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Francisco Fernández
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, francfer@sas.upenn.edu

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The Gothic Genre Beyond Borders: Mathew Lewis’s Influence on José de Espronceda’s *El estudiante de Salamanca*

Francisco Fernández
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

Abstract

Once the Gothic crossed the Spanish border, a number of writers were influenced by this genre. This is the case of José de Espronceda in his *El estudiante de Salamanca* (1840). Influenced by Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, Espronceda not only uses Gothic conventions when he creates a protagonist haunted by a ghost but also subverts them by reversing the villain-victim relationship for the sake of poetic justice. As a result, the development of the plot is more strongly justified, for the hero’s sins are, after all, what lead him to his tragic end.

Gothic literature entered Spain mainly through the French translations of canonical English Gothic romances of the eighteenth century. As a result, Spanish readers did not have access to many of the most famous Gothic works until the second decade of the nineteenth century. For example, as Montesinos indicates in his *Introducción a una historia de la novela en España en el siglo XX*, Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) was not translated into Spanish until 1821, and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797), not until 1832 (cited in Carnero 120-21). Nevertheless, it is believed that some of the exiled Spanish writers of the period also contributed to bringing this genre into the country, thus providing an earlier access to Gothic literature. [1] Once the Gothic crossed the Spanish border, a number of writers were influenced by this genre, even though they did not call it Gothic *per se*. They considered it the “literatura de miedo” (Perugini 96) or “literatura fantástica” (Cuenca 114) and used its traditional elements to shock their readers and heighten their emotions. However, as the Gothic genre became more established in Spain, writers started using it for purposes other than inspiring horror and surprise in their readers. This is the case of José de Espronceda in his narrative poem *El estudiante de Salamanca* (1840). Clearly influenced by Lewis’s *The Monk*, Espronceda not only uses Gothic conventions when he creates a protagonist haunted by a ghost but also subverts them by reversing the villain-victim relationship and giving his protagonist, don Félix, characteristics similar to those of a Gothic heroine. This strategy subverts the gender convention of Gothic and emphasizes the poem’s moral vision to those men who, like don Félix, succumb to a sinful life. [2] Hence, the purpose of this paper is both to show how the traditional outlines and devices of Gothic first manifested and grew among nineteenth-century Spanish writers and to introduce with my analysis of *El estudiante de Salamanca* the relevance that this genre had on Espronceda who, by infusing his work with elements of the Gothic genre, retells the traditional Don Juan story in his poem.

Some of the best known features of Gothic have been described by David Punter as follows:
When thinking of the Gothic novel, a set of characteristics springs readily in mind: an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, [...] and perfect techniques of literary suspense are the most significant. Used in this sense, "Gothic" fiction is the fiction of the haunted castle, of heroines preyed on by unspeakable terrors, of the blackly lowering villain, of ghosts, vampires, monsters and werewolves. (1)

The Spanish works that were influenced by these conventions have never been seen as Gothic, although they carry many of the features of this genre. [3] Manuel José Quintana’s poem “El Panteón de El Escorial” and his drama El duque de Viseo (1801) are two examples of Spanish Gothic works par excellence. Quintana’s poem follows the Gothic convention to the letter and, being a short poem, could be considered a “Gothic novel in miniature” (Carnero 121). As for his drama El duque de Viseo, even Quintana himself acknowledged his debt to the English genre when he wrote: “El asunto de esta tragedia está sacado de un drama inglés intitulado El espectro del castillo, escrito por Mr. M. Lewis y representado en Londres con un aplauso extraordinario” [the theme of this tragedy is inspired by an English drama titled The Castle Specter, written by Mr. Matthew Lewis and presented in London with extraordinary success] (cited in Cuenca 111). [4] This source thus unmistakably places El duque within the same literary tradition as Lewis’s play: the Gothic.

Another popular Spanish Gothic work of the period, the one that reached a broader audience among Spanish readers, was Agustín Pérez Zaragoza’s Galería fúnebre de espectros y sombras ensangrentadas [Macabre Gallery of Bloody Specters and Shadows], published in 1831. [5] Galería is a twelve-volume collection of twenty-one short stories and three novels that shows a Gothic-Romantic language (Gies 65). The Gothic elements in this work seem exclusively designed to shock its readers and to arouse their emotions, as the author himself corroborates in his subtitle: “colección curiosa e instructiva de sucesos trágicos para producir las fuertes emociones del terror” [curious and intrusive collection of tragic events made to provoke strong emotions of terror] (cited in Cuenca 114). It was for this reason that the quality of Galería was underestimated, and some of Pérez Zaragoza’s contemporaries reacted against it because, as Larra expressed, they believed that to arouse emotions with blood is not the work of a poet (cited in Gies 65). In spite of the negative reaction among the intellectuals of the period, this collection became extremely popular and is considered today the widest and most complex universe of fantasy and terror in Spanish Literature (Cuenca 114).

