

The Comic Tragedy of Mere Men and Women: The Ambiguously Distracting Use of Laughter in *The Castle of Otranto* and Its Prefaces

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This paper attempts to analyze the curious effects of the comic scenes in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) through a close reading of Walpole's famous prefaces to the novel. The comic scenes evoke an incongruous dramatic response and contradict the claims made in the prefaces, according to which comic elements highlight dramatic ones. While being often thought of as indicative of a general aesthetic failure, the comic elements in this foundational text of the Gothic are indeed subtle, complex and artful. More precisely, Walpole's curious use of laughter makes a complex appeal to an extra-dramatic level which undercuts the reader's identification with the dramatic situations represented in the novel.

Keywords: Horace Walpole; *The Castle of Otranto*; comedy; drama; Gothic novel; prefaces

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La tragicomedia de los hombres y las mujeres corrientes: usos ambiguos y distractores de la risa en *The Castle of Otranto* y sus prefacios

En este trabajo se estudia la llamativa función de las escenas cómicas en *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), a partir de una lectura detallada y minuciosa de los prefacios que Walpole escribió para acompañar la novela. Las escenas cómicas evocan una respuesta dramática incongruente que contradice las afirmaciones efectuadas por Walpole en los prefacios, en el sentido de que la función de los elementos cómicos es resaltar los recursos dramáticos. Frente a su valoración tradicional como aspectos estéticos fallidos, los elementos cómicos en este texto fundacional de la novela Gótica se utilizan de forma sutil e intencionadamente artística; en concreto, el recurso a la risa por parte de Walpole desencadena una respuesta compleja más allá de la lectura dramática, amortiguando así la identificación de los lectores con las situaciones dramáticas recreadas en la novela.

Palabras clave: Horace Walpole; *The Castle of Otranto*; comedia; drama; género Gótico; prefacios

1. INTRODUCTION

It is an open secret in Gothic criticism that what it takes to be its foundational text is hardly a serious work. There have been countless efforts to force *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) into the mold of serious fiction that can carry the noble mission of performing the origin of an entire genre. I am afraid, however, that the implausibly high-minded interpretations, which work to divert from the irrepressible frivolity of Horace Walpole's work, ultimately run the risk of incurring the critical judgment of frivolity upon themselves.¹ As Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik note, "[t]he critical reception of Walpole's work as the first Gothic novel seems to have involved turning a blind eye to its more comic moments, as if these were somehow an embarrassing element in a text which provides the templates for the conventions of Gothic fiction" (2005, 5-6). There are perhaps no more than a handful of studies that do the basic but honest work of referring to the lack of seriousness in *The Castle of Otranto*. Frivolity, however, is not considered an aesthetic value, and pointing out the comic elements in the text is almost always understood as pointing out a failure. Regrettably, we are made to side either with the lofty interpretation that elevates *The Castle of Otranto* to the honorable heights of a relevant critique of the Enlightenment or a subtle contribution to English political discourse, or with the not-so-serious interpretation that too quickly dismisses the work's strange aesthetics which incongruously blends the dramatic with the comical.² To counter the former, it is high time we did what is perhaps a bit too obvious and therefore rather superfluous, and reveal the open secret once and for all: *The Castle of Otranto* is as much a comic work as a Gothic one. To counter the latter, however, we need to argue that the comic elements of the novel constitute an aesthetic value that is far from insignificant or facile, and that Walpole's use of such elements is artful, subtle and complex. Admittedly, the comic elements in the novel do not support the dramatic ones, and the overall effect of juxtaposing comedy with drama is one of incongruity. In this regard, the famous prefaces, in which Walpole claims to have used comic elements as supplements to the sublime drama in his fiction, are entirely misleading. Such incongruity, however, does not necessarily result in aesthetic failure. As I argue in this paper, Walpole's curious use of laughter makes a complex appeal to an extra-dramatic level that undercuts the reader's identification with the dramatic situations represented in the novel.

¹ See Watt (1999, 12-40) for a historical discussion of the frivolity of Walpole's oeuvre in general and of *The Castle of Otranto* in particular. Focusing on the novel's context of production and reception, Watt stresses that Walpole often "drew attention to the frivolity of his work" in his correspondence with his friends. (32) Unlike the reception of the novel as serious historical allegory in the twentieth century, Watt notes that "most critics and reviewers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries recognized the status of Walpole's work, for good or bad, as frivolous diversion" (25).

