

“The Construction of the Gothic Nun: Fantasies and the Religious Imaginary”

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I would like to begin my talk today by asking a few questions about the construction of the gothic nun. And by that I mean the nun as she was represented in the hundreds of gothic novels and chapbooks that appeared in France, England, Ireland, and Germany from around 1770-1870.

What was it about nuns and convents that so entranced the imaginations of nineteenth-century readers of gothic novels and chapbooks? Why did this reading population recur to meditating on the enigma of women shut up in gloomy cloisters with only a few celibate men allowed access to them? What sort of ideological fantasy work did this representation accomplish for a population that was determined to believe that such an arrangement was not only unnatural, but dangerous and ultimately threatening to the body politic?

As far as her origins are concerned, it would appear that the gothic nun owes a good deal of her pedigree to the Roman vestal virgins, a group of six to twelve women selected at a young age to tend the central hearth fire of Rome while living as celibates for thirty years in the heart of the Palatine. The life of a vestal virgin was privileged, with a high degree of social and political status, but should a vestal virgin fail in her duty to remain chaste, she was condemned to a live

burial within an underground chamber, left there with only enough food to survive for a few days at the most (Wildfang 1). This fate sounds remarkably similar to the one suffered by Agnes in Lewis's *The Monk* (and the trope of live burial is repeated in dozens of lesser-known gothic novels and chapbooks). If we move then to the medieval period, Powers's pioneering study of the British convent examines the realities of these women's lives, while also providing archival vignettes and case histories of individuals. She observes that medieval women entered the convent for a "career, a vocation, a prison, a refuge; to its different inmates the medieval nunnery was all these things" (25). She concluded her study by noting that using convents as dumping grounds for unmarriageable women finally compromised the entire convent system, a concept that becomes central to how the anti-Catholic gothic ideology functioned in the novels.

The gothic nun's origins are a curious mixture, then, of the literary and the historic, of women found in legends as well as actual personages spanning ten centuries and a variety of texts that range from Spain and Italy to France, Germany, England, and finally Canada and America.

From pornographic tales about lesbian nuns to shocking stories of reluctant women forced into convents only to find themselves giving birth to babies that were then hastily baptized and murdered by their priest fathers, the highly and ambivalently sexualized figure of the gothic nun haunted and intrigued the European imaginary for a variety of political, social, philosophical, and religious reasons. Hushed and secretive convents, as the abodes of these seductive creatures came to be figured in the gothic imaginary, were depicted as mysteriously tabooed locales that competed with the patriarchal bourgeois family for control over nubile female bodies. Even more ominously, gothic convents were presided over by perverse abbesses and lecherous monks

rather than the sexless mothers and benignly enlightened patriarchs who claimed to be in charge. These menacing convents became one of the *locus classicus* in the gothic canon, full of dark hallways, dank underground cells, and sexually repressed or perverse women, young and old, beautiful and homely, content or maddeningly frustrated by their lots in life. In many ways, the representation of the gothic nun in her gloomy convent functioned as a blank slate on which both Catholics and anti-Catholics could project any number of fears, anxieties, prejudices, and fantasies both positive and negative and see them come to life on her frail frame. One fact, however, is undeniable: the representation of the gothic nun is multivalent, full of horror and mockery; she can best be understood by reading a variety of texts that expose her full and contradictory complexity in the British Protestant imaginary.

It has been recently argued that the construction and popular circulation of the British gothic nun began with the adaptation of a French sentimental tale by Joseph Addison, *Theodosius and Constantia* (*Spectator* 1711) and a few years later by Alexander Pope's romanticized version of the doomed Eloise in his *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717), forced into a religious vocation against her wishes. One need look no further for examples than Stéphanie de Genlis's depiction of Cecilia d'AIMERI in her epistolary novel of education, *Adèle et Théodore*, later published in England in a chapbook adaptation as *The History of Cecilia, or the Beautiful Nun*, or Matthew Lewis's portrait of Agnes de Medina in *The Monk* to see how popular this particular sentimental representation of the nun was in gothic texts of the time. But by focusing only on these figures, we have a very partial and incomplete portrait of a figure that can be understood in a sympathetic light, as a victim romanticized by an Enlightenment culture that mourned her loss of love and marriage for the chilly climes of a convent.

