

## ‘Vile Treachery in my Castle!’: The Subversion of the Patriarchal Castle in Two Early Gothic Plays

Eva Čoupková  
Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic

### Abstract

This paper compares two early Gothic dramas performed during Horace Walpole’s lifetime – *The Kentish Barons* (1791), the only play by Francis North, and Miss Burke’s single play entitled *The Ward of the Castle* (1793). Many critics read Gothic writing as fundamentally subversive since it questions the political and social status quo. Kate F. Ellis sees the Gothic as the ‘subversion of domestic ideology’, a reaction to the gender roles and separate-sphere ideology that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century. At that time a new area of female activity appeared – women were becoming not only readers, but also frequent theatre-goers, and sometimes even playwrights. The Gothic castle becomes a dangerous place; protagonists are imprisoned within its walls, longing for freedom, or else they are exiled from it, unable to get inside. Moreover, it is a place where the master of the castle (a tyrant) exercises his unlimited power which is often directed against an unfortunate heroine. However, the Gothic play as a genre simultaneously employs and satirizes Gothic conventions, including the notion of the tyrant as master of his castle. There are many minor characters that exhibit anti-patriarchal and anti-aristocratic sentiments, and help to overthrow the tyrant. Through the frequent use of disguise and trapdoors, well-known devices in Gothic drama, both plays contain earthy humour, not so common in the Gothic novel, which makes them highly enjoyable.

*Keywords:* subversion; English Gothic drama; castle; trapdoor; tyrant; heroine; humour

This paper discusses two early Gothic dramas performed just before the end of the eighteenth century, but still during the lifetime of the father of the Gothic genre – Horace Walpole. These two plays – *The Kentish Barons* (1791) by Francis North, and *The Ward of the Castle* (1793), written by ‘Miss Burke’<sup>1</sup> – share common characteristics later to become typical of the emerging Gothic drama. This theatrical form is closely related to the Gothic novel, as exemplified in the person of Walpole, who created the first Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), as well as the first Gothic drama, *The Mysterious Mother* (printed 1768).

Precisely defining the genre of the Gothic drama is difficult since neither eighteenth-century playwrights nor members of their audience used the term. Instead they employed various descriptions of the stage productions of their time - with

---

1 Nothing is known about the person of Miss Burke. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* mentions Ann Burke who published melodramatic novels between 1785-1805, but the editors argue that it is not the same person. See Virginia Blain et al, ed, *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 157, 1212.

melodrama being the key form of the period. The 'Gothic play' was a label applied by later literary critics. One attempt to formulate a definition comes from Bertrand Evans who says that 'a Gothic Play is one marked by features including specialized settings, machinery, character types, themes, plots, and techniques selected and combined to serve a primary purpose of exploiting mystery, gloom and terror.'<sup>2</sup> As Jeffrey N. Cox argues, the Gothic drama reigned over the English stage during the latter part of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, providing a much desired new form of entertainment.<sup>3</sup> It was very popular, appealing to all kinds of spectators, but mainly to the middle and lower-middle classes who started frequenting the theatres in great numbers. There were numerous original plays as well as adaptations of Gothic novels and various works of French and German authors.

In what sense, if any, might these plays be seen as 'subversive'? Cox links the Gothic drama, especially the plays of the 1790s, to the most important event of this era, the French Revolution, and its two decisive moments, the fall of the Bastille, and later the fall of Napoleon. He says that these dramas reflect the main revolutionary movements of their era because the genre of drama is more than any other literary form connected to social and ideological struggles of its epoch.<sup>4</sup> David Worrall sees the connection between political radicalism of the period and a propensity for theatricality present in the London political subcultures. He stresses the ability of these subcultures to evade repressive political conditions, and achieve a relatively free expression of various forms in clubs, private theatres, or popular press.<sup>5</sup> This was enabled by the collective nature of the drama which involves playwrights, audience, actors, theatre managers, critics or reviewers, and physical locations for playing. These 'theatrical assemblages' (as Worrall puts it), constantly shift and mutate, and their cultural meaning changes with every performance.<sup>6</sup> This constitutes a possibly subversive quality of the period's theatre, since even if this artistic form, especially the texts of plays, were continuously under government scrutiny exercised by the Examiner of Plays, its volume and organizational complexity, as well as cultural and political interaction of various social classes, effectively prevented its control or codification.

