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One of the most interesting phenomena in the history of literature, the Gothic novel — which flourished from about 1765 to 1825 — still has much to offer to the modern reader. Supernatural thrills, adventure and suspense, colorful settings, and, in the better examples, literary quality are all present. Unfortunately, true Gothic novels (not simply modern detective stories called "Gothic") are extremely rare books, and have never been as available as they should be. The first member in this collection, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, published as a Christmas book for 1764, was the first and one of the greatest members of the genre. It has also been one of the most influential books in history. It motivated the Gothic revival in the arts, and it probably did more to usher in the early-19th-century Romanticism than any other single work. It also served as the model in plot, characterizations, settings, and tone for hundreds, perhaps thousands of successors. *Vathek*, by the eccentric British millionaire William Beckford, is generally considered to be the high point of the Oriental tale in English literature. Certainly no one has ever written (in any European tongue) a story which better unifies the stirrings of Gothic romanticism with the color, poetry, and vivacity of the original *Arabian Nights*. The third novel in this collection, John Polidori's *Vampyre*, emerged from the same soirées of ghost-story telling in Geneva that produced Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The first full-length vampire story in English, it initiated a very important literary chain that also leads up to the present. Included with Polidori's novel is Lord Byron's little-known *Fragment*, from which Polidori (who was Byron's physician in Switzerland) plagiarized his plot. These three novels (and the fragment) are still well worth reading. Generations of readers have found thrills and horrors in Walpole's fine work, while *Vathek* cannot be excelled in its unusual mixture of the bizarre, cruel irony, and masterful narration. Polidori's thriller still conveys chills, and the *Fragment* makes us all wish that Byron had completed his novel.

Three Gothic Novels: The Castle of Otranto, Vathek, The Vampyre, and a Fragment of a Novel Details

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From Reader Review Three Gothic Novels: The Castle of Otranto, Vathek, The Vampyre, and a Fragment of a Novel for online ebook

Reading Wolf says

I was assigned Walpole's tale "The Castle of Otranto" for my Gothic Tale of Terror class. I enjoyed the story although the dialogue was a little hard to follow. The story reminded me of the Knights of the Round Table stories and I couldn't help but see a glimpse of Henry VIII in there as well. This story set the mold for future Gothic tales. The giant helmet bit hooked me from the beginning.

Colin says

I have long sought a copy of Walpole's "The Castle of Otranto," which has oft been cited as *the* founding Gothic novel, so one can imagine my surprise and delight to find it reprinted in this volume, together with Beckford's "Vathek" (less well-known, I suppose) and Polidori's "The Vampyre"(!), as well as a fragment of a novel by George Gordon (Lord Byron) which bears some interesting similarities to the tale of Polidori.

Rose says

As literature, these stories are just awful. As curiosities in the history of literature, they are interesting.

Bill Bruno says

The stories in this book are perhaps more useful as examples of the beginnings of a genre than on their own merits. The three prefaces given in the introduction in this edition are particularly useful in this regard.

Horace Walpole's Castle of Otranto was the ur-text of the Gothic novel and set the tone with its use of the supernatural (which would increase in later phases of the genre) and its medieval settings. The book itself is a reasonable engaging mix of the dramatic, the comic and the frightening. The resolution of the plot at the end is genuinely tragic while the initial plot development, in which someone is crushed by a giant helmet, is Pythonesque.

William Beckford's Vathek was less interesting than the life of the author itself. Vathek himself was a heavily fictionalized version of the Abbasid caliph Al-Wathiq ibn Mutasim. A key feature of this story is the Orientalism that was a product of the availability of the Arabian Nights in English several decades before Vathek was written. Interestingly, Vathek was originally written in French, with the first English translation being unauthorized. The introduction notes that Orientalism in fiction had more of a presence in French writing than in English. The book itself, about the corruption and fall of Vathek, isn't terribly impressive. Vathek himself is two-dimensional while the book seems overwritten with an excess of description and detail.

John Polidori's The Vampyre (and the fragment of a novel with the same plot written by Lord Byron, from

whom Polidori apparently lifted the idea), won't make anyone forget Bram Stoker but it isn't bad and does seem to be the first English vampire story.

Ashley says

Vathek was by far the best novella out of the three.

Leah says

I've read this book several times. I like the fact that it's reasonably priced and that instead of including *,Frankenstein like other "three gothic novels" compilations, it includes Polidori's "The Vampire" and the Bryon fragment. The texts themselves aren't as scholarly as in other editions. However, it does have a fairly detailed introduction, and the typeface is easy to read.*

Carole says

Weird and even weirder. Hard to give this a rating. The writing is florid, but deliberately so. The plots are over the top, yet purposefully so, I guess they are successful Gothic creations, thus proving this generation did not invent either bad taste or excess. The most interesting aspect of Frankenstein is the sensitive and articulate "monster", Vathek is just bizarre and "The Monk" makes one want to take a shower and scrub for awhile.

Melanie says

Although it took me longer to read this book than many others, it was pretty interesting. The stories written in the mid 1700's to early 1800's during the peak of the true gothic novels have almost a poetry about them.

Jaime says

This book is worth getting if just for Vathek, which is a wonderfully chilling 18th-century Oriental tale. While Walpole's work spurred the development of the Gothic genre, its clunky writing and plot are difficult to stomach. Polidori's "Vampyre" is dreadful, especially in comparison with Byron's intriguing fragment. Essential reading for anyone who wants to see the beginnings of the Gothic and modern horror genres.

Mina says

The Vampyre is excellent!

