Grace Aguilar's 'Edict': Empowering Domesticity in 'The Edict: A Tale of 1492'

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> The love that bids the patriot rise to guard his country's rest,
> With deeper mightier fullness thrills in woman's gentle breast.
> (Aguilar, 1889, p.118)

From its earliest manifestation in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the Gothic novel and its motifs function as a narrative space where women struggle to develop a uniquely feminine voice that empowers a woman's social position. Clara Reeve in *The Old English Baron* (1778) blatantly uses her story to redefine Walpole's construction of the genre and its components. Although she does not focus her story, as Walpole does, on a woman in distress, a central trope of Gothic writing, her preface and dedication to the second edition of the text[1] expose her desire to refine and subvert Gothic literature written by men. Her preface pays an oblique compliment to Walpole's novel, acknowledging his role in establishing the Gothic genre while criticizing him for his overuse of fantasy. She claims *Baron* as:

> the literary offspring of the Castle of Otranto, written upon the same plan, with a design to unite the most attractive and interesting circumstances of the ancient Romance and the modern Novel, at the same time it assumes a character and manner of its own, that differs from both. (Reeve, 1823, p.5)

Reeve's explanation of the Gothic genre as a hybrid of 'ancient Romance and modern Novel' is indicative of her attempt to redefine the Gothic genre through a gendered definition. As a woman, Reeve is obligated to provide socially constructed moral lessons to her young readers and, as a result, she is not able to indulge fully in the fantasy that Walpole can, as a man, in his writing. Similarly, Ann Radcliffe writes *The Italian* (1797) in a way that

[1] The first edition is entitled *The Champion of Virtue* (1777), as mentioned in Reeve's preface to *The Old English Baron*.

criticizes and challenges Matthew Lewis's representation of women in *The Monk* (1796), where women are aligned with Satan both as an extension of the devil and as the devil 'her'self. Grace Aguilar (1816-1847) writes in this tradition of refutation and empowerment pioneered by Reeve and Radcliffe. Aguilar's 'The Edict: A Tale of 1492', published in 1844 as part of her *Records of Israel*, assimilates the structure and motifs of the Gothic romance and merges them with the late Romantic trend of sentimental and historical writing. Publishing 'The Edict' in 1844,[2] Aguilar could be read by contemporary critics as entrenched in the developing anti-Catholic climate that would culminate in the 1850s as a result of the perceived 'Papal Aggression' in England (Griffin, 2003, p.116). Her choice of the Spanish Inquisition for her setting and the atmosphere of persecution by members of the Roman Catholic Church mimic similar sentiments in other works of Gothic fiction. In this way, one sees Aguilar bridge together the sentiments and styles of Romantic and Victorian England. Aguilar uses the setting of the Catholic Inquisition of 1492 in Spain, as did late eighteenth century Gothic writers, to explore gender roles in England. This paper will consider Aguilar as a writer of the literary Gothic to create a more comprehensive image of her Inquisition stories and the ways in which she assimilated the form of Gothic writing to empower the Jewish woman using English Christian expectations. Where Aguilar differs from other writers on these topics is in her addition of religious persecution to the list of threats that a woman must overcome; this initiates a discourse through which she can suggest that a Jewish heroine is not entirely 'other' from one that is English. As Aguilar's stories feature Jewish heroines who embody English domestic ideals while confronting the Inquisition, she encourages her reader to understand a universal picture of women's struggle to balance heroism with modesty. Aguilar empowers women's domestic roles by making their faithful adherence to its stipulations heroic.

[2] There are no biographical details at present that indicate the dates when the stories in *Records of Israel* were written.

