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The Oedipal and the Gothic: The Mechanics of Suspense in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Two Poirot Investigations

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Abstract. The article offers a redefinition of the Gothic as an Oedipal narrative arrangement. This artistic meaning of the Oedipal as relevant for Gothic narratives is defined in separation from the clinical understanding of it as related to the Freudian transgressions of incest and patricide. The article's literary-comparative analysis is concerned with Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Finally, a brief analysis is offered of the classic mystery plot for the purpose of making the proposed Oedipal definition of the Gothic more articulate. The examples are provided by two Hercule Poirot novels by Agatha Christie.

Key words: Gothic, Oedipal, narrative, Sophocles, Ann Radcliffe, Agatha Christie, Sigmund Freud

My purpose in this article is to inquire about the Oedipal element in the Gothic on the example of Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), arguably the greatest Gothic romance of the last decade of the 18th century and a work that defined the genre. My interest is not in the Oedipal content in terms of familial relations between the protagonists, and the extent to which they are transgressive and antagonistic. My interest is in the narrative structure, and I want to compare the narrative arrangement and progression in the original Oedipus play, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, with those of the novel, the goal being to expose the mechanism of generating mystery and terror (or past-oriented suspense) as a defining feature of the Gothic. This analysis is part of my ongoing research on the narrative mechanism or devices responsible for the suspense potential of mystery plots. As detection is a major feature of mystery plots, later in this article I will discuss two novels by Agatha Christie in pursuit of an Oedipal element in them. This operation should allow me to make clearer my understanding of the Oedipality of the Gothic.

It is necessary, at the outset, to draw a distinction between the literary-artistic sense of the Oedipal and the now common clinical understanding of the term.[1] In the Freudian sense, the Oedipal refers to two transgressive "impulses," or the "primaeval wishes of our childhood,"[2] that is, the incestuous mother-desire and the homicidal father-hatred. Following Richard Armstrong's idea of the conflation, in Freud's theory, of the theatrical and the clinical (Armstrong 2012)[3], I want to base my analysis of Gothic suspense in Radcliffe on the artistic ("theatrical") sense of the Oedipal. It is worth noting that Freud himself, with great pertinency, identified this sense in the following summary of the plot of *Oedipus*: "The action of the play consists in nothing other than the process of revealing, with *cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement* – a process that can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis – that Oedipus is the murderer of Laïus, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta. Appalled at the abomination which he has unwittingly perpetrated, Oedipus blinds himself and forsakes his home" (qtd in Sophocles 1970, 70; emphasis added). Freud gives here a succinct definition of Gothic – or past-oriented – suspense as excitement skilfully produced by means of delayed revelation of an unintentionally committed transgression. It is not my purpose to rehearse the many objections with which Freud's interpretation of the play has met. One of them, however, is relevant in this context; namely, the fact that a Freudian interpretation (in contrast to the phrase "unwittingly perpetrated") ascribes transgressive *intentionality* to the hero, which allows this interpretation to see in the back story of the plot a fulfilment of "the fate of all of us" (Freud 1970, 70)[4]; the transgressive impulses are those which "the work of a psychoanalysis" discovers as buried "in our childhood"). From a non-Freudian – and therefore "naïve" – point of view, however, the tragedy of Oedipus consists of the fact that the hero has done all he could to prevent the realisation of the curse.

Symptomatically, the passage in the play which attracted Freud's special attention is Jocasta's comment on the fact that "Many a man ere now in dreams hath lain / With her who bare him […]" (quoted in Sophocles 1970, 72). For Freud, these lines confirm (regardless of the fact that in saying this, Jocasta is trying to comfort her son and

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[1] It is of course the latter, clinical, sense of the Oedipal which has been repeatedly used in psychoanalytical interpretations of Gothic narratives and theories of the Gothic genre; in other words, Oedipal means Freudian. At the same time, Jerrold Hogle's comment is worth noting: "It is not simply that psychoanalysis turned out to be useful for analysing Gothic fiction, but rather that the Gothic produced figurations of haunting surfaces and their concealed, archaic depths that helped to form the assumptions and articulation of psychoanalysis itself" (Hogle 2019, 6). Despite the rather obscure wording (what are those "figurations"?), Hogle's statement may be interpreted as a suggestion of the presence of a narrative structures that the Gothic romance had in common with psychoanalysis.

