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Regina Maria Roche's *The Children of the Abbey*: Contesting the Catholic Presence in Female Gothic Fiction

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I: Locating the Author

Imagine my surprise when I learned that Regina Maria Roche (c. 1764-1845), widely published Irish author of one of the most popular female gothic novels of the late eighteenth century, *The Children of the Abbey* (1796), was not in fact a Roman Catholic. In order fully to understand my surprise, you have to appreciate that there has been something of a scholarly revisionist craze of late to present her as a Catholic or, at the very least, as sympathetic to Catholicism in her major novel. Maria Purves states unequivocally: "Roche was an Irish Catholic, and it seems probable that she wanted to give her audience an insight into the realities—as opposed to the romantic possibilities—of her Church."¹ A few years earlier, George Haggerty had described *The Children of the Abbey* as having an "actively pro-Catholic . . . narrative agenda," while Jarlath Killeen notes that the title of the novel privileges Catholicism and indicates the Catholic basis for Irish and, indeed, Western culture: "we are all 'children of the abbey.'"² Finally, Derek Hand has asserted that "there is a Catholic strain running through [*The Children of the Abbey*] at a subterranean level."³ Unfortunately, none of these claims is borne out by an examination of either Roche's life or her novel.

This is what we do know for a fact: Roche was born in Waterford, Ireland, in either 1764 or 1765 (even that date is in dispute), daughter of Captain Blundel Dalton (or D'Alton) who held the rank of officer in His Majesty's 40th Regiment, a commission that, given the penal laws in operation in Ireland at the time, would not have been available to him were he Catholic. Later in her life, both Roche and her husband inherited property in Ireland from their fathers, which also would not have been possible had they been Catholics. By the time Roche was around fifteen years old, the British attitude towards Catholics had moderated a bit. As Colin Haydon has noted, by 1778, "grateful that the Irish Catholics had loyally not exploited the difficulties produced by the American war, the administration decided that some measure of relief should be brought in for

them.”⁴ After a number of amendments on these measures, however, the new legislation accomplished little, only “remov[ing] the various restrictions on Catholic holding, inheriting, and leasing land set out in the anti-Popish Act of 1704” (p. 171). All of these historical factors have led her modern biographer, James Shanahan, to write to me and say that he would be “astounded” to learn that Roche had been a Catholic.⁵ The question becomes: why has there been an attempt to appropriate and reconstruct Roche and her heroine Amanda Fitzalan for the Catholic cause? Or more broadly, why has there been an ahistorical attempt to characterize the gothic, particularly the female gothic, as pro-Catholic?⁶ This essay will examine both of those questions by using Roche’s *The Children of the Abbey* as something like a case study.

For those unfamiliar with *The Children of the Abbey*, I provide here a brief overview of its plot and characters. Structured as a dual-focus tale about two siblings, the novel follows the complex trials and tribulations of Oscar and Amanda Fitzalan—the children of an Irish soldier and a wealthy Scottish heiress, who was disinherited by her family when she married beneath her station. From an Irish convent, to a Welsh mansion, and finally to Dunreath Abbey, the Scottish ancestral estate, Amanda is pursued by the lecherous libertine Colonel Belgrave, all while she is being courted by her true love, Lord Mortimer of Cherbury, who is confused about her class status and relationship with Belgrave. Meanwhile, Oscar, in love with the beautiful Adela Honeywood, watches helplessly as she is handed over in marriage to the odious Belgrave, who finally dies to everyone’s relief. Both siblings regain their aristocratic identities and property only after Amanda ventures into Dunreath Abbey and, amidst what appear to be supernatural interventions, rediscovers the rightful will written by her grandfather bequeathing the estate to the siblings.⁷

II: *Defining the Issues*

There has been a good deal of controversy about the presence of religion and religious tropes in gothic texts. On the one hand, critics like Sister Mary Muriel Tarr, Irene Bostrom, Victor Sage, and Susan Griffin have claimed that the gothic novelists deployed a crude form of anti-Catholicism that fed the lower classes’ prejudices against the passage of a variety of Catholic Relief Acts pending in Parliament since 1788.⁸ On the other hand, Purves recently has claimed that by focusing on only a “handful of works” (p. 208) that do not represent the full range of gothic writing, literary historians have failed to recognize the

Burkean counter-revolutionary discourse in the 1790s [that] made possible a favourable opinion of Catholicism as a strategically important part of England’s heritage within the context of pro-Catholic sympathy in the form

of the incremental Catholic Relief legislation of the late eighteenth century and England's national support of the French clergy. (p. 204)

However, the Gordon riots of 1780, which left close to 300 dead in London, make it patently obvious that there was strong if not hysterical sentiment against any attempt to loosen the restrictions on Catholic emancipation every step of the way. This current critical controversy simply repeats in a slightly different key a similar one conducted some seventy years ago between Joyce Tompkins and Montague Summers.⁹ The stark differences in opinion on this issue can be resolved by recognizing that an “either/or” explanation will not suffice; in fact a “both/and” method is the more accurate way of accounting for the bifurcated ideological agendas present in the more than one thousand gothic texts that were published between 1780 and 1829.

