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A Castle of Consumption: The Horrors of Feudal Persistence and Capitalist Desire in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*

Feudal power, in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto,* is less a birthright than a fragile embellishment meant to make authority seem authentic and immovable. Modelled after Strawberry Hill, the author's own neo-Gothic home, the novel seems to reflect a tension between admiration for medieval grandeur, and anxiety over the instability of its social structures. Published in the late eighteenth century, Walpole's text engages directly with the uncertainties of the period in which wealth and power began to depend less on inherited rank and more on the public accumulation of possessions. This shift is something both Neil McKendrick and Bill Brown discuss as foundational to the emergence of consumer culture. Additionally, Tom Duggett examines Gothic fiction and its forms of transition more directly, connecting modern readers more deeply to Walpole's depiction of inheritance. Against these backdrops, Manfred treats nobility as something to be acquired and defended through this rising form of material consumption. Thus, the castle becomes a commodity, an object to possess, fortify, and expand, turning feudal authority into something he believes can be bought and manipulated. Throughout the novel, Walpole exposes feudal tradition as inherently unstable as Manfred's desperate efforts to preserve his lineage only become more ruinous, collapsing into Gothic monstrosity when driven by consumerist excess.

Manfred's identity is inseparable from the castle he inhabits, and in his desperate attempts to preserve his ties to it, the novel reveals how feudal inheritance becomes a fragile form of material identity and a cause of his eventual undoing. In chapter two, while speaking

with the Friar, Manfred says, “Now hear my resolve, and obey. Reasons of state, most urgent reasons, my own and the safety of my people, demand that I should have a son” (Walpole, 75). In saying, “reasons of state,” Manfred situates his desire for an heir as a means to maintain his place on the social ladder, and have material claim over Otranto. His references to “my own” and “my people” turn his authority into an act of possession, as though the land and the people that inhabit it are extensions of himself and his lineage. His language therefore exposes how his sense of identity relies on having an heir, keeping his castle, and being its ruler. This attachment to space mirrors Bill Brown’s discussion of Mark Twain’s relationship with his Hartford house. He writes that Twain referred to it as “not unsentient matter,” and when he was forced to sell it, he felt the loss “as a loss of self” (467). In the case of the novel, this idea illuminates the castle as a “living” extension of the self; it is the very structure that legitimizes Manfred. Without secure inherited ownership, Manfred’s very self-perception threatens to collapse, revealing the instability of feudal authority when dependence on it is driven to such a consumptive degree.

Leaning more directly into the concept of material consumption, Walpole’s depiction of oversized objects within the castle highlights how material goods function as symbols of power, desire, and obsession, exposing how the manipulation of them destabilises feudal authority. As the author explains, the son, Conrad, becomes “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” (Walpole 18). The absurd size of the helmet here, transforms it from a functional object into a grotesque spectacle, while the decorative feathers suggest both an aesthetic display and an ominous warning. This simultaneity of both beauty and death alludes to the seductive danger of material excess and its amplification of cruelty and greed. Manfred becomes an example of this when he decides to then keep the suspect of his son’s death “kept prisoner under the helmet itself…declaring he should be kept

there without food" (Walpole 23). Instead of simply locking up the accused, Manfred exerts control over him through a more fetishized manipulation of the object. Brown makes the observation that objects in a consumer culture gather a type of "sex appeal" through their inherent value and beauty which helps shed light on Manfred's wielding of the helmet as an instrument of power (453). Walpole writes, "[Manfred] seemed less attentive to his loss, than buried in meditation on the stupendous object that had occasioned it" (18). He's not surrounded in grief but is instead enamoured by the helmet's potential uses, its scale, its force, and symbolic power. Thus, the castle's artifacts are not neutral to Manfred's anxieties and desires, but rather extensions of them, as he weaponizes the helmet to reclaim a sense of authority that is otherwise slipping through his grasp. Manfred's now inflated desperation to secure his lineage turns material possession into a monstrous form of feudal inheritance, and exposes how these selfish attempts don't reinforce power but expose its fragility and distort it into cruelty and misuse.

Extending on this critique of unchecked material exploitation, Manfred turns women and marriage into consumable and exchangeable resources, revealing how his desperation to remain Prince of Otranto corrupts his mindset and transforms feudal relations into transactional, coercive attempts to obtain control. His first impulse after his son's death is to replace what he lost rather than grieve his son. Walpole writes, "without mentioning the unhappy princesses, his wife and daughter, the first sounds that dropped from Manfred's lips were, "Take care of the Lady Isabella"" (19). Manfred's order to "take care of" Isabella is in other words an effort to keep her under his control, his disregard for his wife and daughter being evidence of this. Instead of considering the emotions of his own family he thinks only of Isabella, the one person expected to secure his bloodline. This shows the obsession he has with pleasing himself, and a lack of care for the needs of other people. Later, Manfred also declares, "Hippolita is no longer my wife; I divorce her from this hour. Too long has she

cursed me by her unfruitfulness" (Walpole 29). Through this, Manfred ultimately treats his wife's infertility as a product defect rather than an unfortunate circumstance, suggesting that he must acquire a new, more "functional" wife to keep his line going. Neil McKendrick writes that a distinction in the late eighteenth century consumer culture was that "those who had inherited ample possessions bought new ones, and those born to superfluity seemed eager to add to the excess with every passing fashion" (27). The way in which Manfred approaches the concept of marriage reflects this consumer logic. He treats Isabella and Hippolita as easily discarded and interchangeable, their value being determined by their ability to extend his lineage.

