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TRANSGRESSIVE GENDER AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF MASCULINE
WOMEN IN *THE MONK*

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Abstract

In my paper, titled “Transgressive Gender and the Empowerment of Masculine Women in *The Monk*,” I discuss how Matthew Lewis revolutionizes Gothic literature by crafting powerful women characters who deviate from traditional female gender roles. Although scholars often address gender in discussions of *The Monk*, the issue of how Lewis empowers women characters who exhibit traditionally masculine characteristics has not been fully dealt with.

My analysis of Lewis’s gender defying characters focuses on three important women from the novel: Marguerite, the Bleeding Nun, and the primary villain, Matilda. Each of these characters plays a different role in *The Monk*, but they are similar in that they all achieve their ultimate goals by adopting traditionally masculine traits. My first section, called “The Villain,” deals with the clearly evil character Matilda, a woman who uses gender-bending in order to seduce the monk Ambrosio. My second section, “The Saved,” focuses on the Bleeding Nun, a supernatural character who earns her salvation by dominating a man into saving her. My last section, “The Savior,” explores the often-overlooked Marguerite—a character I argue is the only true hero in the novel. I show how these women achieve their remarkably different goals by ignoring the societal constraints of their gender and leaving behind the traditional ideals of feminine virtue. By presenting female characters in *The Monk* who ultimately achieve their desires through traditionally masculine actions, Matthew Lewis creates a space for women characters to explore gender deviance within Gothic literature.

Introduction

When Matthew Lewis's classic novel of Gothic horror, *The Monk*, came out in 1796, it was instantly decried as lewd, blasphemous, and immoral. This reaction is due to Lewis's vivid depictions of rape, murder, sexuality, and inhuman cruelty. According to Michael Gamer, despite the instant popularity of the novel, the conservative outcry was so intense that "Lewis most likely would have been prosecuted under the Common Law for either obscene or blasphemous libel had he not published a bowdlerized fourth edition early in 1798" (83). Early reviewers were both captivated by Lewis's fresh take on the Gothic and disgusted by the horrors he depicts. In his 1797 review, Samuel Taylor Coleridge acknowledges that the book is "the offspring of no common genius," but he ultimately concludes that *The Monk* contains such gruesome and horrific scenes and characters that Lewis deserves "our gratitude almost equally with him who should drag us by way of sport through a military hospital, or force us to sit at the dissecting-table of a natural philosopher" (197). Lewis's Gothic novel differs from earlier works in the genre by depicting scenes of graphic violence and sexuality. As Ed Cameron explains, Lewis was "begrudgingly influenced by the works of [Ann] Radcliffe" and wrote *The Monk* to "improve a genre that he felt was not explicit enough" (133). In fact, *The Monk* is widely considered to be the first novel of the new genre of horror Gothic, which directly contrasts Ann Radcliffe's brand of terror Gothic. Radcliffe herself distinguishes between her terror Gothic and Lewis's new horror Gothic in her famous essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry" by claiming that terror and horror are so opposite that "the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them. . . and where lies the great

difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?" (149). Lewis is the first author to show the Gothic's full horrific potential by presenting the bloody violence and transgressive sexuality only hinted at in earlier Gothic novels.

Ann Radcliffe's works of terror Gothic that influenced Lewis have also been referred to as "Female Gothic" since Ellen Moers first used the term in 1976 to describe Gothic novels written by and for women (Wallace 14). As Diana Wallace explains in *Female Gothic Histories*, many scholars of the Gothic have expanded on Moers's definition and examined the distinction between Male and Female Gothic in terms of "narrative technique, assumptions about the supernatural, and plot" (17). Wallace goes on to discuss Anne Williams's criteria for the division of Male and Female Gothic: The Female Gothic "explains the ghosts" while the Male Gothic accepts the supernatural as part of reality; the Female Gothic "demands a happy ending" while the Male Gothic has a tragic plot; and the Female Gothic is "organised around terror provoked by an imagined threat" while the Male Gothic "specialises in horror and focuses on female suffering" (17). According to these criteria, *The Monk* is a prime example of Male Gothic: Supernatural beings play a prominent role in the story; many characters—especially the title monk—meet tragic fates; and there is an abundance of horror and female suffering.

Due to the almost pornographic depictions of sex and violence Lewis inflicts on his female protagonist, Antonia, and the many scenes of brutality against other women, some scholars find Lewis's novel misogynistic. In contrast, according to many critics Ann Radcliffe is a "proto-feminist writer of the 'female Gothic'" (Watt 107), who

“brought the Gothic to bear on women’s vexed experiences of love and romance, and the multifaceted ideology of femininity, particularly the constraining roles advocated for women” (Davison 85). Radcliffe’s female characters are empowering in that they are often capable of thinking for themselves and upholding their honor by rebuffing the advances of villainous men. However, I argue that there is an even greater feminist quality in Lewis’s *Monk*, even though Lewis himself was certainly not a feminist. Although Lewis’s women are forced to endure and strive to overcome horrific suffering while Radcliffe’s heroines deal with terrifying threats of loss of property, rape, and murder that are never fully enacted, Lewis’s tormented female characters are more active in determining their fates. Not only does Lewis present several unique women characters in his novel, but he also allows them forms of personal liberty, agency, and sexual freedom that Radcliffe would never have dreamed of for her heroines. Lewis’s varied female characters infuse new life into the representation of women in the Gothic. The narrator of *The Monk* and Lewis himself may occasionally sound misogynistic, but in the action of *The Monk* Lewis shows his support for both sexually transgressive and physically aggressive women by allowing them to perform masculine actions without being forced to undergo irreparable consequences.

