

Signs of (mis)Interpretation: Eavesdropping and Curiosity in *The Castle of Otranto*

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Understanding the gothic novel as a feminine genre that resists “an ideology that imprisons [men and women]” in “separate spheres” is an important clue to Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (Ellis x). Yet most feminist critics tend to concentrate on later gothic writers such as Ann Radcliffe or Matthew Lewis in discussing female subversion. Indeed, *The Castle of Otranto* owes its chief reputation to being the earliest gothic novel, and major analyses of the text concentrated on it being the “first” gothic genre that blends medieval romance and the modern novel. In addition, critics such as Valdine Clemens or Michelle Massé read the novel as supporting the “idea of feminine bias,” examining Hippolita’s “slavish devotion” as masochistic (Clemens 38). Nonetheless, it should be noted that this text takes as its central concern the “paradox between private fantasy and public fact” (Haggerty 381). Beneath the surface of the boundaries of the domestic and the foreign lies the distinction between the private and the public, and inevitably, the question of female boundaries. By examining the ways in which female characters communicate within and out of the domestic sphere through eavesdropping, this paper proposes to read *The Castle of Otranto* as a subversive text that addresses questions on female subjectivity. Eavesdropping, I argue, functions as an indirect yet effective means for women to access the forbidden truth.

Women’s desire to step outside the domestic sphere is covert just as the novel is veiled by mysteries and supernatural signs. As strangers and uncanny events invade the castle, the characters attempt to interpret the ambivalent signs that haunt them. If the gothic genre employs emotions as the “means for knowing,

judging, and understanding," *The Castle of Otranto* is also all about passion; in this case, emotions of curiosity any more than horror (Mandell xv). It is curiosity that drives people to interpret the mysteries and strange events that occur in the novel. For instance, on discovering the ominous casque that crushed Conrad, Manfred contemplates the helmet rather than his dead son as it becomes "the sole object of his curiosity" (18). Similarly, it is curiosity that invites Theodore to the castle court where the murder took place: "[R]umour had drawn [him] thither from a neighbouring village" (18). In other words, curiosity, or the question of what to make of certain incidents, becomes a central theme in the novel. Yet its characters are usually at a loss as to how to interpret various signs and omens, for they are left to explore unanswered questions based on very little evidence. As Jerrold Hogle argues, the characters are challenged to "penetrate the layers of concealment" but end up unable to decipher the mystery (145). In fact, at the very beginning of the novel, the reader is given an "ancient prophecy" which was "difficult to make any sense of": "*That the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it*" (15-6). By presenting this enigmatic message, *The Castle of Otranto* raises the question of interpretation.

Sue Chaplin observes that this text is "obsessed with the legitimacy and origin of the rule of Law" (177). The search for legitimacy is closely connected with the pursuit of truth. Each character, at some level, is obsessed with finding the essence of veracity. Who is the legitimate heir of the castle of Otranto? Who really is Theodore and whom does he adore? What do the portents indicate? Notably, these questions rarely rise to the surface, particularly in the case of the female characters. Their curiosity progresses on in an inward level where they continually eye each other and interpret behaviors by signs, not through direct investigation.

Examining the distinction between the private, domestic home and the public state is an important ground in understanding these female behaviors. When Father Jerome confronts Manfred regarding the cunning plot against Isabella, Manfred insists that Jerome speak to him privately based on the domestic rules of patriarchy. He argues that "I do not use to let my wife be acquainted with the secret affairs of my state; they are not within a woman's province" (46). The

notion of a gendered private sphere was a popular belief in eighteenth-century Britain in that different social and cultural positions were conferred for women. Surely this is not unique to the eighteenth century, but as Lawrence Stone points out, progressive enclosure and the growth of market economy during this period made a shift in family structures (172). The gradual collapse of village farming, with other social/cultural transitions, resulted in a strict separation of gender roles; women gradually became detached from economic activity "outside" the domestic sphere. The "ramified opposition between the domestic and the public realms" was ossified and generally accepted by the mid-eighteenth century (McKeon 300). It was also during the eighteenth century that "inner virtue" became a "peculiarly feminine trait" for domestic women (McKeon 313). That said, Manfred's argument is a reassertion of the dichotomous separate-sphere theory that confined women to the domestic area.

