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Gothic ‘artefictions’: fabricating history in Horace Walpole’s Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto*

Horace Walpole’s house at Strawberry Hill and his 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto* are both considered landmarks in the development of the Gothic in their respective genres of architecture and literature. They also played a significant role in Walpole’s activities as a historian. Considered together, it becomes apparent that Walpole used a common approach to their creation, combining antiquarian scholarship with modern media to create ‘artefictions’, reconstructed historical artefacts, in order to invoke a sense of the Gothic past and create an emotional and sensory alternative to the rational historiography of the Enlightenment.

The connection between Horace Walpole’s Gothic villa at Twickenham, Strawberry Hill, and his 1764 novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, is well known. Walpole claimed that the story was inspired by a dream in which, ‘on the uppermost bannister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour,’ and he thereafter often referred to Strawberry Hill as his Otranto.¹ However, the relationship between the house and the novel is deeper than a simple case of inspirational scene-setting. They share a common approach in Walpole’s use (or misuse), recreation and interpretation of the medieval past that illuminates his methods and intentions as a historian. The historiography of Walpole and that of the Gothic revival are closely linked, perhaps not surprisingly as Strawberry Hill is considered one of the defining buildings of eighteenth-century Gothic, and *The Castle of Otranto* has assumed canonical status as the founding text of the Gothic fiction genre. Just as eighteenth-century Gothic (or, pejoratively, ‘Gothick’) has been considered ‘a period of ill-formed and uncritical enthusiasm’,² so Walpole has been accused of lacking in seriousness, and seeking only aesthetic effect at the expense of veracity.³ More recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of ideology to eighteenth-century Gothic, bearing political, religious and sexual meanings, although the shifting nature of these associations meant that it could be co-opted by both ends of the political spectrum.⁴ In particular literary criticism has begun to rescue Walpole’s

¹ *The Yale edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence* ed. W.S.Lewis et al. (New Haven, 1937-1983) [online] available at: <<http://walpole.library.yale.edu/collections/digital-collections/horace-walpole-correspondence>> [accessed: 17 Jan 2017] i, 88 (hereafter *Correspondence*)

² Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival* (London: John Murray, 1995, first published 1928) p.56

³ Nick Groom, *The Gothic: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) p.70

⁴ Chris Brooks, *The Gothic Revival* (London: Phaidon, 1999) pp.81-2

reputation as a historian.⁵ Sean Silver argues that Walpole's renowned collection of art and artefacts reveals his prioritisation of the artefact as an alternative to politically-motivated textual narrative, and Ruth Mack defends Walpole from accusations of dilettantism, identifying a coherent historiographical theory underpinning his body of work.⁶ The comparative analysis of Walpole's Gothic creations undertaken here suggests that Walpole's aim was not so much to interpret as to invoke the past, combining genuine artefacts with dramatic and modern materials and literary effects in order to appeal to the emotions as much as the intellect.

Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto* can both be categorised as 'artefictions', historically accurate replicas based on meticulous research but created in a new format.⁷ Strawberry Hill was a Thames-side villa reconstructed into a 'little Gothic castle', with wooden pinnacles and papier-mâché ceilings mimicking the decorations of medieval cathedrals.⁸ *The Castle of Otranto* combined the supernatural romance of the Middle Ages with the realism of the modern novel, and was presented in its first edition as translation of a recently discovered medieval manuscript.⁹ This opened Walpole to accusations of levity in his architecture, and hypocrisy in his literary output, with allegations that Walpole's rejection of Chatterton's 'Rowley' manuscripts on grounds of suspicion of their authenticity, contributed to the young poet's suicide.¹⁰ The publication history of the novel and its relationship with Strawberry Hill illuminate Walpole's activities as a historian and creator of Gothic literature and architecture, suggesting that he did not seek to deceive, but rather to invite a suspension of disbelief that would create an emotional connection with the past. In this reading, Walpole's creative output ceases to be incoherent or fraudulent but instead becomes a dramatic re-creation of the past in which the visitor or reader is invited to form an imaginative link with history. Walpole's antiquarian scholarship was important as a sound and authentic foundation, but it was by marrying the fruits of that scholarship with new methods and materials, and above all through dramatic re-enactment, that Walpole was able to bring that history to life. This emotional and atmospheric reading of history was an alternative to the rational and orderly scholarship of the Enlightenment. Just as Walpole often chose the genuine artefacts in his collections for their associative value (Cardinal Wolsey's hat, James I's gloves), so too his 'artefictions' were a link to the past, through the sensations that they aroused.

