

## ARTYKUŁY

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### DEATH AND THE WOMAN IN M. G. LEWIS'S *THE MONK*

M. G. Lewis's horror gothic novel *The Monk* in many ways subscribes to the patriarchal ideologies of its era; on closer examination, however, certain elements in the plot reveal a grappling with conventional gender allocation and furtively acknowledge a crisis of gender relationships and identities. The ensuing ambiguity surfaces in the way the female body is presented in relation to men, and the way the proximity and arrival of death inscribe it with meaning.

Matthew Gregory Lewis's horror gothic novel *The Monk* is ridden with a rather gruesome vision of family relations. Its thematically ornate and exuberant texture is woven with themes of betrayal, deceit, misalliance, elopement, disinheritance, murder, child abandonment, sexual repression, cross-dressing, and these incurred accusations of obscenity and moral notoriety immediately after it was first published in 1796. It is a novel whose main character, a Catholic Abbott, a virgin of thirty, discovers his sexuality in a relation tinged by homoerotic fascination, resulting in his outburst of truly pornographic imagination. This leads him to a breach of celibacy, to matricide, incestuous rape and murder, and finally, the infamous pact with the devil just to save his soul.

Though the novel centres upon the eponymous monk, to a large extent its action is spun and peopled by female characters. Moreover, there are certain elements in the plot which reveal Lewis's attention to structural balance of genders. For example, within this third-person narrative, the two first-person voices are distributed between Raymond and Agnes. Also, the villainy of the story is split between the Abbott and the Prioress, who both meet equally barbarous deaths. All the same, as in other gothic novels, "[g]ender is, to say the least, problematic here" (R. Miles 1993: 7). It is made even more problematic by the fact that, for commercial reasons, Lewis sets the action of his first novel in the territory of Catholic Spain, whereby his readers get a satire of Catholic institutionalism and its alien reliance on imagistic veneration. In terms of gender representation, the religious dimension opens up a vista of iconographic reservoirs, but at the same time patriarchal relations are warranted by the church's structure and scripture.

As a result, tableaux of religious ecstasy and sexual passion mesh in this novel in unexpected ways, acting out an ambivalence about the familial and

religious positioning of woman, expressed most tellingly in the use and abuse of her body. Conflicting perceptions of female bodies often clash with the ambience of death – metaphorically foreshadowing Poe’s precept about the poetic potency afforded by the death of a beautiful woman – aptly demonstrating that femininity and death “serve as ciphers for other values, as privileged tropes” (E. Bronfen 1993: xi). In the novel’s four main relations – Lorenzo-Antonia, Ambrosio-Rosario/Matilda, Ambrosio-Antonia, Raymond-Agnes – the visual pleasure offered by female bodies, intensified by a promise of carnal delight, is always accompanied by death. The sexual act also either takes place within its proximity, or death secures its enacting, or else the threat of death is shown to intensify sexual desire. A male-female relation in Lewis’s fictitious reality is never a safe ground for a desired and mutual transaction, but a battleground of misconceptions, failed expectations, where the carnage is obligatorily female and the representation of gender roles is never straightforward or static. The meaning of the novel’s imagistic representation lies not only in the fact that it chooses to convey many of its messages by means of female corpses but also – and contrary to Poe’s later proposal – in that it departs from their conventionalised sublimation and beautification. This, plus the fact that “virtually all women in the story [...] are made to look worse than their male counterparts” (D. P. Watkins 1986: 119), can certainly be read as a crude and effective lesson in homocentric ideologies. However, in a novel whose playful tone is ridden by theatricality and imagistic hyperbole, the painful reverberances of departure from the expected feminine submissiveness do not need to be taken at face value but may rather be understood as expressing ambivalence towards patriarchy, or the possibility, if not submerged acknowledgement, of the cracks in its crust.

