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THE MONK



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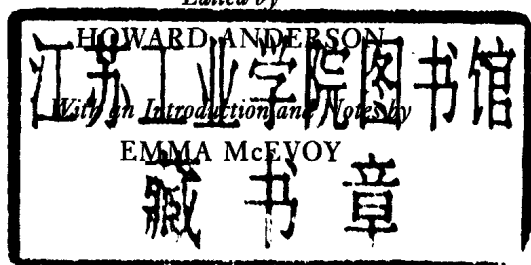


Edited by

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With an Introduction and Notes by

EMMA McEVOY



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HOWARD ANDERSON

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EMMA McEVOY

INTRODUCTION

WHEN Matthew Lewis's *The Monk: A Romance* appeared in 1796, it was greeted by a variety of critical opinions. 'Lust, murder, incest, and every atrocity that can disgrace human nature, brought together, without the apology of probability, or even possibility, for their introduction',¹ read the review in *The British Critic*, in a manner which unfortunately resembled the lurid advertising found at the beginning of the extra-salacious abridged editions of the work in circulating libraries. Coleridge, writing for the *Critical Review*, declared it to be 'a romance, which if a parent saw in the hands of a son or daughter, he might reasonably turn pale'.² He also called it blasphemous—a charge which signalled the start of much trouble for Lewis. On the other hand, the *Monthly Mirror* reckoned not to remember 'to have read a more interesting production'³—praise which it was to increase in an attempt to defend the novel two years later.

The battleground on which most of the controversy about *The Monk* arose was the issue of its morality. A novel had not only to please, but also to instruct, and it should instruct in the ways of virtue rather than vice. An issue of a journal entitled *The Flapper* provides a nice illustration of these more conservative demands. The novel form was still young and not highly respected, and its latest development in what we now call the Gothic novel was the cause of much alarm for more serious educationalists and moralists within the tradition of rationalism. It takes the form of a letter from a newly reformed, anonymous (or rather pseudonymous, for he calls himself 'Aurelius') novel-addict who

¹ *The British Critic*, 7 (1796), 677.

² *Critical Review*, 19 (1796), 194–200: 197.

³ *Monthly Mirror*, 2 (1796), 98.

had been reduced to 'inert imbecility'⁴ by his habit. Aurelius now, however, is able to partake of the occasional novel without fear and has set out to perform an act of public duty to the novel-readers of Ireland by warning them about *The Monk*. He refers to its 'scenes of the most wanton and immodest nature, described in terms scarcely decent' (p. 4) and declares that, as the temptations Ambrosio faces are practically irresistible, the novel may have no moral, an opinion which redounds unfortunately upon Aurelius.

Most of the adverse criticism was aimed at the novel's lewdness and blasphemy. Exception was taken to a certain passage in volume ii, chapter IV, where we are told of Elvira's censoring of her daughter's Bible; she omits the 'improper' passages lest they encourage the wrong ideas in Antonia's breast (p. 259). The 'lewd exploits' and 'lascivious jokes' of various romances, it is declared, are less provocative than the Bible. What might seem strangest to a modern reader is that the tongue-in-cheek tone of this passage is overlooked. It pokes fun at sacred cows, and makes deliberately outrageous comparisons which mock the pious tones of Elvira, and the pomposities of overseers of education, prurient matrons, and critics who express horror at the decadence of romances. However, in the eyes of many, the passage was a statement from an irreligious Lewis, a serious case of blasphemy.

The more conservative critics increased their cries against Lewis. For them, *The Monk* threatened to corrupt youth because of its supposed irreligion, which they associated with a dangerous revolutionary spirit. Thus, the *European Magazine* of 1797 suggests that it was Lewis's intention to attack religious orders and religion itself, comparing *The Monk* to the anti-religious publications which appeared in France before the Revolution, and declaring it to have

⁴ *The Flapper*, 1/4 (17 Sept. 1796), 3-4: 3.

