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Rethinking Terror and Horror with Plato, Aristotle, and Shakespeare

Abstract

This article addresses a blank spot in Gothic studies and in studies of ways in which literature purveys terror, horror, and fear. In the last decades, Gothic studies, including Jacek Mydla's book, have broadened their scope of research by including Shakespeare's influence on Gothic romance and drama in eighteenth-century England. Shakespeare's handling of the ghosts in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* offered Gothicists artistic models of handling terror, especially its supernatural variety: the ghost. While such research on the Gothic broadens our understanding of the genre's development in its historical and cultural context, it fails to place terror within a comprehensive ethic. Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime is notoriously deficient in this respect, similarly to an aesthetic that conceives terror as mind-expanding or merely entertaining. Pursuing Horace Walpole's reference, in the preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, to the cathartic emotions of terror and pity, Mydla explores two interrelated contexts: Plato's critique of Homer's representations of terrors of death and the after-life and Plato's fashioning of Socrates as a philosophical role model in opposition to the impassioned heroism of Achilles. Mydla argues that such "ancient" recontextualising, where Plato's critique and Aristotle's insights are related to lessons from Shakespeare's handling of terror and horror in *Hamlet*, has the potential to enrich contemporary critical reflection.

fear/terror/horror in literature and philosophy; drama; katharsis; Gothic

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Gothic criticism and Walpole's prefaces to *The Castle of Otranto*

So-called "literature of terror" (the phrase occurring in the title of David Punter's two-volume study of the Gothic) was, from the moment of its birth, in need of credentials. This is evident in the prefaces which Horace Walpole prefixed to his *Castle of Otranto*, the novel which, by common consent, in 1764 ushered in a new type of fiction and named it, ambiguously, "Gothic."[1] The unease Walpole may have felt in printing his medieval romance or fantasy is evident, among other things, in his attempt to fool the public into believing that it was a translation. Whether made in earnest or not, that attempt was soon abandoned, and in the preface to the second edition Walpole openly claimed authorship. In the 1765 preface he proudly describes himself as imitator of Shakespeare, whose drama he vigorously defends against Voltaire's detractions. He defines his "Gothic story" as an attempt at generic blending: *Otranto* is said to "blend two kinds of romance": "ancient" and "modern," that is, medieval and fantastical as opposed to realist and commonsensical.

But let us examine the first preface first. Among Walpole's justificatory strategies used in the 1764 preface, there is an attempt to redefine the Aristotelian concept of katharsis. For, even though Walpole does not use the term, he does speak of the twin emotions, fear, or terror, and pity in a statement (see below) which points to the principal emotional focus of *Otranto*. At the same time, terror is given a decided priority in driving the story vigorously forward, and towards a "catastrophic" completion. There is also a great deal of generic mixing involved for Walpole believes that his piece of terror fiction is founded on a dramatic premise:

> Everything tends directly to the catastrophe. Never is the reader's attention relaxed. The rules of the drama are almost observed throughout the conduct of the piece. […] Terror,

[1] Punter calls Walpole "the originator of Gothic fiction" (Punter 2013, vol.1: 43). M. R. James, the author of now-classic ghost stories, described Walpole as "the progenitor of the ghost story" (James 2011: 411); see below. On the various meanings of the word "Gothic," current in the context of the genre's birth, see Mydla 2009: 174–175.

> the author's principal engine, prevents the story from ever languishing; and it is so often contrasted by pity, that the mind is kept in a constant vicissitude of interesting passions. (Preface to the 1st ed., Walpole 1998: 6)

I shall return to this statement; now I want to draw attention to two words that require some elucidation in their mutual alliance: "engine" and "terror." In Samuel Johnson's dictionary,[2] the sense of "engine" relevant in this context (among the six listed) is "any means used to bring to pass, or to effect. Usually in an ill sense." The role that Walpole seems to be ascribing to "terror" is that of a tool with which the author keeps his story moving forward, preventing the pace of its unfolding from "languishing." Some anxiety on the part of the author is in evidence, namely, to keep the reader interested and excited. These days we tend to use words like "compelling," "suspenseful," and "unputdownable"; the last word, my personal favourite, is typically used in reader reviews of thriller novels.

Despite his aversion to realist fiction and what he calls "modern romance" as a literary mode that stifles the imagination, Walpole does not want to diverge from the accepted mimetic understanding of literature, stating, in the 1765 preface (to the 2nd edition of *Otranto*): "tragedy is as surely it ought to be, a *picture* of human life […]" (Walpole 1998: 12; my italics). Yet, as we have seen, Walpole's concept of the emerging literary mode suggests a degree of generic impurity in that his goal is to "blend two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern" (the 1765 preface; Walpole 1998: 9). In the "picture of human life" we hear an echo of Shakespeare's memorable phrase occurring in *Hamlet*: "mirror up to nature" (*Hamlet* 3.2.22).[3] Walpole explains the distinction between the two types of romance in the following way: "In the former [i.e., "ancient" or medieval romance] all was imagination and improbability: in the latter [i.e., modern], nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success." Walpole develops the idea of copying or imitating nature further, by combining it with the concepts of the probable and the extraordinary. The author of *Otranto* wishes "to conduct the moral agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak, and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would so in extraordinary positions" (Walpole 1998: 9–10). The overall idea emerging from these statements can be summed up as follows: let us transplant, as it were, human agents like us into some bizarre ("ancient") setting and make them act the way we would act given such circumstances. Regardless of some evident difficulties inherent in such audacious cultural and geographical time travel (gentlemen and gentlewomen lifted from the modern era to be dropped into a haunted medieval castle and when there, to be made to deal with prodigies), this idea itself is not entirely new, for

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2 See: https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/ [access: 20.02.2025].

3 "Nature" is therefore to be understood primarily as "human nature": "disposition or temper" combined with "the regular course of things" (Johnson's dictionary, senses 4 and 5). Samuel Johnson's Dictionary; nature, n.s. (1773); see https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/views/search.php?term=nature [access: 21.02.2025]. In the 1765 preface to his edition of Shakespeare's plays, Johnson praises Shakespeare as "the poet of nature": "Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life" (Johnson 2008: 421).

this is something that we see happen again and again in Shakespeare as well, especially in the ever-advancing milieu of the theatre. For instance, when Hamlet encounters the ghost, our attention is fixed on Hamlet's reaction as a human agent rather than on the circumstances themselves which, in a theatrical production of the play, are of secondary importance, the stage being little more than a platform leaving the details of the setting to be filled in by the spectator's actively cooperative imagination. This focus on the ghost-seer rather than the ghost was symptomatic of the era's appraisal of Shakespeare's handling of the supernatural. As Joanna Baillie put it in 1798, in the "Introductory Discourse" to her first three "plays on the passions": "No man wishes to see the Ghost himself, which would certainly procure him the best information on the subject [the after-life, the world of spirits], but every man wishes to see one who *believes* that he sees it, in all the agitation and wildness of that species of terrour" (Baillie 2001: 71; Ballie's spelling, my italics).[4]

