

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Vampires and Dungeons and Monks, Oh My!

*Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture*. Patrick R. O'Malley. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 279 pp.

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<1>“The production of nineteenth-century genders and sexualities,” writes Patrick O'Malley in the Introduction to his new book, “so persistently both shapes and is shaped by that of religious identities and practices that cultural studies must consider them in relation to each other” (7). “Amen!” I exclaimed to myself when I read this sentence, remembering those not-so-distant days when gender, race and class reigned supreme in literary and cultural studies, but religious discourse and experience were so overlooked that Jenny Franchot labeled them as part of an “invisible domain.”<sup>(1)</sup> Happily, since the mid-1990s, scholars of the nineteenth century have begun to look far more seriously and deeply at religion as an important analytical frame. A number of studies have demonstrated especially compelling connections between nineteenth-century religious and sexual discourses, many in relation to popular fears about Catholicism.

<2>Catholics made up only a small proportion of the populations of both Great Britain and America in the nineteenth century, but as a foreign, “other” religion, Catholicism became for the Protestant majority a convenient scapegoat for all kinds of social problems and cultural anxieties. Some of the most threatening and rapid changes in the nineteenth century of course had to do with gender roles, sexuality and the family; titles such as Ellis Hanson's *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997), Frederick Roden's *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (2002), and Ruth Vanita's *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (1996) all demonstrate how non-normative sexuality in the Victorian era was often represented (both positively and negatively) through Catholic tropes, ritual, and imagery. O'Malley's *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture* addresses the same phenomenon, but simultaneously provides a fascinating exploration of how Catholicism and “deviant” nineteenth-century sexualities are also inextricably linked with the literary and artistic genre of the Gothic. As O'Malley argues, the Gothic is “a privileged rhetoric for the nineteenth-century coupling of Catholicism and deviance.” His book is “an analysis of how the language and imagery of Gothic comes to be the most significant discursive medium for the production, exploration, and dissemination of an understanding of those deviances—religious and sexual—as inextricably linked” (3).

<3>One of the strengths of this tightly argued book is O'Malley's careful definition of his terms. O'Malley points out that in the nineteenth century, “deviant” sexuality was a broader category than homosexuality (it could also, for example, include celibacy), although the book most frequently discusses anxieties about effeminacy (cultural, religious, and personal) and same-sex eroticism, building up to a strong penultimate chapter on Walter Pater, Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (1891), and the latter's sodomy trials at the end of the century. And although the book's first chapter focuses on such classic Gothic novels as Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), O'Malley defines the Gothic as something enduring and fluid. “Far from disappearing,” he argues, “the Gothic insistently arose in transfigured form throughout the century.... Always thriving on displaced anxieties, the Gothic found a home in widely disparate cultural productions—not only novels, but also newspaper articles, political cartoons, polemical tracts, religious debates, and accounts of conversion” (57).

<4>The Gothic, as O'Malley presents it, exhibits two key characteristics that it shares with popular depictions of Catholicism. The first is an obsession with the past; the ancient rituals of Catholicism resonated with the Gothic's “terror and fascination produced by the refusal of the past to remain in the past” (12). Second, “both the Gothic and Catholicism ... come in the course



of the nineteenth century to symbolize a challenge to the modern mind's belief in the efficacy of strict categories in attaining the transcendence of stable and objective knowledge." The Catholic, the deviantly erotic, and the Gothic, by questioning rigid categories and neat binaries such as domestic/foreign, male/female, normative/deviant and even Protestant/Catholic, "seemed to many Victorians to undermine the very basis of knowledge" itself (28). The "epistemological instability of the Gothic," moreover, "manifested in its resistance to ideological pigeonholing, makes it available both to English Catholics and to their antagonists" (94). Scholars of the nineteenth century are probably most familiar with Protestant condemnations of Catholicism, so O'Malley's incorporation of Catholic figures such as Newman (who also, as the book demonstrates, drew upon Gothic tropes to represent his conversion to Catholicism) adds further interest and variety to this study.

