The Castle of Otranto, a Lost Medieval World

by E. G. Stanley

Horace Walpole (1717–97), the third and youngest son of Sir Robert Walpole (1676–1745), first Earl of Orford (from 1742), published The Castle of Otranto in 1764.¹ It pretends to be a Naples book of 1529 by Onuphrio Muralto. William Marshal, Gent., is the supposed translator of this pseudo-Italian work. One may wonder why Walpole chose the names, Onuphrio that of a desert hermit portrayed with only his long beard covering his nakedness, and Muralto meaning 'high wall'; and why he chose Otranto, far to the south on the heel of Italy, renowned in history for the 800 martyrs of 1480, and in art for the great mosaic floor, twelfth century, of its cathedral, with a very early, unexplained depiction of King Arthur riding uncomfortably on a goat (Fig. 1). Similarly, Walpole's choice of the place-name of Otranto arouses curiosity. New insights can be gained by re-examining the relationship between Walpole's novel and its declared setting, Otranto, including insights gleaned from the heraldic arms of Otranto.

Otranto has a castle, as have many other places in Italy, and the castello of Otranto seems not unusually haunted or ominous. On the other hand the ancient tower by the sea very near to Otranto has acquired a supernatural legend, and forms the subject of the coat of arms of the City of Otranto, a tower encompassed by a monstrous serpent, and known to this day as la Torre del Serpente.² In the arms, superimposed upon the Torre, is a golden coronet of nine tines, and around the Torre is the inscribed scroll, CIVITAS FIDELISSIMA HYDRUNTI, ‘The Most Trusty City of Otranto’, Hydruntum being the ancient name of Otranto. Briefly, the legend is

¹ The title-page states 1765, but it was published on 24 December 1764. References are to the most recent edition: Horace Walpole, The Castle of Otranto, ed. by Nick Groom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
² I am indebted to Professor Maria Elena Ruggerini and her colleague Dr Veronika Szöke (both of the University of Cagliari) for details of the legend. The tower is called either del Serpente ‘of the serpent’ or del Serpe ‘of the snake’.

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Fig. 1: Rex Arturus Riding on a Goat, early twelfth-century mosaic, Otranto Cathedral.
the following. The tower, an ancient lighthouse, was always guarded. One night the guards fell asleep; a serpent came out of the sea, entered the tower, and drank all the oil stored there to feed the light, shining to warn mariners that the coast is rocky. Thus the light went out. This essay recognizes the importance of genealogical complications in the plot and the significance of lines of inheritance.

The coat of arms (Fig. 2) is unusual, and unusually supernatural. The serpent is huge, not as depicted in the legend, encompasses the heraldic tower, and reaches high up. Imagination is needed, as always when contemplating heraldry in relation to what it represents: a lion rampant is not to be thought of as a strokable pussycat on its hind legs. We must see the tower as it would have been on the shores of the Adriatic, higher by far than the now ruinous Torre del Serpente that inspired the heraldic tower (Fig. 3). The supernatural enormity of the serpent in Otranto’s coat of arms might well have inspired Horace Walpole, if he knew it, to write a romance about monsters, not a serious study, and about the not yet united Italy: dynastic grandeur, feuding nobles, usurpation, murder, and much concealment and disguise. Involved with it all is the Roman Catholic Church in the persons of a friar and a hermit, and pilgrimage to the Holy Land is significant in the story, as are church dedications to atone for sins committed. The following list of details offers not a summary of Walpole’s romance, but a selection of dynastic and supernatural aspects relevant to the coat of arms of Otranto. The dynasty that is destined to rule the principality of Otranto is closely intertwined with preternatural happenings, much as the Torre del Serpente on the arms of the most trusty city of Otranto is encompassed by the serpent.

Dynastic Details of Two Related Princely Families
Manfred, Prince of Otranto, has a sickly son, Conrad, killed early in the story by preternatural intervention; and a beautiful daughter, Matilda. His pious wife, Hippolita, can bear no more children. There is an ancient prophecy: ‘That the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it’ (Otranto, p. 17). Manfred is about to divorce Hippolita, because the prophecy requires him to have sons, and he wishes to marry Isabella, from the other branch of the family, who was about to marry Conrad. Manfred explains to the friar Jerome that his need for a son necessitates divorce from Hippolita.

Isabella is the beautiful daughter of Frederic Marquis of Vicenza, who has a claim to the principality of Otranto. Alfonso the Good, one of the former princes of Otranto, is depicted in a
statue in the church of St Nicholas at Otranto as well as in a panel painting on a wall of the castle. There is '[a] young peasant [...] from a neighbouring village' (Otranto, p. 20). The Princess Matilda believes the young peasant is a prince. He gives his name, Theodore. Matilda recognizes in Theodore’s countenance the exact resemblance of Alfonso in his portrait. Jerome, a friar, is of the monastic church of St Nicholas. Much later, Theodore unbuttons his shirt and reveals ‘the mark of a bloody arrow’ (Otranto, p. 53), and by that mark Jerome recognizes him to be his son. Jerome explains that Theodore is his lawful son, and that they are of the ancient Sicilian house of Falconara. A stranger knight enters, and his herald bids Manfred to resign the principality of Otranto, which he has usurped from Frederic, the nearest in blood to the last rightful lord, Alfonso the Good. Frederic had sought the Holy Land, distraught at the death of his wife in giving birth to Isabella. Manfred explains his right to rule Otranto, Alfonso having bequeathed his estates to Manfred’s grandfather Don Ricardo.

