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7-1-2015

Cronstadt Castle [supplemental material]

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Cronstadt Castle; or, The Mysterious Visitor An Original Romance (c. 1800) by an Unknown Author

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MLA Citation

Cronstadt Castle; or, The Mysterious Visitor. An Original Romance. London: A. Kemmish, c. 1800. Print.

MLA Citation from the Gothic Archive

Cronstadt Castle; or, The Mysterious Visitor. An Original Romance. Published c. 1800. E-Publications Marquette. The Gothic Archive, Marquette University, Wisconsin.

http://epublications.marquette.edu/english_gothic/5/. Accessed 9/16/13. Web.

Cronstadt Castle; or, The Mysterious Visitor. An Original Romance.

Full Title

Cronstadt Castle; or, The Mysterious Visitor. An Original Romance.

Summary

The Count de Cronstadt retires for unknown reasons to his remote family castle with his wife, the Countess, and daughter, Joanna. The family dwells there in complete isolation for ten years until their peace is interrupted by the arrival of a young nobleman, Villeroy, who appears at the castle while the Count is away. His servant, Martin, has been gravely injured defending his master from desperadoes. The Countess agrees to care for Martin on the condition that both men remain hidden and depart without the Count knowing of their stay. Villeroy, who has taken an interest in Joanna, is curious about the Count's self-inflicted exile. One night, a ghost-like figure appears before Villeroy and leads him to an underground vault. When he relates the incident to Martin, his servant becomes convinced the Count de Cronstadt is a murderer. The two men are interrupted by the Countess, who enters the apartment in tears and leads Villeroy to her husband, who is dying from a self-inflicted stab wound. Before he dies, the Count takes Villeroy's hand and begs his forgiveness. The Countess explains to Villeroy (who is actually Henry, the Marquis Mont Aubin) that before his suicide, the Count confessed to having kept Henry's father locked in the castle for the last ten years. Remembering his mysterious visitor, Henry returns to the underground vault and discovers a cellar containing his emaciated father. The entire party sits down to hear the contents of a confession left by the Count. Years before, he was good friends with the elder Marquis and Chevalier Lannoy, until the Count fell madly in love with Lannoy's wife, Julia. The two began an affair while Lannoy was abroad and Julia became pregnant. The Count conspired with a servant, Rodolpho, to murder the chevalier on his return journey. The elder Marquis eventually discovered the affair and the Count imprisoned him to maintain the secret. The Count was finally driven to suicide when he learned Rodolpho, under torture, had recently confessed his part in the murder. The chapbook concludes with Henry and Joanna's marriage.

The appended short story, *The Unfortunate Victim*, is the tale of Ludovisio Carantani, who has two daughters. In a bid to consolidate his wealth, he decides to place his daughter Olympia in a convent, while the other, Victoria, is to marry a wealthy young man. He threatens to kill Olympia if she does not take the veil at his command. She begs him to release her from confinement at the convent, since she longs to enjoy her youth. In the end, she hangs herself in the convent's garret before her vows are complete. Her father is dragged to death by his horse immediately thereafter. Victoria's intended husband abandons her, and Victoria dies from grief.

Constellation of Knowledge/Historical Context

Cronstadt Castle is very loosely based on an earlier Gothic sentimental novel by Clara Reeve, *The Exiles; or, Memoirs of the Count de Cronstadt*, published in 1788. Reeve's novel centers on a young aristocrat who commits bigamy. Because the parallel between the two publications is tenuous, the chapbook may have been capitalizing on readers' familiarity with the name Cronstadt and the sensationalism associated with it. Reeve originally borrowed the idea for *The Exiles* from an earlier French sentimentalist, Baculard d'Arnaud, but took great pains to hide the source from readers because of Britain's anti-French sentiment.

The chapbook's setting, a ruined castle with a haunted past, appears in other Gothic chapbooks and novels. Characters in both *The Ruins of the Abbey of Fitz-Martin* and *The Abbess* express fears over bandits taking up residence in an abandoned castle, a fear shared by Villeroy's servant, Martin, and eventually proven true. The plot of a young nobleman taking shelter in an abandoned building and being helped by the daughter of a criminal is also reflected in *The Knight of the Broom Flower; or, The Horrors of the Priory* published the same year as *Cronstadt Castle*.

The Count's written confession closely mirrors that of Father Schedoni in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* and another chapbook, *Nicholas Pedrosa*, published in 1799. Schedoni also hires a servant-henchman to murder his brother and gain access to the dead man's wife. Like Rodolpho, the servant's confession is Schedoni's undoing. Pedrosa is coerced into murdering a pregnant Spanish nobleman's wife by the bishop who seduced her while her husband was abroad.

Cronstadt is the name of the largest town in Transylvania. Transylvania fell under Habsburg rule in the late seventeenth century, followed by a push toward Roman Catholicism in order to consolidate Austrian power. Its nobility was primarily Protestant. By invoking a Transylvanian town, the chapbook invokes yet another Church-dominated region much like the use of Spanish and Italian settings in other Gothic tales.

