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# Concealment and Darkness in Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto

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In 1764, Thomas Gray wrote to thank his friend Horace Walpole for the gift of Walpole's new novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). In his letter, Gray admitted, "[It] engages our attention here, makes some of us cry a little, and all in general afraid to go to bed o' nights" (137). As Gray's comment makes clear, Walpole's literary creation has inspired terror in its readers since its publication. Through its distinctively dark setting, subterranean passages, and supernatural dangers like the infamous giant helmet, Walpole initiated a new literary genre — the Gothic novel — in which he brought together "the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern," or, the romance and the novel, in order to create a literary form that was both realistic and highly imaginative (Walpole 9).

Despite the terror that the supernatural elements of the novel imbue in the storyline, as E.J. Clery and other scholars have shown, the supernatural elements in *Otranto* and its Gothic descendants are not the primary source of terror. Clery suggests that the human villains in Gothic novels emerge as more terrifying than any ghosts due to their sinister intentions for the young heroines of these stories. *Otranto* opens with the notorious scene of the giant helmet that crushes Conrad to death, but the fear in the story is not from other giant falling objects but rather the looming threat Conrad's father, Manfred, poses to the women around him. Since Manfred interprets his son's death as an omen forecasting the ending of his family's reign, he seeks to reestablish his bloodline and confirm his authority by forcing Conrad's betrothed Isabella to marry him instead. Isabella, however, declines his proposal and flees, resulting in a chaotic and fearful chase as Manfred pursues her through the castle's dark underground halls.

While previous scholars attribute the Gothic's terror solely to the nefarious intentions of its villains, they fail to recognize the extent to which the dark setting magnifies the terror by eliminating the heroines' sight. Darkness envelops *Otranto*, with Isabella's escape taking place at night through the castle's subterranean passages. For Isabella, darkness itself poses a danger because, without light, she loses visual sensory perception and the ability to create knowledge of her surroundings. Walpole's novel speaks to almost a century of philosophical debates about the connection between the imagination, sensory perception, and the formation of knowledge. Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke argued that the ability to think arises through empirical observation of the world. In his 1689 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke notes that "external and internal sensation, are the only passages I can find, of Knowledge, to the Understanding. These alone, as far as I can discover, are the windows by which Light is let into this *dark Room*" (123). Locke suggests humans generate knowledge through sensory observation — including vision — of the world, metaphorically comparing knowledge acquired through sensation to "Light" illuminating the otherwise "dark" mind. Rather than use darkness as a passive aesthetic feature of his ancient Gothic setting, Walpole weaves darkness into *Otranto* to manipulate Isabella's visual sensory perception and, accordingly, her ability to knowledgeably think. Darkness, therefore, invokes terror in Isabella not only by concealing danger but also by preventing her from taking in visual data that she can use to generate knowledge and devise her plan to escape, instilling fear of not only the unknown but also the unseeable.

Manfred reveals to Isabella that darkness does not impede his physical movements, contributing to her fear of his pursuit through the underground passages. After Manfred demands a servant bring Isabella to him, he orders the servant, "Take away that light, and begone. Then shutting the door impetuously, he flung himself upon a bench against the wall, and bade Isabella sit by him" (Walpole 23). Through Manfred's removal of a light source from the room, Walpole emphasizes Manfred's propensity to enact evil in darkness. Manfred demonstrates an embodied power in the darkness through his impetuous behavior, confidently flinging himself upon the

bench despite the lack of a light source to guide his movements. Where Isabella's terror aligns with her impaired visual faculties, Manfred remains unnervingly unimpeded by the dark setting. Manfred contradicts Locke's argument that knowledge and, therefore, the ability to reason, require sensory input.

