

1-1-2014

Monkish Mysteries and Impious Intrigue

Ann Christenson
Marquette University



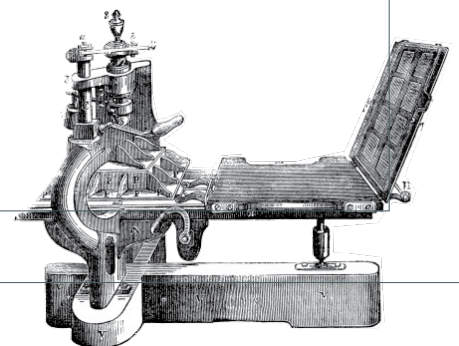
Monkish mysteries and impious intrigue

In a religiously divided England, chapbooks painted a lurid picture of the Catholic Church

The religious climate in 18th- and 19th-century England can be characterized as anti-Roman Catholic. It actually had been since the reign of King Henry VIII, who broke from the Catholic Church and established the Church of England in the early 1500s.

Dr. Diane Long Hoeveler, professor of English, thinks the expansion of cheap printing presses helped spread this air of hostility toward the Catholic Church — at least among the lower classes — churning out popular literature booklets known as chapbooks. Such books were cheap to produce.

By Ann Christenson





Because they were light on text and heavy on images (which Hoeveler describes as looking like primitive comics), they appealed to a less-educated, superstitious audience. By fanning the flames of bigotry, the chapbooks stirred up the lower classes who, in turn, opposed voting rights or property ownership for Catholics.

Hoeveler, a scholar of late 18th- and early 19th-century British literature and author of three books, says she began this research when she “stumbled on” the chapbooks at the British Library in London some five years ago. At the time, she was surprised to discover examples of 15 chapbooks. She later learned there were more than 65 anti-Catholic chapbooks published during this period. In her book, the award-winning *Gothic Riffs: Secularizing the Uncanny in the European Imaginary, 1780–1820*, Hoeveler offers the first complete study of “collateral Gothic” genres, which include chapbooks, as well as operas, ballads and dramas.

Some of the chapbooks are claimed by authors, but many are anonymous. It’s tempting to speculate on the identity of these nameless, venom-spewing authors. We know some of them were related to high-ranking members of the Church of England, while others were Anglican ministers. The majority, however, are unknown and we will likely never know their identities.

In the vein of the Gothic novel genre — think of 1764’s *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole — the books show scenes lurid and violent. Motifs include murderous monks, tyrannous abbots, imprisoned women and victimized, suicidal nuns. The plots are outlandish, melodramatic and shocking, even by 21st-century standards. A common theme is the beating down of women by menacing, bloodthirsty monks. The setting is often an abbey, convent or isolated castle, but these backdrops are not havens of peace. They are rather dens of iniquity.

Hoeveler speculates that the chapbooks were created to “slow down the passage” of the Catholic Emancipation Bill, which allowed Catholics to sit in Parliament, obtain higher education, vote or own property. (The bill was passed in 1829.)

Hoeveler, whose efforts are supplemented by several of her graduate students in the English Department, has been working with Marquette’s Raynor Memorial Libraries to digitize her research on a site called the Gothic Archive, at marquette.edu/gothic. This growing digital collection features 31 chapbooks held at public

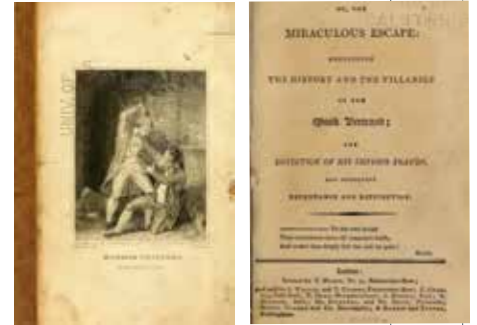
and private libraries in the United States, Europe and Canada. Hoeveler’s graduate students provided the summaries and supporting materials for these works.

Also included in the fascinating collection is a “Glossary of the Gothic.” It expounds on themes like androgyny, deformity, entrapment and female sexuality and what these motifs mean to the larger body of work. In the chapbooks, a woman’s sexuality is treated as anything but healthy and normal. If left unchecked, it will lead to wanton behavior, unwed pregnancy, infanticide and murder.

Another evocative piece in this archive is the gallery of images, which envelops the viewer in the requisite Gothic gloom. It is not difficult to imagine that the stories combined with haunting images of knife-wielding monks would fulfill their mission of keeping the populace in fear of Catholics.

Hoeveler has slated an additional 30 chapbooks for inclusion in the Gothic Archive. To facilitate the posting of these works, she plans to apply for a grant to the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Hoeveler’s fourth book, *The Gothic Ideology: Religious Hysteria and Anti-Catholicism in Popular British Fiction 1780–1880*, will be published in May 2014. The book and all research related to it was made possible by a three-year grant from a Way Klingler Humanities Fellowship.



Centering on hypocritical clergy and an unholy alliance between church and king, Elizabeth Meeke’s *Monkish Mysteries* is filled with the kind of anti-Catholic tropes found throughout the era’s chapbooks.

It is not difficult to imagine that the stories combined with haunting images of knife-wielding monks would fulfill their mission of keeping the populace in fear of Catholics.

