Radcliffe’s Novels and Boaden’s Dramas: Bringing the Configurations of the Gothic on Stage.

Francesca Saggini (Università della Tuscia)

§1. Dramatic ideology and the Gothic drama

Anne Williams’s contention that “until about twenty years ago, the Gothic was ignored by serious literary critics; those publishing on the Gothic were usually either enthusiastic antiquarians such as Montague Summers and Devendra P. Varma or philologists bent on cataloguing,” (2000: 789) might well be applied to the present state of Gothic drama studies. The numerous, mass-oriented, wildly popular Gothic productions that flourished in England around the turn of the 18th to the 19th century have endured an unjustified critical neglect, relegated as they still are to the margins of a genre that for a long time remained – in Williams’s provocative definition – “literature unspeakable ‘other’”.

As far back as 1992, Jeffrey Cox mentioned the “immense popularity” and little critical respect (2) encountered since the early days by such works as J. Cobb’s Haunted Tower (1789), M.G. Lewis’s The Castle Spectre (1797) and G. Colman’s Blue-Beard (1798), due to a high-brow scepticism that still persists in today’s academia. Over the past two decades, however, the Gothic – long relegated to a marginal presence in the field of Romantic studies – has evolved into an area of theoretically-aware scholarship. Within the revisionist project which was labelled “the New 18th Century” (Nussbaum and Brown 1987), since the 1970s numerous, critically diverse appreciations of the Gothic have come out in print, so that no contemporary scholar feels the need to justify the publication of yet another study of the Gothic novel. Yet, in this thriving editorial scenario hardly any critical attention has been reserved to the historiographic and critical investigation of the Gothic stage or to the relation of dramatic and novelistic modes of representation, an issue which might involve a significant reassessment of the relations between diverse cultural forms. As a matter of fact the intersection of varied materials encourages a comparative approach to the study of eighteenth-century dramatic and narrative texts, that promotes the combined analysis of contemporary pictorial, novelistic and theatrical strategies of representation. More significantly, such an approach prompts a series of questions about the nature, development
and relation of usually severed representational practices and the history of their reception in the context of eighteenth-century literary culture.

The overwhelming popular success of the Gothic drama is well-documented in several contemporary primary records, and it is testified by many amongst the most celebrated authors of the day – including Coleridge and Wordsworth, least gentle of judges. Nonetheless, and in spite of regularly overflowing houses, the High-Romantic disregard for mass entertainment contrived to transform the Gothic drama in a dim blot in Britain’s cultural history. Even the recent re-shaping of the editorial market provoked by the on-going revision of the eighteenth-century canon has left relatively unscathed the in-print availability of the primary reference texts of the dramatic Gothic. Only very recently have Gothic dramas started being included in low-priced collections of Romantic/Gothic texts (Baines, Burns eds.) or have they been collected in paperback anthologies (Norton), thus signifying their official incorporation into the mainstream Gothic canon (and their future inclusion in the university syllabi).

In her groundbreaking assessment of English theatre in the years 1760-1800, Paula Backscheider has rightly noticed that off- and on-stage Gothic narratives show the same structure of feeling, as well as sharing stock characters, codified settings and highly-stylised plots (155-56). The main Gothic typologies (the psychological, the supernatural, and the political) (Cox 1992: 6-8) regularly appeared in the late eighteenth-century theatre: dreams, visions, otherworldly apparitions, villainous tyrants and their virtuous opponents, symbolic overthrowings of tortured usurpers and redemptive redressings of social injustice were popular on page and stage alike.

In effect, despite obvious similarities at the level of both signifiers (conventions and superficial appurtenances) and signified (the Gothic themes, which illustrate how fears and desires are symbolically projected and re-worked into culture), most critical studies still seem to ignore the relationship existing between such established Gothic classics as Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto (1764) or M.G. Lewis’s The Monk (1796) and their contemporary, highly-successful theatrical adaptations (respectively Robert Jephson’s The Count of Narbonne, 1781 and James Boaden’s Aurelio and Miranda, 1798).

§. 2 James Boaden.

