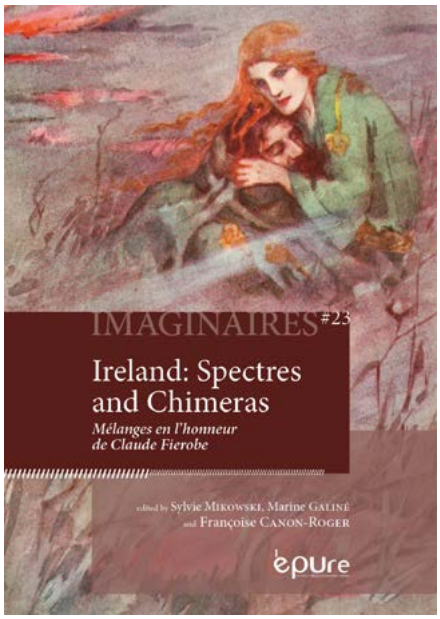
The Inquisition in Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820)



Auteur(s)	Charlie Jorge
Revue	*Imaginaires* (ISSN 1270-931X)
Numéro	23 (2021) : « Ireland: Spectres and Chimeras »
Directeur(s) du numéro	Sylvie Mikowski, Marine Galiné & Françoise Canon-Roger
Pages	101-117
DOI de l'article	10.34929/imaginaires.vi23.14
DOI du numéro	10.34929/imaginaires.vi23
Édition	ÉPURE - Éditions et presses universitaires de Reims, 2021
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Éditions et presses universitaires de Reims
Bibliothèque Robert de Sorbon, Campus Croix-Rouge
Avenue François-Mauriac, CS 40019, 51726 Reims Cedex
www.univ-reims.fr/epure

Chapter seven

The Inquisition in Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820)

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Abstract: The Inquisition wielded a lot of power all across the world, becoming the most feared institution in southern Europe for hundreds of years. Its members used all the tools at their hands against heretics, Protestants or any other group that threatened the papacy. Not surprisingly, all this background became the perfect setting for the novels written by some of the most renowned authors during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In this paper, I intend to analyse the image of the Inquisition reflected in *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), by Charles Robert Maturin. Beyond what many critics deem as a simple attack on Catholicism, we will see how Maturin showed the complicated nature of an Ireland controlled by an almost Inquisitorial state. The Ireland where Maturin grew up brimmed with rebels and government spies, not much unlike the familiars the Inquisition employed, while a foreign power tried to maintain its control over the country through secret manoeuvres and instilling fear in people. Maturin's Inquisition, with all its trappings and mystery, was a good reminder of that spectral medieval institution returning from the world of the dead to haunt the present.

Keywords: *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Charles Maturin, Gothic, Catholicism, Inquisition, Irish Literature

THE Inquisition has been used several times in literature to portray the worst side of humankind, as its prisons and procedures have always been hidden behind a veil of mystery, darkness and the "black legend" of corruption. The prisons of the Inquisition were manned with dark inquisitors and familiars, whose only mention made people in the countries where they wielded their power shiver, as Arturo

Pérez-Reverte's saga *Las aventuras del capitán Alatriste* (1996-2011) still reminds its 21st century readers. Pérez-Reverte's swashbuckler adventures prominently feature evil inquisitors who tirelessly plot against the main characters, and anybody who opposes their will to control Spain. Pérez-Reverte, through the voice of Íñigo, reminds his readership of such ecclesiastical atrocities, such as the immunity and abuses of the church[1] or the inquisitorial procedure and its "*temibles mazmorras secretas del Santo Oficio, en Toledo*" [feared secret dungeons of the Holy Office, in Toledo] (translation mine).[2] The *leyenda negra* ("black legend") around its buildings and manoeuvres speaks of people, and whole families, who disappear not to be seen again. This chimerical "black legend" circulated all over Europe for centuries, and reproduced each time it was told an image of Spain as a theo-political repressive country to such an extent that, as Edward Peters says, "Spain became the symbol of all forces of repression, brutality, religious and political intolerance, and intellectual and artistic backwardness".[3]

Inquisitors, and all their retinue, are probably the religious characters who accumulate the most negative characteristics of all that can be found through the darkest pages of the Gothic novel. These characters are employed to create an atmosphere of terror and to produce the dramatic effect proper to this kind of novel, as they provided invaluable material for these writers,[4] who benefit from the spectres and chimeras from a not-so-far distant past of legal injustices and corruption.[5] Gothic authors "exploit this image of the Inquisition, manipulating the familiar Gothic trappings of the Inquisition with its crosses, dark curtains and black hoods, providing a pervasive atmosphere of evil".[6] In several novels of this genre, we see individuals belonging to the Holy Office carrying out their tasks of purification in the name of the Church. In *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), considered by many a master piece of the genre, Charles Robert Maturin offers a wide choice of these individuals, such as the ones Alonzo de Monçada, one of the heroes in the novel, meets after being captured by the Inquisition. In the centuries when the real power of the Inquisition was weakening and, in some countries, even disappearing, Gothic writers brought its largest and most horrifying dimension closer to their audiences. In their novels, the myth of the Inquisition, and the terrible spectre of its "black legend", took on "an immediacy and imposing presence that greatly strengthened its other roles in religious, political, and philosophical polemic".[7]

