

Imagination and Protestantism in the Early Gothic

Kazuko Mariko (鞠子 和子)

From reading *The Castle of Otranto* (by Horace Walpole, 1764), *The Monk* (by Matthew Lewis, 1796), and *Vampyre* (by John Polidori, 1819), which may all be categorized as gothic novels, and among which Walpole's *Otranto* is the first publication of its kind, it is clear that the gothic novel needs 'imagination' in order to create something imaginary. *The Castle of Otranto* was initially published in December 1764, in the disguise of a genuine tale written in Italy, although in the second edition (published in April 1765) Walpole admitted that the text was his own writing. In its preface, he says that '[t]he favourable manner in which this little piece has been received by the public'¹ is the reason for revelation of his identity. He is fearful that 'the novelty of the attempt' will be unacceptable, so that he must assume this disguise. What is so disturbing about his novel?

Walpole clearly attempts to blend ancient and modern romances. He says that in the former 'all was imagination and improbability.' On the other hand, he says that in the latter, 'Nature has cramped imagination,' 'the great resources of fancy have been dammed up,' and therefore in his attempt he is 'desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention.' '[I]magination' has hitherto been largely restricted, so that he wishes to restore its free range. Furthermore, he states that in modern romances where 'invention has not been [totally] wanting,' 'Nature is always intended to be. . . copied,' and 'a strict adherence to common life' is required in writing. So to avoid 'unnatural[ness]' in a wild situation, Walpole makes his characters act 'according to the rules of probability' and 'laws of nature.' From its first preface, which we will look at later, we can easily identify 'the ancient' with a romance that is related to the Catholic world. So Walpole's statement above stands in contrast to Catholicism. It may

reasonably be assumed that his contemporaries would have agreed with his argument over the ‘cramp[ing]’ of imagination, ‘strict adherence to common life,’ and so on. Both Walpole’s prefaces seem to struggle bitterly to restore ‘imagination’ into his novel. Why should he make such an assumption that ‘[n]ature has cramped imagination’?

In *The Vampyre*, Aubrey was also profoundly ‘attached to the romance,’ and ‘cultivated more his imagination than his judgment’ (4). The contextual tone here is slightly negative with regard to ‘imagination’ which appears to have overcome his judgment. It says that ‘his exalted imagination began to assume the appearance of something supernatural’ (7). Aubrey’s labelling of ‘imagination’ as ‘supernatural’ does not appear to endorse the faculty. Robert Miles writes about Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* of 1794: ‘The contagion of superstition amounts to a loss of self-control. In Emily’s case this primarily means a runaway imagination of the kind that might be induced by too much reading’ (132). His comment suggests that in Radcliffe’s gothic novel, superstition or ‘a runaway imagination’ is a form of ‘contagion.’²

In Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, famously ‘imagination’ is repeated three times (5.1.8, 14, 18) in Theseus’s brief speech of 21 lines. What is noteworthy is that the tone of Theseus’s view on imagination is changing during his exposition. At first it appears that he views something imaginary negatively. He says that ‘I never may believe’ the story ‘[m]ore strange than true,’ which, he asserts, is merely a product of ‘such seething brains.’ Nevertheless ‘[s]uch shaping fantasies’ seize on ‘[m]ore than cool reason ever comprehends.’ Both derogatory terms — ‘such seething brains’ and ‘[s]uch shaping fantasies’ — may be near to what Radcliffe will later call a ‘contagion’ of the imagination. However, Theseus next begins to praise ‘imagination’ for its creativity, and stresses its status as the prerogative of poets and playwrights.

And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (5.1.14-17)

Why does the tone change so much in the same single speech? From all those statements we have seen so far, it appears that the status of ‘imagination’ itself

was controversial.

In his book titled *The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards*,³ William Dyrness writes of ‘the general feeling that Protestants lack imagination,’ which he accepts as ‘the common held view’ (1). He continues that ‘at the Reformation a major shift in the use of the imagination took place. This was both a reaction to and a further development of various medieval devotional trends. . . . This transformation has often been described in terms of a loss of metaphor and the rise of a literal mindedness’ (6). Religion requires, in Walpole’s phrase, ‘a strict adherence of common life;’ it must denounce ‘metaphor,’ in order to cramp ‘imagination.’ Walpole’s statement had a religious background, as Dyrness stresses:

