

Eighteenth-Century Gothic before *The Castle of Otranto*

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Gothic literature in English did not begin in December 1764 with the publication of *The Castle of Otranto*. Horace Walpole's novel comes rather towards the end of eighteenth-century discussion and debate about the Goths and the Gothic (or 'Gothick'), their place in ancient history, and their contributions to political thought, artistic practice, and contemporary society.¹ Three distinct strands are tangled together in eighteenth-century understandings of the Gothic before *Otranto*: historical accounts of the Goths themselves, Gothic polity or the Gothic system of government and its effect on the British constitution, and the culture of the Middle Ages and its influence on contemporary taste. But *Otranto* has retrospectively been constructed as the inaugurating text of a new literary movement, and its fantastical medievalism has eclipsed the much more intricate set of associations that the Gothic had at the time. This chapter traces those meanings up to the 1760s and argues that several texts published in that decade have a stronger claim to the eighteenth-century Gothic literary inheritance than Walpole's novel. In doing so, it becomes clear that *The Castle of Otranto*, *A Gothic Story*, while less Gothic in a contemporary sense, was nevertheless startlingly innovative, and succeeding in shifting the entire Gothic paradigm.

The Goths erupted into the historical record in AD376 when Alaric the Goth crossed the Danube and sacked Rome; it was the first of many incursions that led to the Goths spreading across most of Europe and ousting the Romans.² William Camden, one of the founding historians of racial migrations

1 For the sake of clarity, I have regularized the spelling of 'Gothic' to the modern form, although retain the form 'Gothick' when it appears so in primary sources. The starting point for this essay is Samuel Klinger's etymological account of the Gothic as a cultural and political concept, *The Goths in England: A Study in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952); see also Klinger's 'The "Goths" In England: An Introduction to the Gothic Vogue in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Discussion', *Modern Philology* 43.2 (1945), pp. 107–17; the aim is to unravel Klinger's synthesizing approach. My argument is developed in *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

2 Johann Jakob Mascov, *The History of the Ancient Germans; including that of the Cimbri, Celtæ, Teutones, Alemanni, Saxons, and other Ancient Northern Nations*, 2 vols (London and

and settlements in Britain in his epoch-making work *Britannia* (first published in Latin in 1586, first English edition in 1607), had argued that the Goths who overran Europe originally 'liv'd beyond the Ister, near the Euxine Sea, and were formerly called *Getes*'.³ They were therefore an ancient race, originally from the Ister, or Scythia: the region lying east of the Euxine (or Black) Sea and stretching to the Aral Sea, and today including southern Russia, Kazakhstan, eastern Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Belarus (and possibly the Baltic states). These Scythians or Goths had resisted all attempts at invasion and subjugation, being 'a most ancient people . . . invincible themselves, and free from any foreign yoke'.⁴ And from Scythia, they spread across all of Western Europe.

Figuring the Goths as non-Roman helped to establish them as a people devoid of all the refinements of classical Rome.⁵ Where the Romans were civilized and cultured, the Goths were rude and barbarous; where the Romans built and cultivated, the Goths laid waste. Goths (and Vandals) were therefore persistently referred to as the destroyers of classical learning and all its achievements. The word was a synonym for everything crude, ignorant, vulgar, brutish, and ferine. William Congreve in *the Way of the World* (1700) has Mrs Millamant exclaim, 'Ah Rustick! ruder than Gothick' (IV.i), and the anonymous 'Cynick Philosopher' (1722, possibly one J. Hinton), could only express his extraordinary encounter with one of the rude savages of Yorkshire by coining a new verb from the word:

beyond *Northallerton*, meeting with a Herdsman, I was almost frighted out of my Wits, for this Fellow was a strange Creature, wonderfully *Goth'd*, and be *Vandall'd*, even to Barbarity itself. He was really a Clown in grain, an uncultivated Boor, a Beast of the Herd in Humane Shape.⁶

Westminster, 1737[1738]), II, pp. 385–463; see also Michael Geddes, 'An Essay on the Countries, Religion, Learning, Numbers, Forms of Government, and the Chief Cause of the Successes of the Nations, by which the Roman Empire was Pulled Down', in *Miscellaneous Tracts*, 3 vols (London, 1702), III, pp. 1–26 [separately paginated] for an idiosyncratic account.

3 William Camden, *Britannia: or A Chorographical Description of Great Britain and Ireland, together with the Adjacent Islands*, 2 vols (London, 1722), I, pp. xlvi. The popularity of tracing such genealogies can be seen in for example Joseph Hussey's *A Warning from the Winds* (London, 1704), pp. 8–10, which was a sermon preached on 29 January 1704.

4 Camden, *Britannia*, I, p. xlvi.

5 Ancient Greek classical civilization was not valued as highly as the Roman during the period.

6 *The Comical Pilgrim; or, Travels of a Cynick Philosopher, thro' the most Wicked Parts of the World, namely, England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and Holland* (London, 1722), pp. 27–8; republished in *A Collection of Welsh Travels, and Memoirs of Wales* (London [1748]), p. 6. This verb form is not recorded by *OED*.