Manfred recognizes in Alfonso’s spectre the likeness of Theodore, who tells his story: his mother was taken by corsairs from the coast of Sicily. A message tied to him tells him that he is the son of Jerome, the son of the Count Falconara, and how Jerome had lost everything and become religious. Hippolita enters, and tells Matilda in the presence of Isabella that ‘heaven purposes the sceptre of Otranto should pass from Manfred’s hands into those of the Marquis Frederic’ (Otranto, p. 82). Hippolita therefore proposes that her daughter Matilda should marry Frederic.

Manfred relates that he became Prince of Otranto by a fictitious will, which made Ricardo Alfonso’s heir. To atone for his guilt Ricardo vowed to St Nicholas to found a church and two convents. St Nicholas accepted these dedications, and, appearing to Ricardo in his dream, tells him that he is to be prince of Otranto until the rightful owner should be grown too large to inhabit the castle, ‘as long as issue-male from Ricardo’s loins should remain to enjoy it’ (Otranto, p. 104). Jerome explains how Theodore came to be the rightful heir. On his way to the Holy Land ‘Alfonso was wind-bound in Sicily’ (Otranto, p. 104). He loved and married ‘a fair virgin named Victoria’ (Otranto, p. 104). She gave birth to a daughter. Ricardo took the lordship of Otranto. Jerome married Alfonso’s daughter.

The Preternatural and Heraldic Events

Manfred ‘beheld his child [Conrad] dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers’ (Otranto, p. 18). This miraculous helmet was exactly like that on the figure in black marble of Alfonso the Good. Manfred orders the young peasant (Theodore) to be ‘kept prisoner under the helmet itself’ (Otranto, p. 21). While Manfred is telling Isabella of his intentions, his divorce from Hippolita and his marriage to Isabella, the plumes on the helmet were ‘waving backwards and forwards in a tempestuous manner’ (Otranto, p. 24). ‘At that instant the portrait of his [Manfred’s] grandfather [Alfonso...] uttered a deep sigh and heaved its breast, and quitting its panel, it descends to the floor ‘with a grave and melancholy air’ (Otranto, p. 25) ‘Two servants, Jaquez and Diego, frightened by what they have seen, tell Manfred not to go into ‘the great chamber next to the gallery’ — Satan himself is in there (Otranto, p. 33). They have seen a giant, who was large enough to have borne the great helmet.

At the end of Chapter 2, ‘the trampling of horses was heard, and a brazen trumpet, which hung without the gate of the castle, was suddenly sounded. At the same instant the plumes on the enchanted helmet, which still remained at the other end of the court, were tempestuously agitated, and nodded thrice, as if bowed by some invisible wearer’ (Otranto, p. 55). The herald challenges Manfred, ‘usurper of the principality of Otranto, from the renowned and invincible knight, the knight of the gigantic sabre’ (Otranto, p. 57). The stranger knight enters, displaying in stately magnificence heraldic colours, scarlet and black and a coat of arms, numerous attendants, among them significantly a gentleman on horseback bearing ‘a banner with the arms of Vicenza and Otranto quarterly, and further a hundred gentlemen carrying an enormous sword and seeming to faint under its weight (Otranto, p. 60). Frederic, we learn, on his return from the Holy Land was guided mystically to seek out a forest, and there he finds a hermit dying, but not
before he had told his visitor to dig under a tree. The gigantic sabre lay hidden there at a depth of six feet.

Manfred finds Hippolita with Jerome, at Alfonso’s statue. He acquaints her with Frederic’s acceptance of ‘Matilda’s hand, and is content to waive his claim unless I have no male issue. — As he spoke these words three drops of blood fell from the nose of Alfonso’s statue’ (Otranto, p. 89). Jerome explains that these supernatural events ‘mark this miraculous indication that the blood of Alfonso will never mix with that of Manfred!’ (Otranto, p. 89). The servant Bianca has seen a horror: ‘has not your greatness heard the story of the giant in the gallery-chamber? […] mayhap you do not know there is a prophecy’ (Otranto, p. 95). Frederic goes to speak to Hippolita, and in her oratory he finds a figure praying. The figure turns round to Frederic: it is ‘a skeleton wrapt in a hermit’s cowl’, in fact the skeleton of the hermit who in the Holy Land had released Frederic (Otranto, p. 98). Manfred wishes to see his daughter whom, in fact, he has murdered: ‘A clap of thunder […] and the clank of more than mortal armour was heard’ (Otranto, p. 103). Jerome, Frederic, and Theodore enter the central court of the castle; its walls and they are ‘thrown down with a mighty force’, and a gigantic Alfonso ‘appeared in the centre of the ruins. Behold in Theodore, the true heir of Alfonso! said the vision’ (Otranto, p. 103).