In her study of Gothic masculinity, Ellen Brinks mainly focuses on the feminization of male characters—such as Lewis’s monk Ambrosio—but she also notes how Lewis’s “Germanized gothic” subversively supports “women’s ‘degraded’ commitment to marriage and the principles of feminine ‘delicacy’” (20). For the women in *The Monk*, feminine delicacy is a dangerous flaw. This delicacy leads to ruin for both Ambrosio and his victim Antonia, both of whom are presented as innocent and ignorant

of the world. Instead of celebrating traditionally feminine heroines, Lewis empowers masculine women characters who deviate from the feminine norm in various ways. Overall, the new vein of horror Gothic of the 1790s, of which *The Monk* was an important forerunner, explores the common traits of “a willed departure from patriarchal values” and a “rhetoric of gender deviance” (Brinks 20). While gender deviance has been discussed by many critics of *The Monk*, often in relation to monstrosity, the empowerment of Lewis’s masculine women has not been fully explored. Lewis’s inaugural work of Male horror Gothic primarily critiques patriarchy and champions gender deviance by presenting compelling portrayals of strong, masculine women.

My analysis of Lewis’ gender-defying women focuses on three important female characters: the villainous Matilda, the supernatural Bleeding Nun, and the heroic Marguerite. These characters in *The Monk* are similar because they achieve their ultimate goals by adopting traditionally masculine traits. My first section, “The Villain,” deals with the clearly evil character Matilda, a woman who uses gender-bending to seduce Ambrosio and bring about his damnation. Even though the novel ambiguously represents Matilda as both a woman and an androgynous demon sent by the devil, there is enough evidence in the novel to allow readers to focus on her as a powerful female character. My second section, “The Saved,” focuses on the Bleeding Nun, a supernatural character who earns her salvation by dominating a man. Despite the crimes she committed in life, the Bleeding Nun aggressively demands the right to be at peace. My last section, “The Savior,” explores the often-overlooked Marguerite—a character who is the only true hero in the novel. Unlike all other characters (both female and

male), Marguerite successfully uses intelligence and violence to save both herself and others from a terrible fate. I show how each of these masculine women achieves her remarkably different goals by overcoming the societal constraints of her gender and leaving behind the traditional ideals of feminine virtue. By presenting female characters in *The Monk* who ultimately achieve their desires through traditionally masculine actions, Matthew Lewis creates a space for women characters to explore gender deviance as empowering within Gothic literature.

The Villain

Matilda is the first empowered masculine woman Lewis introduces in his novel; she is also the primary villain. Lewis makes it clear from the beginning that Matilda is not tied to any gender conventions. She begins the novel disguised as a male monk named Rosario, whom Ambrosio remembers as “fond,” “gentle,” and “submissive” (Lewis 210). Then Matilda reveals herself to be a woman, and after this revelation she takes on masculine characteristics; she boldly declares her love for Ambrosio, attempts to seduce him, and even heroically saves his life by sucking poison from his veins. Though these tactics do eventually accomplish the seduction of Ambrosio, Matilda’s dominance leads Ambrosio to realize that her masculine characteristics are “ill calculated to please him” (Lewis 210). He misses the Matilda who was “devoted to his will, and looking up to him as a superior being,” and he is not attracted to the new Matilda with her “cruel and unfeminine” expressions (Lewis 210). While Ambrosio cannot handle the strong, dominating Matilda as a lover, he relies on her heavily when she takes on the role of his partner in crime. The list of atrocities Matilda enacts to keep

Ambrosio under her control, even after he loses sexual interest in her, is quite disturbing: she draws Ambrosio into breaking his vows of chastity, uses black magic to call on demons, and even encourages the rape and murder of the innocent Antonia. Matilda differs from the other women characters I discuss by being an example of pure evil.

Even though she is a despicable character, Matilda receives the attention and even praise of many critics. While Coleridge ultimately concludes that *The Monk* is lacking in many areas, he is enamored by this particular character; Matilda is “the author's master-piece . . . exquisitely imagined, and as exquisitely supported” (195). Over two hundred years later, Donna Heiland declares Matilda a “sublimely superhuman creature who makes the world as she wishes it to be” (39). This praise most likely derives from the fact that Matilda is unlike any previous woman character. Women have been important as villains in Gothic novels before *The Monk*, but none to such powerful effect as Matilda. Before *The Monk*, most villainous women were secondary characters that reinforce the evil intentions of villainous men. They are often characterized as foolish, delusional, spiteful, and dependent on men. For example, Vathek's mother Carathis is a grotesque character, committing heinous acts to aid her son's advancement in William Beckford's *Vathek*, and Madame Cheron torments her niece to please her lover Montoni in Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*. These villainous women both meet terrible fates—failed by the men they worked to assist. Lewis changed the representation of women villains forever by making Matilda clever, competent, powerful, and ultimately successful in all her aims.

In his essay “Transgendering in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*,” William T. Brewer offers the fascinating claim that Matilda actually symbolizes “the possibility of female autonomy in feudal Spain, and, by implication, late eighteenth-century society” (193). This analysis is only relevant if Matilda counts as a woman, and due to a last-minute revelation by the devil near the end of the novel, some critics believe that she is simply “a subordinate but crafty spirit” (Lewis 440) sent as a temptation for Ambrosio. Peter Grudin makes a compelling case for this reading in his article “*The Monk*: Matilda and the Rhetoric of Deceit,” claiming that Lewis carefully crafts Matilda’s “potent rhetoric” and “persistent deceit” in order to maintain her disguise as a human throughout the novel (143). Although Grudin offers an interesting argument, I assert that Lewis’s active presentation of Matilda as a woman makes the actual truth of her identity irrelevant. Matilda functions as a woman throughout the novel, using her beauty as well as her intelligence and power to ensnare Ambrosio. One claim to the contrary cannot undo Matilda’s development as a successful female villain. This is important because intelligent, passionate, and aggressive woman villains were difficult to find in novels before Lewis. He saw that women could take on many unique roles and show strength in many different—including horrific—ways.

