

“A Joy in Fear.” The Passion of Fear in Joanna Baillie’ s Plays *Orra* and *The Dream*

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ABSTRACT: This paper compares two tragedies in the third volume of Joanna Baillie’ s *Plays on the Passions* in which the playwright explores the workings of fear on the minds of two main protagonists. The title character of *Orra* is a woman driven to madness by her superstitious fear of the supernatural, which is indicative of Baillie’ s affiliation with the Gothic. In *The Dream*, General Osterloo collapses dreading death, terrified of dying with a guilty conscience. This paper discusses a new theory of theatre which Baillie herself formulated, that of didacticism, and draws connections to Burke’ s notion of the sublime, stressing the importance of fear and terror for creating an aesthetic experience. The plays also demonstrate a tendency to depict the psychology of characters, their suppressed feelings and emotions.

KEYWORDS: fear; sublime; imagination; madness; theory of theatre; psychology

In 1812, the Scottish playwright and poet Joanna Baillie (1762-1851) published her third volume of *A Series of Plays on the Passions In Which it is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind*, containing two tragedies *Orra*, *The Dream*, a comedy *The Seige*, and a musical *The Beacon*. Apart from the last mentioned work whose principal passion is hope, her last volume of plays is entirely devoted to the “passion” of fear.

Passions play an important role in all of the dramas by Baillie, since she is mainly interested in the psychology of her characters, emotions they are driven by, and the feelings that motivate their actions. Thus the objective is being replaced by the subjective, with the characters and their psychology being more important than the plot. Her view of tragedy as a genre is first presented in the “Introductory discourse” which formed a preface to the first volume of the *Plays on the Passions*. In it she wrote:

The task particularly belonging to tragedy is that of unveiling the human mind under the dominion of those strong and fixed passions, which seemingly unprovoked by outward circumstances, will, from small beginnings brood within the breast, till all the better dispositions, all the fair gifts of nature are

borne down before them; those passions which conceal themselves from the observation of men, which cannot unbosom themselves even to the dearest friend; and can, oftentimes, only give their fullness vent in the lonely desert, or in the darkness of midnight.¹

Baillie tried to formulate a new theory of theatre, believing that it need not serve merely as an entertainment, but that it could affect people's lives in a positive way. She expected her audience to learn from the experience of dramatic characters, be able to control the emotions which may destroy them by following their progress and gradual development. She believed that all people are naturally interested in emotions and what motivates the actions of other people, and that those passions would be more interesting in a dramatic piece than a mere spectacle.

In spite of the fact that Baillie intended her plays to be performed on the stage, they were more popular as "closet dramas", i.e. they were widely read. Not many of her dramas were really acted, partly due to the conditions of the theatres of her time, and also because of hostile reactions of some critics and reviewers.² She was, nevertheless, an important literary figure in the first half of the 19th century, and she counted among her friends many famous writers and poets. The recent critical interest in Baillie stresses her importance as a female playwright, one who dealt with issues like gender problems, patriarchal power, the power of imagination, and the importance of psychology.

Orra is the first play in which Baillie explores the emotion of fear, particularly that of the supernatural. This play is also unique among her oeuvre in that it has a female protagonist - she mostly casts male heroes in her plays. *Orra* is a young woman, heiress to a family fortune, whose guardian wants her to marry his son whom she loathes. She is a strong woman able to resist pressures; longing to live independently, she has her own plans and wants to be her own mistress, so that she may enjoy both her power and her wealth. She knows that in the fourteenth century, when the plot is set, the marriage of equals is almost impossible, thus she chooses spinsterhood. She rejects the state of being just "that poor and good-for nothing, helpless being...with all my lands and rights in the hands of some proud man".³ She refuses to obey both her guardian's demands and her father's last will. But she has one principal character flaw: like Catherine Morland from Jane Austen's early novel, *Northanger Abbey*,

¹ Joanna Baillie, "Introductory Discourse", *The Complete Works of Joanna Baillie*. (Philadelphia: Carey and Lea, 1832), 16.

² Christine A. Colón, "Introduction", In *Six Gothic Dramas*, selected and introduced by Christine A. Colón. (Chicago: Valancourt Books, 2007), xv-xxii. Colón mentions especially the critic of the *Edinburgh Review*, Francis Jeffrey.

³ Joanna Baillie, *Orra. A Series of Plays*. Vol. III. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977), 10.

Orra is obsessed with Gothic stories. She reads them a lot and she also likes her maid to tell her tales about the supernatural. Baillie criticizes the audience response to the Gothic, but compared to Austen's novel, Baillie's play lacks the irony of Austen's narrative. Orra's obsession is taken seriously, and it leads to tragic consequences. When reading or listening to a ghost story, she experiences both mental and physical delight. Orra is completely absorbed in her experience, unable to confront reality. She describes her feelings in this way:

When the cold blood shoots through every vein:
When every pore upon my shrunken skin,
A Knotted Knoll becomes, and to mine ears,
Strange inward sounds awake, and to mine eyes,
Rush stranger tears, There is a joy in fear.⁴

So for Orra, fear is a pleasant sensation.

