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A Possible Source for Horace Walpole's "Otranto"

In 1765, Horace Walpole published his extremely successful *The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic Story* as a translation that "William Marshal, Gent." had supposedly undertaken. The text that Walpole's alter ego claimed to have translated was attributed to "Onuphrio Muralto, Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto." In the preface to his narrative, Walpole introduces the work as one that "was found in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England. It was printed at Naples, in the black letter, in the year 1529" (3). An apology for possible inaccuracies and faults in diction and plot is given to explain the translator's shortcomings in rendering the meaning and beauty of the original Italian adequately into English. This kind of apology is typical of forgeries and fragments that either imitate an important work or attempt to introduce a literary experiment to the reading public.

Although Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* is now accepted as the first gothic novel, it has not been considered that the author, in writing his novel, may have been drawing on earlier eighteenth-century literary sources. It is likely that Walpole was familiar with a text, *The Secret History of Pythagoras. Translated from the Original lately found at Otranto by J. W., M.D.*, which was published in 1721 and republished one year later. Texts such as *The Secret History of Pythagoras* and *The Castle of Otranto* passed as translations until, after a successful reception of them by the reading public, they were acknowledged and owned by their authors.

The explicit mention of "Otranto," as well as the supposed translation of the original secret history, suggests that Walpole's technique of concealing his authorship was inspired by the one that the author of *The Secret History of Pythagoras*, Samuel Croxall, had used. Croxall variously used prefatory material to conceal his authorship. In that respect, he published, under the nom de plume of Nestor Ironside, one canto that he introduced as having originally been written by Spenser for inclusion in *The Faerie Queene* (Jung). In the preface to *The Secret History of Pythagoras*, he anticipates Walpole's apology for his translation of the original of *The Castle of Otranto* that had supposedly been found in "the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England" by defining his own translation in terms of his "supply[ing] the Defects of the Ignorant" through translation, thereby making it "intelligible" to the English reader. Croxall's reference to Otranto is even more direct than Walpole's because he claims that the text was "Lately found in Otranto in Italy." How popular and widely known Croxall's history was is indicated by a review of *A Fragment, faithfully translated from an ancient manuscript lately found at Herculaneum* that was published in the *Monthly Review* (Rev. of *A Fragment* 513). The reviewer immediately realises the pseudo-original

nature of this translation and characterises this fragment as a "sceptical whim; intended to depreciate [the] *Mosaical* account of the creation. This joke of the *Herculaneum* discovery, in the title page, puts us in mind of a contrivance for disguising the appearance of a notable free-thinking pamphlet published some years ago titled *The Secret History of Pythagoras, translated from the original copy lately found in Otranto in Italy* that had also been reviewed in the *Monthly Review* (Rev. of *Secret History* 158). Although Croxall's history has been termed a "free-thinking" pamphlet by one reviewer, Walpole, in his preface, observes that at the time the Italian original of *The Castle of Otranto* was written,

Letters were [. . .] in their most flourishing state in Italy, and contributed to dispel the empire of superstition, at that time so forcibly attacked by the reformers. It is not unlikely that an artful priest might endeavour to turn their own arms on the innovators; and might avail himself of his abilities as an author to confirm the populace in their ancient errors and superstitions. (Walpole 3)

The intentions of the authors of both texts would have been to bring about change and to cause controversy; Croxall was attacking accepted notions of religion, while Walpole, through the unlikely persona of "an artful priest," argues for a return to gothic superstitions. Considering the way in which Walpole introduces his composition in his preface, as well as the explicit reference to "Otranto," it is highly likely that *The Secret History of Pythagoras*, through its technique of concealing its author's identity and the mention of Otranto, served as a source for Walpole's most important literary work.

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NOTE

1. The preface is not paginated.

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