



In the Gothic Theatre

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IN MARCH 1794 *Fountainville Forest*, James Boaden's adaptation of Ann Radcliffe's popular Gothic novel *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), had its premiere performances at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden, starring William Farren as the villainous Marquis of Montault, Alexander Pope as the troubled La Motte, and Mrs. Pope (Elizabeth Younge) as the virtuous Adeline.¹ Boaden was a young lawyer with theatrical pretensions; in due course, he was to become the authoritative biographer of such greats of the Georgian theatre as John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons.² But at this stage in his career (he was twenty-eight), I like to think of him as the 1790s equivalent of Andrew Davies, seizing the opportunity to ride to fame on the back of a far more talented woman novelist, by adapting her works to the popular stage (or in Davies's case, television). After the success of *Fountainville Forest*, Boaden also adapted Radcliffe's *The Italian*, as *The Italian Monk* (1796), and the most horrid of them all, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, as *Aurelio and Miranda* (1798), though deliberately omitting the "supernatural" events in order to concentrate on the "Romance."

Four or five years later, Jane Austen wrote the first version of *Northanger Abbey*, which also makes use of Radcliffe's popular novels—particularly *The Romance of the Forest*—as the source of imaginative

adventures for her heroine. Austen, critics argue, parodied Radcliffe, and the “horrid” novels of which Radcliffe was the most accomplished creator, in order to show that “the anxieties of common life” (201) could provide just as entertaining and more instructive reading. Boaden’s aim was distinctly different—not parody, but adaptation into overtly theatrical form of Radcliffe’s novel, which in its “horrid” aspects was already utilizing large-scale theatricality: dramatic and exotic settings, with spectacular effects, and a positioning of the audience/readers as spectators (we don’t *share* Adeline’s trials, as we do the more realistic mental and social trials of Catherine; we *watch* them).

What were the theatrical aspects of *The Romance of the Forest* that attracted Boaden, and in what ways did he transform them to fulfill the desiderata of a different genre? He was at least partly aware of the manipulation of the audience’s or reader’s emotions that is basic to the effectiveness of the Gothic; and he was aware of the difference between the phenomenological experience of the reader and that of the theatre audience. In a note to the printed text, he comments that he has retained “passages expunged in the performance” (for reasons of dramatic pace, no doubt), as “The Stage and the Closet are very different mediums for our observance of effects.” There we have it: the *situation* of reading is different from that of the audience watching in the theatre: the one private, closeted, almost indeed self-imprisoned in a masochistic place of pleasurable terror, the theatre of the mind; the other public, communal, with a much clearer and safer division between the audience and the performers—bodies like ourselves, not imagined, but seen, and somehow safe behind that proscenium-arch, framed by such clearly artificial “scenery.”

Further evidence of this intuition of the safety of the theatre experience comes in Boaden’s prologue. “The moderns,” he claims, “Demand intrigue, and banquet on surprize”—sensation is a right and an uncomplicated pleasure. There is one complication, however:

Caught from the Gothic treasure of Romance,
[Our Author] frames his work, and lays the scene in
France.

The word, I see, alarms. . . .

In 1794, France at the height of the Terror was in reality a very alarming prospect, a genuinely “horrid” phenomenon of the modern world:

Deprav'd by cruelty, by pride inflam'd,
By traitors madden'd, and by sophists sham'd. . . .

Boaden goes on to conclude, however, that no such terrifying prospect blights the lucky world of the British audience, and that consequently there is no need for the stage to act as propaganda vehicle—or to do anything other than entertain a complacent audience:

Britons, to you, by temperate freedom crown'd,
For every manly sentiment renown'd,
The Stage can have no motive to enforce
The principles, that guide your glorious course;
Proceed triumphant—'mid the world's applause,
Firm to your King, your Altars, and your Laws.

One is tempted to compare this with Henry Tilney's somewhat more complex formulation of the distinctly un-Gothic qualities of modern British life: "Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. . . ." (197). The point being that Austen, like Boaden, is writing in a period of constant threat from the anarchic country across the Channel; *Northanger Abbey* is based in a valorization of Englishness (for all its pettiness and gossip) just as firmly as *Emma* is. For English (Protestant) Christians the enemy is always foreign and Catholic. Radcliffe herself reinforces this model deliberately by having Adeline find refuge in the home of a Swiss Protestant pastor, and by giving her a taste for English literature that anticipates Henry Tilney's incorporation of "literary intercourse" into the national system of surveillance:

She had become a tolerable proficient in English while at the convent where she received her education, and the instruction of La Luc, who was well acquainted with the language, now served to perfect her. He was partial to the English; he admired their character, and the constitution of their laws, and his library contained a collection of their best authors, particularly of their philosophers and poets. . . . her taste soon taught her to distinguish the superiority of the English from that of the French. . . . She frequently took a volume of Shakespear or Milton. . . . (261)

—a rather advanced taste for a dweller in the Swiss Alps in the middle of the seventeenth century!

