Annali Online di Ferrara - Lettere
AOFL VIII 1 (2013) 270/287

PAOLO PEPE

Portents, Horrors, Fatal Attractions. The Gothic Menace on Late-Eighteenth-Century English Stages

On 29 December 1798, at Drury Lane, James Boaden staged the drama *Aurelio and Miranda*, adapted from Matthew Gregory Lewis's novel *The Monk* (1796)[1]. This was only the latest of a considerable number of theatrical adaptations drawing on the masterpieces of Gothic narrative: taken all together, a remarkable corpus of great documental as well as, in a few cases, literary significance[2].

The study of variants and constants between Gothic novels and their theatrical adaptations can certainly help to shed light on the hiatus between page and stage in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, as regards both the presentation and treatment of the specific themes and motifs of a genre and, in a broader sense, the gap between what was considered to be formally and morally acceptable for a written text and what conventional norms allowed playwrights, who worked under «a […] censorship that maintained absolute standards of eighteenth-century morality»[3].

This comparison can be carried further, within the context of Gothic literature, regarding various aspects connected to the phenomena of adaptations. In fact, even more stimulating opportunities for reflection arise when we examine the relationship of adaptations with "original" dramas, that is, when we contrast the two peculiarly dissonant faces of the Gothic Drama[4].

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[1] James Boaden (1762-1839) was a quite successful playwright, as well as a journalist and a biographer of actors and actresses. His biographies include: *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble, Esq*. (1825), *Memoirs of Mrs Simmons* (1827), *The Life of Mrs Jordan* (1831), and *Memoirs of Mrs Inchbald* (1833). Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818), known especially for his novel *The Monk*, was also a very popular playwright as well as a translator from the German, particularly of Friedrich Schiller and August von Kotzebue.

[2] The first "tale of terror" ever staged was Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. It was adapted for the stage, not without a certain technical and writing skill, by Robert Jephson. The drama, entitled *The Count of Narbonne*, premiered at Covent Garden on 17 November 1781 and continued to be performed, with a certain success, until 1807. In adapting Walpole's text, Jephson strove first of all to discard all fantastic and supernatural elements. Walpole himself approved, being pleased that Jephson had succeeded in weaving a consistent plot even without recourse to «the marvellous, though so much dependend on that part»: WRIGHT (1840, 70). The first Gothic tale in the history of English literature was thus transformed into a «romance tragedy about a wicked Count who tries to put away his wife that he may marry his dead son's fiancée, and of the sufferings of his daughter who loves a mysterious stranger, later discovered to be the rightful possessor of the Count's estate»: THORP (1928, 477). Radcliffe's principal novels immediately passed from the page to the stage. Boaden himself, for example, adapted *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) and *The Italian* (1797), staged, respectively, as *Fontainville Forest* (1794) and *The Italian Monk* (1797). Henry Siddons, instead, adapted *A Sicilian Romance* (1794), and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* inspired *Mysteries of the Castle* (1795) by Miles Peter Andrews, especially in the characterization of the villain, Montoni.

[3] CHRISTOPHER (2011, 152). The norms had become rigid, especially after the Licensing Act of 1737, which ruled, among other things, that a «true Copy of all plays, entertainments, prologues, and epilogues» should be submitted to the "Lord Chamberlain" two weeks before its scheduled debut. Any who eluded this control, which turned out to be rigid and pervasive, would be fined £50 and his «authority to perform» would be revoked. For a detailed and acute analysis of the scope and implications of this legislative act, see especially LIESENFELD (1984), which also includes the full text of the act (pp. 191-3).

[4] Among early original Gothic dramas, the following have pride of place: *The Mysterious Mother* (1768) by Horace Walpole, never staged because the author himself regarded it as "immoral", *Banditti* (1781) by John O'Keeffe, *The*

In this regard, the intellectual connection between Boaden and Lewis is particularly interesting, because it allows us to contextualize the various aspects of the question. Lewis was not only one of the most renowned and controversial novelists in London at the turn of the eighteenth century, but also made his mark as an extraordinarily successful playwright, beginning with his first endeavour, a Gothic drama in five acts entitled *The Castle Spectre* (1797).

The cowl does not make the monk

Some of the comments that greeted *The Monk* when it came out leave no doubts as to the disconcertment and alarm it raised. In his review of the novel for «The Critical Review», Coleridge branded it as «a romance, which if a parent saw in the hands of a son or a daughter, he might reasonably turn pale»[5]. The judgment of the «The British Critic» was much more *tranchant*: «Good talents have been misapplied in the production of [a] monster», a literary "monster" heaping up «[l]ust, murder, incest, and every atrocity that can disgrace human nature, […] without the apology of probability, or even possibility, for their introduction»[6]. In the journal «The Flapper», instead, the defense of morality and plausibility took the form of a letter written by a fictitious serial novel reader («a most devout novel-reader») who signs himself Aurelius (a singular coincidence, when we think of the name of the protagonist of Boaden's play). Having finally repented and recovered from his condition of «inert imbecility», thanks to his discovery of the Bible, Aurelius warns Irish readers against leafing through *The Monk*. Blasphemy and obscenity disseminated throughout a totally unlikely story counselled against even touching such an immoral and unrealistic book[7].

