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Critique of Social and Political Institutions in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*: Shaking the Unshakable and Revising the Unthinkable

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Though constructed upon esoteric and supernatural events, Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* is deeply immersed in social reality. Rooted in the social context, this gothic novel critically revisits the social and political institutions of the era through its obscure setting, psychologically disordered characters and sorrowful events. Written at a time when the French Revolution was shaking the stability and order of reality, Lewis' text projects the disorder of the era by highlighting the ills of society and criticizing social institutions established as unquestionable and unchangeable. The present paper examines the different ways through which Matthew Lewis uncovers the ills of his society, focussing on the social and political institutions of the church, the family, marriage and monarchy.

Mysterious corridors, secret underground passage ways, subterranean dungeons, supernatural apparitions and witchcrafts, terrified women stumbling in obscurity and dust and ghosts hovering around haunted castles: these are the immediate images that come to one's mind when thinking about the gothic genre. Dark and gloomy is the setting of the gothic text. Horace Walpole's Manfred in *The Castle of Otranto* hardly overcomes the confines of his old castle. Emily, in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, is horrified by the sight of a rotten corpse. Agnes in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* is condemned to spend her days "in a dark dungeon [. . .] surrounded by rotting corpses, toads and lizards" (333). The darkness overwhelming the setting turns the gothic text into a mysterious and supernatural realm where characters and events hardly relate to reality.

Thrown into the labyrinths of medieval castles, dungeons and subterranean passages, the reader deals with characters, events and settings that are beyond the real world and that pertain to the supernatural realms. Indeed, amazing events like walking ghosts or screaming giants are common in the gothic text, adding to its inexplicable and unrealistic features.

Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* fulfils the requirements of the gothic text insofar as it contains the generic elements of the gothic genre stylistically and thematically. The claustrophobic and impenetrable setting, the atmosphere of gloom, darkness and suspense, the supernatural and strange events, the prevalence of mystery and horror and even the presence of the distressed woman are gothic elements readily detectable in Lewis' text. Nevertheless, through these elements Lewis does not aim at merely creating a horror narrative. Rather, he strives to unveil the ills of his time and critically revisit social convention.

Accordingly, despite the gothic mood of *The Monk*, the reader feels a sense of reality underlying the dark setting and strange characters. Through the depiction of a dark and gloomy atmosphere in the novel, Lewis aims at replicating an existing reality. The character of Ambrosio, the monk, the church's setting and the church dwellers constitute an epitomized microcosm of the writer's social and political reality which is implicitly yet boldly probed and criticized. Institutions of religion, family, marriage and monarchy are critically revisited throughout Lewis' narrative.

Fiercely rejected as soon as published in 1796, *The Monk* shakes the stability of religious legitimacy. Contrarily to the prevailing belief in the church as a sacred setting of sanctity and spirituality, the church in Lewis' text is secularized and rendered to "a monastic setting provid[ing] a highly desirable context both erotically and politically" (Tuite 8). The reader is shocked with the new function attributed to the church as a site of erotic thoughts and rites. It is indeed, behind the locked doors of the church that Ambrosio, the monk, indulges in a lustful relationship with Matilda. It is equally within the spiritual mood of the Capuchin Church that "the man of Holiness" fancies about "the charms of virgin modesty" (Lewis 27) and fulfils his carnal desires toward Antonia: "Heedless of her tears, cries and entreaties, he gradually made himself master of her person, and he desisted not from his prey, till he had accomplished his crime and the dishonour of Antonia" (328). Secularized and devoid of purity, the religious setting is presented in *The Monk* as a "rotten" sphere of lust, libidinous rites and erotic impulses. In this respect, Clara Tuite argues that "what marks *The Monk*, then, as a libertine text, is [. . .] its use of the convent as a pretext, a pornotopic setting for putting into circulation a mode of sexuality as recreational and representational" (8).

The church in *The Monk* is then turned into a field of instinctive desires and the reader may wonder whether the imagery of "the lamps [that] were not lighted, the faint beams of the rising moon [that] scarcely could pierce through [. . .] the obscurity of the church, [. . .] and the universal silence prevail[ing] around" (Lewis 26-27) adds to the sinister atmosphere of the monastery or ironically highlights its romantic significance replicating the erotic element throughout the place.

