A Maternal Tale Unfolds – Radcliffean Gothic

The time is out of joint: The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne and The Romance of the Forest

Twice in Radcliffe’s work – once in A Sicilian Romance and again in The Mysteries of Udolpho – a fragment of Shakespeare is recited to hint at the presence of spectres and secrets. This fragment evokes a juridical order that constructs authority out of the continuing presence of spectres. This economy of power is evident in early Gothic fiction, in Walpole and Reeve for example, both of whom re-work the scenes of haunting in Hamlet in order to interrogate disputed paternal rule. The ghost of Hamlet’s father unfolds a tale of murderous usurpation which demands retribution and he commands Hamlet to swear to set it right. Derrida’s interpretation of this moment – the moment of the juridical oath whereby Hamlet accepts his inheritance – is extremely pertinent to a reading of Radcliffe’s variations upon this Gothic Shakespearean theme. Hamlet’s initial response to the spectre’s command is to interpret it as a curse: ‘The time is out of joint/Oh Curs’d spite, that ever I was born to set it right.’ Derrida foregrounds Hamlet’s notion of disjointed time here, relating it to spectrality and legal temporality: ‘One never inherits’, he says, ‘without coming to terms with some spectre’. That is to say that the law of inheritance – which operates according to a certain legal temporality (the time that is ‘out of joint’) – demands that a determination is made with regard to some ‘spectre’. Hamlet must come to terms with, and determine his response to, a spectral command which is his inheritance and his ‘curse’. This command issues out of a law founded upon a violent patrilineal historical narrative that re-presents the past in the present (through its archives, monuments, crypts, spectres) and that will command vengeance where necessary.
to re-assert its historical continuity and, therefore, its authority. This command is a ‘malediction that marks the history of law, or history as law’ (SM, p. 21). This is the law articulated in terms of the passage of time marked by generations which inherit the law’s command to ‘Swear!’ and then to kill. This is the law as time, a genealogical ‘time’ that is ‘out of joint’. The command of Hamlet’s father – ‘Swear!’ – inserts Hamlet within this dysfunctional juridico-temporal economy. In taking the oath, Hamlet comes to terms with, even as he curses, the past, present and future of the law that ‘stems from vengeance’ (p. 21).

The protagonists of Radcliffean Gothic ‘never inherit without coming to terms with some spectre’. They must work to re-order legal genealogies before they are able to assert their own proper juridical identity. In particular, her female subjects rarely leave the juridical order through which they inherit uncontested. In particular, Radcliffe’s cryptic, Gothic, maternal spaces are subversively implicated in the law’s economy of familiarisation, remembrance and retribution. The cryptic space, as Derrida contends, is never properly legal, even though it is essentially implicated in the juridical economy. It is the disavowed space within the body of the law into which the law’s abject others are expelled; it is the law’s necessary, uncanny, improper monument. In Radcliffe’s work, as in Sophia Lee’s, the cryptic space becomes the site of a maternal feminine presence that is also itself never legal. I will argue, however, that Radcliffe’s female Gothic interrogates more deeply than Lee’s possibilities and problematics of feminine inheritance within a legal temporality that is radically ‘out of joint’. Whilst Radcliffe’s protagonists do tend in the main to remain bound to the law of the father, her work is increasingly concerned to resurrect maternal genealogies and even to conceive of a justice that might find its expression beyond the juridical command that ‘stems from vengeance’.

The Scottish setting of Radcliffe’s first work, The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne (1789), draws upon a contemporary association of Gothicism with a Celtic heritage that worked to consolidate an emerging national literary and cultural tradition in the mid-eighteenth century. North East Scotland becomes in this text a Gothic space positioned at the outer reaches of the nation in which various contemporary meanings of the Gothic in nationalistic, political and cultural terms collide and coalesce. The novel’s opening stresses the antiquity and venerability of a ‘Gothic structure’, an ‘ancient seat of feudal government’ rendered yet more impressive ‘from the virtues which it enclosed’. The Castle of Athlin is a monument to the nobility of its inhabitants and their right to govern. It houses a legitimate line of heirs who have nevertheless been overawed