1. Arturo Pérez-Reverte, *Limpieza de sangre*, Madrid, Alfaguara, 1997, p. 43.
2. *Ibid*., p. 108.
3. Edward Peters, *Inquisition*, Berkeley, California U.P., 1989, p. 131.
4. *Ibid*., p. 190.
5. Diane Long Hoeveler, *The Gothic Ideology: Religious Hysteria and Anti-Catholicism in British Popular Fiction, 1780-1880*, Cardiff, Wales U.P., 2014 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qhfdt), p. 156.
6. Beth Swan, "Radcliffe's Inquisition and Eighteenth-Century English Legal Practice", *The Eighteenth-Century Novel*, 3, 2003, p. 195-216.
7. Peters, *op. cit*., p. 190.

Inquisitors are immersed in a kind of obscurity so much appreciated by the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke and his followers –and their theories on the sublime–, for whom this mysterious obscurity evoked ideas of wonder, horror, awe and joy. As Fred Botting points out, these are emotions that are believed to "expand or elevate the soul and the imagination with a sense of power and sensibility".[8] Therefore, according to Burke's ideas of the sublime, "whatever is obscure […] is terrifying and therefore sublime precisely because it cannot be presented to the mind in the form of a clear and distinct idea".[9] The trade of inquisitor is cloaked in the most obscure secrecy, as inquisitorial trials were sheltered by a vow of silence which concerned everyone who was part of them, no matter if they were the accused, the accusers or the very members of the tribunal. As Peters thoroughly explains, secrecy was inherent part of the Inquisition, since the central part of the inquisitorial process, the questioning itself, was carried out in private. Thus, even if the verdict of the person being questioned was later read in public, "the procedures of the inquisitors were held *in camera*".[10]

In *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Charles Maturin also makes reference to such secrecy when Alonzo de Monçada tells his story to young John Melmoth, the descendant of the eponymous hero and wanderer of the novel. After having been rescued from a shipwreck by young Melmoth, Monçada starts his long narrative "Tale of the Spaniard", the longest tale-within-tale in the novel as it contains most of the others. In his narration, the Spaniard tells about his out-of-marriage birth in one of the most powerful families of Grandees in Spain, his misfortunes as he is forced to enter a convent where he is all but brought to madness and his nightmarish experience at the hands of the Inquisition. It is then that he tells his listener, and the readers of the novel, about the oath of secrecy the prisoners of the Inquisition are forced to swear, thus forbidding them from telling what happens inside, and adding to that mystery mentioned above:

> You are aware, Sir, that the tales related in general of the interior discipline of the Inquisition, must be in nine out of ten mere fables, as the prisoners are bound by an oath never to disclose what happens within its walls; and they who could violate this oath, would certainly not scruple to violate truth in the details with which their emancipation from it indulges them. I am forbidden, by an oath which I shall never break, to disclose the circumstances of my imprisonment or examination.[11]

8. Fred Botting, *Gothic*, London, Routledge, 2014, p. 25.
9. Phillip Shaw, *The Sublime*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 50-51.
10. Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
11. Charles Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1998, p. 227-228.

According to a system that tried to eliminate bribes and other blights of the same kind –often taking place in trials at this time–, this vow was rarely broken and gave the members of the tribunal freedom to a certain point to carry out their investigations. As Helen Rawlings says, the officials of the Inquisition were convinced that this system of oaths of secrecy precluded any bribes or unjust treatment, and that it was fairer for the prisoner. Ironically, the contemporary Protestant British, and their Anglo-Irish counterparts, would undoubtedly have felt the contrary, regarding that very same oath to secrecy as another veil of mystery prone to clerical manoeuvres, a symbol of a corrupted Catholic institution. People put to the question and held in the prisons of the Inquisition disappeared for an unknown period of time and were made to swear to secrecy in case they came in contact with other prisoners, making the whole procedure that mysterious affair that so much attracted Gothic writers and readers:[12]

> The Inquisition was under no obligation to account for those it held in its own prisons. They simply disappear from public view for the duration of their trial, reappearing once their sentence was passed a year or two later. Upon his or her release, the accused was sworn not to reveal anything about his case or that of other prisoners he came in contact with. Very rarely was this wall of secrecy breached. Inquisitors believed that secrecy and justice were interconnected: that their freedom from outside intervention enabled them to make unbiased investigations. Secrecy precluded bribery and was seen to guarantee fairness.[13]

