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The Gothic as a mimetic challenge in two post-*Otranto* narratives

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Abstract

This article examines the Gothic project of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and two texts which engage the novella, Robert Jephson's 1781 tragedy *The Count of Narbonne* and M. R. James's 1923 ghost story "The Haunted Dolls' House", as works which in different ways handle the mimetic potential inherent in this project. A distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic types of mimesis is proposed and then used to address the realistic claims that these works make. The argument is put forward that the two post-*Otranto* texts are attempts to add a dimension of realism – that is to say, relevance – to Walpole's medieval fantasy.

Résumé

Cet article analyse le projet gothique du Château d'Otrante et de deux autres textes liés au roman de Walpole, d'une part une tragédie de 1781 de Robert Jephson, The Count of Narbonne, et d'autre part une histoire de fantômes de M.R. James de 1923, « The Haunted Doll's House », qui retravaillent l'un et l'autre le potentiel mimétique inhérent au livre de Walpole. L'article s'appuie sur une distinction entre formes intrinsèques et extrinsèques de mimésis afin de discuter les ambitions réalistes de ces œuvres. Il défend la thèse que les deux textes inspirés du Château d'Otrante sont des tentatives de greffer une forme de réalisme –et partant de pertinence– sur la fantaisie médiévale de Walpole.

Keywords

Gothic fiction, Gothic drama, ghost story, mimesis, mimetic content, intrinsic mimesis, extrinsic mimesis

Introduction: mimesis and Walpole's Gothic project

In this article, we are concerned with the Gothic manner of handling the pictorial qualities of fiction, qualities which we shall be referring to as mimetic. The Gothic is here treated as a literary project rather than a product. From the mode's or genre's inception with *The Castle of Otranto* (1764/1765), it was subject to negotiations and redefinitions. Some of the defining concerns were about the status of the supernatural; others, the justifiable proportion between what is shown and what is hidden from view. The manner in which Ann Radcliffe founded her aesthetic of terror – where terror is to be sharply distinguished from horror – on the idea of obscurity is evidence of how serious these concerns were (for the idea of Radcliffe's aesthetic see Norton, chapter 6). The transference of the genre from the written page to the stage made authors, critics, and the public even more acutely aware of the aesthetic and moral implications of the Gothic project.

Thus, if an author decided to have a ghost in her story, this decision was seen as one involving making a number of ideological commitments. Here are some of the questions that needed to be answered: What moral justification can be provided for introducing a spectre? How much of this supernatural content will actually be shown, or be allowed to appear? How should this appearance, given the ideological risks involved, be used to the most advantage? In other words, if there have to be terrors, then: Are these terrors justified, and how are they to be handled so that they are most effective? For Radcliffe, the method of "explaining the ghosts away" evidently seemed like an excellent solution, a way to keep the terrors without having to assert the reality of their sources. Her method consisted in evading the risky moral (or "ideological") commitment involved in subscribing to an actual belief in the supernatural. However, novels such as M. G. Lewis's notorious *The Monk* – a romance born out of inspirations in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which fired the young author's imagination with imitative fervour (for a broader context, see Gamer 2002, 91) – were sufficient evidence that the obscurities and ambivalences so abundant in Radcliffe worked as powerful gaps which all but gasped to be filled out with mimetic substance.

Criticism has dealt with issues that we will address in this article; among them are genre diversification (Gamer 2002 and 2004) and the architectural context of the rise of the literary Gothic (Lindfield). The inherent adaptability of the Gothic for the stage – which will be our special focus – has also been tackled by critics (e.g. see Mydla 2011 for the applicability of the mimetic-diegetic distinction and Saggini, for the idea of "implicit theatricality" of Gothic fiction). Attention has been drawn to how Gothic drama itself breaks down into a number of different sub-genres depending – among other factors – on the manner of handling the supernatural.

However, researchers into the Gothic rarely find the idea of mimesis as such relevant, which may have to do with the term's ambiguity. Its use in some studies (e.g. Mydla 2011) requires further readjustments, which is what this article sets out to attempt. The method adopted here can be broken down into the following steps: 1. to review some existing definitions of mimesis and see how they can be applied to fiction; 2. to propose a distinction between two types of mimesis: intrinsic and extrinsic, and to combine it with the definitions; 3. to apply this distinction to Walpole's project of the medieval fantastic; 4. to use the idea of relevance with the aim to clarify the artistic decisions of writers who have engaged Walpole's project in two different ways, one being a stage adaptation and the other a short story with an element of pastiche. Chiefly, the distinction between the two types of mimetic content in fiction will be used here as a lens through which to look closely at the afterlife of *The Castle of Otranto* in the examples of two post-Walpolean works: Robert Jephson's theatrical

adaptation *The Count of Narbonne* and M. R. James's ghost story "The Haunted Dolls' House". After defining the mimetic in the proposed two senses, we shall be concerned with how other authors dealt with the problem which – on the evidence of his preface to the second edition of *Otranto* – Walpole dealt with when composing his medieval fantasy.

