



## The Representation of the ‘Monstrous Feminine’ in the Monk

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### Abstract

Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* is a quintessential novel within the Gothic genre. It relies on traditional male and female gender roles and then obscures and deconstructs those gender roles in order to facilitate the idea of horror. During this time period, a traditional female gender role would be filled by a passive, weak, subservient, and sexually reactive woman. Matthew Lewis revolutionizes Gothic literature by crafting powerful women characters that deviate from traditional female gender roles. Although readers 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. It is showed 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.

**Keywords:** - Ghost, Female, Feminism, Nun, Monk, passive, weak, subservient and masculine.

### Introduction:-

Throughout Gothic tradition and, most interestingly, the Gothic fiction of the Romantic Age, concepts of the monstrous-feminine are inextricably linked with masculine fears of unveiled female sexual identity. More specifically, the female gender's characterization as both dangerous and horrifying is inextricably linked to notions of the sexually independent female. These fears, rooted in rigid patriarchal constructs of eighteenth and nineteenth-century British society, come to embody the portrayal of women in romantic Gothic texts. Masculine fears of female sexuality are prolifically highlighted in the characterization of Matilda in *The Monk*; in Lewis's 1796 tale of 'Gothic Horror', Matilda subverts, and subsequently comes to threaten, stereotypical gender binaries by acting on the urges arising from her burgeoning sexuality. To gain proximity to Ambrosio, Matilda adopts the masculine disguise of Rosario, who is described as a 'fond', 'gentle' and 'submissive' male youth. However, in describing Rosario in this manner, Lewis clearly evokes character traits believed to be possessed by the 'ideal' woman, as conceived by patriarchal teachings on womanhood. These

teachings were emphasized in works such as Coventry Patmore's 1854 *The Angel in the House*. In the poem, Patmore 'idealized women are as devoted docile wives and mothers; paragons of domesticity, virtue and humility.' Patmore declares 'Man must be pleased; but him to please / is woman's pleasure; down the gulf / of his condoled necessities / She casts her best, she flings herself.' Although written some fifty years after the publication of *The Monk*, it is apparent that Rosario's characterization is based upon similar patriarchal teachings on the 'ideal' role of women. Ambrosio's fondness for Rosario, coupled with his subsequent regret at Matilda's metamorphosis, foreshadows Matilda's contradictory and subversive nature. Her nature comes to be presented as both unattractive and monstrous. Upon revealing her natural form, Matilda immediately subverts patriarchal gender ideals by demonstrating to Ambrosio 'the astonishing powers of her mind' and indulging in her own unconcealed sexual desires. As Lewis reveals, '[...] she assumed a sort of courage and manliness in her manners and discourse but ill-calculated to please him. She spoke no longer to insinuate, but command: he found himself unable to cope with her in argument, and was unwillingly obliged to confess the superiority of her judgment' (p.231/232). In the use of the verb 'command', coupled with 'superiority', patriarchal social structures are shown to have been subverted. Ambrosio, once superior to the 'submissive' Rosario, is placed in a subordinate position to Matilda. This positioning, however, is refuted by Ambrosio. As Lewis writes, 'what she gained in the opinion of the man, she lost with interest in the lover' (p.232). In Ambrosio's response to Matilda's subversive nature, it is apparent that he is threatened by Matilda's adoption of such androcentric traits. Her empowerment threatens his superiority, emasculating his sense of power and subsequently undermining patriarchal teachings of masculine authority.

It is the threat that Matilda poses to ordained patriarchal social structure that leads to Ambrosio's fear of Matilda. Her evident sexual identity, as well as her growing independence, comes to be described in terms that evoke horror and fear. As Paul Poplawski argues, Lewis's novel 'represents the male horror of an uncontrolled female sexuality.' This 'male horror' is demonstrated through Lewis's physical descriptions of Matilda. In the novel, Ambrosio finds him awestruck not only by her beauty, but also her striking similarity to his beloved painting of the Madonna. Matilda is described as possessing 'the same exquisite proportion of features, the same profusion of golden hair, the same rosy lips, heavenly eyes, and majesty of countenance'. At first glance, in possessing 'golden hair', 'rosy lips', and 'heavenly eyes', Matilda finds herself aligned with a Romantic ideal of beauty. However, this notion of Romanticist beauty is almost entirely superseded by the subliminal undertones prevalent throughout the description. In an alignment with the Madonna, Matilda's beauty is colluded with the ethereal; the semantic field of the celestial serves to elevate her above mankind. In this elevation, Heil and contends that 'Matilda's beauty has paled in light of the increasingly sublime power of her sexuality'. As a result of Ambrosio's fear, Matilda's beauty is replaced with a combination of awe and terror. As Edmund Burke's work on the Sublime theorized, 'Sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished [...] the great ought to be dark and gloomy.' As he concludes, 'they [Beauty and the Sublime] are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded in pain, the other pleasure.' As Lewis's description demonstrates, Matilda is far removed from Burkean notions of beauty. Her elevation and power lead to Ambrosio's 'amazement', this being, along with astonishment, 'that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.' In collusion with the Sublime, unbridled female sexuality thus becomes a force that is viewed with horror.

## Conclusion:-

The Bleeding Nun also introduces the world of the supernatural into *The Monk*. The supernatural something "that is above nature or belonging to a higher realm or system than that of nature" This introduction brings another Gothic element into the book. Up until this point, the plot has relied on natural elements of the sublime to invoke the terror expected of a Gothic novel. The entrance of the Bleeding Nun transforms this natural world into a world where the supernatural is possible. When she gets into Raymond's carriage, "Immediately thick clouds obscured the sky: The winds howled around us, the lightning flashed, and the Thunder roared tremendously." Nature is acknowledging the presence of a supernatural force.

## References

**Featured Painting:** Cornelis Van Haarlem, *A Monk and a Nun*, 1591, Oil on Canvas, Franz Hals Museum, Haarlem, And The Netherlands.

**1** For more information on the ‘monstrous-feminine’, see Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2012).

**2** Matthew Lewis, *The Monk* (Oxford: Oxford University Classics, 2008), p.232. All further references to Lewis’s text are to this edition.

**3** Donna Heiland, *Gothic & Gender: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), p.38.