Gothic literature can best be understood in the context of the Western secularization process. Cultural work reveals the drive toward secularization on the part of the elite and middle classes throughout Europe from roughly 1780 to 1830.¹⁰ In order to modernize and secularize, the dominant British Protestant imaginary needed an “other” against which it could define itself as a culture and a nation with distinct boundaries. In gothic literature, a reactionary, demonized, and feudal Catholicism is created in order to stand in opposition to the modern Protestant individual who then alternately combats and flirts with this uncanny double in a series of cultural productions that we recognize as gothic novels. It has long been a critical truism to claim that the gothic is anti-Catholic and anti-clerical. I would argue, though, that the issue of religion's uncanny presence in the period's literature is much more complex and conflicted than such a claim suggests. As a result, a novel like Roche's *Children of the Abbey*, which certainly flirts with presenting a nun positively, simultaneously castigates two conniving priests and condemns Irish Catholics for their superstitions and slightly veiled pagan practices (like the “Irish wake” and their belief in banshees). The “whiggish” gothic aesthetic is anti-Catholic, but in its bid to establish a (false) pedigree for itself, it is also nostalgic and reactionary, showing itself to be in thrall to the lure of an earlier feudal, aristocratic, and Catholic past. British and Irish writers like Roche certainly recognized the power of the gothic to seduce their readers with ambivalent and confusing messages. An analysis of the majority of gothic works reveals that the genre needs to be understood as a powerful ideological discourse system that allowed authors to keep alive specters and apparitions of both the sacred and the demonic even as they castigated the failings of a formal, institutionalized religion that they wished to forget they had ever embraced. As a major component of the secularizing process, the gothic aesthetic anxiously looked backward and forward at the same time, torn between reifying the past and embracing

a future it could not quite envision. Roche's novel contains both strands. By focusing on only one of these tendencies (as Haggerty, Killeen, and Purves have done), critics have misread the larger and more contradictory agenda of this novel as well as of the gothic aesthetic itself.

The novel, as a genre, reifies bourgeois ideals of Enlightenment Europe, such as self-control, commercial enterprise, education, literacy, nationalism, legal rights, and civic values such as "virtue" and "reason." As Angela Keane has claimed,

Novels stood to Protestant, Whiggish progressivism as romance stood to regressive, Catholic feudalism. . . . [Therefore] the later part of the eighteenth century produced a new, if ambivalent fascination with the pre-modern epistemology and its cultural and political signs, not least its national signs.¹¹

The gothic imaginary, however, is a distinctly hybrid genre, neither purely a novel form nor purely a romance. Able to assume different shapes and accomplish contradictory ideological work, the gothic could appear to be simultaneously Protestant (Sage and others) as well as Catholic (Summers and Purves). It also could embrace a "pre-modern epistemology" all the while denouncing it as nonsense. For David Punter, "the code of gothic is thus not a simple one in which past is encoded in the present or vice versa, but dialectical, past and present intertwined, each distorting each other."¹² In a similar manner, I would argue that the process of secularization that occurs in the gothic is not a simple forward-moving trajectory that we would recognize as the Enlightenment project but more an oscillation in which the transcendent and traditional religious beliefs and tropes are alternately preserved and reanimated and then blasted and condemned. The gothic aesthetic anxiously splits, then, between an evocation of the religious and feudal past and a glimpse of the emerging secular future, between the importance of the pre-capitalist human community (the idealized all-female convent in Roche's novel) and the newly modern individual in the public sphere (Amanda's brother Oscar in his military engagements and eventual use of the law to regain his inheritance and title).

Writing in opposition to anti-Catholic Surrealists such as André Breton, who had claimed the gothic's use of dreams and the irrational as the basis for Surrealism, Summers notes, "there is no true romanticism apart from Catholic influence and feeling" (p. 390). It is surely no coincidence that the uncanny as defined by Freud was adapted by Breton in 1936 in his own attempt to claim the gothic and the pleasure principle as the origins for Surrealism.¹³ In his appropriation of the uncanny as a manifestation of the fears and phobias of the dark unconscious, Breton has been accused of reducing the gothic to a purely psychological category, a "primal psychomachia," according to Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall.¹⁴ For them, Breton's approach would make the gothic personal rather than political,

and it would fail to situate the genre within its fuller “whiggish” context: its need to condemn “the twin yoke of feudal politics and papal deception, from which [Protestants] had still to emancipate themselves” (p. 219). As they put it,

Gothic novels were set in the Catholic south because, “without great violation of truth,” Gothic (that is, “medieval”) practices were believed still to prevail there. Such representations drew upon and reinforced the cultural identity of the middle-class Protestant readership, which could thrill to the scenes of political and religious persecution safe in the knowledge that they themselves had awoken from such historical nightmares. (p. 219)

While many of the period’s gothic texts conform to this pattern, there is also a concurrent tendency to look backward to the lost traditions of the past with nostalgia, or with “the pain a sick person feels because he wishes to return to his native land, and fears never to see it again.”¹⁵ When Amanda retreats to a convent presided over by a benign prioress and her energetic assistant Sister Mary, she is so happily settled and seemingly so comfortable that when her suitor Lord Mortimer finds her, proposes yet again, and has been accepted, she repeatedly puts him off. He begins to worry they have stayed so long at the convent that his sister will think they “both [have] become converts to the holy rites of this convent” (p. 412). Clearly the convent community depicted here is a nostalgic feudal haven, a microcosmic vision of what life in Ireland could be if presided over by wise and caring women. However, this episode is but a brief idyll in a book that sees the heroine travel from London to Wales to Ireland to Scotland and then back to all of these places in a sort of endless hyper-nationalistic loop, looking for a home that eludes her until the end of this long novel.

To fail to recognize that cultural productions gesture toward both nostalgia and reform is to fail to appreciate how easy it is to be haunted by that which we have supposedly left behind. Indeed, it would seem that one of history’s most vital lessons is that cultures require hundreds of years to absorb radical change into their social imaginaries. The changes that Western Europe underwent, moving from the Renaissance to the “modern” society of the 1848 revolution, were traumatic indeed. From the religious and intellectual upheavals that occurred during the reign of Henry VIII to the Glorious Revolution of 1688, England entered the eighteenth century in the grip of both scientific rationalism and spiritual uncertainty and anxiety. France and Germany went through similar, although certainly not identical, reformations, revolutions, and transformations. As Maurice Lévy has observed, the 1688 Revolution by which the Protestant Ascendancy was finally established was much more important for the development of the gothic than was the French Revolution because “in some sense the fantastic is a compensation that man provides for himself, at the level of the