The most obvious continuity is the fundamental understanding of imagination: the ability to shape images of things not present to the senses. From the first usage of ‘imagination’ in the Middle Ages to the present this has been the core understanding of the word. The massive change which makes our probing difficult is represented in the fact that this function of the mind has been transformed from something negative and dangerous to a universally praised capacity. Much of this has to do with a change in the understanding of ‘creativity.’ In one sense it has always been recognized that the human mind can create images that did not previously exist. It can be creative. But, while, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such creativity is precisely its problem, this is for us its virtue. (4)

The faculty to imagine was ‘something negative and dangerous,’ and started to be challenged and contested since the Reformation started. Protestants, especially Puritans, vehemently denounced ‘imagination.’ Jonas Barish quotes Richard Sibbes, an influential radical professor at Cambridge University:

Uncontrolled imagination ‘is a wild and raging thing; it wrongs not only the frame of God’s work in us, setting the baser part of man above the higher, but wrongs likewise the work of God in creatures, and everything else, for it shapes things as itself pleaseth.’ (94)

Polidori writes: '[Aubrey] cultivated more his imagination than his judgement,' which is as if to say: Aubrey puts his 'baser part of man [imagination] above the higher [judgement].' The Protestants are saying that 'it shapes things as itself pleaseth' or in Theseus's term, one gives 'shapes' 'to airy nothing,' and so destroys the whole design of God. Barish summarizes the main points of Protestant doctrine thus: 'the sinfulness of the human imagination. . . needed not be encouraged but tamed and humbled' (94).

The negative Protestant view on imagination, especially with regard to religious accusation, can be all too easily perceived in the first preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, which we will explore now. This takes the form of criticizing Catholicism. It appears so strange that despite Walpole's reference to his work as 'a matter of entertainment,' he nevertheless compares it to 'the books of controversy that have been written from the days of Luther to the present hour.' He writes that the author (actually Walpole himself) may intend to 'confirm the populace in their ancient errors and superstitions.' He even says that 'the date of the composition' was a time when literary works 'contributed to dispel the empire of superstition, at that time so forcibly attacked by the reformers.' The work is made up of '[t]he principal incidents. . . believed in the darkest ages of Christianity.' It has to give every appearance of endorsing the enlightened individual viewpoint, of which Protestantism approves.

Diane Hoeveler in her *The Gothic Ideology* writes:

. . . in order to modernize and secularize, the British Protestant imaginary needed an 'other' against which it could define itself as a culture and a nation with distinct boundaries. In Gothic literature, a reactionary, demonized and feudal Catholicism is created in order to stand in opposition to the modern Protestant individual, who then alternately combats and flirts with this uncanny double. . . (3)

Walpole appears very firm and resolute in his argument against Catholicism, which must be reduced to an imaginary adversary, and made into an 'other' against or opposite to the self, that is, the mainstream of British Protestantism. He must refer to 'feudal Catholicism,' 'the library of an ancient catholic family,' 'an artful priest,' 'every kind of prodigy . . . so established in those

dark ages,’ ‘this air of the *miraculous*,’ ‘Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events’ and so on.⁴ He needs to add that ‘Miracles. . . preternatural events are exploded *now*. . .’ (emphasis added). Protestants condemn ‘superstition.’ *The Puritan Manifestoes* in 1572 denounces even the kneeling at the reception of the sacrament:

That people be appointed to receive the Sacrament, rather sitting, for avoydyng of superstition, than kneelyng. . . (14)

Walpole’s vehemence against Catholicism in the first preface may be an explicit expression of the position that ‘all was imagination and improbability’ in the second. Both prefaces were adopted in order that a gothic novel utilizing the power of ‘imagination’ to the full might be socially accepted in a Protestant society.

We will further explore this accusation from Protestantism against Catholic practices in *The Monk*. Calvinists believe in the doctrines of predestination and election. Raymond, one of the principle protagonists, ‘combats and flirts with this uncanny double,’ or the ghost of his ancestor, Beatrice de las Cisternas, reappearing in the shape of ‘the bleeding nun’ (273) of four generations ago, who was forcibly put into the convent and eventually committed murder. The text says: ‘That office was reserved for you [Raymond], till your coming her Ghost was doomed to wander about the castle’ (273). So Raymond was entirely predestined by a certain special providence to rescue his ancestor after the incredible twists and turns he experienced. The doctrine of election holds for Lorenzo as well. Both of them embody Protestant values. Lorenzo persistently searches the dungeons in the vault of St Clare’s Convent in pursuit of Catholic vice, and finds his ghostly sister Agnes, and his dying beloved Antonia, both of whom are victims of the Catholic devotees, the abbot and the prioress. At midnight when the Festival of St Clare begins, Lorenzo is conscious that ‘there were some who cloaked with devotion the foulest sins, their hymns inspired him with detastation[sic] at their Hypocrisy. He had long observed with disapprobation and contempt the superstition. . .’ (383). He refers to the ‘artifice of the Monkes,’ and ‘the gross absurdity of their miracles, wonders, superstitious relique’ (383). ‘[R]elique’ is explicitly glossed as ‘superstitious.’ In 1563, the Church of England declared

this in the 22nd article of The Thirty-Nine Articles:

The Romish doctrine concerning purgatory, pardons, worshipping and adoration as well of images as of *relics*, and also invocations of saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented and grounded upon no warranty of scripture. . . (75, emphasis added)

Lorenzo ‘only wished for an opportunity to free them from their monkish fetters. That opportunity, so long desired in vain, was at length presented to him’ (383). The practices associated with Catholicism fill him with disgust. He deplores the enormity of ‘the abuses but too frequently practiced in Monasteries’ (383). In the text, the monastery and convent are presented as the double or repetition of vicious Catholicism. That the author Matthew Lewis depicts the abbot and prioress as the cruelest of criminals is noteworthy. He represents each institution as a dark den of vice, in the abbot’s case, sexual deviation, and in that of the prioress, the tyranny of expanded church power. In his sermon for the Anglican church, John Donne denounces such Catholic establishments: ‘When God had made *Adam and Eve* in Paradise, though there were foure rivers in Paradise, God did not place Adam in a Monastery on one side, *Eve* in a Nunnery on the other. . . ’ (242). In *The Monk*, the monastery per se is an institution of unbearable sexual repression which inevitably produces outrageous desire. The prioress enjoys ‘her secret pride at displaying the pomp and opulence of her Convent’ (385). Monasteries had great wealth as well as great authority and power. Maureen Quilligan writes that ‘[f]rom the fourth to the ninth centuries, the Church became the largest single landowner in Europe, owning one-third of all property’ (44). When Henry VIII became Supreme Head of the Church of England, and Roman Catholic England became a constitutionally Protestant country, the Dissolution of the Monasteries began and was completed during his reign. The fall of monasteries signaled the rise of Protestantism.

Lorenzo’s vehement denunciation of Catholic practices might be regarded as merely a highly conventional protest made by Protestantism. However, given that the function of ‘imagination’ had been being strongly contested by religious quarters, his accusation may have been a prerequisite for representation of a new kind of ‘British Protestant imaginary.’ Lewis seems to

have had the same difficulties in treating the idea of ‘imagination’ as Walpole did. Walpole argues about the issue directly while Lewis would represent his difficulties in the guise of anti-Catholic satire. Their gothic novels needed to reinstate an exalted ideal of ‘imagination.’ Their most powerful use of it would break the spell cast on it in the past, and that power would enable the function of ‘imagination’ to become ‘a universally praised capacity.’

Notes

1 All quotations from the second preface to *The Castle of Otranto* are from p. 11.

2 According to Miles, the term ‘contagion’ around imagination is used at page 490 in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

3 Dyrness explores Jonathan Edwards’s ‘writing in 1746,’ which ‘reflects this negative view’ on imagination. (4)

4 All quotations from the first preface to *The Castle of Otranto* are from p. 7.

Works Cited

- Barish, Jonas. *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley: University of California, 1981. Print.
- Cressy, David and Ferrell, Lori Anne, eds. *Religion and Society in Early Modern England: A Sourcebook*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Donne, John. *The Sermons of John Donne III*. Ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1962. Print.
- Dyrness, William A. *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.
- Field, John and Wilcox, Thomas. ‘An Admonition to the Parliament.’ *Puritan Manifestoes: A Study of the origin of the Puritan Revolt: with a Reprint of the ‘Admonition to Parliament,’ and Kindred Documents, 1572*. Ed. W.H. Frere and C.E. Douglas. New York: Lenox Hill, 1954. 1-55. Print.
- Hoeverler, Diane Long. *The Gothic Ideology: Religious Hysteria and Anti-Catholicism in Popular Fiction, 1780-1880*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014. Print.
- Lewis, Matthew. *The Monk. Four Gothic Novels*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. Print.

- Miles, Robert. *Anne Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995. Print.
- Polidori, John. *The Vampyre*. The Oxford Word's Classics edition. Ed. Robert Morrison and Chris Baldick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.
- Quilligan, Maureen. *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England*. Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania, 2005. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*. Ed. R.A. Foakes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print.
- Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto. Four Gothic Novels*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. Print.