Since its appearance in Plato's dialogues,[1] the idea of mimesis has never stopped baffling theorists of literature, who have, however, repeatedly found it useful despite the inherent ambiguities attached to it. For instance, in his famous 1750 *Rambler* essay, Johnson (173–177) addresses the issue of representative fiction. Thus, while on the one hand he strongly advocates the aesthetic relevance of the mirror-up-to-nature metaphor ("It is justly considered as the greatest excellency of art, to imitate nature […]") as a means to curb the propagation of fictions which have their source in imagination alone, with no anchor in the realities of the social arena, or what he calls the "general converse and accurate observation of the living world" – "for when a man had by practice gained some fluency of language, he had no further care than to retire to his closet, let loose his invention, and heat his mind with incredibilities; a book was thus produced without fear of criticism, without the toil of study, without knowledge of nature, or acquaintance with life" – we at the very same time find him struggling to place moral restraints on imitation: "It is therefore not a sufficient vindication of a character, that it is drawn as it appears; for many characters ought never to be drawn […]." Placing Johnson's essay in the context of what has been called the "effulgence" of the Gothic (a word used by Robert Miles in the title of a chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, 2002), it is difficult not to associate the invention-pursuing author with Walpole and the idea of the "splendidly wicked" protagonist (Johnson, 176) with the type of villainy which became the staple of the Gothic.

Moreover, the imitation-representation distinction is in itself far from unambiguous, and the idea of "drawing characters from nature" is not a remedy. "Nature" as a source of portrayal can be regarded as a criterion, but at the same time the *manner* of representation is left out. After Plato, it seems obvious to regard drama as a genre that is "purely imitative" (Plato, 82) but the criterion of "who is the speaker," similarly, does not remove the problem of the relation between the representation and its object or model. It is to be to be kept in mind that mimesis has found a rightful place in narrative theory (see Genette 1983, 162 ff)[2] for the simple reason that artistic prose has – indeed, *has to* have – features which we regard as "imitative," "verisimilar," "pictorial," "showy," and "stagey," "scenic," and "immediate." As this vocabulary suggests, there is more than one way to define the mimetic qualities or properties of fiction.[3] At the same time, as Plato and Johnson remind us, purely aesthetic categories will not suffice; the *moral* concerns that mimesis raises make us aware that this idea cannot entirely be freed from that of *relevance*. To this latter idea we must and will return presently.

According to a distinction proposed by Matthew Potolsky, the Western literary tradition has inherited two

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1 In a summary offered by Harvey Yunis: "[…] discussing mimetic (representational) art in book 10 [of the *Republic*] and expanding his argument against Homer, Plato demonstrates the harm done to the city and the soul by the very process of poetic mimesis (595b–608b): poetic mimesis increases the soul's receptiveness
to and its appetite for the destructive pleasures (602b–606d)" (Yunis, 18).
2 Genette writes: "Up to the end of the nineteenth century, the novelistic scene is conceived, *fairly piteously*, as a pale copy of the dramatic scene: mimesis at two degrees, imitation of imitation" (Genette 1983, 173).
3 The most common understanding of mimesis defines it as "[a] theory of representation according to which an object is faithfully imitated or copied, with mirror-like accuracy. Literary *realism* in its conventional mode is often referred to as *mimetic* in that it creates the illusion in language of a faithful reflection of the world" (Castle, 316). Gerald Prince in his *Dictionary of Narratology* uses the term "enacting" to emphasise the distinction between showing and telling (Prince, 52).

conceptions of mimesis. "The first idea imagines that art reflects the world as it is, that it copies a material reality outside the work. The second idea defines art as a self-contained 'heterocosm' that simulates a familiar world, and in effect copies our ways of knowing and understanding things" (3). "These ideas," Potolsky goes on to explain, "entail significantly different assumptions about the relationship between art and human nature, in particular, about whether mimesis has its roots in nature and objective reality or in culture and custom" (3). Defined in these terms, mimeticity consists in representation. In the case of things that are accessible to sensory perception, perceptive qualities (colours, shapes, etc.) are transferred to the artwork by means that are specific to a particular form of art. This idea of mimesis is *extrinsic*: in order to assess the (degree of) mimeticity of a work, we need to go beyond that work, as it were, and compare its content to its model or archetype in the reality external to it. For instance, a piece of fiction is realistic because its readers recognise in it a faithful and compelling representation of the world in which they live.[4] The other idea can be called *intrinsic*; mimesis is here defined according to features that do not make it necessary for readers to go beyond the content of the work.

