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STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

Britain, France, and the Gothic, 1764-1820: The Import of Terror, by Angela Wright, Cambridge UP, 2013. 214 pages, \$29.99. ISBN 978-1-1075-6674-3

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***Britain, France, and the Gothic, 1764-1820: The Import of Terror*, by Angela Wright, Cambridge UP, 2013. 214 pages, \$29.99. ISBN 978-1-1075-6674-3**

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In this tight, evocative critical work, Angela Wright describes how Gothic fiction provided a sort of diplomatic correspondence that maintained cross-cultural exchange between Britain and France from the end of the Seven Years War to the Napoleonic Wars. Wright creates a seamless narrative, providing a text that reads like a novel instead of a collection of individual essays loosely related through a connection to the Gothic. Indeed, one is much better served if one reads through the entirety of this manageable 152-page book. Its five chapters reconsider canonical Gothic authors from Horace Walpole to Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis and put forth a serious rebuttal to claims that the national character of Britain was fostered by a hostile reaction to its continental neighbor. While Gothic writers sensed the British hostilities toward France, “they all nonetheless dared to look across the Channel for inspiration, be it through the realms of translation, adaptation, or unacknowledged plagiarism” (10). The feats with which some Gothic writers eluded an increasingly rabid British press, hungry for any sign of French contamination, are, I think, what makes *The Import of Terror* such a riveting read; these allusions, sympathies, and borrowings provide a fecund canon for a perceptive reader, and Wright illuminates these winding corridors and dark recesses of Gallic appreciation.

Distinguishing her work from the many other studies on Gothic literature, Wright mobilizes an eclectic mix of paratextual material, letters, and even bedroom décor to buttress her points. Perhaps, especially in the first chapter, *The Import of Terror* could have developed more sustained readings of the novel proper (in this case, *The Castle of Otranto*), but her discussions of the maneuvers British authors employed to “cloak” their affinities for France in their

literary productions through prefaces and other introductory matter provide more than enough material to add significant historical context to texts widely read and taught from the Gothic canon (41).

One feels privy to insider information, decoding revolutionary sentiments. In the first chapter, for example, Wright unpacks Walpole’s sly allusion to William Marshal, who served as his “translator” for the first preface to *The Castle of Otranto*. The “real” William Marshal, an engraver who created the frontispiece of John Milton’s *Eikon Basilike* (1649), famously and scandalously depicted the deposed Charles I as a Christian martyr. Marshal also produced a portrait of Milton himself of which Milton was less than satisfied. This residual resentment provides the scaffolding on which to support Wright’s claims, centering on “anxieties about representing, mediating, copying and authorship” (25). I have, in fact, assigned Wright’s book to my graduate students for the reason that one of our jobs as literary “sleuths” is to untangle the complex interrelationships among authors from different eras even when they make strange bedfellows because they profess different political agendas. These connections do not demonstrate an “anxiety of influence” but, instead, underscore how authors seek the fellowship and inspiration from other authors, who, too, have persevered through duress and navigated factionalism. Wright’s surprising, and frankly rousing, arguments remind us of the pleasures of close textual analysis and historical reconstruction.

These interconnections among authors and historical periods thread through chapters two and three, in which Wright takes readers on a guided tour of, among other topics,

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seventeenth-century French Romance and Gothic writers' indulgence in myths about Mary, Queen of Scots. Wright also describes the precariousness of translators whose very work left them vulnerable to charges of Gallic sympathies. In particular, she provides ample evidence that Sophia Lee and Charlotte Smith were more than willing to entertain notions that the English had much to gain from exposure to French literature; they even nodded toward France's civil liberties, especially after habeas corpus was suspended in England in 1794, 1798, and 1801, and the rich social relations that extended beyond family and social class.

Wright details how the British press worried that the Gothic novel would supplant newspapers as the vehicle by which readers kept abreast of "political news from France" (81). Firmly establishing the importance of Gothic literature as the conduit across the English Channel, Wright introduces a little-known text, "The Terrorist System of Novel Writing" (1797), which appeared in the *Monthly Magazine* in 1797. Readers may be especially interested in Wright's discussion here as she demonstrates how this sensational text draws attention to the irony in a government which denounces Gothic literature through the very elements that underpin the genre: lack of transparency, despotism, extrajudicial punishment, and corrupt nepotism. Moreover, "The Terrorist System" reveals the fissures in English ideals of liberty and freedom of expression that were supposed to be the envy of its Continental neighbors.

