Unquiet Things

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Horace Walpole’s astonishing literary debut, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), is widely considered the first gothic novel, the original in a lineage stretching from the late eighteenth century to the present. Yet it ends not with fecundity but its opposite. The final words of the novel are these: “Frederic offered his daughter [Isabella] to the new prince . . . but Theodore’s grief was too fresh to admit the thought of another love; and it was not till after frequent discourses with Isabella, of his dear Matilda, that he was persuaded he could know no happiness but in the society of one with whom he could forever indulge the melancholy that had taken possession of his soul” (110).

In this chapter I will work my way toward this melancholy ending, and its claim that the future, inevitable as it may be, will contain nothing that compares to the rich possibilities of what has already gone by. Theodore’s lack of enthusiasm for his new bride is a result of his straitened circumstances, and his sexual and emotional situation—his lack of prospects and consequent melancholy—should be understood as part of the larger movement of Reform that Charles Taylor places at the origin of the secular age. For Taylor, one consequence of the secular is that we experience what he calls “fullness” differently—the rich sense of possibility that is the phenomenological root of religious as well as aesthetic experience has, he proposes, shifted as the background conditions for its articulation have become more secular. We are more likely now to engage in individual projects of self-fashioning than we are to experience deeply rooted communal richness. Here, though, I am less interested in fullness, and whether we experience it differently now, than I am in its opposite: melancholy, understood not simply as a closing down of options but as a recognition of possibilities glimpsed only as impossible, untried experiences encountered as irrecoverable, losses ungrievable because fullness was never there to begin with.
A New Species of Romance

Historians of the eighteenth century have alerted us to a gradually developing contrast between the self-determination of the rising commercial classes and the tradition and stability of the landed gentry, and scholars of the Gothic have described the genre as the mode through which the ascendant middle classes represented their political and social contradictions, particularly the desire to both overthrow and preserve the lineaments of state power. Walpole’s novel certainly seems to align itself with the old guard, for it tells a story of restoration and renewal: the usurper and tyrant Manfred is eventually made to give way to Theodore, the true heir of Otranto who has returned in disguise. Yet Otranto’s backward-looking plot depends on sensational techniques made available by the uncertain world of inflationary capitalism. This paradox, in which value is restored to land and to heritable wealth only after its liquidation by capital, sets the pattern for many gothic novels written in Otranto’s wake, and serves as something of an allegory for a period in economic transition. Specters, ghosts, and hauntings, like the rumor and speculation that drive finance capital, testified to possible experiences cut loose from landed traditions, available to anyone with an imagination and the desire for excitement, risk, and stimulation. Despite the window dressing of absolutism that hangs over the novel, then, Otranto seems less concerned with theories of divine right than with defending the land-based wealth being threatened in the eighteenth century by a new economic order organized around speculation, credit, and capitalism.

Can such sensational means serve the ends of stability, good order, and landed wealth? The question emerges implicitly at the novel’s end, when Theodore’s identity is revealed for all to see:

the walls of the castle behind Manfred were thrown down with a mighty force, and the form of Alfonso, dilated to an immense magnitude, appeared in the centre of the ruins. Behold in Theodore, the true heir of Alfonso! said the vision: and having pronounced those words, accompanied by a clap of thunder, it ascended solemnly towards heaven, where the clouds parting asunder, the form of saint Nicholas was seen; and receiving Alfonso’s shade, they were soon wrapt from mortal eyes in a blaze of glory.

Narratologically, this is the culmination of what Manfred’s daughter Matilda had earlier referred to as “destiny” (39). It not only predicts the future but
retrospectively clarifies and organizes events that had seemed confusing and contradictory at the time. Its supernatural machinery notwithstanding, this destiny is a progressive, secularizing force: divine power, having set things to rights, withdraws from the world as Alfonso’s form ascends into heaven and disappears from sight. (The appearance of Saint Nicholas here is a typically Walpolean joke, since the book was published on Christmas Eve.) This closing vision contrasts with the more local superstitions that pervade the novel and which its narrative ruthlessly undercuts. Pictures move, skeletons walk, doors slam shut mysteriously; the servants and domestics are always credulous, and the elites often superstitious as well; all the characters shriek and faint with regularity. When it comes to such irrationality, the novel goes in for naturalistic explanations: figures appear and disappear, to be sure, but this is due to a network of underground tunnels; Theodore looks like Alfonso because he is Alfonso’s grandson and not because he is the spirit of Alfonso returned from the dead. But the final apparition of Alfonso and Nicholas does not get this treatment; it is the only vision fully endorsed by the narrative.⁴

In sorting out true visions from false superstitions, then, Walpole grounds his allegory of eighteenth-century speculative economies in the reforms of an earlier era. According to both Michel Foucault and Charles Taylor, the early modern period was one of intensified discipline, an orderliness aligned with godliness, and a hoped-for end to “drunkenness, fornication, unbridled speech, immoderate laughter, fights” and other manifestations of social chaos.⁵ Here Walpole’s reference to Saint Nicholas takes on a different signification. That saint, the great giver of gifts, was linked throughout the middle ages to the “boy bishop” ceremonies, when from December 6 to December 28, a single boy would assume the role of bishop or parish priest, blessing the people and presiding over all offices except for Mass. Henry VII banned these boy bishop ceremonies—one more example of the shift from a premodern social world characterized by reciprocity and surprising gifts to the more rational and orderly arrangements of the early modern period.