It is true that the character who appears to act as a paragon of femininity in *The Monk* is a conventional woman, a welcome pivot for the patriarchal cogwheel. The innocent, naïve, beautiful and modest Antonia epitomises all that is expected of undemanding femininity: she is pious, inexperienced, hardly ever utters a word, her existence is home-bound and socially awkward, her knowledge of the world restricted to the Bible expurgated by her mother. Her being seems to be conveyed by means of her appearance, wrapped tight in a veil of chastity. She is an icon to be seen and deciphered. Compared to the Venus de Medici, she epitomises both the classical ideals seen in symmetry and proportion and its Christian extension which read the beauty of appearance as divinely-designed evidence of moral excellence. That Antonia is a cultural male construct is made apparent in the opening episodes in the Church of the Capuchins, during her and Lorenzo’s first encounter. Charmed by her veiled beauty, then aroused by the promise of the concealed rest when she lifts the veil, Lorenzo stays in church after the mass and has a dream in which he sees Antonia, his bride, seized by a monster. She releases herself but “her white Robe was left in his possession,” after which, “animated by supernatural powers,” she darts upwards, admitted

among “rays of [...] dazzling brightness” (M. G. Lewis 1998: 28). The dream unmistakably foreshadows Antonia’s imminent death at the hands of ecclesiastical villainy. But it also plays out the later numerous acts of unclothing of her body performed by the male gazes, and her obligatory chastity. Antonia is fashioned to appear chaste. Not only the sartorial code of a “white Robe,” but also “the most dazzling whiteness” (M. G. Lewis 1998: 9) of her complexion are to be read as unmistakable signs of her innocence.<sup>1</sup> Her social substance is construed by the male gaze, both Lorenzo and Ambrosio following the same trajectory of culturally-inscribed visual interpretation. They both imagine her and dream about her, using the same metaphor of the Venus de Medici. In the above analysed scene Lorenzo dreams about being the sole possessor of Antonia’s body in a socially-sanctioned holy matrimony, whereas Ambrosio ultimately enacts his dream and becomes “Master of her person” (M. G. Lewis 1998: 384) in the dungeons of the convent.

Like his victim Antonia, Ambrosio is separated from experience, he is renowned for being “so strict an observer of chastity that He knows not in what consists the difference of man and Woman” (M. G. Lewis 1998: 17). It is this that Lewis recognises as the cause of the outburst of his repressed sexuality. It is not religion as such that Lewis attacks in this gothic novel but rather those attributes of Catholicism, monastic seclusion and celibacy, which wall off an important sphere of human existence whereby it can emerge in nothing but a perverted form. The images of the female bodies that Ambrosio construes are often pornographic, and in this respect characteristic of the eighteenth century which saw a “boom in the production of pornography in the societies of Western Europe and America” (S. Sontag 1982: 207). Sontag attributes this era of pornography “to a festering legacy of Christian sexual repression and to sheer physiological ignorance, these ancient disabilities being now compounded by more proximate historical events, the impact of drastic dislocations in traditional modes of family and political order and unsettling change in the roles of the sexes” (1982: 207). Transferred to a personal level, all these elements – repression, physiological ignorance, the disrupted family – combined to produce the character of Ambrosio.

Of all the male characters presented in the novel he proves most liable to falsity of perception when, as Superior, he begins to “enter occasionally into the world” (M. G. Lewis 1998: 21). He is the one who is watched by the whole of Madrid but also the one who, after his sexual awakening, is most duped by his own senses. His sexuality is stimulated by the image of the Madonna, modelled on his future lover, Matilda’s countenance, to which he responds – as rightly predicted by the mastermind of this trickery – fusing religious veneration with eroticism, and confusing the holy ideal with his personal perception of its pictorial representation:

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<sup>1</sup> For the analysis of the role of clothing in the discourses of the Gothic see: Spooner (2004).

