

*The Gothic Novel and the Stage: Romantic Appropriations*

Francesca Saggini

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Literary theorist Roland Barthes states that: ‘To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it’ (1975). With this assertion, Francesca Saggini introduces her new monograph *The Gothic Novel and the Stage: Romantic Appropriations*, a work which explores in detail the ‘channel of appropriation’ which exists between so-called original materials and adaptations and between early Gothic novels and theatrical productions (1). She adopts Barthes concept of multi-layered textual interpretation, using it to undermine previous critical assumptions about the relationship between various forms of popular literary output. Fully realizing the plurality of interpretation throughout a diverse survey of early Gothic prose and theatrical works, Saggini parses notions of theatricality and intertextuality in order to shed new light on the development of literary performance and appropriation in the Gothic mode, providing readers with an insightful and theory-conscious resource.

*The Gothic Novel and the Stage: Romantic Appropriations* is a new addition to the Routledge ‘Literary Texts and the Popular Marketplace’ series, edited by Kate Macdonald and Ann Rea, which sets out to explore the development of popular literature throughout history and the socio-cultural implications therein. Saggini’s work is an excellent contribution, making a distinct effort re-characterize ‘low-brow’ works as critically important. Saggini combines a close examination of the historical background and a complex literary analysis which, in exploring the theatricality of early Gothic novels and stage productions and questioning assumptions regarding originality, appropriation, and popular fiction, negotiates the intertextual life of some of the most foundational Gothic works.

Saggini asserts that eighteenth-century theatre drew significant inspiration from the Gothic novel, which itself relied heavily on performative expressions and reactions and which was in turn

inspired by various dramatic works and theatrical adaptations. This innovative argument is realized in the examination of a mutual, self-reflexive and self-perpetuating exchange between novels and stage productions, an exchange usually described by critics as more one-sided. As Barthes suggests, there are rather multiple possibilities of interpretation within a mode so defined by creative co-dependency. Saggini breaks down her approach to Romantic Gothic by identifying ‘page-to-stage’ and ‘stage-to-page’ appropriations, arguing that the theatricality inherent in the Gothic mode made them a valuable source for both novelists and dramatists and facilitated a developing exchange that emphasized non-verbal, performance-oriented aspects. Focusing primarily on the literary works of the 1790s, with some references to earlier texts and to works produced in the 1800s and 1810s, this monograph sets the stage for new critical interpretations of the genre by exploring the writing, performing, and staging strategies utilized during this time, critical responses to novels and plays, and the theoretical implications of such relationships and responses. Reading and viewing audiences themselves also inform the Gothic in a particular way, and Saggini extends her analysis of the rise of ‘melodrama’ and ‘pantomime’ and the strategies those modes share with the Gothic by re-imagining the conscious interaction between literary work and the reading and viewing public.

The first section of *The Gothic Novel and the Stage*, ‘The Gothic Stage’, uses the social and historical context of the late eighteenth century to characterize Gothic theatre as the theatre of ‘spectacle’. Saggini highlights a fundamental contemporary tension between the Aristotelian / neoclassical school and the Romantic / melodrama school, and between pantomime theatre and the Shakespearean tradition, though given Shakespeare’s complicated relationship with the Gothic this argument carries some problematic implications. These critical debates carry much of the blame for the Gothic’s ‘low-brow’ label, yet in spite of the marginalization of ‘popular literature’ in some circles, Saggini argues that such classifications are important to the Gothic as they emphasize visual and physical performance and suggest a creative focus that re-characterizes both novels and play adaptations. Therein, the empathetic reactions of the audience, the creative choices of actors, directors, and producers, and the critical appreciation of a ‘Romantic’ style of writing and performance illuminates not only the cultural identity of the time but also the landscape in which the Gothic mode was able to develop into the form we recognize today. Texts such as *Sir Bertrand; a Fragment* (1773) and *The Mysterious Mother* (1768) provide the basis for discussions

of ‘monstrosity’ and ‘spectacle’ in Gothic theatre and the subsequent development of styles and ideologies that defined Gothic theatre.