'neither *originality*, *morals* nor *probability* to recommend it'.⁵ In the revised fifth edition of *The Pursuits of Literature*, a well-known satirical work remarkable for its sustained spleen, the alarmist author, T. J. Mathias, appealed to fears of growing irreligion and democratic tendencies raised by the French Revolution, asking, 'Is this a time to poison the water of our land in their springs and fountains?'⁶ It is strange how easily the supposed assault against traditional morality is declared to have been inspired by the French Revolution. But, for Mathias, literature is capable of overthrowing the state.⁷ One of the main grievances expressed by Coleridge in his piece for the *Critical Review* is that Lewis signed the second edition (the first appeared anonymously) 'M. G. LEWIS, Esq. M.P.'. He announces that we must 'stare and tremble'⁸ at the fact that a 'LEGISLATOR' has brought forward such a work. For his part, Mathias suggests that the Bible passage is 'indictable at Common Law' (p. 239), and calls for the prosecution of Lewis. Although contemporary accounts do not make clear how far the proceedings went, it is known that Lewis was taken to court, with the result that he had to pledge to recall existing copies of the third edition and alter and delete certain passages for the fourth. In the censored edition there are no mentions of sexual activity, no 'on-stage' seductions or murder attempts, and gone are the descriptions of unclothed female bodies. All the musings on physical pleasure and the physical differences between the sexes have disappeared, and the climactic crypt scene is omitted, as are all mentions of such provocative words as 'lust', 'incontinence', and 'enjoyment'.

So much for the critics, whose behaviour Lewis had already predicted in volume ii, chapter II, when Raymond discusses the attempts 'made by partial and ill-humoured

⁵ *European Magazine*, 31 (1797), III-15: III.

⁶ T. J. Mathias, *The Pursuits of Literature*, 5th edn. (London: T. Becket, 1798).

⁷ *Ibid.* 194. ⁸ *Critical Review*, 198.

Criticism' at 'stigmatizing the Author' (p. 199). It is not that the 1790s was a homogeneously conservative decade, but rather that the frightened conservatives of the time reacted strongly to the work. One of the main causes of the more hysterical reactions was that no critic denied, and nearly all affirmed, that Lewis had 'genius', and it must be borne in mind that these adverse reactions do not reflect majority opinion. Some critics championed the cause of *The Monk*, but their insistence on its moral purity seems just the reverse side of their colleagues' criteria for criticism. The *Monthly Mirror*, in its 'Apology for the Monk' of 1797, declares that the work preaches the danger of being over-confident in virtue and of straying even once from the path of strict moral rectitude. It insists that this 'beautiful romance is well-calculated to support the cause of virtue',⁹ although this defence seems more ludicrous than the charges of immorality. Other papers avoid the issue of moral purity altogether and treat the novel merely as a good read. *The Monthly Magazine* only mentions its lack of regard for decorum.¹⁰ The *Analytical Review* adopts a more glib tone, and declares, of Ambrosio's temptations and fall, 'a man would deserve to be d[amn]ed who could resist even devilish spells conducted with such address, and assuming such a heavenly form'.¹¹

The public reacted very differently from the critics. The novel went through two issues of a first edition, and a second edition six months later, in September 1796. A third edition appeared in 1797 and the fourth in 1798. The censored fourth edition was received with so much disappointment that by 1800 the few remaining copies of the unexpurgated third edition were selling for a guinea. The adverse reaction of some of the critics was very good publicity for Lewis, and illustrates well the fine, if existent,

⁹ 'An Apology for the Monk', *Monthly Mirror*, 3 (1797), 210-15: 211.

¹⁰ *The Monthly Magazine*, 4 (1798), 121.

