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# Introduction

Perhaps the perusal of such works may, without injustice, be compared with the use of opiates, baneful, when habitually and constantly resorted to, but of most blessed power in those moments of pain and of languor, when the whole head is sore, and the whole heart sick. If those who rail indiscriminately at this species of composition, were to consider the quantity of actual pleasure which it produces, and the much greater proportion of real sorrow and distress which it alleviates, their philanthropy ought to moderate their critical pride, or religious intolerance.

(Sir Walter Scott, 'Ann Radcliffe', *Lives of the Novelists*, from the *Miscellaneous Prose Works* (1827), in Ioan Williams (ed.), *On Novelists and Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1968)

What is the Gothic? Few literary genres have attracted so much critical appetite and opprobrium simultaneously. From its beginnings in 1764 with Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, through its production boom in the 1790s, to its present-day permutations, the Gothic remains as nebulous a genre as the shadowy veiled figures which haunt its pages. As E. J. Clery has indicated, 'The attachment of the term *Gothic* to the literature of terror is quite a recent development – and almost entirely accidental.'<sup>1</sup> Horace Walpole (1717–97) only attached the subtitle 'A Gothic Story' to the second edition of his novel, and the term was rarely used during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The word 'Gothic' has been used in many contexts throughout history and culture. Its first usage was to refer to a specific tribe of people, the Visigoths who invaded and defeated the Roman Empire. Robin Sowerby notes that 'Throughout history the word "Gothic" has always been chiefly defined in contrasting juxtaposition to the Roman, and a constant factor in its various uses ... has continued to be its antithesis to the Roman or classical.'<sup>2</sup> As an adjective used to describe a people, then, Gothic came to signify barbarism because of its oppositional position to the Roman Empire. This barbaric association continued throughout the Renaissance. During the eighteenth century, however, 'Gothic' enjoyed a more positive revival. Its connotations moved from the historical accounts of barbaric Visigoths to a more fluid aesthetic association with medieval chivalry. One of the ways in which this

revival was effected was through architecture: it is no coincidence that the first 'Gothic' novelist, Horace Walpole, modelled his own home Strawberry Hill upon a Gothic architecture inspired by medievalism. His example was swiftly followed by the author of *Vathek* (1786), William Beckford (1760–1844), who chose a similarly medieval aesthetic for his home, Fonthill Abbey.

One of the early exponents of the aesthetic revaluation of 'Gothic' in the eighteenth century was Bishop Richard Hurd (1720–1808). In his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), Hurd associated 'Gothic' with chivalry, feudalism and romance, thus paving the way for Walpole's first 'Gothic Story', *The Castle of Otranto*. In his first letter, Hurd commenced his excavation of 'Gothic' thus:

#### ■ LETTER I

The ages, we call barbarous, present us with many a subject of curious speculation. What, for instance, is more remarkable than the Gothic CHIVALRY? or than the spirit of ROMANCE, which took its rise from that singular institution?

Nothing in human nature, my dear friend, is without its reasons. The modes and fashions of different times may appear, at first sight, fantastic and unaccountable. But they, who look nearly into them, discover some latent cause of their production.

'Nature once known, no prodigies remain,'

as sings our philosophical bard; but to come at this knowledge, is the difficulty. Sometimes a close attention to the workings of the human mind is sufficient to lead us to it: sometimes more than that, the diligent observation of what passes without us, is necessary.

This last I take to be the case here. The prodigies, we are now contemplating, had their origin in the barbarous ages. Why then, says the fastidious modern, look any farther for the reason? Why not resolve them at once into the usual caprice and absurdity of barbarians?

This, you see, is a short and commodious philosophy. Yet barbarians have their *own*, such as it is, if they are not enlightened by our reason. Shall we then condemn them unheard, or will it not be fair to let them have the telling of their own story?

Would we know, from what causes the institution of *Chivalry* was derived? The time of its birth, the situation of the barbarians, amongst whom it arose, must be considered: their wants, designs and policies must be explored: we must enquire when, and where, and how it came to pass that the western world became familiarised to this *Prodigy*, which we now start at.

Another thing is full as remarkable, and concerns us more nearly. The spirit of Chivalry, was a fire which soon spent itself: but that of *Romance*,

which was kindled at it, burnt long, and continued its light and heat even to the politer ages.