In the second Preface to his novel, Walpole acknowledged this historical positioning in terms of genre: his “new species of romance,” he wrote, had been modeled on Shakespeare.⁶ Otranto’s plot of usurpation and restoration certainly borrows from Macbeth, its supernatural elements and intimations of incest recall Hamlet, and Walpole learned from Shakespeare how to blend the low comedy of servants and domestics with the appearance of moral
seriousness. But there is a more consistent, though unremarked, historical reference to the person of Henry VIII. For the novel’s succession crisis turns on the tyrant Manfred’s wish to divorce his wife Hippolita and marry the younger Isabella. And as if this plot device were not clear enough, Walpole twice has Manfred claim that he has developed “scruples on the legality of [his] union” with Hippolita.7

In the novel’s second edition, questions of genre (the “new species of romance”) seem to subsume these historical references. But in the first edition, published pseudonymously in 1764, historical reference—and argument—is closer to the surface. For Walpole had initially presented the novel as a translation of an Italian text, printed in 1529 and recently discovered “in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England” (3). That date places the text at the heart of the English Protestant Reformation and the debates it engendered. The year 1529 is also the year of Wolsey’s fall and Henry’s definitive break from Rome. These resonances inspire the editor to try out a reading of his own: perhaps, he规格ulates, Otranto is a product of the Counter-Reformation, the work of an “artful priest” trying to “confirm the populace in their ancient errors and superstitions” (3). Perhaps, that is, the humanist weapons of the Reformation, especially print, can be turned back against it.

And yet, the editor continues, the contemporary reader finds himself far removed from such intrigues:

Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events, are exploded now even from romances. That was not the case when our author wrote; much less when the story itself was supposed to have happened. Belief in every kind of prodigy was so established in those dark ages, that an author would not be faithful to the manners of the times who should omit all mention of them. He is not bound to believe them himself, but he must represent his actors as believing them. (4)

This found text, in other words, flatters its audience while entertaining it. The world it presents is an enchanted one, the editor is a medium or translator between the enchanted and modern worlds, and the reader who is asked to excuse the “air of the miraculous” has the power to suspend her disbelief at will (4). The first Preface thus offers its readers a remarkably compact version of modernization as secularization: in the beginning we lived in an
enchanted, largely static universe; various developments—modern science, the growth of literacy, and so on—gradually disenchanted the world; by the time of the Reformation certain elites had broken with folk piety but continued to manipulate the credulousness of the populace; now, with the process of disenchantment complete, humanity is freed from the bonds of tradition, and the tale can be read as a comforting narrative of progress and freedom. In taking in all these levels simultaneously, the reader comes to appreciate how far humanity has come.\textsuperscript{8} In this sense the novel must endorse its final inflationary vision, even as it fantasizes that this bubble-style economy ("dilated to an immense magnitude"), having done its work, has now, like Wolsey, vanished for good.

It is one thing, however, to posit a transcendent "economy" that expands, sets everything to rights, and then disappears. It is another thing to narrate how European society moved away from the era of absolutism, confessionalization, and the framework of territorial sovereignty, into a new regime of economy and management associated most immediately in England with Horace Walpole's own father Robert, de facto prime minister from 1721 to 1742. Neither Otranto's Preface nor the novel itself offers much in the way of historical explanation, but in its casual way the first Preface does suggest that things are a little more complicated than the novel's closing vision suggests. The presence of the "artful priest," for example, whose rhetorical efforts in the service of the Counter-Reformation actually helped bring about the end of the age of faith, implies that modernity may have been built, even if inadvertently, rather than simply discovered.

Recent scholarship on the Counter-Reformation, in fact, has described it as part of the movement toward explicitation that characterized the age of Reform and the confessional period in general—has emphasized, that is to say, not its doctrinal distinction from the Reformation but its institutional similarity.\textsuperscript{9} The Council of Trent, for example, though directed specifically against Protestant critics of Catholicism and devoted to containing their revolutionary energy, was largely an organizational rather than doctrinal innovation. The founding of the Roman Inquisition and the rejuvenation of the papacy centralized power, increased efficiency, ensured doctrinal conformity, and made provision for better education of both clergy and laity; despite the antimodern cast of its theology, then, Trent was a modernizing and streamlining movement. The age of "confessional Catholicism," that is, was neither merely atavistic nor reactionary; it actually helped build the secular state.\textsuperscript{10}
One of the council’s decrees seems particularly appropriate to Otranto’s stressed absolutism. “On the Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of Saints and on Sacred Images” (1563) commended the veneration of images but drew a clear distinction between such veneration and idolatry. Relics and images did not have any virtue in them, nor could trust be placed in them; rather, according to the council, such things “represented” Christ and the saints. The council goes on to worry, however, that the distinction between a likeness of the thing and the thing itself may escape the unlettered, who might think that “divinity represented in pictures” is the same thing as that which “can be seen with bodily eyes or expressed in colors and figures.” For social order depends on keeping these things separate:

in the invocation of the saints, the veneration of relics and the sacred use of images, all superstition shall be removed, all filthy quest for gain eliminated, and all lasciviousness avoided, so that the images shall not be painted or adorned with a seductive charm, or the celebration of saints and the visitation of relics be perverted by the people into boisterous festivities and drunkenness, as if the festivals in honor of the saints are to be celebrated with revelry and with no sense of decency.11