‘What Beauty in that countenance!’ [...] What sweetness, yet what majesty in her divine eyes! [...] Oh! if such a Creature existed, and existed but for me! Were I permitted to twine round my fingers those golden ringlets, and press with my lips the treasures of that snowy bosom! Gracious God, should I then resist the temptation? [...] Fool that I am! Whither do I suffer my admiration of this picture to hurry me? Away, impure ideas! Let me remember, that Woman is for ever lost to me. Never was Mortal formed so perfect as this picture. But even did such exist, the trial might be too mighty for a common virtue, but Ambrosio’s is proof against temptation. Temptation, did I say? To me it would be none. What charms me, when ideal and considered as a superior Being, would disgust me, become Woman and tainted with all the failings of Mortality. It is not the Woman’s beauty that fills me with such enthusiasm; It is the Painter’s skill that I admire, it is the Divinity that I adore! Are not the passions dead in my bosom? Have I not freed myself from the frailty of Mankind? (M. G. Lewis 1998: 40-41)

Admiring the image of the Madonna, and having confronted the ambiguity of his sensation, Ambrosio succumbs to what seems a similarly safe, yet attainable, experience: being admired by young Rosario. But the sensation caused by the novice soon proves equally problematic: “From the moment in which I first beheld you, I perceived sensations in my bosom till then unknown to me; I found a delight in your society which no one’s else could afford; and when I witnessed the extent of your genius and information, I rejoiced as does a Father in the perfections of his Son” (M. G. Lewis 1998: 57-8). Unknown to Ambrosio, the Madonna has the face of Rosario, who then sheds his habit and turns out to be a woman, Matilda, thus altering from the figure of son/apprentice, with whom the Monk wishes to be linked by a union of the souls, into a luscious and devoted admirer. Ambrosio cannot but admit utter bewilderment, and the theatricality of this series of transformations cannot but appear extravagantly hyperbolic. Lewis conceives of an arrangement in which one woman is capable first of inspiring religious veneration tinged by aesthetic admiration, strong enough to make Ambrosio cross the boundaries of the ecstasies of the soul and evoke sexual temptation, second, of provoking initiation into intimacy, called “pedagogical and pederastic” when she plays novice Rosario (C. Tuite), and third, of producing uninhibited sexual lust intensified by the prospect of imminent death when Matilda is apparently fatally bitten by a snake. This triple assumption of roles, each time involving cross-dressing and each time sending off visually charged messages, in the end meshes in a confused amalgam of subversive passions, incomprehensible for Ambrosio:

Sometimes his dreams presented the image of his favourite Madonna [...] the eyes of the Figure seemed to beam on him with inexpressible sweetness. He pressed his lips to hers, and found them warm: The animated form started from the Canvas, embraced him affectionately [...] His unsatisfied Desires placed before him the most lustful and provoking Images, and he rioted in joys till then unknown to him. [...] He started from his Couch, filled with confusion. (M. G. Lewis 1998: 67)

Ambrosio’s sexuality is, as McEvoy observed, “culturally determined and very intellectualised” (1998: xxvi) but also predictably transgressive in its mocking

exploitation of the formulas of Catholic Otherness. As has been suggested, celibacy (Ambrosio's lust is explained by "his long abstinence from Woman," M. G. Lewis 1998: 379), and monastic conditioning, which results in a tension between "his real and acquired character" (M. Lewis 1998: 237), are seen the cause of the subsequent eruption of his sexuality.

As the institutionally forbidden relation between Ambrosio and Matilda develops, she is "subject to constant metamorphosis" (E. McEvoy 1998: xx) and finally alters from a figure of submission and Madonna-like innocence to a lustful and domineering lover, with a concomitant intellectual rivalry. This reduces the Monk to a passive feminine role. Ambrosio then longs for the docile Rosario and the elusiveness of sexual stimulation his company once offered, passages in which Lewis presents, "the muted, fugitive figure of homosexuality" (C. Tuite). But if this final reversal of roles has its homoerotic aspect, it does not rupture conventional patriarchal laws. At most, and in unorthodox manner, it reveals inadequacy of conventional gender alignment, the corrupted Abbot grieving that, "Matilda preferred the virtues of his sex to those of her own," virtues he holds to be "cruel and unfeminine" (M. G. Lewis 1998: 231-32).