Their prisons were even located in secret places under a very close vigilance. Officials of the Inquisition made sure that their prisoners did not have any contact with the outside world,[14] which added to this aura of mystery and secrecy that this spectral institution carried with it, as Gothic authors such as Maturin, in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, or William Godwin, in *St Leon* (1799) remind their readers. As Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh state, inmates were generally "kept in solitary confinement in chains, and allowed no contact whatever with the outside world. If they were ever released, they were required 'to take an oath not to reveal anything they had seen or experienced in the cells'".[15] It was to such dark places that they took their prisoners after being indefinitely "abducted", and where they had to wait until their judgement, under the psychological pressure of knowing to be "*in the prison of the Inquisition*"[16] [italics in original text], as

12. Hoeveler, *op. cit.*, p. 184.
13. Helen Rawlings, *The Spanish Inquisition*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2006, p. 35.
14. Michael Baigent & Richard Leigh, *The Inquisition*, London, Penguin, 2000, p. 34; E. Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
15. Baigent & Leigh, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
16. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 225.

the parricide in "Tale of the Spaniard" reminds Alonzo when he wakes up in his cell.

This despairing situation prisoners were in was the chance the officials of the Inquisition took to use a figure known in Spanish as the *familiar* –an agent of the Inquisition not to be confused with the witch's close companion. Such a figure would have been easy to recognize by the Irish at the time of the publication of the novel, when Ireland found herself in the middle of the turmoil caused by two major rebellions (1798 and 1803) and the aftermath of the Act of Union (1801). These Inquisitorial agents would assist the prosecutor of the tribunal and would be granted special privileges in society. It is therefore understandable that their position was a desirable one for both spiritual and material reasons,[17] as the parricide in *Melmoth the Wanderer* shows.[18] As Rawlings points out, "each commissioner was assisted by lay agents, known as *familiares* (familiars), who principally acted as intermediaries between the tribunal and the prisoner".[19] That is a role that suits the parricide well, as for several paragraphs he tries to extract a confession of guilt from Alonzo through their adventure trying to break out from the convent and the memory of Alonzo's broken family. The parricide clings to any feeling possible to make Alonzo confess and condemn himself, breaking his spirit.[20] That spirit is ultimately, and desperately, broken when Alonzo faces grim reality at his trial and witnesses the reward a *familiar* is granted, as the parricide is even promoted to secretary of the tribunal to judge Alonzo:

> At this moment I saw a person seated at the table covered with black cloth, intensely busy as a secretary, or person employed in taking down the depositions of the accused. As I was led near the table, this person flashed a look of recognition on me, –he was my dreaded companion, – he was an official now of the Inquisition.[21]

These *familiares* were in charge of getting acquainted with the prisoner and trying to extract any kind of confession that would prove his guilt, promising him redemption through it, as the parricide does with Alonzo in the previous lines. These prisoners, once they had been thrown into such a hopeless situation, would think anyone acting "friendly" was a "true friend", an understanding soul in this barren land where darkness and injustice reigned. As was mentioned above, these *familiares* would not have passed unnoticed by the Irish contemporary to the novel. This hidden plotting to extract confessions would call to mind the network of spies and agents both from Catholic and Protestant agrarian societies in

17. Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
18. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 220, 238.
19. Rawlings, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
20. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 220-225.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Ireland, and also government officials secretly sent from Dublin Castle.[22] These secret societies spread rapidly at the end of the 18th century due to unrest concerning the possession and distribution of the land, mostly in the hands of the Protestant elite.[23] Maturin's contemporary "familiars" would also infiltrate the ranks of both parties in these agrarian revolts to obtain any information that could be later used to forward any accusations, sometimes based on agents fingering their own neighbours.[24]

Alonzo, once he is in the prison of the Inquisition, takes Melmoth for one of these spies, as he can come and go as he pleases around his cell in the most impregnable place in Spain. It is Melmoth who, in one of his visits to Alonzo's cell, tells him about the special condition of these agents, and how they wander the corridors of the prison, under the pretence to be friends with the prisoners, in order to extract all the information torture could not. Familiars benefit from the prisoners' desperate need of a sympathizing soul to alleviate their suffering:

> You know, Sir, or perhaps have yet to know, that there are persons accredited in the Inquisition, who are permitted to solace the solitude of the prisoners, on the condition of obtaining, under the pretence of friendly communication, those secrets which even torture has failed to extort.[25]

However, right after Alonzo tells this to young John Melmoth, he says that the stranger could not be one of these "persons *accredited* in the Inquisition," because Melmoth's language and "his abuse of the system was too gross, his indignation too unfeigned",[26] even for a spy trying the utmost to get a confession from a supposed apostate and heretic.