Manifestations of the Gothic continued as nineteenth-century Spanish writers found new ways to incorporate elements of the genre in their writing. José de Espronceda is one of these writers. In his El estudiante de Salamanca, he shows the influence of his Gothic sources and relies on them both to create an identifiable atmosphere and to characterize his hero, don Félix de Montemar, who, while facing the extreme
circumstances aroused by the supernatural, asserts his proud and fearless nature. With a menacing beginning, Espronceda opens his poem and, in four parts, leads his readers to Don Félix’s doom. *El estudiante’s* first and fourth parts are the ones that show the unmistakable influence of the Gothic, even though most critics have not considered them as such. Robert Marrast, for example, has pointed out Espronceda’s possible sources for his poem. According to this critic, *El estudiante* belongs to the same pseudo-historical and medieval romanticism whose themes emphasize elements like dark nights, tempests, mystery and a terrifying atmosphere (33). Marrast never includes in his theory the concept of Gothic. However, the romantic themes he points out clearly belong to this genre.

The first part of *El estudiante* opens in a city that is described in the poem as a tomb (305). This city is surrounded by a dark, threatening atmosphere where the sky is somber and the wind whistles gloomily (88). In addition, in this description the poet plays with folkloric tradition by setting the action at midnight, a time when the supernatural typically takes over. This strategy reinforces the unreal nature of the tale and eases the readers’ entrance into his fantasy:

Era más de media noche,  
antiguas historias cuentan,  
[. . .].  
Era la hora en que acaso  
temerosas voces suenan  
informes, en que se escuchan  
tácitas pisadas huecas,  
y pavorosas fantasmas  
entre las densas tinieblas  
vagan [. . .]. (87-88)

It was long past midnight,  
old stories tell,  
[. . .].  
It was perhaps that hour when  
frightening voices sound  
shapeless, when are heard  
soundless, hollow footsteps,  
and terrifying phantasms  
in a dense darkness  
roam [. . .].

After this ominous presentation of a city surrounded by ghosts and gloom, Don Félix appears on the scene. Everything seems to bear ill omens for him when he walks onto Coffin Street ("calle del Ataúd"), and the moon hides behind a gloomy cloud ("tras lóbrega nube") provoking a deceitful vision ("dudosa visión") (90). It feels as if the city itself were conspiring against him. Espronceda, aware of the conventions of the genre, adapts them by transforming the entire city of Salamanca into the traditional setting of
the Gothic castle, an oppressive force that delimits the border between the real and the unreal worlds. It is here, in this Gothic Salamanca, that Don Félix’s nightmare takes place:

El cielo estaba sombrío,  
no vislumbraba una estrella,  
silbaba lúgubre el viento,  
y allá en el aire, cual negras  
fantasmas, se dibujaban  
las torres de las iglesias,  
y del gótico castillo  
las altísimas almenas,  
[ . . .].  
Todo en fin a media noche  
reposaba, y tumba era  
de sus dormidos vivientes  
la antigua ciudad [ . . .],  
lafamosa Salamanca [ . . .]. (88-89)

The sky was somber,  
not one star was shining,  
the wind whistled gloomily,  
and there in the air, like black  
phantasms, the towers  
of the churches were silhouetted,  
as well as the highest battlements  
of the gothic castle,  
[ . . .].  
In short, everything at midnight  
was resting, and the ancient city  
was the tomb  
of its sleeping living inhabitants  
[ . . .],  
the famous Salamanca [ . . .].

As for the fourth part, the one in which Don Félix sees and follows the specter of doña Elvira as a mysterious vision in white veil (“visión de blanco velo”) (148), Marrast parallels it with, among other sources, Quintana’s aforementioned El duque de Viseo, which shares a similar theme: the specter of a woman appears to the hero and leads him to his doom. By relating El estudiante to this source, Marrast is indirectly identifying the influence of the Gothic tradition as well, for the foundation of Quintana’s play was, as I mentioned earlier, Matthew Lewis’s The Castle Specter. Nevertheless, El duque is not the only Gothic text that can be paralleled with El estudiante in relation to this scene. Another intertext can be found in another work by Lewis: the encounter of Raymond with the “Bleeding Nun” in his novel The Monk. [7] Raymond suffers an accident when he tries to flee from the Castle of Lindenberg. While recovering in bed,
he nightly receives a “midnight Visitor,” the specter of the Bleeding Nun. She enters the hero’s room, approaches his bed, and, lifting up her veil, discloses the features of her “animated Corse [sic].” Raymond describes her as follows:

Her countenance was long and haggard; Her cheeks and lips were bloodless; The paleness of death was spread over her features, and her eye-balls fixed stedfastly upon me were lustreless and hollow. (160)

Although the hero’s situation and characterization in _El estudiante_ are different, the description of Elvira’s specter and the physical sensations that such an encounter evokes show an evident parallel with the English work. Just as in _The Monk_, the ghost’s unveiled face in Espronceda’s poem is a sordid, horrible skull (“una sórdida, horrible calavera”) (149), which reveals in her hollow countenance (“cóncavo hueco”) (151) an arid, fleshless, yellow and repugnant face (“árida, descarnada y amarilla [...] repugnante faz”) (150). This corpse, then, like Lewis’s, moves toward the hero, seeking a kiss. Such an action, however, is described in _El estudiante_ more explicitly, which establishes a more vivid and terrifying vision. Thus, while Lewis only writes that the Bleeding Nun “press[es] her cold lips” to Raymond’s (161), Espronceda creates a more horrifying image with his detailed description, for it shows not only the ghost’s action but also Don Félix’s powerless reaction:

and with her cavernous mouth she seeks
Montemar’s mouth [. . .].
and he, embraced by her dried limbs
[. . .]
fight in vain to set himself free
and the harder he struggles
the closer she gets and the stronger her desire becomes
such a terrifying specter inspires in him horror.

Another aspect of this episode that appears both in _The Monk_ and in _El estudiante_ is the physical sensations that this encounter evokes. In the two episodes there is a relation between warm and cold blood that separates those who are alive from those who are dead. According to this idea, the two specters are pale and yellow because of their lack of blood, and their touch provokes an extremely cold sensation, due to the same deficiency. The Bleeding Nun’s fingers thus feel as cold as ice. Likewise, Elvira’s
ghost has yellow cheeks, and her hands have a crisp, icy touch (“tacto de crispante hielo”) (148). Moreover, the collision of these two worlds—Life and Death—provides a reaction of horror that paralyzes the living, for their blood freezes, and they succumb to the power of the dead. Raymond’s and Don Félix’s reactions to the specters’ appearance and touch illustrate this idea:

I gazed upon the Spectre with horror too great to be described. My blood was frozen in my veins. I would have called for aid, but the sound expired, ere it could pass my lips. My nerves were bound up in impotence, and I remained in the same attitude inanimate as a Statue. (Lewis 160)

Don Félix’s blood freezes as well when the ghost touches him:

galvánica, cruel, nerviosa y fría, 
histérica y horrible sensación 
¡toda la sangre coagulada envía 
agolpada y helada al corazón!... (148)

Oh this hysteric and horrible sensation, 
So shocking, cruel, nervous and cold 
sends to his heart coagulated and frozen blood.

Then, once these supernatural beings have the heroes under their power, they address them in a “low sepulchral voice” (Lewis 160) that sounds like a lugubrious echo (“cual lúgubre eco”) (Espronceda 151), claiming the two men as their possession. Thus, while Elvira cries, “¡Mi esposo!” (149), the Bleeding Nun proclaims, “‘Raymond! Raymond! Thou art mine! / [...] / Mine thy body! Mine thy soul!’” (160).

In contrast to Lewis’s hero, Don Félix reacts to the presence of the supernatural. Even though the specter also inspires horror in him, his proud and fearless nature makes him overcome his fear and defy this force:

Y a su despecho y maldiciendo al cielo, 
de ella apartó su mano Montemar, 
y temerario alzándola a su velo, 
tirando de él la descubrió la faz. (149)

And spitefully cursing heaven, 
Montemar pushed his hand away from hers, 
and daringly raising it to her veil, 
pulling it off disclosed her face.