<5>Alongside the chapters on "classic" Gothic novels, Kingsley's and Newman's appropriations of the Gothic, and on Pater and Wilde, O'Malley develops his argument with a chapter on the "domestic gothic" of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), another entitled "Vampirism from Polidori to Stoker," and a concluding chapter on Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and "the end of the Gothic." Although fiction takes up the lion's share of this study, O'Malley demonstrates the versatility of Gothic by including other literary genres such as conversion narrative (Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, 1864-65) and art criticism (Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, 1851-53, included in Chapter One, and Pater's *The Renaissance*, 1873). He contextualizes his analyses with quotations from tracts and sermons, mostly Protestant ones bearing such sensational titles as *Homily Against the Peril of Idolatry*, *The Confessional Unmasked*, and *Ritualism, the Highway to Rome*. The book also includes several reproductions of anti-Catholic cartoons.

<6>I enjoyed reading this book. O'Malley's arguments are smart and persuasive throughout; his engaging close readings are informed by a sound understanding of complex nineteenth-century religious controversies, especially the Protestant furor generated by the Catholic Church's sacrament of auricular confession and its doctrine of transubstantiation (the notion of *literal* transformation of bread and wine to Christ's flesh and blood during the consecration of the Mass). One limitation of this otherwise inclusive study is that it almost completely ignores poetry—a puzzling oversight, when it even acknowledges the important role Romantic poets played in sparking nineteenth-century popular fascination with Catholicism. O'Malley fleetingly refers to "a poetic Gothic that this study does not have the space to closely examine [...] the Gothic of Coleridge's 'Christabel' and the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner,' of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey,' [and] of Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer*" (85), in the midst of his chapter on Newman and Kingsley. But given poetry's popularity in nineteenth-century England, and the book's claim that "the gothic shows up everywhere" at this time (11), one might reasonably expect more than half a paragraph of discussion on "poetic Gothic."

<7>A few places in the book's final two chapters also left me wanting more (although perhaps that is merely the nature of conclusions). Some of the book's most thought-provoking claims, at least for me, arrive towards the end, as it looks toward the twentieth century and beyond. In some ways, Catholicism drops out of the picture, as it loses much of its cultural associations with the foreign, the deviant, and the lurid. O'Malley describes the articulation of a "new Gothic, rewriting its ideological valences for a new century in which homosexuality rather than Catholicism would loom in the cultural imagination as the more threatening monster" (165). Yet he rightly points out that anti-Catholicism "persists beyond the end of the nineteenth century, and its eruptions often strikingly follow those of the Gothic" (191). "Beyond the end of the nineteenth century" is, to be fair, also beyond the scope of this study, but it would have been a fascinating point to develop further. In fact, this statement immediately brought to my mind the infamous 2002 *South Park* episode entitled "Red Hot Catholic Love." The show's satire of Catholicism liberally employed Gothic ingredients, including copious references to deviant sexuality (namely pedophilia), and the portrayal of a Vatican (which crumbles into ruins by the end of the episode) presided over by a decrepit, mummy-like John Paul II and a great Queen Spider. The more things change, indeed ...

<8>The book's conclusion also provides a brief but tantalizing look at Freud, whose work, O'Malley argues, "often relies on tropes of the Gothic," and who "rewrites the Gothic for his own age, in this case an age of modern analysis and clinical study" (216). Although "Freud's patients and his texts return to the transgressive fascinations of Catholic or pseudo-Catholic ritual and theology" (215), O'Malley leaves us with the suggestion of a "new Gothic" embedded in modern life, a Gothic in which "[s]ex still haunts us," but Roman Catholicism "can no longer command the passion—or the fascination—that [it] did in the midst of ardent controversy over [its] divine

the problem of the incarnation that [it] has in the matter of what comes before [it], divine or diabolic origins" (216). O'Malley's concluding thoughts point out a number of avenues for future study; one only hopes that whoever picks up these threads will write a book as well crafted and readable as this one.

#### Endnotes

(1) Jenny Franchot, "Invisible Domain: Religion and American Literary Studies," *American Literature* 67 (December 1995): 833-42. (△)