imagination, for what he has lost at the level of faith.”¹⁶ For Lévy, the gothic is not, however, a simple textual substitution for discredited religious beliefs but instead “a genuine expression of profound religious malaise” (p. 42). However, I would claim that there is a good deal of textual substitution being enacted, and one of the primary substitutes is the corrupt monk, the perfidious Jesuit, or the Grand Inquisitor for the devil. In Roche’s novel, the role of the devil is actually played by the libertine-seducer Colonel Belgrave, who pursues Amanda across the landscapes of four countries and who actively works to destroy the life of her brother, Oscar. Belgrave is so demonic that he seduces young women away from their parents twice (once resulting in the young woman’s death). He also kidnaps Amanda, holds her hostage at his creepy gothic estate, and is interrupted in his attempt to rape her only because his dying uncle has demanded to see him before signing his will (p. 316). Belgrave is a secularized demon, even dying in the company of a hired French priest just to make the anti-Catholic association even clearer in the minds of Roche’s readers (p. 635). The idea being put forward would have been one of the oldest complaints against the Catholic Church: that such a man could receive extreme unction and have his sins forgiven at the last moment for the sake of the priest’s payoff.

The devil, of course, was the ultimate external and assaulting force on the soul of humanity, and for centuries Western consciousness was preoccupied with battling this wily opponent. A major move in displacing the devil from his dominance occurred in 1736 when the British Parliament banned all laws that would have allowed courts to convict anyone of demonic possession or witchcraft. Certainly, the passage of this law was a Protestant triumph because, as Lennard Davis notes, the “Catholic Church was seen as having the inside track on exorcisms, and banning the idea of possession was in effect a way of banning popery in general.”¹⁷ The devil also became increasingly identified with the pope in the eighteenth-century lower-class British imagination. The annual and ritualized Guy Fawkes burnings, as well as the liturgies that were held in every Anglican Church on 5 November, consistently linked the devil to the pope, and such an association would continue to be developed throughout a number of gothic novels and chapbooks.¹⁸ In fact, we need to reevaluate the notion that the 1605 Guy Fawkes conspiracy to assassinate the King and the entire Protestant ruling class by blowing up Parliament was a long-forgotten non-event in the eighteenth century. As late as 1818 a chapbook version of the entire history, blaming it on a Jesuit instigator, was published in Penrith, Cumbria.¹⁹

In addition to the continual fretting about the devil in their midst, late eighteenth-century common folk found agreement in the three basic tenets of British anti-Catholicism: political and sexual distrust of the clergy, theological disagreements about transubstantiation and “priestcraft,” and

popular fears about foreign invasions from the Catholic countries of France and Spain using Ireland as a base (Haydon, p. 3). All of these aspects of the anti-Catholic agenda—along with the widespread suspicion of a variety of sexual perversions practiced among a “celibate” clergy—can be found in disguise in any number of gothic novels written by both men and women. The devil most frequently finds gothic embodiment as a lurking Jesuit or Franciscan (such as Ambrosio in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, 1796), who is intent on stealing the inheritances of, seducing, or murdering his hapless victims. The Dominicans, of course, were infamous for presiding over the Inquisition in Spain (1478-1834), and the Jesuits had been implicated in a variety of failed political assassination attempts during the religious wars in England. It certainly is no coincidence that scenes from the Inquisition begin to appear in gothic novels, most notoriously in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797) but also in such chapbooks as the translation of August von Kotzebue’s *The History and Surprising Adventures of Joseph Pignata: who, with several others, was confined in the dungeons of the Holy Inquisition for a suspected crime; the dreadful sufferings and tortures they underwent* (1821). In Roche, as I have noted, the demonic is embodied in Belgrave, but the Irish priest who serves the parish where Amanda lives is a bit of a devil himself. Father O’Gallaghan is described by the narrator as a “little fat priest,” and he first appears at a social event, ingratiating himself into the affairs of everyone and stuffing himself on whatever he can get into his mouth (p. 384). This image of the gluttonous clergyman goes back to Chaucer and certainly was current in gothic dramas like Horace Walpole’s *The Mysterious Mother* (1791) and Lewis’s *The Castle Spectre* (1796). Later in the novel we see Father O’Gallaghan attempting to convince Amanda to convert to Catholicism so that he can arrange a totally unsuitable marriage between her and one of the local Irish farmers. His motivation, according to Amanda, is to preside over a veritable feast of “pudding” (p. 386). Finally, in a scene that makes clear Amanda’s anti-Catholic sensibilities, we see her forced to attend the traditional Irish wake that the local people are holding for her dead father. Disgusted with their drinking, eating, smoking, laughing, and shouting directly over the corpse of her beloved sire, Amanda dismisses them and sits down to a soberly Protestant vigil with the dead, free of the corrupt feast-seeking priest (p. 349).

A second characteristic of anti-Catholicism—accusations of cannibalism caused by literal interpretations of the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist—emerges in gothic textuality as a focus on blood and later vampires, which has been read by Sage as a veiled attempt to confront and mock some of the theological debates about the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (pp. 51-54). Neither Roche nor Radcliffe develop this topic, although Roche twice invokes, only to belittle, the Irish belief in banshees wailing on the night of someone’s death. A third characteristic of

anti-Catholicism was fear of foreign invasions by Catholic Spain or France, a fear precipitated by three events. In 1715 and again in 1745, there were attempts made by the exiled Catholic Stuarts to reclaim the throne. Even more frighteningly, in August 1779, the combined Spanish and French fleets had come as close to invading England as anyone had in recent history: “the attempted invasion [of 1779] had awakened the age-old fears of a ‘beleaguered Protestant isle’ threatened by an alliance of Catholic powers” (Haydon, p. 203). More historically distant and yet more directly connected with Roche was the 1641 massacre of Protestants in Ulster by Irish Catholics seeking to regain dominance of the area. This traumatic event left 12,000 Protestants dead, more than half the population of Ulster, and actually lasted close to ten years, spreading to other parts of Ireland. The psychic scars left on the Protestant population were soon to be shared by Catholics when Oliver Cromwell landed on the island with the full force of the British army in 1649. Roche was born in a country where religious violence between Protestants and Catholics had lasted for generations, been horrifically violent, and left scars still visible in all aspects of the country’s life. All of these historical, theological, and social factors were pervasive in the cultural consciousness, and all of them, to some extent, began appearing in exaggerated and hyperbolic forms in the productions of the gothic imaginary. In fact, Killeen makes an analogous point in his observations on the period:

As Irish Anglican unity was breaking down, the Gothic novel sought to restore it; as terror struck through agrarian secret societies, “terror” novelists sought to channel the anxieties around such violence into a cultural surrogate which solved this violence vicariously. And, in *The Children of the Abbey*, we find precisely the kind of political transformations of death that were being interrogated by the antiquarian investigations of Anglican gentlemen. (p. 183)

Europe before and after the French Revolution was in the grip of both religious angst and political terror, and the emergence and transmutation of the gothic mapped those fears on a broad cultural terrain.

By 1780, the “philosophic” movement in France had built an extremely strong case against religion as a species of “superstition” and the prop on which a corrupt political apparatus rested. Roche frequently condemns “monkish superstition,” code to her readers for an anti-Catholic agenda at work (p. 21, *passim*). Proponents of a variety of Enlightenment ideologies—scientific experimentation, mechanistic philosophy, materialism, Naturalism—challenged the animistic conception of the universe that had been constructed by traditional Christian beliefs. Used to establish a new society based on the realities of matter or the organic cycle of birth, growth, and decay, these epistemologies endorsed the scientific principle and the

notion that the processes of life and matter occurred without recourse to a belief in spirit or the supernatural. However, as various theorists of the decline of magic and superstition have noted, one cannot simply attribute the changes in beliefs that happened at this time to the success of the scientific revolution, the increase in urbanism, or the spread of various Protestant self-help ideologies. As Keith Thomas has concluded, “if magic is to be defined as the employment of ineffective techniques to allay anxiety when effective ones are available, then we must recognize that no society will ever be free from it.”²⁰ Indeed, as Thomas notes, explanatory supernatural theories were rejected throughout most of England well before effective techniques to explain medical and natural events were developed.

It is precisely in this historical gap—between the decline of magic and the rise of science—that the gothic imaginary emerges. For Roche’s heroine Amanda, recourse to God is consistently presented as a discussion about “Providence,” as in “the hand of Providence,” or “the events of Providence” (pp. 371, 486, 606). There is absolutely no indication that Amanda believes in a personal God, and one might in fact characterize the religion of Roche’s narrator and heroine as Anglican Latitudinarianism or what Charles Taylor refers to as “Providential Deism,” a belief system that endorsed a “sense of impartial benevolence, or purely human sympathy” and the embrace of the world as an “ordering project,” as well as the “dispelling of mystery” so that there could be “a kind of equilibrium between our goals and our moral abilities.”²¹ In another later novel, *Contrast* (1828), Roche talks about God as “the Great Disposer of all things” and describes “Religion” as “that inward principle of action” that allows us to make the morally correct decisions in life.²² In fact, at the high point of gothicism in *The Children of the Abbey*, when Amanda confronts what she thinks is her long-dead mother come back to life, she exclaims: “Protect me, Heaven!” (p. 467). Indeed, such non-anthropomorphic appeals to “Heaven” or “Providence” occur throughout the text when Amanda cries out to an amorphous divine power to aid or protect her. There is never any discussion of Christ or God as a father in a personal manner, all of which suggests the sort of chilly Anglicanism that had become popular among middle- and upper-class Protestants by the mid-eighteenth century.

Another possible way to approach these questions would be to ask: how did the West, at least ideally, evolve the values of universal human rights, suffrage, equality between the sexes, companionate marriage, and toleration of cultural differences, the very values we see Roche putting forward in *The Children of the Abbey*? Jürgen Habermas has claimed that the crucial component in explaining modernization can be found in the development of what he calls a textual society in which readers were unified rather than divided into hierarchical social classes.²³ The development of this broad-based literate public sphere was characterized by a print culture whose

literary texts extolled the “whiggish,” bourgeois values of individuality, duty, loyalty, equality under the law, public education, and freedom of choice. However, these social, political, and legal developments did not occur seamlessly or without a fairly contentious interaction with previous modes of largely religiously enforced patterns of behavior and thought. This is where the vexed topic of secularization enters the discussion.

In order to modernize, the newly bourgeois citizen of the secular city (the newly evolving nation-state) had to reject the archaic and superstitious beliefs of the past and embrace a brave new world of reason and “natural supernaturalism,” a society in which the increasingly feminized and domesticated middle class family replaced the hierarchical family proffered earlier by the Church and King. What I am calling the earlier, feudal, aristocratic, and ecclesiastical family/clan (or way of positioning and understanding oneself in a hierarchical cultural structure) was replaced during this period by a new political and familial structure—nationalistic, bourgeois, individualistic, personal, and conjugal—and it was in the oscillation and struggle between these two competing “families”—these two social, religious, political, and cultural formations—that the uncanniness and anxiety in the gothic imaginary was created. Since this culture could not turn away from God, it chose to be haunted by his avatars: priests, corrupt monks, and incestuous fathers and uncles. The gothic was, in fact, extremely effective at keeping alive all of the *ne plus ultra* of the supernatural: ghosts, witches, necromancy, exorcism, the occult, and the devil. The repetitious trappings of the uncanny and animism or magical thinking continue to permeate the reading materials that the lower class and newly bourgeois citizens of Britain imbibed. However, these texts only sometimes explained away the supernatural in favor of Enlightenment’s codes—reason, order, and clarity.