The social aspect mentioned in connection to the Gothic appears, for example, in the title of Kate F. Ellis's book as 'the subversion of domestic ideology', where it means a reaction to a new definition of gender roles and the separate-sphere ideology, that is, the idealized home becomes more and more distanced from the fallen world of work.<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that the Gothic drama was slowly giving a new voice to women. *The Ward of the Castle*, as well as several other plays, illustrate the emergence of a new female readership in the second half of the eighteenth century. Newly published Gothic novels helped to liberate female readers, if not socially, then psychically, giving them the

---

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Evans, *Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1947), 35.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey N. Cox, 'English Gothic Theatre', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 125.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey N. Cox, ed., 'Introduction', in *Seven Gothic Dramas, 1789-1825* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992), 6-8.

<sup>5</sup> David Worrall, *Theatrical Revolutions: Drama, Censorship, and Romantic Period Subcultures, 1773-1832* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 2-4.

<sup>6</sup> David Worrall, *Celebrity, Performance, Reception: British Georgian Theatre as Social Assemblage*. (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 5-15.

<sup>7</sup> Kate F. Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*. (Champaign: The University of Illinois Press, 1989), ix-xii.

possibility to indulge their escapist fantasies.<sup>8</sup> But the growing number of Gothic female dramatists also indicated the real entrance of women into the realm that was previously almost exclusively a male-dominated sphere, playwriting. Ellen Donkin showed that even if more women were entering the profession of playwriting at the end of the eighteenth century – she considers the period from 1765 to 1800 to be a phase of steady growth in the number of women playwrights – it still continued to be regarded as a pastime rather than a serious occupation. Moreover, the profession of the playwright as such violated the proper rules of conduct of women in the society of that time. As Donkin demonstrates, the eighteenth-century woman was expected to be reclusive, obedient, submissive, and compliant; acting as a mere ‘shadow’ of her husband, a clear antithesis to the woman-playwright who, were her plays to be put on stage, needed qualities such as self-assertion, perseverance, or decisiveness. Towards the end of the century, women playwrights were slowly starting to overcome these obstacles, gaining a public voice. They were also able to influence the representation of gender relations on stage and thus change the ways in which society perceived them.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to these, there are other respects in which the Gothic drama might be described as ‘subversive’. There was the mixing of genres, and challenging the hierarchy of genres. Tragedy and comedy of manners lost its appeal for the audience, being replaced by different dramatic forms. For example, M. G. [i.e., Matthew] Lewis’ popular play, [The Castle Spectre](#) (1797), was referred to as ‘a drama of a mingled nature, Operatic, Comical, and Tragical.’<sup>10</sup> John Genest, an influential critic of the period, repeatedly condemned Gothic plays, stressing the fact that they were bad because they were ‘a jumble of tragedy, comedy and opera’. He was specifically referring to Francis North’s *The Kentish Barons* that bears the title of ‘A Play Interspersed with Songs’.<sup>11</sup> These musical pieces were very important, since they were connected to another significant subversive aspect of Gothic plays – circumventing copyright laws and censorship.

At the time of the great popularity of the Gothic drama, between the 1790s and 1820s, there were only three theatres licensed to perform legitimate drama in London. Those three theatres – Drury Lane, Covent Garden and, in the summer months, when those two were closed, also the Haymarket – had been granted letters patent by royal charter. Other theatres in the capital were licensed only for burlettas, which were pieces that had at least five songs in each act.<sup>12</sup> Practically speaking, the minor theatres could present almost any of the works in the repertoires of the patent theatres as long as they inserted the right number of musical pieces. One other important aspect was the increased physical size of the metropolitan theatres. Thus Gothic drama could be performed in a large number of theatres and appeal to a larger portion of the population. .

---

8 Robert Miles shows, in Fig. 1 in ‘The 1790s: the effulgence of Gothic’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 43, a dramatic increase in the number of Gothic works published during the 1790s.

9 Ellen Donkin, ‘Occupational Hazards: Women Playwrights in London, 1660-1800’, in *Getting Into the Act: Women Playwrights in London 1776-1829* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1-40.

10 Quoted in Paul Ranger, *Terror and Pity Reign in Every Breast. A Gothic Drama in the London Patent Theatres* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1991), 1.

11 John Genest, *Some Account of the English Stage from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830* (1832; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1965), 7:38, cited and discussed in Cox, ‘Introduction’, *Seven Gothic Dramas*, 11, 22.