As in Alonzo de Monçada's case when he thinks of the Wanderer as one of these *familiares*, these lay agents of the Inquisition pretended to be prisoners who got a special permission to walk freely the cells of other fellow inmates, feigned to understand their situations and, finally, claimed to be a "friendly" confessor. Melmoth's warning seems to remind Alonzo of that strategy used by the Inquisition, as Hoeveler states, perhaps the most diabolical one they have in store, because "a desperate and imprisoned person would be worn down and vulnerable by this time to any overture of kindness from anyone"[27], and, therefore, extract any confession that would

22. Niall Gillespie, "Irish Jacobin Gothic, c. 1796-1825", *Irish Gothics: Genres, Forms, Modes, and Traditions, 1760-1890*, Christina Morin and Niall Gillespie (Eds.), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 58-73.
23. R. F. Foster, "Ascendancy and Union", *The Oxford History of Ireland*, R. F. Foster (Ed.), Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2001, p. 134-173.
24. Jarlath Killeen, *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2014, p. 66.
25. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 228.
26. *Ibid*.
27. Hoeveler, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

suit their purposes. Afterwards, they would use the information obtained to bring the accused to their final perdition and punishment, which would often involve an *auto-da-fé*, as Maturin's contemporary, William Godwin, also reminds us, a source Maturin would have heavily drawn from for some of his Inquisition settings.[28] When the eponymous hero in *St Leon* finds himself in the prisons of the Inquisition for the crime of necromancy, he is frequently visited by one of these *familiares* with the purpose of leading him on to confess to his crimes, so the Inquisition can finally take him to the stake in an *auto-da-fé*: "I believed he was set upon me by these insatiable blood-suckers of the inquisition, that he might ensnare me with his questions, and treacherously inveigle me to the faggot and the stake".[29] It seems it would not be merely coincidental that Maturin's most important source for his Inquisition setting, as Alonzo's time in its prison resembles that of *St Leon*, tried to fight superstition and injustice in his Gothic masterpiece, with the Treason Trials of 1794 in the background.[30] In a similar way, one can see Maturin bringing to the fore the secret societies that plagued the Irish countryside and cities, and all the network of spies and agents from both Dublin Castle and Protestant and Catholic agrarian societies alike. Late 18th century and early 19th century Ireland was that spectral maze, impossible to escape from, that Alonzo refers to when he says that all Spain is "but one great monastery",[31] a wall-less prison where "I must be a prisoner every step that I take".[32]

The system of accusation exercised by the Inquisition was based on the policy of name-hiding, so the accusers, who could be even the very same relatives and neighbours of the accused, were sheltered by this wall of privacy.[33] As Pérez-Reverte reminds the modern reader in *Limpieza de sangre*, the worst thing for somebody in the hands of the Inquisition was that the reasons for their imprisonment or their accusers were unknown to them, while inquisitors asked them myriads of questions, not knowing whether their answers would condemn them: "*lo más terrible de estar preso en las cárceles secretas de la Inquisición era que nadie te decía cuál era el delito, ni qué pruebas o testigos había contra ti, ni nada de nada*" [the most terrible thing of being imprisoned in the secret gaol of the Inquisition was that nobody told you what your crime was, nor what evidence or witnesses they had against you, nothing at all] (translation mine).[34]

Once the trial had finished and the sentence decided –what in many cases, as mentioned above, implied an *auto-da-fé* –, everyone had to

28. *Ibid*., p. 180.
29. William Godwin, *St Leon*, Peterborough, Ont., Broadview, 2006, p. 327.
30. Ellen Lévy, "The Philosophical Gothic of St Leon", *Caliban*, 33, 1976 (doi:10.3406/calib.1996.1313), p. 56.
31. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 185.
32. *Ibid*.
33. Baigent & Leigh, *op. cit*., p. 33; Swan, art. cit., p. 206.
34. *Limpieza de sangre*, ed. cit., p. 117.

participate of the "celebration" of the hegemony of the Catholic Church: "The burning of a heretic became an occasion for celebration, a joyous event".[35] The refusal to take part, more over members of the family, close relations and friends, implied the disagreement with the dictates of the Holy Office. This was followed by a suspicion of culpability and, henceforth, a rejection on the side of society, or even investigations by an authoritative ecclesiastical regime. All of them would become outcasts, potential suspects tainted by the devil, a mirror image of what Melmoth is: "Non-participation in the celebration of Catholic hegemony implied non-conformity and withdrawal from the community of believers – a potentially offensive form of behaviour that might lead to inquisitorial investigation, social exclusion and ultimate damnation".[36] The Inquisition had taught people to spy in the name of the Church, and this, sometimes, went beyond duty: "It was a sin not to report any enemy of the Church".[37] Much like Maturin's Ireland, with its network of spies and political and religious allegiances, the population of a whole country has been turned into spies.

