ROMANCES OF NATIONHOOD:
FORD AND THE ADVENTURE STORY TRADITION

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In 1924, thinking back to the origins of his novel *Romance*, Ford declared: 'Why the writer should ever have thought of writing of pirates, heaven knows'.[1] In spite of this disclaimer, Ford does in his memoirs provide several clues, some perhaps misleading, as to not only why but also how he came to write a work of adventure fiction, drafting the prototype novel 'Seraphina' in 1898, and, over the next five years, in collaboration with Conrad, revising and adding to the text and changing its title to *Romance*. Among the contradictory reasons Ford gives for 'writing of pirates' are: firstly, that Edward Garnett made the suggestion, pointing Ford towards the historical records of Aaron Smith, the last person to be tried for piracy at the Old Bailey in 1824;[2] secondly, that Ford himself had come across an account of Smith's grim adventures while researching for his book on Ford Madox Brown – of spotting the article in Dickens's periodical *All The Year Round*, Ford wrote that 'certain subjects will grip you with a force almost supernatural' (*JC* 13); and, finally, that '*Treasure Island* was terribly to the fore then' – perhaps an admission that Ford wished to conform with popular taste (*RY* 195). In this essay, I would like to consider a further probable reason for Ford's turn to the adventure tradition, namely that it provided him with a fresh and productive means of exploring one of his key interests: Englishness. As the concordance for *Romance* reveals, the word 'English' occurs in the novel over a hundred times, and the word 'Englishman' twenty times.[3] I will put this linked interest of Ford's in Englishness and adventure into literary and biographical context, and consider how Englishness is constructed and interrogated through the figures of, firstly, *Romance*'s John Kemp, a reconstructed English adventure hero, and secondly of Katharine Howard in *The Fifth Queen* trilogy, in whom traces of the adventure tradition are again reconfigured, particularly in terms of gender.

The adventure tradition in Western literature can be traced back over many centuries – in English writing to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

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(1719) and beyond, and in classical literature to the narratives of Odysseus, Jason and the Argonauts, and other such voyaging heroes. Late Victorian commentators such as Andrew Lang made precisely these kinds of connections, thereby establishing a pedigree for an often disparaged genre.[4] But I am taking the term more narrowly here to denote a broad strand of nineteenth-century fiction in English, often by Scottish writers, its best-known early-century progenitor being Sir Walter Scott, and its mid-century followers including Captain Marryat and R. M. Ballantyne. A late-century flowering of the adventure tradition was stimulated in part by Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1881), and further nurtured by writers such as H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, G. A. Henty and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who together contributed to the 'romance revival' of the 1880s and 1890s.

Among the notable spokesmen for this revival was W. E. Henley, an influential figure early in Ford's career, albeit one to whom Ford remained ambivalent. In *Thus To Revisit* (1921) Ford writes of Henley helping to initiate a change of tone in literature at the fin-de-siècle: 'Henley and his school', Ford remarks, formed 'a vocal and combative body', one which 'admired physical force, lawlessness, piracy, the speed of motor-cars, and the deftness of linotype machines', and which 'studied words from the Authorised Version and Sir Thomas Browne'.[5] This latter feature of the romance revival, its attraction to archaism and overt stylisation, was one that alienated the proto-modernist Ford, who complained elsewhere of 'the semi-biblical over-emphasis of Stevensonian word-jugglery' that the school supposedly espoused (a deft caricature of Stevenson's prose, though one that hardly does justice to its actual heterogeneity, economy of style, and playfulness).[6] Ford's friend Stephen Crane, in reaction to reading one particular sentence by Stevenson, made a similar claim, one that Ford endorsed, namely that Stevenson 'put back the clock of English fiction fifty years'.[7] Stylistically Ford thus saw himself as far beyond more than one key player in the romance revival, and on a personal level he found Henley's school, as he writes in *Ancient Lights*, 'strange and rough' and 'unreasonably boisterous and too loudly cocksure' – hence too extreme an antidote for 'the hot-house atmosphere of Pre-Raphaelitism' that Ford wished to escape (*AL* 196). Yet at the same time Ford did share with the revivalists a taste, which followed him from childhood, for adventure and action narrative. In *Ancient Lights* he tells us how, as a child, in reaction to 'being trained for the profession of a genius' by his Pre-Raphaelite forbears, 'I used

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to lock myself in the coal-cellar in order to read *Dick Harkaway* and *Sweeney Todd the Demon Barber* and other penny dreadfuls' (*AL* 228-9). He also produces a quasi-Stevensonian account of prepubescent fantasy and daring:

> Thank God, having been an adventurous youth whose sole idea of true joy was to emulate the doings of a hero of a work called *Peck's Bad Boy and His Pa*, or at least to the lesser glories of *Dick Harkaway*, who had a repeating rifle and a tame black jaguar and who bathed in gore almost nightly – thank God, I say, that we succeeded in leading our unsuspecting cousins into dangerous situations from which they only emerged by breaking limbs […]' (*AL* 103).