Yet this "secret affairs of state" that Manfred pronounces is not entirely a matter of public affairs. Manfred's design to wed Isabella is not only based on his will to claim a legitimate heir but also stems from a "private" and forbidden incestuous lust. As Isabella respects Manfred as a "parent," this scheme of marriage to a daughter-figure betrays a disturbing obstruction within the family (46). By creating what seems like a state affair by means of Manfred's private desire, the novel suggests a blurring of the domestic sphere and the public state. The friar's reply further unsettles the boundaries of the private and the public. "I am no intruder into the secrets of families," he says, displacing Manfred's "affairs of state" to the "secrets of families" (46).

If women are to be restricted to the realms of the private and the domestic home, it becomes difficult for them to interpret any signs of incongruity that takes place outside the domestic sphere. Women are not even allowed to the courtyard where Conrad is killed, as they are "forbidden" to access any outside information. Therefore, they must contrive a substitute means to satisfy their curiosity, namely, through eavesdropping.

Matilda is the first to gain access to the mystery of the castle through this deviant act. On retiring to her chamber with Bianca, she hears a voice from the chamber beneath hers. While Bianca fears that it must be a phantom, Matilda opens the window to confront it. This window serves as a symbolic site of

mediation between the inner and the outer world contrary to the castle gates locked by the orders of Manfred. Manfred's command to secure the gates signifies the abusive patriarchal power that imprisons the female characters. Accordingly, after learning Manfred's scheme to ravish Isabella, she flees but as "the gates of the castle she knew were locked," has no choice but to go into the subterranean passageway (24). At this point, the castle becomes a "place of danger and imprisonment" where domestic happiness is replaced by threats and danger (Ellis x). So when Matilda opens the window and eagerly talks to the voice, she briefly traverses the boundary of her confinement. After all, Matilda is strictly cloistered, and Theodore is a stranger from outside the castle.

According to Ann Gaylin, eavesdropping, which represents "a process of acquiring secret knowledge about self and other," concerns the issues of "privacy, publicity, and their spatial and psychological relations" (1). Through eavesdropping, one pries into another's private information with the possibility of "publicizing" the secret. In this sense, eavesdropping implies an "eradication of the boundary between one space and another" (Gaylin 8). In Matilda's case, eavesdropping becomes a much more active endeavor of communication, as she has opened the window despite Bianca's protest. In response, Theodore, or the "stranger," answers that "I knew not that I was overheard" (41). Yet Matilda is aware of the social norms and boundaries that restrict her when she states that "it is not seemly for [her] to hold farther converse with a man at this unwonted hour . . . should the labourers come into the fields and perceive [them]" (42). In this way, eavesdropping becomes a transgression and a surreptitious means to find out the truth, an act of secrecy to pry into another's knowledge.

Gaylin further argues that because eavesdropping often provides incomplete information, it necessitates the act of interpretation (9). The hermeneutic effort involved in eavesdropping defines the "identity" of both the listener and the speaker (Gaylin 10). This argument is valid in that the novel, obsessed with finding out the truth regarding the issue of legitimacy, is related to the issue of "individual self-identity" (Chaplin 178). For instance, through eavesdropping, Matilda discovers a secret passion for the stranger in spite of herself. While Bianca endeavors to understand Isabella's absence and the advent of the stranger as consequential, Matilda strongly opposes, arguing that "for

[Isabella's] sake I will believe well of this young peasant" (45). As demonstrated later in the novel, she is actually expressing her fondness for the stranger. In fact, she tries to question him for the second time when they are interrupted by "the bell ring at the postern-gate of the castle" which prevents her from further conversation (44). In this sense, the inadvertent eavesdropping functions as Matilda's way of enquiring into the truth that discloses her hidden desire for the stranger and a willingness to go beyond the private sphere.

The second scene of Matilda's eavesdropping is much more striking because it is a deliberate overhearing combined with voyeurism. While Manfred accuses Theodore of assisting Isabella's flight, Matilda happens to pass by a "boarded gallery with latticed windows" (52). Matilda stops to "learn the occasion," recognizing Theodore's voice which "interested her in his favour" (52). Again, this window becomes a peeping hole that offers glimpses of the public scene; although the trial takes place in the castle, Manfred repeatedly precludes his wife and daughter from coming near his secret, which, as he conjectures, somehow concerns Theodore. What is noticeable is how the window is "latticed," further denoting patriarchal surveillance and imprisonment.