12 Cox discusses the Licensing Act and the London stage of that era in ‘Introduction’, *Seven Gothic Dramas*, 8-12.

Another objection raised against the Gothic drama was the importance attributed to emotions and spectacular stage effects. Coleridge, among others, expressed these concerns, when he remarked that 'all [this drama's] popularity, consists in the confusion and subversion of the natural order of things in their causes and effects; namely, in the excitement of surprise.'<sup>13</sup> As Cox notes, he perhaps had in mind that Gothic drama confused the judgment of readers and spectators because it portrayed villains and tyrants as characters deserving pity and understanding.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, a marked development of stage technology<sup>15</sup> and the growing dimensions of theatre auditoria enabled producers to concentrate more on stage spectacle and sensationalism than on the detailed building of the narrative or character psychology.

Emotions definitely reigned over reason in Gothic drama. The aim of the playwrights, actors and producers was to provoke strong reactions from their audiences. Paul Ranger suggests this in the title of his anthology of Gothic plays: 'Terror and Pity Reign in Every Breast'. To terror and pity, humour can be added as the third central characteristic of the genre, provided mainly by the comic minor characters of maids, knights, and servants.

### The Kentish Barons

The only play of [Francis North](#), *The Kentish Barons*, was performed at [the Theatre Royal, Haymarket](#), on 25 June 1791, and ran for ten nights.<sup>16</sup> Cox stresses the historical and political dimensions of the play, suggesting that its title may be intended to evoke the baronial struggles against King Edward II in the fourteenth century. Because of certain allusions to rebelliousness, the third act of the play has been crossed out by the censor and is therefore missing in [the Larpent collection](#) - the official version of the English inspector of plays of that time.<sup>17</sup>

The plot revolves around the castle. Ellis mentions castles as sites of terror, where villains confine their unfortunate victims. In her opinion, there is a discrepancy between a castle as a home – a place of security and concord – and a castle as a place of danger and imprisonment.<sup>18</sup> In *The Kentish Barons*, the castle can be both. There are three places called castles. The Auberville and Mortimer castles represent two ancient families, between whom there has been a strong hatred for a long time. There then appears a woman loved by both masters, and a long and predictable crisis erupted. Mortimer, the villain, intends to kill his opponent in combat, but the king forbids this and imprisons him for nine years in his own castle; the tyrant is in fact a prisoner in his

---

13 S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, eds. James Engell, W. J. Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 2:221, cited and discussed in Cox, 'Introduction', *Seven Gothic Dramas*, 17.

14 Cox, 'Introduction', *Seven Gothic dramas*, 17.

15 See Michael R. Booth, *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 25, where he mentions spectacular effects in melodrama made possible by improved stage technology.

16 Cox, *Seven Gothic Dramas*, 86

17 Cox, *Seven Gothic Dramas*, 85, 95. The text of the play being used for the current analysis is, as the editor Jeffrey N. Cox explains on page 86, based on the printed version of the text (London: J. Ridgway, 1791), but it also compares this version to the Larpent manuscript. Therefore, there are lines or parts included that are missing in the Larpent manuscript, for example the third act, but also several songs which appear in the Larpent copy but not in the printed version. Concerning the missing third act Cox argues that '...this suggests to me that the third act was rejected by Larpent and returned for revisions, the corrected copy never having been filed with the original manuscript.' *Seven Gothic Dramas*, 86.

18 Ellis, x.

own home. He then seeks revenge and takes the daughter of his adversary, by that time a beautiful young lady, from the safety of her own castle, and keeps her prisoner in Mortimer castle.

This conventional plot is populated by stock characters. Mortimer is a typical Gothic villain: his prisoner Elina describes him as 'so harsh a fiend, so barbarous and inhuman, whose delight, whose only pleasure centres in the pain, he can inflict on others.'<sup>19</sup> But as Elina is inside the castle, the question is what to do with her. Trying to force her into marriage proves to be difficult, since Elina is also a very strong character. Mortimer says she is 'the haughty maid, stubborn and obstinate, remains unmov'd, alike by prayers or threats.'<sup>20</sup> So Mortimer changes strategy and wants to poison her. He orders his seemingly faithful servant Osbert to perform this horrid deed, but Osbert refuses to do so because he feels a strong attachment to Elina. As is revealed later on, he is in fact Elina's own brother: a long-lost relative, a very common protagonist in Gothic drama. This newly-discovered brother later proves instrumental in devising the plan of freeing Elina from Mortimer's power. He contacts Elina's lover Clifford in his castle – the third in the play – and proposes a plan to rescue her. Osbert uses his good knowledge of the tyrant and his edifice when he suggests, 'The Castle's strong, the Baron's brave and vigilant. ...It sure were best by art to gain admittance...I know each path, and by-way to the castle. We, my good Lord, must think of some disguise.'<sup>21</sup> His familiarity with the psychology of the tyrant is equally important, because he knows that Mortimer, 'his heart fierce and arrogant, has yet a soul for harmony,'<sup>22</sup> and can be subdued by lute music;<sup>23</sup> therefore Osbert suggests that they should try to enter the castle disguised as minstrels. He believes that trickery is better than force, simply because the tyrant is used to exercising his power, but clever plotting can surprise him. This is quite ironic, because, as is revealed in the third act, Mortimer used a similar strategy when taking Elina by force, justifying himself by saying, 'All stratagems are honest, he's no soldier who uses force where art can more avail him.'<sup>24</sup>