[2] The source for this and the subsequent references to and quotations from Sigmund Freud is an excerpt from *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1900], in James Strachey's translation (Sophocles 1970, 69-72). For details of the German original see the references section.

[3] In a passage in which he summarises Freud's observations on the *Oedipus* in a 1873 letter, Armstrong uses the word "gothic" in this reference to Freud's "theatrical" approach to the Oedipal: "a gothic shock of recognition at seeing upon the stage a figure who fulfils our hidden childhood experience" (Armstrong 2012, 480). This is the only occurrence of "gothic" in Armstrong's article, and – suggestively – as no explanation is offered, the critic evidently assumes that the reader will find its meaning sufficiently clear.

[4] The whole sentence in *The Interpretation of Dreams* is as follows: "His [Oedipus'] destiny moves us only because it might have been ours – because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him" (Freud 1970, 70). In the original, the words for "destiny" and "curse" are *Schicksal* and *Fluch*, respectively (Freud 1961, 269).

husband) his theory concerning the repressed status of the incestuous impulse. From the "theatrical" perspective, however, there is another moment in the play, which is of special importance in terms of plot's "gothicness." During his interview with Jocasta, Oedipus recalls an incident from before his visit to Delphi and his flight from Corinth, an incident which first raised in his mind doubts related to his birth: "[…] at dinner once, a man had too much wine, and claimed I was foisted falsely on my father" (Sophocles 2022, 31, lines 779-780). Oedipus confesses to having been "gnawed" by doubts, whereupon he went to the oracle and heard the terrifying prophecy. As we shall see presently, in Radcliffe's *Udolpho*, a similar moment of filial doubting is used to launch a narrative of suspenseful mystery in a truly genre-defining fashion. We shall see how the "Freudian" formula for a compelling plot is closely observed regardless of the absence in it of the clinical content. In other words, we shall see that a narrative may be Oedipal without being Freudian at the same time.

The challenge is great, for the anachronistic psychoanalytic understanding of the term "Oedipal" has virtually eliminated other approaches to *Oedipus*'s content and narrative structure. We might say that the Freudian interpretation has been the sin that has blinded critics by making them unable to look past the incest. David Grossvogel's 1979 book *Mystery and Its Fictions: from Oedipus to Agatha Christie* is – despite the promising title – a sad case in point. What else could possibly have made the critic state that "Oedipus blinds himself in a final act that is not unlike a symbolic prelude to intercourse with Jocasta, now dead and lying on the ground […]" (Grossvogel 1979, 34)? On the other hand, studies from a non-Freudian perspective, approaching *Oedipus* as a gripping story of mystery and detection, have been half-hearted. Before proceeding with our analysis of the suspense, let us examine an example. As John Scaggs points out in *Crime Fiction*, *Oedipus* can be regarded as a proto-detective story. The reasons are as follows: the status of the criminal as an outsider, the double position of Oedipus "as both the criminal and the force of law and authority," as this "doubling of functions" "reappears in later crime fiction, in particular in revenge tragedy and in hard-boiled detective fiction." This remark strikes me as odd, as does another one, concerning the methods employed by Oedipus in his "enquiry," which the critic calls "supernatural" and "pre-rational" (Scaggs 2005, 10-11). The idea that the perpetrator is an outsider is irrelevant at best. It is much more pertinent to see in Oedipus an extreme case of a perpetrator with a double identity; the difference being that in crime stories – in Agatha Christie mysteries, for instance – the two identities are not separated as profoundly as they are in the *Oedipus*, where the perpetrator is not trying to conceal the fact that he has killed a man but is unaware of the victim's identity. Moreover, Oedipus' methods of solving the murder of Laius strike us as mundane and conventional: he conducts a series of interviews. What is supernatural is the manner in which he is implicated – due to the curse – in the murder he sets out to solve as an impartial investigator.

