Caleb Williams can be read queerly, particularly if we consider how the sublime is a discursive presence in Romantic writing and is engaged with the subject of gender. Several readings of Caleb Williams consider the relationship between the two main characters of Falkland and Caleb to express a sublimated desire for one another. However, rather than focus on repression, I wish to argue that the novel shows us how homophobia can be effected through the sublime effect of the gaze, both by an individual and in the sense of the gaze as communal and diffused. The novel suggests that men feel afraid at the spectacle of the ambiguously gendered subject who gazes back and threatens their identity. The need to silence or contain the individual who continually doubts the reputation of another male can be historically contextualized within a fear of the accusation of sodomy. The novel illustrates the need to control the effects of gossip and rumour. Representations of the body and the exchange of gazes are central to perceiving how their relationship might be eroticized via the sublime.

Although the novel can be considered in terms of different genres, such as the political novel, there is a case for defining Caleb Williams as Gothic writing. Despite the absence of the ‘machinery’ of earlier Gothic writing, for example the supernatural, the novel’s theme of irrational persecution evoking a sense of claustrophobia in the reader is typically Gothic. The novel also shows how the imagination produces terror, an idea found in Ann Radcliffe’s novels. Caleb Williams can be thought of as Gothic writing because it is concerned with the boundary between that which is visible and seemingly known and the invisible or suspected. Caleb’s defining trait is ‘curiosity’ and he is ‘a sort of natural philosopher’ (4). An almost monkish figure suffering from private, agonized doubts, Caleb is not too far removed from the
Abbott Ambrosio in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796). His monastic quality is especially marked when Falkland takes him into the local jail, where in his ‘cell’ Caleb withdraws in upon himself and transcends his bodily suffering and circumstances by imaginative leaps of memory and re-enactments of conversations and feelings in his head. He sees himself and predicts his reactions to situations. His survival through memory, meditation and prayer evokes the monastic life: ‘By degrees I quitted my own story, and employed myself with imaginary adventures’ (185–186). Only unlike Ambrosio, there is no explicit narrative of sexual fantasy, although his ‘mind glowed with enthusiasm’ (185).

*Caleb Williams* is primarily Gothic in showing the claustrophobia both Caleb and Falkland experience when each feels that the other persecutes him. The strong suggestion of paranoia that characterizes both men points back to Beckford’s *Vathek* and forward to James Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). The claim to realism in the subtitle to *Caleb Williams*, ‘Things as They Are’, is undermined by the resonance of the supernaturalism of Gothic writing which manifests itself in metaphors and similes used by Caleb as opposed to any plot events. When Caleb tries to understand how Falkland seems to know all his movements and to anticipate them, he dismisses the possibility of a supernatural explanation. However, he repeatedly ascribes to Falkland the characteristics of the supernatural: ‘he cannot, like those invisible personages who are supposed from time to time to interfere in human affairs, ride in the whirlwind, shroud himself in clouds and impenetrable darkness, and scatter destruction upon the earth from his secret habitation’.3 The conflict between Falkland and Caleb has been described as ‘a kind of marriage distorted into a satanic bargain’.4 If their relationship is like a marriage, then it is also one in which the roles are reversible.

Caleb and Falkland’s reversibility as either the persecutor or the persecuted hinges around Caleb’s desire to discover Falkland’s secret. When Falkland admits that he is the murderer of Tyrrel, Caleb is placed involuntarily within the closet that Falkland inhabits: ‘I was tormented with a secret of which I must never disburthen myself; and this consciousness was at my age a source of perpetual melancholy. I had made myself a prisoner, in the most intolerable sense of that term, for years’ (138). Caleb fears exposure which can signify as the fear of the unnameable being voiced that is central to how homophobia depends on suspicion. Falkland has to prevent Caleb from escaping in case anyone else discovers the truth about who murdered Tyrrel.