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CONFLICT AS A LITERARY GOTHIC CONVENTION

This paper examines conflict as a literary convention in the early stage of the development of Gothic fiction on the basis of two novels: Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). The starting point for the analysis is the now-classic division of the genre into male and female Gothic, proposed by Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1976), to show that the focus in Walpole's story is on the political: on the monarchic conflict of power; whereas Radcliffe concentrates on the politics of domesticity. However, as the paper aims to show, though both stories are informed by the instability of their times – an era of wars and revolutions, when political tensions and conflicts brought to light certain aspects of social injustice – both novelists place at the centre of their interest a human being, the culprit of conflict. Underneath the layers of conflict for power, dominance and property, in both texts, whether representing male or female Gothic, lies the conflicted, often tortured individual, and it is this presentation of the human side of characters that annuls all divisions, and makes Gothic stories significant voices in their contemporary political and social debate.

KEYWORDS: Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, male and female Gothic, conflict, convention

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to examine conflict as a literary convention in the early stage of the development of Gothic fiction, the last decades of the eighteenth century, a period referred to as classical Gothic. The literary application of the term "Gothic" dates back to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, whose first edition, published anonymously in 1764, was significantly subtitled "A Gothic Story." Although for nearly a decade Walpole did not have any followers, the year 1764 is taken to mark the launch of a new literary phenomenon which was to undergo significant transformations over the decades to come, and which, in various forms and guises, has survived for over 250 years, becoming one of the most potent, and nowadays global, "kaleidoscopic" cultural modes (Silver 2014: 3). Among numerous contributors to its early stage, burgeoning fast in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, Horace Walpole (1717-97) and Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823) are two of the most critically acclaimed authors, considered canonical for this once very un-canonical type of fiction.

Apart from being the first to apply the term Gothic to literature, Walpole is credited with having effectively used in his prototypical story a number of devices and artefacts which with time became the genre's signifiers. Removal of action to a continental, preferably Catholic country; placing it in an environment ridden with architectural hostility, in the past, yet without attention to historical accuracy; introducing supernatural agency, and the stock characters of a villain and a damsel in distress, and, above all, creating the atmosphere of dread and lingering uncertainty are Gothic staples which have been recycled, transformed and perfected by the writers who followed.

Looking at the early classical Gothic novels, it seems that all these paraphernalia are material constituents that enable their authors to engage the characters in playing out a situation of conflict. The creation of the villains is possible, and the background of dark chambers in impregnable castles with labyrinthine corridors indispensable, only because on the level of plot, conflict is enacted. Not enumerated in any of the Gothic must-have lists, on closer analysis, conflict is the springboard for the dramas in Gothic novels and one of their most important thematic conventions. Its operation endorses the emergence of antagonistic characters – the villain and the damsel distressed by his claims – whose relation is always based on a clash: the reason why he is a villain and she is in distress is that their interests are conflicting.

Because of their territorial and temporal removal, early Gothic novels are apparently disengaged from contemporary commentary. However, though displaced into the remote and unfamiliar topographies of Catholic Europe, into distant times, since their emergence they have been recognised as ridden with ripples set off by external reality. The time of their production, the second half of the eighteenth century, was one of continuous political conflict. For example, *The Castle of Otranto* was published a year after the end of the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), famously dubbed by Winston Churchill as the first world war (Wright 2013: 3), and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* – a year after revolutionary France declared war on England (1793-1802). Among the military conflicts of this time there was also the American Revolutionary War and the French Revolution, both posing a threat to the political foundations of Britain, and the latter especially, shaking the rest of monarchical Europe with radical doctrines for over a decade. All these international crises were a daily well of conflict, contributing to the germination of the atmosphere of tension, insecurity and imminent danger, which reverberated abundantly in Gothic fiction. Seen in this light, the temporal detachment and dislocation of these novels is only skin-deep as, since the time of their publication they have been read as eagerly taking up and reflecting the anxieties and upheavals of their era. In an artistically transformed, truly Gothic, indirect, veiled way they offer commentaries on the reality that mattered for their readers and writers alike.

