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BOOK REVIEW

Sinister Histories: Gothic Novels and Representations of the Past, from Horace Walpole to Mary Wollstonecraft. By Jonathan Dent. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2016. 288 pages, $110.00). ISBN 978-0-7190-9597-9

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Sinister Histories: Gothic Novels and Representations of the Past, from Horace Walpole to Mary Wollstonecraft. By Jonathan Dent. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2016. 288 pages, $110.00). ISBN 978-0-7190-9597-9

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Jonathan Dent's *Sinister Histories* offers an interesting discussion of British Gothic fiction in relation to Enlightenment historiography. Dent begins by emphasizing the extent to which Gothic novels depended on narratives of history, pointing out that "the Gothic is obsessed with the nature of the past and our relationship with it" (2). Indeed, Dent makes a convincing case that Gothic fiction and historical narratives influenced one another as historians attempted to create more entertaining narratives about the past, while novelists borrowed from historical writing to construct convincing fiction. Dent is especially interested in the extent to which contemporary histories of England and of the French Revolution modulated the production of Gothic fiction in the late eighteenth century.

Appropriately enough, Chapter 1 of *Sinister Histories* begins with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), while delving into the origins of Gothic fiction. Dent especially examines the relationship between *Otranto* and David Hume's *The History of England* (1754-1762) to argue that Walpole's narrative questions some of the basic historiographical principles of Hume's chronicle. In Dent's words, Walpole's novel "cultivates an imaginative identification with the past, raises difficult questions about the nature of historical knowledge and exploits the blind spots of Enlightenment historiography to evoke suspense, fear and terror" (30). By juxtaposing some of Hume's earlier works with *The History of England*, Dent points out that Hume's philosophy of history evolved over time, moving from a simpler cause/effect approach that saw human nature as universal to a more realistic viewpoint grounded in the complexity of individual human character. Read alongside *The History of England*, Walpole's novel challenges Hume's conceptions of history to suggest that the transmission of historical knowledge is an even more complex process than that suggested by Hume's later narrative. In fact, Walpole's narrative intimates that "all historical writing is subjective in the sense that it inevitably encapsulates elements of the present" (47). Complete objectivity is impossible. While Hume's history contrasts the violence of the past with the peacefulness of the supposedly civilized present, Walpole acknowledges the lack of reason in the causative events of history. For Walpole, the imagination offers a type of historical truth that belies Hume's emphasis on reason.

Chapter 2 moves forward in time to consider the 1778 novel by Clara Reeve called *The Old English Baron* as a sort of response to *The Castle of Otranto* that attempts to pull back from some of the imaginative excesses of Walpole's novel. In this chapter, Dent brings in another historical narrative in *the History of England* (1721-1731) by Paul M. Rapin de Thoyras to investigate the extent to which Reeve's novel mirrors contemporary anxieties about the ongoing American Revolution. Dent makes a convincing argument that Reeve's intent in this Loyalist Gothic novel was "not only to bolster English patriotism, but to heal divisions at home and to create a more united sense of Britain by drawing attention to shared beliefs, principles and values" (72). Dent contends that, although Reeve disliked Walpole's emphasis on the supernatural, she attempted to restore divine agency in the context of her own narrative. Borrowing from the example of Rapin, Reeve constructed a narrative that upheld the values of the British Constitution and Christian faith, punishing the characters who transgressed against contemporary values and rewarding those who did not. For Dent, Reeve "constructs a past that privileges the political values she holds in the present" (86).

