

William Dunlap's *Leicester*, or, the Migration of Gothic Drama

José Manuel Correoso-Rodenas¹

Abstract:

It is needless to say that Gothic has been (and still is) one of the most successful and fruitful literary movements ever developed in the Western Hemisphere. Lesser known is that it had its dramatic counterpart, a much less profitable subgenre, although cultivated by the leading authors that had enthroned gothic novels. The main objective of this article is to show how William Dunlap, the so-called father of American drama adapted the European conventions for the Gothic and rewrote them in the newly born United States. Through his tragedy *Leicester* (1807), it will be seen how Dunlap was both an inheritor of dramatic previous traditions (like Shakespeare's tragedies) and of Gothic (both novel and drama), as his relation with Charles Brockden Brown stated. This play (among others Dunlap wrote) proves how the genre "migrated" from European soil to America, as it had previously happened with narrations, generating a new tradition which lasts until the present day.

Key words: William Dunlap, *Leicester*, gothic drama, Transatlantic Studies

The last quarter of the eighteenth Century saw the awakening of a new literary genre which has been hugely influential in later writers and *belles lettres*. This new and significant genre was Gothic Literature, started with Horace Walpole's (1717-1797) *The Castle of Otranto* (1764)² and prolonged to around 1820 (at least in its first generation), until the publication of such important works as *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) and *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820).³ Gothic novels were a great editorial success at their time,⁴ becoming the best candidates of precedents of modern best-sellers. Works like Clara Reeve's (1729-1807) *The Old English Baron* (1778), Ann Radcliffe's (1764-1823) *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), or *The Italian, or the Confessional of the Black Penitents* (1797), Regina Maria Roche's (1764-1845) *The Children of the Abbey* (1796), or Matthew Gregory Lewis's

¹ William Dunlap's *Leicester*; Or, The Migration of Gothic Drama Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain)
E-mail: jcorreos@ucm.es

² However, it is possible to track the origins of the genre prior to 1764, as many critics argue. See, for instance, Davendra Prasad Varma (1957), William E. Engel (2002), Christina Morin and Niall Gillespie (2014), Elisabeth Bronfen and Beate Neumeier (2017), or Christina Morin (2018).

Besides these scholarly studies, the documents gathered by E. J. Clery and Robert Miles (2000) are also good examples of how the spirit of the Gothic and of Gothic-related concepts was already a reality decades (if not centuries) before the publication of *The Castle of Otranto*.

Here, we should also mention Horace Walpole's friend James Macpherson's (1736-1796) works, specially those of the fictional Gaelic bard Ossian. For further information, see Fiona J. Stafford (1988).

³ As it has been stated for the origins of the genre, the ending of the first generation of gothics is also problematic, for we could include James Hogg's (1770-1835) *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) within this group.

⁴ However, there are critics, such as Robert D. Mayo (1943), who states that this was not the case or that, at least, this posture should be re-considered: "The answer to this question, certainly, cannot be found either by equating popular success with artistic excellence or by citing the judgments of hostile reviewers. If we consider popularity, as we properly should, in terms of the actual interest of there adding public, a solution would seem to await the publication of an annual register of Gothic fiction, in which we might trace the rise and decline of the general taste. Neither of the present bibliographies, however, provides a satisfactory measure of this sort" (59).

(1775-1818) *The Monk* (1796), among many others,⁵ sold thousands of copies and contributed to the spread of the new fashion all across the European continent (specially Germany and France).⁶

But also in other countries like Spain⁷, being received even at the shores of the new nation, the United States where, according to Cathy N. Davidson (1986), the genre was always linked to social anxiety and economic distress:⁸

... the Gothic can subtly challenge the status quo of so-called traditional or premodern society while also criticizing the inherent problems of so-called modern society, especially progressive philosophical or economic theories (liberalism, deism, rationalism) based on a notion of human perfectability. The struggling individual has, in the Gothic world, a remarkable potential for good but an equally powerful motivation (and opportunity) for corruption. Mind is infinitely susceptible to benevolence and fellow feeling, and simultaneously prey to superstition, delusion, or its own deviousness. Moreover, class privilege only extends the abuses of individuals by giving them the authority to assert their will over others. The Gothic, in short, focuses on the systemic possibilities and problems of postrevolutionary American society and of the postrevolutionary self in action in that society (215).