Implicitly distinguishing itself from the Protestant Reformers with their emphasis on the ear, the council does allow the kissing and veneration of objects. But their emphasis nevertheless falls largely on the worshipper’s frame of mind as the means by which to regularize a tactile relationship with devotional things. According to the logic of the passage, lasciviousness, drunkenness, and revelry flow from a mental mistake, a failure to grasp the proper theory of representation. This suspicion of embodied boisterousness carves out a distinct secular domain in which reformed civility can do its pedagogical work.

In Walpole’s novel, this Counter-Reformation effort to harness art to an orthodox but nonsuperstitious sensory modality fails. On the one hand, relics and images really do seem to come to life. A skeleton appears to Frederic, the plumes of the colossal helmet shake, and the form of Alfonso inflates to enormous size over the course of the narrative. More pertinently, both Matilda and Isabella have a hard time following the council decree to keep thing and representation distinct as they gaze lovestruck at a portrait of Alfonso the Good. The portrait itself even comes to life at crucial moments,
bleeding from the nose during one of Manfred’s outrageous speeches, sighing mournfully, and eventually leaving the frame altogether to lead Manfred down a passageway. The general disorientation of the tale and its characters suggests that disenchantment, exemplified here by the artful priest who wields superstition in the service of worldly power, cannot restore the desired “sense of decency.” That can only be done by the progressive narrative that the text labels “Providence.” The larger point is that Walpole’s gothic novel is a straightforward tale of neither disenchantment nor reenchantment; it is an experiment rather with the institutional forms such processes can take.

Walpole’s second Preface, published with the novel’s second edition in spring 1765, abandoned any pretense to historical narrative. Here Walpole revealed what almost everybody already knew: that he was the author of the book, not simply the translator of a found manuscript. He writes that Otranto had been from the beginning an experiment in genre, “an attempt to blend two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern” (7). The modern novel—Walpole is thinking of both Richardson and Fielding—had the virtue of realism, but it was limited by “a strict adherence to common life” (7). The ancient romance, by contrast, may have been unbelievable, but it also freed the imagination. Otranto is an attempt to combine the two, to place real people in unreal situations: the characters react the way real people would react if they saw a ghost, “according,” Walpole writes, “to the rules of probability” (7–8).

The two editions, then, offer two very different accounts of secularization. The first edition positions the characters as enchanted, the author as a mediating editor, and the reader as an enlightened observer of the progress of human reason and its gradual emancipation. Its moral purpose is clear: to assure readers that they are on the proper side of a progressive history. It does this by narrating a historical shift away from a festive folk culture, and locates that shift historically through the consistent references to Henry VIII. The second edition, by contrast, positions the author as reflexive and experimental, the reader as a passive observer of his experiment, and the characters’ world as obviously fictive. In consequence, the moral purpose of the novel becomes less clear: according to the second edition, the past is not a record of human emancipation but merely a laboratory for formal experiments. It makes superstition available as entertainment without harnessing it to an obvious exemplary function.

Such superfluity turned contemporary reviewers against Otranto. The Monthly Review, which had approved of the first edition of the novel, noted that while it “could readily excuse . . . preposterous phenomena” had the
text been authentic, it could not do the same for a “false tale in a cultivated
period of learning. It is, indeed, more than strange that an Author, of a
refined and polished genius, should be an advocate for re-establishing the
barbarous superstitions of Gothic devilism!”

Of course, this objection misses the point, and in a symptomatic way:
Walpole’s novel is less an exercise in barbarism than it is an experiment in
authorial control over a public more gullible than enlightened. In the sec-
second edition power flows to the center—toward the author, away from the
reader, and away from the historical validity of the characters—as if the
author claims for himself the power that the tyrant Manfred can no longer
claim, the power to position the viewer or reader, organize his sensory experi-
ence, even reach into his mind and shape his beliefs. In moving from the first
to the second edition, then, the reader trades a narrative of progress—we
must have advanced beyond them, because we can recognize irrationality for
what it is—for something else, the creation of a space for aesthetic experi-
ments and the transformation of the supernatural into the spectacular. If
before it was the artful priest who unintentionally helped build the secular
age, now it is the artful novelist who does so, and with full knowledge of what
he is doing. This combination of factors is worth underlining: the author, not
the monarch or priest, is the authority, and this means that power is more
fully distributed and harder to locate. Rather than marching under the ban-
ner of secularization and disenchantment, the secular becomes a background
condition, a presence palpable but not localizable.

