daughter-in-law. When confronted with the 'horrid measures' of this quasi-incestuous proposition, Isabella is

understandably overcome with 'fright and horror'. Escaping into the dark, labyrinthine vaults beneath the castle, she is pursued by the politically ambitious villain, each step of her flight pregnant with horrific potential: her blood 'curdle[s]' when she concludes that Manfred is about to seize her, her mind, we are told, continually overcome by every 'suggestion that horror could inspire'. In a jarring transition to the present tense, Walpole's narrator at this point exclaims that 'Words cannot paint the horror of the princess's situation', thus setting in place a concern with the ineffable, with that which is both nameless and beyond the powers of verbal expression, that would become central to the literary representation of horror and terror from 1764 onwards: so extreme are they that the extreme emotions elicited by the Gothic cannot adequately be rendered in words.

Morally indiscriminating in its effects, horror plagues much of the experience of the good or virtuous characters in the narrative, too. Informing Theodore, the soon-to-be restored legitimate heir of Otranto, of the acts of murder and usurpation that lurk in his familial past, for instance, Father Jerome has his son kneel before him as he paraphrases the lines of the father's ghost in *Hamlet*: 'I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul': 'Kneel, head-strong boy, while a father unfolds a tale of horror, that will expel every sentiment from thy soul, but sensations of sacred vengeance'. However, *Otranto* takes little care to differentiate between horror, on the one hand, and the contrasting but related aesthetic of terror, on the other, two terms that, together with the broader category of the 'Gothic', structure our negotiation of the darker sides of literary history today. Indeed, the appreciation of horror and terror as discrete literary modes postdates *The Castle of Otranto* by 60 years or more, an historical fact that is reflected not only in the nebulous definition of the 'horrible romance' offered in the *Encyclopædia Londinensis* in 1827, but also in Walpole's conflation of the effects of horror and terror throughout the narrative. It is 'Terror', Walpole's first Preface to *Otranto* confidently reminds its readers, that is 'the author's principal engine' in the tale, a quality that purportedly 'prevents the story from ever languishing'. Consequently, even as it makes continuous reference to the characters' experience of horror, Walpole's narrative makes equally liberal use of the term 'terror' throughout: Isabella in the subterranean labyrinth experiences a 'new terror' at Manfred's approach; Matilda is filled with 'terror and alarm' at her father's machinations; and with the arrival of Frederic at Otranto, Manfred himself is struck with 'terror'. Neither is the experience of horror and terror in *Otranto* entirely unmarked by moments of what would today describe as camp humour: even Clara Reeve in *The Champion of Virtue*, her own self-proclaimed 'Gothic Story' that was subsequently republished under the more familiar title of *The Old English Baron* in 1778, felt that the hyperbolic excesses of Walpole's fiction were more likely to inspire 'laughter' than fear. Verging always on the brink of humour, and with few distinctions between them, horror and terror are subsumed

under the broader category of the 'Gothic' in Walpole's influential literary experiment of 1764-5.