One of the now classical divisions of these eighteenth-century Gothic novels distinguishes between the "female" and the "male Gothic." The terms were coined

by Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1976) and have since been used to explain the sensitivity, supernaturalism and suppression of women in an environment controlled by patriarchy in the female Gothic, versus the male Gothic, represented by the much more politicised, action-ridden texts by Walpole and Lewis, who additionally peppered his notorious novel *The Monk* (1796) with ideological subversions, moral transgression and inimitable horrors. Robert Miles problematises Moers's gendered distinction and proposes that it can become a legitimate "defensible generalisation" only when the specificities of class are added to the specificities of gender (2012: 97). His proposal to look additionally through the biographical lens lends an interesting conflation of both – class and gender – especially in the case of major male writers of the early stage of Gothic. All of them, Walpole, Lewis and Beckford, were upper-class gender-troubled gentlemen, whereas in the case of the female writers a more down-to-earth, domesticated perspective gains a valuable social dimension when viewed through the middle-class lens of their backgrounds.

Although Moers's gender-oriented critical dichotomy does not suffice to explain the later Gothic texts, which are characterised by more ambiguities and which, with time, become more and more self-referential, and although it may be subject to criticism for subscribing to, and therefore promoting, essentialist views, it does, and has been successfully used to, explain the works of the progenitors of the genre: Walpole and Radcliffe. It is helpful as a starting point in the explanation of the different genealogy and nature of conflict especially in the two above-mentioned works of these authors, *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. To follow the biographical trajectory suggested by Miles, as an MP, Walpole was actively engaged in politics, and his story's leading focus on illegitimate rule and the ultimate return of dethroned genealogy can be seen as broadly reflecting the life-time preoccupation of its author, and thus thematically subscribing to the interest of the male Gothic texts. The works of the female Gothic writer, Ann Radcliffe, are, in present-day criticism, also seen as "involved in political negotiations" as much as those of the male novelists of the period (Miles 2012: 96), but – in line with Moers's division and eighteenth-century gender allocation and expectations – the focus here is on the politics of domesticity, and the way *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, as a female Gothic text, partook in voicing social criticism and raising awareness of social injustice.

In Walpole's prototypical Gothic story the villainy of the male character Manfred is the inherited crime of usurpation of power and property. Manfred is the incarnation of how the personal life of a ruler is integrated with the public sphere. He is "subject to his birth," and in enacting his life and choices Walpole is almost exemplifying Laertes's words from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, who says of the young prince:

> … his will is not his own,
> For he himself is subject to his birth:
> He may not, as unvalued persons do,

Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
The safety and health of this whole state,
And therefore must his choice be circumscrib'd
Unto the voice and yielding of that body
Whereof he is the head.

The difference between Hamlet and Manfred, however, lies in the fact that Manfred's obligation is not to the state, his role in the story is not so much that of a ruler but of an inheritor, and in this sense, Walpole is playing out a drama of both the legitimacy and the replaceability of monarchs. It is the genealogical obligation that forces Manfred to retain the rule of the principality of Otranto, and to secure the continuation of its illegal possession in the hands of his family. To do this Manfred must be a domestic tyrant who arranges the marriage between his puny son Conrad and Isabella. And when, on their wedding day, Conrad is killed by supernatural forces which come to reclaim the throne for the rightful owner and abort the lineage of the upstarts, in a truly iconoclastic frenzy Manfred ignores both the prophecy, which heralds his end, and his own ancestor, who comes out of the frame of his portrait to express his displeasure. Manfred has one goal: to sire an heir.

If *The Castle of Otranto* is a prototypical Gothic story, who are its stock characters that set the tone for the novelists to come?

There is a villain in conflict with his damsels. Here Manfred divorces his barren wife Hippolita: "Curse on Hippolita! … I divorce her from this hour. Too long has she cursed me by her unfruitfulness" and in one go declares his readiness to supplant his own dead son and unite with his bride Isabella (Walpole 1998: 25). However, Isabella determines to use the cunning trick of procrastination, assuring Manfred that her mind is "too sadly engrossed by the recent catastrophe … to think of another marriage. If ever my father returns, and it shall be his pleasure, I shall obey, as I did when I consented to give my hand to your son" (Walpole 1998: 25). When Manfred begins to pursue her, she "gather[s] courage from her situation" and ventures to terrify him with the sight of the plumes of the helmet outside the window: "Look, my lord! See heaven itself declares against your impious intentions!" But Manfred is undeterred when he bellows: "Heaven nor hell shall impede my designs" (Walpole 1998: 25-6). In the end, however, he does not succeed in possessing her. Isabella manages to escape.