Before we examine romance and adventure in Ford's writing, some distinction needs to be made between these two overlapping terms. Common features of romance fiction include an idealised or at least feudal or semi-feudal setting, a quest narrative, and a courtly love motif derived from the original romances of medieval France. Adventure fiction often shares the first two of these features, and can also incorporate subplots resembling courtly love narratives, but its key characteristic, not always present in romance, is a strong focus on action and danger: what Stevenson described as 'the problems of the body and the practical intelligence'.[8] Ford's fairy stories of the 1890s, *The Feather*, *The Brown Owl*, and *The Queen Who Flew*, have been classified as romances and analysed as such by Timothy Weiss, since all involve feudal settings, and quest narrative and courtly love are present in some if not all.[9] Adventure also infuses these stories – *The Queen Who Flew*, for example, sees its protagonist through a series of hair's-breadth escapes. Yet action and danger are sufficiently subordinated to the romantic plots for these tales not to qualify as adventure per se. Ford and Conrad's novel *Romance*, on the other hand, in which the hero John Kemp is assaulted, kidnapped, involved in piratical acts and repeatedly called on to use violence while protecting his noble and beautiful cousin Seraphina, whom he eventually marries, can (despite its title) clearly be categorised as adventure fiction.

There is a notable Anglocentrism within Ford's romance and adventure fiction. *The Queen Who Flew*, in spite of its idealised semi-feudal setting, alludes wryly to the English past and present by taking as its premise the heroine's Queen Elizabeth-like resistance to marriage, and by describing her kingdom as 'the most prosperous and

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contented nation in the world', a possibly ironic view of Ford's England at the time of writing.[10] Many recent critics have examined late Victorian and early twentieth century adventure fiction for its nationalist ideologies. Andrea White, for example, has argued that, via the encounter with otherness that most adventure narratives involve, national identity is able to define itself – often, in English adventure fiction of the period, in supremacist and imperialist ways.[11] White argues, like many other critics, that Conrad both taps into and questions this supremacism. Yet her argument ignores Conrad's collaboration with Ford, ***Romance***, in favour of the more canonical *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, contributing to a relative neglect of ***Romance*** by Conrad and Ford scholars alike. I would like to suggest that ***Romance*** deserves greater attention for its staging of imperial ideology than it has so far received.

How, then, do the romance and adventure elements of ***Romance*** represent and question notions of Englishness? Unusually for Ford's fiction, this occurs to a large extent through action. Action is of course not the only means, nor is it the first that strikes us. Without the first-person narrator's attention to self-description and self-analysis, for example, we would not learn, as we do in the opening chapter, that John Kemp is by background a quite typical English adventure hero, the product of a quiet, disciplined, rural and domestic upbringing, much like Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, Marryat's Peter Simple, or Stevenson's Jim Hawkins. Self-narration also reveals John Kemp's nobility (he is the grandson of an Earl), this being a further trait common to many English adventure heroes, such as Leo Vincey in H. Rider Haggard's novel *She* (1887). First-person narrative generally is of course crucial to Ford and Conrad's practice in ***Romance*** of impressionism – the Modernist focus on a focalising self's subjective perception of the outside world. Yet although action is narrated impressionistically in ***Romance***, it contributes significantly to the construction of an idealised, heroic Englishness. Through numerous scenes of kidnapping, piratical invasion and physical struggle, John Kemp is forced to demonstrate qualities that include valour, self-reliance, and physical dexterity. The plot hinges on the fact that he also believes in the fair fight, even when this puts him in terrible personal danger. His very involvement in Caribbean politics and piracy, after two quiet years of planting in Jamaica, is hastened when he strikes a British official, who, Kemp feels, has unfairly assaulted a political enemy. Later he twice refrains from killing his own enemies

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when they are at his mercy: firstly the corrupt Irish judge O'Brien, and subsequently the psychopathic Spanish pirate Manuel-del-Popolo. Kemp believes it unfair and dishonourable to kill in cold blood; of his struggle with O'Brien, he declares: 'I shall force him to come out and fight fair – and kill him as an English gentleman may'.[12] When Kemp himself is held captive, as occurs several times in the novel, further adventure hero qualities are displayed: an unflinching defiance of and even contempt for his pirate captors, such as is also seen in novels like Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857) and Stevenson's *Treasure Island*; and, in the powerful and disturbing episode of prolonged entrapment in a cave without food or water, great physical endurance, stoicism, and self-control.

