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The Monk by M. G. Lewis: Revolution, Religion and the Female Body

ABSTRACT

This paper reads *The Monk* by M. G. Lewis in the context of the literary and visual responses to the French Revolution, suggesting that its digestion of the horrors across the Channel is exhibited especially in its depictions of women. Lewis plays with public and domestic representations of femininity, steeped in social expectation and a rich cultural and religious imaginary. The novel's ambivalence in the representation of femininity draws on the one hand on Catholic symbolism, especially its depictions of the Madonna and the virgin saints, and on the other, on the way the revolutionaries used the body of the queen, Marie Antoinette, to portray the corruption of the royal family. *The Monk* fictionalizes the ways in which the female body was exposed, both by the Church and by the Revolution, and appropriated to become a highly politicized entity, a tool in ideological argumentation.

Most early Gothic novels written in the eighteenth century offered an escapist adventure into territories which, though disturbed by subversive forces, were safely removed from the boundaries of their readers' households, which was one of the reasons for their growing appeal. Their readers were transported into the realms of desired unfamiliarity, where a capacity for strangeness expanded, and there was always more than met the eye. Foreign, continental territory and a leap back in time prepared the ground for otherness, ensuring for British readers an exotic spatial and temporal distancing, a practice initiated by Horace Walpole in 1764 and continued by successive practitioners of literary Gothicism, most notably Ann Radcliffe and M. G. Lewis. Using history and geography as fanciful backdrops against which their actions were set, these early Gothic novels were notorious for their lack of historical insight and geographical accuracy. However, it is this distancing and imprecision that has been interpreted as offering a safe ground for a discussion of the here and now. Even though there is a disparity between the reality of the readers and the fictitious reality of the characters, it is precisely their indirectness that makes the literary commentaries so appealing and effective. Whether set in Otranto, Naples or Madrid, the Apennines, Gascony or the Pyrenees, Gothic novels can be read as barometers of their era, as veiled and embroidered versions of the ailments and anxieties of their times.

This paper is a reading of the most notorious Gothic novel of the period, M. G. Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), in the context of the atmosphere and the legacy—literary and visual—of the political upheavals of the late eighteenth century, and especially those of the French Revolution. Of the Gothic novels written in the 1790s, *The Monk*, in its representation of institutionalized terror and directness of bodily horror, most explicitly dramatizes the tenor and the resonances of the revolt in France. The contention here is that the novel's absorption and digestion of the rebellious energies of its era is exhibited especially in its depictions of women, and channelled into subversive games with public and domestic representations of femininity, steeped in social expectation and a rich cultural and religious imaginary.

From the moment of its publication, *The Monk* gained a reputation for being an iconoclastic attack on metonymies of Catholicism as perceived by a Protestant eye: its convents and monasteries, celibacy, Mariology and ceremonial glam. Lewis exposes and toys with representations of female bodies which he detects at the core of Catholic symbolism, like representations of the Madonna and the virgin saints. But if *The Monk* is to be seen as dramatizing the rebellious fervour of its time and the unprecedented radicalism taking place just across the Channel, its imagery—a brazen

attack on the Church—is seen as a reworking of the Revolution's attack on the Crown, and later also of the democratic French government's anticlerical policies and de-Christianization. Imagistically, an attack on the Church as an institution becomes conflated with an attack on the Crown as the novel's transgressive tableaux draw both on the ways visualizations of the *ancien régime* were created and then deconstructed by the revolutionaries, and on the ways in which the Revolution, reduced to a series of images, imprinted itself on the English imagination.

The institutions of the Church and the Crown were associated in the public imagination with their females, often beautified and bejewelled, the Virgin Mary and female saints, and Marie Antoinette respectively. In *The Monk,* Lewis scrapes off the glittered surface of Church rituals—like the elaborate processions on the various feast days which abound in Spain—in the same way as the Revolution did with those of the Crown, in order to expose Catholicism as a hierarchical system of idolatry and control, relying on fabricated images of women. Underneath the jewelled coat of religious devotion elevating virginity and obedience—guarded in *The Monk* by the female character of the Prioress—Lewis sees a hub of vileness, corruption and hypocrisy, in much the same way as under the diamond necklaces, elaborate couture and gowns of the Bourbons, the revolutionaries saw their incompetence, immorality and social injustice incarnate.