Boaden, however, omits the Savoy section of the story and the

Protestant La Luc family with whom Adeline finds more secure refuge. He sets his version of Radcliffe's story in the pre-Reformation period, "the beginning of the Fifteenth Century": distant, exotic, automatically Catholic, and unproblematic for an English audience of the late eighteenth century.

Other alterations that Boaden makes to Radcliffe's text in the interests of dramatic simplicity (almost, indeed, of classical dramatic unity) include the restriction of the action to Fountainville Abbey and its environs—so that the heroine Adeline is deprived of one of her most attractive characteristics, the ability to travel intrepidly, often after a daring escape from the evil Marquis or his henchmen. Further, the object of her affections is not the sensitive (and presumably Protestant) Theodore La Luc, who along with the rest of his family doesn't appear, but the scion of the La Motte family, young Louis, who in the original after pining for Adeline ends up with "a lady of some fortune at Geneva" (Radcliffe 363). He it is who in true sentimental heroic style rescues both his beloved and his mother at the play's fifth-act climax:

Enter LOUIS.

Louis. Hold off your hands, you servile Ministers,

Or my quick rage shall trample you to earth.

Marquis. Audacious stripling! (Etc.)

In the second act of the play, Louis arrives at the Abbey and finds his parents in hiding; in his second scene—things move quickly on stage—he declares his love for the newly met Adeline (who at least has the remnant of Radcliffean good sense to beg him not to speak of it at this inappropriate juncture). As soon as he leaves her apartment Adeline begins a soliloquy:

The night is rough, and through these shatter'd casements,

The wind in shrilling blasts sweeps the old hangings.

Whether the place alone puts such thoughts in me,

I know not; but asleep, or waking, still

Conviction haunts me, that some mystery

Is wrapt within these chambers, which my fate

Will have me penetrate.—The falling gust

With feeble tone expires like dying sighs—

The tap'stry yonder shakes, as tho' some door

Open'd behind it (*takes her lamp*) Ha! 'tis so; the bolt,

Tho' rusty, yields unto my hand; I'll see
To what it leads.—How, if I sink with fear?
And so benumb'd, life freeze away in horror?
No matter, powerful impulse drives me onward,
And my soul rises to the coming terror.

The scene “changes to a melancholy Apartment. The Windows beyond reach, and grated.—An old Canopy in the distance, with a torn Set of Hanging-Tapestry.” Adeline, entering, treads on a rusty dagger (“Yes, murder has been busy!” she remarks), then intrepidly touches the tapestry, which falls down to reveal the mysterious scroll (“What scroll thus meets me in the falling lumber?”). Picking it up, she hastily exits before her light is extinguished—remember, this is a theatre and the audience must be able to see her horrid experiences.

In the next scene, the following morning, Mme. La Motte's arrival in her apartment delays Adeline's reading of the document. Here Boaden appropriates one of the most original of Radcliffe's devices—the proto-Freudian dreams that Adeline has at the end of volume I, in which her unconscious mind supplies her with quasi-supernatural images of her murdered father and a mysterious figure in black who leads her to him. “Think no more of them,” says Mme. La Motte, no psychotherapist, but a motherly figure not unlike Mrs. Morland, “such illusions...do usurp the pow'rs, that make life happy,/ And thickly cloud the sunshine of the mind”—advice that might well have been given to Catherine Morland, but that her dreams are waking fantasies and require the sterner correction of a clergyman.

When Boaden's Adeline does finally read the rolled-up manuscript discovered in the “Secret Apartment,” her reading of its dreadful tale is interrupted by a melancholy “Phantom”: at first just a voice “heard within the chamber”; then “faintly visible,” calling “O, Adeline!”; then, climactically, to end the Act:

Adeline: Great God of mercy! could there none be found
To aid thee? Then he perish'd—

Phantom. Perish'd here.