It is far from being my purpose to ridicule or dismiss Walpole's insights into literary terrors. Cliched and somewhat imprecise as his statements may be, they do in fact correspond to our going broad understanding of "thrillers," where we expect this to be happening: human agents, who provide a basis for our empathetic identification, unexpectedly stumble upon something bizarre, say, a ghost or a monster (human or otherwise), and are compelled to deal with an upsetting or, preferably, a life-threatening situation. Again, this is what happens in the opening scenes of *Hamlet*, as we shall examine later. Yet serious doubts about Walpole's medievalist time travel are not easily brushed off. In the opinion of M.R. James, *The Castle Otranto*, chiefly on account of its setting, fails to deliver the kind of ghostly thrills the reader expects to experience: "*The Castle of Otranto* is perhaps the progenitor of the ghost story as a literary genre, and I fear it is merely amusing in the modern sense" (James 2011: 411); he further explains:

> A ghost story of which the scene is laid in the twelfth or thirteenth century may succeed in being romantic or poetical; it will never put the reader into the position of saying to himself, "If I'm not very careful, something of this kind may happen to me!" (James 2011: 406)

This verdict is a little at odds coming from an author who seems to have been perfectly aware that providing supernatural thrills does not allow the author to a claim of literary merit higher than that of making readers "feel pleasantly uncomfortable."[5] Such ambiguities and ambivalences are highly symptomatic: Exactly how serious are literary terrors meant to be? An author like Shakespeare is serious when he wants to be serious and amusing when he wants to be amusing. A Gothicist on the other hand may turn out to be "merely amusing" while making a serious effort at using terror as the "principal engine" of his story.

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4 Systematically carrying out her plan of composing a series of "plays on the passions," Bailie wrote two tragedies on fear: *Orra* (fear of the supernatural) and *The Dream* (fear of death; both these tragedies were published in 1812); see the 2007 collection of Ballie's "Gothic dramas."

5 "The stories themselves [his ghost stories] do not make any very exalted claim" (James 2011: 406). For a discussion of the issue of seriousness in the context of M.R. James's ghost stories, see Mydla 2016.

The decided priority which Walpole accorded to terror in the 1764 preface may be owing to the way in which Edmund Burke, in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), linked that passion with sublimity. In the famous statement Burkes makes in section 7 of Part 1 of this tract, we find this sweeping pronouncement: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to cause to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (Burke 1998: 36; Burke's italics). Burke's psychological approach to the sublime may have inspired new ways of storytelling, as was the case of Ann Radcliffe's use of obscurity. At the same time, the general tenor of statements such as the above-quoted makes an aesthetic founded on them open to condemnation from a philosophical position of equal universality. Symptomatically, in the prefaces to *Otranto*, we see Walpole drawing a distinction between the conduct ("deportment") of the domestics, e.g., "the womanish terror and foibles of Bianca" (1st Preface, 6–7) and "the simplicity of their behaviour, almost tending to excite smiles" (2nd Preface, 10). Terror, apparently, must not be doled out indiscriminately, that is, regardless of the social standing of those who are subjected to it. Rather than unconditionally related to the sublime, terror must itself be subjected to qualifications of another kind. It would be unfair, perhaps, to expect a philosophically grounded theory of terror from Walpole, an enthusiastic medievalist eager to share his fascinations with the public. It is different in the case of Burke, though, who repeatedly sources the great epics of Homer, Virgil and John Milton for examples of poetic sublimity. Yet Burke's engagement with Aristotle's *Poetics* is limited to a passing remark about imitation (Burke 1998: 46).[6]

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I will now move on to put Walpole's definitions and justifications in a larger context, hoping to fill a blank spot in Gothic studies.[7] I will start off by zooming in on Plato's concerns with Homer's depiction of the terrors of death, the after-life, and impassioned heroism. I will then expand the scope by including a discussion of Aristotle's katharsis and Shakespeare's handling of terror and horror in *Hamlet*. I will discuss *Hamlet* in relation to the preceding two contexts, the Platonic and the Aristotelian, which are in themselves interrelated (to the extent to which Aristotle's poetics may be regarded as a response to Plato's critique). I hope to show that an examination of these contexts — especially if conducted in the light of recent scholarship, e.g., studies of Plato and Aristotle by Elizabeth Asmis, Stephen Halliwell, and Angela Hobbs — may contribute to a better understanding, both constructive and critical, of literary terrors and horrors, ancient, modern, and contemporary. The legacy of Plato, Aristotle, and Shakespeare

6 In the section on terror (section 2 of Part 2), Burke argues that "it is impossible to look on any thing as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous" (Burke 1998: 53). I take passages like this to be indicative of Burke's pulling his considerations away from any system of morals that is not baldly empirical.

7 One becomes aware of this gap as one examines publications such as those of handbook/overview character listed in the bibliography: the two Cambridge companions to the Gothic, the Edinburgh companion to the Gothic and theory, Fred Botting's popular introduction to Gothic published in the New Critical Idiom series, and David Punter's history of literature of terror (already mentioned).

goes beyond artistically conjured up thrills, supernatural or otherwise, for it is embedded in premises and insights of universal nature related to poetic imitation (in a variety of senses), morality, and what we these days call psychology.

Plato, Homer, and the terrors of the after-life

Before turning to Plato's comments on literary terrors made in book 3 of the *Republic* (386c–387a), one or two things need to be said by way of setting up the context. Plato's angle when discussing poetry in that dialogue is didactic and idealistic; he asks what kind of stories guardians of the state may and may not hear, which in itself is a recognition that stories and poetry in general are used as a medium of instruction, moral as well as literary. In a perfect state governed by philosophers, as envisioned in the *Republic*, some stories about the gods are to be banned on moral grounds as disagreeing with the idea of a benevolent deity. He then moves on to stories which may put fear of death in the audience. His concern is first with stories which may raise in the hearers "terrors in the after-life," thus making them afraid to go into battle and die in combat: "We must ask the poets to stop giving their present gloomy account of the after-life, which is both untrue and unsuitable to produce a fighting spirit […]" (Plato 2007: 77; 386b).[8]

Plato goes on to quote several passages from Homer's epics. His quotations are brief, reflecting the familiarity of Plato's intended audience with the sources, yet not necessarily allowing us, his contemporary readers, to get a proper sense of the context. Addressing this difficulty, in the passages quoted below I use brackets to highlight the lines that Plato gives in his dialogue. I also simplify things by substituting the author, Plato, for Socrates, whom I take to be Plato's mouthpiece in the dialogues. Much as they admired Homer, Plato/Socrates denounce him as a poor educator, and we must appreciate that this was a controversial stance to take, undermining as it did the poet's elevated position in the culture of their native country.[9] Let us now look in some detail at what Plato calls "an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (*Republic* 607b).