There is much to be said for this one particular face of the gothic nun, and certainly it is true that unlucky aristocratic women were forced into convents by their families for financial and other reasons. With the dissolution of British monasteries in 1539, some British nuns initially went abroad to join convents there, but it was not until the late sixteenth century that British women founded expatriate English convents, three by 1610 and finally twenty-two in France, the southern Netherlands, and Portugal by 1710 (Dolan 510). As only one convent remained in operation in England after the Reformation, Bar Convent in York, nuns were not a visible presence in England until French nuns seeking refuge began appearing on British soil in 1792. If a British woman wanted to join a religious order, she went to a British Catholic convent in Lisbon or France, or possibly the Spanish Netherlands and her family would travel abroad to visit her (Watkinson 220-31). As Dolan notes, “visits to women’s religious houses in the Southern Netherlands became a standard feature on tourists’ itineraries by the late seventeenth century” (510). In particular, Protestant tourists like Walpole and Thomas Gray, for instance, regularly visited convents, and the nuns were something of an “attraction” behind their convent gates, viewed as exotics or living vestiges of an era that the British Protestant imaginary had rejected and yet still nostalgically wanted to view from a safe distance.

This benign face of the nun, however, was by no means the whole story about the nun’s identity or role in the gothic. Indeed, the gothic ideology relies on a bifurcation of its imaginary so that it consistently presents all of its major stock characters in a duplicitous and split manner. The sentimental figures of Eloise or Constantia are mirrored by any number of sexually voracious, perverse, and manic nuns or prioresses, for instance, the mad and adulterous Sister Agnes/Laurentini in Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*, the vicious Abbess of San Stephano in

The Italian, or the terrible Mother St. Agatha, “La Domina,” who presides over the sadistic and murderous Convent of St. Clare in Lewis’s *The Monk*. Or nuns are depicted in any number of gothic novels as petty gossips, shrews, sexual hypocrites, or gluttons. We certainly see this in De Sade’s *Justine* and *Juliette* (the source for so many evil abbesses, modeled on Sade’s portrait of the Abbess Delbène), as well as in Radcliffe’s novels or Elizabeth Helme’s *Magdalen; or The Penitent of Godstow* (1812).

As I have attempted to argue so far, the gothic nun is a complex, multifaceted, and ambivalent representation: sometimes the innocent victim of her own wayward sexuality which causes her to be drawn into a doomed affair with a monk, perhaps based on the legend of the twelfth-century Yorkshire Nun of Watton (Constable). Or sometimes she is the victim of her family’s inability or unwillingness to provide a dowry (for example, as depicted in Aphra Behn’s *The Rover* [1677], Diderot’s fictitious Suzanne Simonin in *The Nun*, or the well-known story of Marianna de Leyva [1575-1650], better known as the Nun of Monza, fictionalized in Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*). At other points she is the lesbian victimizer of other nuns on whom she preys, perhaps based on the case of Sister Benedetta Carlini, a seventeenth-century lesbian abbess in Pescia (J. Brown) or the licentious lesbian nun Sister Angeliqne in the pornographic *Venus in the Cloister, or the Nun in her Chemise* by Jean Barrin (1680; publ 1719). As Valerie Traub has observed, lesbian nuns were a crucial component in pornographic attacks on Catholicism: “same-sex transgressions are fostered by the innate hypocrisy of Catholics and the deprivations of sex-segregation: celibate, and therefore burning in lust, the wily nun is imagined to satisfy her lust either with other hypocrites like herself or, particularly egregious, with unsuspecting novitiates” (63).

Nuns begin to function in anti-Catholic pornography during the sixteenth century. For instance, the French anti-clerical classic, *Venus in the Cloister* was clearly derived from Pietro Aretino's dialogues in his *Ragionamenti* (1534-36), which had five dialogues between Sister Angelique, a lesbian nun of nineteen, and Sister Agnes, a novice who is an apt pupil for Angelique's lessons in "Florentine kissing" and fondling (qtd. Thompson 151). In addition to scenes of flagellation, sado-masochism, and voyeurism, there are rambling dialogues and philosophical discourses about libertinism and the justification of the pursuit of sexual pleasure among the clergy. The work is also an early example of French anti-Catholic pornography that establishes the connections between Catholics and the strange objects they seem (perversely) to worship.

