

Nova vrsta romanse: Volpolov nostalgичni spoj srednjovekovnog i savremenog

A new species of romance: Walpole's nostalgic fusion of medieval and modern

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Sažetak— Cilj rada je da rasvetli vezu između prošlosti i sadašnjosti ostvarenu u *Otrantskom zamku* Horasa Volpola (Horace Walpole), način na koji je ta veza uspostavljena, te udeo nostalgije u stvaranju gotskog romana nazvanog novom vrstom romanse. Horas Volpol bio je engleski plemić i kolekcionar fasciniran gotskom arhitekturom, srednjovekovnim životom i prošlošću uopšte. U ovom duhu napisao je 1764. godine svoj roman prvenac, *Otrantski zamak*, čiji značaj ne leži toliko u njegovoj umetničkoj vrednosti, koliko u činjenici da je u pitanju pionirski gotski roman iz kog su pisci crpili inspiraciju dugo nakon njegovog objavljivanja. Elementi poput smrti, ludila, propadanja, proročanstava i natprirodnih događaja koje je Volpol spojio u *Otrantu*, mogu se bez većih poteškoća uočiti u naučno-fantastičnim i delima horor žanra današnjice, prvenstveno u književnosti i kinematografiji, a zatim i u popularnoj kulturi uopšte. Imajući ovo u vidu, mišljenja smo da Otrantskom zamku valja posvetiti pažnju, čime bi se moglo doprineti potpunijem razumevanju savremenih umetničkih dostignuća nastalim po ugledu na njega, kao i obogaćivanju onih koja će tek uslediti.

Кljučне речи – gotski roman; gotika; prošlost; nostalgija; natprirodno

Abstract – This paper aims to shed light on the link between the past and the present established in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the way this link was formed, as well as the role of nostalgia in the creation of the new Gothic novel. Horace Walpole was an English nobleman and a connoisseur fascinated by the gothic architecture, medieval life and the past in general. In this spirit, in 1764, he wrote *The Castle of Otranto*, his seminal novel, the significance of which lies not in its artistic value, but rather in the fact this was a pioneering Gothic novel, which the writers drew heavily on long after its publishing. Elements such as death, madness, decay, prophecies and supernatural events, which Walpole made use of in *Otranto*, can be identified with no major difficulties in today's horror and science fiction works, primarily in literature and cinematography, but also within the domain of popular culture. With this in mind, we believe that giving *The Castle of Otranto* the attention it undoubtedly deserves would lead to a better understanding of the works it influenced as well as to the enrichment of the works to come.

Keywords – Gothic novel; Gothicism; past; nostalgia; supernatural

I. SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE GOTHIC

In the Enlightenment era¹, which placed great value on rational thought and common sense, experiments were both recommended and commended. Applied to literary works, this inclination to experiment influenced the birth of new literary forms while in everyday life it made the public eager for novelty. Along with the search for 'the new', there came a fascination with what may be called 'the old'. "Fostered by the historical tendency of the eighteenth century" (Raphael, 1964: 11), a revival of medieval interest was brought about. This enthusiasm for the ancient, together with the strive towards the modern ultimately resulted in a work which encompassed both the old and the new ideas— Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

The novel, which Walpole himself labelled *Gothic*², was seen as a response to the stern 18th-century literature of Rationalism, which, as Smith explained, negotiated "a series of Anti-Enlightenment themes" (2007: 18). Indeed, the most characteristic features of the Gothic genre such as the escape from reality (often into madness), resorting to mysticism, defying reason, blurring the line between life and death, etc. were not in fashion at the time. *Otranto* was quite conspicuous back then, since, unlike Walpole and a number of his friends, the modern 18th-century society allowed no room for the irrational, chaotic and "barbarous superstitions of Gothic devilism!" (Clery, cited in Jakovljević, 2015: 100). Yet, Walpole was a man ahead of his time (or, perhaps, behind?). Before publishing his seminal work, he devoted much of his time and money to the creation of his own Gothic castle. Gwynn points out in his *The Life of Horace Walpole* (1932) that his country house at Strawberry Hill was a great source of pleasure and pride for Walpole, as he repeatedly mentions in his letters to Thomas Gray and Horace Mann (103).