Moreover, the medium of artistic expression plays a great role. The staging and performance of a play and a film will be regarded as *more* mimetic than a purely narrative representation of the same narrative. This is so because the media – the theatre and the screen – are more realistic than conventional storytelling, founded purely upon a mode of artistic expression. A crude but helpful way of distinguishing between these two types of mimesis might be to call the extrinsic type the "what" idea; what matters here is the to-be-shown object. The intrinsic type revolves around the manner of representation, or the "how"; what matters here is the method or mode of showing. While verbal storytelling has the potential to be extrinsically mimetic; in theatre and film, this potential is already present in the mode of representation itself. On the other hand, the theatre imposes upon a realist artist the task of adding a supplementary quality to the work in order to make it *relevant* to the audience. It is precisely this quality that early films lacked, even though the viewers were transfixed by the mimetic properties of the medium as such.

In his *The Craft of Fiction*, Percy Lubbock uses the showing-telling distinction known from Plato to make the following point: "The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself" (Lubbock, 62; emphasis in the original; see also Genette 1983, 163 note 5). "Something to be shown" sounds like the simplest way to define mimetic content, corresponding to the idea of intrinsic mimeticity. It is still necessary to clarify the assumptions upon which this definition rests. First of all, showing presupposes perception, which, in its turn, presupposes what phenomenology describes as an act of perception. In its model form, an act of perception is constituted by three elements: the perceiving subject, the perceived object and the act of intentionally grasping an object. In the case of fiction, the so-called implied reader is of course the subject; the object is *shown* to this reader through what Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden calls "aspects" ("*wyglądy*" in Polish, or the "appearances" through which objects are presented to the reader; see Mydla 2014, 157). In the case of drama, the role of the perceiving subject is performed by the spectator or the audience during a live performance of a play. The idea of "aspects" presupposes the act of perception performed by the reader and/or the fictional character. These aspects are to be regarded as sensory impressions which allow the immersion of the reader in the portrayed reality. Without

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4 This idea of mimesis is similar to the so-called classical conception of truth, where truth is conceived as correspondence between a state of affairs in the real world and a sentence which describes that state of affairs.

them, immersive reading of fiction would not be possible because the fictive world would make no appeal to the imagination of the reader.

The properties that render a passage mimetic in the pictorial sense have to do, as Genette points out, with detail, the matter that creates "a realistic effect" (Genette 1990, 49).[5] Understood in this sense, mimeticity is graded; this is to say that pictorial representations are mimetic in greater or smaller degree depending on the features intrinsic to the mode of representation. In the terms proposed by Ingarden, the realistic effect is produced by those properties of the narrative text which make an appeal to – or activate – the sensory imagination of the reader. As we have mentioned, Ingarden finds these properties in a distinct layer, or "stratum", of the literary work.

The following further observations are to be made in addition to the definitions and distinctions just proposed:

1. The idea of showing, when we put it back in its original Platonic context, makes us think of a piece of fiction in terms of the stagey qualities that it might possess, the to-be-shown content or the aspects-layer. A piece of fiction is here conceived as a spectacle, at least potentially: the features that matter are those which it would be possible to carry over to the stage, to put on display in the literal sense of the word.

2. The word "showing", with its suggestion that preference has been granted to vision, has to be regarded as a synecdoche. The idea of aspects in fact covers the different types of sensory perception.

3. Dialogue – which is not only a dramatic but of course also a narrative mode of representation – falls under the category of showing. Representations by dialogue are, after Plato, imitative, and thus – somewhat paradoxically – distinct from telling, or representations in the mode of simple narration. Dialogic passages in fiction, so abundant in *The Castle of Otranto*, are in that sense dramatic passages and are to be thought of as imitative in that the narrator, as it were, gives the initiative over to the characters, who are shown as partakers in a dramatic situation. Occurring both in drama and in fiction, such passages are scenes inasmuch as they represent live verbal interaction.