The opening section of the novel also contains an implicit critique of the church as a religious setting:

The audience now assembled in the Capuchin church was collected by various causes, but all of them were foreign to the ostensible motive. The women came to show themselves, the men to see the women: some were attracted by curiosity to hear an orator so celebrated; some came, because they had no better means of employing their time till the play began; some, from being assured that it would be impossible to find places in the church; and one half of Madrid was brought thither by expecting to meet the other half. (11)

The symbolic function of the church is therefore transgressed and metamorphosed from a sphere of spirituality and saintliness into a secular stage of sexual meetings and erotic attractions. The church is ironically described as a setting in which "it is difficult to obtain a place [. . .] as at the first representation of a new comedy" (18). This description is very telling in as much as it equates the sanctity of the church with the worldliness of a "comedy" or a theatre stage.

Unlike other gothic novels like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) where "the pastoral world [. . .] functions as a source of visions of a divine realm – the 'Deity' which so comforts and strengthens Emily St. Aubert" (Howard 183), the monastic setting of *The Monk* presents the Church of the Capuchins as a place to which people flock for various ends without "expectations of true devotion or of a virtuous congregation of citizens" (183). The reader is openly addressed from the very beginning of the narrative: "Do not encourage the idea that the crowd was assembled either from motives of piety or thirst of information" (Lewis 7). This overt call to the reader is "the opening gambit in a sustained attack throughout *The Monk* on the hypocrisy, superstition, and moral corruption of the Catholic Church" (Howard 192).

Lewis' critical attitude toward the institution of religion through the Church of the Capuchin is clearly sensed throughout the narrative.

The religious setting in the novel is deliberately established as a site of vice. Agnes and the illegitimate child in her womb, the cruel nuns who treat Agnes harshly and who "continued to insist upon her swallowing the poison," (Lewis 304) and Matilda who seduces Ambrosio and blindly drives him to kill his mother, Elvira, and rape then murder his sister Antonia are actually characters who dwell in the convent, turning it into a satanic rather than a consecrated setting. These characters equally testify to such a corrupted sphere of lust and vice. The nuns, for instance, are portrayed throughout the narrative as secretly immersed in erotic fancies. Looking at the male Theodore,

the nuns admired the delicacy of his features, the beauty of his hair, and the sweetness and grace which accompanied all his actions. They lamented to each other in whispers, that so charming a youth should be exposed to the seductions of the world. (245)

In this vein, Lewis criticizes the institution of the church as a hetero-erotic setting grouping both genders and readily metamorphosed into a site of vice and satanic seductions. Through the Ambrosio/Matilda relationship, the convent is indeed constructed as a trap of seduction:

She had torn open her habit, and her bosom was half-exposed. The weapon's point rested upon her left breast. And oh! That was such a breast! The moonbeams darting full upon it enabled the monk to observe its dazzling whiteness. His eye dwelt with insatiable avidity upon the beauteous orb [. . .]. The blood boiled in his veins and a thousand wild wishes bewildered his imagination. (60)

During this erotic scene, religion is critically evoked in Matilda's words "religion alone deserves you; and far is it from Matilda's wish to draw you from the paths of virtue" (55).

Indeed, Lewis' critique of the religious institution is implicitly manifested through Ambrosio's fall as an easy prey in Matilda's trap of seduction:

Drunk with desire, he pressed his lips to those which sought them; his kisses vied with Matilda's in warmth and passion: he clasped her rapturously in his arms; he forgot his vows, his sanctity, and his fame; he remembered nothing but the pleasure and opportunity. 'Ambrosio! Oh, my Ambrosio!' sighed Matilda. 'Thine, ever thine,' murmured the friar, and sunk upon her bosom. (80)

This scene is a demarcation line in *The Monk* since it records Ambrosio's fall from his vintage point of sanctity, purity and spirituality to secular and satanic state of blind lust, witchcraft, rape and murder.