At this point the novel problematizes the ambivalence inherent in the understanding and representation of femininity: veiled, confined and untouchable on the one hand, and exposed, adorned and abused on the other. In this respect, *The Monk* is a fictional digestion of the ways in which the female body, expected to be secluded within the confinements of domesticity, was dragged both by the Church and by the Revolution into the public eye to become a highly politicized entity, appropriated as a tool in ideological argumentation. Lewis plays out the ambivalences of political revolts in which the female body used as a symbol undergoes a transition: from a spectacle of display to a spectacle of degradation. Since tied to femaleness is the notion of the beautiful and the fragile, at the moment of revolt its representation is in crisis, abused and transgressed by the Church, radicals and anti-radicals alike.

Lewis's own way of representing the female body—clothed and unclothed, revered and defiled, beautified and mutilated—is explained within the context of such politically-engaged texts as Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). Burke's treatise in particular relies on a highly aestheticized and emotional rhetoric which appropriates the body of Marie Antoinette to serve as a metonymy for the disproportionate

suffering and humiliation of the royal family. In this respect it continues the project of public appropriation of the female royal body and demonstrates how, on both sides of the barricade, certain paradigms of femaleness can be exploited to become weapons in the political sphere. All these texts reveal the degree to which religious, social and moral meanings in those unstable times, riddled with truly Gothic anxiety, were projected on to the female body so that it became a message board, a stage on which this era's numerous political dramas were performed.

They were written in a period of discontent both at home and on the Continent, closing a century during which Britain was constantly affected by or a witness to wars, rebellions and revolutions. The last decades of the eighteenth century especially were, for Britain, not only rife in armed involvement overseas, but also endangered by the rapid spread of revolutionary ideas on the Continent. From the beginning, the responses the French Revolution provoked among the British varied and oscillated. If, at first, it "was greeted with general enthusiasm in Britain" (Harvie 433) and across enlightened Europe as a laudable revolt against the oppressions of totalitarianism, as events unfolded, the attitudes of both British politicians and the public became more sharply divided, with many sympathizers growing disillusioned and recoiling from the spread of Jacobin bloodshed.

The politically engaged writing which followed the storming of the Bastille bears testimony to this polarization and the shifts of opinion. The first notable response fuelling controversy over how to read the events in France was the anniversary sermon for the Glorious Revolution delivered on 4 November 1789 by Dr. Richard Price, the new Whig and Dissenter, who saw the storming of the Bastille in the light of events at home a hundred years earlier, and those of the American Revolution. Price believed that radical development of this zest for liberty would, with time, become universal and lead to replacing the hereditary power of the monarchs "with the rule of law, and priests with the rule of reason and conscience" (Todd x). These claims provoked Edmund Burke's refutation in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in November 1790. An attack on the revolutionaries and a defence of monarchic rule, it came as a shocking volte-face after his enthusiastic support of the rights of colonialists during the American Revolutionary War. Burke expressed exactly "what the establishment felt: . . . remove customary deference and force would rule" (Harvie 433). Burke's *Reflections* spawned over fifty responses, the first being Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, published anonymously in December 1790 (Todd xi), and the most popular, Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* of 1791–1792. Burke's *Reflections* sold 19,000 copies in its first year, and 30,000 over the next five (Todd xi), whereas

Paine's *The Rights of Man* sold 200,000 copies, a startling number "for a society still only semi-literate" (Harvie 433). The number of copies these political works sold indicates not only the demand for this sort of engaged writing among the English reading public, but also the extent to which the ideas they propagated and images they provoked circulated in popular consciousness at that time.

The numerous political caricatures were another potent source of commentary which fed the popular imagination by reducing words to the appealing brevity of images. They constructed "a visual apparatus through which basic information about key players and occurrences could be communicated," but, significantly, they did so by means of "canny manipulation of verism and distortion" (Kromm 123). As the events in France rapidly advanced, they took for the most part an anti-revolutionary stance. Among the most famous examples are: Thomas Rowlandson's *The Contrast 1792* (1792), James Gillray's depiction of the royal family's recapture during their flight to Varennes in the etching *French Democrats Surprising the Royal Runaways* (1792), *John Bull's Progress* (1793), and the gruesomely crude and direct *A Family of Sans-Culottes Refreshing after the Fatigues of the Day* (1792). It is probably the bestiality and the horrific indifference of men, women and children alike to the cannibalized human parts, depicted as commodity and commonplace articles in this print, that most poignantly capture the significance of the transition from the commended idealism of the initial phase of the Revolution to the unfathomable reality of the years to come. Gillray's later caricature, *The Promis'd Horrors of the French Invasion* of 1796, the same year that saw the publication of *The Monk*, was meant to bring home to the English the political consequences of the spread of revolutionary ideas in a scene which enacts the invasion of London by French soldiers, and the destruction of the pivotal symbols of English democracy: the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, bundled together with Acts of Parliament and various statutes and labelled "Waste paper." Images like these made the English public realize that revolutionary tumult, while ideologically admirable when it commenced, incited unprecedentedly wild energy and provoked unfathomable, inhuman destruction before it could ever produce the desired effects.