² E. J. Clery's interpretation of the novel, which can be found in her seminal work on the rise of the Gothic, is a case in point (1995, 67-79). Clery initially notes the "hedonistic, self-gratifying aesthetic pleasure" (66) in Walpole's work, but she does not comment on the comic elements. She then quickly moves on to a reading of the novel as a social allegory, claiming that "*Otranto* was not simply a backward-looking evocation of a feudal order [...] it represented, in fantastical but recognizable form, aristocratic ideology as it persisted in modern times" (73).

The use of laughter, in other discussions of *The Castle of Otranto*, has been associated with some defect in the writing of the novel or, more positively, with the novel's *camp* sensitivity. Stefan Andriopoulos, for instance, remarks that "the frequency and monstrosity of supernatural interposition lead to a loss of authorial control in Walpole's novel, undermining its 'principal engine'—'terror'" (1999, 742). He goes on to quote Clara Reeve, who remarks that the supernatural scenes in Walpole's work "excit[e] laughter [...] instead of attention" (1778. Quoted in Andriopoulos 1999, 742). Rather than using laughter as a rhetorical strategy, Walpole's fiction, in this view, inadvertently induces laughter because of its poorly written, laughable scenes of terror. In a similar vein, George Haggerty notes that "[w]e find ourselves laughing again and again" as "Walpole's ghost marches 'sedately.'" According to Haggerty, such laughter arises from the novel's confused intention of imparting a sense of novelistic realism to supernatural Gothic material (1985, 381). Max Fincher underscores Walpole's personal sense of humor, i.e., his "self-conscious theatricality and bitchy humour that we might be tempted to see anachronistically as evidence of a camp sensibility" (2001, 232). Marcie Frank suggests that Walpole's fiction be viewed as "comic or satiric—or parodic" in that it "articulate[s] a form of parody whose gestures we might find more recognizable under the label of 'camp'" (2003, 434). Kathy Justice Gentile claims that "Walpole's drag performance [and] his tongue-in-cheek use of hyperbole," destabilize the masculine conceptualization of the sublime (2009, 24). Remarkably, however, none of these studies directly addresses the very conscious use of laughter in *The Castle of Otranto*, which is indeed a major concern of Walpole's two prefaces to his novel.³

Walpole's use of laughter is neither as inadvertent nor as implicit as these readings would suggest, and cannot be merely sought in our response to the hyperbolic nature of its supernatural scenes. In a brilliantly attentive and currently unchallenged close reading of the novel that *does* comment on the comic scenes, Elizabeth Napier argues that Walpole's use of laughter contradicts the critical claims of his second preface, according to which the comic scenes serve to enhance the tragic aspect of the work (1987, 79-81). For Napier, this contradiction reflects a more general aesthetic failure: the persistent confusions in the tone of both the comic *and* non-comic scenes make it impossible to determine whether Walpole is serious or ironic.

I agree with Napier's description of the work as "essentially comic in character" (1987, 78). In contrast to Napier, however, I believe that the tonal confusions, as well as the other curious stylistic elements that Napier is critical of in Walpole's work such as exaggeration, frenetic pace and rapid characterization, constitute the success of the

³ Walpole wrote two prefaces for his novel. The first preface, which was part of the first edition (1764), is a renowned literary hoax, where Walpole hid his identity and pretended to be the translator of a Gothic romance written by an Italian priest named Onuphrio Muralto, a humorously Italianate rendition of his own name. After the success of the first edition, Walpole revealed his identity in the second edition and wrote a second preface (1765) in which he explained the hoax and defended his artistic choices. Both prefaces are usually included in the modern editions of *The Castle of Otranto*.

work rather than its failure. *The Castle of Otranto* is not the kind of unintentional comedy in which we laugh condescendingly at the poor execution. Rather it is a comedy that is exquisitely designed by Walpole in order to give the impression that it is not a comedy. The incongruous, odd, some might say, poorly written *dramatic* scenes, of which there are admittedly many examples in the novel, are essentially comic, both at heart and in design, and very accomplished at that. It is likely that such scenes were poorly written intentionally for the purpose of invoking a comic response, or more precisely, a mixed response that wavers between comedy and drama. It would therefore be unfair to judge Walpole's work according to serious dramatic criteria and criticize it for being too frivolous when the work's only serious intention is its frivolity.

In this article, I examine the more obvious comic elements in the novel, which Walpole acknowledges as such and addresses in his prefaces. I start with a brief discussion of a comic scene at the beginning of the novel in order to illustrate how comic scenes sit oddly with the dramatic elements. As the prefaces make explicit, Walpole is both self-conscious and specific about his own use of laughter, although his particular arguments on the function of comedy may appear poorly substantiated if taken seriously (Walpole may, however, be playing a joke on literary criticism). While arguing through Walpole's claims in the second preface, I formulate my own arguments regarding the function of the comic elements and develop them further through an analysis of a key comic scene towards the end of the novel which is explicitly mentioned in the first preface. I intend to show that there is complex art in Walpole's use of laughter, and argue that the comic distractions make an appeal to the reader's sense of plausibility outside the framework of the dramatic actions in the novel.