Joseph Crawford lends insight into how Enlightenment notions of empiricism and reason reveal Gothic characterizations of villainy, writing that Enlightenment-era authors believed "failures of reason, education, empathy, or self-control" gave rise to evil (6). Manfred perverts Enlightenment values of sensory observation through his preference for darkness over light. His easy functioning in the dark resembles Crawford's depiction of Enlightenment "evil," contributing to his fearsomeness. Moreover, Walpole figuratively emphasizes this correlation between Manfred's preference for darkness and his villainy. As Manfred develops his scheme to entrap Isabella, Walpole notes, "[I]t was now twilight, concurring with the disorder of his mind" (22). In correlating twilight with Manfred's disorder, Walpole likens Manfred's impending evil to the setting's upcoming night. The setting's literal darkness thus materializes as an indicator of Manfred's figurative darkness, or wickedness of character. Nick Groom aptly recognizes twilight as a symbol of concealment, defining "the action takes place in obscurity, from twilight to impenetrable darkness" (121). Twilight, the shadowy precursor to night, suspensefully foreshadows Manfred's yet-unrevealed plan to trap Isabella as his wife through his figuratively dark intentions and shrouded movements.

Walpole reveals the castle's supernatural dangers with lighting to emphasize the chief terror of Manfred's concealment in darkness. After Isabella realizes Manfred's scheme to entrap her, she descends into consuming, "half-dead" fearfulness and only musters bravery when a ray of moonlight cuts through the dark room (Walpole 24). Walpole writes, "the moon, which was now up, and gleamed in the opposite casement, presented [to Manfred's sight] the plumes of the fatal helmet" and Isabella "gathered courage from her situation, [who] dreaded nothing so much as Manfred's pursuit of his declaration" (Walpole 24). The ray of moonlight striking the scene enables her to visually observe her surroundings and create knowledge of the dangers nearby. Through this sensory knowledge, Isabella reasons that Manfred poses a greater danger than the motionless fallen helmet, and she finds bravery in the ability to recognize the bigger threat.

Moreover, Walpole distinguishes between the supernatural terror of the helmet and the human terror of Manfred, implying Isabella finds Manfred more terrifying. Clery, recognizing Gothic literature's characteristic distinction between natural and supernatural terror, explains readers rely on "the mode of the 'explained supernatural', there is also the reverse possibility that such fictions might encourage… a capacity to see the everyday in another, less complacent, light" (114). Clery posits that the Gothic novel demystifies or lends normalcy to supernatural dangers to encourage readers to identify the greater terror — the figurative darkness in "everyday" human villains like Manfred. As Clery argues that normalizing supernatural dangers figuratively sheds "light" on reality's horrors, Walpole normalizes the supernatural helmet through illumination, the ray of moonlight confirming it is unmoving and harmless. Walpole's method is characteristically Gothic; as Fred Botting notes of Sophia Lee's Gothic novel *The Recess*, "[r]ather than the imaginary threats of supernatural powers it is the pursuit and persecution by noblemen that constitute the major instances of fear" (58). Manfred poses a more fearsome danger to Isabella than the inanimate giant helmet. The helmet, well-lit and observable, appears far less terrible than Manfred's figuratively dark intentions and darkness-concealed pursuit of Isabella through the castle's underground halls.

Walpole's notion of fearing what darkness may conceal mirrors ideas of terror presented by Edmund Burke. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke explores how the human psyche responds to danger. He writes that dangers "at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be and they are delightful" (Burke 459). Burke reinforces that dangers will simply inspire fear if the viewer believes themselves at genuine risk. Distance therefore refers to sufficient separation from the dangerous object, delighting the viewer that their life remains unthreatened. Conversely, Burke notes that "when danger or pain press too nearly" they "are simply terrible," suggesting terror manifests when danger is too imminent (Burke 459).

