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Mistaken for Ghosts: The Gothic Trope of Catholic Superstition in Conrad and Ford's *Romance*

ABSTRACT
A perennially fruitful activity in Gothic studies is to track the development of Gothic tropes as popular literature evolves. Joseph Conrad's career, which spanned Victorianism and early Modernism, provides examples of the evolution of certain Gothic conventions between early- and late-career work. Conrad's collaboration with Ford Madox Ford on *Romance* (1903) is an early example of Conrad's exposure to, and use of, Gothic tropes, especially relating to Catholic ghost-seeing. This paper demonstrates similarities between *Romance*'s uses of the trope of Catholic superstition and those of three classic Gothic novels, and also outlines the trope's lasting effect on Conrad's later work.
Keywords: ghost, Catholicism, Conrad, superstition, Gothic

1. Literary Context for the Catholic Element

A widespread trend in early British Gothic Romantic literature is to set stories in Catholic lands and among Catholic peoples. Catholicism is made to appear exotic and its followers full of superstition, facilitating in the original (Protestant) readership the pleasures of escapism and the suspension of disbelief necessary to the effectiveness of the genre. Three of the earliest works of Gothic literature – Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, 1764; Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 1794; and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, 1796 – are essentially stories about Catholics and feature ostensibly Catholic beliefs.

Much discussion may be conducted around the motives for the choice to represent ghostly happenings in foreign Catholic contexts rather than British Protestant ones. One possibility is religious and intellectual resistance in Britain towards ghosts from the Reformation onwards. Throughout the 1600s, the culture of Enlightened Protestantism developed British perceptions of Catholicism as not only exotic and foreign, but also superstitious, paganistic, and populated by ghosts. Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) describes the whole Catholic hierarchy as essentially

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a ghost itself: the "ghost of the deceased Roman empire" that started up "on a sudden out of the ruins of that heathen power" (Hobbes, 2013). Although Hobbes himself does not refer to the thus described "kingdome of darkness" (Hobbes, 2013) as Gothic, authors such as Walpole may have had something of this sort in mind when they set their romances in the "darkest ages" of Christianity (Walpole, 1998, p. 5). Thankfully for early Gothic authors, the philosophical resistance to ghosts did not extend to the popular taste – the English public has avidly consumed Gothic literature and its by-products since its conception. Yet philosophical trends before, during and after the Enlightenment were perhaps not the most amenable to the conception of natively British ghosts, and so the authors may have found a middle ground by supplying foreign, Catholic ones. The tradition of non-Catholic authors setting Gothic stories in Catholic contexts continued throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, with major contributions coming from Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, M.R. James, and countless others.

The norms of Gothic romance were established long before Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford published their second collaboration, which bore the straightforward title of *Romance* (1903). Nominally an adventure romance in the style of Stevenson, it also contains tropes and themes of a distinctly Gothic character.[1] Today *Romance* is read less frequently than other works by either author and is largely off the radar for both Conradians and followers of Ford. However, some scholars have recognized *Romance* as a crucial moment of development for both authors. Raymond Brebach traces the development of the novel, and of Ford and Conrad as artists, in his 1985 *Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, and the Making of* Romance. According to Brebach, Conrad's "technical proficiency developed in the course of the collaboration" as his knowledge of mid-register, popular written English improved due to "the writing skills Ford brought to the partnership" (Brebach, 1985, p. 1).

Brebach also includes a detailed assessment of the partnership's impact on Ford's writing and is able to construct a nearly blow-by-blow account of the