2. THE COMIC SCENE OF JAQUEZ AND DIEGO: THE SPEECHLESS SERVANTS

Reading *The Castle of Otranto* can be a hilarious experience: the scene in which Manfred questions his two domestics Jaquez and Diego about their encounter with the supernatural, for instance, is a brilliant piece of artfully constructed dramatic comedy fit for the stage. These domestics have just seen a giant leg in armor moving around unattached to a proper body. They are overly shocked and confused, and have tremendous trouble in their reporting of their experience to their master, who naturally becomes frustrated by their ineptitude. They commit many an error as they deliver their report: they begin to talk at the same time, become needlessly reverential, frequently interrupt each other, mix up words, repeat their own words, echo each other's words, evade direct answers, give unnecessary information regarding the circumstances and engage in endless circumlocution:

"My gracious lord," said Jaquez, "if it please your highness to hear me; Diego and I according to your highness's orders, went to search for the young lady, but being comprehensive that we might meet the ghost of my young lord, your highness's son, God rest his soul, as he

has not received Christian burial—"Sot!" cried Manfred, "is it only a ghost then that thou hast seen?"—"Oh, worse! worse! my lord!" cried Diego; "I had rather seen ten whole ghosts. Grant me patience! said Manfred; these blockheads distract me." (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 34)

It must be remembered that the narration did not follow these lowly servants around during the event in question, making it impossible for the reader to develop a clear sense of their firsthand experience of the freely-moving giant limb. In keeping with the spirit of high-minded neoclassicism, the narration refrains from focusing on the consciousness of mere servants and from allowing the reader to identify with their experience. The abrupt intrusion of the inept domestics into the scene and their unbearable verbal ineptitude have a strange effect on the reading experience: the servants distract us, readers, just as they distract Manfred. As we laugh at the servants, we give up aligning ourselves too closely with their master and realize that we have been tricked by a narration that refuses to satisfy our curiosity and does so in an entirely inappropriate manner.⁴ Despite the inferiority of their rhetorical delivery, there is something decidedly plausible about Jaquez and Diego's stunned situation. These domestics are perhaps a bit too plausible, too real: one might say that they are as confused and tongue-tied as anyone would be in extraordinary situations like the supernatural sighting of gigantic limbs in motion. The comic scene with the laughable servants then hints at a complex interaction between comical distraction and plausibility, and it is precisely such an interaction that the second preface addresses in its arguments regarding the use of laughter, which I will analyze at some length in the next section.

3. THE SECOND PREFACE

Walpole's arguments concerning the use of laughter in his second preface are couched in terms of a particular discussion where Walpole also wants to justify his use of supernatural elements. In his ambitious literary project of blend[ing] the ancient and the modern romance, Walpole intends to bring both his use of the supernatural and laughter under the prestigious rubric of neoclassicism (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 9). More specifically, he wants to show that his use of the supernatural and laughter does not fully violate the dramatic criterion of plausibility.

The justification of the use of the supernatural in view of the criterion of plausibility appears no less than a paradoxical feat, given that the notion of the supernatural represents the very opposite of plausibility. Walpole attempts to achieve this goal through a rather imaginative argument at the beginning of his preface: in Walpole's estimation, *The Castle of Otranto* represents a happy union between nature and fancy,

⁴ As Robert B. Hamm Jr. also notes, the episode, in which "terror take[s] a backseat to comedy," reveals that "the servant's language and his lack of control over it are useless to convey terror" (2009, 684).

between modern and ancient romance, and hence between the supernatural and the plausible. Despite its fanciful use of the supernatural, the novel stays true to nature in the way it plausibly represents its actions, sentiments and conversations, even when these latter stem from encounters with the supernatural. As Walpole says in his preface, referring to himself in the third person:

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. (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 9-10)

There is a perceivable shift here from a largely genre-unspecific discussion of the romance to one that more specifically addresses the genre of drama. This shift fits well with the overly dramatic, theatrical nature of *The Castle of Otranto* and with the rest of the preface, which is devoted to an extended critique of Voltaire's negative assessment of the inclusion of comic scenes in the tragedies of Shakespeare. It also results in a discussion of the novel in the critical terms borrowed from drama. Walpole intimates that his blend of the ancient romance and the contemporary novel may be seen as a dramatic work that largely adheres to the neoclassical rules of dramatic form and deviates from them only to the extent that it deploys a higher dose of 'interesting situations,' by which Walpole means supernatural events. He observes that he has intended to "make [his characters] think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions" ([1764/1765] 1998, 10).⁵ The implicit claim is that his blend of modern and ancient romance *plausibly* reflects how "mere men and women" would act if they saw an enormous helmet fall from the sky or a severed giant limb moving around in an isolated part of a castle.