His bold reaction even shocks other specters who observe with surprise this daring mortal (“contemplando [...] / con asombro al osado mortal”) (148). Such behavior
contributes to his fatal end, for he does not listen to the ghost’s warning. His fear gives way to temptation, and he follows Elvira’s specter as he would a female conquest. Therefore, the poem’s use of the Gothic serves to reassert Don Félix’s Don Juan nature and contributes to the development of the plot, for his flaws are reinforced before the presence of the supernatural, and his tragic end is in this way justified. Moreover, the resolutions of these horrifying experiences also vary in both works. While Raymond is able to free himself from the Bleeding Nun’s harassment by finding her remains and burying them properly, Don Félix dies a victim of Elvira’s specter by following her to his doom. Further, Don Félix actually meets a double death. As he is about to fall into the specter’s arms, the barriers between the real and the unreal blend together and become one, for he realizes that he, a prisoner of the supernatural world, had already died in a duel and now is about to die again and meet his eternal damnation. Don Félix, like most traditional heroines of Gothic fantasies, is trapped between the real and the unreal and feels threatened by this supernatural being which tries to force herself on him. No longer a villain, he becomes the victim of this ghost, thereby being forced to submit to this “unreal” world, the same sort of victimization that he made Elvira and others suffer in the “real” one. During the three first parts of El estudiante, Don Félix is cast as a villain, as a traditional Don Juan who victimizes Elvira with his false promises and, ultimately, with his seduction. Elvira succumbs to his deceit and commits suicide. However, in the fourth part of the poem, the roles reverse and Don Félix becomes the victim of Elvira’s specter, who comes back to claim his promise of matrimony. With this reversal of roles in the victim-villain relationship, Espronceda subverts the Gothic gender convention, thus emphasizing the final moral vision he wants to deliver in his work: Don Félix’s sins are punished and poetic justice is served.

El estudiante de Salamanca presents us with an example of how Spanish writers relied on the Gothic as a tool both to develop their characters and their plots and to assert a final point. In Espronceda’s case, his final warning is to those immoral men who, like Don Félix, succumb to “sus frívolos placeres” (156). This use of the Gothic as social critique continued through the end of the century with writers such as Benito Pérez Galdós and Emilia Pardo Bazán. By the turn of the new century, the Gothic tradition had taken a firm root in Spain, and twentieth-century writers like Valle-Inclán and Pío Baroja continued to incorporate Gothic elements into their works to lightly veil their political commentary. [8] All of these works, however, have never been classified as Gothic due to their strong association with other literary traditions of their period. Nevertheless, the fact that they have always been classified in relation to specific literary traditions should not prevent us from recognizing their Gothic nature. Beyond the place these works occupy in literary history, we must recognize their Gothic features, thus allowing a new interpretation that acknowledges the debt they owe to Gothic fiction.
Notes


[2] William Day, studying the villain and the heroine in Gothic fiction, states that villains are normally males, whereas heroines are the females who suffer the villains’ victimization. By reversing the villain-victim relationship, Esproceda challenges the tradition and subverts the gender convention of Gothic. As I shall point out later, Don Félix acquires characteristics similar to those of a Gothic heroine when, trapped in an unreal world dominated by the supernatural, becomes the victim of Elvira’s ghost. This subversion contributes to emphasizing the poem’s moral vision and offers a new perspective to the reading of El estudiante de Salamanca.

[3] Carla Perugini indicates that although Spanish romanticism was not as attracted to gore as English literature, it is easy to find good examples of such attraction, especially in some of the journals of the period (89-90). Some of the titles this critic lists contain a clear Gothic influence, even though she does not consider them Gothic per se. For example: “El castillo del espectro” (1835), by Eugenio de Ochoa; “El castillo de los Apeninos,” (1846), anonymous; “El monje” (1847), by J. Pardo de la Casa (cited in Perugini 96). For a more detailed list of works see Carnero’s La cara oscura del siglo de las luces, Cuenca’s “La literatura fantástica española del siglo XVIII,” Gies’s “Larra, La galería fúnebre y el gusto por lo gótico,” and Risco’s Literatura y fantasía.

[4] All translations in this paper are mine.

[6] James Mandrell studies the sublimity of language in *El estudiante de Salamanca*, and he relates the element of terror to the nature of the sublime. However, he does not specifically consider the Gothic elements that this work contains.

[7] As far as I know, critics have not acknowledged this intertext among Espronceda’s influences in *El estudiante*.

[8] Sylvia López and Janet Pérez have also noted the Gothic influence in, respectively, Pérez Galdós and Pardo Bazán. In her article “The Gothic Tradition in Galdós’s *La sombra*,” López argues that the use of the Gothic in this novel “serves as a vehicle for censuring social institutions that restricted women’s movements to the home and attempted to oversee and control their sexuality” (517). Pérez, in her study of the Gothic in Pardo Bazán’s *Los Pazos de Ulloa*, numbers a series of works by this writer that contain an “abundance [...] of Gothic features” (147). Among others, she mentions Pascual López, “Un destripador de antaño,” “Vampiro,” “La emparedada,” and “Tiempo de ánimas.”
Bibliography