Rory says

A very neat little collection containing the Castle of Otranto, the very first Gothic novel, Vathek, an interesting Gothic tale with a more exotic setting than most, and The Vampyre, written by John Polidori, Byron's physician whom nobody really liked, but was present at the "contest" of sorts during which Shelley wrote Frankenstein. Here, Polidori wrote the first piece of vampiric prose.

Jane says

Oh, transport!

Shawn says

Two classic Gothic Novels and a short.

THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO is regarded as the first Gothic novel and has probably been pored over by bored students everywhere in every semester that passes by on God's green earth. Much has been said about it, by much better brains than mine, so I thought I'd reserve this review to my particular reasons for reading it (and the orientalist nightmare that is VATHEK). As a long time fan of the horror/supernatural genre, but also as an avid reader with wide-ranging tastes, I've set myself the task of exploring the various literary byways that helped create and influence my favorite form. The past few years I've dabbled in the Fantastique (the brilliant Hoffmann and Gautier) and read extensively (still reading extensively) from the Decadents (also great stuff). I knew I had a rendezvous in my future with these two touchstones of the Gothic Novel THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO and VATHEK (FRANKENSTEIN, JANE EYRE and WUTHERING HEIGHTS were dispatched long ago). Well, that appointment was recently kept.

OTRANTO is a very straightforward tale - there is a prophecy that the Castle and Lordship of Otranto will be lost to their present holder when the real owner has "grown too large to inhabit it". The present Prince of Otranto is Manfred and his son is about to be married off at the start of the story, until a giant helmet falls from the sky, crushing him. Manfred attempts to divorce his wife and make a move on his son's intended betrothed (shocking a painting of his ancestor, who looks down upon the sordid scene, to such a degree that said ancestor walks out of the frame and leaves the room), which engenders more mystery, intrigue and the manifestation of giant, ghostly arms and legs throughout the castle. A mysterious stranger helps the almost-wed princess to escape, a group of silent knights arrive, monks blither, there are chases and accusations and a bit of the old supernatural "kick-up-the-backside" to another character who has been charged with avenging a death (after he strays a bit from his intended goal, he is upbraided by the ghost of a rotting monk, which must have really chilled the blood of the late-18th century reader, as it actually framed as a movie cliché - a

dramatic turn to the camera moment!). Mysterious bloodlines, unruly rulers and much heavings of bosoms abound. It all works out tragically but, also, benignly for *most* of the participants (Manfred's son - poor, bland Conrad, will remain throughout the history of literature nothing but a smear in a courtyard with no character to speak of, except the detail that his intended wife didn't relish the marriage much). Worth reading? Well, the giant, ghostly manifestations are certainly intriguing (I love the fact that the initial appearance of the prophecy is a giant helmet inexplicably falling from the sky, its so mythic and absurd at the same time, like something from MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL) but, while I have a passingly strong tolerance for older writing styles, this did tend to drag a bit - there's some exciting moments and the ghostly stuff is pretty cool (I've told you pretty much all of it, though). The attempts at "humor", which were criticized even at the time and which Walpole defends in one of the many introductions reproduced here, are extremely broad - but I do admit to wearing a wry grin during an extended sequence when evil, fuming Manfred attempts to pump a servant girl, the bubbly Bianca, for information, only to have his efforts thwarted by her amazing ability to turn every conversation around or set it in a different direction altogether. Overall, though, OTRANTO could be missed (but a perusal of the beginning and ending wouldn't hurt you).

Not so, VATHEK. William Beckford, the author, was an impossibly rich Englishman (his father, possibly the richest man in England, died when he was nine, bequeathing him everything. But young William had no taste for business and much taste for indolence, indulgence and an Orientalism derived from THE ARABIAN NIGHTS). VATHEK is a sprawling tale of an impossibly powerful Caliph, his black magician of a mother, and his quest for unlimited power that causes him to stray from Allah and straight into the arms of Eblis (the Muslim Devil). There is much ornate, gushing, detail (how could it be Orientalist without such unshackled overabundance?) - many lovingly described banquets, extensive collections of jewelry, scads of nubile houris, endless ablutions, dwarfs, eunuchs, and much perfidious witchery involving jinns, demons, "abominable drugs", and blood sacrifices (plus, many mummies are burned, I kid you not!). The middle section, in which Vathek gets waylaid while his entire retinue is on its way to claim his satanic prize for the murder of 50 children, gets bogged down a bit in a strange love story side street, but even that has a few entertaining moments involving a faked death. It all ends in Hell, which was pretty inescapable as an outcome from the start, but is still oddly moving. There are extensive footnotes as well, which I haven't finished reading, I admit. Is VATHEK worth reading? Certainly, if you like the time period or want some fantasy with less of a medieval flavor and more of a "desert sands and minarets" feel.

The third piece featured here is John Polidori's "The Vampyre" and the Byron fragment he seemingly lifted it from. The Polidori is a historical footnote only - I read it years ago and have barely a memory of it. The Byron is perhaps only worth noting in relation to what Polidori did with it.

So that's it - a bunch of cheap Gothic from Dover. Dig in if its your flavor.

lisa_emily says

Castle of Oranto & Vathek read like very long fairy tales- but I have read fairy tales that were much more interesting. The Vampire was so unrememberable that I cannot even recall it now even though I read a few days ago. Overall, an historically interesting collection if you are curious about gothic literature and early fantasy. But underwhelming in regards to all the other things you can read. They all follow a standard formula- pretty maiden, check; corrupt, power-hungry main character, check; naïve youth, check; with some variants.If anyone wants this- I will mail it out to them for free- contact me.

Melisa says

I have long wanted to read these stories, not so much for the stories, but for what they represent as the start of gothic novels. I have long heard about the castle of otranto particularly and was not disappointed.