The characterizing elements of Lewis's novel are essentially two. The first is that it revels in the representation of evil, or, more specifically, of the pleasure of evil: from the Abess's sadistic cruelty to Ambrosio's blind lust, which drives him, in a paroxysmal crescendo of passion and gore, to matricide, incest, and the murder of the object of his desire, Antonia − whom he discovers at the end of the play, from the words of the Devil, to be his own sister. The second feature is the

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Mysterious Husband (1783) by Richard Cumberland, *Vimonda* (1787) by Andrew McDonald − the work where the genre comes into its own − and *The Regent* (1788) by Bertie Greatheed. The most influential and significant works, however, were produced between 1790 and 1820, by North, Colman junior, Lewis, Maturin and Peake. Harshly criticized by the contemporary cultural establishment, around the mid nineteenth century the Gothic drama began a decline that quickly led it to a long-lasting oblivion. Only since Bertrand Evans's study (1947) have critics again begun to analyze it both from a literary and from a cultural perspective, "rediscovering" texts which, at least in some cases, exhibit dramaturgic vitality and quality.

[5] «The Critical Review: Or, Annals of Literature», vol. 19, London, A. Hamilton, 1797, p. 197.

[6] «The British Critic: A New Review», vol. 7, art. 28, London, F. and C. Rivington, 1796, p. 677.

[7] Being indifferent to the «improbability of the story», the author of *The Monk* «avails himself of every opportunity which his subject affords to him, to introduce scenes of the most wanton and immodest nature». Aurelius thus appeals to «The Flapper», in the certainty that no effort will be spared «in warning so numerous a body as the novel readers of Ireland, against a book, the celebrity of which is perhaps undeserved, and the circulation dangerous»: «The Flapper», number LV, Saturday, September 17, 1796, sheets 1-4, www.newspaperarchive.com/london-flapper/1796-09-17.
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pervasive use of the supernatural, which manifests itself in the text under many guises, none of which − running counter to Radcliffe's recommendations − are rationally explainable: the ghost of the «Bleeding Nun», the Wandering Jew, demonic temptation incarnated in the splendid and sensual Matilda, and Satan himself, put on stage in both of his versions. Following the literary, Miltonian tradition, he appears as a fallen angel, a perfect and handsome youth with crimson wings, in whose eyes «melancholy and death» dwell. However, this image coexists with the "popular" one, according to which the devil is just a monstrous creature with horrid black wings on his massive shoulders, a tail, goat's feet, and a bush of live snakes in lieu of hair. This latter Satan is mocking when he reminds Ambrosio of his crimes, committed under the drive of ravenous lust and incommensurable pride, and is deceitful and cruel when he finally induces his victim − locked in the dungeons of the Inquisition waiting for judgment − to give over his soul to him in exchange for his escape, just when he is about to receive the news of his "pardon". The monk's escape will grant him an illusory, momentary freedom, but it is only the prelude to his atrocious death.

Lewis weaves these strands together, in the stories of three couples, both legitimate and "illegitimate": Lorenzo and Antonia, Raymond and Agnes, Ambrosio and Matilda. Their stories are interspersed with a number of digressions, the main one being the subplot introducing the ghost of the «Bleeding Nun» which takes up almost a quarter of the book.

Given the problematic and disconcerting nature of the novel, one cannot but wonder about the real reasons for Boaden's decision to adapt it for the stage, especially when we consider that, rather than an adaptation, his *Aurelio and Miranda* was a radical rewriting following clearly defined guidelines, evidently with an equally clear purpose in mind. Boaden divides Lewis's text into sections, isolates its narrative nuclei, and proceeds to systematically suppress both all that could be perceived as disturbing, obscene or immoral, and all manifestations of the supernatural. In the name of the Aristotelian principle of unity of action, Boaden leaves out the secondary plots. He models the magmatic subject matter of the *The Monk* to compress it within a unified plot and a consolatory structure granting the lovers their just reward[8]. This intent is openly stated in the *Advertisement* of

[8] These are non-original ingredients. They are found, for example, in the so-called «melodramatic formula»: «whereby […] vice was punished, and virtue was rewarded, usually in the form of romantic fulfilment but only after much suffering. The formula also required a singular and unified plotline»: CHRISTOPHER (2011, 153). Indeed, the Gothic, and Gothic drama in particular, has some features in common with late eighteenth century melodrama, another genre that was to enjoy enormous success. Melodrama, as Cox stresses, was extremely ductile and malleable, and interwoven with «Oriental, nautical, Gothic, or domestic elements». It was characterized by three distinctive traits, two of which it shared with the Gothic («sensationalist theatrical technique [and] overwhelming and generally violent plots») and one that marks the difference between the two genres, namely, an «overriding sense of morality», which in melodrama is manifested through a catharsis. Violent acts, spectacular natural forces, and extreme situations and choices, «force the characters to reveal their moral valence»; and thus «melodrama passes from apparent order, an order undermined by the fact that it is ruled by evil men, through violent chaos to moral clarification and the formation of a renewed social order»: COX (1992, 41).

the printed text, where one reads that the play is «avowedly founded on the Romance of the *Monk*. The Author enters not into the discussion which that work has produced. His attempt has been to dramatise the leading incident of the Romance, without recourse to supernatural agency»[9]. In spite of his efforts, however, Boaden was unable to construct a convincing and, above all, a reassuring work, free of ambiguities or contradictions[10].