The first passage is taken from book 11 of the *Odyssey* and concerns Odysseus' descent into the "kingdom of the dead," where he meets and speaks with the ghost of Achilles. Odysseus offers the departed hero words of reassurance; being now "lord over the dead," Achilles has no reason to "grieve at dying." The latter responds by saying:

> "No winning words about death to *me*, shining Odysseus!
> [By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man —
> some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive –
> than rule down here over all the breathless dead."]
> (bk 11; 555–558; italics in the original)

[8] Henceforth references to Plato and Aristotle are marked using numbers and letters corresponding to those found in the margins of scholarly editions of the philosophers' works; the source editions are the 1578 Stephanus edition of Plato and the 1831 Bekker edition of Aristotle. Details of the editions used are given in the References.

[9] Homer's status as a recognized and revered "father," common knowledge as it is, cannot be overstated; see, for instance, Elizabeth Asmis's chapter in *The Companion to Plato* and Richard Hunter's chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*.

Plato's choice of this passage, with its dubious representation of Achilles' ghost, is of special significance due to the latter's status as *the* protagonist of the celebrated martial epic, the *Iliad*, whose main theme is the "rage of Achilles." In the *Odyssey*, the poet gives us an image of this warrior and epitome of valour, reduced to a pitiful ghost pining for life back on earth, no matter how humble. It will be recalled — as Plato's readers were perfectly aware — that Achilles had chosen death in glory: "If I hold out here [in the Trojan war] and I lay siege to Troy, | my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies" (*Iliad*, bk 9; 500–501).

Another passage is taken from book 20 of the *Iliad*. Here the poet depicts the underworld, the domain ruled by Hades:

> The whole world quaked, the slopes of Ida with all her springs
> and all her peaks and the walls of Troy and all Achaea's ships.
> And terror-struck in the underworld, Hades lord of the dead
> cringed and sprang from his throne and screamed shrill,
> fearing the god who rocks the ground above his realm,
> giant Poseidon, would burst the earth wide open now
> [and lay bare to mortal men and immortal gods at last
> the houses of the dead — the dank, mouldering horrors
> that fill the deathless gods themselves with loathing.]
>
> (*Iliad* bk 20; 71–79)

Plato points out the poet's intention to display, evidently with the intention to horrify, what either ought to remain hidden from view or to be regarded as poetic fable: the secrets of the underworld. The lines chosen by Plato add sublimity to this scene thus "laid bare" by turning the gods themselves into horrified spectators.

In book 23 of the *Iliad*, Plato found another supernatural passage: Achilles, still alive, is visited by the ghost of Patroclus. The ghost returns to comfort the grieving hero with a vision of their remains being buried in the same urn: "So now let a single urn […] hold our bones — together." Achilles seeks to reassure him back, but as he reaches out, the ghost slips from his longing grasp. At a loss what to make of this visitation, Achilles is caused to reflect on his experience with a great deal of unease:

> In the same breath he stretched out his loving arms
> but could not seize him, no, the ghost slipped underground
> like a wisp of smoke… with a high thin cry.
> And Achilles sprang up with a start and staring wide,
> drove his fists together and cried in desolation, ["Ah god!
> So even in Death's strong house there is something left.
> A ghost, a phantom — true, but no real breath of life.]
> All night long the ghost of stricken Patroclus

hovered over me, grieving, sharing warm tears,
telling me, point by point, what I must do.
Marvelous — like the man to the life!"
(*Iliad* bk 23; 117–127)

Achilles seems to be discovering the laws of this world and those of the other world as well, evidently. As he is becoming aware of what it is like to die and what the after-life may look like, a new perspective on life itself is also dawning. He is made to reflect on his own bargain for martial glory and immortal earthly fame. The way Plato keeps moving along the Homeric timeline may be somewhat confusing. Yet the passages in the *Iliad* put in perspective the encounter between Odysseus and Achilles in the underworld narrated in the *Odyssey*. Palpable is also an emotional dimension, that of grief and mourning, and possibly that of pity as well in the sympathetic reader. Which is precisely what Plato found reprehensible, as we shall address presently.

The fourth passage takes us "back" to the *Odyssey*. In book 10, in reply to Odysseus' plea with Circe to "make good her promise" and help him and his crew home, the goddess says:

["Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, old campaigner,
stay on no more in my house against your will.
But first another journey calls. You must travel down
to the House of Death and the awesome one, Persephone,
there to consult the ghost of Tiresias, seer of Thebes,
the great blind prophet whose mind remains unshaken.
Even in death — Persephone has given him wisdom,]
everlasting vision to him and him alone…
the rest of the dead are empty, flitting shades."
(*Odyssey* bk 10; 537–545)

We are again made to imagine the underworld with its terrors, but here Plato is laying the stress on the exceptional status of the prophet, perhaps assuming that his audience will make their own inferences as to what has become of Patroclus, that is, what kind of being Achilles' dear friend may have turned into, keeping in mind the previous passage. I also want to draw attention to the word "shade" in the English translation. Used here as a poetic metaphor for "phantom," it is stripped as it were of the solemnity in which it was draped in the Gothic romance, especially in contexts where Walpole and other English Gothicists sought to recreate the sublimity which they imputed to the Shakespearean ghosts.[10]

[10] This sense of "shade" entered into English at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning the seventeenth century (that is, during Shakespeare's lifetime); the relevant OED entries are as follows: "the visible but impalpable form of a dead person, a ghost. Also, a disembodied spirit, an inhabitant of Hades (= Latin *umbra*); chiefly with allusion to pagan mythology. Often collective plural, the shades: the

The passage that comes up next in Plato concerns the fate of Patroclus as depicted in book 16 of the *Iliad*. Again, with little regard for the Trojan chronology, Plato takes us to the central episode of that book, the slaying of Achilles' friend by Hector. Incidentally, while Hector does deliver the final blow, the episode itself is a shocking instance of unfairness, as Apollo actively interferes on the part of the Trojans. Plato's interest, however, is not so much in the combat and whether the central theme of the *Republic*, justice, has any application to the battlefield. Plato is consistently interested in the metaphysics of death, as we may call it. Or, to be more precise, in the metaphysics implied in the poetic depictions of death. He therefore selects lines that depict what happens after Patroclus' dying speech; the narrator says:

> Death cut him [Patroclus] short. The end closed in around him.
>
> [Flying free of him limbs
> his soul went winging down to the House of Death,
> wailing his fate, leaving his manhood far behind,
> his young and supple strength.]
>
> (*Iliad* bk 16; 1001–1005)

Plato's consistency in hand-picking the relevant lines is admirable and may in part justify his disregard for chronology. Indeed, he seems to suggest that in Homer death is the ultimate grim victor, regardless of the heroics of the fights and battles and their discrete outcomes. He highlights the sense that the passages seem to convey: death, ennobled poetically into Death, takes away all that makes a hero, nay, all that makes a man; all meaningful humanity is laid to waste.[11] We must not forget, however, about the big picture; at this point in the *Republic*, Plato is concerned with what is inherent to poetic representations of things. Ultimately, in book 10 of the dialogue, poetic depictions as such will be exposed and dismissed as mere "semblances," far removed from truth.[12]

world of disembodied spirits, Hades" ("shade" (*n.*), sense II.6.a); the plural ("the shades"; shade (*n.*), sense I.2.b) was in usage a bit earlier: "the darkness of the nether world; the abode of the dead, Hades. (Often indistinguishable from the collective plural of sense II.6)" [access: 22.02.2025].