When Clifford and Osbert arrive, Mortimer fails completely to see through their disguise, making a fool of himself when she says to Elina that 'I'm rejoiced to find within this castle's horrid walls, there is something can beguile you of your grief.'<sup>25</sup> In a play within a play the minstrels act a scene of the history of denied love that was thwarted by parental objections, resulting in the captivity of the heroine, and attempts to rescue her. Clifford and Elina communicate in a duet, singing about their relationship and making plans to flee from the castle. This meta-theatrical technique provides a parallel to the main plot and subverts the authority of the tyrant, as he is still unable to get the message, until the slightly dim hero Clifford, who can no longer keep the secret, discloses it. A play within a play also emphasizes the comedic nature of *The Kentish Barons* with its intrigues, improvisation, and humour.<sup>26</sup>

---

19 Francis North, *The Kentish Barons*, in *Seven Gothic Dramas*, ed. Jeffrey. N. Cox (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992), 117.

20 *The Kentish Barons*, 96.

21 *The Kentish Barons*, 126.

22 *The Kentish Barons*, 127.

23 Mortimer as a hero-villain and a precursor of the Byronic hero is mentioned by Evans, 84-89, and also discussed at length in Cox, 'Introduction', *Seven Gothic dramas*, 26-32.

24 *The Kentish Barons*, 130.

25 *The Kentish Barons*, 131.

26 A play within a play is discussed in Gerhard Fisher, Bernard Greiner, eds., 'The Play Within the Play: Scholarly Perspectives', in *The Play Within the Play, The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection*

The ending of the play is quite instructive; Osbert and Elina refuse to punish the villain for his malice and decide to spare him. Osbert says: 'Revenge is sweet, to little minds alone. The noble soul pities the fallen foe, and finds a source of purest pleasure in a brave forgiveness.'<sup>27</sup> The ending and the hint of sympathetic emotions the tyrant deserves are related to Coleridge's complaint alluding to vice and virtue combined in one character and pity felt by the audience for the villain.<sup>28</sup>

The relief of laughter and mixing of tragedy and comedy are strong characteristics of *The Kentish Barons*. The comic element is provided by minor figures, knights, maids, and butlers, whose humour and common sense are in a sharp contrast to the complicated psychology of the main characters. The importance of domestics and servants is mentioned by Walpole in his second preface to [The Castle of Otranto](#), where he says:

However grave, important, or even melancholy, the sensations of princes and heroes may be, they do not stamp the same affections on their domestics: at least the latter do not, or should not be made to express their passions in the same dignified tone. In my humble opinion, the contrast between the sublime of the one, and the naiveté of the other, sets the pathetic of the former in a stronger light.<sup>29</sup>

This juxtaposition of high and low occurs at the beginning of the play, in the first scene, when the hero Clifford laments the loss of his beloved Elina. He sings a song which imitates Catullus.<sup>30</sup> Immediately after this tribute to the perfection of a lovely maid, the knight Bertram remarks: 'These Lovers feed on Air, thank heaven my Stomach, by temperance hath regain'd its proper tone, and longs for more substantial food.'<sup>31</sup> The contrast and parody are heightened by the language, with the main characters using verse, while minor figures speak in prose, a common theatrical strategy dating back to Shakespeare. The variation between prose and verse not only makes it easier for the audience to identify the social position of the speaker, but also accentuates movement between humour and seriousness, of bathos and pathos.

The parallel comic plot, which comments on and subverts the main plot, is provided by the butler Gam and his wife Sue, whose relationship is not based on love and admiration, but on the more prosaic desires for food and drink, as Gam has married an old and unattractive widow because she owns an ale house. Gam also represents the lower classes that complain of patriarchal tyranny. He gives details of Lord Auberville dismissing him from service, leaving him destitute. Sue is not a humble wife, as she tries to reform Gam and keep him at home, which becomes problematic when she refuses to give him liquor. But, as is common in Gothic drama, these characters are important to the main plot. Gam and Sue discuss past events, thus disclosing the complicated history of the baronial conflict. They also recognize the birthmark on Osbert's arm and reveal his true identity.

