Chapter 2: Gothic

GOTHIC THEATRE: ANTECEDENTS

The French Revolution brought inspiration to radicals and terror to conservatives: it also stimulated a new form of drama created by writers such as Jean-Nicolas Bouilly, who provided the story for Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, and the prolific René Charles de Pixérécourt, non-literary in conception and structure, able to handle revolutionary ideas and principles, and neither tragedy nor comedy. It provided a template for some British writers and theatre-makers who refashioned it in a British image as ‘Gothic’ drama, a new form, at least in embryo. British Gothic drama was also indebted to other influences, of course, most obviously the German *Sturm und Drang* drama of Schiller and von Kotzebue, as well as to the indigenous Gothic novels of Horace Walpole, Mary Anne Radcliffe and others.

GOTHIC CASTLES

But it was the French Revolution’s iconic moment – the storming of the Bastille – which provided British Gothic drama with its most potent image: the castle as prison to be broken open. Over and over again in plays like John Philip Kemble’s rendering of Fillette-Loraux’s *Lodoiska* (1794), Miles Peter Andrews’s *Mysteries of the Castle* (1795) and M.G. Lewis’s *The Castle Spectre* (1797), an old quasi-medieval castle is the setting for a terrifying, fast-paced adventure in which either a person, often female, or else a horrid secret, is kept, darkly imprisoned, and is somehow released.

Examples of these gloomy but terrifying castles abound. In Blue Beard’s castle, for instance, in George Coleman the Younger’s drama (1798), not only are the villain’s murdered wives immured, but also various ‘ghastly and supernatural forms’ underneath a sign written ‘in characters of blood’: ‘THE PUNISHMENT OF CURIOSITY’. In ‘Mrs Burke’s’ *The Ward of the Castle* (1793), Matilda and Jaquinetta are confined behind no fewer than eighteen iron locks.

The castles are usually possessed of dungeons, where the victims are held, as Reginald, Angela’s father, is held for sixteen years, in *The Castle Spectre*. There are also secret hiding-places in the castles, false doors and subterranean passageways, and these too feature repeatedly in the dramas – in *The Ward of the Castle*, for instance, Sir Bertram rescues Matilda after digging a tunnel into her dungeon.
SEA, MOONLIGHT, FORESTS

The settings may also expand to incorporate sea, moonlight and forests, as in William Dimand’s *The Foundling of the Forest* (1809), or H.M. Milner’s *Frankenstein* (1826) which takes the characters to ‘the heart of a gloomy and intricate forest’, or Edward Fitzball’s *The Devil’s Elixir* (1829), in which from the castle window are discerned ‘the tops of forest trees’. Through this same window, ‘flashes of lightning’ are visible. In George Blink’s *The Vampire Bride* (1830), there is ‘a dark cypress grove, (and) in the background a magnificent tomb. The moon gradually rising, clouds pass over her at intervals and obscure her light. Occasional peals of thunder (are) heard’.

THE VILLAIN

Isaac Pocock’s *The Miller and His Men* (1813) adds to forest and storm a gang of ‘Banditti’ who roam the night and skulk about in dark corners of the forest. This play also has a typically potent villain, Grindoff, whose evil intentions drive the story. Virtually every play has a similarly formidable villain who forms the hinge upon which the plot turns. In *The Castle Spectre* the villain is Earl Osmond; in Thomas Holcroft’s *Deaf and Dumb* (1801), he is Darlemon.

Such villains are often concealing a mysterious prisoner, as Osmond is concealing Reginald in *The Castle Spectre*. Or else they have a dreadful secret which they try to keep buried: the ‘pale and ghastly’ Lord Walter in *The Vampire Bride* hides his necromantic passion for his dead first wife, and Frankenstein hides the fact he has created a terrifying monster. But the past in such cases almost always reappears, as Frederick reappears in Elizabeth Inchball’s *Lover’s Vows* (1796).