Walpole manipulates Burke's notion of near danger through *Otranto*'s darkness, which makes danger feel nearer to Isabella by preventing her from observing and confirming the danger's distance. When Isabella flees from Manfred through the castle's subterranean passages, lighting controls her understanding of the imminence of Manfred's danger. Isabella relies on lamplight to observe her surroundings, acquiring a sense of safety through the ability to visually confirm Manfred's absence from her immediate vicinity and the nearness of her escape exit. In a moment of "fortifying herself," she considers "what she could observe, that she was near the mouth of the subterraneous cavern" (Walpole 27). Light enables Isabella to ascertain that safety — the cavern's end — lies within reach. Isabella's ability to visually observe her surroundings lends her reassuring confirmation that Manfred remains distant in his pursuit, resembling Locke's argument that rational thought requires sensory input. Lighting thus becomes Walpole's symbolic method for distancing his characters from danger, protecting Isabella from a descent into fear by permitting her to exercise sensory observation. Accordingly, Isabella's fear reemerges only when a gust of wind extinguishes her lamp and plunges her into darkness. As Isabella laments the loss of her extinguished light source, she fearfully "expect[s] every moment the arrival of Manfred" (Walpole 27). Manfred's danger nears Isabella by the possibility that he may lurk in the dark, prompting her Burkian reaction of fear. Darkness transforms Manfred from a visible terror to a terror of expectation, forcing Isabella to suspensefully await his arrival. James M. Keech observes that Isabella's fear "is created not only by that which frightens, the darkness of the underground passageways… but by the foreboding that magnifies its dangers: Isabella's apprehensions of her fate if captured by Manfred in this darkness" (132). Manfred's terrifying character looms — and even grows — in the possibility that he may be concealed in any approaching moment or turn through the passageway. The sudden plunge into darkness compounds Isabella's fear of Manfred; she remains afraid of his pursuit but now doubly fears the darkness that may mask his arrival.

While Isabella must only reasonably fear Manfred's pursuit through the underground passages, she also expresses fear of additional unknowable terrors, suggesting that darkness instills fear by simultaneously broadening and concealing terrifying possibilities. Isabella finds darkness fearsome not only because it conceals Manfred but also because it hides infinite opportunities for danger. Verging on collapse from fear at her extinguished light source, she reports being "far from tranquil on knowing she was within reach of somebody, she knew not whom, who for some cause seemed concealed there-abouts, all these thoughts crowded on her distracted mind, and she was ready to sink under her apprehensions" (Walpole 27). Walpole stresses Isabella's immense terror by revealing her fears in a run-on sentence that mirrors her racing mind. Her fear of being "within reach" of danger parallels Burke's emphasis that danger that is too near is "simply terrible" (Burke 459). Darkness brings danger nearer to Isabella by

preventing her from observing her surroundings, allowing the perpetual possibility that danger lurks nearby.

Moreover, Isabella's fear of an imaginary "somebody" in the darkness reveals irrationality as the consequence of limited sensory perception (27). Her pre-established fear of Manfred, a known pursuer, contradicts this abstract fear of an unknowable "somebody," despite Manfred being the only human in the castle who poses Isabella danger. Botting notes darkness' distinctive ability to instill unreasonable fear of the unknown in Gothic protagonists, writing, "Darkness, metaphorically, threatened the light of reason with what it did not know" (32). Isabella's "apprehensions" of an imaginary "somebody" confirm that an inability to generate knowledge through sensory perception leads to irrationality and, in a dangerous situation that requires a clear and informed mind, fear. Regarding similarly dark passageways and their paranoia-inspiring nature in Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Mary Poovey writes, "In such complete obscurity the imagination is cut loose from all governing images… its innate susceptibility becomes an aggressive force, rushing to fill the void with its own projected images" (320). Despite the irrationality of her fear of mystery persons other than Manfred, Isabella cannot help her imagination's frantic fear of what dangers may be concealed in the darkness. Her fear of mystery persons lurking in the dark resembles paranoia, or an overactive, irrational imagination. Such paranoia corresponds with the Enlightenment idea that rational thought requires knowledge acquired through sensory observation. Stripped of her visual faculties, Isabella accordingly loses her reason.