In *The Castle of Otranto*, Walpole uses "shade" several times in reference to the ghost of Alfonso, the focal manifestation of the supernatural in the novel, devised with evident debt to Old Hamlet's ghost in Shakespeare. In the scene of epiphany towards the end of the story, the mighty spectre rises heavenward: "Alfonso' shade" "ascended solemnly towards heaven" (Walpole 1998: 113).

11 Homer's personification makes one think of the passage in Hesiod's *Theogony* (Hesiod 2008: 25), where the poet describes Sleep and Death, "the sons of gloomy Night"; Death "has a heart of iron and a pitiless spirit of bronze in his breast. That man is his [Death's] whom he once catches, and he [Death] is hateful even to the immortal gods."

12 An analogy comes into view, somewhat tenuous as it may be, between "shades" (phantoms) in these Homeric passages and "shadows" in the simile of the cave (or allegory, as it is also called) in bk 7 of the *Republic* (515a): poets turn truth of things into semblances or appearances ("shadows on the wall"); hence we may say that readers whose world-view is built on poetry are like those prisoners who — as long as they remain chained down — never get to see things as they really are ("nature"). This analogy is admittedly one of numerous interpretations of the simile. For suggestions in support of this interpretation, see editor's note in the *Republic* (Plato 2007: 345). On "semblance" (*eidōlon*), see Asmis 2022: 344.

But let us return to book 3 of the *Republic* to examine two more passages from Homer. Plato now moves forward in the *Iliad*, namely, to book 23, and back to the scene depicting the mourning Achilles. The focus is consistently on Patroclus' ghost: "[…] no, the ghost slipped underground | like a wisp of smoke … with a high thin cry" (*Iliad*, bk 23, 118–119). There is no shift of focus with what comes up next: a passage from book 24 of the *Odyssey*. The opening of the last book of the epic depicts the ghosts of the suitors slain by Odysseus. Once more, Plato chooses lines in which the poet's image of bats in a cavern, with strong emphasis on the sounds they make, gives the audience a sense of the undignified, dehumanising transformation of the human person effected by death:

> Now Cyllenian Hermes called away the suitors' ghosts,
> holding firm in his hand the wand of pure gold
> that enchants the eyes of men wherever Hermes wants
> or wakes us up from sleep.
> With a wave of this he stirred and led them on
> and the ghosts trailed after [with high thin cries
> as bats cry in the depths of a dark haunted cavern,
> shrilling, flittering, wild when one drops from the chain —
> slipped from the rock face, while the rest cling tight …]
> So with their high thin cries the ghosts flocked now
> and Hermes the Healer led them on, and down the dank
> moldering paths and past the Ocean's streams they went
> and past the White Rock and the Sun's Western Gates and past
> the Land of Dreams, and they soon reached the fields of asphodel
> where the dead, the burnt-out wraiths of mortals, make their home.
>
> (*Odyssey* bk 24, 1–15)

Before we move on to the next stage in Plato's debate against poetry, let us make a concluding observation. Plato assumes a degree of familiarity in his reader with the poetic material he discusses. This assumption, as already mentioned, testifies to the status of Homer in the culture of his day, especially as the educator, something that Plato questioned, vehemently opposed, and even sought to ridicule,[13] but also something that he may have felt powerless to eradicate. Indeed, he pays due tribute to Homer and the superior poetic quality of his epics.[14] As Socrates explains in the passage that follows

[13] As Socrates does in the *Ion*, in a debate with a Homeric rhapsode, who believes that being able captivatingly to recite Homer's poetry has endowed him with all kinds of other skills and knowledge (see Plato 2005: 49–65).

[14] One passage in the *Republic* is of special significance; says Socrates: "[…] yet the love and respect I've always had from a boy for Homer makes me hesitate [referring to the critique in progress, resulting in "banishment"] — for I think he's the original master and guide of all the great tragic poets. But one must not respect an individual more than the truth […]" (595b-c). Two brief comments must be

the string of quotations from the epics: "We must ask Homer and the other poets to excuse us if we delete all passages of this kind. It is not that they are bad poetry or are not popular; indeed, the better they are as poetry the more unsuitable they are for the ears of the children or men who are to be free and fear slavery more than death" (*Republic* 387b).[15]

Disinclined as he may have been to revive disturbing depictions of ghosts, the after-life, and the underworld, which he deemed "untrue and unsuitable" (*Republic* 386b), Plato tells us that he takes on Homer and by implication also the culture revering him at its best. Or *worst*. For in thus taking on Homer, Plato seeks to expose a moral weakness that he considered disturbing as a philosopher. We must not be distracted by the ghosts and lose sight of the centrality of the figure of Achilles. It is him that Plato holds firmly in view. This brings us to another crucial aspect of Plato's critique of mimetic poetry, the "pathology" of the passions. Another string of quotations, centring on Achilles, illustrate his disposition as of one who is prone to being subjected to strong passions and indulgent in their expressions. The hero's susceptibility to being affected as well as driven by passions cannot be overemphasised and of course takes us back to the opening line of the *Iliad*: the anger, the fury, the wrath or, in Robert Fagles's translation, the *rage* of Achilles. This memorable line puts in the centre of the reader's attention the young warrior's violent response to King Agamemnon's seizure of Briseis, the captive woman whom Achilles deemed to be lawfully his. One passage will suffice to get a proper notion of Plato's concern. At the beginning of book 24 of the *Iliad*,[16] Homer describes Achilles' intense and protracted mourning over the loss of his friend, Patroclus:

> But Achilles kept on grieving for his friend,
> the memory burning on …
> and all-subduing sleep could not take him,
> not now, [he turned and twisted, side to side]
> he longed for Patroclus' manhood, his gallant heart —
> (bk 24; 4–8)

Such expressions and agonies of profound grief must not be tolerated, first, due to the way they chip away at the dignity of heroes such as Achilles and Priam, but, also and chiefly, due to power inherent in the potency of the poetic medium, poetry's capability of affecting the audience by causing hearers to emulate protagonists. Plato's

made: 1) Plato's approach does not distinguish sharply between the genres of epic and tragedy; 2) Socrates may be ironic in his praise of Homer, but consider that Plato's critique of poetry is weightier if we assume that that praise and admiration are genuine.