This part of the Inquisitorial process is much targeted by Maturin in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, as the cases of Alonzo de Monçada and Immalee show. However, this alienation of suspects and their families, as well as the encouragement to spy on family members and neighbours, alongside the whole *auto-da-fé*, is there to show a brutal imposition of a religious practice. It is the case of a state that foists its beliefs in such a manner and, with it, hegemony to control its population through terror and coercion. In this over-controlling regime, those who do not comply are targets of suspicion and, therefore, investigated. The *auto-da-fé* is nothing else but a symbol of the threat of a state-mandated faith, and the homogeneity that state aims at creating, in the figure of anybody who does not conform with the Catholic Church's dictates: "The Spanish Inquisition's *autos-de-fé* emblematize the threat of a state-mandated faith, and Spain is throughout the novel a hostile environment for non-Catholics".[38] As Melmoth rages at a naïve Immalee when, in her island, he tries to explain the ways of the world, it is all part of a patriot game.[39]

This massive participation of neighbours, community members and even relatives in *Melmoth the Wanderer* is most visible when Melmoth tries to open the eyes of young and still innocent Immalee, who is now known as Isidora. In "Tale of the Indians", Immalee recovers her Spanish name after she is rescued from the Indian island where she grew up in total freedom and is given back to her noble Catholic family in Madrid. Once she is

35. Baigent & Leigh, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
36. Rawlings, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
37. Jean Plaidy, *The Growth of the Spanish Inquisition*, London, Robert Hale, 1960, p. 151.
38. Ashley Marshall, "Melmoth Affirmed: Maturin's Defence of Sacred History", *Studies in Romanticism*, 47(2), Summer 2008, p. 121-145 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/25602138).
39. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 305.

back in Spain, Immalee, and the reader, is to learn that her family are Old Christians, one of the families of untouched Catholic stock since Visigoth times who, thus, complies with the requirements of "purity of blood": "the descendants of the Christian Visigoths, and they had heroically preserved their pure Gothic blood from contamination with the blood of inferior races that had shared the peninsula with them since the eighth century".[40] Therefore, the Aliagas are one of the purest and most powerful noble families in the country, Grandees of Spain, flagships of the Catholic faith and have an important position that has to be kept and maintained through compliance with the status quo. Lest not forget, as Hoeveler reminds us, that the Inquisition played an important role in the purification of the blood ferreting out "crypto-Muslims and Jews who had failed to convert convincingly to Catholicism",[41] as is the case of Don Fernan, the Jew who aids Alonzo in his breakout from the prison of the Inquisition.

This purity of blood, opposed to the miscegenation of New Christians, is something Immalee's parents, Donna Clara and her husband, Aliaga, remark all through the story: "an old Christian such as I […] boast myself to be".[42] To perpetuate their lineage, they want to marry their daughter to another Grandee of Spain and, therefore, also pure of Christian blood and holder of an important position both in society and the government: "as maidens should be rewarded for their chastity and reserve by being joined in wedlock with a worthy husband […] I shall bring with me one who is to be her husband, Don Gregorio Montilla, of whose qualifications I have not now leisure to speak".[43] Aliaga's words infer the high rank and nobility in Montilla's lineage, something that is later confirmed by Donna Clara, when she recalls that Montilla might be "the descendant in the right line of the Campeador",[44] one of the national heroes of the *Reconquista*[45].

Moreover, Madrid, the place where Immalee had her first and shocking experience with Catholicism, was the capital of one of the most fanatic Catholic countries of the time. Her naturalist way of conceiving life and religion clashes completely with the strict conception of Catholicism in the Spain of Counter-Reformation times, when religion was brought to extremes. She lived through a time when, as in former stages of Christianity when the ecclesiastical authorities had to deal with dissent, non-conformity with Catholicism became a crime against it, and "a crime against it became a crime against the empire –treason– as well".[46] As shown above, the over-controlling regime present in the Kingdom of

40. Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
41. Hoeveler, *op. cit.*, p. 150.
42. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 369.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*, p. 378.
45. The early medieval period when the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula reconquered the territories taken by the Muslims during the 8th and 9th centuries.
46. Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

Spain had to maintain its religious homogeneity, and the Inquisition was there to make sure that happened.

