

The Revival of Romance

While the eighteenth century novel arose as a picture of men and manners, the favour which it enjoyed made it inevitable that it should soon expand in many directions under the various influences of the time. One important new movement was thus initiated when it began to respond to that growing interest in the middle ages which, as we shall learn more fully later was a prominent feature in the great changes which were then coming over popular taste. A revival of romance was the result. In this revival the most conspicuous name is that of Horace Walpole, who has already been mentioned as a letter-writer. A busy trifler, who in the course of a long life as man of fashion and virtuoso dabbled in many things, Walpole among other fads took up me-

diacralism. As early as 1747 he bought a small house or 'villakin', near Twickenham which little by little he transformed into a miniature gothic castle. In this he installed with great satisfaction his collection of curiosities and art treasures, suits of armour, illuminated missals, specimens of stained glass, and other miscellaneous articles of the same general description. His 'Gothic' romance, as he called his 'Castle of Otranto' (1765), was simply the expression in fiction of the peculiar tastes already manifested architecturally in this ~~the~~ castle of Strawberry Hill. Inspired, according to his own account, by a dream of 'a gigantic hand in armour', this extraordinary book impressed us today as a mere jumble of childish absurdities, and we on

Smile when we should be amazed and awed by its crude Supernaturalism by the picture which descends from its frame, for example, and the statue which bleeds at the nose. But the point to emphasize is that it broke new ground. It was taken very seriously at the time and by readers of the next generation, for Gray was so frightened by it that he dreaded to go upstairs to bed, Byron called it 'the first romance in the language' ~~and~~ and Scott praised it with his usual reckless generosity. Its popularity, of course, bred imitations, one of which, Clara Reeve's Old English Baron also described as 'a Gothic story', is specially important because it is avowedly an attempt to create romantic interest with machinery less violent and implausible than that which Walpole had

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employed. Sensationalism of the most extravagant kind was, however, the general characteristic of the romantic fiction which was produced in enormous quantities during the closing decades of the eighteenth century. Most of this has gone into the lumber heap of forgotten things, but the works of two writers have still a faint historical interest. Ann Radcliffe gained an immense public by her 'Romance of the Forest' (1791), 'The Mysteries of Udolpho' (1794) and 'The Italian' (1797) books which are very long, very complicated in plot, full of thrilling situations and so compact of horrors that though the author was in fact a very quiet, commonplace kind of woman, the story got about that she had actually gone insane in writing them. Matthew

Gregory Lewis (1775-1818), now best remembered for his personal relations with Scott achieved a great success on somewhat similar lines with his first book, 'Ambrosio', or 'The Monk' published when he was only twenty, this owes much to 'The Castle of Otranto' and 'The mysteries of Udolpho', though it outdoes both in the wild sensationalism of its machinery and effects. There is little in the productions of either of these writers to interest us much today.

The end.

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