4. A further way to define showing is through the category of pace or speed (Genette 1983, 94). We might call this definition time-mimetic and speak about *temporal* mimeticity as distinct from its pictorial variety. By convention, a dialogue is a scene in this temporal sense: the time of narrating through dialogue is identical to the time of reading. Alternatively, it takes as much time for a scene to *happen* as it does to represent it on stage or read it. While every dialogue is a scene, not every scene is a dialogue, because not every non-dialogic scene in that narrow sense will necessarily be mimetic.

Walpole's argument in the second preface (or preface to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, 1765) allows us to regard the novel as conceived in the extrinsic mode of mimesis. It has been written in defiance of

5 Genette is indebted to Roland Barthes and his essay "The reality effect" ("L'effet du réel" [1968]; see Todorov). The idea of the "reality effect" falls under the category of intrinsic mimesis. Mimeticity here is free from the idea of correspondence between representation and the represented object. Besides, the reality effect may be enhanced by the narrative mode called internal focalization. In *The Castle of Otranto* there are fine specimens of this; for instance, the episode that recounts Isabella's escape through "subterraneous passages" (Walpole, 27 ff).

realism defined as "a strict adherence to common life" (Walpole, 9). However, Walpole insists that – despite his rejection of the strictures of realism – he has endeavoured to imitate, or "copy", nature ("Nature was my rule", 10), and possibly succeeded in the attempt. In stating that he has his story's protagonists act in a psychologically compelling manner ("he [the author] wishes to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women do in extraordinary positions", 10), regardless of the extraordinary circumstances (e.g. encounters with ghosts and exposure to other supernatural phenomena), he moves away from extrinsic mimesis and towards the intrinsic counterpart. There is, in other words, nothing in the reality out there (and never has been) that could be used as a model for the situations the reader will encounter in his story. This is confirmed by the statement that – as far as the "conduct" of his "actors" is concerned, he "copied" Shakespeare, "that great master of nature", rather than "nature".

Frantic mimesis: pictures and statues from *Otranto* to *Narbonne*

Walpole's preoccupation with the Middle Ages, expressed in his project of reconstructing Strawberry Hill, found its artistic outlet in the medieval fantasy of *Otranto*. Notably, the novel had its origin in a dream vision. In a letter (to Cole, March 9, 1765), Walpole gave this description of his dream: "I thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story) and that on the uppermost banister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening I sat down and began to write, without knowing in the very least what I intended to say or relate." (quoted in Kallich, 101).

The fantastic birth of the story evidently tends to fire up the imagination of scholars and biographers, similarly to the circumstances surrounding the birth of S. T. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" ("Kubla Khan; or, A Vision in a Dream: A Fragment") and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Biographer R. W. Ketton-Cremer writes: "it arose from a dream [;] the fantasy of an exhausted brain, and unearthly impulse of the original dream still lingers" (Ketton-Cremer, 192). The critic goes on to add: "This strange story, which flared up so suddenly and inexplicably in his brain, meant a great deal to Walpole. So far it was his only sustained piece of purely creative writing, and was all the more important to him for that reason" (Ketton-Cremer, 193). It is obvious that what we are dealing with here is a work of an intrinsic mimetic quality: a compelling, mind-arresting ("surrealist") visual feast and feat, without any anchoring in actuality. The following summary of *The Castle of Otranto* by Ketton-Cremer can be seen as an attempt to bring out the manner in which the narrative remains faithful to its original impulse:

> Walpole has been described as 'perhaps the first surrealist writer': and the atmosphere of *The Castle of Otranto*, with the unreason and exaggeration of its events, the nightmare juxtaposition of unrelated objects, the vast helmet that descended on the little prince, the gigantic leg in the gallery and the gigantic hand on the banister, is decidedly surrealist. The story sums up all the fantastic possibilities inherent in the Gothic style. The giant helmet falls from the skies, the portrait walks sighing from its frame, unexpected paternities are acknowledged and dreadful injustices are plotted, and finally the Castle of Otranto is burst asunder by Alfonso's enormous spectre, as though it had been as fragile as Strawberry. It is all absurd and nonsensical, and oddly exciting to read. (Ketton-Cremer, 193)

This summary makes it abundantly obvious that spectacle – and a spectacle that has possibly gotten out of control – is the overriding logic of the plot of *Otranto*. The critic stresses the "surrealism" and "fantastic possibilities", and these phrases indicate the rule of unreason and a concentration on the image. As the epigraph from Horace emphasises, this assortment of images, arranged in succession, does not necessarily add up to a totality that is plausible or relevant to the reader.