This fact certainly makes him an incompetent man and an ineffective ruler. Nonetheless, in his furtive attempts to change his fate, Manfred proves to be a determined descendant of his line, one who is bold enough to stand up to the authority of the church and declare himself free of marriage bonds, only to secure its continuation. Manfred's villainy lies in the fact that he stands up to his now-constraining family obligations, to superstition and the prophecy which everyone sees beginning to fulfil itself. Isabella, though intended for a damsel in distress persecuted by Manfred's overriding ambition, refuses to stay distressed for too

long. By rejecting the advances of a king, a figure of indisputable authority, she enters into open conflict with him. Her refusal to marry her would-be-father-in-law, a man "in the prime of his age," pushes the action forward and pushes her into action: Isabella runs away and thus the model of a Gothic heroine is created: she is not a political ingenue. She is a survivor.

The aspect of *The Castle of Otranto* which, despite the crudeness of its apparatus, may have made it truly terrifying to an English reader of the 1760s is its enactment of the possibility of return of "the ancient regime." After all, prophecies and superstition triumph in the end, whereas the defeated bold king surrenders and joins a monastery. Walpole's "politicized imagination" (Clery 1998: xxx) transforms the political tensions of his day – digested as a dream which, as his correspondence evidences, was the direct spark of the story – and produces the first Gothic narrative where the legitimacy of power remains an unresolved problem. Does Walpole – "a Whig to the backbone" who went to sleep with a copy of Magna Carta by his bedside (qtd. in Clery 1998: xxvi) – cheer the dethroning of the despotic ruler Manfred? and does he rejoice in the return of the lawful sovereign? Or can, perhaps, the ending of the story suggest a truly horrific vision of a return to "the empire of superstition" (Walpole 1998: 5), a restoration of the ancient rule, which, from the English perspective, must have been seen as the annulment of the Glorious Revolution? After all, Theodore, the new ruler, turns out to be the son of friar Jerome and the final scene of Alfonso ascending "solemnly towards heaven" (Walpole 1998: 113) to a Protestant eye must have seemed almost as an enactment of an image straight from a baroque church of Counter-Reformation popish Europe.

By giving *The Castle of Otranto* the subtitle "A Gothic Story" Walpole takes the Gothic "from a politics to an aesthetics" (Silver 2014: 3), and creates a truly male Gothic text preoccupied with the distribution of power and the world of high politics. But he also, consciously or not, brings into the limelight the fact that underneath this "for men-only" territory is the world of human relations and emotions, full of damsels in distress, "friendless, helpless" women (Walpole 1998: 114), whose strength, like that of Victoria, Theodore's mother, determines the future fate of states.

Horace Walpole was an eccentric aristocrat, his immediate literary Gothic successors were mostly middle-class female writers who, like Ann Radcliffe, transferred his political concerns to household environments, where they also played out scenarios based on conflict. Recognised for penning the epitomes of the so-called Terror School of Gothic, Radcliffe bettered the Walpolean villain and in the character of Montoni created the prototype of the Byronic hero. The elegance of her style and the moral integrity of her characters were appreciated by her contemporaries who, like Sir Walter Scott, considered her to be "the first poetess of romantic fiction" (qtd. in Townshend and Wright 2014: 4).

Growth in readership and demand for literature in the last decades of the eighteenth century created favourable market conditions, which can be seen as

one of the reasons for the immense popularity and proliferation of Gothic fiction. Women constituted a large percentage among these growing numbers of insatiable readers and the writers who catered for their needs. The literature thus produced, though still termed "romance," was in most cases, and certainly in the prose of Ann Radcliffe, deeply rooted in the concerns of an English gentlewoman whose life was far from the ideal professed in a romance. And even if, rather than the Pennines or the Downs, Radcliffe's novels offered the vistas of the Pyrenees and the Alps, they were firmly "placed in the embattled realm of eighteenth century economic life" (Ellis 1989: 100). Similarly to highly-eroticised vampire fiction of the later century which smuggled the forbidden fruit of carnality and sexuality into the parlours of Victorian England notorious for its prudence and propriety, classic Gothic fiction brought home to its readers marked gender inequalities, and staged the domestic violence that so many of them experienced but dared not talk about, much less bring to public attention. In the novels of Ann Radcliffe, a damsel in distress becomes a metonym for domestic oppression.