The first three acts of *Aurelio and Miranda* closely adhere to the main plot of *The Monk*. The only significant variant is in the nature of the bond between Aurelio (the theatrical version of Ambrosio) and Eugenio/Miranda (corresponding to Rosario/Matilda in *The Monk*), which is rendered less dark and ambiguous, and, above all, stripped of any demonic implication or influence.

In the two conclusive acts, instead, the gap between the drama and the novel widens. Aurelio admits that he is in love with Miranda and is thinking of leaving the Church. A first agnition − occurring through the agency of an old gypsy, who confesses to having taken him away from his family when he was little, out of revenge − reveals him to be the heir of the house of De Medina, and thus Antonia's brother. The discovery offers him the opportunity to declare himself free of his vows and thus crown his dream of love. In the fifth act, we witness the punishment of the abbess and the reunion of the pairs of lovers: Lorenzo and Antonia (whom nobody has tried to seduce, much less her brother, and who is therefore not "forced" to die), Aurelio and Miranda (who in the end learns that she is noble herself, being Christoval's sister), and Raymond and Agnes, who in the meantime has borne the child of their initially illegitimate love, whom Boaden spares the dreadful fate reserved to him by Lewis.

The public gave *Aurelio and Miranda* a mixed reception, whereas critics, with a few exceptions[11], judged it in very negative terms. Their somewhat paradoxical attitude is emblematically exemplified by the review of the play in the «Evening Mail». While the anonymous reviewer is ready to grant that the horrible actions staged in the novel have indeed been expunged from the drama, he nevertheless cannot help remarking that «much of its poison is retained», and, what is worse, in a subtle, insidious form compared to the novel. Lewis's original, «[h]owever objectionable [it] may appear, is at least marked with consistency in the catastrophe, for guilt is followed with adequate punishment». In the play, instead, «the author seems to have forgotten, that

[9] BOADEN (1799^3, 1).

[10] Years later, Boaden himself admitted to the structural weaknesses of the play, as well as the inadequacy of his attempt at rewriting with a moral and educational intent, in spite of an encouraging beginning and the seven repeats that the drama nevertheless managed to obtain: «All therefore looked successfully; the greatest dramatic genius admired my work, and the greatest theatric talent had resolved to act it. But it was weak in its structure; the two last acts were entirely an *hors d'oeuvre*; and, what was worse than all, a storm of indignation was excited, that so *immoral* a work as *The Monk* should be resorted to for the purposes of an exhibition, however moral in its tendency»: BOADEN (1825, 582).

[11] For example, an indulgent judgment was expressed in «The London Oracle and Daily Advertiser» of 31 December 1798: «We have here then the pride, the rigor, and the frailty of Ambrosio, but none of his vicious excesses; he commits no crime to shock sensibility, and there is nothing in his character repugnant to virtue»: cit. in CHRISTOPHER (2011, 164).

to reward virtue and punish vice is the great end of the drama». One is hence sorry to see that «[t]he offenders, such as they are, are made happy, a breach of the most sacred vows is encouraged, and the tale of seduction is told in a plausible and justifiable way». This inconsistency between presumed intent and actual result is extremely dangerous, because «what is seen on the stage makes a deeper impression than what is read in the closet»[12]. Thus − and herein lies the paradox − with all its perversion and horror, with all its obscenity and blasphemy, *The Monk* transmits a clearer and more persuasive moral message than the play does, because it exhibits the just punishment of guilt and the guilty, which is absent, instead, in *Aurelio and Miranda*, where the imperative of poetic justice appears weakened and indistinct.

Boaden thus largely fails in his intent. He fails because his approach is too mechanical, and because he has not realized the inevitable consequences of his approach. By choosing the theme of thwarted love happily triumphing in the end as his only guideline, he weaves a much simpler plot than the novel's. This, however, leads him to dismantle Lewis's system of causes and effects, guilt and punishment, sin and damnation, which in *The Monk* is connected with, or rather, *determined by* the intervention of the supernatural and the wickedness of powerful villains.

Apart from Boaden's excess of zeal, partly justified by the difficulty he must have encountered in attempting to normalize a protean and lumpy text like *The Monk*, we should at any rate consider that *Aurelio and Miranda* was hardly an anomaly in those last years of the eighteenth century. Indeed, the main concern of almost all authors adapting Gothic novels for the stage was to «minimize the terrors of their originals, rather than to utilize them for dramatic effect»[13]. Their primary intent was to construct a "Gothicizing" form of drama answering the requirements of cultural and social decorum as set out in the codified forms accepted by the British Theatre. These authors were trying to defuse a narrative genre perceived as dangerous by mellowing down and domesticating its theatrical version.