¹¹ *Analytical Review*, 24 (1796), 403-4: 403.

line between horror and fascination, and the attractiveness of condemnation; as does the following anecdote told by Montague Summers in *The Gothic Quest*. The obliging owner of a circulating library in Dublin ‘underscored all the naughty passages’¹² so that her young female readers would know which parts to avoid. Whether this was intended to be an anti-Irish anecdote or not, it certainly shows the benefits of lip-service. The work was adapted into play form many times, the ballad in volume iii, chapter 11—of Alonzo the Brave and Fair Imogene—was shown as a pantomime ballet, and Lewis became a celebrity—‘Monk’ Lewis. As a play it made for popular adaptations, although a censored version in 1798, where Matilda is a virtuous woman and all ends happily, outraged its audiences so much that they hissed, causing one of the actresses who was carrying a wooden baby to exit too quickly, bump into a door, and knock the baby’s head off.

On 27 July 1792, at the age of 17, Matthew Gregory Lewis arrived at Weimar in Germany, where he was to stay until February 1793. Whilst there, he kept the company of people with titles (he was fonder of them than he ought to have been, reported Walter Scott¹³) and studied German intensively. By the end of this period he was a fluent speaker and reader, and had started to translate some of the literature he found around him.

The most horrifying literature available to Lewis in the English tradition would have comprised Jacobean tragedies (Shakespeare provides much inspiration for Gothic novelists), Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (compare Milton’s Satan to some of the descriptions of Ambrosio), and the productions of the ‘graveyard school’—an example of which Lewis includes in *The Monk*: Blair’s *The Grave*, a poem which, after 368 lines

¹² Montague Summers, *The Gothic Quest* (London: Fortune Press, 1938), 219.

¹³ MS note on Byron’s *Detached Thoughts*, quoted in Louis F. Peck, *A Life of Matthew G. Lewis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), 45.

of descriptions of mouldering corpses and death agonies, has the stunningly placed exclamation 'Sure, 'tis a Serious Thing to die!'¹⁴ The German literary scene, however, was specializing in a whole new horror aesthetic in the works of the *Sturm-und-Drang* writers. *Sturm und Drang* translates roughly as 'Storm and Stress', and the writers involved placed great emphasis on revolt, strong feeling, and the passionate power of genius.

Lewis was much taken with this shocking and often violent German writing and, later, he introduced much German Romantic writing to Britain. He met Goethe and translated some of his poetry, and brought translations of German plays to the English stage. We know from Byron's letters and journals that Lewis translated Goethe's *Faust* aloud for him at Coligny in 1816.¹⁵ Struck by the folk ballads he encountered, Lewis translated some originals and composed poetry in this style for *The Monk* (see 'The Water King' and the 'Ballad of Alonzo the Brave and Fair Imogine'). The latter takes its central theme from Bürger's 'Lenore' (1773) and was much admired by critics and public when it first appeared. Coleridge was struck by Lewis's power of rendering ballads in easy modern language and declared it a great success.¹⁶

However, the *Schauer-Romantik*—horror-Romantic—tradition proved the most important inspiration for Lewis. This writing features ghosts, murders, rapes, secret societies, devils, and tortures, and Lewis assimilated a variety of incidents, plots, and themes which he was to rework a couple of years later in *The Monk*. He used the works of *Schauer-Romantik* writers both indirectly and directly. Not

¹⁴ Robert Blair, *The Grave: A Poem* (London: M. Cooper, 1743), line 369.

¹⁵ See letter to John Murray, 4 Apr. 1817.