¹ The Enlightenment Era, also known as The Age of Reason, Rationalism and The Augustan Age was a movement in Western philosophy, literature and psychology that regarded reason as the chief source and test of knowledge. www.britannica.com. 6.9.2019.

² The definition of Gothic is related to medieval style of architecture or the horror and mystery depicted in fiction about the 18th and 19th centuries. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/> 6.9.2019.

This Gothicised 'cottage', as Walpole would call it in his correspondence, was, in reality, a sizeable castle which grew increasingly bigger through time. With its stained glass windows and its battlements, it may have represented for him a resort, an escape from the oppressive regularity of the outer world. It might even be seen as an expression of Walpole's suppressed nostalgia, his attempt to take hold of the past which he clearly preferred to his own sterile present. When he finally let *The Castle of Otranto* out into the world, he embedded in it a piece of his Strawberry Hill oasis given that the castle in the novel largely resembled his own Neo-Gothic home.

It comes as no surprise then, that the novel was not initially widely accepted. Even today, critics dispute the merit attributed to it, claiming that *Otranto* itself would never have reaped such an immense success had it not been published at the right moment. To their minds, Walpole's breakthrough was merely a corollary of Rationalism, which, attempting to restrain anything out of the ordinary managed only to provoke a rebellion against reason itself. Gerry Turcotte seems to agree to an extent; however, he does not diminish Walpole's achievement when he says that his contribution to the form "was a 'timely one'. He simply asserts that the shift in the spirit of the time was conducive to the positive reception of the novel, which came about when "the age itself was growing tired of the formal principles of Classicism" (Turcotte, 2009: 39). Edith Birkhead, in her pioneering work on Gothic literature, concludes that "the age was ripe for the reception of the marvellous" indicating that the supernatural had, even before Walpole, already begun to find its way back into literature especially poetry (Birkhead, 2012: 21). Here she recalls the works of Grey, Collins, Smollett and Macpherson, finding them quite similar to *The Castle of Otranto* in the choice of setting with their "heaths and lakes haunted by shadowy, superstitious fears" (Birkhead, 2012: 22).

1. The New Species of Romance

Graham (1999: 16) also commends Walpole's efforts, emphasizing that he opened the way for a new form of fiction. He names the new kind of fiction a *new species of romance*. Taking into consideration the ideas and the influences behind Walpole's novel, the title seems quite appropriate. In his preface (1765) to the second edition (which came to be regarded as a *manifesto* of the Gothic fiction), Walpole explains the process of writing the novel. In it, he reveals that his writing *The Castle of Otranto* was "an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern" (Walpole, 1765). He adds that in the former it was 'all imagination and improbability', while the latter intended—and sometimes managed—to copy nature with success. Since nature (that is, *sense*) was almost completely excluded from the 'ancient' novel, it took its revenge on imagination in the modern novel.

As Walpole states himself, he based *The Castle of Otranto* on the 'old' medieval romance, also known as *Chivalric* or *Arthurian romance*. In doing so, he skillfully avoided making his work a mere imitation of an obsolete literary form, thus concocting quite an innovative piece by mixing the 'old' with

the 'new' — the medieval tradition of the chivalric romance with the realism of the 18th-century novel.

II. FUSING THE MEDIEVAL AND THE MODERN

There are many aspects in which Walpole's new species of romance resembles the 'old', chivalric romance³. The traits which the 'hybrid' romance shares with its parent novel range from the language of the novel to the themes, characterization and motifs found within it. We encounter medieval on the very surface of *Otranto*, that is, in the style of language Walpole employs. Walpole makes use of archaisms and not only this, he also included the obsolete forms and meanings of certain words as well as archaic syntax. The following excerpt illustrates this well:

"'Villain! What sayest thou?' cried Manfred, starting from his trance in a tempest of rage, and seizing the young man by the collar; 'how darest thou utter such treason? Thy life shall pay for it.' [...] 'Villain! Monster! Sorcerer! 'tis thou hast done this! Thou hast slain my son!'" (Walpole, 1765: 9)