It is noteworthy that Walpole never concealed his interest in drama (for a broader aesthetic context, see my *Spectres of Shakespeare*; Mydla 2009, 119 ff). On the contrary, already in the 1764 preface to *The Castle of Otranto* he suggests: "It is a pity that he [the author] did not apply his talents to what they were evidently proper for, the theatre" (7). This might be understood as a hint that *Otranto* possesses features which make it supremely suitable for stage representation (see Mydla 2009, 167–168). It is indeed true to say that *Otranto* meets all the criteria of *intrinsic* mimeticity. Paradoxically, the bizarrely mundane conduct of the ghosts (as in this passage: "The spectre marched sedately, but dejected, to the end of the gallery, and turned into a chamber on the right hand", 26) serves to enhance rather that to impair the reality effect.

There is also ample evidence of Walpole's interest and personal involvement in the continuance of the venerable tradition of so-called legitimate drama in a period in which this tradition was threatened by new forms of theatrical entertainment. In 1775, he addressed "Thoughts on Tragedy in Three Letters" to "the author of *The Count of Narbonne*," i.e. Robert Jephson. Walpole lent a costume from his Strawberry Hill collection to an actor who played Austin, one of the protagonists of *The Count* (Ranger, 71). There even ensued a quarrel between Walpole and Jephson about the position which the statue of Alphonso ought to assume. We will take this disagreement as a clue as to the role played by this image in both Walpole's narrative and its stage adaptation.

Put in the terms we have proposed, the outstanding and defining qualities of *Otranto* are dramatic, that is to say, mimetic in at least one of the meanings we have enumerated. What we have regarded as the work's intrinsic mimeticity is not – given the larger cultural context in which the theatre of the time functioned – to be regarded as facile transferability from page to stage. Some of the genre-defining scenes in *Otranto* could not be put on the London stages of the turn of the eighteenth century, and not for technical reasons. This can be seen in the example of the handling of that Gothic-defining component, the supernatural (Mydla 2009, 187–188).

Jephson's adaptation capitalises on those Gothic features in the source narrative that it was acceptable to put on stage. The play, in other words, uses the mundane means as a vehicle for suggestions of supernatural terrors and a supernatural agency at work in the plot. Typical for Gothic plots, the narrative interest is directed towards the past and its mysteries: the circumstances of Alphonso's death and the manner in which power ("the castle and lordship", Walpole, 17) was intercepted by the Count's (play) / Manfred's (novel) ancestor. The spectral presence of the past is maintained for the duration of the plot and the means to this end is the pictorial representation of "the good Alphonso." There is a picture in the inset narrative which – in the play – recounts the dying moments of the Count's father.

Let us analyse two episodes, which will allow us to see more clearly the functioning of mimesis is this particular cultural context. The first occurs at the beginning of Act V, a moment which draws its significance

from the function of awakening the past. This is no mere metaphor: the "shade" of the departed patriarch, "the good Alphonso", assassinated by the father of the current ruler of Narbonne, haunts both Walpole's narrative and Jephson's tragedy. This manner of spectrally sustaining the presence of the dead is the hallmark of the Gothic mode in both fiction and drama (Mydla 2009, 184). In *Otranto* we find the following passage:

> [...] Jerome, and part of the troop, who had met an imperfect rumour of what had happened, entered the chamber. Manfred advanced hastily towards Frederic's bed to condole with him on his misfortune, and to learn the circumstances of the combat, when starting in an agony of terror and amazement [at the sight of the armour-clad Theodore], he cried, Ha! what art thou? thou dreadful spectre! is my hour come? – My dearest, gracious Lord, cried Hippolita, clasping him in her arms, what is it you see? Why do you fix your eye-balls thus? – What! cried Manfred breathless – dost thou see nothing; Hippolita? Is this ghastly phantom sent to me alone – to me, who did not – For mercy's sweetest self, my Lord, said Hippolita, resume your soul, command your reason. There is none here, but us, your friends. – What, is not that Alfonso? cried Manfred: dost thou not see him? Can it be my brain's delirium? – This! my Lord, said Hippolita: this is Theodore, the youth who has been so unfortunate – Theodore! said Manfred mournfully, and striking his forehead – Theodore, or a phantom, he has unhinged the soul of Manfred. – But how comes he here? and how comes he in armour? (Walpole, 82–83)

Typically of the novella, this is a scene. The mode of narration here is the dialogue. This virtually uninterrupted exchange is in places confusing to the reader, due to the wildness of the overall effect. The accompanying comments serve the purpose of rendering the situation more vivid still, as in this passage, which supplies the aspects: "said Manfred mournfully, and striking his forehead [...]." To put this differently, we have here an episode of superlative immersive mimeticity, coupled with the presence of the past in the form of the armour and the pictorial resemblance between Theodore and his ancestor as immortalised in the statue.