Despite, or perhaps because of, her many despicable qualities, Lewis allows Matilda to end the novel in a victorious state. As Heiland notes “the energy with which Lewis writes her character and the fact the she exits the novel in a blaze of glory suggest a subversive endorsement of her” (39). Readers can despise Matilda for her terrible deeds, but they can also admire her for her power and self-confidence. In her final appearance, Matilda shows up in the dungeons of the Inquisition to speak to

Ambrosio, imprisoned there for the brutal murders of Antonia and her mother Elvira. In a fascinating speech, Matilda explains the benefits she will receive from making a deal with the devil: “I have preserved a life, which otherwise I had lost in torture; and I have obtained the power of procuring every bliss, which can make that life delicious! The Infernal Spirits obey me as their Sovereign . . . I go impatient to exercise my newly-gained dominion. I pant to be at liberty” (Lewis 428-9). There are many interesting features of Matilda’s final words, but the most powerful aspect is her insistence on taking active responsibility for her actions. She claims credit for preserving her own life and obtaining power; even though selling one’s soul is an abysmal act, it is a sign of agency. This is not something being done to her—it is a personal action with a specific goal in mind. Matilda sees her deal as a fair trade. The devil gets her soul, but not until she gets all the earthly benefits she cleverly demands for herself. These benefits are not gifts from the devil; they are Matilda’s just due in exchange for her eternal soul. Matilda may now be clothed in “a female dress, at once elegant and splendid” (Lewis 427), but she is still performing the masculine role in this scene. She effectively redeems herself from the fires of the Inquisition, and attempts to rescue Ambrosio from his torment as well.

Matilda is transgressive in many ways, but none more so than her enactment of the traditionally masculine qualities of aggression and agency. Throughout the novel she shows her power and dominance. Ambrosio even notes that, after she uses feminine wiles to seduce him, she “assumed a sort of courage and manliness in her manners and discourse but ill-calculated to please him” (Lewis 231). While showing the power of masculine women, Lewis also critiques the enforcement of excessive femininity—the

submissive, gentle innocence that “well pleases” Ambrosio. While chaste and godly women and men are often seen as good, heroic characters in the Gothic (think of Walpole’s courtly Theodore and Isabella and Radcliffe’s pure Emily St. Aubert and Valancourt), Lewis does not honor purity and innocence. Lack of knowledge about the world—specifically sexuality and the human body—inhibits entrance to a healthy adulthood and causes drastic problems for both female and male characters.

While Matilda represents worldly (and otherworldly) knowledge and passionate sexuality, Lewis shows her opposite in the extreme innocence of Ambrosio and the sexually pure Antonia. For both characters, their enforced innocence leads to their destruction. In the beginning of the novel, Antonia first appears in a veil, and when pressed to remove it states “I never unveil in public” (Lewis 11). Her remarkably uninnocent Aunt Leonella chastises her for this nonsense, and is the first character in the novel to equate innocence with ignorance: “’Tis a young creature. . . who is totally ignorant of the world” (Lewis 12). This ignorance of the world ties Antonia to Ambrosio, who also happens to be her long-lost brother. Don Christoval describes the monk as “so strict an observer of Chastity, that He knows not in what consists the difference of Man and Woman. The common people therefore esteem him to be a Saint” (Lewis 17). This speech shows Ambrosio’s innocence, and equates it with sainthood. Antonia is impressed with this description, and replies “Does that make a Saint? . . . Bless me! Then am I one?” (Lewis 17) In this passage, lack of knowledge about the difference between men and women, about sexuality and the male and female bodies, is equated with virtue. Moral men and women must blush at the thought of sex and stifle any transgressive desires they might feel. However, Lewis presents this

innocence as dangerous ignorance. As Joseph Drury notes, the “extreme sexual naivety of both Ambrosio and Antonia leaves them unable to recognize the internal desires and external threats that they must resist in order to be actively virtuous rather than merely innocent” (221). For Lewis, innocence is actually an impediment to real virtue because it leaves people ignorant of themselves and the world in general. Unlike Antonia and Ambrosio, Matilda understands the world and her desires, and is unconstrained by thoughts of

Lewis explains how Ambrosio goes from being the pride of Madrid, a man who has “never been known to transgress a single rule of his order” (17), to becoming an “abandoned Hypocrite! Inhuman Parricide! Incestuous Ravisher!” (440). Matilda sets Ambrosio on this path to monstrosity when she tempts him to break his vows of chastity. She then assumes the masculine role in their relationship, reducing Ambrosio to the role of a “helpless, hysterical, seduced woman” (Brewer 201). As Davison states, Lewis offers a “type of psychological profile” in which he examines Ambrosio’s personality and shows how it has been tainted by his education; he is “no ‘natural born killer,’ but, rather, a perverse socialized product of an unnaturally cloistered upbringing” (133-4). The monks of Ambrosio’s order begin the work of his feminization, nurturing his bad qualities and stifling the manliness he could have grown into. This tainted education allows him to easily fall into the feminine position in his relationship with Matilda. Since Matilda is in command of both genders, she can transform herself from a docile male novice to a feminine lover to a domineering and powerful woman in the course of the novel, switching gender expression at will. Even though she has the ability to perform femininity, Matilda is always the one in control,

which puts her in the masculine position over Ambrosio at all times—even when she is playing the role of the adoring feminine lover.

