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# CAPTURING

Jonathan Rhys-Myers as  
Steerpike in the BBC  
drama *Gormenghast*

A central aspect of genre is its use of familiar motifs. Their appearance reassures the reader that a fictional world will emerge according to expectation and type. One of the most well known of these motifs is the Gothic castle, the characteristic physical features of which seem easy to list: dark in shade, medieval in its architectural features, characterised by pointed arches, flying buttresses and rib vaults, set above a nearby town or village in brooding watchfulness, distanced from the everyday world of society and community, internally complicated by labyrinthine corridors and staircases, likely to contain subterranean cellars and dungeons. Flaunting its power and spreading fear, the castle seems to represent both physically and metaphorically the darkness at the heart of the Gothic. And yet is the Gothic castle such an unchanging symbol as it first appears? Might what it represents alter as the context of its reception alters?

At the heart of genre, after all, lies ambiguity. Genres are not fixed in terms of their form and content — they mutate. In a sense, the Gothic is itself an admirable representation of this mutability, associated as it is with insubstantial things like ghosts and mists and shadows. The apparent solidity and immutability of the Gothic castle may, therefore, prove an illusion. This is especially so if it is viewed from a critical perspective that argues that readings of a text inevitably change over time.



# THE CASTLE



Castles in the air, castles built on sand: **Pete Bunten** examines the Gothic castle as myth, motif and metaphor, and looks at the ways in which this may reflect the instability of the genre

## *The Monk and The Castle of Otranto*

In *The Monk* (1794) by Matthew Lewis, the very castle-like monastery building itself comes to represent the hypocrisy of the religious community. The monks conceal their licentious desires behind a show of piety. Similarly, the imposing façade of the monastery conceals the grim secrets of the staircases and dungeons. Here Lorenzo is in search of the captive Agnes:

A small lamp...served rather to point out, than dispel the horrors of a narrow gloomy dungeon formed in one side of the cavern... Coldly played the light upon the damp walls, whose dew-stained surface gave back a feeble reflection.

The gloom and obscurity of the dungeon signify what eighteenth-century Enlightenment England might well have seen as the superstition and irrationality of the Catholic Church. Similarly, in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) the lower regions of the castle represent fear and entrapment:

An awful silence reigned throughout those subterranean regions, except now and then some blast of wind that shook the doors she had passed, and which grating on rusty hinges were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness.

Here the darkness of the cavern becomes a metaphor for the darkness of the mind of its prince.

## *Gormenghast and Dracula*

In *Titus Groan*, the first book in Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast Trilogy* (1946), the Gothic castle is used to create a rather different effect. The traditions and rituals, rooted in the fabric of the castle, that sustain the estate of Gormenghast also provide the heir, Titus, with a protective security. Here the castle is both his past and his anticipated future. The traditions of the castle are in many cases ridiculous, but when threatened by Steerpike, a ruthlessly radical insurgent, they acquire a new value.

The story of Gormenghast has been read as an allegory of the way that destructive forces were visited on European civilisation in the middle of the twentieth century. The castle, in this context, becomes an oddly fragile and precious thing. The sense of the castle as a place of safety, one of its original historical functions, is thus never wholly lost in Gothic fiction. Sometimes, of course, this apparent safety is illusory. Jonathan Harker, in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), endures a fearful coach ride during which he is pursued by ravening wolves. Relief comes, ironically enough, when he finally arrives at his destination: 'the courtyard of a vast ruined castle, from whose tall black windows came no ray of light, and whose broken battlements showed a jagged line against the moonlit sky'. The words 'tall' and 'black' anticipate the appearance of the imposing master of the castle, Count Dracula, and the jagged line of the battlements provides an eerie foreshadowing of





Gary Oldman as Dracula

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the most striking features of the vampires who lie within. A similar irony of misplaced expectation famously occurs in *Macbeth* when King Duncan, as he approaches Macbeth's castle, praises its 'pleasant seat' and how 'the air / Nimble and sweetly recommends itself / Unto our gentle senses'. Very soon this 'pleasant seat' is transformed into a place that the castle porter compares to hell, and within its walls the king is slaughtered.

### Damsels in distress?

Another way in which the Gothic castle can evoke rather different responses is in terms of gender. In many Gothic novels the castle represents a threatening, sexually rapacious masculine world in which women are trapped and persecuted. In the episode from *The Monk* described above, the object of Lorenzo's search is eventually revealed: 'He beheld in a corner of this loathsome abode, a creature stretched upon a bed of straw, so wretched, so emaciated, so pale, that he doubted to think her woman. She was half-naked.'