The category of 'mere men and women,' however, may be as elusive as the standards of plausibility. Among the characters of an excessively fast-paced novel whose attention span to individual character and characterization appears to be significantly deficient—judging, that is, by dramatic rather than comic criteria—one may point to three broadly diverging subcategories within the more general category of "mere men and women": nobles, knights and servants (Walpole referring to the latter as 'domestics' or 'subalterns'). The kind of actions fitted to these different subcategories varies: the conduct of the nobles proceeds according to the general pattern of a tragedy; the valorous and hot-tempered knights are sketchy adaptations from medieval romances and supposedly act like romance heroes; and the senseless servants are side-characters drawn from comedy. These three modalities do not seem to be harmonized; rather, they

⁵ This point could also be found in the first preface where Walpole claims that "all actors comport themselves as persons would do in their situation" ([1764/ 1765] 1998, 6).

are brought into deliberate and deliberately absurd discordance. This results in the reader's bafflement as to what code of plausibility, if any, could be applied to unite all the disparate modalities of comportment displayed by the novel's characters. Indeed, Walpole dedicates the remainder of his second preface to the justification of the striking discordance between the comportment of the nobles and servants:

With regard to the deportment of the domestics [...] I will beg leave to add a few words. The simplicity of their behaviour, almost tending to excite smiles, which at first seem not consonant to the serious cast of the work, appeared to me not only 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 others, 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. (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 10)

Notably, this is also the point where Walpole begins his discussion of the use of laughter in his novel. As Walpole attempts to justify his inclusion of the "coarse pleasantries of vulgar actors," he acknowledges that the category of "mere men and women" cannot simply be regarded as a unified class and must be thought of as being stratified. The simplicity of the vulgar domestics, Walpole admits, is decidedly not consonant with the solemnity of the dignified nobles. *The Castle of Otranto* is concerned with both "sublime" (and "dignified") sensations of princes and heroes, i.e., of tragic and romantic characters, as well as the "sublime" style through which such emotions are properly expressed.⁶ The naïveté of the sensibilities of the domestics, accompanied by the naïve (but also "coarse" and "vulgar") style through which they express themselves, make their inclusion seemingly improper (or fanciful) when juxtaposed with the "sublime" representations of the more elevated characters that adjectivally relate to the representations of "grave," "melancholy," "dignified," "serious," "important," "pathetic" sensations. Therefore a reason or even an apology must be offered for the inclusion of the seemingly improper domestics and of their laughter-inducing antics, and Walpole's lengthy explanation is intended precisely to perform as such an apology.

In a statement, which constitutes the main argument of his apology but remains vague without the examples he draws from Shakespeare in the following pages,

⁶ For an insightful discussion of the sublime in relation to *The Castle of Otranto*, see Morris (1985). On the influence of Burkean sublime on the work, see Mack (2008, 375-376).

Walpole remarks that the naïveté of the domestic characters “sets the pathetic [of the sublime of the princes and heroes] in a stronger light.” This statement, however, is hardly consonant with the example that he draws from his own fiction: the coarse pleasantries of vulgar actors, as we have seen in the scene of Jaquez and Diego and as we will also see in the scene with Bianca, do not set their delayed announcement in a stronger light. The announcement of the supernatural events by the domestics becomes “pathetic,” not in the sense of any “pathetic sublime,” and in no way reminiscent of whatever is “grave” and “important,” but perhaps in the ironic, more contemporary way of referring to the pathetic as that which is laughably ridiculous, inadequate and improper.

Walpole’s implicit focus in his justification of the use of laughter in *The Castle of Otranto* is the emotional response of the reader, which he seems to align with the “sensations of the princes and heroes.” But the alignment is decidedly discordant: it is not clear how the reader could harmonize the sublime of the aristocratic characters with the ridiculousness of the servants. Jaquez and Diego do seem to play a practical joke on the reader, frustrating their desire to arrive at the hidden knowledge regarding the “important catastrophe.” To make the introduction of such inappropriate laughter conform to the neoclassical requirements of plausibility, Walpole comes up with two explanations: (1) the improper comportment of the domestics “perhaps [...] heightens [...] the depending event” or (2) “[it] certainly proves that [the reader] has been artfully interested in” the same event (10). In the first scenario, which reenacts the previously mentioned “setting of the pathetic in a stronger light,” the reader becomes effaced. The prolonged suspense heightens the situation without bringing any attention to the process of reading the fiction. In the second scenario, however, the focus shifts towards the consciousness of the reader and highlights the process of reading: the reader cannot help becoming conscious of their being “artfully interested in the depending event.” Here we have an intimation of aesthetic distance: the reader moves away from an all too ready identification with a particular fictional situation to the recognition of the *artful* processes that are used to shape it. In other words, the consciousness of suspense gives way to the self-consciousness of being manipulated by the art of suspense. Walpole appears to acknowledge this second scenario with more certainty than the first scenario, which “perhaps” is the case.