[1] These tropes include, but are not limited to: Imprisonment of an innocent female victim of high birth by a villain who desires her wealth, lands, and titles; Deep mourning by the heroine over the death of a parent; Marriage as an escape from the domination of the villain; Bands of robbers (banditti or pirates) whose presence is significant for plot and theme; The villain's ability to advance his wrongdoing and keep it hidden by way of his public stature, social connections, and skillful manipulation of public opinion; Stylistic and thematic contributions by music and verse; Prose interspersed with verse; The villain's wrongdoing is born in part out of genuine attraction to the heroine; Protagonists are brought near death by prolonged physical stress and mental anguish, with a focus on the degenerative effects of these stresses over time; Lover-protagonists are both from noble families; Lover-protagonists represent "pure good" as opposed to the villain's "pure evil"; The villain employs omnipresent spies who hamper the progress of the heroic couple; Religious processions and sites serve as venues for major plot actions; The hero has a doppelganger/uncanny double; The protagonists are sheltered by subterranean caves and tunnels.

input given to Ford by Conrad, who at the time was the senior author, having had critical, if not popular success with *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* and other titles. Unlike with their earlier collaboration, *The Inheritors*, where Conrad seems to have been "more of a critical reader than coauthor" (Brebach, 1985, p. 1), Conrad was deeply involved with the production of *Romance.* Brebach's analysis, based on manuscripts, letters, third-person accounts and proofs, indicates that any material in the published version of *Romance* that did not originate from Conrad himself is unlikely to have been included without his knowledge and approval.

Romance is at first glance an adventure romance in the style of Stevenson. Says Brebach, "Conrad and Ford conceived of their novel as a popular adventure story, a potboiler which would appeal to the tastes of the masses" (Brebach, 1985, p. 3). Brebach also notes that despite adherence to certain aspects of the Stevensonian format, "*Romance* does not aim at imitating Stevenson's style" (Brebach, 1985, p. 3). He cites "the heightened presence of politics" (Brebach, 1985, p. 5) and the ironic attitude of the narrator in regards to his own past experiences (Brebach, 1985, p. 6) as ways in which "Conrad and Ford tried to make their adventure story interesting to a more sophisticated audience" than, for example, Stevenson's original intended readership for *Treasure Island* (1883)*, Kidnapped* (1886) or *David Balfour* (1893), three works to which *Romance* has been compared in the past (Brebach, 1985, p. 5).

To Brebach's analysis I would like to add that one of the strongest ways *Romance* differentiates itself from Stevensonian adventure fiction is in its adherence to Gothic themes and tropes – in particular its use of Catholic lands, characters, and ghosts to create the feelings of temporal, political, geographical, and ideological distance characteristic of Gothic literature. Catholic characters' superstitious belief in ghosts is also used to heighten dramatic tension and to further the plot in ways that closely recall earlier works by Walpole, Radcliffe, Lewis and others. While the three Stevenson novels previously mentioned do create romantic distance by other means, and *Treasure Island* even uses superstitious characters who believe in ghosts to advance its plot, neither the distance nor the ghosts have anything to do with Catholicism, or indeed, any religion. The religious element in *Romance*, then, may be seen as another, very deliberate layer of complexity onto the Stevensonian adventure romance formula.

2. Uses of Catholic Superstition in *Otranto, Udolpho* and *The Monk*

The three best-known early works of Gothic literature all feature plot developments that would not be possible were they to be set outside contexts where belief in ghosts is not only plausible, but commonplace. Characters in these works who uncritically accept Catholicism are almost guaranteed to accept any apparent manifestation of a ghost equally uncritically, even when the ghost is proven to be

unreal by a more sober-headed character later on. Since the acceptance of ghosts by Catholic characters as a plot device is so prevalent in the three early Gothic works mentioned, and affects their plots in so many ways, a complete analysis is impossible here, and so this paper will focus on just one aspect of how belief in ghosts moves plots in Gothic literature and in *Romance*: What happens when characters are mistaken for ghosts at critical moments.