Wright then uses this obscure treatise to underpin her discussion of Radcliffe, for the anonymous writer of "Terrorist Novel Writing" serves as Wright's most perceptive scholarly forbear. Chapter four, on the "famously proper" Ann Radcliffe, serves as the main attraction for me (49). Armed with allusions to Shakespeare and other English writers, Radcliffe protects herself against charges of treason while attempting to defuse heightened tensions between France and Britain. In this chapter, Wright also deeply engages with Rousseau's influence on English writers, delving into the nuances of sentimental narratives and pastoral space. As for the latter register, whether a device is used extensively at the beginning (Eliza Haywood) or the end of the eighteenth century (Ann Radcliffe), it needs to be treated as a rich critical vein. Countering Raymond William's charge that the pastoral mode indicates "a failure of the imagination," Wright insists that Radcliffe's invocation of it in her 1794 novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* serves as "an elegy for England's lost relationship with France" (95, 105).

Wright devotes much needed critical space to *Gaston de Blondville*, posthumously published in 1826 (a recent version was published by Valancourt Books and edited by Frances Chiu in 2006). Wright's analysis of Radcliffe is striking because she identifies in this work a "conscious attempt to defamiliarise the reader's expectations of what constitutes a Radcliffean romance" (117). That is, functioning as Radcliffe's *Northanger Abbey*, the novel both indicts the failure of leadership in England and reminds her countrymen of the role of art to revive an English readership that was conditioned by a febrile press to interpret literature as propaganda. Radcliffe's tentative allusions to the ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* hark back to Walpole's inspiration for the first Gothic novel, reiterating that England suffers from a "crisis of imagination" (118). Although readers may want to attribute the ghost's impotence to Radcliffe's own shortcomings in this particular novel, for Wright, then, it serves as an indication that years of French hostility are starting to damage not just France, but England. Indeed, the fraying of bonds and indeed the outright hostility between England and France poison readers' appreciation for not only other cultures but also their nation's literary output.

Chapter five sheds light on how Matthew "Monk" Lewis's travels as a teenager to Paris influenced his great novel and less illustrious corpus. In particular, the French theater played a pivotal role in his balanced approach to the "things" of Gothic terror—Catholic iconography and scheming monks, for example. Experiencing his own terrors from critics already emboldened by frequent incursions on fabled British liberty, Lewis is quite explicit about the lessons he internalized from Boutet de Monvel's play *Venoni*. As Wright claims, he promoted "moderate revolution" (131); he was less interested in demeaning religions or professions and preferred to exhort the public to "BE TOLEARANT" (143). While she uses his exposure to French drama to tweak the established critical response to *The Monk*, the chapter mainly covers the modifications Lewis makes to his translations of French sources to mitigate anti-Catholic bias and instead show his sympathy for the French.

As with many coda and conclusions, which allow more free play and imaginative leaps, Wright's "Afterlives" leaves many intriguing readings open-ended. Short discussions of Walter Scott's *The Antiquary* (1816) and *Ivanhoe* (1820) provide both a neat terminus to the book as well as opportunities for fresh interpretations. She concludes with an invitation to pursue her interventions: "The traces of the

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crucible of war are there to uncover” (152). While the thesis of the book is fairly straightforward—British writers navigated and benefitted from the influence of French authors—her close readings and excavation of archival and little-discussed material evidence the need for further critical inquiry. Indeed, as in the second chapter, Wright almost has to stop herself from reconstructing more of the background and afterlife of Lee’s translation: the “list of examples of influence that *The Recess* provoked could be endless” (48-49). *The Import of Terror* conveys the excitement that attends tracing these intricate networks; the sheer amount of sources, moreover, suggests that an underserved public and authors sought opportunities to learn from others and express their solidarity with people suffering from violence and oppression. Although the press whips up xenophobic sentiments, artists and their public thrive on cross-cultural exchange, in this case French literature and thought. Wright celebrates the authors who keep open channels of communication between warring countries and who recognize that, in order to maintain some semblance of social and intellectual life, a country must resist the urge to demonize others even under hostile conditions.