Although none of these qualities is inherently 'English', all are nevertheless framed in the novel within a discourse of Englishness, the chief mouthpiece for which is Kemp's Spanish relative Carlos Riego. Carlos, whom at the start of the novel Kemp helped flee England, is Anglophile to a perhaps intentionally comical extent. Not only does he repeatedly link Kemp's courage and nobility to his nationality; more generally he believes, as he phrases it when persuading Kemp to marry and protect his cousin Seraphina, that 'English things last forever – English peace, English power, English fidelity. It is a country of much serenity, of order, of stable affection' (*Romance* 150). As Kemp comments, '[Carlos] had on him the glamour of things English' (*Romance* 150).

The evidence so far points towards *Romance* being limitingly monologic, one-sidedly inscribing an idealised view of Englishness. However, the novel is more complex than this. Adventure fiction, with its highlighting of difference and otherness, allows Ford and Conrad to construct Englishness dialogically and dynamically. In stark contrast to Carlos with his fetishisation of Kemp's national character, Carlos's maimed companion Tomas Castro has a wholehearted contempt for the English; they are 'foolish and wrong-headed' (*Romance* 48). The supposed impartiality of the English legal system, by which Kemp himself is almost hanged for piracy at the end of the novel, is for Castro coldly ignoble and 'savage' (*Romance* 126). Above all, Kemp's restraint in refusing to kill O'Brien and Manuel-del-Popolo in cold blood, is not merciful but instead proud and selfish in that it releases them to do further evil: 'Are all you English like princes that you should never think of anybody but yourselves?' Castro asks, before indeed being killed horribly through the freed Manuel's devices

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(*Romance* 306). Kemp sees Castro's ruthlessness as 'benighted and primitive' (*Romance* 306); yet Kemp too had wondered after earlier letting O'Brien go free: 'Had I acted like an Englishman and a gentleman, or only like a fool satisfying his sentiment at other people's expense?' (*Romance* 258). O'Brien himself further adds to the dialogism of the novel's representation of Englishness. An embittered Irish rebel, turned colonial renegade, he is virulently, ideologically anti-English. 'These English', he tells Kemp, 'I've seen them spit the child on the mother's breast. I've seen them set fire to the thatch of the widow and childless' (*Romance* 470). Kemp is seemingly uninterested in the iniquities of English colonialism in Ireland – his pragmatic approach is to stop at the thought: 'I was an Englishman. He hated me' (*Romance* 202). Yet through O'Brien's presence in the novel Ford and Conrad's staging of the traditional English adventure hero, far from being straightforwardly romantic, is complicated and politicised.

What further complicates the romanticisation of Englishness in the novel is the self-consciousness to which the very concept of romance is subjected. Not only does Kemp repeatedly muse on what romance is; he also perceives that Carlos's anglophile exoticisation of Englishness is exposed as subjective via his own idealisation of Carlos's Spanishness. The two positions comically mirror and thereby destabilize one another, as romanticisation and hero-worship emerge as wholly relative, and both fictions begin to unravel. In line with this self-deconstructing tendency within the novel's discourses of nationhood, the overriding quality that it in fact pins to its English hero is the anti-romantic quality of disillusionment. Although the novel has a happy ending, with Kemp and Seraphina safely married, and Kemp benignly musing on romance, it is energised by a constant tension between his insistence that his adventures have constituted romance, and his intense narration of the subjective experience of suffering, disgust and disappointment. Ford's agenda (shared with Conrad) to question romance and adventure for the benefit of English letters, is made explicit in his memoir *Thus to Revisit*. Stephen Crane, Ford tells us, had complained that the English had treated literature as 'one immense, petty, Parlour Game [. . . .] Even our adventure stories, colonial fictions, and tales of the boundless prairie were conducted in that spirit' (*TR* 119). Ford concurs that 'Anglo-Saxondom' is regrettably divided between those who idealise gentility and those who idealise heroism, whether it be in war, or physical endeavour, or the

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struggle against poverty. 'The probability is', Ford proposes, 'that Heaven on Earth is to be found only in the kind hearts of kindly men who have known disillusionment' (*Romance* 120). John Kemp ultimately emerges as this very figure – the adventure narrative has allowed his heroic English virtues to be tested and vindicated, yet in his narrative a sense of disillusionment is never far away.