Adeline. My sense does not deceive me! awful sounds!

’Twas here he fell!

The phantom here glides across the dark part of the Chamber,

Adeline shrieks, and falls back. The Scene closes upon her.

In Radcliffe's novel, of course, this moment of horror is firmly

contained within the heroine's disturbed consciousness—its objective cause is revealed to be Peter the servant, who has been trying secretly to attract her attention. Radcliffe, that is to say, no more believes in the “reality” of the supernatural than does Jane Austen. But in Boaden's theatre, “illusion” must be shared by the audience: the Phantom is even named in the cast list (Mr. Follet); and no doubt the star actress, Mrs. Pope, prided herself on a fine shrieking faint.

Austen and Radcliffe share an interest in the situation of the vulnerable young woman and her perception of the dangers that threaten her; while Austen ironizes this naive habit of mind, Radcliffe empathizes with it and finally allows relief from anxiety through rational explanation. These are women-centered novels written by women. But in the drama of the last decade of the eighteenth century (as ever, mostly written by men), “sensation” is expected and reason is discounted. Thus, not only do we see the Phantom who causes Adeline's dramatic faint, we are treated also, from this point onward in the play, to soliloquies of passion, guilt, and self-recrimination by the villainous Marquis, the leading “heavy” actor of the company. Immediately following the star actress's faint, there is an even more dramatic scene for the Marquis:

Violent Thunder and Light'ning, the Abbey rocks, and through the distant Windows one of the Turrets is seen to fall, struck by the Light'ning.

Enter the Marquis, wild and dishevell'd.

Marquis. Away! Pursue me not! Thou Phantom, hence!

For while thy form thus haunts me, all my powers
Are wither'd as the parchment by the flame,
And my joints frail as nerveless infancy.

(Light'ning.)

See, he unclasps his mangled breast, and points

The deadly dagger.—O, in pity strike

Deep in my heart, and search thy expiation;

Have mercy, mercy! *(falls upon his knee.)* Gone! 'tis all
illusion!

My eyes have almost crack'd their strings in wonder,

And my swoln heart so heaves within my breast,

As it would bare its secret to the day....

One might surmise that the Phantom haunting Boaden's text

here really goes by the name of Webster or Tourneur—or perhaps Shakespeare’s Richard III, as represented by the most famous theatrical portrait of the eighteenth century, that of Garrick as Richard starting up from his nightmare in act 5, scene 5. That is to say, this “ranting” scene by the villain or “heavy” actor was an expected part of the evening’s entertainment: a striking example from the same period is Mr. Yates’s favorite part of the Baron in *Lovers’ Vows*, a play that was at the height of its popularity when Boaden wrote his adaptation of *The Romance of the Forest*.

Radcliffe, by contrast, never shows us the Marquis alone—as far as she is concerned, he is simply the most extreme embodiment of all the threatening father figures in her heroine’s adventures. Much of his dangerous image, in fact, arises from his inscrutability—just as Catherine Morland cannot fathom much of what General Tilney says or the motives for his behavior. Boaden does not have time within the constraints of a two-hour drama to dwell on the inscrutability of the Marquis; instead, this character fulfills a role that was to become common in the melodramas of the following century, the dyed-in-the-wool villain. His attempt on Adeline’s virtue is a dramatic climax whose sensationalism was an expected part of the “strong” drama of the period (and had been so since the Restoration—Nahum Tate’s rewriting of *King Lear* included an attempted rape by Edmund of Cordelia wandering on the heath):

Marquis. I have heard too much; and my impetuous love
Now grasps its choicest good—In vain this struggle!
How lovely is this terror! By my transport
It heightens the bewitching charm of beauty,
And lends ten thousand graces to that bosom.

Adeline. Help! help! for mercy’s sake.

Marquis. You call in vain.

None dare intrude. Know, here, that I command;
No power on earth shall snatch you from my arms.

“He pursues her,” the stage direction reads, but he is brought to a halt by recognizing the picture of her mother in a locket that he snatches from her bosom:

Ha! what is this? Hell! do my eyes deceive me?
My brother’s wife! Even as she liv’d once more!

Adeline. Then my father’s murderer stands before me.

