

Anti-Catholicism in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*

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Since King Henry VIII's break with Rome in 1536, Protestantism has become an increasingly integral part of British identity. While the island's history of xenophobia does not rest on this particular event, it certainly did not help. In the early days of gothic literature, Henry Walpole's seminal work, *The Castle of Otranto*, including a preface which "assumes a readership for [the novel] that is modern, enlightened, English and Protestant, and it understands the Gothic world in which the story takes place as one which is medieval, barbaric, superstitious, and above all Catholic" (Salter 52). Four months later, when the second edition was published and Walpole acknowledged his authorship of the text, his new preface drew "a clear correlation between a country's literary culture on the one hand, and the political rights and freedoms enjoyed by its people on the other" (Salter 54). As a foundational text in Gothic literature, *The Castle of Otranto* formed the basis for all the literature that would follow. The shadow cast over the religion by Walpole cast in extremely evident in the anti-Catholic themes of Matthew Lewis' infamous 1796 novel *The Monk*. In Lewis' novel, Catholicism is seen as the root cause of Ambrosio's, the titular monk, fall from grace. The Catholic born horrors of the novel manifest themselves in two primary forms; sexual (both pertaining to the gender of the body and the physical desires and acts of that body) and secular (the perversions of the spirit caused by adherence to Catholicism).

The sentiments of the author towards the religion are obvious from the outset; "the very opening scene of the novel, which is set in and around the Church of the Capuchins in Madrid ('where superstition reigns with . . . despotic sway' [Lewis 7]), appears to have been designed with the express purpose of affronting the sensibilities of the book's English Protestant readers by highlighting the sensual and irrational nature of Spanish Catholicism" (Salter 57). In this opening, not only is the sacred space of the church a breeding ground for intrigue and gossip (such as the machinations of both Leonella and Lorenzo) but it also functions as the space which forges the first connection between Antonia and Ambrosio. Enraptured by his sermon, Antonia feels an immediate connection to, and affection for, Ambrosio, a fatal error of the heart which leads to the tragic events at the climax of the novel. However, another, far more important connection is also made in this opening sequence. During his conversation with Leonella, "Lorenzo ... thematically places Ambrosio in a virginal, feminine position: discovered at the door of the Capuchins and popularly believed to have been a 'present' from the Virgin Mary, Ambrosio was 'educated in the Monastery, where He has remained ever since'. Having

‘pronounced his [monastic] vows’ the thirty-year-old virgin monk (ironically, the age Jesus began his ministry, the product of the same ‘virgin’ birth) has lived in ‘total seclusion from the world’. Having never been outside of the Abbey walls, his character is without the ‘smallest stain’, so ‘strict an observer of Chastity, that He knows not in what consists the difference of Man and Woman’” (Blakemore 522, all quotes from Lewis 17). Not only does the gendered language used in this description (protected, ignorant, innocent, etc.) evoke the contemporary rhetoric around female virtue (a word which was practically synonymous with chastity and virginity), but Leonella’s bizarre advice to Antonia, that she ought to “imagine every body to be of the same sex with yourself” (Lewis 17), serves to create a thematic link between the siblings.

The feminization of Ambrosio is one of the key components of his characters descent within the novel. This feminization occurs at the hands of Rosario/Matilda, a servant of the Devil, but it is the weakness created in him by his monastic life that allows this process to occur. “Lewis’s point is that Catholic vows of chastity feminize monks whose sexual ignorance makes them vulnerable to temptation and hypocrisy” (Blakemore 522). From the outset of her seduction, Matilda is masculinized, a contrast to the weak creature that the Capuchin walls have made of Ambrosio. During his seduction, Matilda’s gaze is said to have “penetrated” (Lewis 83) Ambrosio’s soul, a highly suggestive and phallic verb which echoes the description during the opening scene when “the sound of his [Ambrosio’s] voice seemed to penetrate into her [Antonia’s] very soul”. Here again the siblings are connected, both thematically (“Matilda is to Ambrosio as Ambrosio is to Antonia: both Ambrosio and Antonia are seduced and murdered” [Blakemore 525]) and in the gendered language used by Lewis about them. Antonia is not the only female character which whom Ambrosio is linked in his destruction; “like Agnes, he [Ambrosio] has broken his vows, succumbed to seduction, and fears his “frailty” will be exposed to the world” (Blakemore 526).

