Reading Questions – *The Castle of Otranto* – Guide to Responding

1. The most enduring of all Gothic settings is the ancient, decaying castle. Other buildings like asylums and haunted mansions are also used, but a decaying castle always seems the perfect Gothic stage. The gloomy dark castle is an effective and evocative setting; it illustrates attitudes about the past, the aristocracy, and justice. The castle image may have appealed to Walpole because of its nostalgia value—a fantasy reversion to the roots of the former power and prestige of the aristocracy and a rejection of the changed, newly industrialized world in which they lived, ultimately reflecting in the crumbling stone the final disintegration of the feudal world order in which they were reared.

2. In the mid-eighteenth century, a revival of interest in medievalism brought a new appreciation for the previously maligned Gothic architecture of the ruined castles, abbeys, and priories scattered all over Britain. In the case of Walpole, it developed into the obsessive fascination that sparked *The Castle of Otranto*. Until this time, Gothic structures had been dismissed as a regrettable and barbaric episode in the history of architecture. People of taste and education preferred the mathematical precision of Greek and Roman styles. It took the Enlightenment to open up the possibility that there was knowledge unknown to the ancients. This radical departure from tradition opened the door to independent thinking and Romantic rebellion. Some critics believe that there was a kind of nostalgia for an enchanted, less rational world—one that was linked to the perceived superstitions of medieval Catholicism or the intimate connection to nature thought to typify pre-Christian Celtic Britain. This nostalgia was then transferred to the artifacts of that period.

3. Because most of the plot of *The Castle of Otranto* can be presented in a family tree, it is not a stretch to interpret the importance of family dynamics to Walpole. The issue of parental authority and the obedience of sons and daughters was important in 18th-century England, especially in terms of marriage. The text repeatedly presents Manfred’s patriarchal oppression of the younger generation and the generation’s submission and resistance to it. Conrad and Matilda are subservient to Manfred’s wishes, while Theodore and Isabella are notably more resistant.

4. Written in an age of the Industrial Revolution, *The Castle of Otranto* deploys an array of machines. However, rather than simply informing a reaction to an increase in machinery and industry, the process inaugurates an inhuman pattern that underlies and shocks the progress of modernity: machines beget machines. The work is operated by devices and techniques designed to arouse emotional reactions rather than rational evaluation. These devices—portraits sighing, gigantic statues crashing to earth—are the motors of a plot that subordinates characters to action. The machinery of fiction is tied to invocations of supernatural agency: the sighing of Alphonso’s portrait allows Isabella to escape her immediate peril—the rapacious clutches of Manfred; supernatural intervention triggers another Gothic device, flight and pursuit.