Similarly to *Oedipus*, also Gothic stories have been regarded as displaying features characteristic of murder mysteries. A little further in his book, Scaggs offers a comment on the Gothic, while repeatedly referencing Fred Botting's book *Gothic*, which incidentally also, like his *Crime Fiction*, appeared in the New Critical Idiom series: "The Gothic novel is characterised by the disruptive return of the past into the present, particularly in the form of hidden family secrets and ghosts, and the narrative tension between the past and the present reflects the social and intellectual tension between pre-Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment ideas" (Scaggs 2005, 15-16). Without going into

a debate over the relevance of the pre-/post-Enlightenment opposition for Gothic narratives, it must be noted that also *Oedipus*, in the very figure of its hero, builds a tension between the past and the present, just like a "cold-case" murder mystery (e.g., Christie's *Five Little Pigs*) would be expected to do. The phrase, "hidden family secrets and ghosts" applies *both* to the *Oedipus* and to *Udolpho*, inasmuch as in both plots ghosts are metaphorical rather than real and can be regarded as symbolic of the disruptive presence of the past in the narrative present.

The approach that I propose deviates from typical genre-focused discussions, which tend to single out selected historical features as characteristic of the Gothic, the mystery, the detective, and so on. When examining the two literary texts, *Oedipus* and *Udolpho*, I want to zoom in on and describe an affinity that can be found in the specific orientation of the narrative current and which is responsible for the building of a specific narrative tension. It would be difficult and futile to find a story which does *not* in some way relate the present to the past. As I hope to show, Gothic plots deploy this relation in a manner which is Oedipal and which makes *Oedipus* distinct from a typical murder mystery.

In a murder mystery, the result of the investigation may be anticipated with a degree of anxiety, but the *Oedipus* builds suspense in a very specific manner in that the investigation is essentially related to the investigator's (the "detective's") sense of personal identity. Early in the story we begin to suspect that the protagonist may be responsible for the crime which he has undertaken to solve. The question is, how much is personally at stake here for the "detective"? The greater the stakes, the greater the involvement, and hence also the greater the past-oriented suspense. Constitutive of the Oedipal species of narrative suspense is thus the way in which the detective's identity is destabilised by the enquiry he or she undertakes, which, as it concerns a crime, is of course oriented towards the past. The result of the investigation will determine the degree of the investigator's involvement (if any) in the commission of that crime and the degree of his or her guilt. Even though every criminal investigation is past-oriented and motivated by a desire to find out what happened, it does not elicit that deep level of personal involvement in the investigator. In fact, this kind of involvement is very rare and exceptional, which does not mean that it must be Oedipal in the Freudian or clinical sense of the term.

A significant element of the Oedipal narrative can be described as an oblivious disconnection from the past, an erasure of the past from memory, individual or collective. To be sure, this amnesia – as we might call it – is not complete. Oedipus knows that he killed a man, yet he does not seem to be greatly concerned about that event; after all, in his opinion, the victim fully deserved his fate. What Oedipus is unaware of is the identity of the victim. He believes he killed an offending stranger. His attitude changes dramatically when he starts suspecting or is made to suspect that the man he once killed was his father. Mutatis mutandis, this is also true about his, Oedipus', relationship with Jocasta.

The relation between the past and the present is represented as restless, in the sense that the past is not allowed to "rest." In this respect, the good of the community is more important than the wellbeing of any individual member. The gods are determined to prevent the past from receding into oblivion. Like an avenging spectre, the past remains present in the form of the pestilence, which is decimating the population of the city. Peaceful present depends on laying that spectre to rest by bringing the truth to light and the guilty to justice. This retributive, right-the-wrongs pattern is also known from

detective fiction, where, however, the divine element is usually replaced by a mundane equivalent, frequently by the detective's sense of moral or professional obligation. In Sophocles, the conflicting forces of oblivion and revelation are fighting their battle in one man, the authority figure, the "tyrannos," but also one whose sense of identity is being shaped or redefined as the investigation progresses.