In keeping with this secular picture of power, the Preface to the second
edition serves to emphasize that despite its supposed setting during the age
of the crusades, the novel’s vertiginous spaces, which open and close, change
direction, entrap and disorient, are the spaces of the baroque. Florid and
visceral, baroque architecture, with its turns, reversals, paradoxes, and bodies
flying through space, disoriented the viewer in a process that Susan Stewart
suggestively links to vertigo: “this art constantly unsettles the stance of the
receiver, providing experiences that are analogues of ecstasy”—but ecstasy
methodized, harnessed to earthly authority. This emphasis on spectacle and
worldly power characterized the Counter-Reformation Catholic aesthetic,
when the church encouraged a more direct and self-confident style as a way
of doing battle with Protestantism; art and architecture increasingly aimed to
impress and perhaps disorient the masses. The paradoxical result, as Walter
Benjamin remarked in his own study of German baroque drama and its
characteristic melancholy, is that despite its overtly religious content and
wealth of sacred architecture, the baroque is in fact obsessed with the precariousness of this world. Seventeenth-century court life, centered around the figure of the monarch, was radically uncertain; baroque style, despite its flourishes and embellishments, points always toward the king.\textsuperscript{16} Replace “king” with “author,” and we can glimpse how Walpole’s project in the second edition seeks to join an eighteenth-century progressive narrative of secularization to a seventeenth-century narrative of aestheticized power, retrofitted, in this case, to the inflationary narrative of speculative capital.

Walpole writes that he modeled this new species of romance on Shakespeare. And indeed it is worth recalling, now, that \textit{The Famous History of the Life of King Henry VIII} was one of the most popular Shakespeare plays of the eighteenth century. Performed for George I at Hampton Court (Wolsey’s former seat, appropriately enough) in 1717, it was revived virtually every year in the middle part of the century. At the end of the play, after the chaos and uncertainty that have dominated it, Cranmer produces a prophecy of Elizabeth’s future greatness that imposes an order and direction missing from the events themselves:

\begin{quote}
This royal infant—heaven still move about her—
Though in her cradle, yet now promises
Upon this land a thousand thousand blessings,
Which time shall bring to ripeness. (5.4.17–20)
\end{quote}

Cranmer’s picture of Elizabeth consolidating the blessings of the English Reformation sets the pattern for a retrospective history whose partiality would have been evident to anyone who had watched the disjointed events depicted in the play itself. Even Henry is bewildered by the history whose instrument Cranmer reveals him to be. His response to the speech is remarkable: “O lord Archbishop,” he says, “Thou has made me now a man. Never before / This happy child did I get anything” (5.4.62–64). The suggestion is that the progressive forces of history grant to Henry his proper role as father to a nation. In the familiar story, this is the moment when Henry centralizes power; in Shakespeare’s telling, it is the moment that power dissipates into providential history, procreation, and “the future.” Shakespeare thus narrates the birth of absolutism as if it were the death of absolutism. Perhaps this is why the play spoke so powerfully to eighteenth-century audiences—not merely through its spectacle and pageantry, but also because it served as an
allegory for a crucial transformation from the individual conscience of a sovereign to the collective moral consciences of middle-class reformers, who were, in the early years of the eighteenth century, still trying to clean up and organize a resistant popular and folk culture.17

Good and Bad Fathers

Shakespeare’s closing image of Henry as, at last, a good father suggests what is at stake for Walpole when he corrals the secularizing energies of a progressive narrative into the figure of the author. In Shakespeare’s play the bewilderment of the supposedly central figure invites a reading that favors the baroque and the spectacular over the providential and reproductive. Walpole takes that idea further: like Henry, Manfred and his aging wife cannot produce a viable heir; unlike Henry, Manfred will not be granted an Elizabeth to retroactively make a man of him. In Walpole’s version of the story there is no real future to look forward to—only a past of foreclosed possibilities for which the creative powers of the author serve as a rather melancholy substitute.

The operative model here is the analogy between state and family known as patriarchalism. “The whole worlde is noethinge but a greate state; a state is no other than a great familie; and a familie is no other than a greate bodye. As one God ruleth the worlde, one maister the familie,” remarked John Hayward in 1603.18 The analogy between state and family suggests that as we are born into a preexistent family and into a natural condition of dependency, so subjects are born into a preexistent state and into a natural condition of subjection. The political structure preexists the subject: just as one cannot imagine being born of a different father, so one cannot imagine being under a different ruler, or no ruler at all.19