The conflict between a villain and the damsel he distresses is not introduced here for purely literary effect, as a strategy to indulge in dungeons, dark chambers, labyrinthine corridors and the supernatural. Examining Ann Radcliffe's handling of "the terrifying phantasmagoria" in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, E. J. Clery sees it as dramatisation of "the fears of the women of the middle classes, whose social standing was most unstable, liable to upward and downward variation, and who were therefore necessarily the group most attentive to the taboos surrounding femininity" (1995: 127-8). Clery reads the novel as enacting "the experience of a woman defined by property laws" who therefore became a mere "instrument for the conveyance of property" (1995: 120). And it is in this sense that *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is a highly politicised undertaking.

Radcliffe's novels were published in a decade fraught with political tension, during the war with revolutionary France, after the decapitation of the French monarchs. The reviewers of the day blamed the political massacres across the Channel for the Gothic enthusiasm with terror. An anonymous commentator in the *Monthly Magazine* of 1797 bemoaned the fact that the novels of the day "exactly and faithfully copied THE SYSTEM OF TERROR, if not in our streets, and in our fields, at least in our circulating libraries, and in our closets" (102). The author attributes the popularity of Gothic novels to Robespierre, who, "with his system of terror … taught our novelists that *fear* is the only passion they ought to cultivate" and blames the Revolution for the fact that "our genius has become hysterical, and our taste epileptic" (103). Certainly literature and terror became enmeshed. And although it is hard to measure exactly the extent to which the French Revolution exerted itself on English Gothic fiction, undoubtedly the threat of its spread was real, its radicalism shocking and unexpected. Ann Radcliffe, as the wife of a journal editor, was certainly exposed to political debate. Written at a time when patriotism was growing more fervent that ever, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* can

be seen as a fictional enactment of how political insecurities sharpened ideas of social injustice, how, at a time of political tension, social differences and ailments come into the foreground. At this precarious era, when anything foreign, French especially, was subject to criticism, Radcliffe seems to have followed the nationalistic claims to English superiority and personified villainy in the characters of foreign aristocrats.

In *The Mysteries of Udolpho* the traumatic part of the main character's existence begins when, upon the death of her parents, she is thrust under the legal guardianship of her aunt, and after the aunt's marriage, also that of her husband, the villainous Montoni. Conflict between the male and female characters arises when it turns out Montoni married Emily's aunt for her money and wants to get hold of not only her property but also that of Emily. But the women resist total subjection: Emily refuses to marry Count Morano, a devious way Montoni devises to cheat her out of her inheritance, and his own wife refuses to surrender her Toulouse estates. When Montoni realises the ladies cannot be subdued, he employs the Gothic apparatus of confinement, seclusion, violence and terror for a very mundane reason: to break their will and separate them from their property.

In his analysis of the Romantic novel in England, Robert Kiely devotes a whole chapter to Ann Radcliffe, and, commenting on Emily's emotional condition in Montoni's Italian castle and her resultant perception of the place, he concludes that she "half-creates her own Udolpho" (1973: 74). This is certainly true of Emily's way of coping with the novelty of the hostile environment she inhabits in Udolpho and the survival strategy she consequently develops. Much of it involves indulging in recollections of her idyllic childhood in the household of her loving parents in Languedoc and her desire to form a physical contact with the past. One night, Emily anxiously awaits the music she once heard on the ramparts of the castle, believing the sounds to be "surely no mortal." She trusts they were "celestial sounds … sent to comfort" her, a proof of the physical connection with her late father: "Perhaps, my father watches over me, at this moment!" (Radcliffe 1992: 340). Emily's acknowledgement of the spectrality of her memories is surprising in view of Radcliffe's determined dismantling of the supernatural in her narratives. But it is only in this sense of imagining and longing for the supernatural to materialise, the supernatural which is a connection with the blissful, long-departed past, that Emily can be accused of creating her own Udolpho.