Fears and ghosts of the past

From the nineties of the eighteenth century, the authors of "original" plays drawing on the Gothic repertoire for the background and backbone of their dramatic action had taken another path, having been drawn especially to innovative *mises-en-scènes* and the commixture and homogenization of forms and languages.

When reading reactions to the staging of these plays, one is surprised by the essential uniformity of critics' judgments, with their constant insistence on rationality, equilibrium, morality,

[12] «Evening Mail», 28 December, 1798, sheets 2-5, www.newspaperarchive.com/evening-mail/1798-12-28.
[13] THORP (1928, 476).

distinction of roles, and defense of the natural order: the very same concepts that the adaptors of «tales of terror» put on stage. It is by these parameters that theatrical works were evaluated, approved, and often even emended (by impresarios, directors or actors). In those years, the true issue at stake in England went beyond the literary sphere, while including it. On the morrow of the capture of the Bastille, in a time of major changes and revolutions, the need had arisen to reaffirm the principles of Britishness, seen as founded on tradition, a highly structured and hierarchical idea of society, and the protection of a monarchy threatened by Republican aspirations. This was done, among other things, by defending the equilibrium of some forms of literature against the irregularity, emotionality and irrationality of other forms branded as diseases threatening to corrupt the tastes and true spirit of the nation. There was a special concern to make the theatre, in particular, with its acknowledged capability of speaking directly to the public's heart, a bastion of those cultural, social and political values.

Like certain types of novels, Gothic drama was thus constantly regarded with mistrust and concern. Its hybrid and spurious forms were stigmatized because they stimulated passions rather than inspiring judicious reflection, in the name of an unfettered exuberance that made that kind of drama a reflection of a nation halted at a primitive, barbaric, indistinct stage of development[14]. One could easily extend to late-eighteenth-century Gothic drama Coleridge's later judgment on one of the most successful «plays of terror» of the early nineteenth century, Maturin's *Bertram* (1816). According to Coleridge, this tragedy, which he disparagingly labeled a «Jacobinical Drama», presented «the qualities of liberality, refined feeling, and sense of honour […] in persons and classes where experience teaches us least to expect them», and thereby disseminated republican and anti-British ideals, ending up by conciliating the spectator with «vice and want of principle». Thus, Coleridge argued, a *certain type* of Gothic theatre, unless it was defused, could release morally and politically subversive forces, and fuel «cosmopolitan» − that is, antinational and Jacobinical − aspirations: it should hence be banned from national theatres and readmitted only after being *normalized*, made *conform* to tradition and the neoclassical precepts of verisimilitude and decorum[15].

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[14] On all these aspects, see RANGER (1991); PEPE (2012).

[15] COLERIDGE (1817, 221). As regards the relationship between verisimilitude and decorum, one aspect is especially worth stressing in this context. While both explicitly prescribe the imitation of nature, decorum − as Loretta Innocenti acutely observes − operates according to «modalità di *separazione* e di *discontinuità*», that is, opposite and complementary textual modalities compared to those on which eighteenth-century verisimilitude is founded, viz., linearity, continuity, and connection between the parts. Although decorum is based «sulla costanza e la coerenza interna di ogni singolo personaggio, [esso] propone in realtà la distinzione, la differenziazione dei caratteri […], la tassonomia dei ruoli […], secondo un concetto di *general nature* che evita di considerare gli individui per valorizzare invece tratti comuni». What is even more important, neoclassical decorum separates literary genres, especially dramatic ones, distinguishing between tragedy and comedy, «riportando dentro un alveo chiuso quel mescolarsi elisabettiano e barocco di esperienze diverse». The comic and the tragic cannot coexist, or rather, «il comico non può più permettersi di destabilizzare il locus tragico, come avveniva nelle tragedie di Shakespeare che mettevano in scena re e *fools*, congiure

The singular relationship between Boaden and Lewis is informed by this tension, and reveals it. If we read *The Castle Spectre* in the light of *Aurelio and Miranda*, we immediately realize we are confronted with two types of texts which, although they share a common frame of reference, essentially speak two different languages. They reflect a different conception of the scenic space and a different perception both of the changing of times and of the actual preferences of the public, whose needs and wishes critics mistakenly presumed they could understand, interpret and influence[16]. There is a gap between the two texts: the gap between convention and innovation, between adaptation and originality. Whereas Boaden's play simplifies, tames down and regularizes, Lewis's tragedy surprises, experiments and takes chances, weaving a dynamic web of decisions and options, some of which, although appreciated by the public, where soon discarded or never picked up on at all by contemporary playwrights, while others became very popular and formed the new backbone of the genre[17].