15 Plato's critique gradually takes up vehemence as he keeps shifting perspectives: political (free of enslavement) and psychological/moral ("harm" inflicted on "the mind of the audiences"; *Republic* 595b. see Asmis 2022: 348 ff.

16 Other passages Plato lifts from the epic: bk 18 (lines 24 ff: "A black cloud of grief came shrouding over Achilles […]"; and the "dirge of Thetis, mother of Achilles, at 59 ff) and bk 22 (now describing King Priam, distraught with grief over the death of Hector, "groveling in the filth";lines 477 ff).

concern is that poetry like this[17] will exert an indelible influence on impressionable hearers: "if our young men listen to passages like these seriously and don't laugh at them as unworthy, they are hardly likely to think this sort of conduct unworthy of them as men, or to resist the temptation to similar words and actions. They will feel no shame and show no endurance, but break into complaints and laments at the slightest provocation" (*Republic* 388d). It is plain that a philosopher's way of reading Homer — say, Socrates' — differs radically from that of someone who lacks that kind of discrimination.[18]

It might be interesting to note that Plato seems not to be concerned about passages in the *Iliad* which depict the terrors of the battlefield, not only the "graphic" depictions of the violence of combat, but also the sheer ferocity which the warriors abundantly display in their treatment of their opponents. The vengeful and fortuitous wrath with which Achilles slays Hector and then desecrates the latter's corpse is shocking by our standards, but clearly not a cause for mental unease in Plato. The gods themselves who, as we have seen, are horrified at the sights of the underworld, take a keen interest in the Trojan war without seeming to be upset by the violence.[19] Be it as it may, we do not expect a hero like Achilles to fear open combat; a passion of that kind would virtually deprive him of the esteem to which he deems himself entitled and in which the culture holds him. However, if we examine the Homeric quotations in the *Republic* in the light of Plato's definition of bravery and fear in the *Laches* (Plato 2005: 83–115), we gain a better view of Plato's concern. If fear is "caused […] by the evil that one expects to come" ("fear is the expectation of future evil"; *Laches* 198b),[20] then this definition may

[17] It must be noted in passing that Plato's critique ("ban" or "banishment") does not indiscriminately extend to all poetry; for a recent discussion of this complex topic (including an attempt to integrate *affirmative* statements made in the *Symposium*) see Asmis 2022. Plato's views on poetry within the *Republic* itself seem to lack consistency; the discrepancy between bks 3 and 10 in terms of the (rising) vehemence of the critique has been a vexed issue. Finally, at the end of the *Republic*, Plato offers his own mythical vision of after-life, "the myth of Er" (614–621), to rival the existing ones. For an interpretation of the myth, see Halliwell 2007.

[18] One of the ferocious objections in bk 10 of the *Republic* is that poets tend to pander to the common man's desire for titillation: "[...] he [a hack poet] will go on writing poetry, in spite of not knowing whether what he produces is good or bad: and what he will represent will be anything that appeals to the taste of the ignorant multitude" (*Republic* 602b). "Taste" here is obviously ironic; according to Plato, taste in its proper sense must not be detached from philosophical discrimination, the latter involving a comprehensive view of the human person, a view where reason holds sway over passions and appetites (e.g., anger, grief, fear of death, etc.).

[19] Alexander Nehamas, one of the outstanding "Platonists" of our times, in his essay on Plato and the mass media (1988) applies Plato's critique of poetry to our contemporary concern with the influence of mass media on young viewers. Yet, as evidenced in the *Republic*, Plato's concern with the strength of the passions took priority over the horrors of the battlefield, including things like sheer homicidal rage and vengefulness. Considering how much time has passed since the publication of this fascinating essay, the matter certainly calls for a renewed consideration.

[20] Relevant is also a discussion in the *Protagoras* (360d). Susceptibility to fear ought to be addressed with the assistance of Aristotle's theory of virtues, a continuation of and response to the development of Plato's insights and concerns. Aristotle situates fear between the two opposite extremes of cowardice and rashness (Aristotle 2009: 49–51; 1115a–1116a). Symptomatically, in his elaborate reflections on all kinds of fear and terror in *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke makes no comment on or use of Aristotle, or any other moral philosophy (his references to John Locke are of a different nature). Moreover, he praises the depiction of Death in book 2 of *Paradise Lost* for the poet's "admirable"

and clearly does apply to death. For even if someone denied being afraid of combat, then the kind of after-life which unmans the hero and turns him into a bat-like screeching phantom might still be a powerful factor in preventing that person from putting his life on the line. A guardian, a warrior, perhaps even Achilles himself might be caused to have second thoughts when confronted with Death as depicted by poets and as it were blown out of proportion by the imagination. To get a more comprehensive view of the matter, we need to consider Plato's alternative to the tragic/epic species of heroism found in Homer. We find this alternative in Socrates himself, in the dialogues that depict his last days on earth.[21]

As Stephen Halliwell shows in his "Plato and Aristotle on the Denial of Tragedy" (Halliwell 1984; see also Halliwell 2002: 42), Plato's stance in the "ancient antagonism" between poetry and philosophy (*Republic* 607b) consisted in a systematic repudiation of the compelling artistic representations of human life by Homer and the Attic tragedians, life embodied in Achilles and Oedipus, heroic and impassioned. The dialogues which put forth an alternative model of life are chiefly those depicting the "last days of Socrates": Socrates brought to court (the *Apology*), imprisoned (the *Crito*), and facing imminent death (execution by poison, the *Phaedo*).[22] We see in them their protagonist consistently refusing to be governed by the strong passions that he and those who love and revere him would be expected to feel in trials such as these. He does not allow others either to pity him or to lament their imminent loss; they must not yield to, indulge in or express grief or other strong passions in his presence. And that includes his wife and sons, as represented in the *Phaedo*. This attitude in Socrates, the firmness of his moral imperviousness to the terrors of the situation which these dialogues bring into view and accentuate, is in sharp contrast to the impassioned heroes depicted by Homer and the tragedians. Moreover, it is important that we remind ourselves of the fact that Socrates was himself a soldier, and one of no common reputation for bravery, as testified by Alcibiades in the *Symposium*, where the latter expresses his gratitude to Socrates for saving his life and his armour at Delium.[23]

In the *Apology*, among statements in defiance of the terrors of death, Socrates levelheadedly ponders these questions:

> If on arrival in the other world, beyond the reach of these so-called jurors here, one will find there are true jurors who are said to preside in those courts […] and all those other demigods who were upright in their earthly life, would that be an unrewarding place to settle? […] how much would one of you give to meet Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer?

handling of obscurity (Burke 1998: 55), ignoring the fact that Milton went out of his way to render Sin and Death positively nauseating.