Having set out chronological boundaries and methodological approaches to understanding Gothic hybridity and adaptation, Saggini, in the section ‘Performing Stage Appropriation in the Romantic Era: The Languages of the Stage and the Page’, moves on to examine performative aspects and intertextual relationships of various Gothic appropriations. While bearing in mind the input of the audience, performer, and author, and the interaction between source text and adaptation, Saggini explores overlapping ‘infratheatrical’ works (multiple works performed on a single night in a single theatre) and ‘intratheatrical’ works (works simultaneously performed in various theatres) order to identify areas of generic appropriation and composition and to clarify the responses of both authors and audiences. In this, Saggini carves out new spaces in which the semiotic and narrative similarities and differences may be explored, and her excellent and well-structured accompanying tables clearly lay out the chronological progression of Gothic adaptations and note which pieces were performed or released concurrently in order to fully illuminate the channel of exchange. Moreover, Saggini notes that in both novels and plays physical expressions rather than verbal narratives suggest the Romantic preoccupation with visual signifiers and theatrical style, firmly anchoring the Gothic within the category of ‘melodrama’. This in turn lays the groundwork for a discussion of tragedy and pantomime as reflected in theatrical bodies and performances, again bearing in mind the cultural understanding of sensibility, gender, and aesthetics. The mechanics of staging – sound, scenery, lighting and costumes – as well as generic plot devices and recognizable character tropes, are also examined both as standalone representatives of theatre practice and in terms of overlap and generic appropriation.

Saggini’s final section, ‘Practising the Appropriation of the Gothic Stage’, uses Ann Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), its various adaptations, and Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) as case studies to illuminate the ‘stage to page’ and ‘page to stage’ transition. The use of supernaturalism in Radcliffe’s work is particularly noteworthy given Radcliffe’s tendency to employ the ‘explained supernatural’ in her work, a practice somewhat at odds with Gothic theatre and often modified in theatrical adaptations such as *Fontainville Forest* (1794). Linking the texts to the theatrical traditions of playwrights such as Shakespeare further suggests a re-negotiation of emotionality and the ‘other’ in the theatrical version. Examining Matthew Lewis’s highly theatrical work *The Monk*, Saggini notes that Lewis’s novel is often privileged over his

many theatrical productions, and uses this opportunity to characterize the ‘stage-to-page’ aspect of her argument. Perhaps her most innovative argument in this section is her definition of *The Monk* as an ‘anti-pantomime’, further parsing the Gothic modes relationship to theatricality and melodrama and reflecting the cultural spaces in which the mode itself developed. These case studies are linked back to an examination of eighteenth-century print culture, and provide a fascinating look at the nuances of popular literature and appropriation.

Gothic fiction from *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to *Twilight* (2005) has often occupied an ambiguous position between ‘high-brow’ and ‘low-brow’ literature, a place further complicated by the blurred boundaries between originality and adaptation or appropriation within a genre primarily defined by ‘literary banditry’. Notions of social, political, and literary appropriation have historically complicated and in some cases marginalized specific Gothic texts. *The Gothic Novel and the Stage: Romantic Appropriations* attempts to illuminate some of the underappreciated literary channels through which Gothic novels and theatrical productions developed. Saggini utilizes complex yet insightful theoretical pathways as a means of illuminated communication and exchange between literary works and between performing and ‘receiving’ bodies. Intertextuality is itself a multi-faceted concept, and *The Gothic Novel and the Stage* effectively parses structural developments and narrative strategies within a larger socio-historical context. While non-verbal aspects and creative choices are one of the more difficult areas to quantify critically, especially given the transient nature of theatre and the relative dearth of records, Saggini does an outstanding job of weaving together an array of overlapping readings and resources. Her tables of the chronological and intertextual relationships of literary works and her close reading sections stand out as particularly noteworthy contributions to the field. An inclusive and open-minded reading of a relatively misunderstood area of Gothic literature, *The Gothic Novel and the Stage* provides an excellent resource and solid introduction for scholars.