Wolves and lambs

Besides being a huge theatrical success − 47 continuous performances after it premiered at Drury Lane on 14 December 1797, and takings of about 18,000 pounds in the first three-month run −, following its publication in 1798 *The Castle Spectre* also became an extraordinary literary case, with all of eleven reprints in five years. Lewis decided to publish his text «as originally written» and not, as was common practice, «as performed»[18], to make clear what was actually due to his pen and will, and thus be able to distance himself from accusations, if any, regarding changes made by directors or actors. In his address «To the Reader», Lewis provides an accurate explanation of the fundaments of his approach, showing extraordinary critical acumen and, above all, lucid awareness of the relationship between the written page and its staging, between narrative and theatre − or rather, theatricality.

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tradimenti e *clowns* e, soprattutto, un discorso continuamente minato dal basso, dall'ironia, dal corto circuito del senso, dalla follia, dal dubbio»: INNOCENTI (1997, 149-52). What Gothic dramas challenge, in their attempt to draw on the experience of Renaissance theatre, is the theoretical-normative establishment.

[16] «By the end of the eighteenth century, […] audiences had already taken the criterion of merit out of the hands of critics in every meaningful respect, their judgments being formed and their applause awarded on the wholly subjective basis of whether or not a play or a performer had the power to excite and to satisfy the needs of their collective consciousness». More specifically, «the audiences for which [the plays] were written had begun to pay less attention to the words they were hearing and more to the theatrical image as a whole». A change in perspective and attitude that «is not only deeply fascinating but vitally important to a proper understanding»: SUTCLIFFE (1983, 12f.).

[17] The time was now ripe for a clash between genres and the ideologies they expressed. From the standpoint of moral codes, to use, again, Cox's formulation, «[t]he Gothic always explores the extraordinary, the extreme. The melodrama displays the ordinary, the norm»: COX (1992, 42). Adaptations adopt the basic devices of melodrama to bring Gothic back within the confines of "normality".

[18] LEWIS (1796, 222). All the citations are from this edition. Page numbers are indicated within parentheses in the text.

Lewis is ready to admit that «[p]ersecuted heroines and conscience-stung villains» (p. 222) had already been entertaining the British public for some time[19]. This is a rather peremptory statement, and possibly an excessively reductive one. At any rate, it clouds, instead of exalting, the force and specificity of the villain Osmond, who embodies, both in appearance and demeanor, the typical elements of the Gothic villain in Ann Radcliffe's novels, but in some ways also foreshadows the Byronian hero:

> […] the Castle.– Oh it is the most melancholy mansion! And as to its master, he's the very antidote to mirth: He always walks with his arms folded, his brows bent, his eyes louring on you with a gloomy scowl: He never smiles; and to laugh in his presence would be high treason. He looks at no one […] None dare approach him […]. (p. 159)

The resemblance between this characterization of the Gothic villain and the Byronian hero is obvious: both are cloaked in mystery, somber, guilt-ridden. There is a difference between them, however, or rather, a substantial semantic shift from one to the other: the former is a villain, the latter a hero. As Bertrand Evans convincingly argues, this discrepancy can be better understood in the light of the evolution of Gothic theatre, with its gradual redefinition of the semantic markers of evil and infamy in terms of a connotative system evoking an epic and fascinating heroism[20].

The first to codify the characteristics of the Gothic villain, both in novels and in the theatre, was Horace Walpole. If we compare Manfred in the *The Castle of Otranto* with the countess who is the protagonist of *The Mysterious Mother* (1786), a never performed play which only had a limited circulation in self-printed copies, we will see that from the beginning there is a trait that distinguishes the theatrical villain from the villain in novels: on the stage «the black deeds of [this] villain serve less as terrors to affright a heroine than as terrors to harrow [his/her] own soul». The affliction of the melancholy, feverish and anguished protagonist of *The Mysterious Mother* derives from her secret, a hidden crime that torments her soul. The dramatic action of the play revolves around the revelation of this secret «in terms of mystery, gloom, and terror»[21], a revelation that is constantly put off until the end.

One could say that what is activated and constantly developed in the construction of the dramatic villain is his stratification and psychological "complication". He is torn between his passions, on the one hand, and anguish and guilt, on the other. His crimes are gradually relegated to an increasingly remote past, revealed as late as possible, and replaced by sorrowful reflection that turns into an obsessive wish for an impossible redemption. It is this inner conflict that distinguishes

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[19] For "genealogical" connections with the Elizabethan villain, for example, a still valid study is MCINTYRE (1925, 874-80).
[20] For the relationship between the Gothic villain and the Byronian hero, see EVANS (1947b); SILVANI (2007, 11ff.).
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 757.

the theatrical villain and gives him his attitude of brooding and irremediable suffering that eventually became constant and pervasive. As Gothic drama evolves, its villains stand more and more as *heroes*. Negative heroes, undoubtedly, but endowed with a grandiosity and epic stature of their own as prisoners and victims of a destiny of destruction and corruption.