DISGUISE AND MISTAKEN IDENTITY

These plays often employ the traditional theatrical devices of disguise and mistaken identity but with perhaps a new urgency as terror envelops the characters. Is the hero-villain of *The Miller and His Men* Grindoff or Wolf? Who is Guy Ruthven, ‘the outcast’ in Edward Fitzball’s *The Inchcape Bell* (1828), and what is his relation to the dumb sailor boy? In Jane Scott’s *The Old Oak Chest* (1816), Almanza disguises himself as a blind mendicant, and Rufus, Sahbrico and Lanfranco disguise themselves in ‘terrific dresses’.

THE SUPERNATURAL

The final critical ingredient in the Gothic drama is the supernatural, which takes the tale out of the everyday and introduces the sublime or the demonic. Sometimes this is no more than a shifting vision, as when the ship in Edward Fitzball’s *The Flying Dutchman* (1826) ‘becomes illumined with crimson fire’; sometimes it is a dream, as Francesco in *The Devil’s Elixir* dreams of the Shadow King and his accompanying imps, who drink from the boiling cauldron; and sometimes it is a devilish ritual, as in J.R. Planché’s *The Vampire* (1820), when the Spirit of the Flood is joined by the Spirit of the Air, and ‘they perform magical ceremonies’.

Most frequently, however, the supernatural dimension is supplied by the spectres, phantoms and ghosts who haunt these plays. In *The Castle Spectre*, ‘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'. In Charles Dibdin Jr’s Celtic An-Bratach, or the Cavern Spectre (1806), the ghost rises from the real water of the Sadler’s Wells’ tank, while in Elizabeth Polack’s St Clair of the Isles (1838), the spectre is ‘a figure wrapped in a grey mantle, with long white hair and beard’, which ‘glides along the top of the hills at the back’.

**INTENSITY AND FOCUS**

It is important to understand that on stage all this was played with unbounded intensity and focus, so that the audience willynilly was drawn into the action: empathy was key to its reception, and spectators felt physical fear – sweat, clenched muscles – as they watched. Terror of the unknown, the eerie, the bizarre gripped them.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL APPEAL OF GOTHIC DRAMA**

Gothic drama worked on a number of other planes, too, however. Psychologically, it allegorised fears and aspirations in often dream-like sequences, working on or dissolving hidden tensions and
Gothic
desires. Most obviously, the watcher identified with the imprisoned heroine: the prison then represented all that prevents self-fulfilment – inhibitions, low self-esteem, paranoia. The play subliminally released such tensions and brought, even if only momentarily, psychological liberation.

Audiences were carried along by the impassioned fervour of the action and often responded physically, weeping, clutching each other, and staring at the stage with eyes wide. The spectacle and the sensation were no mere accessories to the action; they were integral to the sense of the play and to the aim of removing the spectator into a realm of fantasy.

This could also embody the search for personal identity. In Harriet Lee’s *The Mysterious Marriage* (1798), the origins of both Rodolpho and Constantia are lost. Albert is married to Constantia but plotting to marry the Countess. The action unfolds so fast, as Albert betrays Constantia, the Count repulses his daughter’s pleas for pity, Constantia faints away and so on, that there is no time to reflect, to question what is happening, and the watcher is carried along on the surges of the plot’s twists. Empathy with the suffering characters is unquestioned and helped by the dream-like quality of the distant voices singing, the villagers just glimpsed on the vista stage, strewing flowers.

Self, gender and identity were dissolved in this world, and sexual frissons enjoyed, fetishised or indulged. In Planché’s *The Vampire*, Margaret must be married to Ruthven, the vampire, against her will: many women awaiting marriage must have worried about the man chosen for them, for in the imagination he might have seemed almost vampire-like. To complicate matters, she actually finds Ruthven, whom she fears, sexually attractive: she tingles at his approach. In several versions of *Frankenstein*, the hero has betrayed his wife and child and created a monster, which stands perhaps for adultery, or perhaps for the offspring of adultery, the bastard child. Yet the monster is gentle and pitiable.