In Radcliffe, the Marquis's sexual importunacy amounts (like John Thorpe's) to not much more than a tacky setting for a proposed seduction: it gets as far as "he threw his arm round her, and would have pressed her towards him, but she liberated herself from his embrace... [and] entreated he would leave her to repose" (163)—which he does, and she promptly escapes. The real threat is in the mind: Adeline's dreams, La Motte's belated recognition that the proposed violation at which he had been an assistant would have been incestuous—not that Radcliffe can bring herself to name this: "when he knew [wrongly] that Adeline was the daughter of the Marquis, and remembered the crime to which he had once devoted her, his frame thrilled with horror" (334). Austen, of course, displaces the threat of rape onto the comic caddishness of John Thorpe and the "abduction" to Blaise Castle; and Catherine learns to distrust the workings of the waking imagination, and has dreamless sleeps. But for Boaden, simplified conventional gender behaviors are sufficient to provide for the entertainment of his audience. Thus Adeline remains a passive victim, to be rescued by the young hero; the Marquis not only offers the audience thrilling soliloquies of guilt and violence that break the taboos of the novel's feminine-identified culture—

Marquis. When can ambition lay him down secure
Of ill-got power, and dread no retribution?
...Furies of Hell!
To tempt me thus with damning incest too!
And bid me crush the form I would enjoy!

—he also provides a satisfying on-stage death scene, self-administered by stabbing, which keeps him in the foreground as the ultimate star of the show. In both Radcliffe and Austen, by contrast, the repentance of the villainous father figure happens off-stage and is reported by the narrator, who is much more interested in the fast-approaching "perfect felicity" of her *jeune premier* couple.

Thus the theatre is at once more conservative and more transgressive: deliciously—and safely—taboo-breaking but ultimately refusing to disturb the structure of patriarchal society by providing either Radcliffe's psychological or Austen's social analysis. Nevertheless, the convention that gives a play's epilogue to the principal actress of the company provides a coincidental rapprochement between the masculinist ideology underlying the play and the proto-feminism of Austen

(whose heroine's admirable qualities are summed up in her mother's comment, "...it is a great comfort to find that she is not a poor helpless creature, but can shift very well for herself" [237]). Where Austen offers a nonsensical "moral"—"I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience" (252)—Boaden ends his play proper with Adeline's pious appeal to the Almighty, which draws on the traditional association of the feminine with natural morality: "the great Avenger of perverted nature / Before us has display'd a solemn lesson." But he provides a counter-image of femininity in the epilogue written for the actress, Mrs. Pope. It is witty and ironical, appealing to a sophisticated audience that recognizes the conventionality of the images and experiences it has been enjoying in the theatre:

Well, heav'n be prais'd, I have escap'd at last,
And all my woman's doubts and fears are past.

She is represented as questioning the success of any playwright's "modern ghost" compared with that of *Hamlet*:

Know you not, Shakspeare's petrifying pow'r
Commands alone the horror-giving hour?
...You mean to sanction then your own pale sprite,
By his "that did usurp this time of night."

—which allows the young playwright, responding wittily to this call to humility, to claim instead a small place in the great tradition of theatrical sensationalists:

Why should your terror lay my proudest boast,
Madam I die, if I give up the ghost.

—not unlike the young novelist, who offered her audience an equally self-conscious (i.e., theatricalizing) but affectionate parody of "horrid" novels. As Catherine finally realizes, she has been both audience and performer in her own private theatre:

it had been all a voluntary, self-created delusion, each trifling circumstance receiving importance from an imagination resolved on alarm, and every thing forced to bend to one purpose by a mind which, before she entered the Abbey [or theatre], *had been craving to be frightened*. (199-200, author's emphasis)

Henry's entertainment of Catherine on the way to Northanger

(vol. 2, ch. 5) is consciously a parody, a performance in which he shows that one can simply assemble the standard elements of the Gothic in any permutation one pleases: they will continue to delight audiences who are willing to subject themselves to it. Henry Tilney and James Boaden, I am sure, would have enjoyed each other's company at the theatre, but both Jane Austen and Ann Radcliffe would have seen themselves as authors of rather more complex imaginative adventures.

NOTES

1. Among his many leading roles, Pope also played Frederick in *Lovers' Vows* at Covent Garden in 1798. Elizabeth Younge (?1740-1797), one of Garrick's protégées, was twenty-two years her husband's senior. She excelled at sentimental wives and daughters.
2. Boaden wrote the *Memoirs of the Life of Kemble* (1825), as well as those of Mrs. Siddons (1827), Mrs. Jordan (1831), and Mrs. Inchbald (1833).

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