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Review of *Contesting the Gothic* by James Watt

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James Watt, Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict, 1764–1832

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James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict, 1764-1832*. Cambridge Studies in Romanticism, no. 33. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. x + 205 pp. $59.95 (Hdbk; ISBN: 0-521-64099-7).

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In a valuable new study of the gothic, Watt claims that he wants to "take issue with received accounts of the genre as a stable and continuous tradition." His stated intention is to depict the gothic as a "heterogeneous body of fiction, characterised at times by antagonistic relations between various writers or works" (i). Given the mass of critical studies published in the past five years or so on the gothic that adopt a historicist perspective, such as Emma Clery's *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762– 1800* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), this is not as original or startling a claim as Watt seems to believe, but Watt's book does bring some exciting archival material to the project, and for that reason alone the book is new and grounded in historical material we have not seen before. His stated foci are: 1) "Walpole's attempt to forge an aristocratic identity"; 2) the "loyalist affiliations of many neglected works of the 1790s"; 3) the "subversive reputation of *The Monk*"; 4) "the ways in which Radcliffean romance proved congenial to conservative critics"; 5) the status of Scott within the gothic; and (6) the "process by which the Gothic came to be defined as a monolithic tradition" (i).

In his Introduction, Watt summarizes the critical positions put forward by gothic theorists such as David Punter, Chris Baldick, and Ian Duncan, all of whom, according to Watt, tend to privilege a monolithic approach to the gothic, and to present the genre as less problematic than it actually was (and is). He moves then to the first statement of his thesis: "Gothic fiction was far less a tradition with a generic identity and significance than a domain which was open to contest from the first, constituted or structured by the often antagonistic relations between different writers and works" (6). By examining publishing records as well as reception histories, Watt intends to follow the historical method advanced by Jerome McGann in his argument that every piece of literature has "two interlocking histories": "one that derives from the author's expressed decisions and purposes, and the other that derives from the critical reactions of the [work's] various readers" (*The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* [Clarendon Press, 1985], 24).

Watt's chapter on Walpole advances this methodology by examining what Watt calls the "larger matrix" out of which *The Castle of Otranto* originated. For Watt, the novel must be understood "in terms of its author's attempt to distinguish himself from other writers of fiction [by] providing novelty for a particular audience . . . [while] the meaning and influence of the work ultimately

need to be considered relationally, and addressed in the context of the overall system of its 'field of production'" (13). Walpole was, for Watt, not simply a writer obsessed with fashioning an "aristocratic" identity for himself; he was also a "licensed risk-taker," someone who thought he could "consecrate 'stupid' and 'incongruous' material" simply through the power of his self-created persona (13). Relying heavily on Walpole's extensive correspondence, Watt makes the case that Walpole was not simply an eccentric with a strictly personal agenda, but a man who used the two prefaces to the work to disdain the craze for antiquarianism, a craze it would appear he was complicitous in creating (39).

In his chapter on the Loyalist Gothic romance, Watt usefully introduces gothic afficionados to little known works like James White's *Earl Strongbow* (1789), Thomas Leland's *Longsword* (1762), Richard Hole's *Arthur* (1789), Joseph Cottle's *Alfred* (1800), Henry Pye's *Alfred* (1801), as well as Godwin's *Imogen* (1784) and Reeve's *Old English Baron* (1778) as adaptations of *Otranto*. In a wide-ranging reading of a number of obscure works, Watt produces what I consider to be his best chapter. Situating these works in their historical, political, and cultural contexts, Watt emphasizes the role of the gothic in the loyalist strategy: "many of these romances sought to give the native, Protestant aesthetic defended by Richard Hurd (as well as Walpole's second preface to *Otranto*) a military inflection or emphasis, defining a distinctively English 'genius' against French, and later German excess" (68).

In "Gothic 'subversion': German literature, the Minerva Press, Matthew Lewis," Watt explores the factors that led to the notoriety of so many gothic works (70), primarily the growth of William Lane's Minerva Press and the growing class-based anxiety about "'unlicensed' reading" (71). Watt's focus on Lewis concludes that, much like Walpole, Lewis as author was consumed with the need to "distinguish his own position within the field of literary production; whereas Walpole took great care to fashion an 'aristocratic' authorial identity, Lewis's quest for reputation was far more indiscriminate, and resulted in works which were consequently even more extravagant" (71). In the Minerva Press books, the upper-class critic saw a dangerous species of works catering to a new, uncontrolled population reading escapist fiction that itself was clearly influenced by the worst tendencies in German literature (uncontrolled emotion, revolutionary sentiments, conspiracies against the state and Church, and sexual deviancies of all types). In *The Monk*, Watt sees a "case study of the reasons why some Gothic romances were held to be so dangerous" (84). The novel did not receive universal condemnation until Lewis's identity as a Whig author was known, and it would appear that Lewis even baited his critics: he "continued to provoke his predominantly loyalist critics by appealing to German sources and, even more importantly, by pandering to popular demand" (95).

In his chapter on Radcliffe, Watt begins by placing her first novel, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789), in the tradition of Loyalist Gothic romances primarily concerned with the property restoration plot (103). The contribution of Radcliffe to the genre, I think, concerns her focus on the subjectivity of her heroines (105), and her emphasis on "the proper management of sensibility" *i.e.*, "education") of her heroines, as well as Radcliffe's female readers (106). Watt usefully places Radcliffe's novels alongside other female gothics like Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (178335), Rosetta Balin's *The Statue Room* (1790), Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy* (1795), and Wollstonecraft's *Maria* (1798), and argues that her novels were not "monologically conservative," but that they instead "negotiated with contemporary constructions of femininity"

(109). Radcliffe's works occasionally reveal her membership in the Dissenting, critical, "middling classes," and contain Whiggish statements against the slave trade, the horrors of the Bastille, the miseries of superstition (*i.e.*, Catholicism), and the arbitrary government of corrupt aristocrats. But for all their political markers, "the occasional topicality of Radcliffe's work seems to have been consistently overlooked by the vast majority of critics and reviewers, who valued her romances precisely because of the refuge they provided from the taint of contemporary politics" (120).

In his final chapter, "The Field of Romance: Walter Scott, the Waverley novels, the Gothic," Watt examines how Scott "distilled or filtered for modern consumption the exotic vitality of the primitive, oral past" (133). Scott's Waverley novels are situated within the loyalist gothic tradition, as well as within the romance novel tradition. By straddling both traditions, the novels "subsumed Gothic conventions within a historical framework, or set up an opposition between romance and real life in order to relegate the Gothic romance to the status of a fictional anachronism" (144). Watt's focus in this chapter is not only on the novels themselves, but also on the shifting and ultimately degenerating reputation of Scott himself as a novelist. *Contesting the Gothic* is most valuable as a resource for a wide variety of historical and critical information that, while available elsewhere, must be gathered from many different sources. All of that information has been distilled here for easy access. Watt's discussions of the literary works themselves are actually somewhat truncated, but the amount of supporting apparatus historical, critical, theoretical that he has brought to bear on the works makes this an important work, and, I think, a predictor of where the field of gothic studies is headed.