It is possible to read Walpole against Walpole and claim that his use of laughter in *The Castle of Otranto* serves to lay bare the fictional artifice used to create suspense. Walpole seems to admit that laughter elicits a predominantly intellectual response, which might detract from the proper, i.e., dramatic, response that grave, important, sublime events are supposed to occasion. In the remainder of the second preface, Walpole attempts to fend off the suggestion that the use of disorienting laughter might compromise the sublime aspect of the work. He resorts to the authority of Shakespeare’s work in order to defend the simultaneous use of the comic and the tragic, launching a drawn-out counterargument against Voltaire, who disapproves of

such use.⁷ As such, he finds fault with Voltaire's lower estimation of Shakespeare in comparison with French dramatists like Corneille and Racine, who, according to him, properly adhere to the neoclassical rules of representation without adulterating the pathetic with laughter:

Let me ask if [Shakespeare's] tragedies of Hamlet and Julius Caesar 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 affectedly unaffected oration of Brutus, artificially exalted by the rude bursts of nature from the mouths of their auditors? (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 11)

In the use of humor in Shakespearean drama, rude nature exalts refined nature, and the opposition between the vulgar and the sublime becomes resolved in the further elevation of the sublime, which also accords with Walpole's earlier statement that the same opposition sets sublime pathos in a stronger light. This would surely be a powerful argument only if it were merely formulated as a critique of Voltaire's assessment of Shakespeare and not framed as a justification for the use of laughter in Walpole's own fiction. The frustratingly speechless, half-witted domestics of *The Castle of Otranto* are radically different from the punning, witty and articulate gravedigger in *Hamlet*; their frolics may thus be thought to deflate the sublime, rather than heighten it.⁸

While Walpole's attack on Voltaire's critique of Shakespeare is well-formulated and witty, it remains unclear how "the moral dialogue between the prince of Denmark and the grave digger" ([1764/1765] 1998, 14) in *Hamlet* might at all relate to the terribly awkward scenes in *The Castle of Otranto*, which contain the servants' comically frustrating accounts of the supernatural. Unlike Shakespearean tragedy, which Walpole enlists in his second preface as authoritative precedent, the novel's use of comic elements *dramatically* fail to bring the sufferings of the tragic characters into sharper relief. The servants' impossibly long winded, comically stuttering articulations of their horrid discoveries to their master do not so much advance the plot, create suspense or lead to the Aristotelian emotions of fear and pity, as disorient the reader.

The comic distractions therefore destabilize Walpole's attempt to elevate his work critically through the strategic deployment of neoclassical vocabulary and the enlistment of Shakespeare as influence and precedent. But such dramatic deficiency is countered by subtle *comic* achievement: the use of laughter serves to deflate the higher station of the novel's noble characters, and this happens by way of artful distractions

⁷ For a discussion of the Shakespearean influence on *The Castle of Otranto*, see Shapira (2012) and Hamm Jr. (2009, 674-681). A great account of Walpole's relations with Voltaire might be found in Finch and Allison Peers (1920).

⁸ Napier also argues that Walpole's implicit comparison between his fiction and Shakespeare's tragic plays is so implausible and far-fetched that his discussion of Shakespeare hints at an intentional burlesque (1987, 81-82).

from the actions represented, which also gives way to the reader's self-consciousness. Different from its use in Shakespearean drama, laughter in *The Castle of Otranto* seems to create an *excess* of self-consciousness in the reader, who finds him/herself artfully implicated in the rhetorical devices of deferral and suspense.

How, then, does such excessive self-consciousness, which leads so blatantly to distraction from the dramatic events in the novel, relate to the idea of plausibility? The second preface fails to explain the connection between comic distraction and plausibility: comic distraction seems to render the dramatic elements less plausible. In the next section, I would like to explore the possibility of a different kind of plausibility, which does not obliterate comic distraction, by way of analyzing a conspicuously comic scene in the novel that is explicitly mentioned in Walpole's first preface.