It was a short step, then, from depicting nuns in pornographic texts to revealing them to be in league with the devil and, in fact, demons in disguise, sent by their master Satan to corrupt honest people. One of the most demonic of gothic nuns is the seducer of hapless men who stumble into her sphere of power and find themselves raped by a sexually voracious and perverse abbess who conceals her duplicity behind the cloak of false piety (the plot of Ireland's *The Abbess*). The most ominous "nun" is, of course, no nun at all. The strange hermaphroditic figure in Lewis's *The Monk*, the bifurcated figure of Rosario/Matilda, supposedly a woman who disguises herself as a monk in order to seduce Ambrosio, the proud and arrogant Capuchin (Franciscan) preacher, is not human at all. This shape-shifting figure is in fact a demon working in league with the devil to send a proud man's soul to hell, and certainly echoes of the Faust and the Wandering Jew legend reverberate throughout a number of these anti-Catholic gothics suggesting the confluence of anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic agendas in the gothic ideology.

The reader of the gothic ideology needs to recognize that for every positive manifestation of a Catholic figure, there are at least a dozen negative examples of this same type. In other words, for every nun who clearly harkens back to Eloise, such as Cecilia or Agnes, there are dozens of demonic and perverse nuns who actually represent the more outlandish face of the “Catholic as other” in the gothic ideology.

Denis Diderot knew the early French anti-clerical works well; in addition, he himself had been forced into a monastery by his father when he refused to become a priest, and he had a sister who had been driven mad and died after she took the veil at the Ursuline convent of Langres. These experiences, along with his knowledge of a nun named Marguerite Delamarre who had tried to annul her vows after her parents forced her into the convent in 1758, worked together to form the impetus behind his composition of *The Nun* in 1760. Intended as something of an epistolary hoax on his friend the Marquis de Croismare, whom he was trying to lure back to Paris from his country estate, *The Nun* finally appeared in separate book form in 1796, twelve years after Diderot’s death. The book first appeared in England as *Memoirs of a Nun* in 1797. So successful that it went through fourteen French editions in the next four years, *The Nun*’s critical reception and widespread readership seem to mirror a series of very significant historical events in France: in October 1789 the First Republic suspended the taking of perpetual religious vows; in February 1790 all religious orders that required lifelong vows were disbanded; and in 1793 Catholicism itself was outlawed (Goulbourne xiv). By the middle of the eighteenth century in France, for instance, there were about 5,000 convents holding some 55,000 nuns, so that it has been estimated that one in every two hundred women in France at this time was a nun (Goulbourne xi). By the 1870s there were almost 130,000 women in French convents, a ten-fold

increase over the number in convents in 1800 (Tallett and Atkins xvii). If the Enlightenment mentality embraced tolerance, justice, and freedom, then the convent and the religious system at the heart of *The Nun* stood for everything that the Revolution was committed to destroying. Of course there were also attempts to condemn the novel as obscene, and once the Bourbons were restored *The Nun* was banned by the government in 1824 and 1826, only to come back into favor during the 1880s, when the anticlerical movement re-emerged with new energy (Goulbourne xiv).

Although the gothic ideology existed before 1796, the publication of *The Nun* caused a veritable explosion of literary works born out of forced vows, underground cells, aberrant sexualities, evil abbesses, lecherous priests, and attempts at escape over the convent walls. Sister Sainte-Christine, Suzanne's second superior, is depicted as a sadistic abbess in the tradition of the gothic ideology, complete with the order of throwing broken glass into the corridors and forcing Suzanne to walk barefoot over it. Indeed, Goulbourne sees *The Nun* as "a forerunner of the Gothic novel with its depictions of hideous suffering" (xxvii), and Choudhury calls it "a gothic novel" (22). Further, we know that it was read by William Godwin in its first English translation (1797) and influenced his composition of *St. Leon*, and that Charles Maturin copied out by hand and used in his *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) the scene in which the Vicar General visits the convent (also see Praz 177). Goulbourne calls both the Godwin and Maturin episodes interesting instances of the "Protestant appropriation of the Enlightenment" (xxxv). A work with a "long shelf-life" (Goulbourne xiv), *The Nun* was faithfully adapted by Jacques Rivette in 1966 as a film that earned the condemnation of the Catholic Church yet again, almost two hundred years after its first publication. Only after a concerted campaign led by Jean-Luc Godard against the

ensorship of the film imposed by the Minister of Culture André Malraux did the film finally see release (Goulbourne xv).