The fact that the image of the Madonna helps spark off the Monk's sexual initiation and character transformation can also be seen as another instance of the novel's paradigmatic ambivalence inscribed in the female body. Just as the image of the veiled Antonia is constructed with the acknowledgement of the cultural weight it carries, the representation of the Madonna demonstrates that the novel explores the tantalising bodily practices expressive of the body's problematical position in Christianity. Though, "theologically discredited and morally condemned," "exceptionally amongst world religions" the body is crucial to Christianity, Christ's earthly activities themselves revolving around the flesh. God becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ, who performs "miracles upon the failing, ailing flesh," suffers bodily horrors on the cross, and proves his corporeal return by inviting a doubting Thomas to explore his bodily wounds (R. Porter 2001: 57). The female body, idealised as Mary, is a Catholic icon, standing for that curious amalgam: virginity and maternity, innocence and experience. However, from orthodox Aristotelian-Christian thought comes also the female body as the "weaker vessel," as Satan's emissary, as the source of all evil and sin. In Lewis's novel the devil uses the image of the Madonna to stir admiration of ideal divine beauty but also to arouse the Monk sexually, thus turning this epitome of chastity and maternal love into "pornographic material" (E. McEvoy 1998: xxvi). Since, as McEvoy notices, the source of fascination lies here "with what is denied," Madonna's image – just like the later image of the shy, innocent, modestly-dressed Antonia – is for Ambrosio the incarnation of whorish caresses he dares not articulate. At the same time, however, to follow the novel's trajectory of exploration and performance of ambivalences, the Madonna also epitomises a motherly gentleness and intimacy that Ambrosio has never experienced.

The initial pleasure Ambrosio derives from contact with Antonia's body is visual, Matilda's sorcery enabling him to voyeuristically watch her bathing in a magic mirror. But before he can translate the mounting visual pleasure into physical pleasure, he murders Antonia's mother-protectress, in a scene which has been described as "one of the most brutal scenes of eighteenth century literature" (G. E. Haggerty 1986: 349). A Christian perspective might, perhaps, mitigate the brutality of the Monk's act and elevate the martyrdom of the mother. However, Lewis does not flinch from conveying the forcefulness and determination of the murderer, or the transitory moments of dying, or bodily detail – when Elvira's agitated limbs flail in desperation, speaking, as if independently, their own disagreement to the rite of passage:

Turning round suddenly, with one hand He grasped Elvira's throat so as to prevent her continuing her clamour, and with the other, dashing her violently upon the ground, He dragged her towards the Bed. [...] the Monk, snatching the pillow from beneath her Daughter's head, covering with it Elvira's face, and pressing his knee upon her stomach with all its strength, endeavoured to put an end to her existence. [...] Her natural strength increased by the excess of anguish, long did the Sufferer struggle to disengage herself, but in vain. The Monk continued to kneel upon her breast, witnessed without mercy the convulsive trembling of her limbs beneath him, and sustained with inhuman firmness the spectacle of her agonies, when soul and body were on the point of separating. Those agonies at length were over. She ceased to struggle for life. [...] Her face was covered with a frightful blackness: Her limbs moved no more [...] Ambrosio beheld before him that once noble and majestic form, now become a Corse, cold, senseless and disgusting. (M. G. Lewis 1998: 303-4)

The outcome, which follows traditional Platonic-cum-Cartesian dualism, produces the visible proof of suffering and death, the agonised body, and suggests an unfathomable and irreversible connection between Ambrosio and Elvira, the murderer and his victim. Though now unobstructed, Ambrosio can enter Antonia's chamber; once there, he merely staggers to a chair and sinks into it "as lifeless, as the Unfortunate who [lies] extended at his feet" (M. G. Lewis 1998: 304). Elvira's death does not annul her or her social identity of mother-protectress; quite the contrary, the sight of his unintended victim deadens Ambrosio's sexual passions. The mother acquires potency as a dead body, the distortion of which communicates his atrocious act and projects itself on his perception of Antonia, causing Ambrosio to retreat: "Antonia now appeared to him an object of disgust. A deadly cold had usurped the place of that warmth, which glowed in his bosom: No ideas offered themselves to his mind but those of death and guilt, of present shame and future punishment" (M. G. Lewis 1998: 304).