Let us return to Radcliffe in an attempt to identify Oedipal elements in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. As suggested at the outset, this may help us capture something unique about Gothic plots. The novel typically features a mystery which arches over the entire narrative. We may say that this mystery is represented by a miniature portrait which the heroine, Emily, sees for the first time at the end of Chapter 2 (vol. I), a chapter which recounts the death of her mother. At some point, Emily happens to observe her father, St. Aubert, in circumstances which she is at a loss to make sense of and which raise in her mind some dreadful "conjectures" whose very namelessness intensifies the terrors they inflict upon the "epistemologically confused" heroine.[5] Here is the passage:

> On looking through the panes of glass, she [Emily] saw him [her father, St. Aubert] seated at a small table, with papers before him, some of which he was reading with deep attention and interest, during which he often wept and sobbed aloud. Emily, who had come to the door to learn whether her father was ill, was now detained there by a mixture of curiosity and tenderness. She could not witness his sorrow, without being anxious to know the subject of; and she therefore continued to observe him in silence, concluding that those papers were letters of her late mother. Presently he knelt down, and with a look so solemn as she had seldom seen him assume, and which was mingled with a certain wild expression, that partook more of horror than of any other character, he prayed silently for a considerable time.
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> When he rose, a ghastly paleness was on his countenance. Emily was hastily retiring; but she saw him turn again to the papers, and she stopped. He took from among them a small case, and from thence a miniature picture. The rays of light fell strongly upon it, and she perceived it to be that of a lady, but not of her mother.
>
> St. Aubert gazed earnestly and tenderly upon his portrait, put it to his lips, and then to his heart, and sighed with a convulsive force. Emily could scarcely believe what she saw to be real. She never knew till now that he had a picture of any other lady than her mother, much less that he had one which he evidently valued so highly; but having looked repeatedly, to be certain that it was not the resemblance of Madame St. Aubert, she became entirely convinced that it was designed for that of some other person.
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> (Radcliffe 2008, 26).

The reader is expected fully to share the confusion of the heroine. Her inability to identify the lady represented in the miniature picture ("some other person") is aggravated by the father's handling of it, a display of emotional attachment which – given his legitimate wife's death – one could reasonably expect to be related to a picture

[5] I borrow the idea of "epistemological confusion" from Diane Hoeveler (1998: 92).

represented the deceased rather than "that of a lady," whom Emily fails to recognise. In other words, in Emily's mind, the break-up of the family due to the loss of the mother is now aggravated and made more painful by the mysterious miniature picture, which draws a kind of wedge between her and the father, the two surviving members of the family.

Another significant episode in this subplot occurs immediately before the death of St. Aubert. In Chapter 7 of the same volume, he makes Emily comply with two death-bed injunctions; one is never to sell the family estate of La Vallée, the other, to burn some papers without perusing them: "These papers you must burn – and, solemnly I command you, *without examining them*" (Radcliffe 2008, 78; emphasis in the original). Her father dead, Emily dutifully "consigns" the papers to oblivion by immolation. At the same time, the mystery is not allowed entirely to be extinguished and the novelist makes sure, as it were, that the heroine's curiosity has enough fuel to sustain it for many subsequent chapters. When about to burn the papers, Emily inadvertently catches a glimpse of the manuscript, just a word or two, to be sure, but enough to make her shudder: "[...] her eyes involuntarily settled on the writing of some loose sheets, which lay open; and she was unconscious, that she was transgressing her father's strict injunction, till a sentence of dreadful import awakened her attention and her memory together. She hastily put the papers from her; but the words, which had roused equally her curiosity and terror, she could not dismiss from her thoughts" (Radcliffe 2008, 103) As before, obscurity reigns, as the reader is never told what those terrible words were. Moreover, Emily finds the miniature portrait, that "of a – lady," which she recognises as "the same [...] my father wept over!" but still cannot identify the person represented (104). As the father's injunction did not extend to this object, the picture is saved from the flames.

Also here, as in the case of the famous black veil at Udolpho, the *reader*'s curiosity is given little to go on, as the narrator refuses to be explicit. We see Radcliffe following her doctrine of obscurity (or narrative reticence) not only, and not even primarily, in her treatment of ghosts. The narrative does not spell out the ideas which cause Emily to be terrified and the readers are supposed to build their own suspicions. Could the picture represent the father's mistress and Emily's biological mother? In this ambiguous treatment of the theme of legitimacy, we detect an analogy to Radcliffe's method of explaining the ghosts away. Just as the supposed ghosts eventually turn out to be fake, also suspicions of illegitimacy eventually vanish when the truth is revealed. At the same time, planting and feeding such suspicions sustain the reader's interest in the progression of the story. What these suspicions have in common is their past-orientedness, which of course means that that interest is also directed towards the mysteries hidden in the back-story (Emily's birth, the past of Udolpho and of Chateau-le-Blanc).