⁵ Ibid. p.56

⁶ Sean R. Silver, 'Visiting Strawberry Hill: Horace Walpole's Gothic Historiography', *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 21:4 (2009), pp.535-64 available at: <<https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:5184/article/270397>> [accessed: 16 Jan 2017] p.546; Ruth Mack, *Literary historicity: literature and historical experience in eighteenth-century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) p.127

⁷ The term 'artefictions' is coined by Nick Groom in *The Gothic* p.75. He applies it to forgeries; I extend the meaning of the term here to differentiate between forgery and replica.

⁸ *Correspondence* xx, 111

⁹ 'Onuphrio Muralto trans. W. Marshal' (Horace Walpole), *The Castle of Otranto* (1764 1st ed) ECCO available at: <www.gale.com> [accessed: 11 Jan 2017]

¹⁰ Paul Langford, 'Walpole, Horatio, fourth earl of Orford (1717-1797)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed. (2011) available at: <<http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2167/view/article/28596>> [accessed:16 Jan 2017]



Figure 1. Strawberry Hill from the South East. Photo: author (2016)

Strawberry Hill was never intended to be taken for a genuine Gothic castle but was always referred to in affectionately diminutive terms by Walpole as ‘a little play-thing house’; he had acquired it in 1747 from the celebrated toy-shop owner Mrs Chevenix and was delighted by the analogy. Over a period of twenty-five years he extended and remodelled a modest eighteenth-century lodging house into a bijou Gothic castellated and pinnacled villa (figure 1).¹¹ A retreat from London, it was an eclectic mix of old and new and housed Walpole’s extensive and ever-growing collection of art, artefacts, china and upscale bric-a-brac. Even as the fabric of the building grew ever more Gothic, it was always intended for comfort and entertaining, and the statuary niches and ogee window arches overlooked luxurious eighteenth-century French-style furnishings.¹² Nor was Walpole’s famed collection restricted to the Middle Ages, and some of Walpole’s greatest treasures, such as the marble eagle found near the baths of Caracalla in Rome, were of classical origin.¹³ Antique, contemporary and reproduction furnishings and fixtures sat alongside each other, creating a home that was striking, comfortable and full of interesting stories of provenance. It was not, and was never intended to be, a complete recreation of a genuine Gothic castle. Hitherto, domestic use of the Gothic revival style had been restricted to the ‘re-Gothicization’ of existing houses with an authentic pedigree, such as Hampden House in Buckinghamshire, with its medieval core and parliamentary associations.¹⁴ Walpole’s innovation was essentially to re-invent Gothic as a fantasy style, by applying it to a domestic building with no Gothic credentials at all. It was fantasy on a grand scale, inside and out, and like all fantasies it was not a hoax but rather an invitation to participate in a thrilling transport of the imagination.

¹¹ Anna Chalcraft and Judith Viscardi, *Strawberry Hill: Horace Walpole’s Gothic Castle* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2001) p.16

¹² *Ibid.* p.84

¹³ ‘Lewis Walpole Library: Strawberry Hill Collection’ [website] <<http://walpole.library.yale.edu/research/finding-collection-material/strawberry-hill-collection>> [accessed: 23 Jan 2017]

¹⁴ Brooks, p.82



Figure 2. The Library, Strawberry Hill. Photo: author (2016)

This historical fantasy, however, was based on thorough and accurate antiquarian scholarship. Walpole was a historian: author of historical works, chronicler of his own times and keen researcher of antiquarian architecture and artefacts.¹⁵ As the house was remodelled and extended, the interior and exterior architecture, furniture and fittings were designed by Walpole's 'Committee of Taste' principally comprising designer Richard Bentley, antiquarian and architect John Chute, and Walpole himself. Chimneypieces, mouldings, bookcases and furniture were designed using antiquarian sources, often books of engravings from medieval cathedrals but sometimes unusual sources, such as the chair designed from a fragment of the medieval stained glass which Walpole bought and incorporated into Strawberry Hill's windows.¹⁶ In designing bookcases for the library, Chute used Wenceslaus Hollar's prints of old St. Paul's, and the chimneypiece was a composite of two great Gothic tombs, Clarence's in Canterbury Cathedral and John of Eltham's in Westminster Abbey (figure 2).¹⁷ These were Walpole's 'artefictions', based on accurate scholarship and giving the appearance of genuine Gothic provenance, but newly created for Strawberry Hill. Furthermore, much of the Gothicization of the house was done in modern materials which added to the fiction: chimneypieces were of plaster, ceiling mouldings of papier-mâché, and the 'stone panelling' of the hallway and stairs was

¹⁵ Walpole's historical works include *Historic doubts on the life and reign of King Richard the Third* (1768) and *Miscellaneous Antiquities* (1772)

¹⁶ Chalcraft and Viscardi, pp.70-1

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.63

painstakingly and expensively painted *trompe l'oeil* wallpaper (figure 3).¹⁸ Despite the use of new materials, he took his role as antiquarian seriously, considering himself to be a historian as much as an interior designer.