In *Gothic & Gender*, Donna Heiland states that Gothic fiction is predominantly about “transgressions of all sorts: across national boundaries, social boundaries, sexual boundaries, the boundaries of one’s own identity” (3). The key acts of transgression in *The Monk* focus on desire and gender identity. Specifically, women characters adopt a masculine identity in order to take control of their lives and achieve their desires—sexual and otherwise. Matilda’s ultimate transgression is that she is truly in control of herself, and focuses on her own pleasure at the expense of all others. In addition to providing Ambrosio with the demonic means with which he rapes and murders Antonia, Matilda also stifles the pity Ambrosio feels for the disgraced nun Agnes when she orders him to “Abandon the nun to her fate” (Lewis 209). Matilda pitilessly reasons that not only could Ambrosio’s interference bring about the discovery of their own indiscretions, but also that Agnes’s “imprudence merits to be punished” (Lewis 209). Matilda’s evil actions are not confined to Ambrosio; she also adopts masculine traits to encourage and participate in violence against other women.

Despite the evil Matilda displays throughout the novel, many of the words Lewis uses to describe Matilda’s masculinity are actually quite positive. She speaks “to command,” has a “superiority of . . . judgment,” and displays the “astonishing powers of her mind” (233). Even though Matilda puts these masculine virtues to despicable uses, Lewis still makes it seem as though she is praiseworthy for having them. I am not claiming that Matilda is a noble or even admirable character; however, I am asserting

that her masculinity is empowering. Lewis may not create a good person in the character of Matilda, but he certainly creates a compelling and powerful villain.

The Saved

Even though she only appears in a brief side narrative, the Bleeding Nun is another compelling women character empowered by her masculine traits. Although the Bleeding Nun has a list of crimes similar to Matilda's, complete with seduction and murder, her role in the novel is entirely different. The biggest difference is that the Bleeding Nun is an undeniably supernatural character—a ghost that haunts Baron von Lindenberg's castle. She is also a tormented soul, condemned to remain in the place where she murdered her lover and was then murdered by his younger brother in return. In this episode of the novel, Lewis adopts the figures of the Bleeding Nun and the Wandering Jew from German horror tales. As Ed Cameron explains, Lewis himself claims “some plagiarisms” by pointing out the “more or less obvious literary borrowings” from his sources (140). These German stories fuel much of Lewis' writing, and contribute to the more bloody and supernatural elements of *The Monk*. Although the Bleeding Nun is not an entirely original character, Lewis goes beyond her fairytale tradition in order to give his version of the character an actual human identity and an important arc in his novel.

As Steven Blakemore explains in his aptly titled article “Matthew Lewis's Black Mass: Sexual, Religious Inversion in *The Monk*,” the episode of the Bleeding Nun examines “gender inversions of the traditional sexual hierarchies” (529). When Raymond first encounters the Nun, he believes that she is his beloved Agnes disguised

as the specter so that she can escape her aunt's home unmolested. Because of this, Raymond immediately claims the Bleeding Nun as his own. Raymond is clearly the masculine figure with sexual agency in his relationship with Agnes; he convinces her to trust in his virtuous intentions and plan to elope with him in secret. His relationship with the Bleeding Nun is quite different—their gender roles are completely reversed. Despite the fact that the Nun requires Raymond to rescue her, she is not a passive victim. In fact, she is notable for aggressively going after Raymond and assuming the active role during their relationship. In a particularly chilling scene, the Nun reveals her identity to Raymond and uses the words meant for his lover Agnes as a way of claiming him for herself:

*Raymond! Raymond! Thou art mine!
Raymond! Raymond! I am thine!
In thy veins while blood shall roll,
I am thine!
Thou art mine!
Mine thy body! Mine thy soul!* (Lewis160)

Blakemore explains that these words function as a ritualistic, yet blasphemous, wedding vow, and the Bleeding Nun repeats them to Raymond every night of their acquaintance; she is effectively acting as a husband claiming a bride (530). Raymond's response to the Nun is also telling. Not only does she claim the masculine role in the relationship, but she actually feminizes Raymond, leaving him terrified and completely passive. In this way, the Bleeding Nun is a match for Matilda. Both women take the masculine role in their relationships and feminize the men they desire. After being confronted with the specter of the Nun for several months, Raymond admits that he becomes "so faint, spiritless, and emaciated, that [he] could not cross the room without assistance" (Lewis

163). The Nun is clearly transgressing the bounds of her gender and embracing masculine agency in order to possess Raymond, body and soul.

While I certainly agree with Blakemore's main argument that Lewis inverts gender roles throughout *The Monk*, I contest his assertion that these gender transgressions "appalled yet fascinated Lewis" (529). In my reading, Lewis does not seem appalled by the Bleeding Nun at all. Lewis gives the Nun a legitimate reason for dominating Raymond—she needs him to bury her bones and end her torment on earth. When the character of the Wandering Jew comes and tells Raymond the true story of the Bleeding Nun, Lewis presents the story in such a way as to encourage readers to sympathize with her plight. Lewis does not simply show the Bleeding Nun as an appalling figure; rather, he reveals her humanity and allows her to achieve her salvation.

As the Wandering Jew informs Raymond, the Bleeding Nun was once a woman named Beatrice de las Cisternas—a distant relation of Raymond. Beatrice was confined in a convent as a young girl; "not by her own choice, but at the express command of her Parents" (Lewis 173). Beatrice escapes her captivity by eloping with Baron Lindenberg, and she lives with him as "his avowed Concubine" (Lewis 173). Freed from the constraints of the convent, she strives to satiate her repressed sexual desires in any way possible, and even renounces all ties to religion by declaring herself an atheist. Eventually, Beatrice grows tired of the Baron and desires his younger brother Otto—"her equal in depravity" (Lewis 174). At Otto's urging, Beatrice murders her lover in order to give Otto his title and wealth. After she has committed the bloody deed, Otto turns on Beatrice and "plunged [the dagger] still reeking with his Brother's blood in her bosom" (Lewis 175). Even though her story is horrific, Beatrice entraps Raymond

because she believes that she has served her penance and deserves eternal peace. Lewis clearly agrees, since Raymond wins his freedom by burying her bones with “all due ceremonies performed,” allowing her to rest after a century of haunting the Baron’s castle (Lewis 178). In addition to earning her final peace, the Bleeding Nun also gets revenge for her murder. Even though Otto is never suspected of having any hand in the death of his brother, “God’s justice permitted him not to enjoy in peace his blood-stained honours” (Lewis 175). As the Bleeding Nun, Beatrice haunts Otto until he dies of a heart attack. The Bleeding Nun is ultimately triumphant in delivering a just punishment to her co-conspirator, and in agitating for her own just salvation.