The preceding summary of preternatural and heraldic aspects of the romance leaves out much of the loves and dynastic hopes, for which The Castle of Otranto is read. Horace Walpole has written this romance about eventful feelings, doubly removed in time from his eighteenth-century realm of experience in England, the Italian Renaissance of the supposed Neapolitan author, Onuphrio Muralto, who looks back in time to the less refined age, centuries earlier, when these fabled happenings were part of the medieval history of Otranto, many leagues to the south east. For us, 250 years after the publication of The Castle of Otranto, there is a further distance in time. We may have difficulty in perceiving that the events have been light-heartedly, ironically even, woven by Walpole into a romance for his readers.

The book is full of superstitions, and Walpole writes about how the author of 1529, Onuphrio Muralto, would not have been like the figures in the romance; thus the Preface to the first edition: ‘Letters were then in their most flourishing state in Italy, and contributed to dispel the empire of superstition, at that time so forcibly attacked by the reformers’ (Otranto, p. 5) Walpole is writing as a Protestant, but, halfway through the eighteenth century, intellectuals like him were not usually bigots as they often had been a century earlier, and he goes on: ‘Such a work as the following would enslave a hundred vulgar minds beyond half the books of controversy that have been written from the days of Luther to the present hour’ (Otranto, p. 5) He says ‘vulgar minds’, as if superstitions were confined to the lower orders; and so it seems, because when in story ‘preternatural events’ are believed by the nobility they become truths for an earlier age than ours.

Understanding Medieval Italy

England in the eighteenth century was not at all like Italy in the Middle Ages. Walpole gives the friar and the hermit highly moral characters in tune with their status in the Roman Catholic Church, which is in tune with the morality of the Middle Ages, yet he has no sympathy with ‘the mysteries of the Roman Catholic faith’. In his account of Spain in a major historico-political work, he wittily defends one aspect of the Duke of Calabria, thirteen years old and heir apparent to Charles III, whose right to succeed was denied by the king: ‘If it was the mysteries of the Roman Catholic faith which he [Calabria] was incapable of comprehending, I should suspect the Prince was a sensible lad’.3

According to The Oxford English Dictionary, Horace Walpole is the first recorded user of the verb to Gothicize and may be unique in using it in the sense of ‘to indulge one’s taste for what is “Gothic” or mediaeval’. At Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, he certainly indulged his taste in that way: the Gothic in taste is a native alternative to chinoiserie. In The Castle of Otranto he

did more than that: he imagined a superstitious Gothic world, wittily exaggerating its Gothicity by symbolic pomp, which included exaggerated renditions of heraldry. I do not know whether or not he knew the coat of arms of Otranto. If he did, he would have enjoyed its Gothicity, the ancient tower encompassed by the serpent. He would have had an answer, one suspects, to the question: what exactly is displayed in the ‘banner with the arms of Vicenza and Otranto quarterly’? (Otranto, p. 60: Nick Groom comments, p. 128).

Walpole says of his work of fiction, ascribed by him to Onuphrio Muralto, ‘I cannot but believe that the groundwork of the story is founded on truth. The scene is undoubtedly laid in some real castle.’ (Otranto, p. 7) Historical fact and fictional history are not easily disentangled. Walpole himself uttered a relevant literary truth: ‘History is a romance that is believed: romance, a history that is not believed — that is the difference between them.’ We need not believe his romance. He may have coined the verb to Gothicize, but we must not believe that by his ‘send-up’ of Gothicality he invented the Gothic Novel, and presented that literary genre to the world.

**The City of Otranto**

Otranto has a real castle (Fig. 4); it is impressive. The port of Otranto is dedicated to San Nicola. The coat of arms of Otranto has its origin in reality: since Roman times there has been a tower, a lighthouse in effect, on the coast of Otranto, la Torre del Serpente. This ancient tower is not the same as the medieval castle, and the monstrous serpent is not like any of the monstrous pieces of Walpole’s story, the helmet, the sabre, or body part; and yet the very abnormality of these narrative elements bears a likeness to the monstrousity of the legendary serpent. I tried to find out if Walpole could have seen this coat of arms. He had a large library, and there were Italian books among the books he owned. The genuine history of Otranto dwells on the 800 martyrs who played a well-remembered part in the Ottoman invasion of 1480. Walpole’s romance is of a time long before 1480. There is no evidence that he was interested in the history of Otranto; there is no evidence that he knew the legend celebrated in the coat of arms of the City of Otranto. And yet the coat of arms with its monstrous serpent encompassing the tower looks as if Walpole’s preternatural world is modelled on the notion that horror has happened to the princely house of Otranto; it is as if the serpent has entered the tower, as if horror has entered the castle of Otranto.

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Fig. 4: *The Castle of Otranto*, mid-eighteenth-century print. 24.17.791P Copy 9.
Image Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library.

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5 Ibid., pp. 14, 49.
6 Pope Francis canonized them in 2013.