

***HORACE
WALPOLE***



***THE CASTLE
OF OTRANTO***

Horace Walpole

The Castle of Otranto

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Horace Walpole

Horace Walpole, the fourth son of Sir Robert Walpole, was born at 17 Arlington Street on 24 September, 1717. He spent the greater part of his boyhood at his father's house in Chelsea, a building that is now part of the Hospital. At Eton, Walpole did not distinguish himself in any way. After leaving Cambridge in 1737, his father appointed him Inspector of Imports and Exports in the Customs House, and, in the following year, Usher to the Exchequer. In 1739 he began the usual "grand tour" on the Continent, where he developed a passion for antiquities. He returned to England at the end of 1741. His father died in March 1745, and in 1747 Walpole settled in the neighbourhood of Twickenham at Strawberry Hill. The transforming of this house into "a little Gothic castle" and museum was the chief occupation of the greater part of his life. Here he erected a private printing press on which he printed many of his own works as well as some poems of Gray. Although never really interested in politics, in 1754 Walpole entered Parliament as member for Castle Rising in Norfolk, vacating this seat three years later for that of Lynn. About this time, too, he made an unsuccessful attempt to save the unfortunate Admiral Byng. He went to Paris in 1765, where he formed a friendship with Madame du Deffand which lasted until her death in 1780. But from 1769 until his death, his life, apart from intermittent literary work and adding to his museum, was comparatively uneventful. In 1773, however, his comedy *Nature Will Prevail* was acted at the Haymarket with considerable success. In 1791, on the death of his brother, he acceded to the Earldom of Orford. He died at what was then 40 Berkeley Square on 2 March, 1797.

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The following work was 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. The principal incidents are such as were believed in the darkest ages of Christianity; but the language and conduct have nothing that savours of barbarism. The style is of the purest Italian. If the story was written near the time when it is supposed to have happened, it must have been between 1095, the era of the first crusade, and 1243, the date of the last, or not long afterwards. There is no other circumstance in the work that can lead us to guess at the period in which the scene is laid; the names of the actors are evidently fictitious, and probably disguised on purpose; yet the Spanish names of the domestics seem to indicate, that this work was not composed until the establishment of the Arragonian kings in Naples had made Spanish appellations familiar in that country. The beauty of the diction, and the zeal of the author (moderated, however, by singular judgment), concur to make me think that the date of the composition was little antecedent to that of the impression. Letters were then in the most flourishing state in Italy, and contributed to dispel the empire of superstition, at that time so forcibly attacked by the reformers. It is not unlikely that an artful priest might endeavour to turn their own arms on the innovators; and might avail himself of his abilities as an author to confirm the populace in their ancient errors and superstitions. If this was his view, he has certainly acted with signal address. Such a work as the following would enslave a hundred vulgar minds beyond half the books of controversy that have been written from the days of Luther to the present hour.

This solution of the author's motives is, however, offered as a mere conjecture. Whatever his views were, or whatever effects the execution of them might have, his work can only be laid before the public at present as a matter of entertainment. Even as such some apology for it is necessary. Miracles, visions, necromancies, dreams, and other preternatural events, are exploded now even from romances. That was not the case when our author wrote; much less when the story itself is supposed to have happened. Belief in every kind of prodigy was so established in those dark ages, that an author would not be faithful to the manners of the times who should omit all mention of them. He is not bound to believe them himself, but he must represent his actors as believing them.

If this air of the miraculous is excused, the reader will find nothing else unworthy of his perusal. Allow the possibility of the facts, and all the actors comport themselves as persons would do in their situation. There is no bombast, no similes, flowers, digressions, or unnecessary descriptions. Everything tends directly to the catastrophe. Never is the reader's attention relaxed. The rules of the drama are almost observed throughout the conduct of the piece. The characters are well drawn, and still better maintained. Terror, the author's principal engine, prevents the story from ever languishing; and it is so often contrasted by pity, that the mind is kept up in a constant vicissitude of interesting passions.

Some persons may, perhaps, think the characters of the domestics too little serious for the general cast of the story; but, besides their opposition to the principal personages, the art of the author is very observable in his conduct of the subalterns. They discover many passages essential to the story, which could not be well brought to light but by their *naïveté* and simplicity: in particular, the womanish terror and foibles of Bianca, in the last chapter, conduce essentially towards advancing the catastrophe.