III: *Confronting the Gothic*

Roche clearly comes down on the side of Radcliffean anti-metaphysics, explaining away what appears to be supernatural in favor of natural and rational causes. The most gothic moment of the novel occurs when Amanda is looking for the portrait of her dead mother in her ancestral Scottish estate. Led to a ruined chapel and eventually into her mother’s dressing room, she finally discovers what she thinks is the portrait that she has been seeking:

She at last came to a door, it was closed, not fastened; she pushed it gently open, and could just discern a spacious room. This, she supposed, had been her mother’s dressing-room. The moonbeams . . . suddenly darted through the casements. . . . She advanced into the room: at the upper end of it something in white attracted her notice. She concluded it to be the portrait of Lady

Malvina's mother. . . She went up to examine it; but her horror may be better conceived than described, when she found herself not by a picture, but by the real form of a woman, with a death-like countenance! She screamed wildly at the terrifying spectre, for such she believed it to be, and quick as lightning flew from the room. Again was the moon obscured by a cloud, and she involved in utter darkness. She ran with such violence, that, as she reached the door at the end of the gallery, she fell against it. Extremely hurt, she had not the power to move for a few minutes; but while she involuntarily paused, she heard approaching footsteps. Wild with terror, she instantly recovered her faculties and attempted opening it. . . . at that moment she felt an icy hand upon hers! (pp. 466-67)

This is the high point of gothicism in the text, and, indeed, this particular scene was chosen by the publishers of the first edition to be illustrated as the frontispiece to the novel (see fig. 1).

Any reader of the genre knows that after such a scene, a revelation about parentage or a lost inheritance will soon be disclosed, and Roche's novel conforms to this pattern. The icy hand in question in fact belongs to Amanda's villainous step-grandmother, the woman responsible for the death and disinheritance of Amanda's mother close to eighteen years earlier, now held as a prisoner in the deserted family mansion by her nefarious daughter and son-in-law because she wanted to remarry against their wishes and, when thwarted, threatened to reveal that Oscar was the true heir to Dunreath Abbey. In the midst of this traumatic narrative about disinheritance and imprisonment, the step-grandmother calls upon Amanda to stay and listen to her narrative: "Lose your superstitious fears, and in me behold not an airy inhabitant of the other world, but a sinful, sorrowing, and repentant woman" (p. 467). The recourse here to renouncing "superstitious fears" had become a long-standing rhetorical practice in anti-Catholic gothic narrative and would have been understood by readers of the text within such a context of Protestant-inflected discourse. The imprisoned Lady Dunreath not only explains the mysteries of Amanda's immediate past and wrongful disinheritance, but she also provides the will that allows Oscar and Amanda to be transformed from disgraced nobodies into wealthy and respected aristocrats. Such a transformation, according to Killeen, represents the uneasy relation between Catholicism and Protestantism within Ireland at this time. For him, Amanda symbolizes "a Protestantism at ease with, and indebted to, Catholicism. Yet it is precisely this link with Catholicism—the most ambitious aspect of Roche's narrative—which undercuts the narrative power. The Ghosts of the Past are here linked to a transformation of the present, and also a transfer of property" (p. 184).

As the penal laws were being relaxed so that Catholics could own their ancestral lands, a concomitant fear about the loss of property (the Land

question) was stirred up in the Protestant population. Handing over to Amanda and Oscar their long-lost and stolen property (displaced in the novel to an abbey in Scotland) is tantamount to activating a long simmering fear in her Protestant readers that rightful owners will, with gothic uncanniness, arise from the almost dead in order to reclaim land that was unlawfully seized from them. Paradoxically, it is in her sympathy with the property claims of the Protestant Amanda and Oscar that Roche has been construed as sympathetic to “revivified Catholicism” (Killeen, p. 185). However, since Amanda is such a resolutely Protestant character throughout the novel, she is not a stable signifier for Catholic property claims. Another way of stating this is to assert that Roche seems not to be fully aware of or in control of the conflicted ideological agenda of her novel.

In addition to the religious agenda at work in the scene, there have been critics who see a sexual one as well. Strangely, Haggerty claims that this scene “shimmers with erotic feeling,” the two women in the grip of the “thrill of discovery. . . . [when] the thrill becomes physical” (p. 75). I am forced again to demur here. I would not find the touch of a seemingly dead woman in my dead mother’s dressing room “erotic” nor do I think Roche’s contemporary readership would have understood the scene as such. Earlier Haggerty attempts to argue that Amanda finds a comforting intimacy with Sister Mary and that Roche was motivated to idealize the convent scenes between the two women in order to portray “an intimacy between [these two women] that would otherwise be suspect” (p. 74). This perspective seems to me a misreading of the interaction between the two women, introducing a level of intimacy between them that is not tenable given Amanda’s clear and consistent heterosexual alliance with Mortimer, her eventual husband, throughout the text. In his second interpretive foray, the attempt to present the horrific as erotic, Haggerty has presented us with yet another severe misreading of a female gothic text. While not as egregious as the historical errors of Purves, Haggerty’s interpretive leaps of fancy have done little to elucidate the actual gothic text in question and instead have worked to try to construct a Rochean heroine who is supposedly both Catholic and queer.²⁴ Admittedly, a dreamy nostalgia infusing the representation of Amanda’s interactions with Sister Mary in the convent could be read as pro-Catholic. As noted at the outset, it has become critically fashionable to claim that the entire novel is pro-Catholic because of the convent scene and the reinstatement of Amanda’s Scottish property, however displaced and confused those representations are. Within the female gothic repertoire, however, this inter-generational female bonding is a standard trope and is always between an orphaned or supposedly motherless heroine and an older woman who functions as a mother substitute. It is not a representation of returning to the Catholic Church or embracing

a same-sex object of desire. The situation between Amanda and Sister Mary is extremely similar, in fact, to the interaction between Ellena and her actual mother, Olivia, in Radcliffe's *The Italian*, and few would label that text pro-Catholic. The real question is why Protestant female gothic novelists place their heroines in convents presided over by real or substitute mothers who need to be negotiated with before the heroine can discover her true identity and purpose in life.²⁵