Many scholars note Beatrice’s tragic story as a parallel to that of the woman she replaces—Raymond’s true lover, Agnes. Both women are contained in convents against their will, and they both suffer greatly when they strive to attain their desires. According to Wendy Jones, the “Bleeding Nun is a warning”; she is an example of the tainted desire that Agnes and Raymond must avoid if they are to become a successful couple. Although Agnes differs from the Nun in being an example of good desire, her earthly torments make up one of the most gruesome episodes of the novel. After Raymond accidentally elopes with the Bleeding Nun, Agnes willingly commits herself to the convent of St. Clare. When Raymond finds her there and explains what happened, however, Agnes admits that she stills loves him and, in an “unguarded moment the honour of Agnes was sacrificed to [Raymond’s] passion” (Lewis 186). In an interesting move, Lewis use this description of Agnes’s loss of honor to place the blame as much on Raymond’s uncontrolled passion as on Agnes’s. It is typical for women to be shamed for any sexual misconduct, leaving men often nearly blameless. In *The Monk*,

men are just as responsible for crimes against morality as women. In fact, the “fallen” women themselves are given voices to express their sense of abuse. Marguerite expresses the opinion that she owes “all the miseries of [her] existence” (Lewis 122) to her first lover; Agnes charges Raymond with the fact that she “depended no less on [his] honor than on [her] own” (Lewis 417); and the Wandering Jew admits that Beatrice was coerced into murder by an equally depraved man, and that she then frightens him to death in an act of justice. While these examples do not relieve women from responsibility for their actions, they do show how Lewis does not simply see transgressive women as appalling and irredeemable.

Although Agnes’s act of transgression is less damning than Beatrice’s (she has sex with her lover instead of murdering him), her punishment is equally if not more vicious. When Agnes’s pregnancy is discovered by the “cruel, ruthless, domineering and rigidly legalistic” Prioress of the convent of St. Clare, who is “easily the most patriarchal character in the novel” (Brewer 195), the Prioress uses her position of power to punish Agnes with extreme methods, policing her sexuality with more harshness than any men in the novel. In the character of the Prioress, Lewis shows that excessive masculinity is as problematic as excessive femininity. The depraved Prioress confines the pregnant Agnes in a dank dungeon, giving her barely enough food for survival. Even though Agnes never embraces a truly masculine role, she does have the power to speak out against this religious hypocrisy by exclaiming “And they are God’s Servants, who make me suffer thus! They think themselves holy, while they torture me like Fiends! (Lewis 370). This speech may just as well have come from Beatrice, trapped in her convent with no outlet for her natural desires. Lewis intends for his readers to

sympathize with these trapped women, and to see the cruel Prioress and anyone who would punish and stifle desires as truly torturous fiends. To highlight this impression further, Lewis shows how Agnes had to go through her labor with no assistance from her captors. Agnes delivers her baby alone, and the result is one of the most horrific scenes of the novel.

While the Bleeding Nun's story is relayed by the Wandering Jew, Lewis allows Agnes to tell her story in her own words. After she has been rescued by her brother, Agnes tells him and her lover Raymond what horrors she went through: "In solitude and misery, abandoned by all...with pangs which if witnessed would have touched the hardest heart, was I delivered of my wretched burthen" (Lewis 412). Unsurprisingly, the baby born in a terrible dungeon dies only a few hours after entering the world. If readers have not been sufficiently horrified by this description of Agnes' suffering, Lewis relentlessly continues by having Agnes talk about the insects crawling over her flesh, the slimy lizards disturbing her sleep, and how she had often "found [her] fingers ringed with the long worms, which bred in the corrupted flesh of [her] infant" (415). This image (which recalls the description of the Bleeding Nun's putrid corpse) is truly meant to freeze the blood with horror, and through it Lewis highlights the "tyranny and brutality concealed behind the Church's front of piety" as well as the "way that tyranny is shown to result from the Prioress's obsession with protecting her order's reputation for sexual purity" (Drury 221). Lewis protests the way in which women are first confined and then punished for trying to escape their confinement. While Beatrice's punishment of death and a hundred years as a specter may seem to fit her crimes, the results of Agnes' punishment for her sexual transgression are severe malnourishment

and torture for her and death for her newborn infant—effects much more horrifying than the minor crime against morality that she committed in having sex with Raymond.

As Ed Cameron states, the Radcliffian heroines of the female gothic can be “ruthlessly pursued and threatened, but, in the end, they all inevitably emerge untouched and unscathed” (109). In Lewis’s Gothic novel, his heroines truly suffer. The innocent Antonia suffers rape and murder at the hands of the monk Ambrosio; Beatrice is murdered by her traitorous lover; and Agnes is left to rot in a dungeon with her dead baby in her arms. Interestingly, while Lewis does graphically depict the sufferings of women, he also decries the harsh punishments dealt to women for sexual transgressions. In Radcliffe’s novels, desiring women who have lost their honor must be “removed from circulation” by placement in a convent—the fate of Signora Laurentini in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (Cameron 131). In the female realm of virtue, a woman who “has sinned, but does not go into the convent, is like the living dead, a spectre” (Zupancic qtd. in Cameron 132). Lewis literalizes this convention with the Bleeding Nun, a fallen woman and an actual “spectre.” For Lewis, the convent is not a place of protection and virtue, but a place of captivity and stifled desire. Lewis also shows that women who act on their desires do not need to be forced into a convent. As Cameron notes, the “image of the Bleeding Nun with a rosary in one hand and a bloody knife in the other represents the paradoxical portrait of a women who is both virtuous and ruthless” (153). While Beatrice spent her life giving in to bad desires, she did have the potential for good. For Lewis, desire and sexuality are not bad things—the repression of good desire is the problem. Agnes takes on Beatrice’s transgressive role for the first time when she dresses as the Bleeding Nun. She is then replaced by the real Nun, and eventually