It is of course the novel, and especially the gothic novel, that does imagine what it might be like to be born of a different father, or the wrong father.20 Indeed Otranto might be read as an allegory of the shifting role of the family as absolutism slowly withers away. Manfred is a figure for someone living through this transition who still behaves as if he is a Renaissance prince of the Machiavellian type—or more specifically, given the references, of the Henry VIII type. In the patriarchal model, a good father works hard because he considers himself to be in the service of the family; a good monarch, likewise, has the interests of his people at heart. What makes the father-king analogy work is a picture of the traditional household as itself a well-managed
economic entity. But Manfred is a spectacularly bad father, and in precisely those terms: rather than serve his family, he concerns himself solely with holding on to power and territory.21 This makes him a baroque prince, whose fascination is in Benjamin’s words “rooted in the conflict between the impotence and depravity of his person [and] . . . the sacrosanct power of his role” (72). With a bad father/king and a household in disarray, the patriarchal model was no longer tenable, and, as historians of the family have demonstrated, a new, more impersonal kind of economic thinking emerged, with a conjugal “private” family now held separate from economic activity itself understood to belong to a bourgeois public sphere and to such impersonal abstractions as the market.22

This is to say that Otranto, its irony and playfulness notwithstanding, is a sober meditation on the various processes that make up what we call “modernity.” Where the medieval church once owned a monopoly on education, health care, law enforcement, and charity, self-directed autonomous institutions gradually assumed those functions. The demise of a single moral universe in which all persons and occupations have an assigned place greatly multiplied individual social and professional options. This indeed is the original meaning of “secularization,” which refers to the transfer of land, property, or persons from the domain of the church to the domain of the world.23 As the career of Henry VIII suggests, that transfer initially strengthened the state. But it eventually weakened the very absolutism it was invoked to support.

Scholars have emphasized different aspects of this paradoxical development. Charles Taylor has for example written of an enlightened intellectual world understood to be “governed by universal causal laws,” and a consequent “moral distaste” for an interventionist God.24 The result was a disengaged and impersonal cosmos, offset in the eighteenth century by the increased prominence of human sociability. This is the age of commercial activity, finance capital, and social theory modeled on interpersonal relations. Less concerned with sovereignty, war, and territory, the state took an increasing interest in commerce and finance. These are the origins of what Michel Foucault has termed the governmental state, “essentially defined no longer in terms of its territoriality, of its surface area, but in terms of the mass of its population with its volume and density.”25 For Foucault the crucial change was the introduction of economy into political practice. Sovereignty may have meant the administration of territory, but the art of modern governance
was now the administration of things: their arrangement, ordering, tabulation, and management. The concept of a population, in its modern sense, emerged.26

The separating out of public from private and economy from family, moreover, introduced what Habermas has called a “process of self-clarification,” wherein private people reflected on the novel experience of their privateness and eventually gave birth to the “public sphere of the world of letters.”27 More and more of the world came under the control, or apparent control, of instrumental reason. As the process of differentiation accelerated, for instance, a burgeoning insurance industry, the science of weather prediction, an industry of critics, writers, printers, and booksellers, and a “growing culture of quantification” that tabulated mortality and disease statistics further rationalized and autonomized what had once been a single social domain.28 And if order was something that could be imposed on things through the effort of human will and sustained labor, then humanity’s natural state seemed less an instantiation of divine form than a terrain on which to work. God may have designed everything according to a plan, but it was up to human actors to put that plan into action.

Providential deism, governmentality, and rational self-clarification: it was Horace Walpole’s father Robert who made these intellectual innovations into social policy. Known as “the fat old squire of Norfolk,” the gifted, wealthy, and corpulent prime minister of England was first elected to Parliament in 1701 and stepped forward decisively with the collapse of the South Sea Bubble. For twenty years he was arguably the most powerful man in the kingdom. Ruthless and systematic, an administrative genius and a man of earthly appetites, Walpole used his power to enrich himself, filling his small palace at Houghton with paintings and furnishings purchased at astronomical prices. But he also made government run more efficiently than it ever had before. Rationalization, efficiency, and trade, he believed, would smooth over otherwise intractable ideological differences. His aims were simple and clear: avoid war, increase trade, reduce taxes. Take care of the economy, and the rest would take care of itself.29

Not everyone was thrilled. Within a few years of the Hampton Court performance of Henry VIII, the opposition press began linking Walpole with Cardinal Wolsey, Henry VIII’s lord chancellor.30 The link made sense: like Walpole, Wolsey was fat, rich, hugely skilled, and detested by the courtier class. From humble origins (he was a butcher’s son) Wolsey had risen to
become a cardinal and, in 1515, the lord chancellor of England.\footnote{If Walpole’s own rapid rise was an obvious point of comparison, then Wolsey’s eventual fate offered opposition writers of the eighteenth century the chance to speculate on Walpole’s own future. In 1727 The Craftsman described Wolsey’s greed and ambition and then noted archly that “Reflecting people may observe from this Picture how like human Nature is in her Workings at all Times.” Awful as he was, Wolsey was better than Walpole, as The Craftsman opined the following year when it compared the two men more overtly:} 