Apart from the hetero-erotic relationships established within the religious setting – Ambrosio/Matilda, Ambrosio/Antonia – very daring is the homoerotic relationship manifested between Ambrosio and Rosario, or the disguised Matilda:

Rosario was a young novice belonging to the monastery [. . .]. His head was continually muffled up in his cowl; yet such as his features as accident discovered, appeared the most beautiful and noble [. . .]. The youth looked up [to Ambrosio] with a respect approaching idolatry. Ambrosio on his side did not feel less attracted towards the youth [. . .]. No novice sounded so sweet to him as did Rosario's [. . .]. Ambrosio was everyday more charmed with the vivacity of his genius and the rectitude of his heart [. . .]. He could not help sometimes indulging

a desire secretly to see the face of his pupil ; but this rule of self-denial extended even to curiosity, and prevented him from communicating his wishes to the youth. (41-42)

Clara Tuite reads the relationship between Ambrosio and Rosario as stemming from the “pedagogical and pederastic” Greek context of relations between teachers and disciples (6). Tuite quotes Michèle Foucault who, in *The Use of Pleasure*, defines such a connection as “a kind of relationship between a younger and older man, based on an erotic of constraint or ‘self-denial’ and the sublimation of erotic interest into friendship” (6). Such a definition is echoed in Rosario’s confession to Ambrosio that “nothing now has the charms for me but your friendship, but your affection” (Lewis 47). Whether seen from a Greek or a Foucauldian perspective, the abbot and the novice relationship is deliberately yet implicitly established to unveil a corrupted religious context where the setting and characters converge to establish an erotic and evil atmosphere.

Although the homoerotic relationship Ambrosio/Rosario is “interrupted with the revelation of Rosario’s ‘true’ gender as a woman” (Tuite 7), the religious institution in *The Monk* remains smeared by lustful and erotic incidents. Tuite argues that “what is significant here is that Rosario’s revelation – in terms of this homoerotic plot – is precisely a strategy of evasion” (7). The gender switch is meant to legitimize a homoerotic liaison between Ambrosio and the male Rosario or the male devil, for “Matilda is unveiled as a masculine devil” (10) toward the end of the narrative. This homoerotic relationship may fairly be described as hetero-erotic, too, since Ambrosio may be reacting to the female Matilda disguised in the male Rosario. Nevertheless, whether homoerotic or hetero-erotic, the Ambrosio/Rosario relationship is the writer’s ironic depiction of the church as a sphere of erotic impulses and carnal desires and thus his sharp critique of the religious institution of his time.

Through the characters and the setting, religious taboos are deliberately transgressed in *The Monk*. The historical religious mood of serenity, spirituality, and piety is substituted by a telling textual mood of carnal abuse and overwhelming instinctive powers that lead to moral destruction. There is a very significant satirical point about religious education in the church which ruins the natural nobility of Man. According to Lewis, seclusion in the church does not lead to any moral improvement. It drives only to the individual’s total ignorance of his/her nature. The church in *The Monk* is a source of repression, obliteration and corruption. Religious education in the church, for instance, represses sexuality in Ambrosio and obscures any human trait in him. Such a repressive power leads to the monk’s sexual eruption and his moral corruption. Thus, the religious education in Lewis’ text is presented as hostile and destructive to the human innate nobility and morality. *The Monk* not only depicts the Catholic Church as an erotic space but also shakes the unquestionably stable truth of God’s existence and omniscience.

Throughout Lewis’ text, the existence of God is recurrently explored through supernatural references such as the “Bleeding Nun” and the “Wandering Jew” apparitions. These supernatural occurrences testify to the presence of a supreme divine power in control of the human soul’s existence beyond life. However, Lewis’ *The Monk* raises more questions about the deity than it answers. Dealing with Lewis’ narrative, the reader is compelled to face unanswerable questions and drown into a mood of suspicion, perplexity and skepticism. This effect is skilfully created by Lewis to question truths presented by the religious institution as unthinkable and taboo. In this respect, Robert Geary points out, in *The Supernatural in Gothic*

Fiction, that “*The Monk* nullifies God, providence, and the agencies of redemption, yet reveals depraved and demonic energies which cannot be exorcised” (45-46).

The dichotomy of good and evil is likewise evocative as far as the religious institution, in *The Monk*, is concerned. Good is present in the text, yet evil is overwhelming. Ambrosio’s feelings of shame, his torment and suffering during the seduction scenes, his pity and his hatred of Matilda because of her heartlessness and cruelty, his feelings of disgust and guilt and his desire to redeem and repent testify to the existence of a certain goodness in the character. Nonetheless, the angelic nature of Ambrosio is ambivalently contradicted and erased by his blind pride, “avarice,” selfishness, lust for power and narcissistic attitudes: “I see no one but myself possessed of such resolution. Religion cannot boast Ambrosio’s equal! How powerful an effect did my discourse produce upon its auditors!” (Lewis 39). By signing the pact with demon, renouncing his service in favour of Lucifer, and leaving himself a prey of his instinctive passions, Ambrosio verifies the prevalence of evil in *The Monk*. The abundant recurrences of evil deeds performed by Matilda (witchcraft, seduction...) and the supernatural apparitions of Lucifer within the religious setting are pertinently meant to criticize the religious institution of Lewis’ time.