As can be seen above, instead of using 'you' as the second person singular pronoun, Walpole uses its obsolete form *thou*, used in Early Modern English. The structure '*How darest thou utter such treason?*' is also behind the times, the suffix *-est* for Middle English⁴ verbs (in third person singular of the present tense) having disappeared back in the 15th century (Đolić, 2002: 134). In the same manner, he uses *hast* and *thou*. Another form which might seem archaic is 'tis (it is), yet this form was not quite obsolete at Walpole's time given that we can find it even in the works of later writers, such as in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ("Tis the women's club-walking, Sir John." (Hardy, 2012: 10))

The archaic language is, naturally, not the only feature Walpole adopts from the old chivalric romances. The novel abounds in supernatural— prophecies, visions and divine intervention, and the unavoidable apparitions, giants and possessed objects, all of which were seldom excluded from the medieval literature. Prophecies were commonly given in the form of riddles and/or verse, and this is the case with *Otranto* as well.

"Where'er a casque that suits this sword is found,
With perils is thy daughter compass'd round;
Alfonso's blood alone can save the maid,
And quiet a long restless Prince's shade."

(Walpole, 1764: 114)

Symbols, omens and signs guide the reader throughout the work and aid the creation of suspense (another indispensable feature when it comes to Gothic literature). Owing to Walpole, all of these came to be adopted as a part of

³ Romance is the medieval genre "typically defined as a narrative about knightly prowess and adventure, in verse or prose, intended primarily for the entertainment of a listening audience" (Newstead cited in Heffernan, 2003: 4). One of the most popular kinds of romance was the *chivalric romance*.

⁴ Middle English is a term used to denote a period in the development of English from the 11th to the 15th century. (Đolić, 2002: 134)

the Gothic tradition and are still found in today's popular genres which stem from it (the horror, science fiction, thriller, and fantasy genres, to name a few).

Walpole's fusion of the ancient and the modern lies in the way he scattered the supernatural throughout the novel and then enwrapped it in the natural so that they made a balanced unity. For instance, Walpole combined essentially realistic characters with an unrealistic plot. He brings to the readers' attention that, in the novel, he introduced both the 'high' and the 'low' characters with different personalities. He says that allows him to contrast them in order to achieve a comic effect on the one side, as well as to allow the contrast between "the sublime of the one and the naiveté of the other [to] set the pathetic of the former in a stronger light" on the other side (Walpole, 1765).

Additionally, Walpole's noblemen (and noblewomen) possess qualities which could be seen in the characters of the Arthurian romances. The men are either diabolically cruel, selfish, manipulative and immoral or chivalrous, brave, pious and honourable. (Heffernan, 2003: 4) Manfred, the antagonist, displays the first qualities, being a typical villain who stops at nothing to get what he desires, while Theodore, a valiant youth is the noble and gallant hero of the story. In fact, we might say that Theodore represents the embodiment of the chivalric principles in the novel. In this respect, he is a foil, a counterpart of Manfred's whose maliciousness is amplified by Theodore's valour. The following passage serves as an illustration of this:

"The injustice of which thou art guilty towards me," said Theodore, convinces me that I have done a good deed in delivering the Princess from thy tyranny. May she be happy, whatever becomes of me!" (Walpole, 1765: 79)

The Arthurian romance, upon which Theodore's character is based, is "typically defined as a narrative about knightly prowess and adventure" (Newstead cited in Heffernan, 2003: 4). Accordingly, Theodore is both chivalrous and fearless and we might say that his story could be described as a succession of adventures. Charlotte Loiseau provides a fairly precise description of his character when she calls him "a hyperbolic medieval hero" (2012: 24). She also seems to be hinting at the link with the 'old' kind of romance by bringing attention to his exaggerated virtuosity and impeccable courteous behaviour. Theodore's conduct towards the women of the *Otranto* is also significant, as it allows for a more complete understanding of his character and brings us to yet another theme of the 'old romance' which Walpole adopted— courtly love. To the young women in the novel, Theodore represents 'a knight in shiny armour' and Bianca, the maid, speaks for all the women when she says:

"He is as comely a youth as ever trod on Christian ground: we are all in love with him: there is not a soul in the castle but would be rejoiced to have him for our prince" (Walpole 1765: 172).