21 For extensive in-depth analyses of Plato's concept of courage and of Socrates as a "role model" or "a new exemplar," and specifically as an alternative to Achilles, see Hobbs 2000; esp. 65 and ch. 8.

22 This is the title of a Penguin collection, which also includes the *Euthyphro*: Socrates answering the summons.

23 See *Symposium* 220d–221b; and *Laches* 181b.

These questions being rhetorical, he declares:

> I am willing to die ten times over if this account is true. For me at least it would be a wonderful personal experience to join them there, to meet Palamedes and Ajax the son of Telamon and any other heroes of the old days who met their death through an unjust trial, and to compare my fortunes with theirs — it would be rather amusing, I think — and above all I should like to spend any time there, as here, in examining and searching people's minds, to find out who is really wise among them, and who only thinks that he is. (41a–c)

The images of the terrors of the underworld and the after-life in Homer's epics bring into sharp relief Socrates' attitude to these matters. A different type of heroism, Plato suggests, is possible, as embodied in Socrates. This heroism, however, is dispassionate, and therefore is profoundly un- or even anti-tragic.[24]

Plato may have believed that in holding up the Socratic type of heroism he has won the intellectual battle between philosophy and poetry. The *Poetics*, which can be regarded as an indirect response to Plato's critique, is evidence that Aristotle thought the issue far from settled. Without calling into doubt the Socratic role model, he seems to have thought both plausible and aesthetically pleasing — if morally distressing — a tragic plot involving a protagonist of admirable personal qualities. Let us turn to the *Poetics* to see if the kind of terror which co-constitutes Aristotle's concept of tragedy has anything in common with the terrors of the Gothic.

Aristotle and the domestic horrors of tragedy

Even though Aristotle discusses terror or fear in several perspectives, I confine my remarks to its occurrence side by side with pity in the definition of tragedy in chapter 6 of the *Poetics*. In Aristotle's well-known yet typically laconic as well as cryptic definition of tragedy, the concept of katharsis (the word's only occurrence) is introduced as follows:

> Tragedy, then, is a representation of an action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude — in language which is garnished in various forms in different parts — in the mode of dramatic enactment, not narrative — and through the arousal of pity and fear effecting the *katharsis* of such emotions. (Aristotle 1987: 37; 1449b)[25]

Pity and fear, defining the emotional impact of tragedy, occur in several passages of the tract. When in chapter 9 Aristotle describes plot-structure (*muthos*), he says: "Since tragic mimesis portrays not just a whole action, but events which are fearful and pitiful, this can best be achieved when things occur contrary to expectation yet still on account of one another" (1452a). It is also in this chapter that Aristotle — in what can be regarded as a covert response to Plato — describes tragedy as "both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals […]" (1451b). Such state-

[24] In the words of Halliwell: "The composed self-consistency of the rationally virtuous character would be almost a negation of the idea of dramatic, 'human' interest" (2002: 83); the critic cites G. E. Lessing's dictum in *Laokoon* that (in Halliwell's translation), "all Stoicism is untheatrical."

[25] The Greek word "*phobos*" is usually translated as "fear"; "terror" is rarely used, see for example Richard Janko's translation in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001).

ments elevate tragic poetry and open it to a defence against some of the objections raised in the *Republic*. Aristotle seems to be saying that there is nothing "pathological" about tragic passions.[26] A major difficulty remains unsolved, however. In the *Poetics*, the operation of pity and fear in producing tragedy's cathartic effect is left tantalisingly obscure. The problem is not made easier by a suggestion of purgation in a physiological sense (see Vickers 1979: 609–610). In translations of the *Poetics* (as in the case of Stephen Halliwell's used here) *katharsis* tends to be left untranslated and open to speculation and a wide variety of understandings as well as misunderstandings.[27] Some scholars offer a fairly unambiguous elucidation; for instance, Elizabeth Asmis — without referring explicitly to the *Poetics* — states that "Aristotle takes the view that the emotionality of poetry *cleanses* instead of corrupts" (Asmis 2022: 350; italics mine). Others list the existing interpretations, assessing their degree of coherence within Aristotle's theory of poetry. Paul Woodruff (Woodruff 2009: 622–623), developing Halliwell's typology (see Halliwell 1998: ch. 6, and Appendix 5: 350–356), names as many as five interpretations: didactic, ethical, therapeutic, intellectual, dramatic.

The abundance and richness of existing interpretations of this notorious and inspiring Aristotelian concept prevents me from undertaking in this place any meticulous discussion of its relevance for the Gothic as inaugurated by Walpole. It does, I believe, allow one or two observations concerning Walpole's understanding of pity and fear, or terror, in the 1764 preface to *Otranto*. As we have seen, even though Walpole does not disregard pity, he considers it to be a kind of companion passion to terror, which he treats with a chosen preference as the "engine" of the plot. Katharsis is not explicitly named, yet the word "catastrophe" may be taken as the kind of closure that a "Gothic" story is supposed to deliver. Noteworthy is another word that Walpole uses instead of "katharsis": "vicissitude," whose basic sense is alternation.[28] Walpole suggests a kind of emotional back-and-forth between pity and terror. We suspect that generating these passions in the reader is the author's major purpose. Stimulation, therefore, seems to be the goal, with no framework within which to put the operations of these strong passions. In other words, while an Aristotelian approach to tragedy raises the question of a goal, a telos or a "good" of tragedy (purgation, cleansing, purification, intellectual illumination, etc., depending on the meaning of katharsis we choose, prefer or prioritise[29]), Walpole seems to be headed in a different direction. Walpole's "defence" of the Gothic — assuming that this is what he is after in the prefaces — make it liable to Plato's attack on passions-driven and passions-indulging poetry.

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26 See Appendix I in Brian Vicker's *Towards Greek Tragedy* (esp. Vickers 1979: 611).

27 In the words of Paul Woodruff: "Wise commentators leave the word un-translated and undefined, like mimesis" (Woodruff 2009: 619). Vickers, among other scholars, opines that despite its cryptic wording, Aristotle's katharsis is an attempt to defend "tragic" emotions: "The emotions are not 'self-indulgent'; our experience of tragedy is not an 'emotional orgy' […]" (Vickers 1979: 610); Vickers cites *King Lear*.

28 As defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, "vicissitude" is "the fact of change or mutation taking place in a particular thing or within a certain sphere; the uncertain changing or mutability of something" (OED "vicissitude" (*n.*), sense 1.a [access: 19.02.2025]).