Two other sources for a number of the anti-Catholic gothic tropes that appear in British chapbooks, besides the novels of Radcliffe and Lewis, are *Anecdotes of a Convent* (1771), published at the very beginning of the period, and *Atrocities of the Convent* (1808), published by a Quaker at what might be considered the height of one stage of anti-Catholic agitation in England. These two texts suggest again that the gothic ideology was formed through a complex system of incorporating a number of other sources, both fictional and non-fictional. In the first work, a young girl is forced to board at a convent and very quickly begins to hear a number of stories about life in the convent, all of them quite negative or perverse. She also denounces the greed and hypocrisy of the nuns: “whilst the unfortunate victims of superstition renounce the world with their lips, they carry all its prejudices, together with their own passions, into the interior of it in themselves” (I: 197). Or she smirkingly states: “these pious ladies know perfectly well the proper value of money” (I: 194). *Anecdotes* is written in a very matter of fact tone and presents itself as an eyewitness account of the absurdities of the convent system. The text reads like a conduct book for young Protestant British women who might unexpectedly find themselves sent abroad to live in a convent trapped with any number of very odd women (or young boys raised in a convent who think they are female).

The second text is written in the style of an epistolary novel between French women who have sisters and friends in a French provincial convent. The stock names are used once again—specifically, Angelica, Clementina, and Agatha—all clerically-coded names that suggest imminent priestly abuse, and as we might suspect, these nuns are quickly called up for charges

meted out by the cruel Abbess: they have been found with the volumes of Voltaire and Rousseau in their cells and therefore are to be punished for crimes of intellectual heresy (I: 25). After the ritual book burnings, the sisters all join in a public lashing of the errant nuns and Eugenia St. Ange, the heroine, is held in confinement and punished severely as an example to the others. When she attempts unsuccessfully to escape, she is held in an underground cell where she is slowly starved by the sadistic Sister Margaret, in the employ of the evil abbess. In the next cell is the desperate Sister Clara, pregnant and delivered of a baby smuggled out of the convent. Even more shocking is the “natural son” of the Abbess who regularly visits the convent where his mother presides, using his *entre* there to conduct illicit affairs with a variety of the nuns (I: 98). And then there is the evil Father Seraphim, who lures Eugenia into a private cell where only he has access to her. It is another two volumes before we hear details of his attempted seduction, and the inevitable rescue and destruction of the convents during the French Revolution (III: 162). And so it goes, a well-worn narrative with the usual complications extended over three volumes, echoing tropes that had circulated in a variety of texts over the past century.

Together these four strands of discourse—the anti-clerical, polemical, pornographic, and sentimental—intersected to create a literary tradition that would quickly extend beyond France, leading to a flood of gothic textuality in England, Germany, Canada, and eventually America. The nun’s body, its possession and loyalties, became for this culture something like the terrain on which a wide variety of epistemological and religious conflicts could be waged. In short, the nun functions as a master signifier of conflicted religious sensibilities in a number of works written by authors as diverse as Diderot and Genlis in France, and Matthew Lewis, “George Barrington,” William-Henry Ireland, Isaac Crookenden, Edward Montague, and Sarah Wilkinson in England.

Finally, a chapbook that was published anonymously in London in 1803 plays on the name of the major character in *Venus in the Cloister*, that is, *The Nun; or, Memoirs of Angelique; An Interesting Tale*. Although one would hope to see similarities between the novel and the chapbook, there are none. And, although the frontispiece prominently features a nun exposing her breast to a monk, almost in imitation of the garden scene in Lewis's *The Monk*, there is only the hint of such a corresponding scene in the chapbook. Clearly, the chapbook has been constructed to appeal to a reading public that would have been familiar with the Lewis text, even in chapbook form, and perhaps they would have known the heroine's name was associated with *Venus* and therefore expect a quasi-pornographic work. One can only assume they were disappointed by the tameness and predictably of the actual work that they either borrowed or purchased.

This eighteen-page chapbook presents the usual account of a young woman forced into a convent against her wishes by her father, who has offered her up in prayerful sacrifice if one of his shipping ventures returns a profit. Although Angelique is already in love with Ferdinand, her father is unrelenting and so she takes her vows and lives for one year as a nun. It is at this point that the mother superior informs her that a young novice is to share her room and, as one expects, the young novice turns out to be Ferdinand (the name of the love interest in Radcliffe's *Sicilian Romance*) in disguise. The lovers repair quickly to a chapel where they catch a monk and nun *en flagrante*, and so the monk agrees to marry them and help them escape in exchange for their silence about his nocturnal activities in the confessional. Much is made of underground tunnels connecting the convent and the monastery, and much is made as well about the folly of

maintaining allegiance to her vows as a nun when she was forced into them against her will.