This infatuation of the female characters with Theodore does not deter him from his love for Matilda, Manfred's daughter. Theodore convinces the readers of his veracity and the strength of his character by rejecting Isabella as she

professes her love for him. As tempting as Isabella may be in her beauty, Theodore "drawing a deep sigh" rejects any intimation of love between them. We learn from his carefully chosen but unambiguous words, that "beauteous and all perfect" as Isabella might be, "his soul is dedicated to another" (Walpole, 1766, p. 122).

Still, the hero worships his object of affection from afar; he is never abrupt, insistent or inappropriate. Accordingly, his beloved, Matilda, loves him in return in the same concealed manner. She also reminds us of the female characters from the old romances when she delivers the hero from her father's wrath thus aiding him 'on his quest'.

Another conspicuous similarity between the new species of romance and its predecessor is the pervasive male domination. Manfred, being a man and an aristocrat, represents the highest authority in the novel and is never to be questioned. In his conduct towards his servants and family, he is impetuous and tactless. He is commanding and uses imperatives more than any other character in addressing his subjects: "Speak, infernal spectre!", "Tell me truly; thy life depends on thy veracity!", "...answer; for the other fool seems more distracted than thou art" (Walpole, 1765: 20, 32, 33).

Additionally, in order to highlight the dominance and the 'autocratic rule' of the male, Walpole introduces his female counterpart— Manfred's wife Hippolita— whose loving and forgiving nature serves to amplify her husband's tempestuousness. She is blind for her husband's flaws, and her devotion to Manfred overshadows even her love for her only child. The following paragraph provides an illustration:

"Oh! Matilda, this stroke is too heavy for thee! Weep not, my child; and not a murmur, I charge thee. Remember, *he is thy father still!*" "But you are my mother too," said Matilda fervently; "and you are virtuous, you are guiltless! Oh! must not I, must not I complain?"

(Walpole, 1765: 150-151)

From this peculiar treatment of patriarchal power in romances springs yet another distinctive feature of the later Gothic novels and at the same time represents another example of Walpole's fusing the old and the new. It is the specific representation of female characters who, helpless, naïve and submissive are usually persecuted or tormented by a heartless male tyrant.

For instance, Matilda and Hippolita are threatened by Manfred and are completely dependent upon him. They must accept the decisions that Manfred makes on their behalf— Hippolita has to consent to divorce him, while Matilda must accept marrying one she does not love.

Ultimately they pay this submissiveness with their lives— figuratively speaking when it comes to Hippolita, but quite literally when it comes to her daughter, who dies at the hands of her own father. The story ends, yet the good are not rewarded, as one might expect. In this, Walpole strayed away from his medieval 'role model' in which a happy ending would often celebrate the triumph of good over evil.

III. CONCLUSION

Horace Walpole's nostalgic surge into the past resulted in a rich literary tradition. His peculiar interests, scorned upon at the time, compelled him to tailor a new literary form according to his own taste. Despite having been mostly criticized by the intellectual elite of the time, this new form turned out to be what most of the society craved, having grown disenthralled with the stern and sterile Rationalism of the 18th century. What is more, Walpole did not only start a trend, but he also provided in his preface to the second edition a manifesto of the genre, in which he described the process of 'concocting' this piece. He explained that his intention was to reconcile the past and the present, the medieval and the modern; to merge the natural and the supernatural in a balanced unity (Walpole, 1765).

Drawing on the Arthurian romance of the medieval era, but also inspired by his own life at his faux Gothic retreat, he gathered in his novel a range of elements which became part of the Gothic conventions. These elements in different arrays and combinations are still employed by the writers of the genre today. *The Castle of Otranto* came to be more appreciated towards the turn of the century and was eventually acknowledged as the pioneering Gothic work. His influence can still be observed today, not only in literature but in other art forms as well, which, we might conclude, exist owing to the nostalgic disposition of this devoted antiquarian.

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