The revelation comes in Chapter 17 of volume IV (the penultimate chapter of the novel). The all-revealing passage reads as follows:

> Emily, in discovering the Marchioness de Villeroi [the lady represented in the miniature picture] to have been the sister of Mons. St. Aubert, was variously affected; but, amidst the sorrow, which she suffered for her untimely death, she was released from an anxious and painful conjecture, occasioned by the rash assertion of Signora Laurentini, concerning her birth and the honour of her parents. Her faith in St. Aubert's principles would scarcely allow her to suspect that he had acted dishonourably; and she felt such reluctance to believe herself the daughter of any other, than her, whom she had always considered and loved as a

> mother, that she would hardly admit such a circumstance to be possible; yet the likeness, which it had frequently been affirmed she bore to the late Marchioness, the former behaviour of Dorothée the old housekeeper, the assertion of Laurentini, and the mysterious attachment, which St. Aubert had discovered, awakened doubts, as to his connection with the Marchioness, which her reason could neither vanquish, or confirm. From these, however, she was now relieved, and all the circumstances of her father's conduct were fully explained: [...]. (Radcliffe 2008, 663)

References to Signora Laurentini are crucial. Laurentini – or Sister Agnes, as she is known in the convent where she lives and dies – is the main offender: the jealousy-driven murderess of St. Aubert's sister and Emily's aunt, the Marchioness de Villeroi, the lady represented in the miniature portrait. Somewhat conveniently, Laurentini is also responsible for planting (or rather, strengthening) the suspicion, the "painful conjecture," of illegitimacy (incest?) in Emily's mind (see Łowczanin 2015).

The reader is of course glad that Emily's mind has found the much-desired repose after being painfully oppressed with "doubts" and "an anxious and painful conjecture" regarding the purity of her birth. The reader rejoices in the heroine's relief and in her triumphal return to La Vallee in the company of her husband, Chevalier Valancourt, now that his reputation also (like that of St. Aubert, for that matter) has been vindicated. In the reader's mind, however, doubts linger in proportion to the strength of the those painful doubts and anxious conjectures, as some questions remain unanswered. For instance, what should we make of the puzzling resemblance of Emily to sister Agnes/Laurentini? What should we make of Emily's inability to identify the person represented in the miniature picture?

Most significantly, however, in view of our interest here in the Oedipal element in the subplot, we need to say more about the familiar/familial source of those doubts and anxieties. Let us try to sort out the similarities and differences in order to be able to see to what extent the label Oedipal is justified.

The differences are many. First of all, the Oedipus plot is a tragic one, with the prominent position of the cure and the operation of fate. Radcliffe's Emily is not doomed to experience the kind of tragic illumination which fate dishes out to Oedipus. In the 1970 Norton edition, Oedipus exclaims, in the moment of tragic illumination: "Oh God! O no! I see it now! All clear! O Light! I will never look on you again! Sin! Sin in my birth! Sin in my marriage! Sin in blood!" (Sophocles 1970, 27). In a more recent, "pagan" translation, there is no reference to sin: "Oh, oh! Everything now comes clear. / O light, I look at you for the last time! / Now I'm revealed as who I am: the child / of parents who should not have had a child. / I lived with those who should not be together, / and I killed those whom it was wrong to kill." (Sophocles 2022, 45; lines 1182-1187). The differences are substantial, reflecting, on the whole, the fact that a reading of the play cannot help being filtered through the concerns and predisposition of the reader, which hardly need to be said.

From a contemporary perspective, especially one influenced by the Christian concept of sin the Oedipus plot recounts the discovery of occult *guilt* (to use a phrase from *Hamlet*, see below). Scholars protest against this kind of anachronistic interpretation and cite a passage from *Oedipus at Colonus* in support of the idea that Oedipus is aware of his *innocence* (Dawe 1982, 4). Accepting the strength of this reading, we perceive an

analogy with the situation of *Udolpho*'s heroine; Emily, though painfully anxious over the issue of her legitimacy, is similarly innocent. At the same time, there is a huge difference, for the past "crimes" are not hers to have committed. Even if her worst suspicions were true, it would still be impossible to hold her personally responsible for the transgressions.