**WOMEN IN GOTHIC DRAMA**

On the other hand, in Gothic drama there are also notably strong women, like Nancy in James Cross’s *Black Beard*, or The Captive Princess (1798) or Lady Roskelyn in Polack’s *St Clair of the Isles*. *The Mysterious Marriage* presents an unexpectedly resilient friendship between two self-possessed women.

**POLITICAL APPEAL OF GOTHIC DRAMA**

Gothic also speaks to the age politically, its agitations and tumults reflecting those in the political sphere. In an age when any overt political reference was disallowed by the censor, it is clear that the dingy castle may represent the old, rigid order which holds prisoner the young, the idealistic and the aspirational. The play then dramatises the overthrow of this old order, subverting social hierarchies and ushering in something new and hopeful. The villain stands politically for conservative tyranny, and what he represses is the threat of revolution or proletarian power.

Some Gothic plays ended in a celebration or Bacchanalian feast marking freedom gained, and these echoed the French revolutionary fêtes, as in James Cartwright Cross’s *Julia of Louvain* (1797), but more frequently the endings showed the heroine or the virtuous escaping, as in *The Ward of the Castle* when a boat appeared to transport Matilda and her maid away. ‘The Guards endeavour to seize them, but are too late’. And as the boat retreats they sing: ‘Blow as the winds may, here we’re free!’ This play has a not untypical fairy tale-like quality, too: the princess waits in a tower, locked up by her wicked guardian; she is rescued not by letting down her hair, as Rapunzel did, but by her prince digging a tunnel: she is immured – he will liberate her.
HOLCROFT’S A TALE OF MYSTERY

Many of the key facets of the Gothic drama are to be found in Thomas Holcroft’s pivotal play, A Tale of Mystery (1802). Adapted from Pixérécourt, the play boasts a gloomy castle, a wild landscape and an increasing storm. Selina is trapped in a promise to marry the villainous Romaldi’s son. Banditti have attacked Francisco in the depths of the forest and reduced him to literal dumbness.

The play made an immediate impression. The Times thought that ‘an entertainment more distinguished for novelty and interest, more happily composed of fable, incident, dialogue, music, dancing and pantomime, more decidedly sanctioned by the approbation of an audience, has never been produced on the English stage’, while The Monthly Mirror said at the end of many paragraphs, ‘The length of these observations testifies our sense of the merit of the entertainment. It is the most captivating which the stage has for many years exhibited’.1

COMPLEXITY IN A TALE OF MYSTERY

A Tale of Mystery is not as simple as this may suggest, however. Its ending is intriguingly ambivalent, with Selina and Francisco seeming to wish to care for the vanquished villain, Romaldi, rather than exact their revenge, hinting at a future based on reconciliation and mercy rather than punishment. And the scene of Francisco’s near-murder is an extraordinary theatrical tour de force, a dream-like sequence poised between mime and dance, and conducted through music:

(The stage dark; soft and solemn music. Fiametta enters, with Francisco and a lamp, which she places on the table. She regards him with compassion, points to his bedroom, then curtsies with kindness and respect, and retires, he returning her kindness. He seats himself as if to write, rises, takes the lamp. Looks round with apprehension, goes to the chamberdoor of Romaldi, starts away with horror, recovers himself, again places the lamp on the table, and sits down to write. The door of Romaldi opens; Malvoglio half appears, watching Francisco; but as he turns again retires.)

(Enter Selina, who gently pulls the sleeve of Francisco; he starts; but seeing her, is satisfied. Music pauses.)

SELINA (in a low voice): Dare not to sleep! I will be on the watch! Your life is in danger!


ROMALDI (to Malvoglio): Watch that entrance. (To Francisco.) Wretched fool! Why are you here?

(Music expressive of terror and confusion. Francisco starts up, seizes his pistols, points them towards Romaldi and Malvoglio, and commands the former by signs, to read the paper that lies on the table. Music ceases.)

ROMALDI (reads): ’Repent; leave the house. Oblige me not to betray you. Force me not on self-defence’. Fool! Do you pretend to command? (Throws him a purse.) We are two; take that, and fly. (Music.)

(Francisco, after a look of compassionate appeal, spurns it from him; and commands them to go. After which, sudden pause of music.)