One important feature these minor characters possess is their loquacity, which, as Walpole mentions, 'heightens the impatience and expectations of both spectators and

---

(New York: Editions Rodopi, 2007), xi-xvi. They also mention a play within a play as a means of subverting the idea of theatre as a property or domain of the ruling classes, xv.

27 *The Kentish Barons*, 137.

28 See Cox, 'Introduction', *Seven Gothic Dramas*, 14.

29 Horace Walpole, 'Preface to the Second Edition', *The Castle of Otranto*, in *Three Gothic Novels*, ed. Peter Fairclough (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 44.

30 See Cox, *Seven Gothic Dramas*, 91.

31 *The Kentish Barons*, 91.

main characters, and delays them from arriving at the knowledge of upcoming catastrophe.’<sup>32</sup> In Act II, Scene 3, Osbert wants to enter Clifford’s castle to inform him about Elina’s confinement with the tyrant, but is prevented from doing so by the garrulous knight Bertram, who ends his long soliloquy by claiming that ‘you young fellows waste such a cursed deal of time in talking, ...you never go directly to the point, and lose the hour of action in debate,’<sup>33</sup> This almost happens to their plan, since Elina’s appointed hour of marriage to Mortimer is quickly approaching. These comic scenes with servants not only help to detach the audience from the actors’ performance and bring relief after the dramatic passages – in a way subverting the tragic elements in the plot - but also, as Paula Backschneider argues, ‘add dimensions to the anti-aristocratic bias’ of the plays.<sup>34</sup>

A popular comic figure in Gothic drama was the incarcerated heroine’s maid, kept with her in her confinement. In *The Kentish Barons* Elina’s maid is called Beatrice. She is not very active in the plot, but her importance is clearly recognized by the lover Clifford, who claims that Beatrice is Elina’s confidant who ‘feign’d such a tender interest in my passion, dispell’d my fears, and fed my heart with hope.’<sup>35</sup> So heroines keep in touch with the outside world through their maids, and these servants help them to manipulate both lovers and tyrants.

### ***The Ward of the Castle***

In the *Ward of the Castle* spectators meet Jacquinetta, a maid who is more active than Beatrice. The author of this piece is Miss Burke, of whom very little is known. She wrote only this play, which was performed at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, on October 24, 1793, and ran for three nights. John Franceschina cites the play as the first Gothic melodrama written by a woman. It is also an example of a mixed-genre play, referred to as ‘comic opera’, with music by a composer of Italian opera in England called Tommaso Giordani.<sup>36</sup> As in *The Kentish Barons*, the Castle (in this case, belonging to the Duke of Alberossa) is the focal point of the play. This ‘fortified castle in Normandy’<sup>37</sup> should represent a patriarchal power, a place where the Duke is the supreme ruler. But, as is gradually revealed in the play, this is not the case, since the tyrant’s knowledge of his own castle is surprisingly weak. In the first scene of Act I, a knight, Sir Bertram, remarks:

How carefully the Duke excludes one ever from within those castle gates. But I think myself amply repaid for all my toils, by the Lodge he has assigned me in the Oak Court of the castle. Little did he think he was furnishing me with the means of penetrating underground to the apartment of his lovely ward.<sup>38</sup>

This ‘lovely ward’ is called Matilda and is confined in the castle together with her loyal maid Jacquinetta. The play presents an interesting discussion on the topic of the castle as a space of male or female influence. As Ellen Moers notes when considering

---

32 Walpole, 44.

33 *The Kentish Barons*, 122.

34 Paula R. Backschneider, *Spectacular Politics: Theatrical Power and Mass Culture in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 182.

35 *The Kentish Barons*, 90.

36 John Franceschina, ed., ‘Introduction’, in *Sisters of Gore: seven Gothic melodramas by British women, 1790-1843* (New York: Garland, 1997), 6, 17-24. Franceschina explains that the source of the text for this edition was Larpent Manuscript 992 at the Huntington Library, and, of the song lyrics, the printed copy of *Songs, Duets, Choruses, etc. in the Ward of the Castle* at the British Library.

37 Ms. Burke, *The Ward of the Castle*, in *Sisters of Gore: seven Gothic melodramas by British women, 1790-1843*, ed. John Franceschina (New York: Garland, 1997), 25.