In Jephson, Theodore, "the grandson of good Alphonso, / And Narbonne's rightful lord", also comes on the stage clad "in armour". For the Count this scene is also one of ghostly encounter. The Count addresses the armour-wearing Theodore in words which – due to their Shakespearean ring – have been traditionally reserved for encounters with the supernatural:

> Are miracles renew'd? / Art thou not risen from the mould'ring grave? / And in the awful majesty of death, / 'Gainst nature, and the course of mortal thought, / Assum'st the likeness of a living form, / To blast my soul with horror? [...] / Alphonso. / His form, his arms, his air, his very frown. / Lord of these confines, speak, declare thy pleasure! [...] / Ha! Theodore? / This sameness, not resemblance, is past faith. / All statues, pictures, or the likeness kept / By memory, of good Alphonso living, / Are faint and shadowy traces, to this image. (Act V, Sc. 1)

Somewhat inconsistently, the repeated emphasis on pictorial identification ("his form, his arms, his air, his very frown"; "this sameness, not resemblance") provides the much-needed verbal confirmation of the to-be-attained visual effect. It is as though the stage representation were deficient in the department in which it alone was expected to reign supreme.

Finally, vividly and impressively, the setting is laid for the ultimate scene of the tragedy (Act V, Sc. 3). This is a scene of spectral retribution, in which the titular Count takes his own life after he has unintentionally killed his own daughter, Adelaide. This killing may not seem plausible, yet the logic of the plot requires human sacrifice if the ghosts of the forefathers are to be laid to rest. Moreover, in the play – the playwright carefully avoiding the representations of the supernatural – the *statue* of Alphonso, the "martyr", presides over the final act of administering justice. The stage directions which open the scene read as follows: "The inside of a Convent, with Aisles and Gothic Arches; Part of an Altar appearing on one side; the Statue of ALPHONSO, in Armour, in the centre. Other Statues and Monuments also appearing. ADELAIDE veiled, rising from her knees before the Statue of ALPHONSO." In his introduction to a collection of Jephson's plays, James Maynard explains: "The scene was constructed with the statue of Alphonso recumbent on his tomb. Jephson wanted it erect. Walpole maintained that it was more authentic as it was and that in any case there was no time to correct the matter" (Maynard, xiv). This singular argument makes us aware of the role of stage design in the drama of the period. It makes us see the growing role of the visual-mimetic component.[6] At the same time, it emphasises the role that this component played in *Otranto* as *the* blueprint Gothic narrative, regardless of the influence of the Hamlet ghost on Walpole and of the dream-vision origin of the original narrative.

Towards the end of *Otranto* comes the spectacle which – regarded in purely technical terms – fulfils the pictorial promises of the prophecy: "A clap of thunder at that instant shook the castle to its foundations; the earth rocked, and the clank of more than mortal armour was heard behind. […] the walls of the castle behind Manfred were thrown down with a mighty force, and the form of Alfonso, dilated to an immense magnitude, appeared in the centre of the ruins" (112). This climactic pageant-like celebration of the retributive victory of supernatural powers over human is not to be found in Jephson's adaptation. What we do find there instead is terrors produced by mundane means. There is also a plea for tears of pity over a scene of domestic catastrophe. The dying words of the Countess fully become the tragic mode the playwright had chosen for his adaptation:

COUNTESS. [After looking some time

distractedly.] –

Where am I? Ruin, and pale death surround me.

I was a wife; there gasping lies my husband!

A mother too; there breathless lies my child!

Look down, oh Heaven! look down with pity on me! –

[…] Hear me, great God of Nature!

[…]

Release thy poor, afflicted, suffering creature;

Take me from misery, too sharp to bear,

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6   In the most general terms, the tendencies amidst which Gothic drama developed were towards the visual and away from the verbal. Writes Ranger: "Spectacular settings, elaborate costumes and the colourful effect of massed gatherings added zest to the gothic drama" (Ranger, 75). The patent playhouses of Covent Garden and Drury Lane, especially after extensive rebuilding, which considerably enlarged both the auditorium and the stage, became, in the words of Richard Cumberland, "theatres for spectators rather than playhouses for hearers" (quoted in Ranger, 88).

And join me to my child!

