Eighteenth-Century Gothic Fiction and the Terrors of Middle-earth

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J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has proven itself as one of the most beloved literary works of the twentieth century. It is a landmark text, redefining the fantasy genre and permeating numerous aspects of popular culture. One of the most memorable characteristics of this fantasy epic is the potent level of terror that Tolkien uses throughout its narrative to create a foreboding atmosphere of fear. Terror is an intricate element in establishing the fear that exists within *LotR*; it is, as a literary device defined by Fredrick S. Franks, a sensation that is "caused by what is dreaded and anticipated and relies heavily on suspense. It has an apprehensive and suggestive dimension that can evoke feelings of the sublime. Terror, then, is preliminary fear accompanied by a certain delight in the awful anticipation that it brings" (349). In *LotR*, Tolkien's use of terror shares many similarities with how it is employed by the eighteenth-century writers of gothic romances.

There is good reason to believe that Tolkien was familiar with the texts and conventions of the early gothic romances. According to Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien was widely read in all areas of literature, often staying up late each night reading various books of different genres and scope. The birth of medieval antiquarianism in the mid-eighteenth century is also important to note as one of its immediate legacies was the gothic romance. As a scholar of medieval literature, Tolkien would have been aware of this rekindling of interest in the medieval era. Classical gothic romances also received a great deal of attention from academics and publishers during the 1920s through the 1940s when Tolkien was at Oxford. It is therefore not terribly surprising to detect some influential borrowing, whether conscious or not, from the gothic romances of the eighteenth century when Tolkien devised the extremely frightening nature of *LotR*. All of this, when taken into consideration with *LotR*'s gothic elements, implies Tolkien knew and drew on the eighteenth-century gothic romance when writing his fantasy masterpiece.

Gothic fiction is a genre that thrives on aesthetics and conventions, and one of the most popular devices seen in the eighteenth-century gothic romance were the banditti, which Markman Ellis describes as "an organized gang of marauding brigands" (58). They were often horse riders that inspired a great sense of terror in characters and readers alike. First gaining popularity in Friedrich Schiller's play *Die Räuber* (1781), it was the gothic romances of the 1790s that immortalised these cruel highwaymen to the reading public as a source of terror; they were outlaws prone to violent and insidious acts while always hidden on the slim border between civilization and the wilderness. The banditti thus resonate with those that read Tolkien, notably

in the form of the Black Riders. For the first half of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the sinister Black Riders are presented in several instances that greatly resemble the eighteenth-century banditti, especially in their ability to create terror. Terror is the key to their existence; Strider relates that "their power is in terror" (*FotR* 171) and it is characteristically fitting that "terror overcame Pippin and Merry" (191) by their presence. Likewise, the banditti of the eighteenth-century gothic romances have this same symbiotic correlation to terror. In Peter Teuthold's *The Necromancer* (1794), a group of banditti prey on a small village and its local surroundings.[1] These banditti operate under the disguise of ghostly horse-riders from a nearby abandoned castle, implying a supernatural origin. The villagers are in a state of pacified terror as they dare not go out at night or travel near the banditti's castle; the innkeeper says, "we are now used to that nocturnal sport, and do not care for those infernal spirits, but many strangers have fallen ill through fright" (27). The

Figure 1. Cover. The Necromancer; or, The Tale of the Black Forest. By Peter Teuthold. 1927 edition. From the author's private collection.

terror for the villagers has become conditioned, but it proves to be extremely frightening for visitors. When a group of travellers investigate the castle, they are given a most frightful reception as:

> again every thing was silent, but in an instant the former noise struck once more our listening ears, and the infernal hosts rushed by like lightening – the Lieutenant, the Baron, and I darted through the passage leading to the gate, but the airy gentlemen were already out of sight, and we could see nothing, save the faint glimmering of horses. (35)

These men are terrified, and subsequent encounters with the banditti, even when they are revealed as supernatural frauds, prove just as frightful.

Though Teuthold's pseudo-supernatural banditti share some stark similarities with Tolkien's Black Riders, it must be noted that banditti from other texts of the 1790s, such as *The Monk* (1796), *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and *Clermont* (1798), all serve the purpose of acting as a wild and mysterious source of violence that consume those that they prey on by the use of terror. This is due to the behavior that they exhibit. Externally, both attempt to murder and rob their victims. The Black Riders hope to overtake Frodo and steal the Ring from him. They engage in acts of terror that are threatening to the hobbits and those connected indirectly to their plight such as Fatty Bolger. Though most banditti display this pursuit of greed and a disregard for the lives of their victims, none are more ruthless than the group encountered in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*. When Raymond, one of the protagonists in Lewis's narrative, recounts his encounter with a ruthless group of banditti, he notes "that the banditti were frequently whispering among themselves" (101) discussing how to murder and rob the unsuspecting. Lewis's banditti are as ruthless as they are treacherous, and the Black Riders can be seen as entertaining the use of similar pre-meditated violence against their intended victims.