Osmond − to return to Lewis − for much of the play brings to the stage an agitation, a distress that induces him to seek refuge in solitude, or comfort in his dialogue with his two African servants, or even the approval of his young niece Angela, whom he is housing in his castle and keeps under strict surveillance. But Osmond still adheres too closely to models such as Manfred, Schedoni, and Montoni. He will eventually let himself be swept away by his incoercible passions, abandoning himself once more to violence, the prelude to the final catastrophe and an inevitable death. But the path is now traced: in the Gothic plays of the end of the eighteenth century, the long and recurrent monologues revealing a harrowed conscience will slowly cut out for the theatrical villain a different role than the one he had originally been assigned.

Even more than in novels, in Gothic plays the villain is a strong, dominant figure. The positive hero actually appears dull, and his role totally accessory. In *The Castle Spectre*, for example, Percy is certainly a well-mannered gentleman, but is almost totally lacking in character. This largely explains why the leading actors of companies tended to reserve the role of villain for themselves, and asked authors, with growing insistence, to make them into complex, multifaceted figures, even such as to captivate the public rather than repel it. Another factor to be taken into consideration is the pressure of theatrical censorship, which imposed the triumph of virtue and the punishment of the wicked. In this perspective, the guilt that slowly gnawed at the villain's soul, causing in him such a suffering and such a convincing anxiety to repent as to even induce the persecuted maiden to pardon him (in later plays), perfectly answered this need, as it guaranteed the proper balance between crime and punishment. Silent suffering, the distinctive trait of the villain, begins to take on the character of a pathos-inducing element capable of favouring emotional identification and, eventually, empathy with the public.

The final step to the definitive inclusion of such a character, in spite of his ambiguous and contradictory nature, into the "heroic" sphere, was taken by Byron in his *Manfred* (1816-17) with his decision to enshroud his character in a veil of *indeterminacy*. By not disclosing, leaving half explained the reason for his character's torment, Byron instills a doubt that leads to the suspension of moral judgment, cloaking an already statuary figure in even more fascination and mystery:

> as the eighteenth century had seen the villain through the horrified eyes of an oppressed heroine, so the nineteenth saw the "Byronic" hero through the charmed eyes of an ecstatic one[22].

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 771.

But this is a different matter.

Cupboard philosophy

In his "dialogue" with the Reader, Lewis explicitly claims recognition for his originality in the treatment of comic elements and characterization of minor characters, starting with Osmond's two servants, and especially Hassan, whom Lewis calls «my misanthropic Negro» (p. 222). Hassan is a man of strong passions and violent feelings, who has lost everything, even hope, wherefore «he has no single object against which he can direct his vengeance, and he directs it at large against mankind. He hates all the world, hates even himself; for he feels that in that world there is no one that loves him» (p. 222). As to the evident anachronism of staging two coloured slaves in the service of a medieval lord, Lewis is ready to recognize its implausibility:

> That *Osmond* is attended by *negroes* is an anachronism, I allow; but from the great applause which Mr. Dowton constantly received in *Hassan* […], I am inclined to think that the audience was not greatly offended at the impropriety (p. 223).

As an authentic theatre man, interested in scenic impact and the reaction of the public as much as he is in the principle of verisimilitude, the anachronism actually does not trouble him at all. He will go to any extreme to capture the attention of his public and elicit its applause:

> For my own part, I by no means repent the introduction of my *Africans*: I thought it would give a pleasing variety to the characters and dresses, if I made my servants black; and could I have produced the same effect by making my heroine blue, blue I should have made her (p. 223).

Moving from the experience of Elizabethan theatre, Lewis also tries to fill «the gap between "high" and "mass" culture»[23] by reinterpreting comic elements and low-status characters in a way that transcends the sphere of comic relief in the restricted sense. Lewis does not limit himself to an "accessory" use of the comic, aimed only at relieving tension and pathos with the liberating force of laughter to grant the public a break before new suspense and the tragic catharsis. On the contrary, invoking Shakespeare's authority and the relationship between the tragic and the comic in Shakespeare's plays, Lewis declares his intent to enhance the role of his comic characters in the grotesque and paradoxical situations they determine, as expressions of a different approach to reality and holders of a different point of view: the point of view of common sense, which is practical, sometimes coarse, and always prompt and genuine[24]. A sort of democracy of judgment. For example, Motley, the servant, appears as the evolution of a Shakespearean fool, ironic and wise

[23] GLANCE (n.d., 4).
[24] Cf. SAGGINI (2005, 70); SILVANI (2007, 18).

in reading reality; similarly, both Father Philip and Angela, the maid, show a double nature, as the former is coward and yet enterprising, while the latter is credulous and superstitious but also capable of understanding what is going on better than others. Furthermore, Lewis's decision to bring to the fore, to shine the light on «homely subjects such as eating, drinking and the travail of marriage», allows him to provide «a center of conventional domesticity to contrast with the horrors of the central Gothic action»[25]. Openly contravening the principle of decorum, this commixture of lofty and lowly also becomes a commixture of genres − tragedy, comedy, opera − and theatrical techniques, notably through the introduction of music, songs, dance and pantomime in the "spoken drama". Hybridization of forms and languages, subversion of hierarchies, a search for scenic effects: these are the "revolutionary" foundations on which Gothic playwrights built their edifice.