38 *The Ward of the Castle*, 26.

castles in Radcliffe's romances, 'the Gothic castle, however much in ruins, is still an indoor and therefore freely female space.'<sup>39</sup> It can also provide protection for women against the dangers of the outside world, especially the attentions of men. The Duke expresses these views clearly when he answers Matilda's complaints by saying that 'you should be thankful for being withdrawn from the snares of the world,' and continues with a song in which he stresses that '...thus retired from public view, the rose of youth retains its hue, nor flattery's breath, nor art deform, the beauties of that lovely form.'<sup>40</sup>

However, Matilda and her maid are able to break free – mentally at least – from the tyrannical power of the Duke. Matilda's escapist fantasies bring about her dreaming of her lost lover Bertram and the chance of rescue. Jacquinetta is addicted to reading romantic novels, a feature to become typical of Gothic heroines. This leads to many comic situations, since the maid is so overwhelmed by her fiction that she is unable to distinguish between reality and imagination, and this, combined again with her extreme talkativeness, often excites, to Matilda's great satisfaction, the Duke's pangs of jealousy. When Jacquinetta is unable, due to her preoccupation with reading, to answer the door and gives as an explanation, 'I beg your Grace's pardon; but indeed I could not stir while he was on his knees', the effect is immediate; the Duke demands: 'who? – Who was on his knees? - (To Matilda) I insist on knowing what this means.'<sup>41</sup>

The association between melodrama and romantic novels has been mentioned before by literary scholars.<sup>42</sup> Miss Burke makes this connection specific when the maid Jacquinetta refers to specific novels popular at that time, such as *Clélie* by Madeleine de Scudéry, and asserts, 'I could have never existed here for these ten long months, shut up under eighteen strong locks, if it had not been for those four and twenty volumes of charming romances.'<sup>43</sup> So making a comparison between a Gothic heroine and the female reader becomes quite natural.

As Franceschina notes, this play provides an insight into the reading habits of women at the end of the eighteenth century. The establishment of the first publishing houses such as the Minerva Press, enabled the spread of books, before this time inaccessible, among middle class readers. Those were mainly women who had, by that time, the means and the time to read.<sup>44</sup> However, this trend was not seen as completely positive by some eighteenth-century critics. James Beattie, for example, pointed out that the new novels could corrupt their readership:

The majority (of romances) tend to corrupt the heart, and stimulate the passions... A habit of reading them breeds a dislike to history, and all the substantial parts of knowledge; withdraws the attention from nature, and truth; and fills the mind with extravagant thoughts, and too often with criminal propensities.<sup>45</sup>

---

39 Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 126.

40 *The Ward of the Castle*, 30.

41 *The Ward of the Castle*, 29.

42 See Montague Summers, *The Gothic Quest – A History of the Gothic Novel* (London: Fortune Press, 1938), 26. Summers mentions translations of novels popular at that time as referred to, for example, in Charlotte Lennox's satire [The Female Quixote](#). See also Franceschina, introduction to *The Ward of the Castle*, 17.

43 *The Ward of the Castle*, 28. *Célie* is also mentioned by Franceschina in the introduction to the play, 19.

44 Franceschina, introduction to the play, 17-19.

45 James Beattie, 'On Fable and Romance', cited in Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 26, or in Ioan Williams, ed., *Novel and Romance: A Documentary Record 1700-1800* (London: Routledge, 1970), 327.



On top of that, the novels can show masters of the houses and castles in a less favourable light, subverting their social status as rulers in a family. Jacquinetta states this quite openly when she exclaims, comparing the romantic heroes of her novel and her lord the Duke: 'What men were in those days!'<sup>46</sup> But Burke shows also the male reaction to romantic novels; the Duke, inspecting Jacquinetta's volumes, angrily exclaims: 'Bah, nonsense...How dangerous it is to suffer a woman to read at all.'<sup>47</sup> Jacquinetta, however, points out that it is not only women who are addicted to novels. As the Duke is quoting all the absurdities contained in those fictions, Jacquinetta rightly notes that 'as sure as fate he has been reading it himself.'<sup>48</sup>

This was true for many famous and learned men of that time. For instance, Henry Crabb Robinson wrote in his diary, 'on March 3<sup>rd</sup>... read till near one the beginning of Vathek...'<sup>49</sup> The same opinion appears in [Northanger Abbey](#), a novel which is in part concerned with satirizing female reading habits. However, when Catherine apologetically says, "'But I really thought before, young men despised novels amazingly,'" thus rating this hobby among the weaknesses of her sex. Henry Tilney soothingly replies: "'It is amazingly; ... for they read nearly as many as women. I myself have read hundreds and hundreds.'"<sup>50</sup> But young men usually do not go mad or act irrationally after this reading experience.