[Falls on the Body of ADELAIDE (Act V, Sc. 3)

In this lament of a distraught mother we may hear the voice of the playwright, whose desire is to invite the spectator into a bond of sympathy with the actors of the drama. This means endowing the spectacle with relevance, and thus indirectly vindicating the intrinsic mimeticity of Walpole's project by connecting it more firmly – through the figure of the bereft and lamenting wife and mother – to a human interest.

Ghosted mimesis: Strawberry Hill as a haunted dolls' house

In a 1929 text entitled "Some Remarks on Ghost Stories" (James 2009, 342–349), Montague Rhodes James had the following to say about *Otranto*: "*The Castle of Otranto* is perhaps the progenitor of the ghost story as a literary genre, and I fear that it is merely amusing in the modern sense" (343). In James's opinion Ann Radcliffe's handling of the supernatural was far more effective (her "ghosts are far better of their kind"), but he finds irritating her unwillingness to allow real spectres to roam her stories: "with exasperating timidity [the ghosts] are all explained away" (343). What in principle James objects to in Walpole is the temporal distance, which is too great to make the story effective: "It cannot be said too often that the more remote in time the ghost is the harder it is to make him effective […]" (350). In other words, James insists on a high degree of the mimetic (in the extrinsic sense) in a "ghostly" author's handling of the setting: "[…] the setting should be fairly familiar and the majority of the characters and their talk such as you may meet or hear any day. A ghost story of which the scene is laid in the twelfth or thirteenth century may succeed in being romantic or poetical; it will never put the reader into the position of saying to himself, 'If I'm not very careful, something of this kind may happen to me!'" (James 2009, 337–338; from the Preface to *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*). In a 1924 introduction to a collection of ghost stories, James similarly insists that "a setting so modern that the ordinary reader can judge of its naturalness for himself is preferable to anything antique. For some degree of actuality is the charm of the best ghost stories; not very insistent actuality, but one strong enough to allow the reader to identify himself with the patient; while it is almost inevitable that the reader of an antique story should fall into the position of the mere spectator" (James 2009, 339–340).

In the terms proposed here, James censures the early Gothic project for lack of those elements which would make the fictions relevant to the reader, which would allow her to *identify* with the protagonists. It is to be noted that this idea, namely relevance, is contained in the term "patient", which is how James describes the "ghost-seer", or the figure who comes into direct sensory contact with the supernatural. Realistic setting, a setting that the reader would *recognise*, is the proper backdrop for this type of identification to occur, and thus, as a necessary element of *extrinsic* mimesis, must be regarded as conducive to relevance.

James did not only make direct and indirect comments on Horace Walpole's medieval fantasy in his theoretical writings, which contain these remarks on the ghost story as a literary genre and a variety of the Gothic. In one of his short stories, "The Haunted Dolls' House", James decided to play with Walpole's preoccupation with the Middle Ages. As a type of antiquarianism – which is in itself a classic Jamesian motif – that fascination found a quaint expression in Strawberry Hill, "the main interest, the central passion of his life" (Ketton-Cremer, 109; on the "Gothic" of Strawberry Hill, 137–142). As we have already hinted, "To a

great degree, Otranto and Strawberry Hill were identical. Walpole himself said so more than once" (Ketton-Cremer, 193). As biographical facts, the fascination and the identification may be of negligible importance for literary-critical analysis; yet what is worth inspecting is how a master ghost story author in the Gothic tradition has handled these motifs, and whether or not he has succeeded in making this quaint blending of the real and the imaginary relevant.

The scene that opens the story about a haunted dolls' house depicts a transaction. The titular object changes hands, which is often the case in James's stories, e.g. "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book" and "The Mezzotint," the latter story being – as James readily admitted – based on the same pattern as "The Haunted Dolls' House". Mr. Dillet, James's typical collector of antiquities, acquires the house convinced that the transaction is an almost unbelievable bargain. The dolls' house comes alive at night and the new owner is compelled to watch a succession of scenes. Predictably, an allusion to theatre is made later in the story, and – despite its jovial couching – the metaphor is a significant hint: "a regular picture-palace-dramar in reel life [sic] of the olden time, billed to perform regular at one o'clock A.M." (James 2006, 87). Haunting here has the form of being forced into the position of a passive spectator to some silent, rough-hewn dumb show. The pun reel/real suggests at once a primitive sort of movie and stresses its realistic properties.