Learned Himself, to Learning was a Friend;  
Himself, adorn’d with Arts, did Arts defend;  
Whilst all Thy [Walpole’s] Knowledge is confin’d to GAIN;  
To funds, and Stocks, and Bribes, thy Country’s Bane.\footnote{And the anonymous writer of the Authentick memoirs of the life and infamous actions of Cardinal Wolsey (1731) went so far as to refer to Wolsey anachronistically as a “prime minister” and to note darkly: “But to the Terror of future evil Ministers it will be seen, that their [sic] is no Power so very great as to be always able to skreen [sic] him from the Vengeance of an injured People.” Wolsey’s fall was easily read in the eighteenth century as an allegory of the failure of an upwardly mobile professionalization narrative. But in Henry VIII this does not mean the restoration of traditional sovereignty. In the play Wolsey serves a useful purpose in helping to get rid of Katherine, but the future he has made possible is an uncertain one. The play is held together on stage by royalist pageantry, which is why the eighteenth-century tendency to frame it as an exercise in spectacle seems so apposite: it is less about individuals (sovereign or otherwise) than it is about forces, and particularly the problem of their management by an increasingly abstract entity known as “the government.” Walpole too may be eclipsed, but one lesson of Henry VIII is that the changes associated with modernity cannot be located in a single person.}  

In recent years, both Robert Miles and Diane Long Hoeveler have written of the gothic mode as “poised” on the cusp of these transitions—an agent of Reform, or, as Hoeveler writes, a “part of the ambivalent secularization process itself.” Both critics seek to complicate arguments like E. J. Clery’s that see the gothic as spectacle, a merely aesthetic reaction to the confluence of enlightenment, secularization, and capitalism. I agree with them, but I
view *Otranto*, at least, less as a pluralizing instrument for human flourishing within the immanent frame than as a prescient *critique* of that frame, a meditation less on the options immanence opens up than on the possibilities it closes down. In this I am inspired by E. P. Thompson’s argument that early modern English society held “customs in common”—that both elites and plebeians were committed to the maintenance of a reciprocal culture that balanced the demands of the different orders through well-developed but informal mechanisms, ranging from carnival to food riot, which together ensured that elite and plebeian forces remained in rough equilibrium. David Collings, in a recent application of this idea, argues that modernization was the steady withdrawal of elite commitment from such mutual give-and-take; in its place came the belief that society does fundamentally cohere, or *would* cohere were it not for some illegitimate or unpalatable element that must be expelled. Cast out of proper society, reciprocity thus returned in monstrous form, in the fevered imaginations of social reformers during the revolutionary era and in the mobs and monsters of the gothic novel. 37

Reform and its symbolic economy allow us to place a novel like *Otranto* into this timeline, beginning with the early modern “rage for order” that swept across sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. In this example, the ideals of Reform—discipline, order, efficiency, sobriety, right belief—produce the very political uncanny they claim to banish. This paradox, which I take to be central to secularism itself, illuminates the persistence of the gothic alternative to official culture. This is one reason that gothic novels and the realist novels that owe so much to them continued to treat Catholicism symbolically well into the nineteenth century—as part neither, that is to say, of a theological conflict (Catholic versus Protestant) nor of an economic one (landed aristocracy versus rising bourgeoisie), but as a particularly secular form of haunting, the result of a reforming elite’s withdrawal from a social compact that had once upon a time made space for popular culture. As we will see shortly, the gothic possibilities that circle around the edges of Jane Austen’s novel *Emma*—its various fantasies, love affairs, charades, and mysterious coincidences—should be read not simply generically (as debased romance plots), but historically, as the illegitimate progeny of Henrician reform itself, possibilities made marginal by the same process that fathered them. The issue is, once again, not so much a matter of doctrine or belief as it is a conduit to a rambunctious and decidedly *different* world of folk practices that by the early years of the nineteenth century lie within the realm of what the narrator of *Emma* will insist upon calling “impossible things.”
Chapter 2

Heterosexual Melancholy

Eighteenth-century conversations and clarifications structured the public sphere, but they also reached into the more private zones of sexuality and the family. Unlike patriarchal theory, contract theory (favored throughout the seventeenth century by religious and political dissenters, and in the eighteenth century by the liberal Anglican mainstream) “entails the explicit consent of its participants” rather than their merely tacit acceptance. Foucault has noted, too, that the development of statistics revealed populations as entities with their own cycles—growth, retraction, epidemic, productivity—not always reducible to the cycles of the family. Thus the family became newly instrumental and paradoxically irrelevant: where its role had once been the patriarchal one of providing a model of the well-run state in microcosm, its symbolic and biological functions now began to pull apart: it would “contribute” to a population that didn’t need it. Such contradictory imperatives cleared room for a literary public sphere that limned the contours of bourgeois procreativity, creating new ways of imagining a social whole.

While Otranto’s first edition may comport well with the general outlines of the public sphere as a mode of secularization and self-clarification (we were once in thrall to outside forces, but now we have self-determination), the second edition repudiates that ideal; in place of a comforting narrative of religious privatization and eventual irrelevance, Walpole offers an experimental, campy, and differently “irrelevant” literary confection. In the opening scene a giant helmet falls from the sky and crushes Manfred’s heir; soon Frederic arrives carrying a giant sword; later, other colossal pieces of armor will accumulate, as if the scattered body parts of the legitimate heir are being slowly reassembled. The only official point of this parade of comically larger-than-life items may be that such a burlesque (replete with vibrating feathers) is a new thing in the world, but the reassembled body of Alfonso suggests nevertheless that the process of Reform is now far enough along to be available for literary reflection: the dis-membered, re-membered, and inflated figure registers, though in oblique and ridiculous form, the real violence done to people like Elizabeth Barton.