Another difference that comes into view concerns the investigation. The play lays great emphasis on the political and communal dimension of the investigation into the death of Laius. The gods have made sure, as it were, that the well-being and the future of the whole city-state (the *polis*) of Thebes depends on the success of this enquiry. This dimension corresponds to the systematic nature of Oedipus' proceedings. In contrast to this, the situation in *Udolpho* is both personal in terms of the dimension and lacks the thoroughgoing determination in the pursuit of the truth, which may at least in part be put down to the insecurities of Emily's situation, the fact that in the Udolpho/Montoni part of the narrative, she is her aunt's dependent, Montoni's prisoner, and finally a fugitive. Besides, as we have observed, her father's injunctions concerning the papers were meant to prevent her from being able to solve the mystery.

To further sharpen the concept of the non-Freudian Oedipal narrative, let us briefly examine other literary examples. One is *Hamlet*, a work which, in Freud's mind, was closely associated with the Oedipal and exemplified the clinical understanding of this concept dressed in literary guise. I will also briefly discuss two of Agatha Christie's "cosy" mysteries, ones in which the investigation concerns "cold cases" that involve domestic crimes and transgressions. My goal is to inquire whether, due to their persistent preoccupation with transgressive past, we can detect in them typically Gothic plot arrangements. Do they deliver past-oriented suspense?

In *Hamlet*, whose role in the development of the literary Gothic in England would be difficult to overestimate (Mydla 2009; Williams 2020, 149ff), there are two episodes worthy of attention. One is that of the ghostly revelation and concerns Hamlet's suspicions of rottenness, not in the state as such, but in his family: "O my prophetic soul! My uncle!" (1.5, 41). The horrors of incestuous adultery haunt Hamlet/*Hamlet*. Radcliffe repeatedly and insistently uses the idea of fatherly haunting, especially so in the scenes in which, in La Vallée, she makes Emily have visions of her father at the same moment when she is about to execute his orders: "To this inform state of her nerves may be attributed what she imagined, when, her eyes glancing a second time on the arm-chair, which stood in an obscure part of the closet, the countenance of her dead father appeared there" (Radcliffe 2008, 102-103). In scenes of this kind, Radcliffe may be said to conflate the Oedipal and the supernatural. Emily's mind is agitated in two ways and by two causes: the mundane suspicions (murderous adultery, as embodied in the figure of Agnes/Laurentini) and the spectral presence of the father. The latter, however, unlike the vengeful Ghost of Old Hamlet, is bent on suppressing the painful familial secrets.

The other episode that is worthy of note is that of Claudius and his "occult guilt" (*Hamlet* 3.2, 80), especially in relation to Hamlet's scheme of revealing it through with the help of the play-within-the-play, or the Mousetrap, as the latter facetiously calls it (3.2, 232). Hamlet's scheme corresponds closely to Freud's comparison between the plot of *Oedipus* and the psychoanalytical method of identifying and revealing hidden guilt ("a process that can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis"). In his comments on *Hamlet*, Freud makes no allusion to this episode, fixing his attention instead on the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. Yet, both in *Hamlet* and *The Mysteries of*

Udolpho – as in the *Oedipus*, of course – there is an actual murder mystery, which must be solved. In both, the protagonist is personally concerned, even though the configurations of this personal concern are different. The culprits and "villains," namely, the incestuous fratricide in *Hamlet*[6] and the passion-driven lover in *Udolpho*, are two different cases of guilt-oppressed conscience. Shakespeare's Claudius does not meet the conditions of an Oedipal protagonist. He is a murderer who – according to his own confession – is keenly aware of the enormity of his crime and, like Macbeth, is making his personal safety a priority. Radcliffe's treatment of this topic is Gothic, with Agnes/Laurentini driven to distraction by her guilt in the shape of visions of avenging spectre of her victim. What makes the scenes of haunting in *Udolpho* Oedipal is the fact that she takes Emily for the ghost of her victim, Emily's aunt (Radcliffe 2008, 578). Emily is thus cast in the role of an avenging spectre representing the culprit's criminal past. This gives the trope of haunting by guilt a twist which may be considered a Gothic variation on the Shakespearean original, where Claudius is, as it were, separated from the supernatural.