Matilda peers into the room and observes Theodore's features, which she interprets as the "exact resemblance of Alfonso's picture" (52). Her insight is extraordinary because Manfred himself has yet to solve the mystery of the stranger. It is only later in the novel, after Theodore strikes Frederic by mistake and is brought back to the castle, when Manfred recognizes Theodore's resemblance to Alfonso: "What, is not that Alfonso? ... Can it be my brain's delirium?" (80). Chaplin also points out that Theodore's strong resemblance to Alfonso is "scarcely comprehended," indicating Manfred's inability to signify the portents (Chaplin 183). Thus, when Matilda distinguishes Theodore's appearance as similar to Alfonso's, she has discovered Theodore's secret identity when even Theodore himself was not aware of. Through the unlawful intervention of eavesdropping, she deviates from her "proper" sphere only to gain power that surpasses the male community with her insightful interpretation.

Remarkably, eavesdropping in *The Castle of Otranto* occurs only between man and woman at the periphery of the public and the private sphere but never

between the female characters. When Isabella and Matilda suspect each other of falling for Theodore, they initially search each other's face silently to find out whose heart belongs to whom, "[wishing] to know the truth" (83). This does not last long, however, when Isabella decides to confront Matilda. After exchanging information, they soon give way to the "natural sincerity and candour of their souls" and "confess" their true feelings (85). It is the same case with Hippolita when Matilda and Isabella end up professing their true feelings. Isabella blurts out Manfred's evil scheme, while Matilda admits her passion for Theodore. It seems that these female characters appear to be frank and open when it comes to discussing what they feel and know; truth certainly rises to the surface between women.

Another noticeable point in female relationships is Matilda's obsession with her mother. Massé argues that Hippolita's way of dealing with the abuse of patriarchal authority is to "increase her passivity" and repeat her trauma through replicated oppression towards her daughter (22). One cannot deny that Hippolita appears as a submissive character who claims that "[Matilda's] fate depends on [her] father" (89). However, unlike Hippolita's firm belief in the patriarchy, Matilda's main concern is with her mother, not the father. When ordered to go ask on Manfred after Conrad's death, she approaches his chamber only to find out that he has given orders not to disturb him. Yet her mother's command "encouraged her to venture disobeying the orders he had given" (20). Later, when Hippolita orders Matilda to refrain from corresponding with Theodore, she obeys with these words: "A frown from thee can do more than all my father's severity" (89). This demonstrates that the mother is much more influential in Matilda's life compared to her father's oppression.

Yet Hippolita's power over Matilda does not indicate that the mother becomes a surrogate for the tyrannical father. There is a difference of manner in the way Matilda communicates with her parents in terms of confidentiality. Matilda can only confess to her mother and never the father. Though *The Castle of Otranto* traces the legitimacy of male history, Matilda's obsession with her mother suggests a subversion of the patriarchal order while challenging the dominant power that actually takes place in the domestic sphere.

If eavesdropping functions as a subtle means to communicate outside

women's boundaries, the last scene where Manfred overhears Matilda and Theodore's conversation should be understood in a different light. Manfred's way of approaching the couple should be examined in detail:

Gliding softly between the aisles, and guided by an imperfect gleam of moonshine that shone faintly through the illuminated windows, he stole towards the tomb of Alfonso, to which he was directed by indistinct whispers of the persons he sought. (104)

Upon hearing from his "spy" that Theodore was conversing with "some lady from the castle," Manfred initially "hastens" to the cathedral to confront them (104). Yet as he approaches, he glides "softly" so as not to get caught. The "imperfect gleam of moonshine" is a recurring motif that facilitates the mysterious atmosphere in the novel; when Isabella flees from the castle, she too is guided by the "imperfect ray of clouded moonshine" (26). Interestingly, there appears another window by which the moonshine comes through. In this case, the "illuminated window" could be understood as providing an obscure meaning to the already elusively "gothic" atmosphere where "fantasy and fact can mingle" (Haggerty 16).

While Matilda previously engaged as the subject of eavesdropping, here she becomes the prey to Manfred's furtive overhearing. Whereas Matilda's eavesdropping functioned as a channel to obtain the truth, Manfred's is an act of punishment. Presupposing that the woman conversing with Theodore is Isabella, he seeks revenge, not the truth. His misjudgment is based on "indistinct whispers" followed by Matilda's lament: "Does it, alas, depend on me? Manfred will never permit our union" (104). As Gaylin points out, eavesdropping as interpretation is insecure because the information is "partial, incomplete, [and] imperfect" (9). Mistaking Matilda as Isabella, Manfred, or the "tyrant" as the narrator refers to him specifically in this scene, slays her out of jealousy and rage (104). Not only does he misunderstand the conversation, but also fails to recognize the voice of his own daughter. Chaplin claims that this suggests "the extent of Matilda's alienation from Manfred's economy of power" as she does not have "a voice capable of being heard or understood within this symbolic order"

(187).