The internal behavior of the two groups comes from their relationship with one another, adding to their mystique. The Black Riders are remembered for their piercing cry, which Tolkien describes as:

> a long-drawn wail came down the wind, like the cry of some evil and lonely creature. It rose and fell, and ended on a high piercing note. Even as they sat and stood, as if suddenly frozen, it was answered by another cry, fainter and further off, but no less chilling to the blood. There was then a silence, broken only by the sound of the wind in the leaves. (*FotR* 88)

The cry functions as a signal that can only be understood by other Black Riders. Its unnatural sound makes it even more ominous, contributing to its terrifying nature. Likewise, the banditti of the early gothic romances are known for their esoteric gestures that are perceived as frightening to those not counted among their numbers. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily is frightened by the coded gestures and hand symbols of Montoni's henchmen. Her reaction is similar to the hobbits as it increases the state of fear she is in. Emily's belief that Montoni and his henchmen are banditti is later proved false, but it is the link she makes between the gestures and banditti that is important. The Black Riders are also shown to haunt the forests in the northwest of Middle-earth. For centuries, the forest had been viewed as a place where strange fey creatures lurked; it had a mysterious and threatening presence to those of a more urbanized inclination. It is also the place haunted by the banditti, as seen in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Monk*, and *The Necromancer*. The forest was a popular place to waylay victims; its mysterious nature is used as the setting for terror to take place. Finally, both the banditti and the Black Riders resort to strength in numbers when confronting their victims. The Black Riders only attempt to overtake the hobbits when there are several of them together; this not only increases their chance of success, but it furthers the terror as their intended victims realise that they will be overwhelmed. This is also how banditti of the gothic romances would operate; in *The Monk*, the banditti wait until more of their numbers arrive before committing their criminal acts. The banditti thus inspire terror in every aspect of their being and few characters in any of these romances demonstrate fearlessness against them. Tolkien likely realised how effective the banditti were in establishing literary terror. That is why his Black Riders, for the first half of *FotR*, are so like the banditti. He illustrates his understanding of this frightening character type as the Black Riders are extremely efficient creatures in creating a potent sense of terror comparable to what is found in many eighteenth-century gothic romances.

Another element of early gothic fiction appears in *LotR* after the major plot revelations of the Council of Elrond. The heroes' journey takes them into a place of unfound terror, and their escape from the foreboding mines of Moria places a somber tone over the next many pages of the narrative. When Gandalf makes the suggestion that the Fellowship should travel through it, a sensation of "dread fell at the mention of that name. Even to the hobbits it was a legend of vague fear" (*FotR* 287) and Boromir bluntly states that "the name of Moria is black" (288). Moria is thus established as a place of great terror before the Fellowship enters its ancient halls. The exterior of Moria is described in language typical of gothic fiction, with "a path, most broken and decayed, that wound its way among the ruined walls and paving-stones of an ancient highroad" (292) and "stumps and dead boughs were rotting in the shallows" (295) affirming it as a place of things long dead. Death is part of Moria's essence for the language Tolkien describes it with marks it as a place of decay and degeneration. Yet Moria's interior is even more imposing than its exterior; it is "bewildering beyond hope" (303) and filled with a foreboding sense of darkness and loss. Paranoia takes hold on the Fellowship while there, as evident in the example of Pippin, who fears "that some unknown thing would crawl up out of the well" (305). There is nothing hopeful in this fearful place; terror proves so integral to Moria's existence that a haunting mark is left on all

that pass through its halls.

Moria's dreadful nature has been visited before in literature, notably by the writers of the early gothic romances. At the heart of Moria is an obscure presence, and, according to Edmund Burke, "to make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary" (114). David Stevens mentions the importance of Burke's reflection, noting that in gothic literature "a ruin of some sort seems to embody that sense of mysterious obscurity" (55). Indeed, the obscure setting is an important element of the genre's conventions. Consider this example from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764):

> The lower part of the castle was hollowed into several intricate cloisters; and it was not easy for one, under so much anxiety, to find the door that opened into the cavern. An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions, except now and then some blasts of wind that shook the doors she had passed, and which, grating on the rusty hinges, were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness. (10-11)

Walpole employs a great deal of obscurity into his torturous labyrinth that it becomes quite terrifying. A mere replacement of the word 'castle' with that of 'mines' and the above description from Walpole would become almost identical with that of Tolkien. The haunted landscape appears frequently in many other gothic texts; for example, the protagonist in Eliza Parsons's *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793) comes to a castle believed haunted and "she trembled, and deliberated whether she should return or not" (10). The

reaction here is quite striking with that of the Fellowship as many of its members expressed doubt and had hoped to pursue other paths before finally becoming trapped within Moria. In *The Monk*, obscurity is given to a Roman Catholic crypt, where terrors hide and evils are committed under the mask of holiness. These places of antiquity do exactly what Walpole had originally intended as they blur the "laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural" (Hogle 2) to create a sense of terror within the confines of forgotten obscurity. Moria stands as a twentieth-century creation descended directly from its eighteenth-century ancestors; there can be little doubt that Tolkien conceived of the abandoned dwarven home without having first encountered the mysterious places from the early gothic romance.