As she does with her other heroines, Aguilar portrays Josephine Castello in the liminal state between adolescence and adulthood, preparing her reader for Josephine's inevitable maturation; however, Aguilar adds to her exploration of heroism in 'The Edict' by considering what defines an ideal Jewish mother and her role in the domestic world. Josephine is a strong woman, devoutly Jewish and endowed with a voice that she confidently employs in spite of her personal tragedies. 'The Edict' is the story of Josephine Castello's family living in a hidden valley of Spain just prior to their eviction at the start of the Spanish Inquisition. As Aguilar's heroine, Josephine experiences a series of tragedies: the forced exile of her father; the death of her mother; and the adoption of her young deaf and mute brother. She spends the story trying not merely to survive, but to survive while maintaining her faith and her family. After a brief explanation of Josephine's father's alcoholism at the beginning of the story, Aguilar tells of how his most recent drunken brawl resulted in the death of another man. Subsequently, Castello is banished from Eshcol.[3] Despite still having a family to care for, Josephine's mother Rachel refuses to live as a mother without her husband. Consumed with mourning the loss of her husband, she forsakes her domestic and religious obligations to her family. Without the patriarch, Aguilar suggests that a family unit cannot hold together unless the mother is of a particular type. Rachel's grief inhibits her from caring for her family and as a result she dies, bestowing premature motherhood upon Josephine by leaving Josephine with a newborn child to care for. Aguilar, as Linda Zatlin explains in *The Nineteenth-Century Anglo-Jewish Novel*, uses Rachel's failure as an opportunity to idealize Josephine as a mother in order to structure this story around expectations for womanhood (1981, p.31). Now empowered as matriarch and mother to the newborn deaf and mute Aréli, Josephine delves into her mother-role and strives to instill in her

[3] Eshcol is a fictive Jewish city located in a forgotten valley of Spain. Members of the community do not live as crypto-Jews because the Spanish government is unaware of their existence.

brother a strong love of Judaism.

In order to make Josephine into a domestic heroine, Aguilar creates a setting for her story that empowers a woman's duty within a woman's space. She achieves this by using landscapes, an important feature of the Gothic romance, to position the players in her drama. If indeed 'Gothic characters tend to play as embodiments of social psychic forces rather than as individual personalities,' as Valdine Clemens suggests in *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from The Castle of Otranto to Alien*, authors of Gothic histories and romances use Inquisition stories to explore a 'psychic force' that is both masculine and feminine (1999, p.49). The Gothic novel was a hybrid of new 'Gothic' motifs and 'the novel of sentiment and sensibility' (Clemens, 1999, p.42). Historical settings, love triangles, elaborate pastoral displays, women in distress, and other tropes associated with Gothic writing encouraged mainstream reading since, as Gary Kelley explains in *English Fiction of the Romantic Period: 1789-1830*, novels of this genre were reworked novels of manners and 'social emulation' that young readers were expected to look towards to understand their gender roles (1989, p.42). The immediacy with which Aguilar confronts the task of educating her young readers in propriety is linked entirely to the subterranean tribunal of the Inquisition which, according to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (under *inquisition*) can be defined as a 'an ecclesiastical tribunal established c. 1232 for the suppression of heresy, notorious for its use of torture'. For Aguilar the secrecy of the Inquisition works as a foil for women's private domestic sphere and this connection functions as the foundation upon which Aguilar builds her image of the heroic woman. 'The Edict' opens with a quaint domestic tableau set just outside the Castello home in which the heroine and her lover converse about where they will live once they are married. The family's home exists in a 'vale' that has been 'set apart by Nature as a guarded and blessed haven of peace for the weary wanderers of Israel' (Aguilar, 1889, pp.120-121). Like

the domestic world that women inhabit, the Castello home is removed from the public world of politics and industry; however, Aguilar writes the Inquisition as similarly removed. Once King Ferdinand determines to evict all the Jews from Spain if they fail to convert to Catholicism, Spaniards penetrate the hidden world of Eshcol in order to root out the Jewish people from deep within the hidden recesses of the Spanish valley:

> The Spanish officers and several of the men had quitted Eshcol, leaving only the lowest rank of soldiery to keep watch lest any of the fugitives should return, and, taking advantage of the secluded situation of the vale, set the edict at defiance […]. The night was pitchy dark, but far and near the thick woods and blackened heavens suddenly blazed up with lurid hue. (Aguilar, 1889, p.144)