29 Woodruff opens his discussion of the Aristotelian theory of tragedy with a quotation from *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 2009, 3; 1094a). In full, the opening statement of this tract is as follows: "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good;

Before examining Shakespeare's handling of terror and horror in *Hamlet*, I point out in passing that some of Walpole's literary inheritors were evidently aware of the issues inherent in Walpole's somewhat desperate attempt at a quasi-Aristotelian definition. Ann Radcliffe, the most celebrated Gothicist of the 1790s, came up with a distinction between terror and horror in her posthumously published essay on the "supernatural in poetry," in fact a dialogue and originally part of her last novel. This essay testifies to her concern, aesthetic, psychological, and possibly moral as well, with the type of fiction that made her name famous in and outside England, but which also attracted avid imitators — Matthew Gregory Lewis among them — eager to *entertain* the public with terrors of the pen. Like Walpole's, also Radcliffe's debt to Shakespeare is extensive. Her praise of Shakespeare's handling of the supernatural in the essay owes a great deal to Burke, as she commends the playwright's skilful building of terror ("thrilling awe") with other sublime features of poetic representation: solemnity, grandeur, obscurity, and suspense.[30] Radcliffe's appreciation of the ghost in *Hamlet*, which she unanimously shared with the entire nation, need not occupy us here. However, it is in this context that Radcliffe draws a sharp if vague distinction between terror and horror. She expresses it metaphorically in terms of their discrete operation on the mind of the reader: while terror "expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life," horror "contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them [faculties]" (Radcliffe 2000: 168–169). As with Walpole and Burke before her, the lessons from Shakespeare are half-learned. As a necessarily brief analysis of *Hamlet* in the last section will show, Shakespeare seems to have been aware of at least some of the concerns that Plato raised in his critique of tragic poetry. Shakespeare integrated his handling of the terrors he unleashed in *Hamlet* with the help of the ghost with an alertness to the fact that, by themselves and regardless of their origin, source, and intensity, terrors will not suffice to deliver a comprehensive and compelling "mirror-reflection" of human nature. We don't need to go as far as Harold Bloom and believe that in inventing Hamlet Shakespeare invented us, to appreciate the fact that *Hamlet* does offer a comprehensive philosophy within which we can contextualise terror. In fact, the lines spoken by the ghost are helpful in this respect.

Shakespeare and the terrors and horrors of *Hamlet*

A supremely self-conscious drama, *Hamlet* has a lesson or two to teach us about terror, pity, and horror. The first act contains something like a format for a compelling handling of supernatural terrors. It is as though the poet was saying to us: If terror is what you want, this is how you should do it.[31] The opening scene unleashes both mystery

and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim." Woodruff shortens this to "Every art […] aims at some good" (Woodruff 2009: 612).

30 Radcliffe 2000: 166–168; she does not use the word "suspense," but does speak of curiosity and expectation.

31 The "lesson" learned by M.R. James, among other authors. In his brief essays, James details his opinions and precepts on how to handle the ghost in a manner that is artistically compelling without being lurid (bringing to mind Radcliffe's terror/horror distinction); e.g., "Ghosts — Treat Them Gently" (1931; see James 2011: 416). See also Mydla 2023: 102 ff. For a study of how the format works in a contemporary horror movie, see Mydla 2015.

and suspense, as the ghost's defiance of the laws of nature terrifies as well as arousing fascination with its speechless and awe-inspiring obscurity. Shakespeare unveils the ghost by well-paced stages, first verbally, with proper doses of ambiguity and scepticism, before allowing it to take centre stage and disclose secrets of the underworld.[32] There is then an *artistic* reason why in the opening scene Shakespeare has the guards exchanging vague remarks about "this thing" and "this apparition" and why they are accompanied by Horatio, who initially believes that "it" is "but fantasy" (1.1.22). When the ghost does appear, Horatio must abandon his scepticism and admit that he also, despite being a "scholar," is "harrowed" "with fear and wonder" (1.1.41, 43).[33] Hamlet's reaction to being told about the ghost in scene 1.2 is one of amazement ("admiration"; 1.2.191) mixed with a sense of foreboding in expectation of a revelation of some nasty secrets: "All is not well; | I doubt [= suspect] some foul play" (1.2.253–254). Hamlet, now expecting to see the ghost himself, fixates on the word "foul" (he uses it again here in the phrase "foul deeds"); the ghost will then take it over from him, as it were, to describe the fratricide: "his [Claudius's] foul and most unnatural murder!"; "murder most foul […] most foul, strange and unnatural" (1.5.25–28). Yet before that message is delivered, Hamlet's first reaction to the ghost in scene 1.4 is one of terrified amazement. The moment when the ghost appears before Hamlet and Hamlet's speech starting with "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" (1.4.39) have gone down in literary and theatrical history as the most celebrated ghost-seeing scene.[34] The ghost remains mute, and the personal dimension takes the place of supernatural terrors. Hamlet is fervently trying to penetrate the mystery: "King, father, royal Dane. O answer me […]" (1.5.44), and in an instant comes to the full realisation that *his* life is about to take a critical turn: "My fate cries out […]" (1.4.81).

Yet I want to stress that, in studying the play's handling of the ghost in this *artistic* perspective, we must be alert to how, in scene 1.5, as he depicts the encounter between Hamlet and his father's ghost, Shakespeare causes the terrors generated in the preceding scenes (sc. 1, 2, and 4 of act 1) to vanish and be replaced by horrors of a different kind. To be sure, the word "horror" resounds during the interview between Hamlet and the ghost, but now it is coupled with words like "foul" to express the moral shock at the depth of wickedness and corruption that is being revealed by the restless and "perturbed spirit" (1.5.180). When the ghost says, "[…] I could a tale unfold whose

[32] The phrase "to hold the stage" is used by M. R. James to describe a full manifestation of the ghost in a story (James 2011: 407); it applies with wonderful literalness to scenes 1.4 (especially) and 1.5 of *Hamlet*.

[33] Shakespeare's emphasis on the ghost's "majesty" and "solemnity" (in a line spoken by one of the guards, 1.1.142; and later confirmed by Horatio, 1.2.200–201), may be interpreted as a "response" to Plato's dismissal of the Homeric "whining" and "screeching" ghosts. The ghost in *Hamlet* has been something of a technical challenge for theatrical productions and film adaptations since its first appearance on the stage. The 1980s BBC film adaptation is (typically) faithful and successful in this respect. This BBC ghost was evidently inspired by Henry Fuseli's 1796 depiction of the beckoning ghost at the end of scene 1.4 (www.artic.edu/artworks/154524/hamlet-horatio-marcellus-and-the-ghost; [access: 27.02.2025]). On Fuseli's depiction of Achilles and the ghost of Patroclus (*Achilles Grasps at the Shade of Patroclus*), see Timothy Webb's chapter "Homer and the Romantics" (Webb 2004: 296–297).