Did the theatrical productions of the Gothic masterworks, however, manage to stage those basic formal and stylistic features that are so relevant to the Gothic novel? In this
respect, the analysis of the dramatic works of James Boaden (1762-1839), one of the most reputed practitioners of the genre, may be of help.

Drama critic and Shakespearian connoisseur James Boaden is now a nearly forgotten literary figure, almost exclusively remembered as author of five amongst the best known Romantic theatrical biographies (Boaden 1980: v-x). As well as for his skill as dramatic memorialist and translator, Boaden is also recalled for the composition of some original plays of his own, amongst which The Secret Tribunal (1795), maybe the most notable of them, is a covert comment on the British political situation in the Nineties (Warrall 2000: 95-97). Thus Boaden appears a suitable candidate for investigation, in consideration of both the aforementioned canonical/recovery dichotomy, and the historical contingency of evaluation.

The author’s mid-life dramatic re-fashioning may be indeed attributable to his life long involvement with the London Theatres Royal, in his double role of enthusiastic and stage-struck spectator as well as discriminating and keen reviewer. As well as bringing him in contact with the leading actors of the day, whose individual dramatic abilities he learned to discern and appreciate, Boaden’s activity permitted him to become aware of the rapidly shifting tastes of the late eighteenth-century audiences, more and more inclined towards illegitimate dramatic forms that privileged spectacularism and dramatic gigantism. During the 1790s – the decade that bore witness to the consolidation of the Gothic craze – Boaden composed and staged a number of fortunate adaptations of some amongst the most popular Gothic novels of the period: Ann Radcliffe’s The Romance of the Forest (1791) and The Italian (1797) were respectively transformed into Fontainville Forest (1794) and The Italian Monk (1797, this latter with loose Lewisian borrowings that deftly capitalized on the novel’s popularity), whilst Matthew G. Lewis’s The Monk was bowdlerized into Aurelio and Miranda (1798), which managed to deflect both dramatic censorship and textual subversion, in keeping with Lewis’s other contemporary sentimental revisionings (amongst the others, a pantomime and, incredibly, also a ballet).

§ 3. Onstage Gothic: From The Romance of the Forest to Fontainville Forest.

PLOT. In 1794 Boaden adapted for the Covent Garden stage Ann Radcliffe’s The Romance of the Forest with great public acclaim and as much critical abuse. The choice of text must have obviously been intentional, since the novel was praised so widely at the time of publication that it encouraged its author to drop any previous reticence in acknowledging her work. At the same time, the novel presents specific adaptation problems, since it firmly
established Radcliffe’s reputation for the poetical description of landscapes, a trademark trait that characterizes her later production, and in particular *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).

The plot of *Fontainville Forest* is highly formulaic and it presents all the cultural icons of the Gothic tradition. In a forest outside Paris, Adeline, a beautiful orphan, is given by ruffians over to the Lamottes, a family in flight from Paris. They seek shelter in a crumbling Abbey, property of the Marquis Philippe de Montalt who, unbeknownst to Adeline, is the girl’s uncle as well as the murderer of her father, the rightful heir to the family fortune and title. Both Louis Lamotte and de Montalt fall in love with Adeline; the latter demands Old Lamotte help him trick the girl into a mock marriage. In case of refusal, he menaces to betray the family and give up Lamotte, who attacked him in the forest. Hence Lamotte’s moral dilemma, whether to abandon Adeline to the lust of the Marquis, to whom he is under obligation, or to withstand the nobleman, thus jeopardising his own and his family’s safety.

**ANALYSIS.** An holistic approach to 18th-century literary culture implies the analysis of each text as a set of intersecting texts, that can be appreciated through the critical retrieving of the individual visual, narrative and dramatic palimpsests within it. Thus not only should the analyst of the Gothic drama investigate the generic context of the plays, but also wonder what the audience and the critics actually saw and heard on stage. How far and how much did the familiarity with the novelistic hyper-texts bear upon the reception of their dramatic adaptations? And how much did the Gothic playwrights rely on this previous knowledge, or on the departure from the narrative version of the story? Finally, dramatic censorship and custom made subversive texts unfit for stage representation. Did the Gothic adaptors rely on the audiences’ previous knowledge and on their ability to restore its subversive narrative subtext?