Peter Kafer (2004) argued that the historical events that were taking place in America during the last quarter of the eighteenth century also meant an invaluable source of raw material for the first American gothicists, like Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), whose family suffered their effects:

The crucible of turmoil, crisis, inexplicable loss, and surprise recovery - underscored by explosion and light shows - was Charles Brown's childhood. The verbal attacks, the confiscations, the rocks through windows, the unwanted soldiers foisted on households, it could be said, were all part of the historical continuum for "the people called Quakers." As were "unjust" imprisonments (38-40).

At the same time, writers like Horace Walpole himself (with *The Mysterious Mother*, 1768), Matthew Gregory Lewis (with *Adelgitha; or, The Fruit of a Single Error. A Tragedy in Five Acts*, 1806), and Charles Robert Maturin (1782-1824) (with *Bertram; or The Castle of St. Aldobrand*, 1816), wrote gothic dramas. Eventually, these plays were a total failure of critic and audience, which was very surprising bearing in mind the great acceptance of their novels. As for the different mimesis that was generated, we could state a dissimilitude between the sphere of the private and of the public. In the first one, novels would have been read by particular individuals or small groups as an intellectual act. That did not constitute an extreme subversion of the morals of the time, because novels were labeled as "fantasies" and fictional representations. This happened even with the reasons scholars like Dale Townshend (2014) argue, for which reading gothic romances was not an easy task for eighteenth century Britons. However, theatre was a public event, where the society as a whole had to face the horrors and vices that were being depicted on the scene. The recognition could be total and the spectators would have gone through a process of anti-catharsis, for not a cure but a distress was offered by the actors and, in consequence, by the authors of the dramas. These, for years, even kept their plays in secret, as Paul Baines and Edward Burns (2000) state for Walpole's *The Mysterious Mother*: "The scandalous nature of the action amply indicates the reason why the play (unlike the novel) remained a secret for most of Walpole's life..." (xi). The origins of this particular phenomenon are stated by William Hughes (2013), who argues that "Though it is apparently permitted in academic criticism to appropriate pre-18th century plays as precursors of Gothic drama, readings based on such a rhetorical strategy will always be tainted by the rhetorical instabilities associated with anachronism" (242).

⁵ For a detailed list (although not complete) of the gothic novels that were published in this period, see Juan García Iborra (2007).

⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the spread of the Gothic across Europe, see, for instance, Neil Cornwell (2000), who offers interesting statements for both France and Germany as main receptors of the new British tradition, and who also expands the "Gothic canon" to Russia.

⁷ The arrival of the Gothic in Spain has traditionally been argued as a late phenomenon, only developed during the nineteenth century and lacking the strength it had had in other European countries. However, Miriam López Santos (2010) stated that this was far from the truth, tracking the origins of the genre in Spain to the last two decades of the eighteenth century at least. Spain was, too, one of the first receptors of American Gothic in Europe, as proved by Pere Gifra Adroher (2015) or José Manuel Correoso Rodenas (2019 and 2020).

⁸ A debate to which William Dunlap was not alien, as Michael J. Drexler (2011) points out: "Dunlap's memoirs gravitate toward the problem of slavery in colonial and early republican America. References to slavery, the slave trade, and the emancipation project aimed to return former slaves to Africa preoccupy him even as he focuses his attention on his education and his career in the arts. In the historical narrative as well, Dunlap detours from his putative agenda to record anecdotes associating slavery with trauma" (4).

The main objective of this article is to show how William Dunlap (1766-1839), one of the earliest dramatists of North America,⁹ adapted the European conventions of the Gothic and rewrote them in the new nation. A process Michael T. Gilmore (1997) has describe with the following words:

Fiction and poetry were second to foreign plays in providing literary inspiration for the native stage. Like the cinema, the early American theater thrived on dramatizations of other genres; the better known a story was - the closer it came to being a common inheritance- the better its chances for success (581-582).¹⁰

Through his tragedy *Leicester* (1807), it will be seen how Dunlap was both an inheritor of previous dramatic traditions and of the Gothic, as his relationship with Charles Brockden Brown stated. This play (among others Dunlap wrote, such as *André; a Tragedy in Five Acts* –1798–) proves how the genre “migrated” from European soil to the United States, generating a new tradition which lasts until the present day.