It remains, however, to specify the relationship between the secularity of Reform and the manliness achieved with such labor in Shakespeare’s play and achieved not at all in Walpole’s novel. For Otranto’s closing sentences seem to reject a normative model of the private conjugal family, and to reject
in consequence the imperative of heterosexual coupling and the literary public sphere that depends upon it. Here is the closing passage again:

Frederic offered his daughter to the new prince . . . but Theodore’s grief was too fresh to admit the thought of another love; and it was not till after frequent discourses with Isabella, of his dear Matilda, that he was persuaded he could know no happiness but in the society of one with whom he could forever indulge the melancholy that had taken possession of his soul. (110)

Now restored to the throne and bestowed with a wife, Theodore is the novel’s most obvious representative of the future—a role established for him moments earlier by the giant Alfonso and his closing commands. Yet Walpole avoids the device that would be rapidly categorized as the marriage plot. Remarkably, he lets the problem of paternity and inheritance, already an issue in Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* and in Manfred’s family, linger beyond the end of the text. Theodore’s melancholy and his decided lack of enthusiasm for heterosexual union suggests that another succession crisis is in the offing.

The world of *Otranto* is a world full of things that have lost their significance, and the prospect of boredom and consequent sensationalism in this text is less the direct result of market society and its appetite for stimulation than it is of the restlessness and *acedia* of characters unable to attach themselves to anything in particular. To be sure, believing in impossible things is easily coded as backward-looking, credulous, or irredeemably aestheticized—modes very unlike Habermas’s conception of the clarifying effects of the literary public sphere. But the novel’s melancholy also looks backward like Benjamin’s angel of history, who helplessly views the wreckage of the past as he is propelled into a future he cannot face. Some critics have interpreted Walpole, together with near contemporaries like William Beckford and Matthew Lewis, as early examples of what would eventually be codified as male homosexuality. But this is to focus on questions of sexual identity rather than on the queerness of *Otranto* itself, particularly how at odds it seems with the eighteenth-century public sphere—either in its Habermasian version as a process of “self-clarification,” or in the more nuanced model of the “conversable world” for which Jon Mee has argued. If Shakespeare had staged the birth of absolutism as already dissipating into a familial and procreative future structured by the division between the private conjugal family and the
public sphere of self-clarification and conversation, then Walpole’s innovation is to suggest that this “future” forecloses upon a past that never was. The novel seems determined to hold public-sphere formations at arm’s length. Its melancholic rejection of the public world and appeal to another kind of discourse is not simple nostalgia for an enchanted world but rather the thing that binds together the politics of sexuality and secularity in this novel, marking a relation to plenitude located in a past not so much superseded as never available in the first place.

This is true historically as well as psychologically. For melancholy is one of a range of bodily experiences that is itself secularized over the course of the early modern period. Taylor writes of this process in terms of medical history in particular. The premodern link between black bile and melancholy is intimate: black bile doesn’t cause melancholy, it is melancholy, and so being told that my mood comes from black bile isn’t reassuring but rather confirms that I am in the grip of something malevolent. By contrast, learning that my depression is the result of something particular to my body chemistry allows me some distance on the feeling: the feeling doesn’t “mean” anything in itself but is rather the effect of a set of causes that are in principle analyzable from the outside. In this sense a wholly different set of meanings accrues to the feeling: even if its phenomenology is the same, I have a different relationship to my embodied experience of it.42

Robert Burton’s famous Anatomy of Melancholy (1621) suggests something of the array of possibilities within this schematic shift, for Burton explores his topic through such an exhaustive range of texts and authorities that melancholy becomes not a single thing but a window into the seemingly infinite nature of knowledge itself, both supernatural (devils, witches, and the stars may cause melancholy) and natural (old age, genetic inheritance, diet, bad air, and insufficient exercise are also culprits). Finally Burton arrives at what he calls the “passions and perturbations of the mind,” particularly sorrow itself, an “inseparable companion, the mother and daughter of Melancholy, her Epitome, Symptome, and chiefe cause: as Hippocrates hath it, They beget one another and tread in a ring, for Sorrow is both cause and Symptome of this Disease.”43 Especially in the context of Theodore’s lack of interest in his new wife, Burton’s mutual begetting of sorrow and melancholy suggests the circular and self-fulfilling nature of this mood, its entropic or simply exhausted repertoire of feeling. The community of rational and deliberative individuals whom public sphere theory invokes seems here to depend
on a prior act of self-alienation, its circular treading a mark of its difference both from itself and the world in which it now finds itself.44