The attention in the description of Elvira's body is on the transformation from animate to inanimate, from effective to helpless, from loved to disgusting. It is also evident in the account of Antonia's reaction to her mother's death. She is struck and overpowered by its physicality, the very first sensual contact with the corpse involving the sense of touch. Antonia stumbles against "something" which lies in her path, her mother transforms into a "dead-cold" "inanimate

form" which she clasps and then "with a movement of disgust" uncontrollably drops on the floor (M. G. Lewis 1998: 307). These scenes demonstrate a confident departure from the puritan ideal of dying well and a good death which, though achieved its apotheosis in the seventeenth century *artes moriendi* manuals, flourished well into the eighteenth century and exerted a lasting impact on succeeding generations (R. Kastenbaum, B. Kastenbaum 1989: 98). In line with these precepts – practised by such writers as Richardson half a century earlier in his potent enactment of Clarissa's death – neither Elvira's dying nor her death are beautiful. The fact that this pious woman, who makes the Bible an educational tool in the raising of her child, dies an ignoble un-exemplary death reveals a lot about Lewisian ideologies. Watkins suggests that the novel's emphasis "on the distortion, horror, crime" is attributable to "violations of social hierarchy" (1986: 117). Elvira, the daughter of "as honest a pains-taking Shoe-maker as any in Cordova" (M. G. Lewis 1998: 13) is punished for violating the social order and marrying above her station, and so is the offspring of this misalliance, Antonia and Ambrosio.

When after Elvira's death her ghost is believed to haunt the house, Ambrosio is summoned to stay for the night. The effects of her death on his conscience provide only temporary safety for Antonia and in the end paradoxically enable the satisfaction of his now insatiable sexual appetite. The atmosphere preceding the encounter with his next victim is depicted with attention to detail characteristic of the Radcliffian "preparatory stage." Oppressive silence and lifelessness deepen Antonia's feeling of loss, and her observations lead her to conclude that Elvira's death has materialised in the dysfunction of everyday objects. An empty bed, an extinguished hearth and lamp, withering plants unwatered since the mother's demise, an empty chair – the sight of these unused articles inspires Antonia with "a melancholy awe" in a typically Radcliffian manner. For Ambrosio, this silence produces simultaneously images of the body desired and the body repulsed: "Antonia's image and of the murdered Elvira persisted to force themselves before his imagination" (M. G. Lewis 1998: 336).

Finally, again with the help of Matilda's sorcery, Antonia is made to experience fake-death, after which she is interred in the catacombs under the Convent of St. Clare, thus becoming the sole possession, a tool, of Ambrosio's lust. For Antonia, the dungeons mean a new impersonation, an involuntary rite of passage from innocence and chastity to experience and sin. Also for Ambrosio, the process of getting to the dungeons indicates transformation; the passage is intricate because these realms, like "attics, secret rooms, and dark hidden passages connote the culturally female, the sexual, the maternal, the unconscious" (A. Williams 1995: 44). The Capuchin Abbey, the dominion of male monks, contrasts with the sepulchre of the convent of St. Clare, representing "dark 'female' otherness," a secluded female world of dead nuns. Reaching this cavern is an act of double transgression for Ambrosio: firstly, he enters the territory allotted to the