Numerous critics and scholars (i.e. Leslie Fiedler, Teresa Goddu, or Alan Lloyd-Smith, for instance) have pointed out that American Literature is quintessentially Gothic, in reference to the novel. The first of the mentioned scholars, father of modern American criticism, has developed this idea to the limit of stating that Gothic (and its derivations) constitute the essence of American *belles lettres*:

It is the gothic form that has been most fruitful in the hands of our best writers: the gothic *symbolically* understood, its machinery and décor translated into metaphors for a terror psychological, social, and metaphysical. Yet even treated as symbols, the machinery and décor of the gothic have continued to seem vulgar and contrived; symbolic gothicism threatens always to dissolve into its components, abstract morality and shoddy theater. A recurrent problem of our fiction has been the need of our novelists to find a mode of projecting their conflicts which would contain all the dusky horror of gothic romance and yet be palatable to discriminating readers, palatable first of all to themselves (28; emphasis in the original).

Fiedler goes on with this thesis by acknowledging which are the gothic motives that have more predominantly used by American writers along the time-lasting history of its tradition:

Such a mode can, of course, not be subsumed among any of those called “realism.” Our fiction is essentially and at its best nonrealistic, even anti-realistic; long before *symbolisme* had been invented in France and exported to America, there was a full-fledged native tradition of symbolism.¹¹ That tradition was born of the profound contradictions of our national life and sustained by the inheritance from Puritanism of a “typical” (even allegorical) way of regarding the sensible world—not as an ultimate reality but as a system of signs to be deciphered. For too long, historians of American fiction have mistakenly tried to impose on the course of a brief literary history a notion of artistic “progress” imported from France or, more precisely perhaps, from certain French literary critics (28-29; emphasis in the original).

In the opinion of Teresa Goddu, Gothic in America has even traversed the frontier of a literary expression, lying at the core of America’s culture and history:

American gothic literature criticizes America’s national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation’s claim to purity and equality. Showing how these contradictions contest and constitute national identity even as they are denied, the gothic tells of the historical horrors that make national identity possible yet must be repressed in order to sustain it (10).¹²

Alan Lloyd-Smith (2004) adds specific examples to Fiedler’s and Goddu’s theoretical assessments: “Certain aspects of the American experience may be understood as inherently Gothic: religious intensities, frontier immensities, isolation, and violence; above all, perhaps, the shadows cast by slavery and racial attitudes” (25).

⁹ And also one of the first critics of the country, as proved by his *A History of the American Theatre from Its Origins to 1832* (1832). For further information, see Fred Moramarco (1968).

¹⁰ However, this did not provoked that Dunlap could live a tranquil life out of his dramatic productions, as stated by Robert H. Canary (1963): “Dunlap’s experience illustrates the hazards faced by the early American artist. In the theatre, he had hoped to uplift the popular taste by presenting superior fare. Instead, he found himself writing frantically to produce new attractions, catering to the masses with plays and spectacles he thought ‘vile trash,’ and ending his independent management bankrupt for lack of customers” (46).

¹¹ The symbolism of native tradition is also part of a long-lasting tradition that has reached contemporary American literature. Some outstanding examples are those of N. Scott Momaday (born in 1934) or Manuel Pino (born in 1953), among many others.

¹² However, all of Goddu’s opinions are produced in spite of her position towards the “impossible” nature of American Gothic: “America’s lack of gothic subjects, particularly a ruined past, is constantly remarked upon by early American writers and critics and continues to trouble authors as late as Hawthorne and James” (1997 54).

If we look at the dramatic production, this sense is not so strongly accused. However, names like Arthur Miller (1915-2005) (we all remember *The Crucible* –1953–) and John Updike (1932-2009) have contributed to spread the pertinence of American Gothic drama to the present day.¹³ Nevertheless, this study does not focus on contemporary production,¹⁴ but on one of the earliest examples of American Drama, interestingly enough a Gothic drama (or a succession of them).

