

Headnote for Horace Walpole

By John O'Brien

Horace Walpole (1717-1797) is one of the most interesting literary figures of the eighteenth century in Britain. He had his own printing press at his amazing home, called Strawberry Hill (about which more in a moment), which published some of his own writings, and he saw himself as an important contributor to the literary and artistic culture of his day. But he is probably less well known to people today than many other eighteenth-century British writers because the work he did was often in forms that do not fit well into the usual categories of texts that get taught and read now. In his own lifetime, Walpole was well known as a writer of smart, witty, gossipy, and incisive letters. His correspondence alone comes to forty eight modern printed volumes and is a tremendous resource for learning about his life and the high society in which he traveled. But it has never been edited or anthologized for the general reader, and has therefore been read mostly by specialists in the field. Most of Walpole's other works are equally obscure to modern readers. His first published book, called *Aedes Walpolianae* (1743) catalogued his father's painting collection. He wrote another book on art (*Some Anecdotes of Painting in England*, 1762), an essay trying to exonerate Richard III from having, among other things, killed the princes in the Tower (*Some Doubts on the Life and Reign of Richard III*, 1780), a book on gardening, a book describing his house, and some poetry. All of these works are interesting, and reflect the varied interests and enthusiasms of the cultured man of wealth and leisure that Walpole was, but it is not surprising that they do not have a lot of readers nowadays.

The great exception, of course, is Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto*, first published on Christmas Eve 1764 and always in print since then. *The Castle of Otranto* is remembered now as inventing the Gothic novel, and while that is a bit of a simplification, it's true to say that this book has been both popular and influential.

Walpole was the son of the most powerful politician of eighteenth-century Britain, Robert Walpole, who was the leader of the government from 1721 to 1742. Robert Walpole was in effect the first Prime Minister of Britain, though the title did not exist then. And in many ways he was more powerful than any Prime Minister has ever been. At his height, in the late 1720s and 1730s, Robert Walpole exercised tremendous even ruthless control over Parliament and the press, suppressing dissent less through censorship than through intimidation and bribery. Robert Walpole is often credited with the famous aphorism "Every man has his price"; whether he said it or not is not certain, but it does seem clear that he believed this and ruled accordingly, using the resources available to him as the leader of the Whigs and the apparatus of government to manipulate both his allies and his enemies. His regime was accused of corruption, and even of being a "Robinocracy," with a play on words on both his name ("Robin" being a nickname for "Robert") and the way that he and his cronies were robbing the country. By means legitimate and corrupt, Robert Walpole did become incredibly rich during his reign, ensuring that his son Horace would have ample resources to indulge his literary, artistic, and architectural pursuits.

Horace Walpole went to Cambridge University, where he became friends with the poet Thomas Gray, who was a few months older than him. After graduation, Walpole went on a Grand Tour of continental Europe, which was the kind of thing that wealthy young British men did then. The idea was that a young man would travel for two to even three years, visiting major cities in France, and Italy (at least), sampling the art, social life, and cultures of the continent, buying up souvenirs and art before returning home to help run the family's estates. Walpole invited Gray to come with him, and they apparently immediately started quarreling. After about year and half, Gray left and made his way back to England on his own. No one knows exactly what happened to cause the breach; Walpole later admitted to his own immaturity, and it seems likely that there were times when he treated Gray, who was no where near his peer socially, like the help. (The breach was eventually healed; Walpole would go on to be a patron of Gray's works and even published an edition of his friend's poems at his own press.) Walpole returned to England and took a seat in Parliament. Just as his political career was beginning, his father's was ending; Robert Walpole's government

fell in 1742. Horace remained in Parliament for most of the rest of his life, but was rarely a particularly active member. Rather, he spent his time on writing, collecting, socializing, and in particular on building and designing his house, Strawberry Hill.

Strawberry Hill, located in the suburbs of London, is one of the most remarkable private homes in England from the eighteenth century. When Walpole first leased the property in 1746, it was a simple farmhouse. Over the years, he and a group of friends he called “Committee of Taste” transformed Strawberry Hill into a showpiece. Mimicking the stone of medieval buildings with wood, plaster, and papier-mache, the group encased the small original house with added wings, towers, and turrets, decorated it with architectural details inspired by the medieval buildings that Walpole had seen in continental Europe, and filling it with curiosities that Walpole had collected. Strawberry Hill became a tourist destination even in Walpole’s lifetime, and it has remained a landmark of what became known as the Gothic Revival style. The house also clearly inspired Walpole’s most important and influential work of literature, his novel *The Castle of Otranto*. Or perhaps “inspired” is too tepid a word: in making a house (rather than a person) the center of a work of fiction, *The Castle of Otranto* seems to be an attempt to put Strawberry Hill into words, to make the house itself into the central figure in a story. In its medievalism, its theatricality, and its eccentricity, Strawberry Hill became a kind of expression of Walpole’s personality.

In recent years, scholars have begun to think about Walpole’s sexuality and the ways in which that influenced his art. Walpole never married, and although he seems to have had some romances with women as a young man, particularly on his Grand Tour, and would continue to have many women friends and correspondents throughout his life, most of his most intimate relationships were with other men. We have no evidence that any of these relationships, with men or with women, was ever consummated sexually; Walpole’s letters and memoirs, copious as they are, reveal a lot of things, but never explicitly describe sex. And nowhere does he call himself gay or homosexual. But no one in the eighteenth century did; those terms had not been invented, nor had anything like a modern gay identity been formulated for either men or women. What seems clear, though, is that Walpole had little interest in conforming to a normative, heterosexual identity, either as it might have been lived in his time or in ours.

Some scholars understand Walpole’s sexuality to be central to his art. In his biography *Horace Walpole: The Great Outsider*, architectural historian Timothy Mowl asserts that “the enchanted castle of Strawberry Hill should be seen not only as an exercise in public relations, but as a large Gothic ‘closet’ to which Horace Walpole could sometimes retire when he wished to express his true passion with intimate friends.” More recently, the critic George Haggerty suggested that thinking of Walpole in these terms as a “closeted” gay man is anachronistic, and has argued that we can more productively think of Walpole as “queer”; not gay or straight in a modern sense, but not conforming to normative, heterosexual identities, either. In its theatricality and deviance from the conventional norms of the architecture and fiction of its period, both Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto* might be seen as expressions of that kind of queer sensibility. Another way in which both have been spoken is in terms of “camp.” Originally described, and named, in the 1960s by the critic Susan Sontag, “camp,” Sontag writes, takes as its “essence... its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.” Sontag even identifies Walpole as one of her examples of a camp sensibility, which she and many others have associated with queer sexual identities. Considered in this way, Walpole’s achievement is even more striking; he is not only a key figure in the creation of a new architectural style (the Gothic Revival), a new genre of fiction (the Gothic novel), but helps mark the origins of one of the most creative modes of aesthetic expression in the modern world.

Images: Horace Walpole, painted by John Giles Eckhart, 1754 (National Portrait Gallery, London); Strawberry Hill House as it looks today (Wikimedia Commons).