In this way, Brown's concept that an object's social life or importance comes from "their abstraction," their "fungibility," is the exact logic that Manfred applies to women (449). He thinks people can be replaced and he further carries this ideal in his belief that "[Hippolita] would not only acquiesce with patience to a divorce, but would obey," which turns her into a passive commodity rather than a woman with autonomy. Even Isabella, whose guardians were first "bribed" by Manfred to "deliver her up" to his son Conrad, is referred to as a literal object by the Friar who "feared if Manfred had no hope of recovering Isabella, that his impatience for a son would direct him to some other object" in which to secure his rank (Walpole 97, 78-79). This constant phrasing throughout the novel starkly places the women in Manfred's world not as partners or equals but as objects to acquire and dispose of as he pleases. In his desire to maintain his bloodline, which is arguably the most valuable feudalistic duty, it becomes hollowed out by his consumerist impulse to purchase and exchange women to create a suitable heir. By treating women as replaceable commodities, Walpole exposes feudal authority itself as an exchangeable good, revealing how the system's very logic and Manfred's impulsive pursuit of it, becomes the eventual source of his ruin.

Lastly, Manfred's frantic haste contrasts the calm, leisurely command that can often be expected of lords, exposing how his desperate effort to outpace the prophecy and the people that threaten him actually cause the collapse of his feudal ambition and lineage within the shifting social order. Instead of embodying a stable and confident demeanor which often improves one's credibility and respectability, Manfred behaves impulsively and makes choices that are unpredictable. Readers are given numerous examples of his fast temperament throughout the novel, one being when he resolves to have a double marriage between himself and Isabella, and Matilda and Frederic. Walpole writes, "Transported with his success, and impatient to see himself in a situation to expect sons, he hastened to his wife's apartment, determined to extort her compliance" (158). While this speaks to the previous discussion in which Isabella and Hippolita are seen as exchangeable objects, it also speaks volumes to how Manfred's sudden actions turn feudal marital duty into a race against imagined rivals. Words like "transported," "impatient," "hastened," "determined," all indicate how quickly he's acting on his ideas. As McKendrick explains, there was an emerging idea of "man as a consuming animal with boundless appetites" in this new world of capitalism (15). He also writes that this consumption "offered nothing more than a calculating hedonism" (McKendrick 16). Manfred's eagerness is depicted in this animalistic way through his movements in the novel, such as, "starting from his trance in a tempest of rage," "stepping back hastily," "shutting the door impetuously," or "he rushed again on the young peasant" (Walpole 21-22, 25, 27). This passion to save his lineage and find out who dares create such challenges against him, expresses his self-indulgent desires, his egocentrism in getting what he wants.

These same impulsive actions further translate over to how he speaks to others as well. When his servants come running to him to tell him of two ghostly presences that they've encountered in chapter 1 and chapter 5, Manfred's impatience with the situation leads

him to continuously interrupt them. He cuts in with “But, what?” or demands they give him “a direct answer” as if speed itself is able to secure his fading supremacy (Walpole 44-45). Tom Dugget notes that *Otranto* treats tradition as “a process of transition” rather than a stable past (342). Manfred embodies this instability and uncertainty as he tries to cling to a feudal system that’s already disappearing. His haste therefore corrodes his power further as every frantic action or command exposes the insecurities behind his authority. By attempting to outrun the prophecy and speedily assert dominance, Manfred reveals that his power isn’t dependent on noble legitimacy anymore, but on the same competitiveness that defines a consumer-driven society. Thus, Manfred’s urgency becomes the mechanism of his own undoing, his very pace becoming incompatible with the feudal legacy he aims to protect.

By the novel’s end, Manfred’s loss of the castle demonstrates how feudal authority proves unstable when reshaped by the logics of possession, frantic accumulation, and exchange, all of which are shaped by consumerist impulses that it's not meant to sustain. Walpole shows that Manfred’s obsessive desire to preserve his lineage and other possessions is, at its core, a drive to remain the immortal ruler of the castle, the physical and symbolic center of its reputation and authority. As Brown writes, “If everyone has the right (though not the means) to possess the things I possess–if my things are not inherited and exclusively heritable rather than exchangeable–then how can my possessions genuinely distinguish me” (466). This fear of losing his distinctive authority to consumerism, leads him to frantically manipulate his lineage, the castle’s objects, and the women around him. Yet he is not alone in this impulse. Frederic for example, displays a similar drive in ownership when his marriage to Matilda is proposed, as he contemplates how it may either expand or limit his claim over the principality (Walpole 173). The fact of this collective mindset, points to this larger anxiety of the shifting times. It's as though the prophecy itself is a symbol of these emerging social realities of the late eighteenth century. Capitalist rise in society displaces feudal rank,

thus undermining Manfred's obsessive logic and making him fear the outcome. Through these intersecting examples, Walpole simultaneously critiques both the obsession with feudalistic desires and the monstrous impulses of consumption that begin to overtake it. The novel closes with Manfred's ruin being a testament to not only his personal failings, but also to the complete instability of feudal inheritance when treated as a commodity.

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