An equally compelling question is why, when we know that there was a vogue for anti-Catholic sentiment throughout this period, when we know that Protestant female novelists were complicit in articulating anti-Catholicism, is there currently an attempt to elide the historical facts staring us in the face. The need to reform our ancestors, to make them over into something that resembles our own liberal and tolerant image, is quite evident in the current literary criticism about the gothic. Indeed, it is a characteristic of secularization to believe that prejudice is part and parcel of an ancient worldview that has long been absent from our practices, let alone our consciousness. In fact, the British gothic imaginary was rabidly anti-Catholic and sought to demonize foreigners, scapegoat the Catholic clergy, and depict the threat of a looming and traveling Inquisition to a lower and middle-class population that it was seeking to manipulate for a variety of political purposes. The presence of a demon is always useful in scaring people to resist change and reform. One of the most effective demons in the gothic arsenal was, of course, the secret cabal working with great resources to undermine the benign attempts of the British crown to ensure the status quo. This efficacy is the primary reason why we see the Illuminati in so many of these gothic texts; in fact, they became interchangeable with the Jesuits because both groups were commonly conceived of as secretive, fanatical, and anti-Protestant. Novels like Lewis's *The Monk*, Radcliffe's *The Italian*, Mrs. Patrick's *The Jesuit* (1799), and William Godwin's *St. Leon* (1799) all capitalized on the vogue for anti-Catholic hysteria according to Robert Miles.²⁶ The gothic novel charts the ongoing effort to kill Catholicism over a period lasting more than two hundred years in all its convoluted and complicated moves. One of the most persistent tropes in the gothic is the exposure, punishment, and even death of a corrupt duke or monk, and certainly in this repetitive action, we can see ritualized the killing of a bad, illegitimate king (read: legitimation of a *British* king) or the erasure of a God of superstition (read: fidelity to a *Protestant* God). The rationality and self-control that were so highly prized by Protestant individualism and Enlightenment ideology move to center stage in the gothic, creating a new cultural ideal that chastised idolatry, superstition, hierarchy, and popery in all its forms.²⁷

One would hardly characterize the gothic, however, as a uniformly consistent Enlightenment genre. In fact, the gothic is actually a series of

nostalgic and ambivalent gestures, conflicted and contradictory poses, a mode of writing composed by authors who mixed piety with equal parts of political and social anxiety. Whereas Catholicism was accused of using the confessional to absolve the most heinous of sins, Protestantism insisted on the unmediated internalization of individual conscience. No Protestant clergyman could absolve anyone of their sins; as such, absolution could only be obtained within the “closet” of one’s own conscience. But how can a society be based on trust in each individual’s conscience if, in fact, our own life experiences inform us all too clearly that evil or at least ill will towards others lurks in every bosom? Whereas the sentimental ethos clung to the notion of the “noble savage” or the inherent perfectibility of the untainted human subject, the gothic was willing to confront the inadequate explanations provided by Protestantism to basic spiritual concerns; it probed the persistent mystery of human cruelty, corruption, and finally, death.

Parodic traces of an almost cartoonish Catholicism—evident in hyperbolic deathbed confessions, a bleeding nun who can kidnap a young man at midnight in order to demand a Christian burial, ghosts that appear to explain mysterious events in the past (as in Lewis’s *The Castle Spectre*), the devil transformed into a beautiful young woman luring a monk into temptation—continue to appear in gothic works as the residual uncanny, the persistently strange and yet seductive elements of this earlier system of belief.²⁸ We might ask who benefitted from this fear of the Catholic “Other.” It seems relevant that Horace Walpole’s father Robert was the first Whig “prime minister” of England, while Matthew Lewis served as a Whig member of parliament for one term. The Whig agenda was, as Haydon and others have observed, deeply invested in anti-Catholicism, and one of their methods was clearly to take to the road of ideology and propaganda, hence the gothic imaginary. The secularizing of the uncanny, then, is an attempt by a modernizing, Protestant-inflected social imaginary to strip these atavistic practices of their power and, indeed, to eradicate the magical properties these practices held in the public imagination. By confronting the portrait of her dead mother, Amanda discovers, not a magical representation of the unknowable and inexplicable past (read: Catholicism), but instead a rational and common-sense explanation of an even earlier historical avatar of displaced feminine power, a coded endorsement of the Protestant way of understanding the world, the explained supernatural. Amanda gets to the root, so to speak, of female disinheritance and recovers in a real and tangible way her and her brother’s true identities. They seize their patrimony only by understanding and claiming the power of the displaced matriarchy for themselves. Such is the illogic of political and religious affiliations in the British gothic imaginary.

IV: Contesting the Catholic Presence

In addition to the sexual perversion theme, there is a clear focus in a variety of gothic texts on such themes as clergy as political meddlers, practitioners of “priestcraft,” and orchestrators of the Inquisition, which is seen as being dangerously close to invading British soil. As Jacqueline Howard has observed, popular fiction in the 1790s had “a strong anti-Catholic bias” and dwelt almost obsessively on the motifs of the secret society (read: Jesuits or Illuminati), clandestine political organizations (again, read: Jesuits or Illuminati), bandit outcasts, wicked and scheming clerics, mistaken identities, underground passages and vaults, imprisonments and murder plots gone awry, and spirits mixed with erotica.²⁹ A number of these anti-Catholic gothic works actually originated in either France—such as Denis Diderot’s *The Nun* (1759) and Stéphanie Félicité de Genlis’s inset history of the “beautiful nun” Cecilia in *Adèle and Théodore* (1782)—or Germany—such as Friedrich Schiller’s *Ghost-Seer* (1789) and Augustus von Kotzebue’s *The Adventures of Joseph Pignata* (1801). Other particularly popular German works that were quickly translated into English were Cajetan Tschink’s *Victim of Magical Delusions* (1795), a three volume novel that denounced apparitions and praised Martin Luther for restoring reason to religious belief; Karl Grosse’s *The Genius* (1796; also translated as *Horrid Mysteries*); and Veit Weber’s *The Sorcerer* (1795).³⁰ These works manifest an intense distrust of Catholicism as a species of “priestcraft,” a system whereby priests appear to have magical powers such as turning wine into blood and bread into the flesh of Jesus. When Father O’Gallaghan is first introduced to Amanda, he immediately “smirks” and approaches her to say that he wishes he could “get her initiated”: “for it would do my soul good . . . to confess such a pretty little creature as you are” (p. 161). To say that Amanda moves away from him as quickly as possible would be to underestimate her disgust. Despite this anti-clericalism, Killeen asserts that Amanda comes from an “ancient Irish family” of Norman descent that has converted to Protestantism by the time the narrative begins:

However, Anglicans in Ireland were distrustful of new converts by the Catholic aristocracy—of Old Irish or Norman blood—suspecting a conversion motivated by social rather than religious desires. This suspicion would have been confirmed in that Amanda does come to claim property back from those interlopers, although ironically she is related to them, as many of the Norman families in Ireland may have been related, either through marriage or blood, to the New English arrivals after the Reformation. (p. 185)

For Killeen, the purpose of *The Children of the Abbey*, as well as the gothic in general, is to present

this moment in Irish Protestant history where the past was being re-read, both by Anglican liberals and Catholic apologists, as revelatory of a deep

connection between Anglicans and Catholics on the island. . . . In the figure of Amanda Fitzalan these histories will be reconciled in a very clear and devastating manner. (p. 185)

Exactly how “clear” Amanda is as a Catholic figure, as I have noted throughout, is a matter of dispute. Killeen claims that she is associated with the Virgin Mary in her vehement virginity, hence for him, she is “a mediator between the cultures of conservative Anglicanism and Catholicism” (p. 186). When Mortimer is uncertain whether or not Amanda has had an affair with Belgrave, his ambivalence is read by Killeen as

a good representative of the Anglican attitude toward Catholic devotion to the Virgin as concealing a sexually dissolute reality. Amanda, however, in her staunch defense of her virginity, proves herself as a worthy nexus of Anglican and Catholic versions of chastity, and she offers the best means of a resolution of the ideological conflicts in Ireland. (p. 186)

This highly conjectural reading is then used by Killeen to claim that the novel presents a “generous attitude to Catholicism” although he later admits that the presentation of priests suggests “the stereotype of greed and lechery so common in pornographic Catholophobia of the period” (p. 188). In short, Killeen’s reading is muddled by the very confusion of religious tropes deployed throughout the novel. Attempting to read Amanda as Protestant and then as Catholic (at one point he claims she had a symbolically “Gothic Catholic childhood” because it took place in Wales, pp. 187, 189) or even sympathetic to Catholicism simply will not work.

As a gothic writer committed to an inherently moralistic agenda, Roche continued to write throughout her long life, penning a preface to *Contrast* in which she directly addressed Princess Augusta Sophia (1768–1840), second daughter of King George III, in order to praise Augusta’s father as “famous for supporting and defending the Protestant Church” (p. ix). Stating that it was “her anxious wish and aim, to inculcate, under a pleasing form, pure morality; and under the garb of fiction, to express only such sentiments as may be conformable to the precepts of religion,” Roche went on to praise George III’s efforts to “return [the Church] to Divine Providence” through recourse to “Holy Writ” (pp. xv-xvi, ix). There is certainly a good deal of critical controversy over the exact nature of the “religion” that she was committed to expounding, but as I hope to have demonstrated, an objective assessment of the plot, imagery, rhetorical codes, and characters of *The Children of the Abbey* suggests that this “religion” was the system of bourgeois morality that we now understand as Providential Deism. While professing rationality and common sense as its ideals, however, the Providential Deist consistently deployed a bifurcated vision of Catholicism. That is, it presented Catholicism in a nostalgic glow,

as a gauzy throwback to an earlier feudal era, while probing it as a threatening political and tyrannical force that, if brought back to life, would threaten the secular values of contemporary Britain.

NOTES

¹ Maria Purves, *The Gothic and Catholicism: Religion, Cultural Exchange and the Popular Novel, 1785-1829* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), 122. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² George Haggerty, *Queer Gothic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 72; and Jarlath Killeen, *Gothic Ireland: Horror and the Irish Anglican Imagination in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2005), 187. Subsequent references to both works will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³ Derek Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 56.

⁴ Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England, c. 1714-80: A Political and Social Study* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 170. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁵ See James Shanahan, "Regina Maria Roch(e)," in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, accessed 24 August 2011, <http://dib.cambridge.org>; and email message to author, 23 August 2011. In additional email correspondence, Tina Morin (24 August 2011) and James Murphy (22 August 2011) have confirmed Shanahan's opinion of Roche's Protestant birth and upbringing. Other recent biographies have been summarized by Natalie Schroeder, but none of them discuss Roche's religious affiliation; see Schroeder, "Regina Maria Roche and the Early Nineteenth-Century Irish Regional Novelists," *Éire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies*, 18 (1984), 116-30.

⁶ The only female gothic novel that could be construed as pro-Catholic is Louisa Sidney Stanhope's *The Nun of Santa Maria Di Tindaro* (1818), which is about the sufferings of and eventual retreat into a convent by the pious Sister Helena; see Frederick S. Frank, *The First Gothics: A Critical Guide to the English Gothic Novel* (New York: Garland, 1987), 383. In addition to *The Children of the Abbey*, Purves considers Eleanor Sleath's *The Orphan of the Rhine: A Romance* (1798), Agnes Lancaster's *The Abbess of Valtiera or the Sorrows of a Falsehood; a Romance* (1816), and Catherine Selden's *The English Nun* (1797) as examples of pro-Catholic female gothic novels (p. 130). Even if these claims were true, they suggest that the exceptions prove the rule. Given the fact that we know that more than 1,100 gothic novels and chapbooks were published during the period 1780-1829, this is hardly a large sample of gothic textuality (Frank, p. xi).