In the final section of this article, I want to look at two murder mysteries by Agatha Christie, ones in which we might reasonably expect to find an Oedipal plot arrangement. I have chosen two of the Poirot novels, *Five Little Pigs* from 1942 and *Elephants Can Remember* from 1972. As I have already noted, the choice is not arbitrary. As both recount investigations into mysterious deaths of parents in which the surviving children – daughters, to be precise – are involved, the question might arise, Are the mysteries Gothic? The latter novel is especially interesting, and not only due to its being one of the last of Christie novels (the author died in 1976), but also and chiefly due to the persistent way in which it addresses the issues of memory and ageing. The "elephants" who "remember" are those whom Hercule Poirot and his companion detective (and crime author) Ariadne Oliver interview in their joint attempt to reconstruct the events that took place some 12 years before the commencement of the story. References to Poirot's previous cases, including that recounted in *Five Little Pigs*, stress the fact that in *Elephants* Christie takes up a theme which she found worth exploring 30 years before. This theme is summed up in the title of one chapter, "old sins have long shadows," which brings to mind the Biblical "moral" Horace Walpole attached to his "Gothic" story: "sins of the fathers visited on the children" (Walpole 1998, 7; Preface to the 1st edition).

In *Five Little Pigs*, Hercule Poirot is approached by a 21-year-old lady, Caroline Lemarchant née Crale, who asks him to examine a case from 16 years ago: her mother, also Caroline, was found guilty of murdering her husband (Caroline's father) and died a year after being sentenced to "penal servitude for life" (Christie 2013, 3). Caroline believes that her mother was innocent, this belief made strong by the mother's written confirmation. Now she wants Poirot to prove it. To the extent that the plot involves family relations and a "familial" murder, it may be regarded as Oedipal, especially as regards the situation of Caroline. She is determined to know the past, which she does not seem to remember. At twenty years of age, she began "to ask questions. About my own

[6] The fact that the marriage between Claudius and Gertrude is not incestuous in the literal sense is of little importance. What matters is that both the Ghost and Hamlet *believe* that "damned incest" (*Hamlet* 1.5, 83) has been committed. Like the Catholic provenance of the Ghost, this issue has elicited critical debate; see for instance the editors' comment in the 3rd Arden edition of *Hamlet* (Shakespeare 2016: 209, editors' note to line 1.2.157).

mother and father. Who they were and what they did?" (Christie 2013, 5). An "amnesiac" disconnect between the past and the present is certainly there: the past is so remote that it has to be forcefully retrieved from the memory of the five people who witnessed the tragedy, one of whom eventually turns out to be the real murderer. At the same time, the novel lacks a truly Oedipal element, as the character principally concerned, Caroline, is not personally involved in the enquiry, either as an investigator or as a suspect. Typically of these mysteries, the detective is detached from the case, and this lack of personal stakes in fact guarantees a successful execution of the task with which he is entrusted. At the same time, while Caroline admits that the past "matters" to her and her future husband, she stresses that what matters even more is the future (Christie 2013, 6).

On the way to the other Christie novel, I would like to respond to a possible general objection: No cosy mystery novel – the argument might go – can be regarded as "Gothic" for the obvious reasons that the author worked in a genre of her own, a genre which the Poirot fictions largely defined. In theory, this is true. In *Five Little Pigs*, however, the conventions of the genre did not prevent Christie from engaging – if somewhat playfully – the idea of the supernatural. In the chapter "Reconstruction" at the end of the book, the ghosts of the past are finally expected to be "laid." Even though Poirot dismisses the idea of a "*séance*," he admits that "as to the ghosts, they will not materialize, but who is to say they are not here, in this room, although we cannot see them" (Christie 2013, 251). Yet the fact remains that all this ghost-talk is irrelevant and in no way obliterates the exceptionally uncanny fact that the murder of Caroline's father was committed by his then lover, Elsa, who watched him die while he way finishing her, Elsa's, portrait. Despite the daughter's determination to expose the truth about the past and despite the detective's successful exposure of this shocking iniquity, the story fails to convey a modern version of the Oedipal, which indeed it was not the author's goal to do, some ambiguous initial suggestions to the contrary notwithstanding.