Aguilar deliberately constructs the 'secluded situation' of Eshcol to draw together the Inquisition and the female sphere. Although the actions in each often go unperceived because of the 'pitch dark' and 'thick woods' that remove each from one's immediate gaze, there are actions in both that 'blazed' beneath the surface: women struggle to empower themselves in order to help their family survive and the Inquisition uses corruption to root out perceived threats to the Roman Catholic state. Early nineteenth century English writers recycled the setting of the Spanish Inquisition in their writing as part of the evangelical conversion movement. Michael Ragussis suggests in *Figures of Conversion: The Jewish Question and English National Identity* that these novels 'that delighted in fusing supernatural horror with the horrors of Inquisitorial persecution' evoke 'a critical moment in the development of English antimonastic and anti-Spanish rhetoric' by deconstructing idealized images of clergy and Church to reveal the perceived hypocrisy of Catholic doctrine (Ragussis, 1995, p.135). Clemens explains how 'the ritual of descent in Gothic fiction […] undoubtedly appealed to the women readers of the day' because it offered a 'suggestion that the above-ground, or conscious, public version of reality is incomplete'

so that 'if one dares to venture into the strange and uncanny world below the surface, one finds a different story' (1999, p.49). Aguilar writes her Inquisition stories by assimilating tropes of the literary Gothic but manipulating them to make the hidden world of the Inquisition similar to the private sphere accessible to women who are expected to function in their world as the angels of their homes. By doing this, Aguilar creates a socially acceptable place within which her female characters are empowered by their gender.

Aguilar uses nature further into the story to help build Josephine's character and to help her readers identify her as a model mother and, therefore, woman. Daniel Cottom, in *The Civilized Imagination: A Study of Ann Radcliffe, Jane Austen, and Sir Walter Scott* notes that nature in Ann Radcliffe's Gothic romances 'has a privileged value as the archetypal art of Providence, infused with moral and spiritual truth' (1985, p.37). He goes on to explain how a character's ability to recognize the beauty of nature and understand how to use its aesthetic principles in their own life helps the reader understand that 'art defines [one's] own virtuous nature' (Cottom, 1985, p.37). Marianne Thormählen, in her text *The Brontës and Religion*, explains this further in relation to the Brontës' use of nature in their Gothic literature to speak for God rather than for Christ (1999). In 'The Edict', however, Aguilar associates Jewishness with the world of nature and virtue, one set in opposition to majority society. Early in the story, Aguilar describes the community of Eshcol elaborately, expounding upon 'the rich vegetation which crowns this ridge of mountains' and the herbs that 'grew in rich profusion amidst the cliffs', as well as 'the palm, the olive, the lemon, orange and almond interspersed with flowering shrubs of every variety, marked the site of the hamlet' in order to define the physical setting of the community as 'a second Judea' for its inhabitants (Aguilar, 1889, pp.120-121). This elaborate description, one that is repeated in various forms throughout the short story and Aguilar's other tales, functions to indicate the