If we turn our sights to the dramas produced during the last years of the colonial period, one of the dominant notes found is that one of the main influences were (understandably) William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and the Elizabethan dramatists. Of course, the production of Shakespeare is prior to the awakening of the Gothic; however, scholars like Dale Townshend (2014), Christy Desmet and Anne Williams (2009), or the aforementioned Elisabeth Bronfen and Beate Neumeier (2017)¹⁵ have pointed out the “Gothicness” of the author of *Hamlet*, signaling it as extremely influential in the birth and first development of the Gothic:

On Saturday June 18, 1743, “The Dear Witches: An Interlude; being a Parody on Some Scenes of Macbeth” was published anonymously in *Old England: or, The Constitutional Journal*, a political magazine managed by one Jeffrey Broadbottom, the *nom de plume* of Philip Stanhope, the Fourth Earl of Chesterfield.... Proceeding along the basis of Walpole’s reference to the piece in his *Short Notes on the Life of Horatio Walpole*, together with two printed copies and a holographic transcription of the text included in Walpole’s commonplace book, Catherine M. S. Alexander has not only managed to determine the text’s Walpolean authorship, but also to sketch out some of its possible political meanings (Townshend 43-44).

Christy Desmet and Anne Williams go even further, linking both Gothic and Shakespeare with the literary, historical, and cultural reevaluation that was taking places in Britain during the second half of the eighteenth century:

Shakespeare and the Gothic were born together in the eighteenth century. By “Shakespeare” we mean the canonical figure in place by the 1790s, England’s national poet and candidate for the greatest writer in the Western tradition, the Shakespeare who, as Harold Bloom would later claim, invented “the human”. But the concept of “Gothic story” that sprang fully armed from Horace Walpole’s dreaming brow in 1764 has only recently begun to be regarded as a significant phenomenon, though it has also inspired some grandiose claims (1).

Another of the sources Dunlap uses, according to Benjamin F. Fisher, was the production of his contemporary Thomas Morton (1764-1838) (2014 97). With these influences, it is normal to see how the production of William Dunlap is in debt with the proto-Gothic. This, mixed with the fashion of the years in which he lived and wrote, concludes with the plausible solution of being a creator of Gothic dramas. (Not in vain, Dunlap’s *Fountainville Abbey* –1795– was based on Ann Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest* –1791–.) To all these key elements, we must mention his long friendship with the so-called father of American Gothic: Charles Brockden Brown, especially during the years when both were living in New York.¹⁶ As Dorothy C. Barck (1930) said in the Introduction to William Dunlap *Diary*:

During the 1790’s Dunlap was a member of the Friendly Club, to which belonged his brothers-in-law, W. W. Woolsey and George M. Woolsey, Charles Brockden Brown, the novelist. Dr. Elihu Hubbard Smith, William Johnson, Dr. Samuel Latham Mitchill, the brothers Dr. Edward Miller and Rev. Dr. Samuel Miller, Anthony Bleecker, James Kent, and others, most of whom became illustrious citizens in their various professions of law, medicine, literature, and business (xviii).

¹³ For further information, see Donald Greiner (1981) or Christopher Bigsby (2000), for instance.

¹⁴ To see an evaluation of this interesting characteristic, see Mary Beth Inverso (1990).

¹⁵ In the collection they edited, for instance, the testimony of Catherine Belsey is especially relevant, for she links horror, Shakespeare’s ghosts, and previous cultural and religious concepts such as that of the Purgatory: “It has become fashionable to explain Old Hamlet and his vernacular predecessors as remnants of the Catholic purgatory. But European ghost lore was well established long before the twelfth century, when the Church first thought of providing a phase of purgatory for the deceased that would permit their returning spirits to solicit funds for the institution. And the surviving fireside tales often invest the walking dead with purposes quite incompatible with Christian orthodoxy. They may be substantial and threatening; they are also unpredictable and perplexing. Indifferent to the laws of nature and logic, which draw a line between the living and the dead, ghost stories remain to puzzle the intellect, at least in fiction (2017 39).