Here female suffering is directly connected to the nature of the building. The 'corner', for instance, suggests a marginalised existence, and both the place and its inhabitants are 'wretched'. A factor, however, that complicates the sense of sympathy for the victim is Lewis's salacious tone. There's an element of literary voyeurism here, akin to an effect film critics have referred to as the operation of 'the male gaze'.

In *The Castle of Otranto* Isabella's flight from the demonic Manfred is slightly more conventionally expressed through a

description of the labyrinthine passages through which she has to flee:

...believing, by what she could observe, that she was near the mouth of the subterraneous cavern, she approached the door that had been opened; but a sudden gust of wind that met her at the door extinguished her lamp and left her in total darkness.

Even the elements seem to be forced into a conspiracy against the helpless woman. Isabella's attempts at escape are thwarted by the wind, and she is trapped within the darkness that also represents the corruption within the castle. The world of the castle in Gothic fiction is thus also a world of sharply contrasting light and dark. In *The Castle of Otranto* and elsewhere, these binary opposites provide ways of representing the different moral positions of the central characters.

The laboratory in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) incorporates many of the physical features of the Gothic castle. 'In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a gallery and staircase, I kept my workshop of filthy creation.' Here the 'castle' may be seen from another critical perspective: it is in this 'workshop of filthy creation' that Frankenstein perverts the natural process of giving birth, the laboratory becoming a parody of the mother's womb. Dracula's castle, on the other hand, contains within it some very unmaternal figures. The female vampires that approach Jonathan Harker in his sleep offer a 'voluptuousness which is both thrilling and repulsive'. They seem, unlike Harker, to be



unconstrained by the physical restraints of the castle: 'they simply seemed to fade into the rays of the moonlight'. Here it is the male who is imprisoned and at the mercy of 'the three terrible women'. Harker's journal makes regular references to bolts clanging shut, chains hooking and unhooking, and doors being locked with no sign of a key. If the images of locked and unlocked doors within the Gothic castle often signify the sexual vulnerability of women, here the gender roles are reversed.

There are other instances in Gothic fiction of female power being demonstrated through reference to the buildings they inhabit. In Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) the wholesale destruction of the house follows the death of the Lady Madeleine. In 'The Bloody Chamber' by Angela Carter (1979), the narrator's mother, 'a very magnificent horsewoman in widow's weeds', bursts through the gates of the castle and saves her daughter from the horrors of her husband's torture chamber. Here the castle is a manifestation of a seemingly irresistible masculine power, but this flaunted power is shown to be illusory. Thus the castle, rather than simply being a place of incarceration, can act as a challenge, a test of resolve that women can triumphantly pass.

Interestingly, this narrative function of the castle as a test also occurs in the case of a male protagonist, David Balfour, in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (1886). Sent by his traditionally wicked uncle to climb a staircase in the Gothic house of Shaws, Balfour finds that the staircase ends in a sudden and vertiginous

drop into the void: 'to set a stranger mounting it in the darkness was to send him straight to his death'. Through the timely illumination provided by a flash of lightning and his own bravery and resolution he survives the ordeal. All illusions lost, he returns to try to take control of his destiny. 'But I knew what I wanted now, and turned and groped my way down again with a wonderful anger in my heart.' Physically decayed and unutterably dreary it may be, and suffering under a sort of curse ('blood built it' says a local woman), the house nevertheless represents a valued prize. The last chapter of *Kidnapped* is entitled 'I came into my kingdom', and the kingdom in question is David Balfour's inheritance, physically embodied in the house of Shaws.

### Function and form

The castle therefore may be seen as an extended metaphor within Gothic fiction — a metaphor that reveals much of the ambiguity of genre itself. It may represent authority that is either reassuring or fearful, human triumph or defeat, female subjugation or triumph, physical and psychological constraint or freedom. The idea of the castle takes many physical forms, from a Transylvanian chateau to a gaunt farmhouse on the Yorkshire moors. Its functions within the narratives of Gothic fiction are equally diverse.

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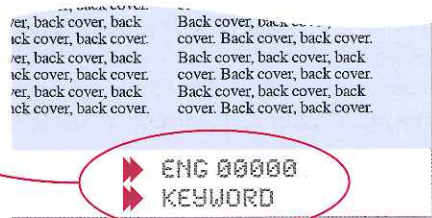
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