In a passage full of dramatic quality, Melmoth tells Immalee that her ideas could take her to the stake and that, at that final moment, even the members of her family would willingly light the flames of purification. By doing so, they would show their compliance with the status quo, and their faithfulness to the Catholic cause. Her parents, brother and neighbours would sacrifice her so they would not become objects of suspicion and, thus, reaffirming their loyalty to the state:

> Yes, I remember catching a glimpse of that religion so beautiful and pure; and when they brought me to a Christian land, I thought I should have found them all Christians.' – 'And what did you find them, then, Immalee?' – 'Only Catholics.' – 'Are you aware of the danger of the words you utter? Do you know that in this country to hint a doubt of Catholicism and Christianity being the same, would consign you to the flames as a heretic incorrigible? Your mother, so lately known to you as a mother, would bind your hands when the covered litter came for its victim; and your father, though he has never yet beheld you, would buy with his last ducat the faggots that were to consume you to ashes; and all your relations in their gala robes would shout their hallelujahs to your dying screams of torture.[47]

In a way to reinforce the contrast between Immalee's ideas and those of the over-controlling state, Maturin makes her arrival in Spain, and in Madrid, coincide with the summit of the Counter-Reformation, at the time of the House of Habsburg, when Spain felt like one big prison under the control of the Inquisition.[48] As some scholars point out, the "Tale of the Indians", which tells the story of Immalee's life, from her little Indian island to her death at the hands of the Inquisition in Madrid, takes place between 1680 and 1685, at the time of the reign of Charles II of Spain.[49] One cannot forget that this was the period when the laws regarding "purity of blood" were applied with most strength.[50] These were laws that clung to the "logic of ethnic purification"[51] supported by the Inquisition and a governmental hierarchy that granted positions in the government only to those who, like the Aliagas and Montilla, could prove their lineages had not suffered from miscegenation, and were thorough Old Christians. This was also the time

47. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 344.
48. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 180.
49. Charlie Jorge, *La figura del héroe en* Melmoth the Wanderer*, de Charles Robert Maturin*, Leioa/Bilbao, TD-Arte y Humanidades, 2018, p. 150.
50. Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
51. Eric Griffin, "Nationalism, the Black Legend, and the Revised 'Spanish Tragedy'", *English Literary Renaissance*, 39(2), Spring 2009, p. 336-370 (doi:10.1111/j.1475-6757.2009.01050.x).

when the *Procesiones de Semana Santa* (Holy Week Processions) began, with all their paraphernalia of dresses, *saetas* (songs to the suffering and death of Christ sung aloud as the floats pass by), flagellants, penitents, mourning and automatons made to impress a fervent Catholic audience; a tradition still in use and very popular in modern twenty-first-century Spain. However, one should not forget that the period of Immalee's return to Madrid, and fall into Inquisitorial hands, also coincides with the ascent of the Catholic James II to the throne of England and the subsequent prelude of the Williamite War in Ireland.[52] As Hoeveler reminds us, there is a strong link in the Protestant imagination "between the threatened return of the Catholic Stuarts and depictions of that most infamous of Catholic institutions, the Inquisition".[53] Coincidentally, Immalee dies in the prison of the Inquisition barely four years before the break of war, thus, highlighting a crucial landmark in Irish history.

However, what a society permanently under control of the Church feared most was the excessive power wielded by the Tribunal of the Holy Office, as has been shown so far. The General Inquisitor, head of this dreadful organization, had so much power in his hands that he was, in fact, almost second to none in government, as he was "one of the most powerful functionaries in Spain next to the king".[54] With the amount of power this person, as well as any other member of the Holy Office, could have at the time, it is beyond any doubt that such an organization could inspire so much terror in a society easily controllable through the union between religion and throne.[55] This is clearly and impressively expressed in another masterpiece of Gothic fiction, Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), when a crowd of people in the middle of the festivities in Rome move back as the Inquisitors who carry Vivaldi, the hero of this novel, appear "in solemn silence". The crowd show their fear, and even a morbid curiosity, leaving space for the carriage of the Inquisition to pass in the direction of their prison: "But, when their office was distinguished, part of the crowd pressed back from the carriage in affright, while another advanced with curiosity; though as the majority retreated, space was left for the carriage to move on".[56]

This fear is also perfectly visible, and dreadfully represented, in the mind of Alonzo de Monçada, once he is hidden in the house of the *converso* –a people also persecuted, and threatened, by the Inquisition. The youth realizes then, after seeing terror reflected on the *converso*'s face, that

52. Nicholas Canny, "Early Modern Ireland, c. 1500-1700", *The Oxford History of Ireland*, R. F. Foster (ed.), Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2001, p. 125.
53. Hoeveler, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
54. Rawlings, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
55. Marshall, art. cit., p. 124; 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)*, Whitefish, MT, Kessinger, 2010, p. 104-105.
56. Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1971, p. 195.