*The Ward of the Castle* was not the first play to discuss the subversive force of female reading. It echoes the main theme present already in George Colman the Elder's play [Polly Honeycomb](#) (1760). The plot of this short comic play is quite simple: the strong-headed middle class daughter Polly chooses to disobey both her parents and the dictates of social conventions, and marry the husband of her choice. Instead of the practical but rather dull accountant Ledger she chooses Scribble, a fake poet, mainly because she believes that he resembles the ideal hero-prince of her romances. The dangerous nature of reading is mentioned several times; for example, Polly says to her nurse 'a novel is the only thing to teach a girl life,'<sup>51</sup> indicating that neither parents nor church or other social institutions should be shaping the opinions of young people, since they are inclined to follow the examples of their fictional heroes. Moreover, Polly not only disobeys, but openly ridicules her parents, and in particular the affection they display for each other, which in her eyes seems to be exaggerated, and evidence even of senility. Polly's father recognizes the danger related to novel reading and absolute denial of parental authority in the last scene when he complains:

Was ever man so heartily provoked?...Instead of happiness and jollity, my friends and family about me, a wedding and a dance, and everything as it should be, here I am, left by myself, deserted by my intended son-in-law...my daughter mad, my wife in the vapours...this comes of cordials and novels. A man might as well turn his daughter loose in Covent-garden, as trust the cultivation of her mind to a circulating library.<sup>52</sup>

---

46 *The Ward of the Castle*, 29.

47 *The Ward of the Castle*, 32, cited also in the introduction to the play by Franceschina, 18.

48 *The Ward of the Castle*, 32, cited also in the introduction to the play by Franceschina, 19.

49 Cited in Victor Sage, Allan Lloyd, eds., *Modern Gothic – A Reader* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 49.

50 Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, in *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman (London: OUP, 1933), 5:107.

51 George Colman the Elder, *Polly Honeycombe, A Dramatick Novel of One Act* (London: T. Becket, P.A. DeHondt, 1757), 22. This play is also mentioned by Franceschina when he discusses Miss Burke's melodrama – see pages 17-19.

52 *Polly Honeycombe*, 60-61, cited also by Franceschina in his introduction to *The Ward of the Castle*, 18.

The dangers of reading novels are also summarized in the Epilogue written by the actor and theatre manager David Garrick; he speaks, reasonably positively, of a world where women leave their traditional roles, devoting their time to domestic duties and joys, and start ruling not only over their henpecked husbands, but also their old fathers.<sup>53</sup> So, following the examples set by the novels, daughters and wives were encouraged to adopt, even if just humorously, direct methods of control.

This can be seen in *The Ward of the Castle* where Matilda and Jacquinetta succeed also literally in liberating themselves when they finally manage to escape from the castle. As already mentioned, the Duke is not the real master of the castle and there are some aspects of his abode he is not familiar with. Sir Bertram and the carpenter Geoffrey can, therefore, easily devise a stratagem to outwit him. There exists a subterraneous passage leading to the room in which the two ladies are confined - it only remains to add a trap-door to make it a perfect outlet.

This device helps the development of the plot since it enables both women to move almost freely inside and outside the castle without exciting the suspicion of the tyrant. As stage instructions read: (Bertram) 'exits at door in back-scene, and in view of the audience descends rapidly into the subterraneous passage, through the trap-door.'<sup>54</sup> [The trap-door](#) became a popular and theatrically effective device, playing a crucial role in the development of the stage machinery of the period's theatre. George Rowell mentions the frequent use of stage-traps which, together with side-lights, counterweight systems, and increased flying space above the stage, enhanced the success of increasingly spectacular drama.<sup>55</sup>

Miss Burke liked the trap-door so much that she almost overused it in her play. Matilda and her maid travel twice through the passage. Bertram decides to employ a disguise to deceive the Duke – they pretend that Matilda is a Turkish lady whom Bertram intends to marry, and she wears a turban and Turkish dress to conceal her true identity. Comic relief is provided in a scene in which Matilda, having travelled through a passage and trapdoor, tries to undress quickly, and pretends to be asleep, while the Duke is already unlocking the doors of her chamber. Here the important role of minor figures emerges again, since Jacquinetta not only helps her mistress undress, but also tries the Duke's patience with her long explanations.

Even if the Duke is suspicious when he sees Matilda in her Turkish apparel, exclaiming 'that Lady, whom, by some vile treachery, you have convey'd from within my castle, is Matilda,'<sup>56</sup> he refuses to believe that there could actually exist a means of escaping from his castle. He is finally convinced of his mistake when Matilda, after being married to Bertram, declares: 'You were never more in error, my Lord, than when you thought yourself secure of your prize by force of Locks and Bars.'<sup>57</sup> Perhaps this is a lesson Miss Burke wanted all Gothic tyrants of castles to learn.

