MATTHEW G. LEWIS’ THEATRE: FEAR ON STAGE

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If we consider the development of the Gothic aesthetics in the last decade of the eighteenth century, it is evident that M.G. Lewis’ play *The Castle Spectre* (1797) succeeded in raising the popularity of Gothic drama to the level of that of the Gothic novel. Still highly acclaimed in 1829, the play was adapted as a prose romance by Sara Wilkinson (perhaps the only example of its kind, the opposite procedure being certainly more frequent) and its fame was by no means inferior to that of *The Monk*. Lewis was not the first to try his hand at this new literary genre: there had been previous attempts, as regards setting (ruins, castles, convents), plot and characterization (mysterious events, supposedly dead fathers, pursued heroines, usurpers), such as John Home’s *Douglas*, a highly successful tragedy performed for the first time in Edinburgh in 1756, and *The Countess of Salisbury* by the Irish dramatist Hall Hartson, staged in Dublin in 1765.

It is difficult to date the origins of Gothic drama in English literature, on account of the heterogeneous features that distinguish this genre. According to certain critics,¹ it can be dated from the performance of dramas such as Robert Jephson’s *The Countess of Narbonne* (1781), an adaptation of *The Castle of Otranto*, and Richard Cumberland’s *The Mysterious Husband* (1783). Others, however, consider the genre to have been launched by Horace Walpole’s *The Mysterious Mother* (1768),² to say nothing of the various adaptations of Gothic novels staged before *The Castle Spectre*. In this connection,


there are outstanding similarities between Lewis’ drama and Andrew MacDonald’s theatrical adaptation of his novel *Vimonda* (1788). In the latter tragedy, the heroine is pursued by a relative who attempts to force her into marriage by making her believe that the man she loves has murdered her father. Her father’s ghost (not an authentic ghost because he is not really dead) reveals himself in order to shed light on the whole sinister affair. The similarities are indeed striking, apart from the essential difference between a true ghost and a false ghost, and thus between a murder that has been committed and a presumed murder, all of which confirm the strong presence of intertextual elements in Lewis’ dramatic production. In addition, Lewis was well-read in recent German and French literature: he translated dramas by Schiller and Kotzebue and adapted a French “convent play” by Boutet de Monvel entitled *Les Victimes Cloîtrées* (1791), staged with the title *Venoni* (1808). These, and other English literary works, in particular Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, had an undeniable influence on his dramas and novelistic masterpiece.

In Lewis’ rich theatrical output, it is above all the dramas featuring supernatural elements – such as *The Castle Spectre*, *Adelmorn the Outlaw* and *The Wood Daemon* – which offer clear evidence of how cultural contexts influence the contents, reception and influence of a literary work. Indeed, as observed by Jeffrey Cox, Gothic dramas “provide an opportunity to explore the complex interactions between authors, texts, genre, the literary institution of the theater, and larger cultural or ideological constructs during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries”.

These works, savaged by critics and acclaimed by the public who decreed their success, can be considered revolutionary on two accounts: first of all, in their introduction of radical transformations, thus laying the foundations for future developments in the melodramatic genre; secondly, in their elaboration and suggestion of models of behaviour, situations and characters embodying, more or less explicitly, a libertarian and, therefore, revolutionary message, in a more strictly political sense.

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4 Joseph J. Irwin, *M.G. ‘Monk’ Lewis*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976, 65: “*The Castle Spectre* is also a prediction of the melodrama that was to be prominent in England a few years later in certain mechanical devices, in characterization and in