the Inquisition controls the whole country to such an extent that he will never be safe in Spain. In fact, the Holy Office threatened with severe penalties, even more for a Catholic at the time, those who would aid any fugitive: "On pain of their own excommunication, other people were forbidden to provide him [the fugitive] with food, shelter or sanctuary".[57] As seen above, Spain, much like Maturin's Ireland, has been turned into a convent, a wall-less prison. What Alonzo sees beyond his forced host's doorstep is a wide and never-ending landscape full of devastation and despair. His life has been made barren by the power of the Inquisition, which has left him without family or friends; like Melmoth himself, he has become an outcast:

> [T]he Inquisition had laid waste the whole track of life, as with fire and sword. I had no spot to stand on, a meal to earn, a hand to grasp, a voice to greet, a roof to crouch under, in the whole realm of Spain.
>
> 'You are not to learn, Sir, that the power of the Inquisition, like that of death, separates you from, by its single touch, from all mortal relations. From the moment its grasp has seized you, all human hands unlock their hold of yours, –you have no longer father, mother, sister, or child.[58]

A great deal of this terror and distrust towards the officials of the Inquisition, and, ironically, a great reason to become part of it, was based on the immunity they obtained. This fact shocked British readers greatly at the time, and most likely their Anglo-Irish counterparts too, as is shown at the beginning of Radcliffe's *The Italian*, when an Englishman is shocked at how the church would thus conceal among its ranks a former assassin.[59] This helped writers and readers of the time to create a myth that would be used by political reformers and philosophers to attack oppressive and authoritarian governments, or even civil power being held in the hands of organized religion:

> The myth was originally devised to serve variously the political purposes of a number of early modern political regimes, as well as Protestant reformers, proponents of religious and civil toleration, philosophical enemies of the civil power of organized religions, and progressive modernists.[60]

The members of this organization were beyond the reach of civil justice. In fact, it could be argued that they were even beyond and over any

57. Baigent & Leigh, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
58. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 250.
59. *The Italian*, ed. cit., p. 2.
60. Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

kind of justice, as one of these privileges was being almost untouchable: "The most important of these [privileges] rendered the office holder […] untouchable by the secular authorities".[61] No matter what the crime committed by them had been during their civil life, once they were into the Church establishment, the shadow of any previous offence was totally erased, as no common civil tribunal could prosecute them:

> Clerical privileges and responsibilities were extensively defined and quite distinct from other contemporary forms, for example, of holding and transmitting property, of determining personal inquiry, of being subject to litigation, and of other aspects of full social participation.[62]

Maturin was well acquainted with this special status that members of the Catholic Church in general, and Inquisitors in particular, had, common to any privileged class within an abusive government.[63] In *Melmoth the Wanderer*, as young Alonzo de Monçada tries to escape from the convent where he was committed, he gets acquainted with a lay monk who is his only help and connection with his brother. This monk entered this religious institution running away from justice, after having killed his father and been charged with parricide: "There is a wretch in your convent, who took sanctuary from *parricide*, and consented to become a monk, to escape the vengeance of heaven in this life at least. […] On the crimes of this wretch I build all my hopes".[64] Alonzo finds this, and the monk himself, repugnant, however, he decides to trust in him, partially at least, as he is his only hope of escaping the convent and the imprisonment he had been forced into.

On their way out of the convent they have to go through several calamities, including the parricide telling the terrifying stories of his crimes. In one of them Alonzo's companion tells in a mad dream how he murdered his father in a fit of passion and hatred, whereas in the other Alonzo listens in horror to the story of the two lovers imprisoned in the dungeon where they have to spend a night. The lay monk himself confesses how he betrayed them when they tried to run away from the hands of the Church, a fact that turns out to be an uncanny mirroring flashback of what is about to unfold. After they were locked in this dungeon, the unrepentant lay monk asked permission to keep guard at the door and see how they moved from the purest love to extreme cannibalism, until their death:

61. Rawlings, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
62. Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
64. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 178.

> 'I do not quite like to go through the details by which this wretched pair were deluded into the hope of effecting their escape from the convent. It is enough that I was the principal agent, - that the Superior connived at it, - that I led them through the very passages you have traversed to-night, they trembling and blessing me at every step,'
>
> […]
>
> The first day they clung together, and every moment I felt was like that of one person. The next the man alone struggled, and the woman moaned in helplessness. The third night, […] the disunion of every tie of the heart, of passion, of nature, had commenced. […] It was on the fourth night that I heard the shriek of the wretched female, - her lover, in the agony of hunger, had fastened his teeth in her shoulder; - that bosom on which he had so often luxuriated, became a meal to him now.'[65]