The Castle of Otranto is first to use this trope. Princess Isabella is fleeing the evil Manfred through catacombs deep beneath the castle when she encounters a figure she takes to be "the ghost of her betrothed Conrad" (Walpole, 1996, p. 29). The figure turns out to be the man who will rescue her, but the misapprehension is a moment of terror that heightens the tension of the scene and reinforces the characterization of Isabella as prone to high emotions and to superstition. The episode also highlights the general fear of all in the household of ghosts, devils, and other apparitions, which is seen to detract from characters' abilities to work constructively to solve their problems – an oblique commentary on Catholic countries and cultures by the British author. At another point in the novel, the villain Manfred, who is especially prone to the "brain's delirium" caused by stress and fear, eventually mistakes Theodore, a peasant, for the ghost of Alfonso, the former Lord of Otranto who was killed by Manfred's grandfather (Walpole, 1998, p. 83). This mistake provides foreshadowing, because Theodore is eventually revealed to be Alfonso's true heir, and by the end of the novel takes his place as Lord of Otranto. In both episodes, the fact that characters mistake living people for ghosts heightens the drama of the moment and also acts as a plot point upon which later developments rest.

The "mistaken for ghosts" trope is also an active mechanism of the plot in *Udolpho*. In this novel, the "ghosts" are actually pirates who had hidden their plunder in the vaults of the eponymous castle during the years when its only inhabitants were a pair of elderly caretakers. During those years the pirates would routinely enter the castle by secret passageways and make ghostlike noises in order to terrify the caretakers and perpetuate the legend that the castle was haunted. Thanks to this intrigue, the pirates are able to access their loot even when the castle is again occupied, coming and going from the vaults and upper chambers from which the Catholic inhabitants have been frightened away (Radcliffe, 2013). The trope has an appreciable impact on the plot when Ludovico, who does not believe in ghosts, decides to spend the night in the haunted chambers, and disappears, resurfacing later on when a group of the heroes are captured by those same pirates, and discover that Ludovico, too, is their prisoner. Ludovico's presence with the pirates is a key in the escape of the heroes. If the pirates had not been mistaken for ghosts, Ludovico would not have investigated the mystery or been kidnapped, and so would not have been in position to rescue the group when the time came.

The Monk also uses the trope of mistaken ghostly identity to advance the plot, this time with an ironic twist. One of the heroines, Agnes, is imprisoned in a castle in order to keep her from her lover, Raymond. Agnes has heard, however, that each year the ghost of a nun who was tortured and killed in the castle is said to walk down from the tower that she haunts in order to exit the castle from its main gate, which is always left open for her on that night by the superstitious castle-dwellers (Lewis, 1998, pp. 139-141). Agnes decides to impersonate the ghostly nun in order to escape (Lewis, 1998, p. 148). Dressed in a bloody habit, she succeeds in leaving the castle, but the coach which Raymond promised to have waiting is not there. Ironically, Raymond has already left in the coach – along with the real ghost, whom he has mistaken for Agnes (Lewis, 1998, pp. 155-157). The ensuing possession of Raymond by the ghostly nun, as well as the ramifications of Agnes's continuing confinement, become major plot points.

3. Uses of Catholicism in Conrad and Ford's *Romance*

Like *Otranto, Udolpho* and *The Monk*, *Romance* uses Catholic contexts to full advantage in creating romantic distance and moving the plot. Especially notable in *Romance* is the handling of the concept of distance, which seems to draw from, as well as update, the Gothic propensity to use Catholic superstitiousness as a distancing tool. *Romance*, a work by two early-Modernist authors, also includes a dimension of self-consciousness that cannot be expected from the three earlier Gothic novels mentioned. Kemp gives voice to the importance of geographical and temporal distance in the creation of romance:

> Journeying in search of romance… is much like trying to catch the horizon. It lies a little distance before us, and a little distance behind – about as far as the eye can carry. One discovers that one has passed through it just as one passed what is to-day our horizon – One looks back and says, "Why, there it is." One looks forward and says the same. It lies either in the old days when we used to, or in the new days when we shall (Conrad & Heuffer, 1925, p. 62).

Conrad, in a letter to William Blackwood, also emphasizes cultural distance as an important component of romance, saying that "the feeling of the romantic in life lies principally in the glamour memory throws over the past and arises from contact with a different race and a different temperament" (Brebach, 1985, p. 38)[2]. Setting *Romance* in a Catholic context supplies all three types of distance: temporal, geographical, and cultural.