¹⁶ S. T. Coleridge, Letter to William Wordsworth, Jan. 1798: 'The simplicity and naturalness is his own, and not imitated; for it is made to subsist in congruity with a language perfectly modern, the language of his own times . . . This, I think, a rare merit.' Quoted in André Parreaux, *The Publication of The Monk: A Literary Event 1796-1798* (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1960), 50 n.

only did he contribute to the English Gothic novel the pleasures of grisly descriptions and real devils, he also used some of the plots and characters he found in the German writing. Lewis mentions finding the legend of the Bleeding Nun in German folklore. The character of the Wandering Jew appears both in a poem by Schubart, 'Der Ewige Jude', which supplies many of the details for Lewis, and in a story by Schiller—*Der Geisterseher*—a work which also gave him the idea of a picture of the Madonna being used to inspire love for a living woman. Flammenberg's *Der Geisterbanner*, translated for English audiences in 1794 as *The Necromancer*, provides a source for the banditti episode in the Black Forest and details for Elvira's ghost. Many more sources have been suggested, but it is important to note that the Gothic thrives so much on convention that to cite direct sources is often impossible when so many works share the same stock episodes, characters, and even phrases. However, his most blatant 'borrowing' is the almost exact copy of the description of Ambrosio's fate from a story by Veit Weber, 'Die Teufelsbeschwörung' (1791). Further details may be found in the explanatory notes, together with translations of some of the more relevant passages from the German.

Ann Radcliffe, in an essay 'On the Super-natural in Poetry', first published in 1826, declares that whereas terror 'expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life', horror 'contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them'.¹⁷ When Radcliffe made this terror-horror distinction she probably had *The Monk* in mind. Lewis had been reading *The Mysteries of Udolpho* just prior to writing *The Monk*, and declared it to be 'one of the most interesting Books that ever have been published'.¹⁸ Radcliffe read *The Monk* and

¹⁷ 'On the Supernatural in Poetry', *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 16, 145-52.

¹⁸ Letter to his mother, The Hague, Sunday, 18 May 1794, quoted in Peck, *A Life of Matthew G. Lewis*, 208-9.

was so horrified that in 1797 she produced *The Italian*, which in many respects is a reworking of material from *The Monk*, as well as a review of her own works in the light of Lewis's novel.

Radcliffe was the most famous writer of romances of her time. She was commonly thought of as a 'poetess' and often compared to Shakespeare. Her works are informed by the terror—rather than the horror—aesthetic, and are a constant stream of suspense and mystery, of vaguely glimpsed objects behind veils and strange voices singing outside prison windows. The supernatural terrors she conjures up have their source in a mixture of fear and anticipation which demands a curious kind of reader-response technique. What the heroine fears, awaits, and often faints before is what the reader also encounters, enduring all the agonies of suspense, and remaining as ignorant of the reality as the heroine. The structure in Radcliffe's works of long-drawn-out, interlacing mysteries whose secrets are suspended over hundreds of pages gives way to a more episodic form in Lewis's book, a work which enjoys short climaxes, rather than long anticipation.

Radcliffe's supernatural terrors are always finally explained away. In contrast, Lewis's supernatural incidents, which are not hidden or awaited, partake of the horror aesthetic in that they are displayed in all their gory and ghastly totality. What is threatened and usually avoided in Radcliffe is completed and handed out for the reader's disgusted delectation in Lewis. The empathetic reading—the heroine-reader sympathy—demanded by Radcliffe's text, gives way to the presenter-spectator relationship of Lewis's. Lewis's *Monk* belongs to a branch of literature that has not traditionally been honoured with a distinguished place in the literary canon. Throughout the eighteenth century the novel as an art form never enjoyed a reputation as serious literature, and Gothic novels remained classified as minor works or as literary rubbish into this century.

Recently, however, there have been attempts to write a literary history in which Gothic is recognized as the workings of Romantic imaginations, in prose—though often it is merely treated as a prosaic Romanticism. Lewis's Romantic credentials are especially convincing: his poetry was appreciated by Coleridge; he inspired and advised Walter Scott; he was acquainted with German Romanticism; and he met the Shelleys and was a friend of Byron.