4. THE FOIBLES OF BIANCA

In an argument on the use of laughter which is almost identical to the one in the second preface, in the first preface Walpole makes a direct reference to the scenes that finiceature Bianca, a female domestic, who comically interrupts the flow of narrative and frustrates the nobleman Manfred's designs just prior to the final catastrophe, i.e., Manfred's murder of his daughter Matilda after mistaking her for his love interest, Isabella.

Some persons may 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 well be 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. (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 7)

Contrary to Walpole's statements in this passage, Bianca's contribution to "the advance[ement] of the catastrophe" is at most negligible. Bianca's humorous interruption leads to distraction on behalf of the reader, who is made aware of their being suspended in the middle of frantic action. There are two subsequent scenes which immediately precede the final catastrophe and where Bianca comes to the foreground. In the first, Manfred questions Bianca as to whether she has any knowledge concerning the true nature of the relationship between Isabella and Theodore, his rival, the brave young peasant who is revealed to be an aristocrat and an implicit contender for the principality of Otranto (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 100-102). Throughout the scene, Bianca remains unyieldingly vague and somewhat manipulative, managing to extract a present from Manfred, who is in need of her services as a spy. In the second scene, which almost immediately follows, and which may more adequately be called a scene of laughter, Manfred encounters a stunned Bianca who has just seen a gigantic, armored

severed hand moving around. Bursting into Manfred's room, Bianca interrupts his conversation with Frederic, one of the rightful heirs to the principality and the father of Isabella. Manfred's aim in this conversation is to secure the hand of Isabella, and thus endure his rule and settle the disputes regarding his legitimacy as the prince, which would also signify the intermarriage of contending interests.

Bianca's presence in this latter scene is entirely inadequate for Manfred's purposes: unlike Jaquez and Diego, who frustrate Manfred by delaying the account of what they have seen, her too immediate revelation of her sighting of the ghastly hand has the potential effect of ruining his marriage prospects by alerting Isabella's father that the castle has been haunted by unseemly ghosts who seek atonement for past crimes. Manfred therefore wants to summarily dismiss the stunned Bianca from the presence of Frederic, but Bianca will simply not be ordered away until she concludes her fragmented and senselessly prolonged account of the terrifying experience, during which she divulges to Frederic, to Manfred's dismay, that Manfred has been secretly spying on Isabella. Though Manfred frequently interferes to diminish the import of Bianca's revelations, Bianca insists on continuing with her delightful jabber:

At that instant Bianca burst into the room, with a wildness in her look and gestures that spoke the utmost terror. "Oh! my lord, my lord!" cried she, "we are all undone! It is come again! It is come again!"—"What is come again?" cried Manfred amazed.—"Oh! the hand! the giant! the hand!—Support me! I am terrified out of my senses," cried Bianca, "I will not sleep in the castle to-night. Where shall I go? My things may come after me to-morrow. Would I had been content to wed Francesco! This comes of ambition!" (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 102)

The code with respect to the conduct of "mere men and women" changes dramatically: the grave and sublime mode of "princes and heroes," of tragedy and romance, is interrupted by the sudden "burst" of the unorganized and undignified conduct of the naïve domestic. Bianca's naiveté (and Walpole's *art* of representing it) is truly disorienting; it disorients not just Manfred, but also the reader. Her improper bursting into the scene subjects the reader to some rather intimate details of her life that are completely irrelevant within the development of the plot. As readers, we are superfluously introduced to the inner workings of Bianca's mind, to her wayward stream of consciousness that runs counter to all principles of dramatic necessity. We learn, for instance, that she interprets her sighting of the gigantic moving limb as a divine punishment for having rejected the marriage proposal of one Francesco, who is mentioned for the first time in the narrative here, and who, given the impending final catastrophe, will never surface as a character. "This comes of ambition!" reveals Bianca's sense of guilt concerning her ruined matrimonial prospects, but it might also be seen, within the context of the plot, as a judgment on Manfred's inexorable ambition to retain his rule over the principality of Otranto despite the evidence of the disapproving higher powers that haunt the castle in the ghastly

shape of giant severed limbs. But the resulting connection does not project a stronger light on the sublime, which, in this context, could be understood as the representation of Manfred's tragic predicament. Rather, it results in the debasement of the pathetic sublime and its degeneration into the utter mundane. The tragic cast of the work and its supposed propriety are discarded through the vulgarizing connection forged between Manfred's princely ambitions and Bianca's domestic one.