It is certainly not the case in relation to the real danger she and her aunt face at the hands of Montoni. When during a party his "Venice glass" shatters and he realises someone has attempted to poison him, the accusation falls on the wife and she, together with Emily, is immediately locked in one of the rooms which had formerly been a prison in the castle. Montoni's threats materialise, they are not "the dream of a distempered imagination," as Emily tries to explain to herself her prolonged state of anxiety in Udolpho. Most of the time Montoni does behave towards Emily and his own wife "with a monster's cruelty" (Radcliffe 1998: 296,

267). In this light, her venture to explore the mysterious dark chamber cannot be seen as a mere search for excitement, but for confirmation of Montoni's previous murderous activities, a search Emily conducts to validate her own fears. Her reaction to the mysterious sight lets the readers believe that behind the black veil was indeed Laurentini's corpse. Emily's fainting is caused both by the supposed contact with the gruesome physicality of a decaying body, but also by the realisation that in front of her is irrefutable evidence that Montoni is capable of killing his women to seize what is rightfully theirs. So when Madame Montoni refuses to surrender her property to him, and, as a consequence, is sent away to a remote part of the castle – where she eventually dies – Emily has every right to fear for her life. Emily and her aunt, like so many women in Radcliffe's works, become "immobilised," "physically and symbolically, by the physical and symbolic violence of the society" (Chaplin 2014: 205), and in such scenarios Radcliffe is enacting the consequences of the legal and social vulnerability of women.

> The terrible suspicion, that Madame Montoni no longer lived, thus came, accompanied by one not less dreadful for herself. Unless the crime, by which the aunt had suffered, was instigated merely by resentment, unconnected with profit, a motive, upon which Montoni did not appear very likely to act, its object must be unattained, till the niece was also dead, to whom Montoni knew that his wife's estates must descend. Emily remembered the words, which had informed her, that the contested estates in France would devolve to her, if Madame Montoni died, without consigning them to her husband, and the former obstinate perseverance of her aunt made it too probable, that she had, to the last, withheld them.
>
> (Radcliffe 1992: 341)

To Radcliffe's contemporary middle-class English female readers, the legal situation enacted in the novel was clear: Emily's plight was a comment on the precarious legal position of an English gentlewoman whose existence was subordinated to that of her husband. Marriage meant, for a woman, a total loss of autonomy, and dependency on her husband, as stipulated by the law of coverture. The English jurist William Blackstone famously summed up the position of a married woman in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-60):

> By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in the law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything.

Moers's division into male and female Gothic can help to explain the different preoccupations of their representatives, and, as a result, the characters they created, and the nature of conflict enacted in their novels. However, at the core of both types of Gothic and their conflicts lies a human being and a human reaction to the conflicts they partake in or inflict. Underneath the villainy of Manfred, in conflict with his wife, with his own daughter and daughter-in-law-to-be, is a man who is

a slave to his birth, who, at the moments of crisis lapses into dream-like states, as if he could not take the burden of his ancestry anymore. With Isabella, underneath the veneer of a distressed damsel hounded underground to save her integrity, lies a woman who refuses to yield to the demands of patriarchy. Emily, too, stands up to Montoni, and so does her aunt, his wife, the otherwise despicable Madame Cheron. But what unites Manfred and Emily as people is perhaps a suggestion, in the case of Manfred, and a depiction, in the case of Emily, of their inner worlds. Manfred's lapses into dreamlike states in which he momentarily loses contact with reality are very short and cannot be compared with the much more psychologised depictions of Emily's inner world, her retreat into books, poetry and the welcome spectrality which bridges the horrific present with the idyllic past. But both Walpole's and Radcliffe's handling of a very human reaction to conflict gives evidence that in every Gothic story, underneath the surface there is much more than meets the eye, much more than aestheticised terror. After all, no matter what the nature of the conflict is, at this early stage Gothic novelists seem to engage in a humane project, often in line with the indictments of poetic justice. Conflict, the engine of these stories, is always resolved in the end, villains punished, and a hope for conjugal, humane partnership prevails.

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