herself becomes “a bleeding nun chained up in the confines of the underground catacombs” (Cameron 155). Both bleeding nuns are saved by the end of the novel. Beatrice finds her eternal rest and Agnes escapes the convent and marries Raymond. For Radcliffe, however, the desiring woman cannot save herself. Signora Laurentini is—like Matilda and the Bleeding Nun—a violent seductress. Unlike the other two characters, her transgressions break her. She is allowed no joy in her crimes and no true rest. In fact, she spends the rest of her life in a convent, “shrouded in the identity of the mad Sister Agnes, and so self-tortured that she becomes almost literally a shadow of her former self. She becomes a ghostly presence, haunting the environs of her convent” (Heiland 73). Laurentini becomes the ghostly Sister Agnes, while Beatrice becomes an actual ghost and Lewis’s Agnes is imprisoned in a convent. The difference is that Beatrice gets to justify herself and command Raymond to lay her bones to rest, and Agnes escapes the convent and ends up happily married. The Bleeding Nun torments Raymond in order to save herself and Agnes is tormented by the despicable Prioress, while Signora Laurentini torments herself for transgressions that many years of repentance and of the severest penance could not erase from her soul. Even though Lewis acknowledges the fact that sexually transgressive women are performing immoral actions, he makes his narratives more interesting by placing equal blame on men and on a society that facilitates these deeds, and by allowing these women salvation. Instead of hiding his transgressive women away in convents, Lewis liberates them from their convents and absolves them of their crimes against morality.

Beatrice/the Bleeding Nun is an important figure in many ways. First, she stands as a warning not only to Agnes and Raymond about the dangers of transgressive

sexuality, but also to those who would confine female sexuality. Beatrice's sexual desires were repressed when her parents confined her in a convent against her will, and this led to the development of only bad desires that could never be properly satisfied. Beatrice is a criminal, but she is also a victim of her society. Lewis shows Beatrice as a sexually aggressive killer, but even this crime is not enough to doom her to eternal damnation. Through her domination of Raymond, the Bleeding Nun finally gains a voice and earns the right to rest in peace. She may be an example of sexuality and desire gone wrong, but Lewis still affords her some measure of dignity in the end. As the Wandering Jew notes, due to the familial relationship between Raymond and Beatrice de las Cisternas, "her ashes demand respect" (Lewis 173). In order to be relieved of his nightly visitations from the specter, Raymond must honor their familial tie and bury her bones in the family vault. It is only her ability to turn the tables on Raymond and take the masculine role in their relationship that allows Beatrice to finally gain this respect—despite the "enormity of her crimes" (Lewis 173)—and finally rest in peace. Due to her own aggressiveness and the adoption of a masculine role, the Bleeding Nun is ultimately saved.

The Savior

Like the Bleeding Nun, Marguerite is a minor figure in the novel; she appears in Raymond's account of his travels in Volume I Chapter III, and is not mentioned again except in passing. Despite her minor status in the text, Marguerite serves as the most competent and most legitimately well-thought of character in the novel. She embraces masculine traits of violence and bravery in order to effectively save herself and others.

In contrast to Matilda (who only saves herself) and the Bleeding Nun (who aggressively forces Raymond to save her), Marguerite takes on the role of the novel's only true hero when she actively saves herself, her children, and Raymond.

Lewis goes against Gothic conventions when he alerts readers to the fact that Marguerite is neither beautiful nor traditionally virtuous. As Coral Ann Howells notes in her book *Love, Mystery, and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction*, the traditional Gothic heroine needs to be “the idealized image of beauty,” sensible rather than passionate, and able to “turn with disgust from any suggestion of sexuality even when shown by the hero” (11). Antonia is *The Monk's* sole female character who fits these requirements, but only to her detriment. When Radcliffian heroines such as Emily St. Aubert present these traits, they tend to end up happily married. For Lewis, Antonia's beauty combined with her enforced ignorance and innocence leads to horrific results—specifically rape and murder. In Marguerite, Lewis offers a radical alternative to this typical Gothic heroine.

The first description Lewis gives of Marguerite is that her manners are “harsh and repulsive” (99). Raymond, the narrator of this section, goes on to describe her in quite despicable terms, and readers are lured into thinking that this woman must be a villain: “Her countenance had displeased me on the first moment of my examining it. Yet upon the whole her features were handsome unquestionably; But her skin was sallow, and her person thin and meager; A louring gloom over-spread her countenance; and it bore such visible marks of rancor and ill-will, as could not escape being noticed by the most inattentive Observer” (Lewis 100). In this observation, Raymond equates looks with personality. When Raymond notes Marguerite's once “handsome” features,

he is connecting her more to the masculine than the feminine. By giving this unflattering portrayal of Marguerite in such detail, Lewis shows readers the superficiality of looks. He may not be trying to make a statement for all of womankind, but Lewis's characterization of Marguerite highlights the inherent problems with society's idea about what gives a woman worth. At first, all Raymond and readers can see is an unpleasant, rancorous figure. However, in a radical twist Lewis turns the stereotype on its head by making Marguerite the only competent hero in the novel.