The disillusioned English adventure hero is arguably a type that also makes an appearance in Ford's *The Fifth Queen* trilogy, albeit with the full disillusionment coming only in the final pages. That hero, or heroine, is the idealistic Katharine Howard. To dub Katharine an adventure hero is certainly to stretch the term; even to label the trilogy 'romance' (as Ford subtitled the third volume) requires qualification, since as historical fiction it deals less in romance than in politics. It is clearly more than a romance novel; as Herbert Howarth has shown, it is an adaptation and development of a popular genre, the new turn-of-the-century historical novel of writers such as Maurice Hewlett and Baroness D'Orczy, in which Ford found attractive the entertaining rapidity of narration and the period language that Hewlett called 'pothouse realism'.[13] Katharine is more than a romantic heroine. As Howarth argues, Ford's representation of Katharine, quite at variance with the sexually forthright figure of more recent historiography, challenges the genre and lends it a new seriousness by making Katharine a Catholic martyr. This is a tactic that Howarth rightly defends. It enables Katharine's story to work at the level of myth, in a way that is all the more compelling for its transparency. If the reader knows that Ford is whitewashing Katharine's reputation, this does not necessarily obviate the pleasurable suspension of readerly disbelief. In spite of the pseudo-sanctification of Katharine, however, she does at crucial moments in the narrative engage in physical action, and displays many of the necessary qualities of the adventure hero, such as nobility, courage, and physical dexterity.

The trilogy's link with the adventure tradition is reinforced by its first novel's dedication to Joseph Conrad. Furthermore, Katharine's story is essentially a quest narrative, her grail being of course the undoing of King Henry's break with Rome. Her disillusionment comes in the final chapter when she confesses: 'I was of the opinion that in the end right must win through. I think now that it never shall – or not for many ages – till our Saviour again come upon this earth with a great glory'.[14] Up to this point, Katharine devotes every effort to her mission, one that involves, like John Kemp's, both physical

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action and the negotiation of national identity. Misleadingly, Katharine's first appearance, in which she is guided by her cousin and would-be lover Thomas Culpepper through a riotous sectarian brawl to the safety of the King's garden, is inauspicious. 'A woman', we are told, 'covered to the face in a fur hood and riding a grey mule, was hit on the arm by the quarterstaff of a Protestant butcher […] because she wore a crucifix round her neck. She covered her face and shrieked lamentably' (*FQ* 36). It is left to the enraged Culpepper, who at this point seems more the adventure hero type than his cousin, to '[strike] his dagger through the butcher's throat' (*FQ* 36). By the end of the first novel, however, Katharine is ensconced in the palace as a maid to the Catholic Lady Mary, and is beginning to take on more adventurous roles: she has carried a treasonable letter written in invisible ink, and has shown herself capable of self-defence, stabbing the spy Throckmorton with the sharpened point of her crucifix to evade capture. Ford's narration of action in this scene is as immediate and direct as anything in Stevenson:

> A great burst of sound roamed, vivid and alive, from the distant stairhead. She started and cried out. Then there came the sound of feet hastily stepping the stair treads, coming upwards. A man was coming to lay hands upon her!' (*FQ* 218)

The second novel in the trilogy, *Privy Seal*, in spite of its suggestive subtitle *His Last Venture*, is more concerned with conspiracy than with action, yet, as with the novel that preceded it, the climax gives Katharine a role in violent transactions, this time through her failed plea for the stay of execution of her political enemy Thomas Cromwell. Significantly, her heroic quality here is that of restraint, of holding back the hand of violence, just as with John Kemp's mercy towards O'Brien and the pirate Manuel – restraint being a quality identified there with Englishness. The third volume of the trilogy, *The Fifth Queen Crowned*, climaxes in Katharine's own execution, but before this she again works towards her ends through physical action, in the scene where the embarrassing arrival of her drunken cousin in her bedchamber leads her to asphyxiate him, an act which the unwary reader might initially take as a murder attempt, whereas, more subtly than this, it is merely intended to silence him. All of the action on Katharine's part in the trilogy is highlighted by its contrast with the unheroic acts and the misadventures of the male characters in the novel, especially King Henry with his vacillation, and Culpepper with

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his lovelorn degeneration into drunkenness and desperate vengefulness. Through Katharine, Ford effectively regenders the adventure hero, even if physical action is only a relatively marginal part of her adventurous journey.