[34] See Mydla 2009: 78 and 93–95, on the popularity of this scene on the stage in eighteenth-century England.

lightest word | Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood […]" (1.5.15–16), the purpose is to *divert* Hamlet's (and the audience's) attention away from the horrors of the underworld and put it on a different track altogether.[35] The horrors of "O horrible, O horrible, most horrible!" (1.5.80) are emphatically *not* those of the ghost's "prison-house," the torments of the purgatory; "horrible" is the mundane deed committed by the less-than-human (all-too-human?) brother and uncle, "that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (1.5.42). This type of horror brings to mind Aristotle's conviction that crimes committed by family members against each other are the most appropriate material for tragedy in terms of delivering katharsis: "what must be sought are cases where suffering befalls bonded relations — when brother kills brother […], son kills father, mother kills son, or son kills mother" (*Poetics* ch. 14; 1453b). Besides *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear* supply excellent examples, while in *Macbeth* the assassin is the victim's "cousin."

In drawing attention to the shift of focus in *Hamlet*, from terror to horror, my point is not to take sides in the ages-long debate over Hamlet's indecision. Nor is it to argue for or against the (rectitude of) ghost's command of vengeance:"Revenge this foul and most unnatural murder!" (*Hamlet* 1.5.25). Yet, though immediately following the supernatural encounter, Hamlet seems to be fully resolved to take action, soon we see him struggling to whip up enough vengeful passion to kill his uncle.[36] I want to emphasise that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare goes beyond the supernatural thrills supplied and aroused by the ghost; indeed, the ghost's "Pity me not […]," uttered in response Hamlet's "Alas, poor ghost" (1.5.4–5), suggests that the ghost refuses to be a mere vehicle for some cathartic relief in the sense of unproductive compassion. Nor are we expected to allow our faculties to stay "frozen" (to borrow Radcliffe's word), that is, overcome or overwhelmed by sheer terror. The many-dimensionality of *Hamlet* actually allows us to view and read this play as a testing ground for a modern poetics of terror and horror. The Platonic and Aristotelian context — especially the objections raised by Plato — encourage a renewed and fresh rereading, as does the meta-dramatic/theatrical dimension of the play (see, for instance, James Calderwood's 1983 study). The play-within-the-play, *The Murder of Gonzago* (or the Mousetrap, as Hamlet calls it), is a spectacle expressly devised by Hamlet as a "mirror" in which the murderer will see the enormity of his crime openly displayed (see his speech in 2.2, esp. 524–527). While Hamlet enthusiastically welcomes the itinerant players to Elsinore and solemnly lectures them on the public utility of the theatre, he himself reiterates some of the

[35] This did not prevent the ghost's lines from being celebrated in their own right for their suggestive power. Walpole uses it with undisguised relish in *Otranto* (e.g., "[…] while a father unfolds a tale of horror […]"; Walpole 1998: 94), even as he composes scene after horrific scene modeled after ghost-seeing scenes in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Ann Radcliffe used "I could a tale unfold […]" as a title-page epigraph in her first accomplished Gothic novel, *A Sicilian Romance* (1791), where she deployed the device that became her signature method of delivering fictional terrors (and which came to be known as the explained supernatural): suggestions of the supernatural keep the readers "on edge" for long stretches of the narrative, but the ghost turns out to be fake; for a discussion, see Mydla 2023: 58.

[36] Scene 2.2 takes us back (in poetic if not historical time) to the Trojan war, as it reverberates with Homeric and Virgilian allusions. You will recall that in that scene Hamlet has one of the itinerant actors ("players") recite a piece of narrative poetry depicting the sack of Troy and the slaughter of Priam by Pyrrhus (suggesting an analogy with bk 2 of the *Aeneid*). In this way, I suggest, *Hamlet* invites an interpretation in the context of the Platonic critique of impassioned poetry.

common antitheatrical objections (see *Hamlet* 3.2, esp. 1–43). But meta-theatre means, among other things, that Shakespeare opens the medium he is working in to critical self-examination, which may mean bitter disappointment; the Mousetrap actually fails to "catch the conscience of the king," and, after watching some of the show, Claudius breaks it up.[37] He then succeeds in repressing his conscience and goes on to set a deadly trap for Hamlet.

Being the kind of open work that *Hamlet* is, some will insist on seeing it as a philosophical play and with little difficulty find reasons to support their interpretation, for instance, by citing the hero's famous if embarrassingly unheroic suicidal ponderings. Though evidently not another philosophical dialogue, *Hamlet* does stage or dramatize a major philosophical dilemma: the role of passions in human life. For in the course of the play we see its hero trying, and failing, to decide which, if any, of the passions — love, grief, terror, pity, anger, and vengefulness — are to be followed, until he finally finds himself unable to simply let things take what course they please: "The readiness is all […]. Let be" (*Hamlet* 5.2.200–201). The final scene shows that letting be is an impossibility in the sublunary realm, and before we know it, we watch a bloodbath which leaves a sight which even a natural-born warrior such as Fortinbras cannot view without a shudder of horror: "Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this | Becomes the field but here shows much amiss" (5.2.385–386).

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Literary Gothic may have worked out artistic models of handling terror, especially its supernatural variety, the ghost. The scope of Gothic studies, which now include the influence of Shakespeare on the genre, may be broadened by an examination of concerns with fear and terror in ancient poetics. That inclusion was invited by Horace Walpole's oblique reference to Aristotle's katharsis in the preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, a story which initiated the Gothic genre or mode. While Gothic studies may have contributed to a better understanding of the genre's development, they have eschewed engagements with terror, fear, and horror in terms of their place in an ethic that is universal rather than relative to the period in which the genre came into being. Edmund Burke's attempt at redefining the sublime is symptomatically unsatisfactory in this respect, as is Walpole's attempt to garner Aristotelian and Shakespearean credentials. The critical sterility of concepts such as "pleasing terror" or "vicissitude of interesting passions" calls for a change of frame of reference. Plato's critique of literary mimesis and of Homer's representation of terrors of death and after-life offers a worthwhile re-examination of this kind. I have tried to show how, combined with Shakespeare's poetics of terror and horror in *Hamlet*, the insights of Plato and Aristotle may enliven literary studies by activating a broader ethic. I believe that, if we want to make sense of fear, terror, horror and pity, we might do worse than consider an ethic embodied in a role model who shows how to cope with them, preferably a historical personage like Socrates.

[37] I am aware of the Hamlet-friendly line of interpretation (as pursued by John Dover Wilson, to name a notable example) which sees the Mousetrap in terms of a moral victory: the theatrical mirror held up to Claudius has produced the required amount of terror in the perpetrator. I still believe that — chiefly due to Hamlet's interventions — the scene remains open to other interpretations. Be this as it may, the consequences as portrayed in the play are disastrous for Hamlet.

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