It is natural for a translator to be prejudiced in favour of his adopted work. More impartial readers may not be so much struck with the beauties of this piece as I was. Yet I am not blind to my author's defects. I could wish he had grounded his plan on a more useful moral than this; that *the sins of the fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation*. I doubt whether, in his time, any more than at present, ambition curbed its appetite of dominion from the dread of so remote a punishment. And yet this moral is weakened by that less direct insinuation, that even such anathema may be diverted by devotion to St. Nicholas. Here the interest of the monk plainly gets the better of the judgment of the author. However, with all its faults, I have no doubt but the English reader will be pleased with a sight of this performance. The piety that reigns throughout, the lessons of virtue that are inculcated, and the rigid purity of the sentiments, exempt this work from the censure to which romances are but too liable. Should it meet with the success I hope for, I may be encouraged to reprint the original Italian, though it will tend to depreciate my own labour. Our language falls far short of the charms of the Italian, both for variety and harmony. The latter is peculiarly excellent for simple narrative. It is difficult in English *to relate* without falling too low or rising too high; a fault obviously occasioned by the little care taken to speak pure language in common conversation. Every Italian or Frenchman, of any rank, piques himself on speaking his own tongue correctly and with choice. I cannot flatter myself with having done justice to my author in this respect: his style is as elegant as his conduct of the passions is masterly. It is pity that he did not apply his talents to what they were evidently proper for—the theatre.

I will detain the reader no longer, but to make one short remark. Though the machinery is invention, and the names of the actors imaginary, I cannot but believe that the groundwork of the story is founded on truth. The scene is

undoubtedly laid in some real castle. The author seems frequently, without design, to describe particular parts. *The chamber, says he, on the right hand; the door on the left hand; the distance from the chapel to Conrad's apartment:* these, and other passages, are strong presumptions that the author had some certain building in his eye. Curious persons, who have leisure to employ in such researches, may possibly discover in the Italian writers the foundation on which our author has built. If a catastrophe, at all resembling that which he describes, is believed to have given rise to this work, it will contribute to interest the reader, and will make The Castle of Otranto a still more moving story.

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The favourable manner in which this little piece has been received by the public calls upon the author to explain the grounds on which he composed it. But before he opens those motives, it is fit that he should ask pardon of his readers for having offered his work to them under the borrowed personage of a translator. As diffidence of his own abilities, and the novelty of the attempt, were the sole inducements to assume that disguise, he flatters himself he shall appear excusable. He resigned his performance to the impartial judgment of the public; determined to let it perish in obscurity, if disapproved; nor meaning to avow such a trifle, unless better judges should pronounce that he might own it without a blush.

It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance: the ancient and the modern. In the former, all was imagination and improbability; in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life. But if in the latter species nature has cramped imagination, she did but take her revenge, having been totally excluded from old romances. The actions, sentiments, conversations, of the heroes and heroines of ancient days, were as unnatural as the machines employed to put them in motion.

The author of the following pages thought it possible to reconcile the two kinds. Desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations, he wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak, and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions.

He had observed, that in all inspired writings, the personages under the dispensation of miracles, and witnesses to the most stupendous phenomena, never lose sight of their human character; whereas, in the productions of romantic story, an improbable event never fails to be attended by an absurd dialogue. The actors seem to lose their senses, the moment the laws of nature have lost their tone. As the public have applauded the attempt, the author must not say he was entirely unequal to the task he had undertaken; yet if the new route he has struck out shall have paved a road for men of brighter talents, he shall own with pleasure and modesty, that he was sensible the plan was capable of receiving greater embellishments than his imagination or conduct of the passions could bestow on it.