Figure 3. The Hall and stairs, Strawberry Hill. Photo: author (2016)

Turning to *The Castle of Otranto*, it is apparent that Walpole used many of the same techniques that he was employing at Strawberry Hill: antiquarian scholarship, the combination of historic and modern, and their recreation as ‘artefiction’ are all found the novel and its production. The story synthesises the medieval tradition of romance and supernatural tales with the realism of character and naturalness of dialogue of the modern eighteenth-century novel. Walpole acknowledged this as his aim, writing in the Preface to the second edition, ‘It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern.’¹⁹ A rollicking tale of usurpation, dynastic politics, ghosts and giant enchanted armour, set in the courtyards and dungeons of

¹⁸ Ibid. p.36

¹⁹ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (London, 1765 2nd ed) p.i

an Italian castle, it revived the medieval taste for fantastic tales, but brought it to life through the realism of the novel format. He also brought his antiquarian knowledge of manners, clothing and incidental detail to full effect in the text. Writing to his friend William Cole soon after publication, Walpole admitted, 'You will laugh at my earnestness, but if I have amused you by retracing with any fidelity the manners of ancient days, I am content.'²⁰ The combination of an ancient Gothic form of literature with accurate historical details and lifelike characters and prose, was the literary equivalent of rooms such as the Holbein chamber at Strawberry Hill, with its mediievally-derived chimneypiece and Holbein prints complemented by a state-of-the-art papier-mâché ceiling and luxurious bed hangings.²¹

The comparison with Walpole's methods at Strawberry Hill also sheds light on the controversy surrounding the initial publication of *The Castle of Otranto* and Walpole's reasons for presenting it pseudonymously as a 'found' manuscript. First published on Christmas Eve 1764, not by Walpole's own Strawberry Hill Press but by Thomas Lowndes in London, the novel claimed to be the work of Onuphrio Muralto, Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas, Otranto, translated by William Marshal, Gent. The 'Translator's Preface' gave details of the manuscript's supposed provenance, 'found in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of *England*. It was printed at *Naples*, in the black letter, in the year 1529. How much sooner it was written does not appear.'²² After a swift sell-out of the original print run of 400 copies, it was reprinted in April 1765. This time, Walpole owned up to his authorship, subtitled it 'A Gothic Story' and including a new Preface in which he explained his intentions and influences. Much literary criticism has been devoted to the Prefaces, with Emma Clery accepting Walpole's assertion in the second Preface that 'diffidence of his own abilities, and the novelty of the attempt, were his sole inducements to assume that disguise.'²³ Others have located the text within the 1760s phenomenon of Gothic literary fakery of which the works of 'Ossian the ancient Gaelic bard' (actually James Macpherson) and the 'medieval monk, Thomas Rowley' (Thomas Chatterton) were the best known.²⁴

Walpole's novel is indeed part of this phenomenon of 'artefictions', but clues within the text and the reaction of friends and reviewers suggest that Walpole did not seriously intend to deceive the reader. 'Onuphrio Muralto' is a convoluted anagrammatic pun on Horace Walpole.²⁵ Echoes of *Hamlet* also warn the reader that the manuscript is not what it seems: themes of deception and meta-theatricality are writ large, and *The Castle of Otranto's* purported translation from Italian mirrors *Hamlet's* counterfeit

²⁰ *Correspondence* i, 88

²¹ Chalcraft and Viscardi, pp.75-79

²² Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) p.iii

²³ Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1765 2nd ed) p.v; Emma J.Clery, 'Horace Walpole, the Strawberry Hill Press, and the Emergence of the Gothic Genre,' *Ars & Humanitas: Revija za Umetnost in Humanistiko*, 4 (2010), p.105