The great geniuses of our own and foreign countries, such as Ariosto [1474–1533] and Tasso [1544–95] in Italy, and Spenser [1552–99] and Milton [1608–74] in England, were seduced by the barbarities of their forefathers; were even charmed by the Gothic Romances. Was this caprice and absurdity in them? Or, may there not be something in the Gothic Romance peculiarly suited to the views of a genius and to the ends of poetry? And may not the philosophic moderns have gone too far, in their perpetual ridicule and contempt of it?

To form a judgment in the case, the rise, progress, and genius of Gothic Chivalry must be explained.

The circumstances in the Gothic fictions and manners, which are proper to the ends of poetry (if any such there be) must be pointed out.

Reasons, for the decline and rejection of the Gothic taste in later times must be given.

You have in these particulars both the SUBJECT, and the PLAN of the following Letters.<sup>3</sup> □

Hurd's letter challenged the neoclassical principles espoused by Alexander Pope (1688–1744), which retained ascendancy throughout the eighteenth century. He commences an appreciation of the literature of the past by connecting the Italian poets Ariosto and Tasso with Milton and Spenser, admitting that the latter 'were seduced by the barbarities of their forefathers'.

As we shall see in Chapter One of this Guide, Hurd's cultural rescue of Romance, which had fallen into literary disrepute, is of great significance to the rise of the Gothic romance. Clara Reeve (1729–1807), whose romance *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story* was published in 1778, followed up her Gothic excursion by publishing a sustained literary essay entitled *The Progress of Romance* in 1785. There, she pursued Hurd's reevaluation of Romance, and argued that the Romance's ancient and esteemed connections had been overlooked.

Hurd's and Reeve's essays were two of many eighteenth-century attempts to revive both Gothic and Romance from the disrepute into which they had fallen. In terms of literary experimentation, the late eighteenth-century poetry of Thomas Gray (1716–71), James Macpherson (1736–96) and Thomas Chatterton (1752–70) also looked to the past for its sources of literary inspiration. In their turn, they also contributed to the rise of the Gothic Romance.<sup>4</sup> Hurd's *Letters* indicate that he views Gothic as an ideal that should move between Romance and poetry. And yet, as we will see in Chapter One, the artificial separation of Gothic from poetry began towards the end of the eighteenth century, particularly with the attack by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) on *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew Lewis (1775–1818).

Recent critics of the Gothic genre have problematized the Gothic's separation from Romantic poetry. Anne Williams, for one, in her 1995 study *Art of Darkness*, argues that ' "Gothic" and "Romantic" are not two but one', and Robert Miles, in *Gothic Writing 1750–1820: A Genealogy*, views Gothic writing 'as a discursive site crossing the genres'.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Michael Gamer in his study *Romanticism and the Gothic* agrees with Robert Miles that Gothic is an aesthetic that crosses literary genres, but qualifies this slightly:

■ At the very least, if gothic is a site crossing the genres, it is a site that *moves*, and that must be defined in part by its ability to transplant itself *across* forms and media: from narrative into dramatic and poetic modes, and from textual into visual and aural media. I find the conception of gothic as a shifting 'aesthetic' helpful because it corresponds to how late eighteenth-century critical audiences imagined and represented gothic's emergence into British literary culture, except that their own labels for gothic – as foreign invader, as cancer, as enthusiasm, as emasculating disease, or as infantilizing nurse – are more pejorative. The number and intensity of these labels, moreover, demonstrate the range of impressions gothic produced even among its detractors, and give some indication of the extent of the gulf existing between critical and popular audiences.<sup>6</sup> □

Gamer perceptively views Gothic as a nebulous 'protean' entity that both sustains and is sustained by other literary discourses. And crucially, in Gamer's account, its critical reception in the 1790s, also explored in Chapter One of this Guide, also comes to define how we continue to understand the Gothic.

The vibrant debate upon the Gothic and its different generic mutations and implications continues to grow and gather strength. In this Guide, I have chosen to focus primarily upon the prose criticism and fiction which the popularity of the Gothic spawned during the Romantic era. The Guide concentrates upon the 'classic' and widely available Gothic novels from Walpole's *Otranto* in 1764, through the fiction of the 1790s, up to the publication of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) by Charles Robert Maturin (1782–1824).<sup>7</sup> Whilst the majority of the criticism that I refer to throughout the Guide focuses upon the more mainstream Gothic romances of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823), Lewis and Maturin, the contemporary eighteenth-century material that I discuss is less canonical. It makes reference to partially forgotten authors such as Regina Maria Roche (1764–1845), Eleanor Sleath and Francis Lathom (1774–1832) among many others. More recently, the author Charlotte Dacre (?1772–1825) has justifiably received attention, and her romance *Zofloya* (1806) is referred to in Chapter Six. *Northanger*

*Abbey* (1818) by Jane Austen (1775–1817), frequently invoked throughout this Guide as both Gothic critique and Gothic romance, produces a far more heterogeneous and inclusive list of Gothic fiction in the 1790s than many twentieth-century critical accounts. If anything, the eighteenth-century critical reception of Gothic attests to the variety, abundance and terror of the Gothic, and proves that there is yet much critical excavation and evaluation to take place.