With regard to the deportment of the domestics, on which I have touched in the former preface, I will beg leave to add a few words. The simplicity of their behaviour, almost tending to excite smiles, which at first seems not consonant to the serious cast of the work, appeared to me not only not improper, but was marked designedly in that manner. My rule was nature. However grave, important, or even melancholy, the sensations of princes and heroes may be, they do not stamp the same affections on their domestics; at least the latter do not, or should not be made to express their passions in the same dignified tone. In my humble opinion, the contrast between the sublime of the one and the *naïveté* of the other, sets the pathetic of the former in a stronger light. The very impatience which a reader feels while delayed by the coarse pleasantries of vulgar actors from arriving at the knowledge of the important catastrophe he expects, perhaps heightens, certainly proves, that he has been artfully interested in the depending event. But I had higher authority than my own opinion for this conduct. That great master of nature, Shakespeare, was the model I copied. Let me ask if his tragedies of *Hamlet* and *Julius Cæsar* would not lose a considerable share of their spirit and

wonderful beauties, if the humour of the grave-diggers, the fooleries of Polonius, and the clumsy jests of the Roman citizens, were omitted, or vested in heroics? Is not the eloquence of Antony, the nobler and affectingly unaffected oration of Brutus, artificially exalted by the rude outbursts of nature from the mouths of their auditors? These touches remind one of the Grecian sculptor, who, to convey the idea of a Colossus within the dimensions of a seal, inserted a little boy measuring his thumb.

No, says Voltaire, in his edition of Corneille, this mixture of buffoonery and solemnity is intolerable.—Voltaire is a genius¹—but not of Shakespeare's magnitude. Without recurring to disputable authority, I appeal from Voltaire to himself. I shall not avail myself of his former encomiums on our mighty poet, though the French critic has twice translated the same speech in *Hamlet*, some years ago in admiration, latterly in derision; and I am sorry to find that his judgment grows weaker when it ought to be farther matured. But I shall make use of his own words, delivered on the general topic of the theatre, when he was neither thinking to recommend or decry Shakespeare's practice; consequently at a moment when Voltaire was impartial. In the preface to his *Enfant Prodigue*, that exquisite piece, of which I declare my admiration, and which, should I live twenty years longer, I trust I shall never attempt to ridicule, he has these words, speaking of comedy (but equally applicable to tragedy, if tragedy is, as surely it ought to be, a picture of human life; nor can I conceive why occasional pleasantry ought more to be banished from the tragic scene, than pathetic seriousness from the comic): "*On y voit un melange de serieux et de plaisanterie, de comique et de touchant; souvent meme une seule aventure produit tous ces contrastes. Rien n'est si commun qu'une maison dans laquelle un pere gronde, une fille occupée de sa passion pleure; le fils se moque des deux, et quelques parens*

*prennent part differemment à la scene, etc. Nous n'inferons pas de là que toute comedie doive avoir des scenes de bouffonerie et des scenes attendrissantes: il y a beaucoup de tres bonnes pièces où il ne regne que de la gayeté; d'autres toutes serieuses; d'autres melangées: d'autres où l'attendrissement va jusqu'aux larmes: il ne faut donner l'exclusion à aucun genre: et si l'on me demandoit quel genre est le meilleur, je repondrois, celui qui est le mieux traité."*² Surely if a comedy may be *toute serieuse*, tragedy may now and then, soberly, be indulged in a smile. Who shall proscribe it? shall the critic, who, in self-defence, declares that *no kind* ought to be excluded from comedy, give laws to Shakespeare?

I am aware that the preface from whence I have quoted these passages does not stand in Monsieur de Voltaire's name, but in that of his editor; yet who doubts that the editor and author were the same person? or where is the editor who has so happily possessed himself of his author's style and brilliant ease of argument? These passages were indubitably the genuine sentiments of that great writer. In his epistle to Maffei, prefixed to his *Merope*, he delivers almost the same opinion, though I doubt with a little irony. I will repeat his words, and then give my reason for quoting them. After translating a passage in Maffei's *Merope*, Monsieur de Voltaire adds, "*Tous ces traits sont naïfs: tout y est convenable à ceux que vous introduisez sur la scene, et aux mœurs que vous leur donnez. Ces familiarités naturelles eussent été, à ce que je crois, bien reçues dans Athenes; mais Paris et notre parterre veulent une autre espece de simplicité.*"³ I doubt, I say, whether there is not a grain of sneer in this and other passages of that epistle; yet the force of truth is not damaged by being tinged with ridicule. Maffei was to represent a Grecian story: surely the Athenians were as competent judges of Grecian manners and of the propriety of introducing them, as the parterre of