ROMALDI (aside to Malvoglio): I know him; he will not fire.

(Music. They draw their daggers; he at first avoids them; at length they each seize him by the arm, and are in the attitude of threatening to strike, when the shrieks of Selina, joining the music, which likewise expresses terror, suddenly brings Bonamo, Stephano and servants through the folding doors.)

SELINA: Uncle! Stephano! Murder!

(Romaldi and Malvoglio, at hearing the noise behind, quit Francisco, and feign to be standing on self-defence. Music ceases.)
MELO-DRAME
The scene is claustrophobically tense. The audience’s held breath is almost palpable. What contemporaries noticed was Holcroft’s extraordinarily sophisticated use of music, which made the play into what he called a ‘melo-drame’, a drama with music. One commentator argued that the music by Thomas Busby actually ‘initiated both passion and action’. It conducted the events, it intensified the emotion and it gave the performance rhythm. The actors therefore were able to organise their performances around the music, acting sometimes with it, sometimes against it.

MUSIC IN A TALE OF MYSTERY
It was during this period, with the growth of melodrama, that audiences learned to read the kind of theatre music they were provided with, and indeed the reading itself became part of the pleasure of going to the theatre. Holcroft’s verbal descriptors imply the active part the music plays here – ‘Music to express contention’, ‘Music expressive of terror’, ‘Sweet music’, ‘Music expresses confusion; then ceases’. Busby’s compositions became themselves gestural, pointing the moment, or the action.

DUMBNESS ON STAGE
The effect was further enhanced because Francisco, the central character in A Tale of Mystery, was dumb – a silent protest, perhaps, against the patent laws which forbade speaking on stage, though the play was first staged at Covent Garden where speaking was allowed. In Deaf and Dumb, presented the year before A Tale of Mystery, Holcroft had used dumbness as a symbol for those without a voice, without a vote, and the same seems to apply here. Both plays concern the abuse of power, and in both, releasing the deaf and dumb person becomes a revolutionary act.

Dumbness also raises interesting questions about acting in Gothic drama. Before Holcroft’s two masterpieces, playwrights employed expressive stage directions, as in Lewis’s The Castle Spectre: Percy, ‘after walking a few turns with a disordered air, suddenly stops’, or Morton’s Speed the Plough: ‘Henry, in an agony of grief, turns away, strikes his forehead, and leans on the shoulder of Ashfield’. But Holcroft had assimilated some of the ideas about physical expressivity of Johann Caspar Lavater, best known for his theory of physiognomy, and also he probably shared the widespread view that language was most useful to prevaricate and deceive, whereas in silence there was truth. At any rate, after A Tale of Mystery, as the Gothic drama mutated towards melodrama, playwrights used dumb show to pinpoint determining moments, as in H.M. Milner’s Frankenstein:

Emmeline falls on the ground – the storm still continues to rage. The Monster enters in alarm and wonder, and stares wildly about him; at length perceives Emmeline extended on the ground – is struck with wonder, approaches and raises her; is filled with admiration; expresses that the rain occasions inconvenience, and that the lightning is dreadful, his pity for Emmeline being exposed to it, his wish to procure her shelter; at length he takes her up in his arms, and bears her off.

Some actors became highly skilled in conveying meaning through mimed action such as this, including Charles Farley, the original Francisco in A Tale of Mystery; Marie-Thérèse de Camp, who played
Theodore/Julio in *Deaf and Dumb*; and Henry Johnstone who played Champanzee in John Fawcett’s *Pérouse, or The Desolate Island* (1801).

**A DIONYSIAN DRAMA**

Gothic drama was thus something new: it mined the primitive side of human nature and gave space to the non-material, the unpredictable and the spiritual. It asked its audiences to identify with the persons of the play, and to suffer, thrill or shudder at the moment-by-moment fantasy it presented. And in its endings, it offered at least the illusion of liberation. Gothic drama made a clean break from the comedies of the Enlightenment, a Dionysian assertion of the power of the imagination and the validity of emotional experience.

**NOTE**