Unlike political pamphlets and caricatures, which comment on the Revolution directly—whether discrediting it, like Burke and Gillray, or supporting some of its claims, like Wollstonecraft and Paine—Gothic fiction, as has been said, never directly engages in commentary on, or representation of, historical events. However, though ostensibly removed to the times of the Counter-Reformation, it embodies a large degree of political tension and atmosphere related to the events of the years of its writing

and publication. At the time when the most notable Gothic novels were written, events in France had gone beyond the reforms—at first welcomed in progressive British circles—leading to, as was believed, constitutional monarchy seen in the light of the native Glorious Revolution. Britain was already at war with France, the Reign of Terror had taken its toll of tens of thousands, the royal family had been guillotined and the starting point of the Revolution, the storming of the Bastille, had turned from a symbol of the overthrow of the despotic power of royalty into a symbol of violence and aberration more shocking than those it sought to avert. The changes were implemented by the brutal elimination of everyone associated with the old regime, and carried out by an uncontrolled mob who did not stop short at mutilating the bodies of their enemies, as evidenced, for example, by the fate of the remains of the queen's confidante, Marie Louise, the Princesse de Lamballe.

Although the horrors of the French Revolution were never mentioned directly by Gothic writers, they affected their artistic imagination, supplying ever more daring imagery and demanding new diction to accommodate the monstrous reality. In his *Representations of Revolution (1789–1820)*, Ronald Paulson claims that the Gothic served "as a metaphor with which some contemporaries in England tried to understand what was happening across the channel in the 1790s" (217), whereas Maggie Kilgour, looking from a literary perspective, sees the Revolution as supplying an invigorating energy to the genre, which might have come to "an aesthetic dead-end" if the events in France "had not made it an appropriate vehicle for embodying relevant political and aesthetic questions . . . as the Terror proved fertile for a literature of terror" (23). Writing in 1797, an anonymous commentator of *Monthly Magazine* bemoaned the fact that the novels of the day "exactly and faithfully copied THE SYSTEM OF TERROR, if not in our streets, and in our fields, at least in our circulating libraries, and in our closets" ("Terrorist System" 102) and blamed the Revolution for the fact that "our genius has become hysterical, and our taste epileptic" (103).

The Monk embodies exactly this heat of political conflict, social fervour and the ambivalence of revolt. The provenance of its moral instability, of the disruption of accepted notions of the human, of the decline of authority and subversion of aesthetic and gender paradigms, of the fact that in *The Monk* "nothing is what it seems" (Punter 79), has been acknowledged by many critics as an artistic digestion springing directly from the ambience of terror in which Europe was seeped as a consequence of the revolt in France.[1] Its first literary commentator, the Marquis de Sade,

[1] Paulson (219–25), Kilgour (159–60), Whitlark (1–8), Davenport-Hines (178–79).

in his "Reflections on the Novel" in *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings* (1800), said of *The Monk* that it "was the necessary fruit of the revolutionary tremors felt by the whole of Europe" (qtd. in Sage 49). Sade considered Lewis's novel "superior on all accounts" to other works of this kind—especially "to the bizarre flashes of the brilliant imagination of Radcliffe"—because, at that unstable time, it was necessary to appeal to the supernatural and hellish realms for imagery gripping enough for readers, who were by then "familiar with the extent of the miseries which evil men were able to heap upon mankind" (qtd. in Sage 48, 49). Gothic tropes "could no longer be presented naively; they had all been familiarized and sophisticated by the events in France" (Paulson 221).