After Matilda successfully seduces Ambrosio, Lewis’ gendered portrayal of their unholy match becomes increasingly overt. “Ambrosio becomes progressively more submissive and dependent. Threatened by Matilda not ‘to follow’ her into the ‘caverns’ of St. Claire, Ambrosio longs ‘to penetrate’ into the cavern’s ‘mystery’, but his courage fails him as he begins to descend: ‘He remembered Matilda’s menaces if He infringed her orders, and his bosom was filled with a secret unaccountable awe’ [all quotes from Lewis 232]. This scene is subsequently reversed when Matilda assures him that he can possess Antonia by following her into the cavern and conjuring the aid of a fallen Angel (Lewis 267-68). When Ambrosio refuses because

a demonic ceremony would damn him, Matilda mocks and shames him by, in effect, 'daring' him to be a man².

Finally, in the portrayal of Ambrosio's final agreement to a pact with the Devil, the unnatural gender relations created by this fall from grace are solidified. "Lucifer re-emphasizes the link between the satanic marriage ceremony and demonic, sexual possession, insisting that Ambrosio must be totally his: 'I must have your soul; must have it mine, and mine for ever . . . mine you must and shall be ... Mine you must be' (Lewis 434). Note the allusive demonic echo of Matilda telling Ambrosio, 'I lust for the enjoyment of your person ... I must enjoy you, or die' (Lewis 89), and more pertinently, Ambrosio, who tells Antonia before he rapes her: 'Before the break of day, mine you must, and mine you shall be!' (Lewis 379)" (Blakemore 533). Ambrosio is feminized in his seduction, recreated as male in his rape of Antonia, and finally re-feminized in the end by his ultimate seduction by Lucifer. This final nail in the coffin of his masculinity comes in the form of his death, when Lucifer, in the form of a giant bird, drops him from a great height. There is an unmistakable phallic allusion in the phrase "the sharp point of a rock received him" (Lewis 442), and when the "eagles of the rock tore his flesh piecemeal" (Lewis 442), Lewis draws a parallel between the seduction of Ambrosio by the devil and the mythological rape of Ganymede, whose very name become a Renaissance byword for homosexuality.

The feminization of Ambrosio is not the only basis on which Lewis builds his supernatural critique of Catholicism. In his descriptions of Ambrosio's sins, there are implicit hints that Ambrosio has been warped by his monastic upbringing and tenure as a Catholic priest. Not only did his sheltered life fail to adequately prepare him to face the temptations of the flesh (and, the text implies, fail to make him a proper man who could resist the treatment he receives from Matilda), but it also created a propensity for perversion within his soul, the foremost example of this being the tendency towards voyeurism which Ambrosio displays. It was a common Protestant prejudice that the act of Confession, integral to Roman Catholic church practices, was inherently perverse, and the image of a corrupted priest deriving enjoyment from listening to the beauty ladies of the congregation spilling their innermost thoughts and desires is a common one in works which display the same anti-Catholic sentiments as this novel. This particular image is taken even further in this novel. In order to retain his obedience, Matilda gifts Ambrosio with an

² 'Ridiculous [religious] prejudices! Oh! blush, Ambrosio, blush at being subjected to their dominion... Throw from you these terrors... and dare to be happy! . . . You dare not?... That mind which I esteemed so great and valiant, proves to be feeble; puerile, and grovelling, a slave to vulgar errors, and weaker than a Woman's' (Lewis 268)" (Blakemore 531).

enchanted mirror, which allows him to spy upon Antonia as she bathes, preying upon the already voyeuristic tendencies of the confessor.

A book about a monk who is seduced by an agent of Satan, murders his mother, rapes his sister, and ultimately pledges his soul to be damned could hardly avoid commenting on religious practices. Lewis' novel, in which said agent of the devil has an image of the Virgin Mary created in her likeness (which the aforementioned monk lusts over) and where an echo of the iconic Madonna and child pose is recreated with a disgraced nun and the rotting corpse of her baby, has its feet firmly planted on the side of "sensible" English Protestantism, and clearly rejects the "smells and bells" of Catholic mysticism and superstition. Through a reversal of religious imagery, as mentioned above, and an exploration of the weaknesses created by the Catholic repression of the natural and healthy expressions of the body, Lewis uses the supernatural and grotesque to frighten the Protestant reader, while simultaneously titillating and thrilling them with depictions of the pornographic and forbidden.

Works Cited

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