¹⁶ For further information, see Cathy N. Davidson (1986), Bill Christophersen (1993) or the aforementioned Peter Kafer (2004), who states that “Dunlap had first met Brown in New York in the mid-1790s. He was familiar with Brown’s general activities from that juncture on, and he had the benefit of conversations with Brown through the years when Brown was writing his novels” (197).

Both Dunlap and Brown will follow a similar literary trajectory, sons of the epoch they lived in. At the beginning of their careers, they copied (or followed) British patterns in novel and drama.¹⁷ However, as the years advanced and independence was seen as a reality, models changed, and new American literary models arose. This does not mean Dunlap broke up with the previous tendencies: he wrote following a British-like style for a period of time, being this style now covered by Gothic.

Leicester brings together most of the characteristics of American drama to that day, following the trend stated by Gary A. Richardson (1993) for which William Dunlap (along with James Nelson Barker -1784-1858-) had fought for the creation of a national concept of theatre, as narrative and essay writers would do during the so-called American Renaissance. Through these actions, American letters were finally gaining independence from British literature, starting the new national tradition. However, according to Peter B. High (2010), theatre was a *rara avis* among American letters until the Independence:¹⁸

In the years immediately after the Revolution, there were also some hopeful beginnings in drama. Although French and Spanish Catholic priests had used drama for religious education among the Indians, drama developed very slowly in the English colonies. The New England Puritans, and some other Protestant groups, believed that the theatre was “an invention of the Devil”, bad for the morals of the people. In the South, far away from the Puritan influence, there were a few theatres.¹⁹ America’s first theatre was in Williamsburg, Virginia. THOMAS GODFREY’s *Prince of Parthia* (written in 1759, produced in 1767) was probably the first American play to be professionally produced. But it wasn’t until after Independence that American theatre became interesting (24; emphasis in the original).

When it then became a popular entertainment and a way to praise the historical moment, according to Lucy Rinehart (2001):

Dunlap and his generation recognized the theater’s efficacy in prospecting the national memory; the theater, argued “Candidus” in the *Pennsylvania Packet* (16 February 1789), provided republican leaders with their “most eligible mode of *recreating* their fellow citizens.” The theatrical impulse was pandemic in the post-Revolutionary period. In parades, festivals, and street performances, the citizens of the republic –instructed by none other than George Washington in his Circular Letter of 1783 to consider themselves “actors on a most conspicuous theatre- obsessively rehearsed their new political identities (269; emphasis in the original).

The play also gathers many of the most relevant features of Gothic fiction in general, as it will be seen below. It can be considered that, and that will be the unifying thread of our thesis here, with *Leicester*, most (if not all) the Gothic conventions of European literature “migrated” to the New World. According to Edmund Clarence Stedman and Ellen Mackay Hutchinson, it also became quite popular, being “the First American Tragedy Regularly Produced” (<http://www.bartleby.com/400/poem/673.html>). First of all, the scenario in which the action takes place (Kennilworth Castle) and the characters are clearly of British origin, belonging to the nobility of that country (being Lord Leicester the main character). This can be interpreted at the light of the previously mentioned influences Dunlap received. The plot developed is quite simple, and strongly related to the first

¹⁷ Brown was a great follower and correspondent of William Godwin (1756-1836) and, according to George Levine (1973) *Wieland* (1798) was used by Mary Shelley (1797-1851) as one of the sources for her *Frankenstein*.

¹⁸ Michael T. Gilmore also stated in 1997 that the development of drama in America had been closely related to the political processes that took place in the second half of the eighteenth century: “The American drama was the most republican and propagandistic of the literary genres. Slow to accommodate the individualism that became synonymous with nineteenth-century authorship, it failed to develop Romantic talents of the highest rank. One might object that the nineteenth century, the age of the novel apotheosis, proved remarkably inhospitable to Western playwriting generally. Although this may be an accurate appraisal, at least until the last quarter of the century, it remains true that the complex of assumptions governing the native stage was singularly uncongenial to the nurturing of Romantic inwardness and self-realization. The drama of the early Republic was intimately tied to the civic sphere. It retained a commitment to the common good long after fiction and poetry (or rather, the fictions and poems considered canonical) had modified or shed such loyalties for more private goals. The most ‘residual’ of the arts, the theater was the closest to oratory and the world of men; it lagged behind the novel’s identification with print and its receptivity to feminization” (1997 573).