The first connections between Romanticism and the Gothic were made earlier this century, with the suggestion that the Gothic is a kind of pre-Romanticism that enacts a literalization of Romantic metaphor. Thus what is internalized in Romantic poetry is externalized in the Gothic, so that the castles and storms of the Gothic act as crude symbols of the passions more subtly treated in the poetry. However, this approach seems to deny the *content*, effect, and sensationalism of the Gothic, as well as the specificity of its own symbolic systems. *The Monk*, for example, features some strange slippages between the metaphorical and the literal. The precipices and abysses which appear in Lorenzo's and Elvira's dreams, and in much clichéd imagery throughout the novel, become literal reality at the end of the work.

There have been many different accounts of the significance of the Gothic. Some critics have seen it as an expression of the spiritual or the irrational side of the human psyche that had been too long repressed by the prevailing rationalist ethos of the eighteenth century. Such accounts of the Gothic dwell on the descent into crypts and prisons as images of the unconscious or of the numinous. However, as will be discussed below, more recently the Gothic has been analysed in the light of the challenge that it poses through what many critics have called its superficiality.

The Gothic has often been linked to the outbreak of the French Revolution, and declared to be revolutionary in

politics itself. The Marquis de Sade, jotting down his ideas about novels, declared the Gothic to be the 'necessary fruit of the Revolutionary terrors felt by the whole of Europe'. Of these shocking novels—these *romans noirs* or black novels—the crown goes to Lewis's *Monk*, superior even 'to the bizarre flashes of the brilliant imagination of Radcliffe'.¹⁹ As a glance at the criticism surrounding *The Monk* shows, some eighteenth-century readers did perceive it in this way, though this tends to be the opinion of a conservative minority. Much recent criticism has challenged the revolutionary credentials of the Gothic, showing how its tendency is to annul the threats of terror posed by unruly elements.

Ronald Paulson, in *Representations of Revolution*, takes up this idea when he studies the peculiar figure of Ambrosio as victim and aggressor.²⁰ He gives a convincing explanation of the pattern of revolutionary activity imaged through Ambrosio's career, as the progression from repression, through revolution, to the Terror, where the repressed son assumes the same aspect as the tyrannical father. Ambrosio's victimization under the old regime of Catholicism, and his seizure of liberty, quickly become a new tyranny as he turns to murder and rape.

However, there is also a side of *The Monk* which is more concerned with a supposedly benevolent paternalism, in which kind uncles, fathers, dukes, and cardinals step in and right wrongs. More particularly they seem to have to step in to right the wrongs caused by the seizure of power by unruly elements—mobs and women. The Abbess's power must be curbed by the Cardinal-Duke. The Duke de Medina must try and prevent the mob from destroying all

¹⁹ Extracts from 'Idée sur les romans', in *Les Crimes de l'amour*, quoted in Victor Sage (ed.), *The Gothick Novel: A Casebook* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 48–9.

²⁰ Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution 1789–1820* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), 219–22.

that lies in its path, though not until all the previously suppressed anger of the mob, displaced from Ambrosio, Raymond, and Lorenzo, has torn the Abbess to pieces. It is no accident that the worst excesses of the Church are represented by a female figure—or that the satanic comes in the figure of Matilda.

The Gothic tradition, for those used to reading realist novels, can prove strange and inaccessible. In contrast to the realist novel, set in modern society, amongst ordinary folk in small towns or cities, the Gothic novel is most often set in a foreign country (usually Italy or Spain), in a barbarous medieval past (though it has a pragmatic blitheness as far as anachronism is concerned), populated by virtuous heroes and heroines and unspeakably evil villains. The typical Gothic is ultimately conventional—in the sense that a thousand versions have been spawned from a limited set of elements. Its plots are proscribed and prescribed beforehand, and characteristically involve evil (Catholic) ecclesiastics, beautiful heroines, handsome heroes, separation, imprisonment in dungeons and convents, mazes of passages, the evil (sexual) older woman, wild scenery, castles, and ruins.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*²¹, declares that it would be possible to write a Gothic novel using such a description as a formula, in a way that would be impossible with a realist novel. Whereas much past criticism has concentrated on metaphors of depth in the Gothic, Sedgwick and other critics more recently have concentrated on the tendency of the Gothic to write in terms of surfaces—its speciality is its superficiality.