Moving outside the monastery, Lewis keeps the same critical distance from social reality. Family as a social institution is ironically and critically portrayed as the seed of vice and incest. Ambrosio’s lineage is made “undecided” from the start: “The late superior of the Capuchins found him while yet an infant at the abbey door. All attempts to discover who had left him there were vain, and the child himself could give no account of his parents” (19). Later on, Ambrosio turns out to be the son of Elvira and the brother of Antonia. Such a revelation turns him to be the murderer of his mother and the abuser of his sister. Through the character of Ambrosio, Lewis ironically depicts the family institution as a net of destruction. Elvira, for instance, has not mothered her son, Ambrosio, and has tragically driven him to exterminate the family bond by destroying both mother and sister. Antonia, however, has been overmothered by Elvira and, thus, turned into an ignorant defenceless female who is easily caught in Ambrosio’s trap of untethered passion.

In the parallel plot of the novel, Raymond and Agnes, two lovers, decide to escape from the confines of their families. In her escape, Agnes is disguised into a nun. In the convent, however, she falls victim to Ambrosio and the nuns and suffers a deadly confinement among rotten corpses and hovering ghosts. Through the character of Agnes, the institution is explicitly criticized, for she is depicted as the victim of her aristocratic family and her attempt to run away from parental authority leads to her tragic fate. So symbolically, Agnes tells the story of her baby who died soon after birth:

I vowed not to part with it while I had life; its presence was my only comfort, and no persuasion could induce me to give it up. It soon became a mass of putridity, and so to every eye was a loathsome and disguising object; to every eye but a mother’s. In vain did human feelings bid me recoil from this emblem of mortality with repugnance [. . .]. I endeavoured to retrace its features through the livid corruption with which they were overspread. (352)

Brendan Hennessy argues, in *The Gothic Novel*, that “this is the most morbid passage in Lewis” (333). It is also a very telling sequence, for it metaphorically replicates a lugubrious yet real portrait of the family institution of Lewis’ time. It is indeed a rotten union of authority, rigidity, and abuse. Death, violence, and rape are key notions of the family institution in *The Monk*.

Depicting the family institution a site of violence and incest, Lewis inscribes in the gothic scene which depicts the family as a source of sin and perpetual curse and in which incestuous relationships are ubiquitous. Manfred, in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, tries to establish a new family with his daughter-in-law based on guilt and incest. Another attempt is made by Montoni, in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, who turns his attention to his deceased wife's niece, Emily, for purely abusive ends. While Ambrosio in Lewis' text is his sister's abuser and Manfred in *The Castle of Otranto* is his daughter's-in-law's pursuer, Montoni in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is the oppressor of his niece, Emily St. Aubert insofar as he is depicted as a cruel director orchestrating the process of Emily's possession and shaping her life according to his selfish aims. Emily's confinement and her fears inside darkness do not differ much from Antonia's incarceration in subterranean dungeons. Furthermore, while Lewis' Antonia is physically raped by Ambrosio, Emily St. Aubert is psychologically violated by Montoni. Both distressed females are, then, a symbolic projection of male oppression and abuse in the family institution within the gothic convention.

Family, as a social institution, is also ironically and critically evoked through Lewis' recurrence to biblical imagery. The portrayal of Ambrosio, the monk, as fatherless is so suggestive that it leads the reader to equate the protagonist with the sacred figure of Jesus Christ: "No one has ever appeared to claim him, or clear up the mystery which conceals his birth" (Lewis 19). While the religious text claims Jesus as a holy son of deity, Lewis' text turns Ambrosio into a slave of carnal desires, disguised in "saintly" appearance: "The common people therefore esteem him to be a saint" (19). Antonia's inquiry in amazement: "Does that make a saint? [. . .] Bless me! Then am I one?" (20) adds to the ironic attack on the family institution. Indeed, through such a statement, Lewis anticipates a certain relationship between Ambrosio and Antonia. As the narrative proceeds, this relationship turns out to be implicitly based on transgression, for Ambrosio transgresses the saintly norms and rapes the "saint" of innocence in Antonia. Therefore, Antonia's innocent and ignorant commentary carries Lewis' veiled concern to construct the family institution as corrupted, vicious and incestuous.