Although Marguerite does not look the part of the typical heroine, her physical appearance is not the only—or even the most important—way in which she deviates from the model of the perfect Gothic female. In her article “Stories of Desire in *The Monk*,” Wendy Jones distinguishes between two types of desire: good desire, which focuses on an appropriate object, and bad desire, which is repressed and can never know its object (133). Good desire is ultimately a life-giving force, and the people who desire each other in this way have a sort of moral ground to stand on. Bad desire, on the other hand, is a perverted force that can only lead to death and destruction, as shown most clearly in the stories of Ambrosio and the Bleeding Nun. Both characters are cloistered without their consent and left with no proper outlets for their sexuality, which forces them to direct their energies to the fulfillment of bad desires. In addition, Ambrosio and the Bleeding Nun both end up murdering their love objects and meeting their own deaths due to their perverted desires.

Though their experiences of desire are quite different, I see a deep connection between Beatrice and Marguerite as well. Both women have parents that try to restrain their sexuality; they are both sexually passionate individuals; and they both end up

stabbing men to death with knives in displays of violence unheard of for women in earlier Gothic novels. When Marguerite explains herself to Raymond, she claims “though my passions over-powered my virtue, I sank not into that degeneracy of vice, but too commonly the lot of Women who make the first false step” (Lewis 122).

Beatrice is a perverted version of Marguerite; she is the more common woman who falls into degeneracy. Like Agnes, Marguerite has true love on her side, and therefore represents a good type of desire, but Beatrice’s desire comes from impulsive passions and “unbridled debauchery” (Lewis 173). Marguerite is true to a lover who is also true to her, but Beatrice murders her lover at the urging of his younger brother.

According to Jones’s model, when Marguerite runs away with her lover against her family’s wishes, she represents a sort of good desire gone wrong. Unlike most of the fallen woman characters in British literature up to this point, Marguerite (again like Agnes) tells her own story and earns the sympathy—not the disgust—of her audience. Also unlike many other women, Marguerite never truly repents of her love. She does not see her actions as criminal or sinful; rather, she understands her imprudence, but articulates the idea that the power of passion is stronger and more important than traditional sexual morality. In one of the most moving moments of the novel, Marguerite tells Raymond “My nature was licentious and warm, but not cruel: my conduct had been imprudent, but my heart was not unprincipled” (124). As Jones explains, this statement is not only a defense of Marguerite’s own actions, but it is actually a speech defending all those who transgress traditional sexual mores in the name of good desire (142). Marguerite makes some bad choices, and she never denies this. Even though she is willing to admit her failings (“my passions overpowered my

virtues”) she defends her honor by claiming “I loved my Seducer; dearly loved him!” (Lewis 122). For Marguerite, her motives are more important than the social implications of her sin.

Overall, Marguerite possesses virtues very different from those of the typical Gothic heroine. In many Gothic works, especially Ann Radcliffe’s popular romances, the heroine has to be beautiful, obedient, and entirely chaste. As I have shown, by the time readers are introduced to Marguerite, she is none of these things. In fact, she does not fit any of the descriptions of a typical heroine. Instead, she is more in line with the conventions of a male hero. Marguerite is passionate, shrewd, self-reliant, and aggressive. When her villainous second husband intends to rob and murder Raymond, along with other guests in their home, Marguerite decides to risk her own life in order to save them. Marguerite attacks her forced husband and tormentor Baptiste when he attempts to murder Raymond, and “wresting the dagger from his hands, plunged it repeatedly in his heart till He expired” (Lewis 118). At this point in the story, Raymond is participating in the action, but it is ultimately Marguerite who kills the villain and proceeds to lead Raymond to safety. In previous Gothic novels, women characters can resist villains by refusing their advances or trying to flee their presence, but they can never resort to actual violence against their foes. That kind of behavior is not properly virtuous for a heroine. However, for Matthew Lewis, feminine virtues are not really virtues at all; rather, they are signs of weakness and dangerous ignorance. After all, Lewis does present us with one traditionally virtuous woman—Antonia, the character who experiences the most horrific fate in the entire novel.

Antonia's fate is due in large part to her mother's failure to educate her. Marguerite does not make the same mistake with her children. In addition to her role as the only successful hero in the novel, Marguerite also functions as the only example of a successful mother. The Prioress, who should act as a mother to all the women in her convent, is a monstrous figure; Agnes and Beatrice both have unfeeling mothers who consign them to convents against their will; and Elvira fails her daughter Antonia horribly. Marguerite and Elvira have much in common—they both care desperately about their children and they both made imprudent yet affectionate marriages. However, their parenting styles differ drastically. Marguerite's masculine strengths keep her children safe and prepare her son Theodore to act heroically himself. In contrast, Elvira tries to protect Antonia by keeping her in ignorance, going so far as to copy out the Bible "in her own hand" in order to alter or delete "all improper passages" (Lewis 260). Because of this somewhat blasphemous bowdlerization, Antonia's Bible does not give her information about real humanity, but only about the purity she has always known. Even after Ambrosio attempts to force himself on Antonia for the first time, Elvira refrains from fully explaining the danger of rape, a crime her daughter knows nothing about. While she does endeavor to tell Antonia of the risk Ambrosio represents, she does so cautiously, "lest in removing the bandage of ignorance, the veil of innocence should be rent away" (Lewis 264). Because of Elvira's enforcement of innocence, Antonia never truly learns to fear Ambrosio until it is too late. As Brewer notes, the education Elvira provides Antonia is "designed to make her a proper, if ignorant, lady," but it actually leads Antonia to "trust and even encourage the lustful Ambrosio" (194). Elvira's failure eventually brings about her own murder, and the rape and murder of her

innocent daughter. Marguerite knows that innocence cannot keep her children safe, so instead of keeping her sons ignorant of the world, she “labored unceasingly to plant [her] principles” in Theodore’s heart (Lewis 124). Because of her care, Theodore is brave enough to hasten to the city and get help when his mother asks for his aid. In Marguerite’s words: “[I] communicated to him my project, and He entered into it with eagerness” (Lewis 125). Marguerite’s role as a strong mother is key to her role as a savior.