Something of this alienated self-founding remains in Freud’s definition of melancholia as the unfinished process of grieving. But for Freud the mutual self-constitution of sorrow and melancholy now marks not only difference but loss: when a “person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues an alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the object inside the ego.”45 This is why the grieving is never complete: the subject preserves the object psychically, even if it is, in reality, gone. On this reading, the most obvious cause of Theodore’s melancholy would be the dead Matilda. And yet the tenuousness of gender is very much at issue in both Henry VIII and Otranto. In both texts becoming a man is an “accomplishment,” to use Judith Butler’s term—something achieved or attained partly in despite of other options, necessary as those choices may be for the maintenance of an always precarious sexual order coded as “destiny.” That this contingency must be disavowed means that heterosexuality is structured by its loss of what Butler calls “unlived possibilities.”46 Her reading thus returns to a pre-Freudian notion of melancholy as less invested in a particular sexual object than in the constitutive relation between selfhood and self-alienation. Heterosexuality is melancholic by definition: the loved object does not have to die or disappear in order for gender identification to be structured by an “unlivable passion and ungrievable loss” (135). Melancholy is simply the sign of disenchantment, of a plentitude forgone.

We can glimpse the secular dimensions of this kind of psychological melancholy if we appeal to Ashis Nandy’s assertion of a “homology between sexual and political dominance” that characterized the colonial situation in nineteenth-century India. In The Intimate Enemy, Nandy examines a dynamic of identification in which colonial Indians “saw their salvation in becoming more like the British, whether in friendship or in enmity.”47 When it came to anticolonial resistance, he continues, “the search for martial Indianness underwrote one of the most powerful collaborationist strands within Indian society,” the collaboration in this case between colonial aggressors and the anticolonial Indians who, in identifying with a picture of virile masculinity, unintentionally propped up colonial dynamics of power (7). Nandy argues that this martial picture of masculinity, competitive and aggressive, unwittingly led to a flattening out of other gendered possibilities that had always existed in India. Under colonial rule, he writes, there was “an attempt
to lump together all forms of androgyny and counterpoise them against undifferentiated masculinity” (8). Nandy wrote these words some years before the advent of queer theory, but his discussion of how “femininity-in-masculinity” came to be perceived by Indians themselves as “a pathology more dangerous than femininity itself” (8) resonates with Butler’s more recent insistence that, precisely because gendered identification is an accomplishment that depends upon the renunciation of other options, it must defend itself militantly against anything that threatens the categories it has worked so hard to achieve.48 Some years later, when Nandy himself turned his attention to the place where secular and sexual politics meet, he made the link to what he had called “androgyny” and what Butler called gender performance explicit: secularism, he wrote, is “uncomfortable with the somewhat fluid definitions of the self with which many live.”49

The range of premodern and early modern sexual possibilities and experiences remains difficult to specify, but there is a widespread consensus among historians that it was at least some of the time more fluid than our modern categories can easily accommodate. In traditional societies procreation was an important but far from exclusive purpose of sexual contact, which involved a range of practices and a variety of bodily interactions.50 By the seventeenth century, however, a growing emphasis on procreative coupling as an activity distinct in kind from other activities had begun to emerge. Those other practices could now be distinguished, sorted, and often condemned: fondling, masturbation, fornication, sodomy, and so on.51 The codification of a homosexual identity that Walpole variously anticipates is thus a relatively late development in the much longer process of Reform. It is part of the same series of civilizing and reforming imperatives that cleaned up unruly common practices, privatized devotion, death, and other bodily activities, and narrowed and deepened the experience of (religious and sexual) privacy. Theodore, the clever but melancholy young man forced into a marriage for which he has little inclination, is in this analysis the latest subject of that reforming and disciplining work that had begun with the policing of public bodies (festivals and carnivals, icon worship, prostitution) and now, by the middle years of the eighteenth century, began to take the family too in its purview.

Theodore’s melancholy highlights these processes of Reform, especially as their weight bears disproportionately on heterosexual marriage. To be “made a man,” as Henry is by Cranmer at the conclusion of Henry VIII, is to be rushed headlong into a future where procreation and the family will be
marshaled toward certain ends. Henry’s bewilderment at this moment marks it as a sudden loss of possibilities that he didn’t know he had until they were gone; the loss is in this sense ungrievable, even if the compensatory gain—a nation, the future—seems worth it. *Otranto* takes this dynamic a step further, highlighting the way Reform produces melancholy as an unquiet refusal of a future destiny imagined in terms of a biological contribution to such things as “economy” and “population.” One cannot mourn for a possibility that was never anything other than impossible. One can, however, speak of it—and so the novel’s conclusion, wherein “frequent discourse” leads not to Habermasian self-clarification but to yet more melancholy, hints that the only resistance to such an arrangement is simply to call it what it is. If Cranmer’s closing speech makes a man of Henry VIII, then, Theodore refuses to let Alfonso’s speech make a man out of him. Coleridge, in a nasty mood, once remarked that Walpole had no “spark of true manliness.” It was meant as an insult, of course. But if we read “manliness” less as a matter of personal identification than as a mark of how identities and desires are enfolded into the destinies of nations, then Coleridge was more right than perhaps he knew.