importance of the physical setting of Eshcol to its people. The beauty of the land helps the reader to understand the Eshcolites' appreciation of it (Aguilar, 1889, p.121); moreover, Aguilar's description of Eshcol as 'a second Judea' also shows the way in which she integrates the Gothic trope of divinity and virtue in nature into her story, 'Judea' being a reference to the Jewish holy land. To drive this point further, Aguilar writes Josephine as particularly in tune with nature and therefore able to accommodate her brother's special needs. Josephine overcomes her sadness at her mother's death and father's banishment by seeking 'to render [her brother's] affliction less painful than it appeared, and she succeeded,' creatively using the natural world around her to provide an education the social world cannot (Aguilar, 1889, p.125). This illustrates Aguilar's suggestion that the ideal mother is attuned to the natural world. To ensure her brother becomes socialized, Josephine leads Aréli 'into the fields of nature' and 'every spot became to the child a fruitful source of intelligence and love, providing him with language, even in inanimate objects' (Aguilar, 1889, p.125). Only after equipping Aréli with a sense of the world around him and immersing the innocent child in the natural world does Josephine enlist the aid of the social world, teaching Aréli to read and write with wax tablets. Josephine sees a lack in the social world's capacity to educate all youth about virtue and, empowered as a woman through her role as a mother, she fills this void using the outdoors. Aguilar uses nature in 'The Edict' as a metaphor for virtue as do other writers of the Gothic romance; however, Aguilar develops this motif by adding to it a deaf and mute child, one who appears unreachable by normal standards. Aréli is particularly significant to Josephine's character development because he exists outside the influence of society, functioning as a kind of test for her in which she can display her power to think as a woman and a mother. Further, through Aréli Jewishness comes to exist outside society not just during the Spanish Inquisition but metaphorically in the English nation. However, Aguilar writes this

Jewishness as natural rather than alien and celebrates Josephine's ability to fulfill her obligations to Aréli as his mother and to show her '*amor patriæ*' for her home (Aguilar, 1889, p.121, emphasis in original).

As illustrated above, Aguilar uses Josephine to teach her readers about ideal motherhood. Simultaneously, Aguilar empowers Josephine by explaining the importance of a mother's faith in God. 'The Edict' differs immensely from 'The Escape: A Tale of 1755' and 'The Fugitive: A True Tale' because in it Aguilar struggles to reconcile an ideal woman who abides by her socially constructed role as an obedient, domestic woman and one who defies it to defend her religious values against the threat of conversion. In 'The Escape', Almah Rodriguez is silenced for literally defying her gender role by disguising herself as a man and figuratively by entering the male world on an errand of heroic behavior. Once the members of Inquisition, who find her trying to free her husband from their prison, catch her,

> They had provided Almah, at her own entreaty, with female habiliments; for, in the bewildering agony of her spirit, she attributed the failure of her scheme for the rescue of her husband to her having disobeyed the positive command of God and adopted a male disguise, which in His eyes was abomination, but which in her wild desire to save Alvar she had completely overlooked, and she now in consequence shrunk from the fatal garb with agony and loathing. (Aguilar, 2003, p.76)

In 'The Fugitive', Inez Benito marries Judah Azavédo only because she feels it is her duty to do so:

> The *romance* of love *before* marriage she might not have known, but its *reality afterwards* she made so manifest, even when disease, joined to other infirmities, so tried her husband as to render him fretful and irritable, that there were still living some to assert that never was wife more tenderly affectionate, more devotedly faithful than was Inez Azavédo. (Aguilar, 1889, p.117, emphasis in original)

These women lose power because of their sex and in these stories Aguilar writes for her young readers neat images of the ideal domestic woman that uphold social expectations: Almah adheres to gender dictates and spends the rest of the story in passive silence; Inez marries and serves the man who loves her regardless of her own sentiments. 'The Edict', however, provides these same readers with a different, more powerful vision of femininity. As soon as King Ferdinand pronounces the edict of 1492, as in the story's title, which forces the Jews out of Spain and initiates the Inquisition, Spaniards go out of their way to root out the Jews. It is this action that enables Josephine's heroic, empowered character to fully develop. Spanish soldiers discover Aréli wandering the area and abduct him in order to convert him to Catholicism. Josephine rescues Aréli, who is in trouble with these men for destroying a cross, and she stands up to Aréli's oppressors. She curses their desire to manipulate a child, demonstrating that she has succeeded in educating her deaf and mute brother in the ways of their faith:

> Are ye men […] that thus ye would take the blood of an innocent, helpless child—one whose very affliction should appeal to mercy, denied as it may be to others? On yourselves ye called this insult to your faith […] Oh, shame, shame on your coward hearts! (Aguilar, 1889, p.141).