For a general overview of the development of American drama until the end of the nineteenth century, see Russell Dinapoli (2000).

¹⁹ According to Mark Zelinsky and Amy Cuomo (2007), the region would have witnessed a flourishing of the genre during colonial times: “The roots of theatre in the United States originate in the South, reaching back to the seventeenth century with Virginia court documents from 1665 providing the earliest evidence of a play performance in the colonies. Three Virginians were brought before a judge for acting *The Bear and the Cub*, a work no longer extant. The actors were eventually cleared and their accuser paid court costs; thereby, although rather dubiously, the beginning of the American theatre and free artistic expression were established” (281).

examples of Gothic novel, too. If we look at examples like *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury* (1762), by Thomas Leland (1722-1785), or *The Castle of Otranto* itself, we will discover how a very similar pattern is followed: a tyrannous nobleman and a conspiracy to return the ownership of the castle to more “human” (and probably the rightful) proprietor.

The next section of this article will be dedicated to the discussion of the different Gothic elements the American audience had to face for the first time, after having read the romances of Charles Brockden Brown, a similar process to that one British spectators had gone through in the previous two decades. The first really Gothic element of *Leicester* appears in Act II, when Matilda and Henry are talking before the appearance of Lord Leicester. His arrival is preceded by some signs, such as a terrible noise or the menace of death over the characters in the scene:

Mat. What dreadful sound ----

Hen. Fall, fall, ye towers, and hide me!

Mat. It rung the knell of death. 'Twas Lei'ster's voice! (Dunlap 105).

This passage is narrowly linked to those influences we have already mentioned as proper for the development both of the Gothic drama and of William Dunlap's production: William Shakespeare and the Gothic novel. On the one hand, the desire of Henry of being hidden under the towers as a consequence of having been discovered in his conspiracy is directly related to those Shakespearean personages who claimed the same fate over them in a similar situation. For instance, one of the most remarkable examples is that of Macbeth, who also wants the universe to darken after his crimes can be discovered: “Out, out, brief candle!” (Shakespeare 132). On the other hand, the sound Matilda hears and, again, the desire of being buried under a tower is very similar to the beginning of *The Castle of Otranto*, in which young Conrad dies crushed by a giant helmet: “He beheld his child dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made by human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers” (Walpole 19).

Within the same act, this sense of terribleness will accompany these two characters in the next scene, whose change is marked by “Scene changes to another apartment” (Dunlap 108). Henry will continue with the remorse for his dutiful yet treacherous action, stating once and again that death is the only reward he deserves:

Hen. (not hearing) Am not I *now* that wretch deserving curses?

Methinks I am a loathsome, venom'd toad,

Shedding dire poison on the blooming rose,

That when man looks to find a perfume sweet,

According with its beauty, he meets – death (Dunlap 108; emphasis in the original).

After this, Henry goes deeper and deeper into his sorrows, even comparing himself to a demon, a resource Gothic novel had used in relation to its villains since its very beginning. Characters like Manfred (from *The Castle of Otranto*), Schedoni (from *The Italian*), Ambrosio (from *The Monk*), or Sebastian Melmoth (from *Melmoth the Wanderer*), among others, deserved this description. It is a comparison that Gothic literature has kept using until the present day, with later outstanding examples such as Oscar Wilde's (1854-1900) *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Bram Stoker's (1847-1912) *Dracula* (1897) or, more recently, Stephen King's novels. Then, Henry compares himself with a demon, and he summons his (according to him) partners from Hell in his help, strengthening the Gothic atmosphere of the drama:

Hen. Could some rack'd spirit in Tartarean depths

Be sooth'd a moment with delusive sleep

While Fancy bless'd him with the joys of Heaven,

Then let his rest be broke by furies' yells,

Like me, he'd wake to double, double hell! (Dunlap 109).