After such a horrific story, at which Alonzo starts in disgust, they come out of the vaults, where Alonzo finally meets his brother Juan. This short moment of happiness and safety felt by the two brothers is the chance taken by the parricide monk to murder Juan and hand Alonzo over to the Inquisition, according to a plan devised with the religious authorities to get rid of such a load as Alonzo's case: "'*He is safe*,' cried Juan, following me [Alonzo]. '*But are you?*' answered a voice of thunder. Juan staggered back from the step of the carriage, - he fell. I sprung out, I fell too - on his body. I was bathed in his blood, - he was no more'".[66]

When young Monçada wakes up in one of the secret cells of the Holy Office, he discovers that not only has the treason and murder carried out by the lay monk not been punished, but, instead of paying for his crimes, he has been rewarded with a position of great responsibility within the Inquisition. As was shown above, when Alonzo is lead to the tribunal that is about to look into his case, he sees the lay monk acting as secretary. The complete realisation that the former parricide and murderer of his brother, among his other crimes, has become an official of the Holy Office makes Alonzo fall in momentary despair at seeing his case, and all hope, lost:

> I saw a person seated at the table covered with black cloth, intensely busy as a secretary, or person employed in taking down the depositions of the accused. As I was led near the table, this person flashed a look of recognition on me, - he was my dreaded companion, - *he was now an official of the Inquisition. I gave all up the moment I saw his*

65. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 208-213.
66. *Ibid*., p. 215.

> *ferocious and lurking scowl, like that of the tiger before he springs from his jungle, or the wolf from his den.*[67] [Italics mine]

This is a factual proof of the kind of members that were accepted within the doors of the Holy Inquisition. This proof of the corruption present in Catholic institutions would undoubtedly have fuelled the suspicions and chimerical terrors of the Protestant Anglo-Irish of Maturin's times, who saw, with what they thought cause for worry, the dawn of Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Emancipation movement.[68] The lay monk is not seized by a single doubt at any moment after he betrays the couple of lovers and, later, Alonzo de Monçada and his brother Juan, as far as he gets promoted, first in the monastery and later in the Holy Inquisition. The lay monk comes to showcase what some people would do to gain promotion in an abusive regime, and also what tools these governments would resort to, whichever faith that regime allied to. As Melmoth himself would put it: all religions are the same.[69]

The Inquisition would use all the means at their disposal to inspire and create an intense dramatic effect in real life with the intention of extracting confessions in an easier way. Their methods and the black legend that surrounded them were used by writers, politicians, philosophers and pamphleteers to attack abusive governments and institutions, as Godwin did. These political activists would highlight the Inquisition readiness to use any tools, including their mysterious settings and dark reputation, to extract any confession, as would the governments and abusive institutions they tried to attack.[70] Maturin's contemporaries used the Inquisition as a model for all kinds of "implacable secret tribunals", as Peters states: "During the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first few decades of the nineteenth, the Inquisition-model served in the depiction of other kinds of tribunals as well".[71] This was so common to the point that both writers and readers conceived the Inquisition and these abusive tribunals as exchangeable in their minds and writings. These secret tribunals had been so much on the minds of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries readers and writers that "where one could not place an Inquisition, one could as easily place a similar institution".[72] Gothic writers also used the Inquisition for their own means, both aesthetic and beyond, and drew on the ambiguous popularity it had at the time, creating an intensity that attracted readers craving to devour pages full of such morbid scenes.[73]

67. *Ibid*., p. 238.
68. Hoeveler, *op. cit*., p. 180.
69. *Melmoth*, ed. cit., p. 389.
70. Swan, art. cit., p. 209-210.
71. Peters, *op. cit*., p. 214.
72. *Ibid*.
73. Robert Miles, "The 1790s: The Effulgence of Gothic", *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Jerrold E. Hogle (Ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 2006, p. 41-62.

In this respect, it seems that Charles Robert Maturin used the Inquisition motif to its full potential, combining the theo-political discourse of his time with the aesthetic use of this sublime religious institution, so much in vogue amongst his potential readers.[74] Maturin's attacks on theocracy set him apart from the purest religious rant against Catholicism,[75] and place him in the role of the writer as political activist, following closely the steps of his friend Walter Scott, or William Godwin. The Inquisition's vow of secrecy, the usage of familiars to obtain confessions, the whole system of accusation and trials with their terrible *autos-da-fé*, the power behind the throne wielded by the Tribunal of the Holy Office as well as the invulnerability of its members; all these were used by Maturin in *Melmoth the Wanderer* to create this oppressive atmosphere with which he cast a hard critique on oppressive, overpowering institutions. These were tearing apart his beloved motherland, as later eighteenth century and early nineteenth century Ireland was plagued with spies and agents from both sides of the religious and political fence, and the whole country had become a prison without walls, but equally suffocating. Through the figure of the Inquisition in Catholic Spain, Maturin denounces the abuses and injustices of these institutions in countries where they exercise unreined power.

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74. Hoeveler, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
75. Marshall, art. cit., p. 139.

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