The tradition of telling ghost stories at Christmas has long been associated with Victorian England, especially Charles Dickens and A Christmas Carol. However, Nick Groom, author of “Gothic Antiquity” the first chapter in the catalogue of the current British Library exhibition Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination, writes, “this year is the 250th anniversary of Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, first published on Christmas Eve 1764 as a seasonal ghost story” (“There is no escape”). Here, Groom places Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto firmly within the Christmas ghost story tradition, moving the origin back almost a century from Dickens. Interestingly, Groom tempers the claim slightly in the “Introduction” to the 2014 Oxford World Classics edition of The Castle of Otranto, writing “Indeed, the publication of Otranto on Christmas Eve perhaps reflected the seasonal tradition of telling ghostly stories at this time of year” (Groom xxx-xxxi). Groom’s claim of the “seasonal ghost story” roots of Otranto may have some earlier roots in the work of Montague Summers. As early as 1934, Summers wrote (quoting himself from a decade earlier) “It is hardly an exaggeration to say that to Walpole’s romance is due the ghost story and the novel, containing so much of the supernatural and occult, than which no forms of literature are now [1923] more common and applauded” (179). Summers does not necessarily link the ghost story to the tradition of seasonal Christmas Eve ghost tales, but does cite Otranto as the origin of ghost stories and novels (the latter a claim that would be contested by essentially all literary scholars). However, there is a dearth of research that verifies the claim that Otranto was intended as a seasonal ghost story and influenced the tradition that Dickens wrote in. In this paper, I will begin to fill the void,
extending the traditional narrative of the Christmas ghost story tradition and seeking to establish

*The Castle of Otranto*’s place in that narrative.

There is some precedent for looking beyond Dickens to find the origins of the Christmas ghost story. “Dickens was responding to a convention well established before he penned the unrivalled perfection of Scrooge's four redemptive spirits. For people of the northern hemisphere, supernatural tales told around the hearth during the darkest hours of the year roll back further than the yule log” (M. Gray). Yet, claims such as these jump from Dickens to pagan traditions centuries prior, leaving hundreds of years in between, with no clear delineation of the tradition continuing. Placing *Otranto* in the narrative requires some work connecting *Otranto* to *A Christmas Carol* and also establishing the origins of the tradition pre-*Otranto*.

The Christmas ghost story tradition appears to date back to at least 1732, some thirty years prior to *Otranto*, with the publication of *Round About Our Coal Fire*. “And now I come to another Entertainment, which is frequently used, which is of the Storytelling Order, viz. of Hobgoblins, Witches, Conjurers, Ghosts, Fairies, and such like common Disturbers” (*Round About* 11). The text is a collection of traditions related to Christmastime, but the vast majority is devoted to different varieties of scary stories (*Round About* 11-42). The tradition is in place to some extent prior to Walpole’s publication, yet the existence of the tradition is not enough to confirm that Walpole was writing in the tradition. To complicate the narrative, Sasha Handley has written extensively on the tradition of ghost stories in eighteenth century England, noting “The early decades of the eighteenth century saw such values increasingly prioritized by writers like Daniel Defoe. The moral lessons taught by Defoe’s ghosts in his History and Reality of Apparitions were firmly set within…1720” (137). Handley identifies that the ghost story was firmly set by at least 1720 with Defoe, adding a sense of legitimacy to the tradition’s presence in
Round About the Coal Fire. However, looking at the index, Handley’s work contains no mention of Christmas (280). Perhaps the tradition was more oral than written.

An examination of entries for “ghost” in the 17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers database between 1 November 1734 and 31 December 1766 reveals little published evidence of a Christmas ghost story tradition. Of 121 entries, none bore clear signs of being Christmas ghost stories. The references covered a variety of material, ranging from the Holy Ghost, to actors in various Shakespeare plays, to poems, to letters supposedly from ghosts. The publication data for the materials also discourages consensus for an existent Christmas ghost story tradition in print. The articles and notices seemed to lack any semblance of an ordering around the winter or December particularly to suggest an association with the Christmas season. While this relatively small sample is not definitive proof, it seems odd that virtually no sign of the tradition would be evident.

Walpole’s personal correspondence also displays a lack of commentary about any Christmas traditions and especially the Christmas ghost story tradition. The fifth volume of his correspondence contains twelve letters that explicitly mention “Christmas.” None of the letters discuss the telling of ghost stories or Walpole’s wishes at placing Otranto within the Christmas ghost story tradition. The majority of the references are to illustrate time, suggesting that the recipient should or should not come to visit Walpole at certain times due to the holiday and his potential absence. While the letters are more formal, the utter lack of references to “ghost stories” or anything along those lines and Otranto in conjunction with Christmas suggests that Walpole did not intend for the text to belong in the tradition.