However, Henry is not alone in this scene: Matilda is still with him, and she will now introduce another very relevant element of the Gothic genre. Indeed, she will offer a brief monologue on one of the key concepts of the first-generation Gothic literature: terror. According to Ann Radcliffe (1826), “terror” and “horror” are the two main categories in which the Gothic novel could be divided in her time, offering a fruitful definition of each of them: “Terror expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life. Horror contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them” (149). The terrible situation she and Henry have to face now, and the precarious destiny that awaits them if their conspiracy is discovered, make Matilda think the expansion of the soul terror can offer is the only solution to save their lives:

Mat. I cannot lull thee!

Vengeance is near; terror hath seiz'd upon me.
 Thou art my hope; but thou will treble danger
 If thus thou sart'st, involuntary changing
 Thy colour, varying with each varying chance.
 If thou dost play the man no better, Henry,
 Shame and disgraceful death must soon o'ertake us (Dunlap 109).

Act IV will continue showing the profound regret of Henry. However, during this act, it will be not his words, but it is the *atrezzo* accompanying him what will bring this to the scenario. In one of the scene changes, as Henry enters to open it, the stage direction describes him in the following manner: “Enter HENRY, in black” (Dunlap 128; emphasis in the original). Even if it can be considered as overused, obscurity has been a principal resource of Gothic literature since its very beginning.²⁰ If we pay attention to the main locations in which the Gothic plots have taken place, dungeons, caves, dark corridors, etc., have always been present. Depriving the characters of light, fears arise more easily.²¹ According to Cameron Dodworth (2013), the presence and importance of darkness in Gothic literature serves a further purpose, for it can be related to the fear of what is hidden by that darkness:

This concept of the fear of the Other is also consistently enhanced by the theme of darkness, as the Gothic is almost inconceivable without its connection to darkness and its many connotations such as death, evil, immorality, and the mysterious. The dark, feared Other can also be related to aesthetics, whether it be a recognizable negative aesthetic of ugliness and dirtiness/unclean, or a sometimes even more feared positive aesthetic of beauty that masks an evil, immoral, and therefore ugly and dirty/unclean negative aesthetic (11).

Besides, the depiction of characters in black has always been in relation to death and curses.²² So, Dunlap, by making Henry wear those clothes, immerses him in an entire Gothic environment. On the other hand, it can also be interpreted as the culmination of a process of transformation, through which Henry has gone from victim to villain. As deduced from many examples of Gothic novels (the end of Ambrosio in *The Monk*, for instance) and from the myths of Faust or Don Juan, too, all those who have any relation with demons end by becoming similar to them, even if their intentions were noble at the beginning.

However, the scene that concentrates the highest amount of Gothic resonances is located in Act V, when Matilda and Henry have finally performed their revenge against Lord Leicester. As said, the elements gathered in this scene are multiple, so we are going to try to analyze them one by one. First of all, it must be noticed that all of them have already been explored by writers of Gothic novel in one or another way. The first of them comes from the testimony of Leicester, the Gothic villain of the drama, when he says “That food is poisoned!” (Dunlap 146). The resource of poison is narrowly linked to the Gothic genre, since it was one of the keynotes of inspirational real characters such as Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519) or Elizabeth Báthory (1560-1614). It had also been associated with witchcraft or practices such as voodoo or Santeria as a mean to possess victims’ conduct. In consequence, this scene also marks the culmination of a process which has been appreciated during the whole tragedy: the turn of Matilda to evil, her journey from maiden to villain. By using methods Leicester could have used, she is equating herself to him. So, it is not strange when we discover what her end is like. After having finished her duty, instead of facing the logic consequences of her acts, she takes her own life:

Mat. 'Tis well. Eternal Providence, I thank thee!
 It is not chance which thrice this day hath sav'd
 The worthiest gentleman that England owns.
 To avoid foul infamy I sought thy life;
 Heaven hath preserved thee, and I am caught.
 But think not, Lei'ster, I will live o bear
 This load of guilt and shame. I have a friend
 That will avenge thy wrongs, although thou wouldst
 not.

(*Stabs herself...*) (Dunlap 146; emphasis in the original).