Whispers and cries (of wonder)

Lewis's use of the supernatural is undoubtedly spectacular. In *The Castle Spectre*, as the title already announces, the supernatural finds expression and concreteness in the apparition of a ghost[26]. Theatre forced playwrights to make more clear-cut decisions in this regard than novelists:

> While ghosts were acceptable in Gothic novels because they could be dismissed as the subjective delusions of a character, that option was not open to the playwright who either had to give the ghost a physical presence or omit it entirely[27].

A middle ground of course was possible, but within certain limits, unless at the risk of a total loss of scenic efficacy. Such was the case for Boaden's own *Fontainville Forest*, where, due to the pressure of the theatre management and the actors, the ghost was hidden behind a canvas, a screen of sorts that concealed it from the eyes of the public, and as a result went almost unnoticed.

In *The Castle Spectre*, Lewis goes the opposite way: he accentuates to the utmost the visual and perceptive impact of the ghost, staging a spirit endowed with an undeniable physicality, and accompanying its apparition with a paroxysm of music, light and sound:

> The folding doors unclose, and the Oratory is seen illuminated. In its centre stands a tall female figure, her white and flowing garments spotted with blood; her veil is thrown back, and discovers a pale and melancholy countenance, her eyes are lifted upwards, her arms extended towards heaven, and a large wound appears upon her bosom. Angela sinks upon her knees, with her eyes riveted upon the figure, which for some moments remains motionless. At length the Spectre advances slowly, to a soft and plaintive strain; she stops opposite to Reginald's picture, and gazes upon it in silence. She then turns, approaches Angela, seems to invoke a blessing upon her, points to the picture and retires to the Oratory. The music ceases. Angela rises with a

[25] COX (1992, 23).
[26] *Aldernon the Outlaw* (1801) stages all of three ghosts. The supernatural in the form of visions, phantasmatic apparitions, returns in the "Grand Musical Romance" *The Wood-Daemon* (1807, expanded in 1811) and the spectacular equestrian melodrama *Timour the Tartar* (1811).
[27] GLANCE (n.d., 2). On this question, see also WOLFREYS (2002).

> wild look, and follows the Vision, extending her arms towards it […]. The Spectre waves her hand, as bidding her farewell. Instantly the organ's swell is heard; a full chorus of female voices chaunt «Jubilate», a blaze of light flashes through the Oratory, and the folding doors close with loud noise. (p. 206)

This is almost tantamount to a challenge to well-established practices, since after the first apparitions of ghosts, the persistent and ideological ostracism of the cultural establishment had long relegated them to pantomimes and farces, in comic and burlesque roles. Examples include Harlequin's vicissitudes in the pantomime *The Enchanted Castle* (1786) by Miles Peter Andrews, or James Cobb's *The Haunted Tower* (1789), where horrors and ghosts are presented in grotesque forms and as caricatures, to the end, not of scaring the public, but of inducing it «to laugh at them»[28]. In these and other similar cases, however, we are not dealing with a ridiculization of popular culture. Instead, latching on to Bakhtin's discourse on popular laughter, in my opinion the dynamics here are the opposite, with an attempt to *admit* and *keep alive* aspects of unofficial culture *even in* discourses and spheres where they are normally not allowed: another cornerstone of the fusion of the "lofty" and the "lowly" that the Gothic genre encourages and achieves[29].

In his address «To the Reader», Lewis dwells at length on his decision to depict the ghost in his full, physical, disquieting form. He replies, not without irony and almost with condescension, to the recurrent objections raised against him. The first was a cultural one: «Against my spectre – he says – many objections have been urged: one of them I think rather curious. She ought not to appear, because the belief in Ghosts no longer exists!» (p. 223). An accusation that Lewis turns against its authors using the very same reasons they adduce:

> In my opinion, this is the very reason why she *may* be produced without danger; for there is now no fear of increasing the influence of superstition, or strengthening the prejudices of the weak-minded (p. 223).

The second objection regards, more in general, what was deemed fit for a "serious" theatre show:

> Never was any poor soul so ill-used as Evelina's, previous to her presenting herself before the Audience. The Friends to whom I read my Drama, the Managers to whom I presented it, the Actors who were to perform in it – all combined to persecute my Spectre, and requested me to confine my Ghost to the Green-Room (p. 224).

This is the most determined attack, but Lewis is undaunted, convinced of the choice and the dramatic necessity with regard to the plot: «Aware that without her my catastrophe would closely resemble that of the Grecian Daughter, I persisted in retaining her». He supports her, above all,

[28] THORP (1928, 476).
[29] BAKHTIN (1984, *passim*); see also SILVANI (2007, 15f.).

because she has gained the almost enthusiastic approbation of the only subject that really counts in his novelist and playwright's eyes, his public:

> The event justified my obstinacy: The Spectre was as well treated before the curtain as she had been ill-used behind it; and as she continues to make her appearance nightly with increased applause, I think myself under great obligations both to her and her representative (p. 224).