Paulson claims that Sade's perception of Lewis as a writer acknowledging the extent of miseries endured by Europeans "hardly explains Lewis." In Paulson's opinion *The Monk* was for its author "largely an aesthetic expression," whereby the mixture of tones it displays can be explained "in terms of a Jacobean tragicomedy" and a play with "the aesthetic of sublimity" (220). One cannot but agree with his claim that *The Monk* is much more of an aesthetic than a political exercise, the novel's theatricality having been critically acknowledged.[2] However, its unprecedented depictions of bodily horror seem to be much more than gaudy displays of ingenious stagecraft. In a critical introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*—Wollstonecraft's immediate reaction to Burke's *Reflections*—Janet Todd draws attention to the fact that Wollstonecraft based her argument and rhetoric on reversing the gender roles in response to Burkean ideas of the sublime and the beautiful, "with its aesthetic genderizing in which beauty became associated with women and sublimity with men" (xiii). It seems that at work in Lewis's novel is a subversive play with "aesthetic genderizing," whereby women are not exclusively associated with beauty in a Burkean sense but also with the dark forces of sublimity.

Firstly, this is facilitated by an aestheticized reversal of, and games with, gender roles and gender performativity. The most notorious examples here are connected with the character of Matilda, who initially poses for a pictorial representation of the Madonna, making the virgin Abbott Ambrosio experience the sublimity of religious worship, which quickly transforms into unabashed erotic ecstasy. She then cross-dresses and inhabits a Madrid monastery as the virgin novice Rosario, to be in the end exposed as the embodiment of a demon. In contacts with her, Ambrosio progresses from the experience of "the enjoyment of pleasure," a pleasure that is initially "stolen, and not forced upon" him (Burke, *A Philosophical*

[2] Kilgour (145–46, 150–53, 156), McEvoy (xxx), Spooner (43).

Enquiry qtd. in Sage 37–38), to the experience of fear, which makes him tremble as she leads him along "the passages which . . . formed a sort of Labyrinth" where in "profound obscurity" he takes part in a black magic ritual (Lewis 273, 275). Upon Matilda's inspiration, Ambrosio comes into contact with Lucifer whose sight and power produce emotions of fear and admiration, "secret awe," "delight and wonder" (277), so that, as in contact with the sublime, "strength, violence, pain and terror" rush upon his mind together (Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry* qtd. in Sage 38). Also the depiction of the novel's victim, Antonia, though in a less spectacular manner, progresses from the incarnation of beauty and innocence, veiled from head to foot when Lorenzo spots her for the first time in the Church of the Capuchins, to the unclothed Venus de Medici when the same Lorenzo in the same church gives rein to his erotic imagination and undresses her in his mind's eye. Finally, Antonia's ravisher Ambrosio sees in her his "sweet Girl" (Lewis 381), but after the rape, the same pair of eyes perceive her as a "Fatal Witch" (385) and a serpent he fears and wants to recoil from.

Secondly, if, according to Burke, the experience of the awe-inspiring sublime is unattainable without the accessories of terror and obscurity, when transferred to the political and religious arena, it becomes precisely the desired emotion aroused by the figures of power, whether derived from the heavenly kingdom or from the divinely appointed monarchic authority. Religious and royal ceremonies alike were fashioned to mark distinction and to distance both the humble believer and the subject of the state from the source of reverence. The glitter of the glamorous gear was associated both with the royal wardrobe, like that of Marie Antoinette, and with elaborate church ceremonies, during which, especially in Spain, the effigies of saints were richly adorned. Representations of Virgin Mary whose chastity was a gem, were similarly depicted in a jewelled fashion, like in the baroque churches and convents of the Counter-Reformation Madrid in *The Monk*. The institutions that the Revolution sought to abolish, the Court and ultimately the Church, were associated with wealth and represented by beautified images of women, transmogrified, constrained, if not handicapped, and, in a truly Gothic manner, almost obscured by the dazzle of glitter.[3]

On this theme too, Lewis comments with tongue-in-cheek audacity. The villainous Prioress secures for her novices only virgins from the most illustrious families, and St. Clare is the patron of their convent. In its vaults, a dazzling ruby sparkles on the finger of her statue. Quite significantly,

[3] Cf. the so-called Diamond Necklace Affair, crucial in discrediting the reputation of the royal family (Schama 203–10).

however, the historical St. Clare of Assisi was an ardent follower of St. Francis, lived the life of poverty and austerity and was the cofoundress of the Order of Poor Ladies (Robinson 4).