Yet Manfred's misidentification between Isabella and Matilda is not without grounds, as Isabella's role as a substitute for Matilda has been pointed out by critics such as Clemens or David B. Morris. Morris argues that the two women are linked by their position as potential brides for the father-figures, Manfred and Frederic, and also through the "repeated language of kinship [that] emphasizes their role as near sisters" (305). Indeed, they are both young innocent virgins confined in a castle, attracted to the same man. However, perhaps the most striking point in their resemblance is that after Matilda's death, Isabella is offered as Theodore's bride. This substitution is somewhat problematic, and unlike Massé's view that *The Castle of Otranto* can be read as a "marital gothic" where "restoration of order" coincides with marriage, the novel's marriage is not entirely welcomed (20). Cast out during the male search for legitimacy, Matilda fails to gain victory from her trial of truth. She becomes a scapegoat under the patriarchal order, marginalized in the process of Manfred's quest for power.

This is not to argue that by placing Matilda as a martyr, the novel establishes a firm ground of patriarchal order. The finale scene where the castle walls crumble down suggests an unsuccessful patriarchal reorganization. Even after Theodore regains his status as the lawful heir of the castle, the restoration is not altogether satisfactory; in fact, he marries Isabella so that he can "forever indulge the melancholy that had taken possession of his soul" (110). Although the issue of legitimacy is resolved, the patriarchal reinforcement stands on an unsound foundation. After all, the political order is achieved "at the price of Matilda's death, leaving all 'disconsolate' and Theodore grief-stricken" (Howard 32). The search for the legitimate heir has left scars for everyone; Matilda is dead, Theodore lost his true love, and Manfred and Hippolita are ultimately left childless. Clemens's suggestion that this novel "expresses some fear about the loss of old certainties . . . [but] also calls for the collapse of the ancient castle" is useful to point out that the patriarchal order is never fully solidified (40).

That said, though ultimately victimized, Matilda's death by no means indicates a reestablishment of patriarchal order. Her fatal death problematizes the obsession with the proper male succession and the domestication of women.

Matilda's approach to the truth by means of eavesdropping, which at first sight seems inadvertent, signifies an active resistance to her confinement within the domestic sphere. She differs from Isabella in that she is a more active and vocal figure who willingly goes against the rule of order. Eavesdropping becomes the channel to resolve the binary opposition of the private and the public sphere while complicating the issues of privacy, secrecy, and interpretation. It also discloses hidden desires where Matilda finds her heart of passion, and Theodore ends up discovering his true identity. Manfred's eavesdropping, on the other hand, is an ensnarement which leads to a catastrophic misinterpretation. *The Castle of Otranto* is a text that plays with the boundaries of the private and the public, recognition and misrecognition, past and present. The deviant act of eavesdropping enables the female protagonists to navigate these boundaries and functions as an active drive for female subjectivity.

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ABSTRACT

**Signs of (mis)Interpretation: Eavesdropping
and Curiosity in *The Castle of Otranto***

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This paper examines eavesdropping as a peculiar means of communication adopted by the female characters in *The Castle of Otranto* that signifies women's covert desire to resist their designated private boundaries. The patriarchal order of Manfred demarcates women's sphere to the domestic area, forbidding them to access any information that takes place outside the private sphere. The deviant act of eavesdropping becomes an active means for women to obtain the truth.

Matilda, by eavesdropping on Theodore, not only discovers who Theodore is but also finds her hidden desire for the stranger. Furthermore, she comprehends Theodore's identity to be relevant to the search of legitimacy. Through the unlawful intervention of eavesdropping, she deviates from her "proper" sphere only to gain power that surpasses the male community with her insightful interpretation. In this novel, eavesdropping occurs only between male and female and never between women, as women address each other in a more direct voice. Manfred's eavesdropping is differentiated from Matilda's in that it is an act of punishment rather than a channel to access the truth.

Yet although the issue of legitimacy is resolved, the patriarchal reinforcement stands on an unsound foundation. Matilda's fatal death problematizes the obsession with the male succession and the domestication of women. As this text plays with the boundaries of the private and the public sphere, eavesdropping functions as a means to traverse these boundaries and further enables women to seek subjectivity.

Key Words eavesdropping, interpretation, private sphere, public sphere, female subjectivity, history of legitimacy