On the first night following the purchase, having carefully unpacked the dolls' house and placed it near his bed, Dillet is awakened by "a bell tolling One". Of course, this bell is no part of *his* world; in fact, on a metafictional level, James engages here the well-established ghost story tradition, a tradition that originates upon the haunted battlements of Elsinore. Dillet is all but physically transported into another time-space, and the use of internal focalisation combined with an array of sensory aspects enhances the mimetic effect of the scene: "He seemed to be conscious of the scent of a cool still September night. He thought he could hear an occasional stamp and clink from the stables, as of horses stirring. With another shock he realised that, above the house, he was looking, not at the wall of his room with its pictures, but into the profound blue of a night sky" (James 2006, 82).

There are reasons to suspect that James has an intertextual joke in mind when he puts in the mouth of Dillet a comment on Horace Walpole and the latter's antiquarian preoccupation. The invasion upon the modern setting (Dillet's room, of course) of another time-space is for James as an occasion to engage the idea of Gothicness in its architectural and aesthetic senses. For this reason, the story itself assumes the meaning of a literary contest, one in which the proper handling of the mimetic component is at stake. It is Dillet himself who facetiously refers to the Gothic revival as represented by Walpole's "castle" at Strawberry Hill, a quasi-medieval residence and a fulfilment of the owner's wish to be transported into and inhabit a fantastic past world. Mr. Dillet murmurs to himself: "Quintessence of Horace Walpole, that's what it is: he must have had something to do with the making of it" (James 2006, 81). This is Dillet's impression upon unpacking the dolls' house and before finding, in the parish register, information suggesting that the "picture-palace-dramar" may *actually* have taken place in the year 1757. And so, indeed, perhaps Walpole did have something to do with *James's* idea. Bearing in mind James's distaste for the medievalism ("antiquity") of stories of the *Otranto* type, we might infer a rivalry of sorts going on here: instead of fantastic visions of pieces of gigantic armour flying about the place, James ousts Walpole and puts some "reel life of the olden time" into the mock Strawberry

Hill.[7] Moreover, there is a linking theme: that of ownership and appropriation, which connects the several stories: *Otranto* with its villain and usurper Manfred; the dolls' house drama with the poisoning of an old man, apparently the rightful owner of the property; finally, the fateful "bargain" that opens the dolls' house story. On top of it all comes a gesture of dispossession of Walpole by his literary successor M. R. James.

In his study of the classic ghost story, Jack Sullivan stresses the idea of distance: "James's narrators maintain an almost pathological distance from the horrors they recount" (82). This, in the opinion of the critic, allows us to speak of perceived elimination of direct experience of the supernatural. In other words, James's real ghosts – unlike those of Radcliffe – would be oddly absent. But there are reasons to regard this conclusion as hasty. To begin with, this argument confuses – it seems to me – mood and voice. The distance that James plays with in this story is that of perception and thus has to do with mood ("who sees") rather than voice ("who tells"; see Genette 1983, 161–162; Prince, 75–77).[8] This and similar passages place the emphasis firmly on perception, a degree of reticence on the part of the author/narrator notwithstanding. This "Gothic" use of ekphrasis, which characterises James's method in stories of this kind, but is also found in crucial passages of *The Count of Narbonne*, adds a new meaning to embedding: the picture occupies the central position. The experience of the supernatural is mediated, to be sure, but retains the intensity of an unmediated impression, the kind of directness – at the very least – which we can reasonably expect in a ghost story. These technical considerations make us realise the extent of artistic adjustments undertaken by James in his renewed attempts to make *his* variety of the Gothic relevant to his contemporary readers.

"The Haunted Dolls' House" is thus to be seen as an intentional literary prank. There is an allusion to the dramatic (theatrical) qualities inherent in *Otranto* and inspirational for Jephson's adaptation. There is, however, also a conscious and polemical engagement of the mimetic potential of the original "Gothic story", evident in James's determination to probe the artistic boundaries of the genre, and to put to a test its moral commitments.

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7   It is difficult to say whether the ambiguity suggested by the spelling "reel"/"real" is intentional on the part of James. The former word suggests a motion-picture-like succession of scenes; this reading would enhance the realism of the show.

8   In the twin story, "The Mezzotint", the observers are brought into a relatively close visual contact with the supernatural, a typically horrific apparition, busy with the abduction of a child. James taunts the curiosity of the reader by making the narrator say: "what was *visible* made the *spectators* profoundly thankful that they could *see* no more than a white dome-like forehead and a few straggling hairs. […] the arms were tightly clasped over an object which could be dimly *seen* and identified as a child […]" (James 2009, 23; my emphasis).

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