Typical Protestant appeals are made by Ferdinand to Angelique's "conscience":

‘Why would you intreat your maker to eradicate those very feelings he has himself implanted? Why pray for their annihilation only for the purpose of adopting such a line of conduct as he never meant you to pursue? since, if he had, some impulse would have arisen in your own to aid you in the prosecution of it. Conscience, my sweet Angelique, conscience would have whispered to your soul your father's cruel adoption, if it had been essential to your salvation, or if the Almighty had looked with pleasure on the sacrifice. But believe me, when I tell you in the words of St. Evremont, though much more seriously than he, when dissuading the Duchess of Mazarine that your perseverance is not virtue, but, in fact, a temptation of the Demon, who envious of the glory of God, will not suffer our admiration to be given to his most beautiful work.’ (10)

The reference to the “Duchess of Mazarine,” one of King Charles II’s French Catholic mistresses, is also a particularly telling one, as it was her biography in a highly fictional adaptation that was the basis for Aphra Behn’s *The History of a Nun*. But even more interesting is the fact that her father, Cardinal Mazarin, successor to Cardinal Richelieu and political advisor to Anne of Austria, Louis XIV’s mother, was slandered throughout the French popular press as the “illegitimate offspring of a priest and a servant girl” (Darnton 1995: 207). As we know, Angelique allows herself to be married to Ferdinand and, shortly after their wedding, they attend a masquerade ball in which several of the participants arrive dressed in clerical costume, suggesting a performative quality to this critique of Catholicism. What are we to make of this sudden introduction of the carnivalesque into the text at this point? Would it have been a scene that readers would have been able to interpret within a wider cultural context? I think so when we consider that the Fifth of November every year saw

public anti-Catholic displays held, full of symbolism and ritual. These dated back to Tudor times, and in their most basic form consisted of the burning of the Pope’s effigy. Other effigies might be introduced—the Devil and, up to at least 1746, the Pretender and leading Jacobites. Long parades with participants dressed as cardinals,

monks, nuns, and Catholic priests might wind through a city's streets prior to the effigy-burning, whilst placards could be carried, detailing the iniquities of Popery. Small dramas could be enacted. They might show the horrors that would ensue if a Catholic king were restored, or describe how Rome's plots against the Protestant island had been defeated in the past and would be foiled in the future. There might be burlesques of Popish ceremonies. (Haydon 33-34).

While dancing with a Cardinal and then an Abbé, Angelique is separated from her husband and suddenly finds herself in the arms of a Monk who turns out to be her father in disguise (the scene in the frontispiece illustration). Confronting her for her duplicity and renunciation of her vows, he condemns and threatens her and finally concludes this, the most dramatic scene in the work, by plunging a knife into Ferdinand's breast. He ends his days as an actual monk in the monastery of Chartreuse, doing penance for this murder, and he learns just before he dies that his daughter gave birth to a stillborn child and then promptly died herself. The work ends with a denunciation of parental tyranny and an unmistakable slap at the Catholic Church for fostering such a system:

May [this tale], perhaps, sooner or later induce some father to decline the adoption of violent measures, when mild ones have been tried without effect; for when a parent attempts to curb the natural right of choice in his child, authority swells into tyranny, and the inherent spirit of free-will bursting its bonds, flies into extremes that but for such oppression it would have shuddered to think of. Filial affection is absorbed by this grand injustice, and the parent loses his child, and the daughter her father, by his unbounded exertion of that power, a moderate use of which might have insured long life and happiness to both. To tear my Angelique from connections the most delicate and natural, in order to the accomplishment of an absurd vow, is an action I now wonder how I could be guilty of, since my reason has learnt to appreciate with more accuracy the goodness of the Deity and the rights of human nature. (18)

The chapbook nun is a hybridized representation, clearly influenced by anti-clerical pornographic works as well as sentimentalized portrayals such as *Genlis*'. While her portrait was widespread among lower-class readers, the gothic nun was too large and complex a

representation to have been fully delineated in the narrow confines of a chapbook. In order to present the generational doubling that was necessary to depict the full critique of Catholicism's pernicious effects on women, it was necessary to expand her portrait in the novel, and so it is to the novels that we must turn in order to explore the major components of the representation: the nun as rapist and poisoner, the nun as shape-shifting and monstrous, and the nun as an unnatural manifestation of perverse femininity at odds with the advancement of her country and civilization as they understood it. In short, the gothic nun was a potent and powerful nightmarish figure who haunted modernity's dreams of itself as progressive.