²⁴ Groom, *The Gothic* p.75

²⁵ For a full explanation of the pun see Chalcraft and Viscardi, p.41 n.6

drama which is also supposedly ‘writ in choice Italian’.²⁶ Walpole acknowledged his debt to Shakespeare, and *Hamlet* in particular, in the second Preface.²⁷ Reading the first Preface with knowledge of the author’s true identity, it is clearly full of self-deprecating jokes: ‘I am not blind to my author’s defects.’²⁸ The reviewers reserved judgement on its authenticity, with Smollett’s *Critical Review* remarking, ‘whether he speaks seriously or ironically we neither know nor care’, and even the more credulous *Monthly Review* hedged its bets, commenting ‘on the supposition that the work really is a translation, as pretended.’²⁹ Taken alone, the textual clues are not conclusive, but when considered alongside Strawberry Hill, the novel shares many characteristics with Walpole’s other ‘artefictions’. Indeed, the library where the manuscript was ‘found’ was quite probably, in Walpole’s imagination, his own library, and Strawberry Hill drew heavily on the aesthetics of Catholicism. Rather than authorial bashfulness or deception for commercial purposes, the novel and its supposed medieval provenance was another facet of Walpole’s historical play-acting. So successful was the emotional and historical journey of chilling suspense and excitement on which *The Castle of Otranto* took its readers that it led to a new genre, the Gothic novel, which proliferated so widely that by the century’s end it was being satirised by Jane Austen.³⁰

Drama was central to how both Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto* achieved their effects. In designing his house, Walpole’s guiding principle was never purely historical recreation. Authenticity was important, but only in so far as it contributed to a carefully orchestrated whole in which the effect on the visitor was equally prioritised. Walpole’s aim was an atmospheric recreation of ‘the gloomth of abbeys and cathedrals.’³¹ Careful consideration was given to the effects of light and shadow; the Refectory chairs were designed and placed so that the shadows they cast on the wall behind resembled traceried windows.³² As the fame of his house and collection spread, Strawberry Hill received a steady stream of visitors, obliging Walpole to issue tickets and produce a guidebook. It shows how his housekeeper Margaret led guests along a carefully choreographed route.³³ After inspecting the heraldic Library and the regal splendour of the Holbein chamber, the crescendo came as visitors trooped through the gloomth of the trunk-ceiled passage and Margaret flung open the door

²⁶ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* III, ii 250-1; also see Jerrold Hogle, ‘The Ghost of the Counterfeit and the Genesis of the Gothic’, in *Gothick Origins and Innovations* ed. by Allan Lloyd Smith and Victor Sage (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp.26-8

²⁷ Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) p.ii

²⁸ Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) p.vi

²⁹ ‘The Castle of Otranto, a Story’ *The Critical Review, Or, Annals of Literature*, v.19 (Jan 1765), p.51 Available at <<http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2059/docview/4522331?accountid=13042>> [accessed: 11 Jan 2017]; ‘The Castle of Otranto, a Story. Translated by William Marshal, Gent. from the original Italian of Onuphrio Muralto, canon of the church of St. Nicholas at Otranto’ *Monthly Review*, v. 42 (Feb 1765), p.99. Available at: <<http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2059/docview/4597693?accountid=13042>> [accessed: 11 Jan 2017]

³⁰ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1817, but probably written 1798-9). See Markman Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) pp.68-9

³¹ *Correspondence* xx, 372

³² Chalcraft and Viscardi, p.31

³³ Horace Walpole, *A description of the villa of Mr. Horace Walpole, ... at Strawberry-Hill near Twickenham, Middlesex. With an inventory of the furniture, pictures, curiosities, &c* (Twickenham, 1774, 2nd ed. 1784) ECCO available at: <www.gale.com> [accessed: 13 December 2016]

to reveal the dazzling crimson and gilt of the Gallery (figure 4). Visitors to the house today are still treated to this flourish. When entertaining friends, Walpole pulled out all the stops, and on one memorable occasion, the actress Kitty Clive descended from the ceiling by moonlight.³⁴ It was Walpole himself, however, who was the chief actor on the stage he had created. He delighted in role playing, often signing correspondence as ‘the Abbot of Strawberry’, or dressing up in items from his collection to receive visitors. Strawberry Hill was a performance, and Walpole was its director, set designer and principal actor.