The juxtaposition of *The Romance of the Forest* and *Fontainville Forest* might be of help in drawing a sketchy illustration of Boaden’s adaptation strategies. In table 1., in the columns on the left you find four short passages from Radcliffe’s novel. In the columns on the right you have the relative passages from Boaden’s adaptation. All of the passages have been chosen as illustration of specific features of the two types of Gothic texts here under investigation. In particular, the dramatic scenes have been selected as exemplifying the generic and institutional framework of the Gothic.

1. **Location.** In *Fontainville Forest* the suitably Gothic Abbey is emphasised at the expense of the heroine’s long wanderings through scenic parts of France and Switzerland, a journey that covers ten out of twenty-six chapters in the novel. This choice is textually coherent as the house symbol is always present in Radcliffe’s novels. However this narrower
topological focus also implies that little emphasis is given to Adeline’s emotional response to the beauty of Nature or to her aesthetic appreciation of the Sublime, and thus to the display of that uniquely informed sensibility which is the trademark of the ever-virtuous Gothic maiden. At the same time this adaptation strategy points to the difficulties experienced by the Gothic dramatists - and, more pointedly, the scenic artists - in recreating the alternations sublime-beautiful, dangerous-safe, savage-mild, wild-cultivated which have such relevance on Radcliffe’s notions of the picturesque.

The Abbey, one of the Gothic stock locales, represents the enclosed space, scene of murderous events, that became a staple element of the genre. Its ruinous condition visually embodies the idea of a crumbling, constricting past that still tries to project its influence on the present and the future. At the same time, the single, claustrophobic location highlights Adeline’s loneliness. Its forlornness duplicates the girl’s solitude, and it helps develop the character of the Marquis, an isolated authority figure who commands over his property in feudal fashion.

2. Plot and characters. In the play after forcefully challenging the villainous Marquis de Montalt, Adeline effectively defies his sexual advances, as she willingly takes upon herself the task of revenging her murdered father’s death. If the social sub-plot is thus maintained, the romantic one becomes but accessory. Louis Lamotte, the dramatic lover, appears even more ineffectual than his novelistic counterpart, thus contributing to focus the attention of the audience entirely on the heroine’s actions, and on the moral dilemma experienced by the divided hero, the ill-advised (but rehabilitated) Old Lamotte.

In the dramatic passages selected (table 1.), the absence of the nominal hero is particularly relevant. The dramatic action focuses on three characters, who embody the main dramatic types of the Gothic: the villain-hero, the persecuted maiden, and the reformed protagonist. The Gothic villain-hero – a usually attractive, anguished, and self examining character – is a libertine, driven by violent passions and voluptuousness, and he extols the joys of unrestrained (‘natural’ or instinctual) behaviour. [Passage 4.] The villain is torn between contrasting feeling of (illicit) love and hatred (revenge for past deeds) and he is also tormented by remorse [Passage 3. where remorse is accompanied by the other two main motifs of the Gothic, sublime guilt and mystery] (Cox). The contemporary styles of performance suggest that this speech would be illustrated by a succession of emotions passing quickly over the actors’ countenance. At the same time, the exclamation marks paralinguistically connote the Marquis’ speech, emphasising a contemporary manner of
delivery. Punctuation also reminds us that the changes in the theatrical morphology made projection and grand gesture essential.

In passage 4. the villain-hero is opposed to the young heroine, whom he desires as an object to possess. During the play, the necessity he strives under to protect his ill-gained property transforms the heroine from the victim of the villain’s lust into a social obstacle, that needs removed. This confrontation between virtue and vice is sexualised through the actors’ bodies: the mesmeric male eye [passage 3.], as a channel of expressiveness and a site of surveillance, is juxtaposed to the female bosom, [passage 4.], as signal of both woman’s sexuality and vulnerability (Backscheider 1993: 163-65, 187-90).²

On a pragmatic level, we may point out that the audiences identify quite strongly with the villain-hero, who appears almost tragic in his grandiosity and whose isolated revolt against normativity expresses the power of the individual against society. This attraction makes moral judgement unclear, thus undermining the strong didactic function traditionally recognized to theatre. At the same time, the importance of the struggle between good and evil (personified by the virtuous maiden and the villain-hero), with the comic final triumph of virtue, also points towards the affirmation of XIX cent. domestic melodrama, a form that reinforces the norm and the convention, and thus signals the later transformation of the Gothic spirit of revolt.