The most famous (or infamous) of convent tales are those by Rebecca Reed and "Maria Monk," published about their harrowing experiences in and escapes from convents in Charlestown, Massachusetts (1832) or Montreal, Canada (1836), both largely ghost-written by men (Benjamin Hallett, George Bourne, Theodore Dwight, and Rev. J. J. Slocum in particular) and initially published in the New York penny press paper *The Protestant Vindicator*. The Ursuline convent in Charlestown, MA was burned to the ground by men dressed as Indians in 1834, setting off a flood of textuality on both sides of the issue, including the Mother Superior Mary Anne Moffatt's side of the story (1835), as well as the parody *Six Months in a House of Correction or the Narrative of Dorah Mahoney who was under the influence of the Protestants about a year* (1835); Norwood Damon's *The Chronicles of Mount Benedict. A Tale of the Ursuline Convent* (1837); Harry Hazel's *The Nun of St. Ursula, or, The Burning of the Convent* (1845); and the novellas by Charles Frothingham, *The Haunted Convent* (1854) and *Six Hours in a Convent* (1855). Maria Monk's tale, which sold 300,000 copies before 1861, spawned its own textual circus, culminating in *Maria Monk's Daughter; an Autobiography* (1874) by Lizzie St. John

Eckel, a woman purporting to be Monk's child. As all of these texts have been discussed at length elsewhere, and as none of them is British, I will not treat them here apart from noting their similarities to any number of earlier gothic novels and chapbooks that treat the same anti-Catholic themes.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the nun has never really left the gothic imaginary, for she was resurrected by Francis Marion Crawford (an American expatriate living in Italy) in his 1908 novel *The White Sister*, in which the heroine is forced by her evil older stepsister into a convent so that the stepsister can pursue the reluctant nun's soldier-lover. So popular was this novel that it was adapted as a film in 1915, 1923, and 1933, culminating most recently in Sophia Loren's rather incongruous turn as the unlucky "white sister" in the 1972 Italian filmic adaptation. The gothic nun also made a frightening appearance in Part Two of Benjamin Christensen's 1922 Swedish film classic *Häxan* (*Witches or Witchcraft through the Ages*) as a victim of superstition and the prey of Satan, but then was idealized during the next few decades in such films as *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945) with Ingmar Bergman, *The Black Narcissus* starring Deborah Kerr (1947), or *The Nun's Story* (1959) featuring Audrey Hepburn.

The situation turned much darker, however, during the 1970s and 1980s when the "nunspoitiation" filmic genre exploded in Europe and Japan, producing such notorious works as Ken Russell's 1971 film *The Devils* (based on Aldous Huxley's description of the seventeenth-century case of mass hysteria and demonic possession in the French convent at Loudon), as well as Joe D'Amato's shockingly pornographic Italian films from the late 1970s, *Images in a Convent* and *The Nun and the Devil*, based on the historical suppression of the Convent of San Archangelo at Naples in the sixteenth century in which a condemned nun launched a bitter attack

against the church hierarchy (see Mathijs and Mendik). D'Amato's *Convent of Sinners* (*Monaca nel peccato*, 1986) claimed to be based on Diderot's *The Nun*. There are also dozens of (very strange) contemporary Japanese films about gothic nuns. In other words, for every Whoopi Goldberg as a hip singing nun or Sally Field as a flying nun, there continue to be depicted in dozens of films in Europe, America, and Asia the "unnatural" and perverse gothic nun: yet ever more sinister portraits of the ghostly and avenging Sister Ursula as witnessed by *The Nun of Monza* (1980) and 2005's *La Monja* (*The Nun*). Whether she was stalked by a priest through the hallways of a dark convent at night or whether she herself stalked a young and beautiful novice, the gothic nun has intrigued the British Protestant imaginary for well over two hundred years. Wearing a habit that functions as something of a blank screen, the nun has allowed this population to project onto her veiled form their own anxieties about the ambivalent attraction and repulsion they experience when they (re)-imagine their own historical past, their own imaginative subjection to the lure and the seductive power of the Catholic Church.