Yet, some aspects of the publication suggest otherwise to a modern observer. The Castle of Otranto was initially published on Christmas Eve 1764 (Otranto xxxiv). In addition to
this, the advertisements for the novel and the title page include the phrase “Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto” (Otranto 1; “Advertisement for The Castle of Otranto”). The connection between St. Nicholas and Christmas Eve seems too strong to not be a nod to the Christmas ghost story tradition. Particularly given the emphasis that Thomas Grey draws to it. “I have received the Castle of Otranto, and return you my thanks for it. It engages our attention here, makes some of us cry a little, and all in general afraid to go to-beds o’nights. We take it for a translation, and should believe it to be a true story, if it were not for St. Nicholas.” (T. Gray 266). For Gray, the text was believable except for St. Nicholas. What did Grey mean by this? What is it about St. Nicholas that caused Grey to doubt the veracity of the text? It must have been something quite impressive to be more convincing than the giant sable helmet falling from the sky and crushing a boy in the first three pages. It is unclear what exactly Gray was referring, complicated by the importance of St. Nicholas to the plot of the novel. There are sixteen references to “St. Nicholas” in the text, with the majority of those serving as descriptions of the Church near the castle. These references suggest an interesting relationship to the saint, but one that seems largely devoid of Christmas implications. St. Nicholas plays a prominent role in the resolution of the text. Frederic says “saint Nicholas appeared to me, and revealed a secret, which he bade me never disclose to mortal man, but on my death-bed” (Otranto 81). Perhaps this is what Grey is referring to in his letter about disbelieving the story as a whole. Bleeding statues are acceptable, but the appearance of a saint to a man is simply unbelievable. More likely, the end of the tale may be the place of concern for Gray. “Behold in Theodore, the true heir of Alfonso! said the vision: and having pronounced those words, accompanied by a clap of thunder, it ascended solemnly towards heaven, where the clouds parting asunder, the form of saint Nicholas was seen; and receiving Alfonso’s shade, they were soon wrapt from mortal eyes in a blaze of
glory” (*Otranto* 112-3). Here Saint Nicholas is seen in the sky enveloping the “Alfonso’s shade.” This dramatic climax to the text may be the point that Gray is referring to in his letter. It is difficult to know clearly, what Gray meant. However, understanding some of the history of St. Nicholas’s connection to Christmas may address some of the alternatives.

![Fig. 1. Ngram of “St. Nicholas.”](image)

Usage of St. Nicholas in books appears to peak in around 1762 (see figure 1). Looking through the results of what books use St. Nicholas in this early period, it seems that the most common usage was to refer to churches and not to reference the St. Nick-Christmas tie (“St. Nicholas” search). This seems to further distance the events of Otranto from the Christmas ghost story tradition, despite what appears to be an almost perfect storm in favor of it. However, the idea of St. Nicholas as a miraculous gift giver was well in place centuries before Walpole was writing (Handwerk). In fact, estimates place the tradition at around 1200, holding strong for at least 300 years (Handwerk). The events of the Reformation put a damper on the tradition, but it is alive and well by the late-eighteenth century or early nineteenth century. This places Walpole in an awkward position, sandwiched between two voids, incorporating a saint that may or may
not intended to draw the reader’s thoughts to Christmas. It is possible that Walpole meant for the connections between Christmas and St. Nicholas as the tradition pre-dates his writing by centuries, but the probability decreases given the peak in usage before him and the void of references to St. Nicholas in conjunction with Christmas in virtually all of the materials that reference the saint.

Yet still another possibility to place *Otranto* in the tradition is a connection to Shakespeare. Walpole cites Shakespeare as the master from which he is drawing to create the work in his preface to the second edition. “But I had higher authority than my own opinion for this conduct. That great master of nature, Shakespeare, was the model I copied” (10-11). While Walpole mentions more well-known plays by Shakespeare in his reference to him as his mentor (*Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*), he may be giving a subtle hint that he also is drawing from the winter tale tradition that Shakespeare plays on with *The Winter’s Tale*. The tradition appears evident in that play when Mamillius says “A sad tale's best for winter: I have one/ Of sprites and goblins” (II.i.629-30). Hermione replies to him “Let's have that, good sir. /Come on, sit down: come on, and do your best /To fright me with your sprites; you're powerful at it” (II.i.631-3). The lines from the play clearly suggest the use of ghost stories at Christmastime to frighten others. However, it seems to be a bit of a tenuous connection to draw. Although *Otranto* definitely fulfills these expectations and strives to terrify. As the preface to the first edition of the text states, “Terror, the author’s principal engine, prevents the story from ever languishing” (Walpole 6). The story is built around the supernatural and released in the wintertime, including an explicit shout-out to Shakespeare, a previous teller of winter ghost stories. Yet, it seems too far to claim definitively that Walpole meant for this to be the case.
Moving to the post-Otranto world, the publication history of *The Castle of Otranto* suggests that the influence of the novel was felt throughout the latter third of the eighteenth century. The “Note on the Text” in the 2008 Oxford World Classics edition traces the publication history to 1797, noting that “the third was in 1766, the fourth in 1782, the fifth in 1786, and the sixth (a reprint of the fifth) in 1791. Another edition (also known as the sixth) was printed at Parma in 1791 by Bodoni for Edwards. Others came in 1793 (two editions), 1794, 1796, and 1797” (xxxiv). This pattern of publication carries *Otranto* to 1797, just shy of the nineteenth century. The continued popularity of the novel is indicative of some level of cultural significance that broadens the scope of the text’s potential influence and therefore provides some leeway in finding other texts that continue the Christmas ghost story tradition. Not to mention that references to *The Castle of Otranto* in print rise until peaking shortly before 1840 (see figure 2). This trajectory fits in neatly with the traditional narrative concerning the Christmas ghost story. It also allows for Otranto to have a larger emphasis on the narrative than originally thought.
While it may not have been written as a Christmas ghost story, perhaps Otranto influenced the arc of the ghost story.