Sedgwick points out several Gothic conventions that are particularly relevant to *The Monk*: stories within stories, multiple plots, and flights from imprisonment to reimprisonment, where there is no sense of progression or of descent

²¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (London: Methuen, 1986), ch. 1.

to the depths that the reader might like to think of as the heart of the novel. One Gothic convention that seems to fly in the face of the habits of the reading of character that we expect in the realist novel is the technique of paralleling or doubling, where character is conveyed through the use of doubles and correspondences. In *The Monk* character traits have a habit of turning up again and again. Innumerable parallels are drawn, as if the points of comparison are deliberately limited, so that the fewer details there are, the greater the similarities. The Bleeding Nun occupies a pivotal role in this respect; she acts as both a cypher for Rodolpha's sexuality and as a foreshadowing of Agnes's. Raymond and Agnes's elopement repeats an ancestral pattern, and Antonia finds herself shrouded and murdered like her mother.

There is an aspect of contagion to a Gothic text. The fates of the characters seem to spread over and through them, as if they are communicated from one to another, and characters repeat patterns set up by their ancestors. Thus, Agnes's victimization by the Church may be compared to Ambrosio's, and Ambrosio's victimization of Antonia is similar to that of Agnes by the Abbess. Agnes and Antonia swallow the same poison and share the same living death in the crypt.

Characters are very easily interchangeable, so that Antonia seems to become Virginia de Villa-Franca. The vanished modesty and chastity of Matilda is quickly replaced by that of Antonia. The story told in the Ballad of Alonzo and Imogine exemplifies another pattern which spreads through the text: that of the demon lover killing his (or her) partner. The embrace of the Bleeding Nun almost makes a ghost of Raymond, as does Raymond's embrace of Agnes. Likewise, the embraces of Matilda and Ambrosio prove fatal to their respective partners.

Lewis, however, is also a determined saboteur of convention and of the more conventional sensibilities of his

readers. Before him, sex in the Gothic novel had taken place in the lascivious prehistory of the individual work, when the evil characters would have indulged in real sex and orgies of emotion. For the heroine and hero sex would wait until after the finale, and virtuous marriage. But in *The Monk* it is about to take place at the end of the first volume. Where a kerchief on a bosom might suffer disarray in a more demure earlier Gothic novel, Matilda's 'beauteous Orb' (p. 65) suffers full exposure in a very co-operative moonlight in chapter 11. Where previously the pursuit of Gothic heroines by avid lechers had been doomed to failure, the rape in *The Monk* proves devastatingly successful. Lewis has followed all the conventions up to this point: we are given the heroine's screams and the usual band of men led by the lover-hero—yet they are too late. For *The Monk's* first readers, this flouting of convention must have been almost as shocking as the rape itself. The sex featured in *The Monk* throws a disturbing, retrospective light on the excitement of earlier Gothic novels, and reveals their prurience. 'This is the way it was all tending,' Lewis seems to say, 'only you didn't dare say it.'

However, it is not only the Gothic's supposed sexual innocence that is called into question in *The Monk*, but the innocence of the characters themselves. It seems as if Lewis is determined to wreak vengeance on the unbelievably virtuous characters of other novelists. Radcliffe's heroines, never guilty of impropriety, would refuse to elope with the hero whether or not on the point of being abducted or murdered, but Agnes, mischievous and willing to elope, and Antonia, naïve and chattering, have slipped from the pitch of perfection to which other Gothic heroines are wound. As soon as Antonia appears at the beginning of the book, she is doubled by the grotesque Leonella, who takes on the attributes of Antonia's virgin modesty, and wantonly and self-consciously abuses them in a parade that becomes parody. Where Antonia would blush, Leonella writes in red