As has been said, the Revolution, among many things, demonstrated the extent to which the female body can be appropriated and certain paradigms of femaleness can be exploited to become weapons in the political sphere. Lewis's novel does not respond to this in the form of an intellectual rhetorical exercise, as was the case in Wollstonecraft's text, but digests it by means of a theatrical subversion feeding on recognizable tableaux constructing femininity. He depicts the unbridled sexuality of women, de-beautifies them and problematizes their transformation into political bodies in a showy and highly aestheticized manner. Moreover, his novel contains instances of conferring not only agency, sexual as well as political, but also horrendous evil on women, which can be read as imagistically digested reverberations of ambiguities inherent in the unprecedented political shocks across the Channel.

If *The Monk* is a "fable of revolution" (Paulson 221), it is also in the way it enacts group reaction to institutional abuse and stages a true rupture of the established order to erase hypocrisy and oppression. The most immediately recognizable revolutionary scenes in the novel involve the overthrow of the convent, originally aimed not to eradicate this institution, but to dethrone the villainous and tyrannical Prioress responsible for the alleged death of Agnes, sister of the Duke of Medina. The revolt is planned to take place during an elaborately staged procession in honour of St. Clare, which is engineered as a display of "pomp and opulence" (Lewis 348–49). Elitism, institutional rigour and expectance of reverence for its procedures "to which no Prophane was ever admitted" (345) may be read as parallel to the absurdity of court rituals at Versailles, which "fetishized the royal body" and admitted only high ranking aristocrats.[4] In both cases the upkeep of power and the necessity for institutionalized grandeur are associated with a cliquish practice meant to endorse the importance not only of its main objects, but also of its selected participants, and by means of an elaborate complexity to distance them from the "Prophanes."

During the procession, one of the nuns, St. Ursula, plays the main role in disclosing the vileness taking place behind the closed doors of the convent. Risking her life, she takes courage, ascends a throne on the glittering Machine prepared for the procession and from there addresses "the surrounding multitude" (Lewis 350). Significantly, she begins her speech

[4] Schama mentions that among aristocrats at Versailles "hierarchies were established according to who might pass the King's slipper or hand the Queen her chemise" (211).

by making apologies for her sex, excusing her public appearance and conduct, which to the gathered crowds must appear as "strange and unseemly . . . when considered to be adopted by a Female and a Nun" (350). Though powerfully emotional, her speech is logical, and she is composed and undeterred by the novelty and inappropriateness of her first public appearance. The scene can also be read as ridiculing in one go the necessity of beauty to stand with femaleness and glitter with religious reverence. Lewis playfully tones down the inappropriateness of St. Ursula's undertaking by using a lavish display of jewels and ornaments in the background to her advantage, as elements which warrant her femininity in the eyes of the crowds. St. Ursula's words gain agency and credibility because, speaking from the throne, she assumes a position of authority, whereas the crowd, seeing a beautiful virgin addressing them from the "most brilliant ornament" (348) are, in effect, experiencing a surrogate of the lavish spectacle for which they had gathered.

The scenes that follow seem almost the enactment of the frenzy of the populace known from the September massacres of 1792 in Paris. When St. Ursula exposes to the mob the atrocious dealings of the Prioress, their determination to execute immediate justice cannot be checked. *Vox populi* becomes *vox dei*. Vain are the protestations of Lorenzo and Don Ramirez that, the Domina's crimes notwithstanding, she should undergo a trial and therefore be legally subject solely to the Inquisition. The fury of the mob dominates this scene. Despite the presence of the protectors of order, the archers and the guards, and of the men who attempt to stand for the rightful execution of justice, Lorenzo and his friends, the crowd swells into a "multitude of voices," an indeterminate mass acquiring a new assorted identity, levelling its components into one ferocious swarm, referred to as "the Populace," "the Throng" and "the multitude" (Lewis 355). This representation of collective violence clearly parallels the Burkean imagery of fluid from *Reflections*, where he refers to the revolutionary mob using phrases like "the wild *gas,* the fixed air," "the liquor" and "frothy surface," which is "plainly broke loose" (Burke 6–7; italics in the original). Burke applies the same terminology to refer to the unchecked crowds of the populace when he highlights similarities between the French Revolution and the native Gordon Riots, during which Lord George Gordon "raised a mob" and "pulled down all our prisons" (Burke, *Reflections* 81).

