THE GOTHIC NOVEL AND THE STAGE: ROMANTIC APPROPRIATIONS

By Francesca Saggini
(Pickering & Chatto, May 2015), c. 256 pp.
Reviewed by Emily Anderson on 2016-01-26.

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In Percy Shelley's Gothic drama *Cenci* (1819), the evil count of that name celebrates the arranged murder of his sons by declaring, "I have drunken deep of joy, and I will taste no other wine tonight." A tale of incest and murder, the play--because of its subject matter--was never performed in its own time. Neither was Horace Walpole's play *The Mysterious Mother* (1768), also a tale of incest, and the work often cited as the first "Gothic" play. And yet, between these examples, Gothic drama was regularly featured on the late eighteenth-century stage. One effect of Francesca Saggini's new book is to remind readers of this fact: that the Gothic topoi so characteristic of much late eighteenth-century literature--the emphasis on the picturesque and the supernatural, the themes of illegitimacy, the sensation of dread--were circulating in the period in theatrical and not just novelistic forms. Another effect of her book is to expose the mutual lines of influence between these two venues. As Saggini claims, Gothic literature, more than other subgenres of literature, is defined by its intertextuality, a fact that makes the critically overlooked movement from page to stage or stage to page in Gothic literature particularly self-conscious.

Ann Radcliffe, for instance, used passages from Gothic plays such as Walpole's *The Mysterious Mother* as epigraphs for chapters in two of her Gothic novels, *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) and *The Italian* (1797), and James Boaden adapted Radcliffe's *Romance* for the stage. Boaden's adaptation, *Fontainville* Forest (1794), becomes one of Saggini's key case studies of the effects of moving between page and stage, for the stage embodiment of Radcliffe's themes, Saggini finds, prompts Romantic debates about the merits of "inward" versus "physical" sight (21). While drama in general and Gothic drama in particular seem to rely on the physical spectacle that many Romantic poets and novelists belittled, Saggini claims that the popularity of these Gothic plays actually reaffirmed the importance of spectacle in literature. For Saggini, the influence of the theater on the Gothic novel suggests that the latter genre also valorizes a "visual reading," albeit of material that is rendered figuratively on the page (22).

Saggini divides her book into three parts: an overview of the Gothic stage, an overview of stage appropriation in the Romantic era, and finally a section featuring case studies of Gothic adaptations. The latter section includes Gothic novels adapted by other authors to the stage (such as Boaden's adaptation of Radcliffe's *Romance*) and Gothic writers such as Matthew "Monk" Lewis, who was best known for his novel *The Monk* (1796) but who also wrote numerous Gothic plays, such as *The Castle Spectre* (1797). Strikingly enough, Saggini's case studies suggest that as compared with Gothic fiction, Gothic theater sometimes gave more play to things invisible. For example, while Radcliffe in her novels famously and ultimately asserts natural causes for supernatural events, Boaden's stage version of her *Romance*, Saggini argues, preserves the "sublime insubstantiality" of Radcliffe's "ghost" even while visually expressing its "otherworldly presence" (171, 172). "The great contrivance" of Boaden's play, said the playwright himself, "was that the spectre should appear through a blueish-grey gauze, so as to remove the too corporeal effect of a 'live actor,' and convert the moving substance into a gliding essence" (qtd. 172). Paradoxically, the supernatural is affirmed by the spectacular, dramatic form that would seem more suited to challenging it, while the novel (in Radcliffe's hands) portrays an embodied, "substantial," natural source. By contrast, Saggini finds Lewis applying his dramatic expertise to his infamous novel. Contemporary stagecraft, she shows, informs his fictional representation of the supernatural, which takes its cue from other, contemporary "stage actualizations" of ghosts (21). For Lewis as for Boaden, Saggini contends, the spectacular embodiment or "actualization" of the supernatural does not contradict it, but rather represents--preserves--"the ontological and epistemological uncertainty at the heart of Lewis's poetics" (21).

At such moments Saggini's articulation is clear, and her reasoning is innovative and complex. So too when she claims that Boaden's decision to preserve the supernatural onstage shows him hearkening back to Shakespeare, making his stage phantom "not so much a stage illusion, as the imaginative embodiment of the author's...creative and critical agenda" (175). Or again when she claims that the Gothic playwrights' emphasis on spectacle resonated through the Gothic novel, as, in both forms, "subtlety and detail gave way to hyperbole and grand presentation" (96). Yet in this book, as in her first (*Backstage in the Novel: Frances Burney and the Theater Arts* [2012]) Saggini uses the language of semiotics to explain inter-generic appropriations, and I continued to find her terminology often hindering her exposition--though less so than before. When looking at literary shifts from the stage to the page, Saggini quite reasonably considers how the embodied, "non-verbal" aspects of drama will be re-rendered in words, but her "appropriative reading of Gothic texts" becomes needlessly convoluted in statements like "the practices of intersemiotic translation--of which the 'corporeal semantics' of the performer's body...are an example" (98). Likewise, the tables and charts that proliferate throughout this book often seem to complicate rather than clarify the results of her exhaustive research for it. (Oddly, while the main text teems with charts and diagrams, and with anecdote and detail, the index is unhelpfully sparse.)

That said, Saggini has researched her topic deeply, and the resulting book represents a thoughtful analysis of the practices and negotiations activated by the Gothic stage. Advancing the critical project of de-marginalizing Gothic literature, this book uncovers new relevance for the once wild popularity of Gothic plays. While Saggini is consciously (and graciously) indebted to critics such as Jeffrey Cox and Michael Gamer, she extends their scholarship by examining the reciprocal relationship of Gothic plays and novels. Her project thus revises assumptions about Romantic attitudes toward visual culture--and also the role played by the reader or spectator in the reception and construction of Gothic works--in ways that should interest any scholar in the field.

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FRANCESCA SAGGINI RESPONDS TO EMILY HODGSON ANDERSON:

My thanks to Emily Anderson for her kind words and all her insightful comments, which I have gratefully taken on board. I write to explain why the index is "unhelpfully sparse," as she quite rightly points out.

When I signed my contract, Pickering & Chatto was a thriving publisher that promised to offer a more than adequate outlet for my research. But a couple of years down the line, shortly after I submitted the final draft of my manuscript, Pickering & Chatto was acquired by Taylor & Francis, and it was a rather hectic spring as all the books then in production needed to come out before April 30.

During proofreading I realized with concern that among other things, the indexing was inadequate. Though I notified the publisher and promptly compiled a list of names, titles, and terms that needed to be included, I was told they could not be.

In June 2015, once the move to Taylor & Francis was finalized, I contacted the new production editor there to explain my situation and, among other things, improve the index. Though the production editor kindly agreed, she explained that these changes could not be made for the first printing; they could only be held in the archive in case of reprints and Print on Demand copies.

My thanks again to the reviewer for her interest in my book and also for the opportunity of responding to the reviewer.

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