

“Some Fatal Secret”: Mortmain in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*

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In Horace Walpole’s novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Matilda spends hours gazing at a portrait of a knight, Alfonso the Good. She explains to her maid, “[...] some how or other my destiny is linked with something relating to him. [...] I am sure there is some fatal secret at bottom.”¹ The “fatal secret” is just one of many tropes present in the novel that came to define the genre of “terror fiction” or, as it is now more commonly known, the Gothic novel. Frederick Frank argues that, as a “prototype” for the Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* “furnishes a symbolic glossary for evoking dread, for arousing pleasure in the irrational and for establishing an iconography of an unholy and malignant cosmos governed only by absurd forces.”² One of these “absurd forces” is the notion of property and the laws surrounding it. Questions about what constitutes property and what it means to own it were subjects of widespread public debate throughout the eighteenth century, a debate in which Gothic literature had a powerful voice.³ The uncertainty surrounding the changing economy and the tensions resulting from it are manifested in the novel’s depiction of a Gothic

1. Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. Michael Gamer (London; New York: Penguin, 2001), 37–38.

2. Frederick S. Frank, “Proto-Gothicism: the Infernal Iconography of Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto*.” *Orbis Litterarum* 41, no. 3 (1986): 199–212, 201.

3. Gary Kelly. “General Introduction.” *Varieties of Female Gothic*, ed. Kelly (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002), xxxi. Kelly points out that writing Gothic novels enabled women in particular to participate in public debates about social, cultural, and economic issues, debates from which they were otherwise excluded. Many Gothic fictions by women focus on these issues in relation to property.