The tradition appears to still be in place in 1819, with the serial publication of The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. Washington Irving’s work contains a section that describes the events of a Christmas Eve. “When I returned to the drawing-room, I found the company seated round the fire, listening to the parson, who was deeply esconced [sic] in a high-backed oaken chair, the work of some cunning artificer of yore, which had been brought from the library for his particular accommodation” (Irving 208). Irving’s tale notes the tradition of gathering to hear tales and stories from a respected figure, in this case a parson. The invocation of a religious figure as the storyteller serves to lend credibility and weight to the merging of the Christian Christmas tradition to the supernatural, pagan or Gothic elements. The connection grows stronger as Irving continues: “From this venerable piece of furniture, with which his shadowy figure and dark weazen face so admirably accorded, he was dealing forth strange accounts of the popular superstitions and legends of the surrounding country, with which he had become acquainted in the course of his antiquarian researches” (208). Not only is the parson sharing stories and pieces of “yore,” but he is “dealing forth strange accounts of the popular superstitions and legends.” At least in Irving’s story, there is evidence of a tradition involving supernatural stories during the Christmas season. Almost a century separates Irving’s note of the tradition and the description found in Round About the Coal Fire, with Otranto providing a possible bridge as an example in print.

Dickens publishes A Christmas Carol in 1843, with the full title giving away the tradition that Dickens is working in—A Christmas Carol in Prose Being a Ghost Story of Christmas. Perhaps it is due to this that scholars claim, “his [Dickens’] hugely successful Christmas Books
of the 1840s forged the cultural association of ghosts and Christmas” (Henson 44). Walpole may have played an inadvertent part in this narrative, creating a stage for others to stand on. The tradition appears firmly cemented and well-known by 1891, with the publication of Jerome K. Jerome’s *Told After Supper*. The collection’s introduction notes: “Of course, as a mere matter of information it is quite unnecessary to mention the date at all. The experienced reader knows it was Christmas Eve, without my telling him. It always is Christmas Eve, in a ghost story, Christmas Eve is the ghosts’ great gala night” (Jerome). There is little ambiguity by this point as to the prevalence of ghost stories at Christmas Eve, with Jerome even going as far as saying that “it is quite unnecessary to mention the date at all,” suggesting that the ideas of ghost stories and Christmas Eve had become so intertwined that a mention of one included the idea of the other.

Suggesting that *The Castle of Otranto* was intended as part of the Christmas ghost story tradition is overly ambitious. However, there are still several avenues to pursue to definitively confirm or deny its part in forging a connection between Christmas and ghost stories. While it seems unlikely that the text was written as a part of the seasonal ghost story tradition, the possibility remains that *Otranto* has played a part in influencing the Christmas ghost story narrative that has gone largely unnoticed. There are still large areas of work to be done to understand the connections between *Otranto* and the Christmas ghost story tradition. Further analysis of contemporary periodicals for tales of the supernatural during the winter months and especially at Christmastime would provide grounding for the claims that *Otranto* was written in the Christmas ghost story tradition. While my search of periodicals of the time yielded no such results, that is by no means definitive proof that such a connection does not exist. In addition, research into the writings of Thomas Gray and other people of the day to determine how St. Nicholas was perceived could provide insight into what exactly was meant by Gray’s comment
that *Otranto* was completely believable “if it were not for St. Nicholas” (266). The information that I found suggests that there is no intended connection between the St. Nicholas of Walpole’s text and the jolly, gift-bringer that we associated with Santa Claus. There appears to be a likely relationship between the winter tales of Shakespeare and older writers and the Christmas ghost stories that developed in the eighteenth century, yet the relationship is still unclear and therefore it is difficult to place *Otranto* in the middle of that narrative. The evidence suggests that there was no intention for *The Castle of Otranto* to be read as a Christmas ghost story. However, further research could yield insights into the relationship that *Otranto* has had with the development of the Christmas ghost story, with some promising signs, including the correlation between the rise in print references to *Otranto* and Christmas ghost stories during the Victorian period.
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