This flagrant incongruity between the different styles of domestics, princes and heroes does seem fanciful, and Manfred's intent to have Bianca dismissed from the scene may be understood as an attempt to also dismiss the sense of stylistic disorientation in the representation of the scene:

"Saw what? Tell us, fair maiden, what thou hast seen," said Frederic. "Can your highness listen," said Manfred, "to the delirium of a silly wench, who has heard stories of apparitions until she believes them?"—"This is more than fancy," said the marquis; "her terror is too natural and too strongly impressed to be the work of imagination. Tell us, fair maiden, what it is has moved thee thus."—"Yes, my lord, thank your greatness," said Bianca; "I believe I look very pale; I shall be better when I have recovered myself." (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 103)

This dialogue between Manfred and Frederic regarding Bianca's "fancy" may be thought an ironic reflection on the representational strategies of *The Castle of Otranto*. Manfred, who knows very well that the castle is being haunted, makes a false appeal to the presumably enlightened consciousness of Frederic, indicating that Bianca's story must be understood as "the delirium of a silly wench, who has heard stories of apparitions until she believes them." The kind of "delirium" exemplified by Bianca's undignified conduct is not how princes and heroes express their sensations "[h]owever grave, important, or even melancholy" such sensations might be (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 10); it must therefore be dismissed as mere fancy. Frederic's response to Manfred's appeal becomes significant precisely because it makes an appeal to a rhetorical strategy that rules the representation of nature in the scenes that depict the foibles of the domestics in *The Castle of Otranto*: Frederic observes that Bianca's stunned response and her state of terror cannot be fancy since they are "too natural" and so cannot be the "work of imagination," which also connotes art, artfulness and fiction. This reference to naturalness, and more implicitly, to nature may also be seen as a reflection on the notion of plausibility that is a major critical concern of both prefaces.

Within the context of the scene, however, it is clear that the too-obvious sense of nature in Bianca's response may only be thought of in terms of the "supernatural" event (the sighting of the moving severed hand). This implication of the supernatural specifically entails the work of imagination, along with its artful inventions and fanciful machinations, in the reference to nature: it is impossible to make a clean separation between the natural and the supernatural in the way Walpole does in his prefaces between natural conduct on the one side, and supernatural events on the other,

implying thus that nature can somehow be thought untouched by the sense of the supernatural. Frederic implies that nature, as reflected in Bianca's terror, must be "more than fancy;" yet, in view of the supervening supernatural, such nature cannot be but the work of more fancy, more imagination.

The sense of nature being more than fancy may only become possible with the supplement of the reader. Frederic's statement—"her terror is too natural and too strongly impressed to be the work of imagination"—may be seen as an appeal not just to Manfred, who is *in* the fiction, but also to the reader *outside* the fiction, in precisely the same way as Walpole makes an appeal to his readers both in the first and the second preface, urging them to expand their sense of probability or their rule of nature so that they may accommodate the supernatural: "Allow the possibility of the facts, all actors comport themselves as persons would do in their situation" (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 6). The hypothetical mode, which makes an implicit appeal to the fancy of the reader, may also be observed in Walpole's affirmation that his actors "think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions" (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 10). The reader, who is already disoriented and distracted due to not just the laughable response of Bianca, but also the discrepancy in the representational mode between the domestics and the nobles, should become the arbiter of "the possibility of the facts" or the rule of nature, by way of hypothetical fancying or imagination.

In view of the supernatural, however, the rule of nature becomes ever more fanciful. It becomes hard to retain nature as standard when the reader is made to allow the possibility of supernatural facts: the supernatural confounds the natural. Of course, there would not be any problem if the rule of nature was simply out there, in the nature of things to be merely imitated, as when Walpole wants to relegate Bianca's response to her class (and gender) inferiority, which supposedly exists in the universal rule of nature independent of the reader. Recalling Walpole's observations on the rule of nature in his second preface: "The simplicity of [the] behaviour [of the domestics], almost tending to excite smiles, which at first seem not consonant to the serious cast of the work, appeared to me not only improper, but was marked designedly in that manner. My rule was nature" (Walpole [1764/1765] 1998, 10).

In order to judge whether Bianca's terror is natural (which also means, plausible), the reader will have to take the rule of nature into account in order to decide whether Bianca comports herself "as persons would do in her situation" or whether she thinks, speaks and acts as "it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions." This would perhaps not be so difficult if Bianca did not inhabit a world haunted by ghastly apparitions: the plausibility of her behavior would then be decided through a fairly objective comparison with the phenomenal world. In a supernatural world, however, the question What do persons plausibly do when they see giant severed limbs in motion? can only be answerable through recourse to the sheer fancy of the reader, which becomes the sole basis for the rule of nature.