Figure 4. The gallery, Strawberry Hill. Photo: author (2016)

The Castle of Otranto was shaped by the same desire for theatrical effect, and the novel shares many characteristics with drama: its five act structure, the rapid sequence of events and the mixture of ‘high’ and ‘low’ characters for contrast and comic effect. Walpole used his skill with lighting effects here too, as when Manfred pursues Isabella: ‘the moon, which was now up, and gleamed in at the opposite casement, presented to his sight the plumes of the fatal helmet.’³⁵ But the drama is not restricted to within

³⁴ Chalcraft and Viscardi, p.88

³⁵ Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) p.24

the text itself, with fantasy and role-playing operating on several different levels. Firstly, the use of dramatic techniques within the text itself. Secondly, the publication and presentation of the story was a form of acting, with the novel playing the part of a translated found manuscript. Thirdly, the story of *Otranto* became seamlessly integrated into the narrative of Strawberry Hill. As well as being originally inspired by the house and collection, its success ensured that it became a part of the story of Strawberry Hill, bringing visitors to ‘the scene that inspired the author of *The Castle of Otranto*.’³⁶ Walpole tied Strawberry Hill even closer to *Otranto* by acquiring items for his collection that linked to the plot. In 1771 he purchased the armour of Francis I, writing to Horace Mann, ‘It will make a great figure here at *Otranto*’, and as it loomed from its niche over the stairs it would immediately remind visitors of the great helmet and glove of Alfonso that featured prominently in the story as supernatural agents.³⁷

The symbiosis between Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto* was perhaps the strongest manifestation of the tapestry of historical reconstruction that Walpole was weaving: fantastical, yet entirely serious in its scholarship. Walpole’s ultimate goal as a historian and creator was to forge an emotional connection with the past. Historical ‘truth’ lay less in an assemblage or interpretation of facts, and more in atmospheric recreation. It was for this reason that the ‘gloomth’ of Strawberry Hill was so important, and why the first readers of *The Castle of Otranto* were encouraged to feel the thrill of reading an ‘authentic’ and possibly even ‘true’ supernatural story from the medieval past. Walpole invited his visitor or reader to complicitly share in this fantasy, facilitated by the accuracy of historical details in the building and text. Walpole’s own writings suggest this. ‘Gothic’ was first and foremost an emotional state, in contrast to the supposed objectivity of Enlightenment natural philosophy, hermeneutics or history. ‘One must have taste to be sensible of the beauties of Grecian architecture; one only wants passions to feel Gothic,’ wrote Walpole in 1762 in his *Anecdotes of Painting in England*.³⁸ Within this context, historical truth lay not in facts but in feelings. Walpole neatly summarised this with an aphorism in his *Commonplace Book* of 1780: ‘History is a Romance that is believed: Romance is a History not believed – that is the difference between them.’³⁹ His best known ‘artefictions’, Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto* tread a fine line between Romance and History. Walpole and his visitor or reader knew that what they were experiencing was not ‘real’, in the sense that it was a recreation, but at the same time Walpole invited the rational part of the brain to push that knowledge aside and indulge in a sensory experience of the Gothic era (loosely located somewhere around the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries). Rarely completely serious, Walpole often combined playfulness with an underlying element of truth.

While Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto* may be seen as two facets of Walpole’s historical fantasy, the legacies they have left to the development of different branches of

³⁶ Walpole, *A description of the villa of Mr. Horace Walpole* p.iv

³⁷ Silver, ‘Visiting Strawberry Hill’ p.558; *Correspondence* xxiii,350

³⁸ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) Appendix p.108

³⁹ Cited in *Chalcraft and Viscardi*, p.68

the Gothic movement have diverged widely. In literature, following the success of *The Castle of Otranto*, subsequent writers of Gothic novels enthusiastically embraced a whole range of atmospheric and supernatural tropes of which modern-day horror films are the heirs. Strawberry Hill is celebrated chiefly in architectural history as the point at which Gothic domestic architecture was liberated from a specific historical locus, allowing the style to be freely developed and applied across a whole range of buildings.⁴⁰ Walpole's antiquarian researches also helped steer Gothic architecture towards a more precise fidelity to actual Gothic models, as typified by the Ecclesiologists of the nineteenth century. Ironically it was perhaps AWN Pugin who was the spiritual heir to 'the Abbot of Strawberry'. While the contrast between Pugin's intensely-held Catholic beliefs and Walpole's laconic appropriation of Catholic aesthetics could not be more marked, both believed that Gothic architecture represented much more than a decorative style with historical or political allusions, but could recreate the spiritual sensibilities of their medieval forbears. The 'artefictions' of Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto* are paradoxically a truthful representation of the atmosphere of the Gothic age.

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⁴⁰ Brooks, pp.86-7

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