As I have already indicated, in *Elephants Can Remember*, Christie is persistently preoccupied with memory, the "elephants" being the people who still remember and can help shed new light on the "tragedy" that took place 12 years earlier (Christie 2002, 46-47), the alleged "suicide pact" of a couple, the Ravenscrofts. Their daughter, Celia – like Caroline, her counterpart from *Five Little Pigs* – is hoping to get married. According to the social logic at work in *Udolpho*, being able to start a life of her own means being released, as it were, from the past and its dreadful mysteries. Celia does want to know what really happened. She refuses to remain ignorant, even though, as Poirot warns her, truth may not bring "reassurance."

> [...] when I start an investigation I pursue it to the end. I will bring to light the truth and if it is, shall we say, truly the truth that you want, then I will deliver that knowledge to you. But it may that you want reassuring. That is not the same thing as the truth. (Christie 2002, 194).

> I think there may be something very painful to learn and I am asking you whether you will be wise enough to say: "The past is the past. There is a young man whom I care for and who cares for me. This is the future we are spending together, not the past." (197)

In this way, we may say, Poirot offers a combination of the circumspection of Tiresias (as he offers a similar warning to Oedipus) and the determination of Oedipus to proceed with the investigation.

In the context in which we are discussing the novel, such "Oedipal" echoes seem distinct. Indeed, Christie strengthens them with an explicit reference to the Greeks: "[...] the Greeks" – says Poirot – "were the inventors of curiosity. They wanted to *know*. Before them [...] nobody wanted to know *much*" (Christie 2002, 42; emphasis in the original). At the same time, the young lady's interest in the past seems meagre in comparison with the intense involvement of an Oedipus or a Gothic heroine. Unlike her fictional predecessor in *Five Little Pigs*, Celia was not present when the domestic tragedy occurred; but like Caroline she takes no part in the investigation. Moreover, when the "ugly" truth does come to light, Celia remains unperturbed:

> "No," said Celia, "we'll never worry again. I think they were rather splendid people, my mother and father. Mother tried to look after her sister all her life, but I suppose it was a bit too hopeless. You can't stop people from being like they are." (Christie 2002, 297)

This comment may shock the reader, who remembers that this "sister," Dorothea, Celia's aunt and her mother's twin sister, killed her sibling out of jealously, whereupon her father killed the offending woman, Dorothea, as an act of justice, and then took his own life. Perhaps, in a not entirely satisfying attempt to deliver a denouement that accords with the conventions of the genre, Christie decided not to dwell on the sinister loose ends and ramifications of this uniquely dark tale, one of them being that of heredity. The uneasy question that the readers and Celia are left with is, can she have inherited any of the tendencies which made her aunt antisocial and homicidal, making her a deadly threat to children and kin? In a manner reminiscent of *Udolpho*, the tragic past seems to have been safely left behind. Like Oedipus, the main offender is exculpated: "Dorothea was a tragic figure. By no fault of her own but by some accident of genes, of birth, of hereditary characteristics, she was mentally unstable" (Christie 2002, 286).

To conclude, an artistic meaning of the Oedipal can be distinguished from its clinical, Freudian understanding and can be used to detect and describe instances of Gothic narrative arrangement in which investigation related to past transgressions destabilises the investigating protagonist's sense of his or her identity. Gothic narratives posit a distant yet troublesome past which haunts the present (sometimes in the shape of an actual ghost) and calls for exposure of crimes and the righting of wrongs. The Gothic element is related to the amount of anxiety and suspense that the thus-acquired knowledge regarding the past transgressions generates and the extent of a protagonist's responsibility for them. An analysis of the mystery plot in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* shows essential analogies with the plot of *Oedipus*. We see in the novel how the author sets in motion an anxiety-based past-oriented curiosity, which can be regarded as Oedipal with no recourse to the Freudian clinical interpretation of the play. An analysis of examples of the detective genre shows that criminal investigations, despite their orientation towards the past, may lack the specific type of suspense that Gothic narratives aimed to produce.

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