dead, secondly, as a male monk he trespasses on the territory belonging to the female convent, a female arena characterised by qualities belonging to the Aristotelian “line of evil” (A. Williams 1995: 19). In such an environment a complex connection between love, or rather the biologically life-sustaining sexual act, and death, its denial, takes place. These two states engage the same archetypal emblems, or, in Saussurean terms, the same signified; in these scenes they are a resting-place and privacy, accompanied by olfactory sensations, realised by semantic vehicles different for death and for love. The horror of Antonia’s first physical contact with a man arises from reversal of the signifiers. Lovemaking is accompanied by the emblems culturally associated with death: the bed is substituted by a tomb, immersed in penetrating sepulchral odours; seclusion, a prerequisite for intimacy, is granted by the morbid silence of the vaults. “This Sepulchre seems to me Love’s bower,” is Ambrosio’s morbid invitation to lovemaking (M. G. Lewis 1998: 381).

A semantic disparity between sensations experienced by Antonia and Ambrosio is revealed also in the meanings of the word “passion” – for him, it means intense sexual experience; for her, the suffering and death of a Christian martyr. It is symptomatic also that in the sepulchre Antonia ceases to be an object of metaphorical comparison. Metaphors provide images which are placed between the viewing subject, Ambrosio, and the object, Antonia. Before the sexual act takes place Ambrosio refers to the image of the Medici Venus, which does not bring him closer to Antonia, but in a way distances her from him, thus, like a veil to be removed, enhancing his desire by making her more unattainable. When she is in the dungeons all the desirable cultural points of reference are no longer valid or necessary. She is within his reach, readily available as a pornographic object of sexual pleasure. He does not need any intermediaries, any metaphors to arouse him by distancing himself from her imaginatively by means of a previously welcome culturally-inspired fantasy. She is no longer “like” the Medici Venus, after the rape becoming a Serpent.

Another character, Agnes, is also imprisoned in these vaults, punished by the Prioress for her unbridled sexuality and getting pregnant. Both Antonia and Agnes are made to execute primal, physical, life-sustaining activities among the rotting corpses of the nuns: Antonia – lovemaking, Agnes – childbirth and eating. The presence of these young women in the realm of the decaying dead violates the physical and emotional distance that culture sets between the living and the dead, and this transgression of the natural order has its price: act of love becomes a savage rape, culminating in murder; childbirth is premature and ends in the infant’s death, attributed to the mother’s inability to breastfeed.

The texture of the subterranean territory where the action descends temporarily demotes the centrality of perception. In the charnel house a funereal lamp sheds a gloomy light, blurring the contours of objects, intensifying instead the senses of smell and touch, and the morbidity of these passages appeals through

the characters' noses and fingertips, not eyes. Touch, especially, registers death's life-annulling coldness and putrefaction, and shortens a preferred distance from mortality. The sensations Agnes is made to experience are, just like Antonia's, unnatural and culturally anomalous. Waking from the slumber she has been put into by the nuns, she is intoxicated by the sickening smell and intends to escape, when her hand rests on the soft, putrid, worm-eaten, mass which retains the features of a nun who had died a few months earlier. The horror of touch pushes her back into a near-death state. But later, when her own child dies, Agnes clings desperately to its decaying remains. Touch is an outward, physical expression of emotional closeness allowing for a union with and a direct experience of another body, and for Agnes it is a way to hold on to her child and annul its death. This "mass of putridity" functions as the only tangible evidence of her motherhood and relationship with Raymond (M. G. Lewis 1998: 412).

There is yet another aspect to the sense of touch and sight of the body, sensations connected with experiencing both love and death. For centuries the sexual act was considered especially dangerous for men, as women were believed to be the carriers of venereal disease, able to sap a man's strength through intercourse, contributing to their early death (B. A. Bassein 1984: 37). Since Aristotle, women were thought the morally weaker sex, more susceptible to evil, later to Satan's temptation: "the repository of all the evil that keeps man from God" (B. A. Bassein 1984: 38). The negative epitomisation evident in Ambrosio's postcoital attitude to Antonia can be read within the ethical framework of 1790's patriarchy in which "the fear of pollution springing from women's sexuality" was profound (D. Miall). For Ambrosio, the force of these precepts, in line with the preaching of the early fathers of the Church with which Ambrosio must have been familiar, always comes after the sexual act, a fact that led Sedgwick to conclude that "the hero's main, recurrent motive for further action is postcoital depression" (1986: 145).