Another gleam of light saves Isabella from her terrified state, confirming that her sharp transitions between fear and relief depend upon her perception of the darkness around her. Isabella reports "a kind of momentary joy to perceive an imperfect ray of clouded moonshine gleam from the roof of the vault" and gladly moves towards the chasm revealed by the light to continue making her escape (Walpole 27). Isabella takes joy not just in the chasm itself but also in her ability to see, or "perceive," her surroundings with moonlight. Light spares Isabella from the unknown and infinite dangers of darkness, and her happiness mirrors Burke's understanding of delight, which requires dangers stay "at certain distances" (Burke 459). Without changing her physical location in the subterranean passage, Isabella takes delight in the illumination that confirms her distance from her pursuer and her — albeit momentary — safety. Manfred's villainous intentions remain unchanged, yet Isabella expresses joy in the return of her visual faculties, revealing her relief at creating knowledge of her surroundings once more.

Walpole frames these gleams of moonlight that repetitively assist Isabella's escape as unpredictable strokes of good fortune, building readerly suspense and inviting readers to share in Isabella's tumultuous experiences of the unpredictable dark. As Theodore — the rightful heir to the crown whom Manfred so fears — and Isabella search for a trapdoor to assist her escape, "a ray of moonshine streaming through the cranny of the ruin above shone directly on the lock they sought—Oh, transport! Said Isabella, here is the trap-door!" (28). In the image of a ray of light shining directly on the object Isabella desires, Walpole contrasts the unimaginable, pervasive darkness with a focused, well-lit detail, relieving Isabella of her darkness-instilled fear and the reader of their sympathetic suspense. The detail of the lock only surfaces to Isabella — and to readers — after the moonlight illuminates it, allowing her to surpass an obstacle in her frantic journey. Robert D. Hume observes that "the Gothic atmosphere seems mechanical, even in the greatest of these novels, but originally its purpose was to arouse and sensitize the reader's imagination," referring to the suspense-building nature of supernatural horrors (284). *Otranto*'s dark setting and providential strokes of moonlight inspire similarly bated breath. Darkness

conceals Manfred's location and Isabella's means of escape — such as the lock — to Isabella and, therefore, to readers limited to her perspective. The novel's dark setting invites readers to experience Isabella's nervousness at her concealed surroundings. Readers must suspensefully wait alongside Isabella for the strokes of moonlight to relieve the darkness, enduring the tumultuous emotions that Isabella herself feels as a result of the darkness or light.

Scholars have previously recognized that *Otranto*'s human dangers — namely, Manfred and his tyrannical pursuit of Isabella — invoke more terror than its supernatural threats; additionally, scholars acknowledge that Isabella's darkness-shrouded flight through the subterranean passages inspires terror characteristic of the Gothic genre. Indeed, *Otranto*'s supernatural dangers are extremely visible in their moonlit, larger-than-life appearances, but Manfred's fearsomeness emerges in both his darkness-shrouded stalking and his figuratively dark intentions. Yet increased attention to the birth of Gothic literature during the British Enlightenment suggests a significant correlation between dark settings and the genre's characteristic horror. Before the development of the Gothic novel, Enlightenment thinkers associated sensory observation with the development of knowledge and, therefore, rational thought. By utilizing darkness as a tool to create sensory deprivation, Walpole explores the deep-rooted fear of irrationality that underlies the Enlightenment pursuit of knowledge. Through vivid and thrilling storytelling, *The Castle of Otranto* demonstrates a keen understanding of the philosophical and psychological emphases of its time. The recognition it spurred in readers, demonstrated by genuinely fearful reactions such as Gray's, fueled a new genre driven by this primal understanding of human nature. Darkness pervades *Otranto*'s successors in the Gothic genre, including in the similarly dark castles Radcliffe and Reeve modeled after Walpole's. The influence of Enlightenment thought on Gothic fear of the dark and the unknown can, therefore, be traced from Walpole through the genre he inspired.

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