Josephine does not stop her teachings with children but goes on to educate ignorant adults, in particular 'men', in the fact 'that even the youngest Jewish child will prefer slavery, exile, or death, to forswearing his father's God' (Aguilar, 1889, p.142). Diana Peschier in *Nineteenth-Century Anti-Catholic Discourses: The Case of Charlotte Brontë* suggests that Catholicism was criticized during the nineteenth century for making women into 'mere puppet[s]' that exist only as men 'manipulated' them, an argument taken up by evangelical Christians who attempted to convert Jewish women throughout the nineteenth century (2005, p.31). Aguilar

reverses this relationship and it is Josephine who holds her family and its faith together despite male government and, in this case, persecution. Josephine rather than her husband or father finds Aréli and confronts his male persecutors. Josephine's power as a woman lies in her keen observance of her duty and role as a matriarch, a power that is justly bestowed, as evident in the 'tear' that 'rose' in her former oppressor's 'eye' while Josephine 'drew [Aréli] closer to her, and they disappeared together' (Aguilar, 1889, p.142). Aguilar's critics often remark that her heroines are stronger, more faithful and more dependable than the men in their lives. The aforementioned passage details the importance of a mother's faith and her role as educator of her family. Aguilar empowers her heroine with a keen sense of duty that keeps the Castello family intact religiously although ultimately not physically.

Heroes and heroines of Gothic romances often seek refuge in religion when threatened by religious injustices at the hands of persecutors. Ellena di Rosalba, of Radcliffe's *The Italian*, stands up to the evil abbess, refusing to be forced into a nunnery by demanding justice and asserting the Catholic Church's hypocrisy:

> The sanctuary is prophaned […] it is become a prison. It is only when the Superior ceases to respect the precepts of that holy religion, the precepts which teach her justice and benevolence, that she herself is no longer respected. The very sentiment which bids us revere its mild and beneficent laws, bids us also reject the violators of them: when you command me to reverence my religion, you urge me to condemn yourself. (Radcliffe, 1998, pp.84-85)

St. Ursula, a righteous nun in Lewis's *The Monk*, responds similarly in a moment of strife heroine when she reveals her Prioress's part in victimizing helpless women:

> Mine is the task to rend the veil from Hypocrisy, and show misguided Parents to what dangers the Woman is exposed,

> who falls under the sway of a monastic Tyrant.' (Lewis, 1995, p.350)

Marie, the heroine of Aguilar's novella *The Vale of Cedars; or, the Martyr*,[4] stands up to the Grand Inquisitor Don Luis Garcia, whose intention is to rape her, in the bowels of the Inquisition beneath King Ferdinand's castle. She proclaims, 'My soul thou canst not touch', before entering into a harangue against the Inquisitor's persecution of her:

> What holds thee from me? God!' replied the prisoner, in a tone of such thrilling, such supernatural energy, that Garcia had actually started as if some other voice than hers had spoken, and she saw him glance fearfully round. 'Thou darest not touch me! Ay, villain—blackest and basest as thou art—thou darest not do it. The God for whom thine acts, yet more than thy words blaspheme, withholds thee—and thou knowest it!' (Aguilar, 1874, pp.170-171)

These female characters are justified in stepping out of socially defined positions as silent and obedient women to challenge authority. They achieve this balance between domesticity and heroism by interpreting scripture in a way that makes them appear pure and virtuous and their persecutors evil and corrupt. Aguilar uses this element in 'The Edict' and, subsequently, in *Vale of Cedars* as the heroine's death is considered martyrdom. For Aguilar, Josephine dies a martyr because she possesses and dies for pure religious values. When Castello returns from exile to his family he exposes Eshcol to the Inquisition. The Jewish community there must then either convert to Catholicism or leave Spanish borders. Unaccustomed to living double lives, the community opts to immigrate to England. Aguilar describes the Castello family's journey to religious freedom as one of harassment, robbery, and abuse by Spanish Catholics, the same people that once circled Eshcol, and Josephine, her husband, her brother, and her father ultimately fail to leave Spain. The only option for Josephine's family is conversion. Rather than