Dent's Chapter 3 turns the reader's attention to Sophia Lee's novel *The Recess* (1783-1785) in relation to Hume's *History* and William Robertson's *History of Scotland* (1759). Specifically, Dent is interested in how Lee's novel reflects some of the features of Elizabeth I's reign as depicted by the two historians. *The Recess* brings female experience to the center of attention to show how

the author uses "the Gothic metaphor of entombment to comment on woman's plight in the past and present" (115). For Dent, *The Recess* is a good example of the Female Gothic, which "privileges female subjectivity" in an effort to expose some of the limiting features imposed on women in a patriarchal social system (119). Dent shows how historical narratives can privilege masculine values and how Lee illuminates the complications caused by these narratives by bringing actual historical figures into her fictional narrative. Dent further suggests that Lee saw the cult of sensibility as a limiting factor in the development of feminine agency, for, "[i]n the nightmare world of *The Recess*, excessive sensibility renders women more vulnerable than virtuous" (136). In fact, sensibility renders women metaphorically "entombed" in much the same way that Lee's characters are literally buried in the recess (137). Dent points out that in emphasizing feminine agency—or the lack thereof—*The Recess* further clarifies the "mutability of the historical record" (144).

Chapter 4 turns to Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) to examine its connections with the French Revolution and especially Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and Mary Wollstonecraft's response to Burke titled *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). Dent points out that late eighteenth-century intellectuals often equated the Gothic and the French Revolution. The rapidity and violence of the upheavals in France certainly paired well with similarly violent plot elements in Gothic novels. Burke's account of the revolution famously takes a conservative viewpoint that sympathizes with the aristocracy and casts the revolutionary French in extremely negative terms. Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, sympathizes with the revolutionaries. In both Burke's and Wollstonecraft's analyses, the Gothic is associated with conservative aristocracy, but as Dent points out, "In Burke's *Reflections*, 'Gothic' signifies anything old or time-honoured; in Wollstonecraft's rebuttal, it is anything tyrannous and defunct" (172). Radcliffe, however, blurs the lines between the past and the present to suggest that masculine agency is the source of most evil, regardless of whether it has aristocratic origins. *The Romance of the Forest* is a Female Gothic novel in which, to use Dent's own words, "[u]sing the past to comment on the present and the political debates triggered by the French Revolution, Radcliffe demonstrates how seemingly chivalrous acts often ensure the domination and oppression of women by men" (179). From Radcliffe's viewpoint, the chivalry that Burke defended was the source of oppression. Additionally, Radcliffe evokes the Burkean sublime—a notion connected with terror—to construct her versions of the past (190).

Finally, Dent ends *Sinister Histories* with a discussion of William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798) in Chapter 5. He points toward the French Revolution, again, as a significant source of British anxiety during the 1790s. Indeed, by the time Godwin and Wollstonecraft wrote their narratives, the September Massacres and the Reign of Terror had taken place, crushing most of the enthusiasm with which many British intellectuals had greeted the initial stirrings of the Revolution. Dent argues that "*Caleb Williams* and *Maria* are in dialogue with each other and both novels show close affinities in terms of politics and narrative style" (209). The difference is that while Godwin focuses on traditional aristocratic legal structures as sources of tyranny for men, Wollstonecraft focuses on the same types of structures that render women "prisoners of patriarchy" (214, 227, 233). In both novels, the main characters ironically become complicit in their own oppression by internalizing and propagating traditional social and political hierarchies through a type of ventriloquism by which they mimic the attitudes of their oppressors. The novels thus begin a move toward the psychological examination of human motives. Dent ends this chapter by suggesting that Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's narratives had significant influence on later writers who linked their own narratives with the Gothic tradition such as Charles Brockden Brown, Jane Austen, Charlotte Dacre, Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley, Charles Robert Maturin, and James Hogg.

Generally speaking, *Sinister Histories* provides an excellent analysis of the interaction between the Gothic and contemporary historiography in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Although a short, summary chapter might have improved the book's conclusion a bit, Dent's arguments are logical and clearly outlined in the text that is easy to read and that is supported by cogent endnotes. This book will be of special interest to scholars—and perhaps general readers—who are interested in the development of Gothic fiction in Britain. Dent has raised a number of interesting questions that hopefully will inspire further research in this important field of literary inquiry.