However, such a strong emotion can be easily used to the character's disadvantage, and that is exactly what happens to Orra. To terrorize her into submission, her guardian and one treacherous count, who wants to marry her instead of the guardian's son, decide to confine her to a castle which is said to be haunted by a murdered knight. Both conspirators arrange that Orra hears the story of the knight and learns that she is the murderer's relative. The scheme is seemingly perfect, Orra is confined to the same chamber where the murder is said to have been committed, and even on the same date, St. Michael's Eve. She spends the critical night incarcerated in the chamber together with her maid, and even if she is most horrified, she still wants to listen to the stories of the spectres, so again, her passion is stronger than reason. She also repeatedly rejects the advances of the treacherous count who tries to use her superstitious fear to force her into a marriage with him. But Orra rejects him claiming that to experience a night of terror is better than to become the wife of a "vile reptile"⁵, as she calls him.

The situation becomes more complicated when there appears a rescuer: Theobald, a nobleman of reduced fortune, enters through an underground passage leading to Orra's chamber. Unfortunately, he enters in the guise of the murdered "spectre-huntsman", which is not a good idea, because upon seeing him, Orra believes that she is being visited by her murdered ancestor. She shrieks and falls senseless to the ground. Orra never recovers - her strong emotion deprives her of sanity. Her madness is seen as a liberation from social

⁴ Baillie, *Orra*, 29.

⁵ Baillie, *Orra*, 71.

pressures, which is often the case with Gothic heroines. She escapes matrimony, because a mad, even if a rich wife, is not a desirable object. It was her superstitious fear which gave her guardian and other men conspiring against her a certain amount of power over her, which is now lost forever. Mad Orra declares: "I' m strong and terrible now: Mine eyes have looked upon all dreadful things."⁶ She feels strong, but not strong enough to liberate herself from her paranoia. As William D. Brewer observes, imagination can be both a liberating and debilitating power.⁷

The debilitating power of the imagination can be most strongly observed in the protagonist of the second tragedy on fear, *The Dream*. The principal character of this tragedy is a male, General Osterloo, a brave imperial warrior, whose principal weakness is the fear of death with guilty conscience. Baillie challenges the traditional view that women are naturally predisposed to succumb to fear, while men are not. In her address "To the Reader" she explains why she wrote a second tragedy on fear with a male hero. Baillie was "unwilling to appropriate this passion in a serious form to her own sex entirely, when the subjects of all other passions hitherto delineated in [*The Plays on the Passions*] are men".⁸ Also in the play one monk remarks to another, observing the pitiful state of mind of Osterloo awaiting execution, that "fear will sometimes couch under the brazen helmet as well as the woolen cowl."⁹

As in *Orra*, the world of *The Dream* is essentially a dark, Gothic, medieval nightmare. The action takes place in a monastery where two monks are haunted by disturbing dreams in which an opened tomb and a mysterious skeleton appear. In a nearby village, an unknown pestilence is claiming the lives of many peasants. In the dreams it is revealed that a passing knight should be chosen by lot to pay penance for a long-forgotten crime. Osterloo is the chosen knight who is to undergo the test of fear to redeem the suffering community. As the play progresses it turns out that Osterloo is a murderer who treacherously killed his rival in love who happened to be the brother of the prior of the monastery. The prior now wants to exact revenge and execute the knight. Osterloo is able to withstand physical torture since he is

⁶ Baillie, *Orra*, 99.

⁷ See William D. Brewer, "The Liberating and Debilitating Imagination in Joanna Baillie's *Orra* and *The Dream*", (In Romantic Circles Praxis Series, *Utopianism and Joanna Baillie*, edited by Orrin N.C. Wang, June 10, 2011, <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/utopia/brewer/brewer.html>).

⁸ Baillie, *The Complete Works*, 246.

⁹ Baillie, *The Dream*, In *Six Gothic Dramas*, selected and introduced by Christine A. Colón. (Chicago: Valancourt Books, 2007), 193.

a valiant soldier, but he is not prepared to face the reality of the crime he committed years before, and is horrified of the eternal punishment awaiting him after death.

While awaiting execution, he quickly deteriorates from a macho domineering type of a warrior into a feeble ruined man. As one monk sees him, “he seems broken and haggarded with age, and his quenched eyes are fixed in their sockets, like one who walks in sleep...”¹⁰ Similarly to Orra, there appears a brave rescuer who tries to save him, but this time the gender roles are reversed and his old love, countess Leonora, enters a secret passage leading to the monastery disguised as a monk. Unlike Osterloo, Leonora feels strong and full of energy, which saves her from fear. But her attempt fails - she has been deceived by a monk loyal to the prior and given a wrong key to the grated gate.