After the rape Ambrosio's sin is inscribed on Antonia's abused body. A similar semantic translation happens in the case of Ambrosio's attitude to the body of Elvira. He cannot escape its image and, looking at the decaying bodies of the nuns, is haunted by conjecture about the future state of his victim. Elvira's decaying and Antonia's raped body are put to another use; they become for Ambrosio projections of his soul, symbolic representations of his own crime and prospective punishment, rubbing his nose into his own degeneracy.

Many characters in *The Monk* remain equivocal, others undergo transformations, or a "process of dissection" which allows Lewis to "explore the metaphorical and psychological exposures with which the novel is preoccupied" (A. Campbell). We find such dissection at work with the character of Baptiste, who at first impresses his guests as an amiable host, whereas his wife, Marguerite, appears crude and hostile. But appearances again prove deceptive: it is Marguerite who risks her life and saves the visitors from her husband, who turns out to be a

vile murderer. Of a piece with this are other moments where two meanings are interfolded, as in the overthrow of the convent. Here, inspired by Lorenzo to revenge the alleged death of his sister, the mob riots, seeking, “nothing but the gratification of their barbarous vengeance” (M. G. Lewis 1998: 356). Guilty and innocent nuns are likewise assailed, and the convent is plundered and set alight, “a scene of devastation and horror” issuing from an initially justified intrusion (M. G. Lewis 1998: 358).

Drawing on de Beauvoir’s analysis of cultural myths of femininity, Bronfen contends that since they demonstrate woman as “semantically encoded as good and evil, as the possibility of wholeness and a frustration of this dream, the connection to the infinite beyond and the measure of human finity,” “the one stability” found in those myths “is in fact ambivalence” (1993: 66). The “conjunction of Woman as nature” is one of “the most poignant examples for such ambivalence.” The two most conflicting feminine types, both essential tropes and icons in Christianity, are “the temptress Eve and the healing Virgin Mary,” one serving as “allegory of evil, sin, deception, destruction and negation,” the other as “a figure for the triumph over the ‘bad’ death of sin and decay” (E. Bronfen 1993: 67). Both these types are appropriated by Lewis, subscribing to the church-inspired objectification of women and performing a literary reification of women into categories of either sanctity or temptation. But with the temptress Eve assuming in *The Monk* the face of the Madonna, and with the Christian icon of the Mater Dolorosa lamenting over the dead body of her child now transmogrified into the form of a fallen woman clutching the worm-ridden remains of her own child, what Lewis’s text does is diffuse and subvert these archetypes, further destabilising the notions of femininity inherent in their visual impact. At the end of the novel the female survivors are the experienced Agnes, who emerges from the realms of the dead having witnessed the death of her puny child born out of wedlock, Virginia, Lorenzo’s new bride, representative of his own class, a woman “seemed calculated to make him happy” (M. G. Lewis 1998: 397), and Matilda, who leaves Ambrosio at the hands of “infernal Dæmons,” and defiantly speeds “to joy and liberty” (M. G. Lewis 1998: 430).

Female characters and their inescapable physicality are inscribed in *The Monk* with a variety of discourses, and their bodies, dead or alive, become a meaningful site if not of a redefinition of gender relationships, then certainly of an eloquent ambiguity about femaleness. A woman in Lewis’s novel can give life and refuse to sustain it (Agnes); she can abandon one child and become obsessively protective towards another (Elvira in relation to Ambrosio and Antonia); she can take the form of the Virgin Mary and be the advocate of Satan (Matilda). The femininity that survives may be beaten up and experienced, but, though still often bowing to patriarchy, it is also self-knowing and persevering, flesh and blood, far from Radcliffian fantasy land.

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