I do not subscribe to the belief espoused by Maurice Lévy in his significant critical work *Le roman 'Gothique' Anglais, 1764–1824* (1968) that the Gothic expires in 1824. The vibrancy of the interdisciplinary journal *Gothic Studies*, the internet presence of so many websites devoted to the serious study of the Gothic, and the International Gothic Association's biannual conferences bear testament to the Gothic's endurance well into the twenty-first century. The Gothic is culturally amphibious. As Michael Gamer and others suggest, the Gothic moves across both generic and time boundaries with startling ease, and thrives in contemporary fiction, drama, poetry and film.

In order to explore the richness and vibrancy of the Gothic, however, I have chosen to examine in detail here the Gothic romance from 1764 to 1820 in the hope that the criticism of Gothic in this period alone will give readers an appetite for the wealth of critical accounts on Gothic up to the present day. Gothic criticism is in itself a 'protean' and vibrant field. Over the following six chapters, I examine a range of critical responses to Gothic novels published between 1764 and 1820. I do so by considering six different themes. Chapter One addresses the contemporary response to the Gothic in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The reception of the Gothic is explored through the lens of both the reviewers and some of the authors. The chapter concludes by considering the continuing critical implications of these early responses. Chapter Two explores the Gothic aesthetic of terror, and its counterpart, horror. The chapter begins by exploring the theory of the sublime through the work of Edmund Burke (1729–97). It then moves on to consider how contemporary commentators such as Anna Laetitia Aikin (later Barbauld, 1743–1825), Nathan Drake (1766–1836) and Ann Radcliffe responded to Burke's theorizing of terror. Then the chapter offers a variety of twentieth-century critical responses to the use of the sublime in the Gothic. In Chapter Three the French Revolution's impact upon the Gothic is examined, again through the lens of both Romantic responses to it as well as twentieth-century responses to the Gothic's engagement with the Revolution. Chapter Four considers the intimate connections between the seemingly profound anti-Catholicism and British nationalism in the Gothic. As the range of criticism and analysis in this chapter proves, the Gothic genre is deeply embedded in discourses of nationalism and religion. In Chapter Five, a range of

psychoanalytic approaches to the Gothic genre is explored. We start with Horace Walpole's own analysis of his dream regarding *The Castle of Otranto*, and move through the Surrealists' psychoanalytic appropriation of the Gothic in the early twentieth century. The chapter explores a range of essays and critical analyses through the lens of Sigmund Freud (1859–1939), Jacques Lacan (1901–81) and Julia Kristeva (born 1941). One of the most heated debates currently surrounding the Gothic romance is the issue of 'Female Gothic', a term originally coined by Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* in 1976. Chapter Six, on gender and the Gothic, explores the richness of this debate and just what 'Female Gothic' might imply. It is, however, important to acknowledge that issues of gender in the Gothic are not specifically confined to 'Female Gothic', and the chapter also addresses those Gothic texts which are predominantly male, such as *Caleb Williams* (1794) by William Godwin (1756–1836). Issues of gender, violence, sexuality and desire in the Gothic are explored in this final chapter.

Early twentieth-century critical responses to the Gothic were hesitant and apologetic. In the 'Preface' of her ground-breaking 1932 study *The Popular Novel in England: 1770–1800*, J. M. S. Tompkins began, 'A book devoted to the display of tenth-rate fiction stands in need of justification.'<sup>8</sup> Even as late as 1957, Devendra P. Varma, in *The Gothic Flame*, also perceived the need to excuse his critique: 'A study devoted to the analysis and investigation of a body of fiction that is usually left to moulder in the libraries of the curious, perhaps stands in need of justification.'<sup>9</sup> Thankfully, this former urge to defend study of the Gothic has now evaporated.

The diversity of analyses and criticism explored in the following chapters demonstrates that the Gothic continues to arouse the same critical passions and arguments that it did in the 1790s. As I have also suggested, however, there is yet much work to be done. As Walter Scott suggests in the epigraph to this 'Introduction', the 'actual pleasure' produced in reading and responding to the Gothic ensures its critical survival.

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