### Conclusion

Both plays illustrate tendencies in late eighteenth-century British theatre, and that the eighteenth and early nineteenth century playwrights, directors and theatrical

---

53 *Polly Honeycombe, Epilogue*, 63.

54 *The Ward of the Castle*, 44.

55 George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre, 1792-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 14-24.

56 *The Ward of the Castle*, 49.

57 *The Ward of the Castle*, 59.

managers succeeded in transferring some of the significant characteristics of the genre of the Gothic onto the stage. Some 'subversive' qualities of these plays were brought with the Gothic into the theatre, including the new role of women as readers, spectators, theatre-goers, and playwrights, as well as the skirting of copyright laws, the mixing of genres, the importance of emotions, and the role of minor characters in providing humour and subverting the main plot.

The two plays discussed in the paper present clear examples of the fascination of the early Gothic drama with the castle and its inhabitants. How to get inside and outside this edifice is the main puzzle the protagonists are trying to solve, as well as the question of who is the real master of the castle. Both plays try to demonstrate how the patriarchal power of the tyrant in his castle, which seems absolute, can easily be overthrown by a headstrong heroine and her agile maid.

### References

- Alden, Raymond M. 'The Development of the Use of Prose in the English Drama: 1660 – 1800'. *Modern Philology* 7, no.1 (1909): 1- 22. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/432459>
- Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. In *The Novels of Jane Austen*. Ed. R.W. Chapman, 5:11-252. London: OUP, 1933.
- Backschneider, Paula R. *Spectacular Politics: Theatrical Power and Mass Culture in Early Modern England*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Blain, Virginia et al. Ed. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*. Yale University Press, 1990.
- Booth, Michael R. *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980.
- Botting, Fred. *Gothic*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Burke, Ms. *The Ward of the Castle*. In *Sisters of Gore: seven Gothic melodramas by British women, 1790-1843*. Ed. John Franceschina, 25-61. New York: Garland, 1997.
- Coleridge, S.T. *Biographia Literaria*. Ed. J. Engell, W.J. Bate, 2:221. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Colman the Elder, George. *Polly Honeycombe, A Dramatick Novel of One Act*. London: T. Becket, P.A. DeHondt, 1757.
- Cox, Jeffrey N. 'English Gothic theatre'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Ed. Jerrold E. Hogle, 125-144. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Cox, Jeffrey. N. Ed. *Seven Gothic Dramas, 1789-1825*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992.
- Donkin, Ellen. *Getting Into the Act: Women Playwrights in London 1776-1829*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Ellis, Kate F. *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*. Champaign: The University of Illinois Press, 1989.
- Evans, Bertrand. *Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1947.
- Fisher, Gerhard; Greiner Bernard. Eds. 'The Play Within the Play: Scholarly Perspectives' in *The Play Within the Play, The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection*, xi-xvi. New York: Editions Rodopi, 2007.
- Franceschina, John. Ed. *Sisters of Gore: seven Gothic melodramas by British women, 1790-1843*. New York: Garland, 1997.
- Genest, John. *Some Account of the English Stage from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1965.
- Miles, Robert. 'The 1790s: the effulgence of Gothic'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Ed. Jerrold E. Hogle, 41-62. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

- Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- North, Francis. *The Kentish Barons*. In *Seven Gothic Dramas*. Ed. Jeffrey N. Cox, 86-137. Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1992.
- Ranger, Paul. *Terror and Pity Reign in Every Breast. A Gothic Drama in the London Patent Theatres*. London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1991.
- Rowell, George. *The Victorian Theatre, 1792-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- Sage, Victor; Lloyd Allan. Eds. *Modern Gothic – A Reader*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986.
- Summers, Montague. *The Gothic Quest – A History of the Gothic Novel*. London: Fortune Press, 1938.
- Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto*. In *Three Gothic Novels*. Ed. Peter Fairclough, 37-148. London: Penguin Books, 1968.
- Williams, Ioan. Ed. *Novel and Romance: A Documentary Record 1700-1800*. London: Routledge, 1970.
- Worrall, David. *Celebrity, Performance, Reception. British Georgian Theatre as Social Assemblage*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Worrall, David. *The Politics of Romantic Theatricality, 1787-1832. The Road to the Stage*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Worrall, David. *Theatric Revolutions: Drama, Censorship, and Romantic Period Subculture, 1773-1832*. Oxford University Press, 2006.