Catholic superstition in *Romance*, in particular, remains an important mover of plot, especially the propensity for Catholic characters to mistake real people for

[2] Brebach quotes this letter from *Joseph Conrad: Letters to William Blackwood and David S. Meldrum* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1958, p. 130).

ghosts. There are two main scenes in *Romance* where being mistaken for ghosts helps the heroes escape from danger. The first of these scenes occurs when Kemp, Seraphina Riego, and their protector, Castro, are escaping from Casa Riego and the *Lugarenos* (smuggler-pirates in thrall to the villain O'Brien) who control it. They row through a foggy, windless bay in a leaking dinghy, trying to find some kind of ship to rescue them. While they are rowing past a spit of sand in the south of the bay, the fog parts, revealing them to a group of *Lugarenos* on shore. However, the *Lugarenos* mistake them for the ghosts of English seamen supposed to haunt the spot, "after the manner of spectres that linger in remorse, regret or revenge" (Conrad & Heuffer, 1925, p. 255). The *Lugarenos'* panicked exclamations include the invocation of Mary – "'*Santissima Madre!* What is this?'" – as well as a "trembling mutter of an invocation to all the saints" (Conrad & Heuffer, 1925, pp. 254-255). Level-headed Kemp, however, dismisses the superstitiousness of the *Lugarenos* and sees the episode from a patriotic perspective:

> my obscure and vanquished countrymen held possession of the outlet by the memory of their courage. In this critical moment it was they, I may say, who stood by us (Conrad & Heuffer, 1925, p. 255).

The runaways are able to pass by and eventually find temporary safety in a British ship.

Religious superstition is also responsible for a second escape. Kemp, Seraphina and Castro are eventually forced to leave the British ship when they realize that it is bound for Havana, where O'Brien will be waiting for them. The plan is for the runaways to take another, smaller boat to Havana, where they will rejoin the British ship only after it has been thoroughly searched by O'Brien and his men. The plan goes wrong, however, and the three find themselves trapped in a cave onshore with a band of *Lugarenos* waiting for them at the entrance. Days pass of starvation and thirst inside the cave. A sequence of events leads to the death of Castro. Just when things start to seem impossibly dire for Kemp and Seraphina, the leader of the *Lugarenos*, Manuel, catches sight of the "gaunt and disheveled" Kemp at the mouth of the cave and mistakes him for "an apparition from another world" (Conrad & Heuffer, 1925, p. 415). In his shock Manuel screams, "'In the name of God, retire!'" and falls off the ledge and into the ravine, having "recoiled violently in a superstitious fear from my [Kemp's] apparition" (Conrad & Heuffer, 1925, pp. 424-425). Both this episode and the previous one adopt wholesale the Gothic trope of characters escaping due to being mistaken for ghosts due to Catholic superstition, and is responsible for two major developments of the plot. It's important also to note that the second instance, at least, was likely the invention of Conrad alone; it occurs in Part Four of *Romance*, an entire section for which, according to Brebach, Conrad was "totally responsible" (Brebach, 1985, p. 86).

4. Impact on Conrad's Later Work

There is a marked difference in Conrad's treatment of Catholicism before and after *Romance.* Catholicism became a tool for creating distance and introducing Gothic content, a tool which Conrad was to use again and again. Works preceding *Romance* do not include Catholicism in a meaningful way, let alone Gothic material relating specifically to Catholicism. In contrast, the novel Conrad wrote immediately following *Romance* – *Nostromo* – persistently uses Catholicism to create romantic distance, and at least one episode in its plot that deals with Catholic superstition even echoes a scene found in *Romance.* Brebach recognizes *Nostromo's* overall debt to *Romance*, though not the Catholic element, and devotes several paragraphs to the influence of *Romance* on Conrad's next novel, saying that

> It is hardly surprising that while writing his own Latin American novel Conrad should have turned to *Romance* to find incidents and situations which he could further exploit, especially since the *Romance* proofs began arriving from the printer shortly after Conrad began to work on *Nostromo* (Brebach, 1985, p. 99).