3. The Gothic drama and the theatre. On the level of dramatic practice we may notice that Boaden produced Fontainville Forest (Covent Garden, 25 March 1794) at the time when the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane re-opened (12 March 1794), after major restructure works had considerably increased its size, number of spectators, stage dimension, and greatly modified its repertoire. The changing morphology of the Theatres Royal, centred on the growing division between the stage and the auditorium, had a direct impact upon dramatic composition, acting techniques, theatre design, and staging.

In the same period the cultural duopoly of the Theatres Royal also began to eclipse, as new theatres (which relied on alternative, illegitimate forms of entertainment) emerged on the London scene (Cox). This stronger emphasis on visual rather than verbal elements implied that subtlety and detail gave way to grand presentation, as projection and externalisation became essential. While spoken drama remained exclusive to the Theatres Royal, new and competing forms based on gesture and scenery (for instance, pantomime) thrive in the minor houses. By degrees, a similar repertoire also arrived at the major theatres. These new dramatic events brought along several advances in theatrical techniques and special effects became
particularly elaborate, giving centrality to the role of the scenic artists (Cox 1992: 10-11, Backscheider 1993: 166-71).

As to the styles of performance, they relied heavily on the display of the passions, which the contemporary discourses of the body maintained could be expressed through a codified gallery of mimic signs. (Billi 1985 and 2000; Ranger 1991: 90-104; Backscheider 1993: 172-78). This acting technique was further enhanced by the use of picturesque poses, i.e. freeze frames/tableaux, which illustrated particular sections [see passage 2.]. Actors would keep each stance for a certain length of time, changing to another attitude with every new emotion. In particular, in passage 2. we see that freeze poses alternate with dynamic scenes, thus interchanging moments of stasis with moments of activity. This acting style of passion animated would thus duplicate the structure of the plays, which were imagined in terms of intense activity accompanied by intermissions (for example, comic relief).

It has been remarked that the pantomimic language had already educated the audience to a detached appreciation of the wonders of scenery and special effects. The dramatic passages selected offer an instance of the highly emotional Gothic acting style, and the influence of pantomime is evident. Strong reliance on physical gesture couples with numerous scenographic effects, which aim at creating an emotional response in the spectator. As we notice in passage 2., the “collapsing Turret seen through distant windows” mentioned in the stage directions indicates a feature of the prospective-layered scene interiors (made up of receding planes working on hinges and grooves that increased the depth of the backstage, recreating a realistic sense of place) and it again underlines the central role of machinists and stage hands (Ranger). Visual and sound effects (here, thunder and lightening) also have the function of juxtaposing the power of nature to the helplessness of mankind.

4. Supernaturalism. An issue which deserves particular attentions is the staging of the supernatural, a controversial question which may represent one of the distinctive points of Boaden’s adaptations. Whereas in The Romance of the Forest Radcliffe explains away her heroine’s fears as the effects of her overstrained sensibility and wild imagination, in Fontainville Abbey Boaden insists in embodying Adeline’s anxiety through an onstage ghost, which directly addresses her in the middle of the play. As well as offering precise contextual connections (for instance, the importance of late 19th-cent. pictorial supernaturalism, the influence of Shakespeare, and the function of unearthly apparitions for the Enlightened Englishmen) (Boaden 1825; Reno), Boaden’s choice undermines the idea of the Gothic playwrights as “closet dramatists” (Joanna Baillie has been only recently cleared of such an indictment), whilst highlighting a crucial feature of his adaptational practice. The playwright
realized that whilst in Radcliffe’s novels the character’s consciousness offered a filter
between the narrated events and the reader, who shared in the protagonist’s uncertainties, this
could not work in a play, a less mediated event which obliges the artist to choose whether
admitting or banishing the supernatural. Boaden firmly believed that the audience would
appreciate the spectacle as a work of art, an artistic illusion composed by a playwright and
acted by players, thus limiting any accusation of irreligious or unenlightened inspiration.