Likewise, the portrait of Agnes with a rotten child in her bosom (Lewis 351-52) is significantly reminiscent of the biblical image of Virgin Mary nursing Jesus. Although feelings of motherhood are celebrated in both images, the contexts are extremely divergent. The biblical portrait is established in a context of purity, sacredness and divinity; whereas *The Monk's* image is built upon a vicious, lugubrious and repugnant context. Therefore, from the celestial realm to the earthly sphere, the symbolic biblical imagery tells about *The Monk's* uncovering of the fake sense of sacredness characterizing the family institution in Lewis' time. The fatherless Ambrosio, the execution of his mother and the rape and the murder of his sister, the childless nuns, Agnes clinging to a dead baby; these incidents and scenes are Lewis' attempt to destroy the myth of the family as a site of sacredness, purity and life. The same incidents and scenes may also be studied as the author's implicit critique of the social institution of marriage.

In *The Monk*, the institution of marriage is strongly emphasized by virtue of its absence. Throughout the novel, the reader deals with diverse affairs like that of Raymond and Agnes, Don Lorenzo and Antonia and Ambrosio and Matilda. Nevertheless, none of these relationships is concluded into an institutionalized marriage, which is indeed, Lewis' critique of the social institution of marriage. In Lewis' narrative, the institution of marriage lends itself to several established social requirements. For instance, the relationship between Lorenzo and Antonia is doomed to failure due to social differences between the couple. "Hearing nothing

more of [Lorenzo], Antonia supposed that he had quitted her pursuit, disgusted by the lowness of her origin" (211). Advising her daughter on marriage, Elvira says: "By sad experience, I know what sorrow she must endure, who marries into a family unwilling to receive her" (179). Revealing her "sad" marital experience, Elvira is the writer's medium to critically approach the institution of marriage.

The Monk produces two utterly diverse "visions" of marriage. Don Lorenzo and Antonia dream that "the Indian islands will offer us a secure retreat [. . .] thither, we will fly, and I shall consider it to be my native country if it gives me Antonia's undisturbed possession" (184). Don Lorenzo's fancies establish the "fond, romantic vision" of marriage as an idealized alliance of a young couple who escapes the social boundaries to create a safe nest of fantasies and love.

In Raymond's letter to Agnes, there is another significant instance of a couple who transgress the social norms to create the perfect "vision" of marriage: "All is ready for your escape my dearest Agnes! [. . .] My Agnes! My dear and destined wife! Fail not to be at the garden door at twelve" (44). Escape is, then, a strategy adopted by lovers to move outside the social conventions of marriage and to begin a new concept of the social institution ruled by the healing power of love. However, this perfect "vision" of marriage conceived by lovers is damaged by dominant customs and conventions.

Agnes' fancies about a love marriage after her escape, are ironically turned into a depressing nightmare, for the desired life with Raymond turns into an existence of isolation and darkness among rotten corpses and the romantic moments she dreamed of are substituted by sorrowful days spent in subterranean dimness and repulsion with a rotten corpse of a baby at her bosom, a chain around her waist, and "a lamp glimmering with dull melancholy rays through her dungeon," (350) allowing her to watch all the horrors of the place.

Likewise, Antonia's dream of a perfect life with Lorenzo is ruined by a bitter reality. Indeed, Antonia's romantic fancies are dashed by Ambrosio's animalistic lust: "He still grasped Matilda's dagger; without allowing himself a moment's reflection, he raised it and plunged it twice in the bosom of Antonia. She shrieked and sank upon the ground" (335). Therefore, through both stories, Lewis demonstrates the superstitious belief of his time that unequal alliances transgressing the social conventions are doomed to collapse.