Brebach goes on to discuss various aesthetic and political matters, and though his analysis does not touch Catholicism, the fact remains that *Nostromo* was the first of Conrad's independent works to use Catholicism to such a large extent in establishing establishing cultural distance. The Catholic religion itself is presented as primeval, the fuel for deep superstition and explosive emotions. One Protestant character is even "shocked and disgusted at the tawdriness of the dressed-up saints in the cathedral – the worship, as he called it, of wood and tinsel" (Conrad, 1990, p. 90).

Nostromo also recycles thematic material and plot developments from *Romance* relating to ghosts. As Brebach notes, the harbor escape in *Romance* is reenacted in *Nostromo*:

> Both sets of scenes involve perilous flights into dark or fog-shrouded seas; both involve the protection of treasures of immense value (in *Romance* the treasure is Seraphina herself; in *Nostromo* it is the silver); in both the protagonists are almost literally run into by their enemies (Conrad & Heuffer, 1925, p. 99).

To this I would add that both adventures are also associated with ghosts. In *Romance*, the runaways are literally mistaken for the ghosts of the non-Catholic English sailors said to be lingering at the scene of their greatest regret (naval defeat at the hands of the *Lugarenos*). Similarly, in *Nostromo*, Decoud and Nostromo are strongly associated with the ghosts of "two gringos, spectral and alive… believed to be dwelling to this day amongst the rocks" of an island where they guard a treasure they discovered there (Conrad, 1990, p. 40). *Nostromo* is not a romance, and doesn't need to follow genre rules exactly, so Nostromo and Decoud are never

literally mistaken for ghosts. However, Nostromo's greed after hiding the treasure, as well as Decoud's eventual death protecting it, draw the parallel between their situation and that of the "gringo ghosts suffering in their starved and parched flesh of defiant heretics, where a Christian[3] would have renounced and been released" (Conrad, 1990, pp. 40).

The use of Catholicism for the creation of romantic distance and the working in of Gothic material doesn't end with *Nostromo.* This classically Gothic trope continues throughout Conrad's career, with "Gaspar Ruiz" (1904-1905), "The Duel" (1908), "Prince Roman" (1911), "A Warrior's Soul" (1917), *The Rover* (1923) and *Suspense* (1925). The latter two novels – the last ever written by Conrad – still contain echoes of patterns originally found in *Romance*. For instance, Catholicism figures heavily in the temporal and geographical setting of *The Rover*: the French Mediterranean coast soon after Napoleon's Concordat of 1801 relegitimized Catholicism in France. Special pains are taken to portray this Catholic coast as exotic, tribal and superstitious, a foreign land populated with tribes of savages. The identification of a character with a ghost is also an important metaphor and plot device. Arlette, a young woman who as a child endured all the horrors of *la Terreur,* has spent years almost completely silent. A British sailor observes her:

> There glided without a sound before his eyes from somewhere a white vision of a woman. He could see her black hair flowing down her back. A woman whom anybody would have been excused for taking for a ghost (Conrad, 1924, p. 62).

Arlette is never literally mistaken for a ghost; like *Nostromo*, *The Rover* is not a genre romance, and so the black-and-white "mistaken for a ghost" scenario of *Romance* would be out of place. Still, the trope remains as a metaphor and has an appreciable effect on the plot. Arlette's unearthliness is so disconcerting that it leads her aunt to attempt to discourage the niece's would-be lover from starting a life with her, an event which contributes to the climactic action of the novel.