Notwithstanding Lewis's self-assured and well-argued defense, and the public's appreciation, this form of supernatural was not as common as one may expect among the major authors of Gothic plays of the turn of the eighteenth century[30]. This apparent contradiction can possibly be explained if we subsume the *market success* parameter within the broader notion of sociocultural *environment*; if, that is, we envisage a context subject to the action of complex forces, capable of amplifying the pressure of the *public's judgment*, but also of opposing and containing it, and thus of steering preferences of literary forms in a different direction than the expected one.

Lights (and shadows) of the stage

Undoubtedly, Lewis sets his stakes on spectacular *mises-en-scènes*, capable of eliciting surprise and wonder. His approach, to paraphrase a judgment running from Wordsworth to Hazlitt − originally intended as sarcastic and disparaging −, fit the taste of the time like a glove[31]. But that is not all: Lewis's works also fit perfectly with the new demands of the two principal London theatres, the "official" theatres operating under royal patent. In the early 1790s, both had undergone major structural changes. In 1792, Covent Garden had been expanded and its capacity increased to 3013 spectators, about 15% more than after its renovation in 1782. In 1794, it was Drury Lane's turn to be totally renovated and have its capacity increased to something between 3600 and 3900 spectators, from the previous 2300. This change in scale also affected the relationship between the public and the stage, as well as the form of the stage itself, which became broader and deeper. These transformations thus had an immediate and direct impact on performing techniques, dramatic composition, and scenery. Covent Garden and Drury Lane became «theatres for spectators rather than playhouses for hearers», where «the splendour of scenes, the ingenuity of the machinist and the rich display of dresses […] supercede[d] the labours of the poet»[32]. Authors writing for the official theatres, the cathedrals of "spoken drama", soon began to turn for inspiration to technical devices commonly adopted in "minor houses". These irregular theatres hosted equestrian performances, pantomimes, and operas, and had hence learned to make ample and skilled use of music, light,

[30] The next significant paradigm shift, the rise of scientific monstrosity, came much later, with Frankenstein and his creature.
[31] «Fitting the Taste of the Audience Like a Glove»: HAZLITT (1823, 294).
[32] COX (1992, 9).

gesture, and a scintillating scenery. In this regard, Lewis was a fundamental *trait d'union*, because through his plays «[t]he increasingly popular fare of the "illegitimate" theaters crossed over […] to the immense stages of the "legitimate" theaters. His melodramas blurred the boundaries between the two at a crucial moment of flux»[33].

Yet another commixture, then, which was soon perceived as dangerous and corrupting. The predictable consequence was a radicalization of positions, whereby «the "legitimate" drama − primarily tragedy and comedy of manners − came to be seen not only as the legally protected form of the spoken drama controlled by the patent theatres but also as an embodiment of traditional, moral, cultural, and social values». On the contrary, «the "illegitimate" drama was […] felt to be not only a threat to aesthetic quality − as pantomimes or equestrian spectacles edged Shakespeare or Congreve from the stage − but also as a challenge to the political and cultural order»[34].

As suggested at the beginning of this analysis, there is a deep-running logic behind the different trends and forms of the Gothic drama, especially in the nineties of the eighteenth century.

Boaden and Lewis's productions, with their singular plots, define two different perimeters, two non-coinciding spaces; and yet, they ultimately share a common destiny. Lewis and his contemporaries and successors North, Baillie, Colman, Maturin, etc. created a diversified genre, but one that was anchored to some basic principles − the reformulation of the figure of the villain, the hybridization of language and genres, and theatricality − which in the short run was able to stand up against the prescriptions of critics and authors bound to a controversial idea of tradition, rationality and decorum, and succeeded in winning over a large and even enthusiastic public. In the long run, however, it was sociocultural censorship that prevailed and condemned this type of theatrical production to the oblivion of forgotten literature. This was a vast and multifaceted body of theatre, in some cases spectacular and having a literary quality of its own. Its flame, dispersed in other genres or left smoldering under the ashes of time, when appropriately kindled has still proved capable of flaring up with a glow of surprise and the warmth of novelty[35].

Significantly, the Gothic novel did not share the Gothic drama's fate. Unfettered by the hampers of verisimilitude and a rigid respect of rules of formal consistency and moral irreproachability, it continued to regenerate itself and blend fear and desire, lending substance and a voice to irrationality and menace. It is an inexhaustible and vital literary form, whose metaphors at once express and conceal dangerous charm and charming danger[36]. *Gothic flames, critical furors.*

[33] GLANCE (n.d., 3).
[34] COX (1992, 11).
[35] SAGLIA − SILVANI (2005, 12f.).
[36] For an in-depth examination of these aspects, see MORETTI (1987, 104-37).

Paolo Pepe

Università Telematica e-Campus

Facoltà di Lettere

Via Isimbardi, 10

I – 22060 Novedrate (CO)

paolo.pepe@uniecampus.it

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