Katharine's mission to reunite England with Rome involves her in a very different construction of Englishness to that found in *Romance*. Whereas in that novel various perceptions of established national identities were brought into conflict, in the *Fifth Queen* trilogy national identity is perceived as being unstable, with religion as the great undecided factor. In both novels, Catholics and Protestants are pitted against one another; but whereas in *Romance* religion divides along national lines, in the trilogy the English themselves are shown to be religiously divided. What contributes further to the fluid sense of Englishness in the trilogy is that the contested sources of religious and intellectual identity are largely imported: the Church of Rome; German Protestantism; Katharine's cherished Greek and Latin 'New Learning'; and medieval European scholasticism. In Thomas Cromwell's adherence to Machiavellianism there is a further foreign system of thought against which no effective alternative 'English' political method is offered in opposition. Only Katharine, the 'virtue mad Queen' (*FQC* 519) and occasional action heroine, emerges as a counterweight to Cromwell's cynical *realpolitik*, and even Katharine eventually must resign herself to defeat.

Ford's reworkings of romance and adventure story elements allow him in both *Romance* and the *Fifth Queen* trilogy to dramatize conflicting notions of Englishness. In *Romance*, the English heroic character, incorporating both a readiness for and a restraint from physical action, is perceived as being stable, yet is differently interpreted and judged by friends, enemies, and the hero himself, through his modernist narratorial mode of nuanced disenchantment. In the *Fifth Queen* trilogy, Englishness is in flux, and the quest narrative, at times involving physical action, is one of struggle over the very foundations of national identity, a struggle that leads not only to disillusionment but to defeat for the hero. Ford's ambivalence towards the romance and adventure materials available for fiction in English would later feed into the anti-romanticism of the subject-matter of *The Good Soldier* (1915), in which the supposed chivalric hero becomes a philandering anti-hero. The earlier novels borrow from a nineteenth-century adventure tradition that *The Good Soldier* would reject, but in

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so doing they also reinterpret and refashion that tradition in ways that both highlight and question notions of Englishness.

NOTES

1 Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* – henceforth *JC*; London: Duckworth, 1924, p. 14.
2 Ford, *Return To Yesterday*, London: Gollancz, 1931– henceforth *RY*; p. 195.
3 Todd K. Bender and James W. Parins, *A Concordance to Conrad's Romance*, New York: Garland, 1985.
4 See Andrew Lang, 'Realism and Romance' 1886, reprinted in *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History c. 1800-1900*, ed. Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 99-104: 'The "Odyssey" is the typical example of a romance […]. Are we to be told that we love the "Odyssey" because the barbaric element has not died out of our blood, and because we have a childish love of marvels, miracles, man-eating giants, women who never die, "murders grim and great", and Homer's other materials. Very well' (p. 102).
5 Ford, *Thus To Revisit*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1921, p. 35.
6 'The Work of W. H. Hudson' (1909), reprinted in *Ford Madox Ford: Critical Essays*, ed. Max Saunders and Richard Stang, Manchester: Carcanet, 2002, p. 69.
7 Ford, *Ancient Lights and Certain New Reflections* – henceforth *AL*; London: Chapman and Hall, 1911, p. 52. Ford misleadingly renders the sentence as simple narrative dressed up in florate language: 'With interjected finger he delayed the motion of the timepiece' (*AL* 52). The cue for Ford's comment is no doubt Stevenson's murder story 'Markheim', and its metaphorical description of the murderer's remorse: '[N]ow, by his act, that piece of life had been arrested, as the horologist, with interjected finger, arrests the beating of the clock'. See R. L. Stevenson, 'Markheim' (1885), in *The Merry Men and Other Tales*, London: Heinemann, 1924, pp. 87-106, pp. 96-97.
8 R. L. Stevenson, 'A Gossip on Romance', 1882, reprinted in *R. L. Stevenson on Fiction*, ed. Glenda Norquay, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 51-64, p. 54.
9 Timothy Weiss, *Fairy Tale and Romance in Works of Ford Madox Ford*, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984, pp. 19-37.
10 Ford, *The Queen Who Flew*, London: Bliss, Sands and Foster, 1894, p. 5.
11 See Andrea White, *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition: Constructing and Deconstructing the Imperial Subject*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
12 Joseph Conrad and Ford, *Romance* (1903); London: Dent, 1923, p. 365.
13 Herbert Howarth, 'Hewlett and Ford Among Renaissance Women', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 5:1, February 1976, pp. 79-88, p. 80.
14 Ford, *The Fifth Queen* trilogy (1906-8), London: Bodley Head, 1962 – referred to in the text as *FQ*; p. 590.

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