Conrad's final novel, *Suspense*, continues and in a sense culminates Conrad's use of Catholicism to create romantic distance and introduce Gothic material. Like *Romance, Nostromo* and *The Rover, Suspense* takes place in a Catholic setting, the Italian city of Genoa. The hero is a young Englishman named Cosmo. *Suspense* also mirrors the same spectral scene shared by *Romance* and *Nostromo*: an escape into a bay at night, with the need to travel silently so as to avoid enemies. The treasure is political information that will be used "for Italy" (Conrad, 1925, p. 274). There's no fog this time but an atmosphere of lightlessness and silence prevails;

[3] In both *Romance* and *Nostromo,* Catholics refer to themselves as "Christians" and do not think of non-Catholics as Christians.

ten-minutes' poling with oars is enough for the enemy galley to become "invisible" (Conrad, 1925, p. 271) and travel is conducted "with infinite precaution to avoid knocks and bangs, as though the boat, the oars, and everything in her were made of glass" (Conrad, 1925, p. 270). When Cosmo's smaller boat meets its larger partner there is "no hail or even murmur" and the men aboard her are described as ghostlike, "silent and shadowy" (Conrad, 1925, p. 272). In *Suspense*, unlike in *Romance* or *Nostromo*, there is no local ghost legend with which to compare the runaways. However, Cosmo's comparison to a ghost is made much more directly by the spectral language with which he is described:

> "I am not sleepy," said Cosmo. If no longer invisible, he could still feel disembodied, as it were. He was neither sleepy nor tired, nor hungry, nor even curious, as if altogether freed from the weaknesses of the body, and not indifferent, but without apprehensions or speculations of any sort to disturb his composure, as if of a fully-informed wisdom. He did not seem to himself to weigh more than a feather (Conrad, 1925, p. 272).

Immediately following this ghostly description, we learn that Cosmo will be unable to leave the conspirators, as he had thought earlier, and will have to accompany them further on their voyage. In fact, a place in the crew has opened up for Cosmo due to the quiet drifting into death, presumably from fatigue, of its elderly steersman. This scene from *Suspense* is the last known scene in the novel Conrad was in the midst of writing at the time of his death.

Looking back at the arc of Conrad's career, we see that the Gothic trope of "being mistaken for a ghost" that Conrad picked up in *Romance* evolves from the formulaic (an enactment of the Gothic genre trope of Catholic superstition, in *Romance*,) to the literary (an analogy between a legend and the actions of two characters, in *Nostromo*) to the spiritual (in *Suspense*, where the scene's supernatural side and the action of the plot finally merge into the same narrative level.) In the repetition and revision of this scene, we may be getting a look into Conrad's process of making an influence his own.

5. Conclusions

In *Romance*, Conrad and Ford take full advantage of the Gothic trope of Catholicism for the creation of romantic distance and also use instances of Catholic superstition to propel the plot. Aside from its interest to the Gothic Studies community generally, Conradians in particular may wish to study *Romance* as a potential early source of Gothic material for Conrad. The fact that Conrad recycled and redeveloped certain elements out of *Romance* suggests that the collaboration with Ford had a lasting effect on Conrad's writing. As demonstrated, certain Gothic elements from *Romance* don't just show up once and go away; they are there even at the very end of his writing life. The "mistaken for a ghost" trope is used again

by Conrad throughout his career, becoming refined and repurposed as Conrad's artistry increases. Conrad also recreates the "escaping into a dark bay" scene in *Romance,* which utilizes the Gothic trope of "being mistaken for a ghost," in two later novels, eventually resulting in the integration of the supernatural and earthly elements of the original scene.

Romance includes many more classically Gothic tropes than this paper could cover, and Conrad reuses many of them, and variations on them, throughout his career. Yet despite the wealth of Gothic material found in Conrad, few in-depth studies on Gothic matter in Conrad exist. Moreover, Conrad Studies is also almost totally lacking in research investigating how and when Conrad might have been exposed to elements of Gothic literature. Such research must be the cornerstone of any attempt to portray a "Gothic Conrad". One piece of the puzzle could be Conrad's participation in writing *Romance*. As demonstrated, Conrad was intimately involved with every stage of the production of the novel. Notwithstanding other possible exposure to the Gothic, Conrad's collaboration with Ford should be viewed as one clear example of a time when he actively worked with multiple tropes of Gothic romance.

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