The superstitious belief about cursed unconventional marriages is also made manifest through Elvira's story. In an attempt to convince Lorenzo of the impossibility of his and Antonia's union due to social differences, Elvira resentfully claims: "You are young and eager. It is natural for you to entertain such ideas. But experience has taught me to my cost that curses accompany an unequal alliance" (184). Indeed, the failure of Elvira's marriage experience is deliberately meant to demonstrate that "an [sic] union contracted against the inclinations of families on either side must be unfortunate" (184). In the same way, Gonzalo, Elvira's husband, calls her "the companion of want and wretchedness, [. . .] his bane! The source of his sorrows, the cause of his destruction!" (184). Gonzalo's description of his wife testifies to the incredibility of the vision of marriage as an ideal romantic union since their escape did not lead to a peaceful life of love and serenity. Instead, it was the origin of a life of sorrow, misery and exile (cf: *The EXILE* poem p.186). Thus, through Elvira's tragic marital experience, the real vision of the social institution of marriage is ironically established. Even Leonella's, Elvira's sister, seemingly happy "arrival at Madrid" and her intention "to present her young husband to Elvira" (295), significantly coincides with the day of Antonia's

entombment. Such a coincidence is ironically meant to equate marriage with death and to validate the fruitlessness and meaninglessness of such a social institution in an awful atmosphere of violence, rape and untethered passion.

Donna Radolpha, Agnes' aunt, is another instance of Lewis' critique of the institution of marriage. Indeed, she treats her husband in "a despotic way" and her "word is law in the castle; her husband pays her the most absolute submission, and considers her a superior being" (127). So, the vision of marriage as an alliance of harmonious conjugation is reversed in the case of Donna Radolpha and her "despotism" toward her husband. Such a relationship built upon dominance and disobedience equally reflects Lewis' critical stand point toward the contemporary institution of marriage.

In a context where females are childless and males are fatherless, the marriage institution, as a threshold toward procreation and eternity, is of no significance. Even if established, the marriage institution in *The Monk* would be a perpetual "curse" and a state of deep sorrow. So, depicting the religious institution as a site of lust, the family as a net of incest, Lewis attempts to revise the conventional perspectives of marriage as a sacred union and turns it into a source of despair, sorrow, and everlasting pain. Ironically dealing with the family and marriage institutions, Lewis' text does not make the exception, for the gothic convention exhibits a sense of scepticism concerning these social institutions, portraying them as sources of abuse, incest and death. Lewis' implicit critique of these social institutions is skilfully created through the setting, themes, and characters. Ambrosio, for instance, is the embodiment of the writer's criticism of his society and its institutions. The protagonist is also Lewis' hidden medium to criticize the political institution of monarchy.

Ambrosio, the monk, is portrayed as the supreme rule and the superior of the monastery. Indeed, through metaphoric images, Ambrosio is turned a monarchic figure on whom every existence depends. "The Man of Holiness" gives a religious sermon every Thursday and "all who have heard him are so delighted with his eloquence" (20). He mesmerizes his audience with "a distinct deep voice" (20). He is also described as a man who "in the whole course of his life, [. . .] has never been known to transgress a single rule of his order" (18). Spellbound by the power of his words, "his auditors crowded round him, loaded him with blessings, threw themselves at his feet and kissed the hem of his garment" (21). This scene, which is reminiscent of the relationship ruler/ruled, turns the abbot of the convent into a political figure whose powerful speech ensures the order and establishes authority and order. However, the fall of the sanctified man who "has never sinned" and his incestuous deeds is Lewis' ironic replication of the fall of monarchy.

The institution of monarchy is also ironically evoked through the rigid rules governing the convent. Agnes, among other instances in the narrative, complains: "The punishment which the law of St. Clare assign to unfortunates like myself, is most severe and most cruel" (45). Ambrosio, the voice of monarchy, ironically affirms that

the laws of our order are strict and severe; they are have fallen into disuse of late; but the crime of Agnes shews [sic] me the necessity of their revival [. . .] and Agnes shall be the first to feel the rigour of those laws. (47)

Rigid and cruel as it is, the institution of monarchy is established throughout the text as sphere of violence and guilt. It is revealed in Lewis' text as a merciless and oppressive agglomeration of laws persecuting the poor and the weak. Antonia's description when she retires to bed is so revealing that it ironically summarizes that state of monarchy in Lewis' time: "For several

hours, she enjoyed that calm repose which innocence alone can know, and for which many a monarch with pleasure would exchange his crown” (219). Thus, the political institution of monarchy, in *The Monk*, is portrayed as an emblem of restiveness due to injustice and guilt.