Key Words

Apparition

A ghost appears to Villeroy while he is staying at *Cronstadt Castle* and attempts to reveal his father's hidden cell to him. This ghost could be the 'mysterious visitor' referenced in the chapbook's subtitle, since his frightening appearance is one of the most sensational moments in the text. The ghost cannot speak, and his message is therefore obscured. It's not until the end of the chapbook that we learn that this ghost was probably the murdered Lannoy, who was attempting to reveal his friend's imprisonment to the castle's inhabitants. If it had not been for the ghost, the trapdoor to the cell may never have been found,

however, which means the apparition's message is eventually received in a roundabout way.

Banditti

In *Cronstadt Castle* we get the rare origin story of a leader of the banditti, who were so often the subjects of popular tales. Rodolpho, a manservant in Lannoy's household, decides to turn on his master for money, which in turn enables him to set up shop as a banditti in the forest. He is eventually captured by the authorities, and when they torture him, he reveals Count Cronstadt's crimes. In a twisted way, the banditti serve to reveal the truth in this chapbook. Rodolpho is caught for an unrelated crime, so the authorities only discover Lannoy's murder by accident. If this coerced confession had not taken place, it's possible the Count could have kept his secrets for many years to come.

Castle

The castle itself is almost a character in this chapbook. It seems to have endless corridors, winding and twisting in such a manner that even Joanna, who has lived there for a decade, is afraid to go around unescorted for fear she won't be able to find her way back. The castle also serves up a series of chambers within chambers, hidden rooms and abandoned wings, all contained within a crumbling exterior, surrounded by miles of unoccupied forests. This combination of claustrophobic containers set in an isolated place creates a trap for the women in the Count's family, who are held there at his whim.

Domesticity

Throughout *Cronstadt Castle*, Antonia, Joanna, and the servants manage to maintain a calm and orderly household despite the Count's unpredictable behavior. The chapbook strongly suggests the value Antonia's excellent hostessing and home management skills, as she is universally praised for them despite going against her husband's wishes and harboring Villeroy and Martin in the castle. Antonia's insistence on the maintenance of domestic routines is so entrenched that even after she and Lord Henry effect the rescue of his father from his hidden cell, she refuses to reveal her husband's secrets until after they've all had a good meal together.

Entrapment

Not only does the castle entrap its occupants, but entrapment is a central component of the main plot. The Marquis spends almost the entirety of *Cronstadt Castle* locked in a cell, where for ten years he is held captive. Entrapment is a common theme in the gothic, although it is most often used against the heroine of the tale. Nonetheless, the circumstances of the Marquis' confinement are horrific, and he nearly dies as a result of being held in close quarters with limited sustenance for such a long time.

Family

Beyond a simple extramarital affair, Count Cronstadt disrupts the notion of family by attempting to be the patriarch of two estates at once, and to ask two women to bear children in two places. From his letter of confession it is clear that his concept of family is

somehow improper to begin with, since he considers Lannoy to be 'a brother', but does not hesitate to impregnate his wife. *Cronstadt Castle* also contains the barely-mentioned tale of the 'orphan' Matilda, who stays in the castle as Joanna's companion. Matilda, of course, is not an orphan at all, but is the Marquis' long lost niece, whose identity was hidden as a result of her mother's shame at having extramarital intercourse with a banker. In this manner, the author of *Cronstadt Castle* manages to participate in many of the discourses surrounding family life at the turn of the century.

Letters/Manuscripts

The use of a letter to reveal secrets is a common trope in the gothic, although it is often clear that the source of that letter is unreliable. For example, the only way we know of Count Frederick's murder of Lannoy is through his letter, and since he's dead when the letter is found, it's not possible to question him about its contents. The characters in the chapbook seem to believe everything in the letter, however, the Count does paint a particularly flattering picture of himself as the intended protector of his neighbor's lovely wife, which strains credibility.

Identificatory Talisman

The presence of the onyx ring on Joanna's finger at the end of *Cronstadt Castle* serves as a modified identificatory talisman. Rather than identifying her by name or relationship, however, it serves to connect her with Villeroy's previous stay at the castle, when he took shelter there during a fierce storm. It is only through the ring that he realizes he is in the same place as before.

Intertextuality

The relationship of this story to Reeve's *Exiles* is just one aspect of the intertextuality of this chapbook. In addition to being connected by many tropes with other gothic chapbooks, *Cronstadt Castle* was physically bound with *The Unfortunate Victim*, which is another story of a terrible father who botches his responsibilities to his estate and children. *The Unfortunate Victim* also connects this text to America, where it was first published in *The Dessert to the True American* magazine December 29, 1798 under the title *The Tragical Story of Ludovisio Carantani, a Milanese and His Two Daughters*.

Violence

Violence occurs multiple times in *Cronstadt Castle*'s plot, and in the end is also revealed to have been the impetus for the extreme changes in the last ten years of Count Cronstadt's life. His violence is originally motivated by a complex mix of the desire for a woman, the need to hide secrets. Once his secrets are about to be revealed, however, he turns his violence against himself to commit suicide.

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