[4] Written between 1831 and 1835, but not published until after Aguilar's death in 1850 by her mother (Galchinsky, 2003, pp.48-50).

submit to this though, Josephine asserts the 'glory and a triumph in the martyr's death,' and that 'the same God who strengthened Abraham to offer up his son, enables His wretched people to give up all for Him' because they do not '[deny] and mock Him' in the face of their own destruction by renouncing their Jewish faith and converting to other religions in order to save themselves (Aguilar, 1889, p.148). Josephine cannot heed her father's desire for the family to live in Spain as Marranos, existing publicly as Catholic citizens and privately as Jews. She condemns her father's struggle to 'tempt' her husband 'to perjury for [her] sake', begging forgiveness for 'this first disobedience to thy will' (Aguilar, 1889, p.152). Josephine's refusal demonstrates Aguilar's passionate opposition to Jewish conversion, one that trumps a woman's requirement to be obedient to male authority; moreover, when Josephine asks her father not to 'tempt' her husband, Aguilar suggests that this woman's faith and strength of religious right is stronger than that of the two men, as both Josephine's father and husband initially desire to take the easier path of outward assimilation and secret worship. According to Aguilar, it is therefore the Jewish mother's duty to pass Judaism on from generation to generation, and, as Ragussis believes Aguilar's argument to be, it is the Jewish woman who has the power to save the religion (1995, p.127). This scene reinforces the aforementioned passage in which Josephine stands up to Aréli's abductors and defies male authority while educating her persecutors and her readers in Jewish family values. Both of these moments display Josephine's strength and religious convictions, demonstrating a woman's power to function as a moral, religious and domestic stronghold despite tragedy and inevitable death. Because the Spanish Inquisition functions secretly, and sometimes subversively, Aguilar manipulates her setting to bring it close to a woman's domain: the private sphere. In this way, Aguilar makes the domestic world heroic and suggests that women become more powerful than men when they defend their space.

'The Edict', when read in the context of the literary Gothic, focuses on the life of an ideal mother and the importance of her faith in God, character traits that usually go rewarded in Gothic texts: virtuous female characters are united with lovers and restored to their original financial and social states. However, Aguilar ends 'The Edict' tragically, Josephine's family perishing at sea in a storm as they attempt to reach the safety of England. Aguilar appears to concur with Matthew Lewis's desire in *The Monk* to remove divine power from the Catholic clergy, as readers can see in both of their condemnations of corrupt Catholic persecutors. But, Aguilar also follows Radcliffe's pattern for her female characters, reconciling the male and female literary Gothic. In 'The Edict', Aguilar appeals to readers through familiar tropes of the female literary Gothic novel, although she adds discussions of Judaism into them. Aguilar's novella *The Vale of Cedars* and short stories 'The Edict: A Tale of 1492', 'The Fugitive: A True Tale', and 'The Escape: A Tale of 1755', use the Inquisition[5] and adopt the tropes of Gothic romance and novels of sensibility from Walpole, Reeve, Lewis, and Radcliffe. Her stories struggle to find narrative ways to express her didactic purposes in order to appeal to young readers. Where Aguilar differs from these writers, however, is in her portrayal of women. In the Gothic works referenced throughout this paper, the heroines either die, as is the case with Lewis's Antonia Dalfa, or are rewarded for their heroism with marriage, as is the case with Walpole's Isabella de Vicenza and Radcliffe's Ellena di Rosalba. Aguilar's heroines, who defy expectations and do not return to their roles by the end of the novel, however, die as martyrs, as is the case with 'The Edict's' Josephine. In this way, Aguilar's heroines present their Jewish faith as synonymous with English conceptions of domesticity, empowering nineteenth century women by encouraging them to find pride in the private world of the home and exist as the religious and moral foundation for their families and communities.

[5] 'Escape' is the only Inquisition story of Aguilar's set in Portugal rather than in Spain.

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