It has been very perceptively pointed out that the use of onstage ghosts has nothing to
do with the contemporary disbelief in supernatural apparitions (Reno) (so much so that
whenever Boaden did away with the unearthly in his later *Aurelio and Miranda*, the
audience’s disappointment or dissatisfaction were repeatedly recorded). The appearance of
the ghost promotes the progress of the play and his call for revenge moves Adeline into
action, therefore representing a dramatic necessity. At the same time terror is transformed into
an aesthetic experience, distanced and safely contained within the stage-frame, thus
reminding the audience of the fictionality of the dramatic event.

Concurrently the function of Boaden’s ghost is clearly symbolic or psychological (after
all the claim to illusion would have hardly been sustainable in a theatre with visible scene
changes and detectable stage machinery). Adeline’s fears and anxieties, which Radcliffe’s
describes at length in long closet-scenes (intense solitary experiences of emotional upheavals,
similar to those vicariously lived by the reader), are here incisively ostended and persuasively
embodied in a hieratic figure, that physically brings on stage the girl’s fears and passions. In
fashion similar to the locket that conventionally uncovers the heroine’s secret familial
connections, or the birthmark that prodigiously returns the protagonist her long-withheld
identity, the ghost supports a symbolic (and romantic) interpretation of the tale. Further, the
Gothic narrated situations were few and recurrent, and the spectators’ pleasure would be
increased by this pattern of repetition (Ranger 1991: 10-14). The terrifying, unexpected
apparition would de-familiarize dramatic structure and conventions, thus highlighting
Adeline’s essential contact, that is crucially set in the central scene of the play (III. iv). In this
respect the phantom may also represent the heroine’s encounter with her story, her way of
coming to terms with her past and, finally, her passage into adulthood.

§ 4. Conclusion.

In conclusion we might say that the Gothic drama heavily relied on formulaic
mechanisms of repetition and deferral, a predictable plot, and a restricted number of settings
and characters. This limited configuration collaborated in transforming a disquieting experience into a collective ritual, self-contained and thus safely containable. Authors and audiences expected to recognize the acting styles of the various performers, and obviously this familiarity with the acting codes partly jeopardized the illusion of the Gothic spectacle, whose social function was to contain and dissolve collective fears. The contemporary acting techniques did not contemplate any physical contact among the players, further contributing to reassuring the audience. Even the staging of picturesque female sufferance – one of the most expressive and sexually charged elements of the Gothic tradition – was deflated into collective relief (Backscheider 1993: 150, 187, 200).

A comprehensive study of the components of the Gothic dramatic presentation might enable us to understand the relevance of its profound and distinctive stylistic features, thereby illustrating the mechanisms of cultural production of the age and retrieving a fundamental and long-neglected aspect of XVIII cent. literary culture.

Correspondence: Istituto di Studi Anglo-Germanici, Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere, Università della Tuscia, Largo dell’Università, 01100 Viterbo (Italy), e-mail: fsaggini@unitus.it

1. Radcliffe’s poetical descriptions connect with the numerous inset texts, which matatextually link up to a forming literary canon (based on the study of the passions and the appreciation of sublime poetry) (Clery 2000) to provide authorial commentary on the narrated events along with an illustration of the characters’ emotions. Conversely, in a staged production the metatextual link is purposely dramatic, as shown most clearly by Boaden’s deliberate revisioning of such masterworks as Shakespeare’s and Fletcher’s (Reno 1984, Billi 1985; Knight 1986; Ranger 1991: 5).

2. In her discussion of eighteenth-century mammary iconography as visual locus of female sensibility, Prytula observes that “conventional descriptions of the body of the woman of feeling consistently endow the breast with certain physical propensities that render it uniquely expressive of character and emotion, thus transforming the very corporeality that literally obscures the heart into a communicative medium that fleshes out its otherwise invisible impulses” (174-75). We might assume that theatrical costumes must have conspired along with contemporary ladies fashion in the exposition and exaggeration of this conspicuous part of the female body.
References