“Allowing the possibility of the facts,” Bianca’s response is perfectly natural, perhaps, “too natural”: any person would be utterly stunned and laughably scattered afterwards in a way not so different from Bianca if they ever witnessed a severed giant limb armored and in motion. The reader is made to identify with Bianca, not because of any dramatic necessity, not from the framework of identifications within the narrative, which refrains from following the mere domestic and showing her encounter with the giant limb. Rather, the reader’s identification happens from outside, that is, from the fanciful and largely non-dramatic consideration regarding how any person would seem after having been exposed to the supernatural. Such identification is comically dissonant with the supposedly sublime representations of the tragically supernatural events in the text: in fact, the identification takes place outside the text. Despite the purportedly serious drama that is unfolding in the novel, an *extra-dramatic* level of identification emerges between the laughable Bianca and the reader, who would plausibly appear as laughable and as confused as Bianca after a frightening encounter with the supernatural.

Consequently, the dramatic inadequacy of Bianca’s response and the resulting distraction from represented actions become tempered with the reader’s extra-dramatic identification and resulting sense of plausibility. The reader’s consciousness of having to negotiate a sense of nature in view of the supernatural results in the fanciful production of a sense of *hypernature* (or hyperreality) that shortcuts dramatic identification as though it did not need this work of drama or literary fiction.⁹ So, when Frederic states that “[Bianca’s] terror is too natural and too strongly impressed to be the work of imagination,” we might reread this statement as an appeal to hypernature, which is extrinsic to any dramatic development in *The Castle of Otranto*. Bianca’s terror is hypernatural, in other words, *too* natural, insofar as it is based on the reader’s extra-dramatic rule of nature. Notably, this comic sense of the hypernatural further detracts from the sublime, tragic and pathetic aspects of the work of imagination contingent upon the “development of the catastrophe” or of the plot.¹⁰

The incongruent juxtaposition of Bianca’s laughable response with the dignified response of princes and heroes further destabilizes the category of “mere men and women.” Ironically, the rule of *hypernature* also enables an extreme sense of (hyper) reality, i.e., of plausibility, to burst into the scene in an as unruly way as Bianca does, opening up a perspective which, being completely indifferent to the sublimity of the unfolding drama, equalizes the differences between the domestics and the nobles. The category of “mere men and women,” which often functions as a rhetorical veil that dissimulates the preference for that which is noble, high, dignified or elevated in art

⁹ Jerrold Hogle also uses the word “hyper-reality,” albeit in an entirely different sense, to generalize about particular Gothic effects that suggest the Lacanian “Real” and Kristeva’s understanding of the “abject” (2010, 169).

¹⁰ In a similar vein, Marcie Frank notes that Walpole’s fiction “require[s] us to reconsider the short step that separates the sublime from the ridiculous” (2003, 435). I believe such a short step is enabled by the effect of hyperreality in Walpole’s use of laughter.

and nature, is hence reproduced and reimagined not through the dignified conduct of the nobles but through the vulgarizing spectacle of Bianca's laughable terror, which the reader is made to identify as "too natural" from their position outside the narrative.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to show that the aspect of comedy in *The Castle of Otranto* is far from being simple-minded, and that there is considerable art in the work's frivolity. In particular, I have underscored two elements introduced by the comical distractions in the work: (1) the reader's self-consciousness and intellectual response regarding the use of suspense and (2) the sense of hyperreality and of the (hyperreal) plausibility of the servants, which result from the reader's identification with them from a position outside the dramatic course of the narrative. Such elements reinforce the reading of *The Castle of Otranto* as a self-conscious comedy rather than a tragedy. In other words, the foundational text of Gothic fiction must be understood as a comedy.

So, what do we do with the foundational text of Gothic literature if it is not serious and cannot be made serious? In this paper, I have proposed that it be appreciated as an artfully written comic text and argued that such artfulness consists in the subtle way in which the text both incites comic distraction and engenders an extra-dramatic sense of plausibility. It is curious that *The Castle of Otranto* is a comedy given that, in its more typical manifestations, Gothic fiction can be morbidly serious. It must be remembered that Walpole, in his first preface, stresses "entertainment" as the proper mode in which his fiction should be read by his contemporaries. Just like the priest in the first preface, Walpole's recourse to the imagination serves to create interesting and extraordinary situations that tantalize and enthrall, only in order to conform to the ancient desire of a reading populace to be tantalized and enthralled. *The Castle of Otranto* is undoubtedly exploitative with its various objects of horror that are simply there, not for the advancement of the plot, but for the facile thrill they may transitorily offer. But as Walpole's artful use of laughter shows, it is done self-consciously, which makes the reading experience of *The Castle of Otranto* all the more remarkable and contemporary.

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