Even though Marguerite is successful as a savior (and as a mother), it is true that she suffers punishments for her imprudent marriage. Her life is not an easy one. She is made to live with murderous robbers, and is then forcibly married and raped by their leader Baptiste after her true lover dies. For many years, she is trapped in this miserable existence, surrounded by criminals and forced to stand by as they perpetrate their crimes. Despite all this adversity, Marguerite stays strong, bides her time, and ends up rescuing herself and Raymond. Lewis makes Marguerite’s heroism quite clear at the end of her story. Not only do Raymond and the others rescued from the robbers offer her their gratitude and readily admit that she is responsible for saving their lives, but her father even forgives her for running away with her lover in the first place and welcomes her home as “a gift from heaven” (Lewis 127). Marguerite’s masculine qualities not only save her own life and the lives of several others, but they lead to the restoration of her reputation and her family. She is by far the most successful savior in the novel, and her power lies in her ability to transgress the boundaries of her sex and embrace more traditionally masculine virtues.

Conclusion

In their groundbreaking work of feminist theory, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore how both women characters and women writers have often been constrained by the idea that men are the only ones who can legitimately take up the pen and write. Gilbert and Gubar discuss the ironic fact that male authors often berate women characters for their refusal to submit to a male owner while simultaneously creating these strong women characters that “perversely display ‘monstrous’ autonomy” (16). While many Gothic works present autonomous women as monstrous, Lewis shows that there are many different ways for women to express their agency. There is no indication that Lewis subscribed to liberal gender politics, and there are points in *The Monk* and even his personal correspondence with his mother that reflect blatant misogyny. However, Lewis still manages to create three fully realized women characters that exert their own will on the world—specifically the men—around them. Matilda defies nearly all of the patriarchal and religious laws that could possibly bind her. She claims the role of a male novice in order to be closer to Ambrosio, the object of her desire; she learns how to command black magic so that she can control the world around her; and she ultimately sells her soul to the devil in exchange for freedom and power on earth—a transaction that allows her to exit the novel in triumph. Although all her actions are in the service of villainy, Matilda is certainly a unique example of a strong autonomous woman. Beatrice de las Cisternas exercises her autonomy in order to pursue licentious deeds as a living woman, but as the supernatural Bleeding Nun she exerts her power over Raymond, ultimately performing the aggressive masculine role in their relationship and earning her own salvation in the process. While she doesn’t exit

the novel in glory, she does exit in peace. Raymond fulfills his duty and lays Beatrice to rest with “all due ceremonies performed” (Lewis 178). Finally, Marguerite uses traditionally male virtues such as bravery, intelligence, self-reliance, and violence to kill her abusive husband and free his prisoners. She is the only character with the ability to save both herself and others. Marguerite is esteemed by Raymond and all those she helped rescue, and brought back into her father’s home—not as a disgraced woman, but as a “gift from heaven” (Lewis 127). These three women successfully adopt masculinity to achieve their own radically different happy endings.

By empowering women characters who are autonomous, sexual, and aggressive beings, Lewis changes Gothic literature forever. Although the damsel in distress character has never, and probably will never, disappear from novels, powerful women who use masculine traits to their advantage now play a prominent role in Gothic literature. While Radcliffe and other writers of the Female Gothic focus on the “decorous management” of the female body, Lewis challenges this “polite” Gothic with his “scandalous treatment of the body” (Shapira 454-5). For Radcliffe and her followers, the empowerment of heroines comes from their fortitude and propriety. Only the pure women get happy endings. In contrast, Lewis shows the variety and power of the female body; he presents Matilda “in all her pomp and beauty” (84) achieving her sexual desires; the spectral Bleeding Nun terrorizing Raymond with her bloodless features; and Marguerite repulsing Raymond with her “thin and meagre” (100) person, before showing her true strength by killing Baptiste. Lewis also fully describes the mangled corpses of the Prioress and Ambrosio after they are killed for their unforgivable crimes, as well as the tortured body of Agnes and the dead baby rotting in

her arms. Lewis shows the horror of female suffering, but also the triumph of female power.

Donna Heiland argues that women featured in works of Male Gothic such as *The Monk* are “damned if they claim power and damned if they don’t” (36), but I have shown that this is not an accurate claim. While I admit that it would be quite a stretch to say that Lewis’s representations of women fulfill Judith Halberstam’s wish to “make masculinity safe for women and girls” (268), it is important to realize that Matilda, the Bleeding Nun, and Marguerite all claim masculine power successfully and achieve their ultimate desires. The masculine women in *The Monk* are certainly not always safe, and they are not presented as perfect role models for women and girls. However, Lewis’s *Monk* is revolutionary because it presents masculinity as a viable option for women characters. Lewis shows that masculinity is not always appalling in women; rather, adopting masculine traits allows women to experience their sexuality, hold dominant positions in relationships, and even save themselves and others. While Heiland does note that the “sublime power of Matilda threatens the power of patriarchy,” she fails to see the empowerment of Lewis’s other masculine women. According to Heiland, Lewis leaves readers with a world in which “women have been restored to their rightful identification with the beautiful in the form of the chastised Agnes” and “the radical promises of Matilda have receded so far into the background that they have disappeared” (42). However, Heiland overlooks the power of Matilda’s final moment, her “blaze of glory,” as well as the promises of the Bleeding Nun and Marguerite, which claim that women can be desiring subjects and hold their own with and even dominate men when necessary. These fallen women do not languish in convents to

atone for their sexual transgression; instead, they achieve their desires and happy endings. By deviating from the constraints of traditional feminine virtues and adopting more masculine virtues, Matilda, the Bleeding Nun, and Marguerite take power for themselves. With these examples, Lewis opened the way for future transgressive, empowered, and masculine women.

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