⁷ Regina Maria Roche's *The Children of the Abbey* was originally published in four volumes (London: Minerva Press, 1796). All references will be cited parenthetically in the text from the edition reprinted in Philadelphia by Porter and Coates, 1876, <http://www.archive.org/details/childrenofabbeyt00rochiala>.

⁸ See Sister Mary Muriel Tarr, *Catholicism in Gothic Fiction: A Study of the Nature and Function of Catholic Materials in Gothic Fiction in England (1762-1820)* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1946); Irene Bostrom, "The Novel and Catholic Emancipation," *Studies in Romanticism*, 2 (1963), 155-76;

Victor Sage, *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1988); and Susan Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Subsequent references to Sage will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁹ Joyce Tompkins stated in “Ann Radcliffe and her influence on later writers” (thesis, University of London, 1921) that “the prejudice against Catholicism, or, more particularly, priests and monks, the ‘anti-Roman bray’ . . . is heard at its loudest in both the English and the German novels of terror” (p. 104). However, while Tompkins concludes by seeing the demonization of Catholicism as motivated by the Protestant reading public’s attraction to the “lurid” (p. 274), the devoutly Catholic Montague Summers boldly pronounces that the gothic should be read as a nostalgically romantic revival of the supernatural beliefs of Catholicism. See Summers, *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel* (London: Fortune, 1938). Subsequent references to Summers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁰ As Robert Miles sees it, England (I would also add Germany) viewed the Protestant Reformation as “unfinished business,” so the gothic became popular because it displayed “the deformities of Catholicism [and] held [them] up to the reader for the purposes of Protestant delectation” (p. 84). For Miles, “anti-Catholicism is frequently a screen for national concerns” and is consequently much less concerned with religion itself and much more focused on anxieties about the new sources for political and social legitimacy in a society that had suspended the divine right of kings and had no plausible replacement on hand (p. 90). See Miles, “Europhobia: The Catholic Other in Horace Walpole and Charles Maturin,” in *European Gothic: A Spirited Exchange*, ed. Avril Horner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 84-103.

¹¹ Angela Keane, *Women Writers and the English Nation in the 1790s: Romantic Belongings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 24.

¹² David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman, 1980), 418.

¹³ See Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’ (1919),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 17, *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, 1917-1919* (London: Hogarth Press, 1975), 219-52; and André Breton, “Limits not Frontiers of Surrealism,” in *Surrealism*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 93-116.

¹⁴ Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall, “Gothic Criticism,” in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “nostalgia,” accessed 7 August 2011, <http://www.oed.com>.

¹⁶ Maurice Lévy, “In the Hands of an Angry God: Religious Terror in Gothic Fiction,” trans. Joel Porte, in *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism*, ed. G. R. Thompson (Spokane: Washington State University Press, 1974), 42. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁷ Lennard Davis, *Obsession: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 33.

¹⁸ An extensive discussion of the pope’s association with the devil during the Guy Fawkes festivities can be found in Haydon’s introduction. The devil’s appear-

ance in any number of gothic novels (in particular, those by Matthew Lewis and Charles Robert Maturin) suggests that the gothic imaginary worked by transforming historically distant but lingering political and historical fears triggered by the Gunpowder plot, the Spanish Armada, the Irish massacre of Protestants at Ulster, and the Jacobite rebellions.

¹⁹ See *The History of Guy Fawkes, and the Horrid Conspiracy of the Gunpowder Plot* (Penrith: Anthony Soulby, 1818), a 24-page chapbook that names Father Henry Garnet as the instigator of the attempt to blow up Parliament in 1605. This chapbook was published only four years after the Jesuit order was reinstated by Pope Pius VII in Europe.

²⁰ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), 668.

²¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 261.

²² Roche, *Contrast* (London: Newman, 1828), ix, viii, <http://www.archive.org/details/contrast01roch>. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

²³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1989).

²⁴ Indeed, Haggerty states in *Queer Gothic* that “gothic fiction is always already queer” (p. 44). This premise forms the basis of *Queer Gothic* as well as some of the essays in the edited collection *Catholic Figures, Queer Narratives*, ed. Lowell Gallagher, Frederick S. Roden, and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Palgrave, 2007). See especially Haggerty, “The Horrors of Catholicism: Religion and Sexuality in Gothic Fiction,” in *Queer Gothic*, 63-83.

²⁵ I have explored the gendered dynamics of these questions in my *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

²⁶ Miles, “The 1790s: The Effulgence of Gothic,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 52.

²⁷ I analyze much more fully what I call the “gothic ideology” within the larger context of 400 gothic novels and chapbooks in my book “The Gothic Ideology: Religious Hysteria and Anti-Catholicism in British Popular Fiction, 1770-1870,” forthcoming from University of Wales Press in 2014.

²⁸ See Victoria Nelson, who has defined the subgenre in her chapter, “Faux Catholic: A Gothick Genealogy from Monk Lewis to Dan Brown,” in *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). However, the “faux Catholic” had earlier origins. Peter Wagner traces it to the early anti-Catholic pornographic polemic of Pietro Aretino (1492-1556) and to early anti-clerical French works such as *The History of Mademoiselle de St. Phale, giving a full account of the miraculous conversion of a noble French lady and her daughter, to the reformed religion. With the defeat of the intrigues of a Jesuite their confessor* (trans. 1691), cited by Godwin as an influence on his *Caleb Williams* (1794); see Wagner, “Anti-Catholic Erotica in Eighteenth-Century

England,” in *Erotica and the Enlightenment* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1991), 116-92.

²⁹ Jacqueline Howard, *Reading Gothic Fiction: A Bakhtinian Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 229.

³⁰ All of these works are discussed in greater detail in my *Gothic Riffs: Secularizing the Uncanny in the European Imaginary, 1780-1820* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010).