The final example to be discussed here is that of the hidden pursuer. This threatening character type is found throughout the early gothic romances and foreshadows ominous events. In *LotR*, this is embodied by Gollum, roughly from when the Fellowship enters Moria until he reveals himself to Frodo and Sam. At first, Gollum's presence is subtle and faint yet while in Moria, Frodo "began to hear, or to imagine that he heard, something else: like the faint fall of soft bare feet. It was never loud enough, or near enough, for him to feel certain that he heard it" (*FotR* 304). Frodo and the reader are suddenly made aware that something else is present, hidden and elusive. As the Fellowship continues its journey, Frodo is continually haunted by "two pale points of light, almost like luminous eyes" (*FotR* 310). With each subsequent notice, more is slowly revealed about this mysterious stalker. The reader is continually forced to

dwell on the nearby terror that lurks in the shadows. Each additional encounter heightens the level of terror; not only does the reader discover more about this assailant, but each appearance is more terrifying than the last. For example, while being escorted by Haldir, Frodo is told that "a strange creature had been seen, running with bent back and with hands near the ground, like a beast and yet not of beast-shape" (340). When Aragorn confirms Frodo's fear that this hunter is Gollum, the level of terror is increased. Reader and character now realise what it is that follows; a murderous and twisted recluse stubbornly intent on reclaiming what it greedily sees as its own. The final moment of Gollum's pursuit comes to an end in *The Two Towers* when Tolkien describes him as a "black crawling shape now three-quarters of the way down, and perhaps fifty feet or less above the cliff's foot" (599). He makes his dreadful appearance but is subdued by the two hobbits, ending his hunt from the shadows.

Gollum's pursuit is indicative of a continued increase in psychological terror. Each subtle detection furthers this, until he is ready to make his presence known via violence and murder. Gollum's function as a frightful and persistent tracker, determined to overtake and capture, is, however, yet another iconic use of terror taken from the pages of the eighteenth-century gothic tradition. David Punter describes the type of terror caused by a character, such as Gollum, as that "which has to do with persecution" (117). This is exactly what Gollum does to Frodo; his persecution comes from the fact that he is the Ring-bearer, and Gollum hates him for this.

Similar examples from eighteenth-century texts are plentiful. Two specific texts that bear strong examples of the zealous stalker with parallels to Gollum are *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Castle of Wolfenbach*. In *The Castle of Otranto,* when Isabella desperately flees from Manfred, her flight is described in a manner that it is reminiscent of Gollum's presence in Moria; for example, "in one of those moments she thought she heard a sigh. She shuddered, and recoiled a few paces. In a moment she thought she heard the step of some person. Her blood curdled" (11). The terror created in Isabella's mind is much like what the reader encounters with Frodo when he first begins to notice Gollum, whose first portrayal as a pursuer is only noticed from mere sound. What is more, Gollum, like Manfred, demonstrates a powerful resolution to follow his 'precious' no matter where it might take him; he chases it over a great distance before finally revealing himself to the two hobbits. Gollum's desire to possess what he sees as his is at the center of his nature as a pursuer. Similarly, in *The Castle of Wolfenbach*, the villainous Weimar exhibits behavior closely akin to Gollum's. Weimar's mad obsession with his niece Matilda utterly clouds all logic and reason within his mind. He intends to force Matilda into an incestuous marriage and when she flees he relentlessly follows her across Europe. This desire of possession is his ruling passion; he admits that he would prefer Matilda to die than to become another's, when he explains, "your death would to me have been the greatest

comfort; I cannot bear the idea another should possess you" (163). Matilda is Weimar's Ring, and his mad, unrelenting quest to possess her creates much of the tension in this text. The similarities between Gollum and these gothic villains is clear and it should not be too surprising that Tolkien likely drew on these figures as inspirational sources when developing Gollum's character.

The gothic romances of the eighteenth century were immensely popular and influential on later writers, such as Bram Stoker and H. P. Lovecraft. Tolkien demonstrates similarities with them in his attempts to achieve a specific type of literary terror. As has been noted, there are ample examples in *LotR* that have strong parallels with many gothic romances. A professor of language and literature, Tolkien would have been familiar with at least some of the better known titles of this period. His interest in the medieval romance, and how men like Walpole dwelt upon it with a high level of fascination, would also have brought him into contact with many of these texts. Through intertextual analysis, it becomes apparent that Tolkien was familiar with the eighteenth-century gothic romance since a great deal of his magnificent epic contains strains of literary terror that is reminiscent of these early gothic writers.

Notes
1   See Figure 1 for a cover of this text republished in the United Kingdom during the 1920s.

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