²⁰ As the Gothic itself, also a long-lasting one, as proved, beyond literature, by cinema, graphic novels, or the attire of the so-called “Gothics.” For more information, see Sara Martin (2002).

²¹ Manuela López Ramírez (2010) deals with a similar concept, that of *chiaroscuro*, in which (specially) characters are not always illuminated, but partially covered in the shadow of uncertainty.

²² The Spanish and South American “enlutado” is an outstanding example found in folklore.

After having committed the crime, she condemns herself for eternity, as Ambrosio in *The Monk*, bringing the new scenario of Hell to the scene.

Nevertheless, none of her efforts will succeed to destroy Leicester, for he lives after having eaten the poisoned food. This paradoxical situation is conceived in order to allow Henry to re-renter the scene surrounded by a new Gothic element, the assassins, crowned now as the new lord and as the new Gothic villain of the tragedy.

It will be him and his mercenaries (“Hen. Stand all aside, leave Lei’ster to my arm –Dunlap 146–) the final perpetrators of the ultimate crime of the drama. Assassins, or banditti, had been a common resource in Gothic literature since the moment Ann Radcliffe situated her romances in Italy, as Massimiliano Demata (2006) argues:²³ Radcliffe used Edmund Burke’s ideas on the sublime in her visual representation of Italy, and especially in the landscapes of the Alps and Appennines, which she knew through her extensive reading of travel books. Italy was dominated by mysterious banditti and wicked priests, and, closely associated with the tragic grandeur of her famous villains, Montoni (in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*) and Schedoni (in *The Italian*) (2).

Kerry Dean Carso points out a similar feature of these prototypical characters in reference to the painter Washington Allston (1779-1843), who belonged to the same generation as William Dunlap and Charles Brockden Brown:

Allston was a reader of Gothic novels, and Ann Radcliffe in particular. In 1833, ten years before his death, Allston admitted that in his youth he suffered what he called “banditti mania”, an insatiable appetite for reading stories and painting pictures of his favourite subject, Italian banditti. Later in life, Allston would write: “Up to this time [the end of college] my favorite subjects, with an occasional comic intermission, were banditti... I did not get rid of this banditti mania until I had been over a year in England” (c.1802). These “clever ruffians”, as Allston called them, populated not only the canvases of one of Allston’s favourite artists, Salvator Rosa, but also the pages of Radcliffe’s novels (29-30; emphasis in the original).

New Historicism has offered an interesting scenario for developing studies that link different cultural manifestations of varied kinds. In consequence the analysis of a literary production, along with its historical, political, and social context, and with what was going to be the development of the genre in the Western Hemisphere is especially relevant. William Dunlap lived and work in an era of revolution and of transition. Besides, his cultural context was that of the dawn of a new literary mode that had not existed previously, at least independently. So, the fights and horrors that were depicted in many of his dramatic examples play the double role of participating of the new *à la mode* literature and of showing the spectators a picture of the world as it had been (and how it could be again), through the representation of the worst and darkest side of the preceding society.

As seen, *Leicester* would be an outstanding piece for the application of these theories, for it gathers most of the Gothic elements that were being developed during those years. In consequence, it can be considered that William Dunlap in drama, as Charles Brockden Brown was doing in novel, introduced the Gothic in the United States. Through a strong knowledge of what was being done in Europe, he could “migrate” all the elements that characterized this new literary genre, adapting (or re-telling) them for an American audience, who had to face, for the first time, something different to the Shakespearean or colonial *oeuvres* that had been performed in the previous decades. If Isaac Mitchell had imagined castles in Connecticut, Dunlap was imagining an aristocratic romance to be of the interest of the average American. The task was not easy, so the result was not a big success. However, if William Dunlap is considered today the father of American drama is because of a series of reasons. One of them is the translation of European models (true, obscure and melodramatic ones) to the American scene. Later on, more blooming authors would consolidate this task. We cannot think of Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams without the concurrence of Gothic, of dark themes. Even if Dunlap was not totally accurate in the model he chose, the honor of opening the door for what was going to come deserves to be paid.

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²³ See also Jo Ellen DeLucia (2019).

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