Correspondingly, the metaphor of “the crowd” is functionally employed in the novel to tell about the corrupted institution of monarchy. On the one hand, the image of “the crowd” in the opening scene constructs the character of Ambrosio as a monarchic figure having full command of his monastery and great influence beyond it” (Whitlark 4). On the other, it is Lewis’ symbolic vision of a public rebellion against the institution of monarchy: “The rioters poured into the interior part of the building, where they exercised their vengeance upon everything which found itself in their passage” (Lewis 307). David Punter, in *The Literature of Terror*, comments on this rebellious “crowd,” stating that “Lewis places considerable emphasis on crowd scenes and the public ramification of private disaster and tragedies: Ambrosio’s fate is not only his own but simultaneously an aspect of the wider decadence and hypocrisy of a mythical Madrid” (79). From an image of “the cattle” in the Kantian¹ sense to a rebellious force, the metaphor of “the crowd” is Lewis’ medium of constructing the social, religious, and political institutions of his time as corrupted and oppressive.

The “crowd” metaphor builds the monarchic dominant figure in Ambrosio yet at the same time destroys it in a mood of sedition reminiscent of the French Revolution. In this Context, Fred Botting states in his book entitled *Gothic* that

In the 1790s, there were more serious threats to social and domestic stability with which certain parts of *The Monk* must have a degree of resonance; its description of the riotous mob destroying the monastery, for example, is likely to have been read alongside accounts of revolutionary mobs in France. (73)

The French Revolution is symbolically replicated in the scene of the “riot” toward the end of the narrative. Both rebellions have indeed the same origins and the same motives, namely destroying the rigid, despotic, and oppressive social and political institutions.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge accuses Lewis’ text as “lacking the moral truth [. . .] and portraying scenes of lust and debauchery in a way likely to corrupt readers” (603). He describes *The Monk* as “a book which if a parent saw in the hands of a son or daughter he might reasonably turn pale” (603). Likewise, Thomas James Mathias describes passages in the book containing reference to the Bible as “open to legal action” since they are blasphemous (qtd. in Irwin 46). Lewis’ text is therefore received with “an unalterable reputation for blasphemy and obscenity” (Maclachlan 10), which is indicative of its revolutionary spirit. Though established in a monastic setting of darkness and confinement, the text overcomes the closed pace to reach a wider social realm, examine it and shed light on its dark corners.

Although aware of the difficulty of such a revolutionary mission, and although conscious of his contemporary audience’s reaction: “An author, whether good or bad, or between both, is an animal whom everybody is privileged to attack” (Lewis 172), Lewis manages to shake the stability of predetermined truth. The implicit rebellious style of *The Monk* is extremely destructive since it targets and exterminates the decaying social institutions of Lewis’ time and constructs a new vision of social, religious and political institutions based on

¹ In “What Is Enlightenment?” Immanuel Kant postulates that the main concern of the rulers or the “guardians” is to prevent people from thinking, turning them into a kind of a mindless “domestic cattle” easy to manipulate and control. “Guardians” discourage the ruled people to be free, showing them the danger that would threaten them if they should try anything by themselves. (58)

reconciliation and reform: “The rain fell in torrents, it swelled the stream; the waves overflowed their banks; they reached the spot where Ambrosio lay, and when they abated, carried with them into the river the corpse of the despairing monk” (377).

It is not coincidental that the narrative is closed with such a symbolic natural scene for the metaphors of the streaming “rain” and the “overflowing waves” tell about an expected religious purification, a political reform, and a social regeneration. This optimistic vision that concludes *The Monk* is preceded by the seemingly blissful marriage of Lorenzo and Virginia and Raymond and Agnes implying union, harmony and restored order. Nonetheless, the same closing scene of the novel may lend itself to a different reading. Indeed, through images of violent storms, “overflowing waves” and “flooding streams,” Lewis skilfully creates an apocalyptic scene which projects his ground-breaking spirit and reflects a vicious state in which Man is viciously caught. Such an apocalyptic vision may, then, be read as an artistic reproduction of Lewis’ time and the 1790s which were “chaotic years in which domestic unrest and fears of invasion from abroad shaped political and cultural life” (Punter 54). Whether seen as optimistic vision of regeneration and social reform or an apocalyptic scene of chaos and death, *The Monk*’s end reveals Lewis as a seditious thinker who “ha[s] the courage to use [his] own understanding” (Kant 58), and who intrepidly questions what had been established as unquestionable, forcing his audience to start revising what had been acquired as unthinkable.

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