There is another chance for Osterloo when the king’s ambassador enters the execution chamber in the manner of the deus ex machina and orders the execution to stop at the very moment the executioner’s axe is about to behead the general. But it is too late, Osterloo is dead. The prior tells the ambassador to “return to Lewis of Bavaria your master and tell him that his noble general, free from personal injury of any kind, died, within the walls of this monastery, of fear.”¹¹

Both the characters of Orra and Osterloo share the same emotion of fear which is “intensified to the point of hysteria by their strong imagination.”¹² This character trait is quite symptomatic of the genre and the period, and we can find it in many plays and novels. David Punter in his *Literature of Terror* (1996) stresses the importance of fear as “not merely a theme or an attitude, but a factor having its consequences in terms of form, style and social relations of the texts.”¹³

Orra’s experience of joy united to fear reminds us of Edmund Burke who believed that “terror is in all cases whatsoever . . . the ruling principle of the sublime”, and that “no passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.”¹⁴ Burke also demonstrates the close connection between fear and pain in acting on body and mind, and observes that fear causes “unnatural tension of the nerves, alternately accompanied with unnatural strength which suddenly changes into an extraordinary weakness.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Baillie, *The Dream*, 192.

¹¹ Baillie, *The Dream*, 197.

¹² Brewer, “The Liberating and Debilitating Imagination,” 9.

¹³ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror*. (London: Longman, 1996), 18.

¹⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. In *The Works*, Vol. I. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), 88.

¹⁵ Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, 145.

These sudden changes can be seen both in Orra and Osterloo. Orra, when confined to the haunted chamber, repeatedly and bravely resists the advances of her suitor, but when he finally leaves her, she falls into utter despair. This tendency is more visible in Osterloo whose transformations from a brave soldier into a helpless miser are even more surprising. When he learns about the fate awaiting him, he desperately tries to free himself, exhibiting courage and strength. Also when Leonora, his former love and present rescuer, enters his prison cell, she hardly recognizes him, so changed is his appearance. But when she communicates to him the chance of a rescue, he retains his old strength, claiming that he is strong enough to liberate himself. When the attempt fails and the prior's soldiers try to detain them, Osterloo fights as a lion, then, upon being secured, falls again into his former stupor. A soldier describes the change in Osterloo: "Alas! His face has returned to its former colour, his head sinks on his breast, and his limbs are again feeble and listless. I would rather see him fighting like a fiend than see him thus."¹⁶

Burke mentions other concepts creating the effect of the sublime and affecting the imagination. He concluded his treatise with a chapter on the influence of words on the emotions. He states that eloquence and poetry are in many cases more capable than nature and the other arts of creating deep and lively impressions. This is certainly true for Orra who revels in ghost stories. The influence of words on Orra is clearly visible - she is flushed, then turns deadly pale. And when she is confined to a haunted chamber with her maid who tells her one more ghost story, the effects on Orra are clearly visible: "Thy shrunk and sharpened features, are of the corpse's colour, and thine eyes, are full of tears."¹⁷

Osterloo's imagination is less vivid because his fear rests mainly on the dread of the unknown realms of the afterlife. This is also the concept Burke mentions when he speaks about the fear connected to ideas of God, magnificence and infinity. Osterloo tells the prior that anything that can be endured here is mercy compared to the dreadful things that come after death. He is a sinner, so he believes that the dreadful tortures of hell will follow his execution. He even loses his faith, as his imagination overpowers his devotion. He sees a "terrible form that stalks forth to meet me! The stretching out of that hand! The greeting of that horrible smile! And it is thou, who must lead me before the tremendous majesty of my offended Maker!"¹⁸

¹⁶ Baillie, *The Dream*, 189.

¹⁷ Baillie, *Orra*, 74.

¹⁸ Baillie, *The Dream*, 187.

To conclude, Baillie in both plays depicts the emotion of fear and the power of imagination as strong forces operating on the minds of the characters of Orra and Osterloo. On the one hand, both protagonists experience the sense of the sublime as a strong aesthetic experience, while fear awakens their perceptions and enhances their human qualities bringing about the voice of conscience in the imperial general. On the other hand, their fearful imaginations make them vulnerable as they can be easily manipulated, which eventually brings about their destruction. Both plays, and in general most of Baillie's plays, reflect this tendency visible in the literature of the 19th century, a tendency to depict the psychology of the characters, a concentration on their suppressed feelings and emotions. Another important factor is the relationship between the imagination, reality and otherness, which in this period shifts from readings of otherness as supernatural, which Tzvetan Todorov calls "the marvelous", and otherness as natural and subjectively generated, which is the category of "the uncanny".¹⁹ There is no ghost of the dead knight in Orra, rather it is a real person, and the ghost exists only in Orra's vivid imagination. When encountering him Orra sees the image of her dreams, not reality. Also the dreadful scenes of the afterlife are present only in Osterloo's visions, but they are so strong that the boundaries of reality and dream, life and death collapse for him. So there definitely can be "a joy in fear", but the consequences can be less joyful than the experience itself.

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¹⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, translated by R. Howard. (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1975).

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