The most poignant Revolution-inspired imagery follows when the "People continued to press onwards." The crowd breaks the cordon of guards, takes hold of its victim, the Domina, and proceeds "to take upon her a most summary and cruel vengeance" (356). Seeking justice for her barbarities, the mob abandons the precepts of the Enlightenment, which

would dictate that she be handed over to the tribunal. The rioters are determined to stage what they imagine must have been the suffering and degradation she inflicted on her victims.

> The rioters heeded nothing but the gratification of their barbarous vengeance. They refused to listen to her: They showed her every sort of insult, loaded her with mud and filth, and called her by the most opprobrious appellations. They tore her one from one another, and each new Tormentor was more savage than the former. They . . . dragged her through the Streets, spurning her, trampling her, and treating her with every species of cruelty which hate or vindictive fury could invent. At length a Flint, aimed by some well-directing hand, struck her full upon the temple. She sank upon the ground bathed in blood, and in a few minutes terminated her miserable existence. (Lewis 356)

In the end, mob aggression extends beyond the infliction of pain to the mutilation of the corpse, in an act of final disrespect and annihilation which echoes Achilles mistreating the body of Hector for twelve days in *The Iliad*, and foreshadows twentieth-century mob executions of justice on political dictators like Mussolini or Ceausescu.

> Yet, though she no longer felt their insults, the Rioters still exercised their impotent rage upon her lifeless body. They beat it, trod upon it, and ill-used it, till it became no more than a mass of flesh, unsightly, shapeless, and disgusting. (356)

This scene of group vengeance on the Prioress, horrendous in its detail, is a fictitious enactment of what revolutionary massacres must have looked like to the English imagination. Written after the death of the French royals when the guillotine reached the untouchables, and the guillotined acquired a name recognizable by everyone, this scene similarly gives a face to the deadly consequences of revolutionary horror. Its attention on the destructive energies of an angry mob can be read as echoing the way in which the bodies of the members of the *ancien régime* were treated at the time of the Massacres. The body of king Louis XVI, for example, was intended to be "turned to nothingness" in order "to obliterate the remains . . . so thoroughly that nothing at all would survive except mortal dirt" (Schama 673).

The logic applied by the French revolutionary mob during executions, fictionalized by Lewis in this "moment of popular frenzy" (356), is one of exact reciprocity, as in Hammurabi's law of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." In this Babylonian code, social and legal meanings were statutorily conferred on the victim's body, appropriating it in the

implementation of justice. Yet the potency of the scene above lies not only in the way Lewis "exploits the dramatic resonances of the revolution and its anticlericalism," but also in the way he recognizes the energies of the mob: "bloodthirsty, completely out of control, animal-like in its ferocity" (Paulson 219). Just as in Gillray's caricature, the revolutionaries are presented in *The Monk* as no better than the tyrants. If Lewis's Spain of the Inquisition bears parallels with, and offers commentary on, revolutionary France, it also does so in its depiction of the ambivalence of mob action, during which laudable claims of justice are forgotten and the boundaries between victim and victimizer no longer apply.

Luis-Vincent Thomas suggests that by disrespecting and disfiguring the remains of their victims in an act that guarantees their complete annihilation, the oppressors perform a double murder (67–68), the result of which is a contradiction of the concept of the good and beautiful death, seen as an extension to, and a confirmation of, the laudable life. In an act of mutilation, the violated body changes its status from social, public, inscribed in a sartorial code, from a body, as Bakhtin would have it, "completed," "finished" and "closed," to one that is unmasked and unveiled, to use a Gothic trope. Suffering, then often ruptured, it transforms into a Bakhtinian "body of grotesque realism . . . hideous and formless," a body that is made to go "out to meet the world," one whose parts "are open to the outside world" (Bakhtin 29, 26).

Such public exposure of the female body, expected to be veiled and hidden from the public eye, must be seen as the most cruel punishment to which it can be subjected. In *The Monk*, on the one hand, the formlessness and the hideousness of what remains of the Prioress serves as a metonymy for her sinfulness and corruption. Moral order is restored by subjecting her to the hyperbolically bad death the mob feels she deserves. On the other hand, however, Lewis seems to be addressing the contentious issue of female public involvement and the consequences of the violation of the doctrine of separate spheres. The Prioress is punished not only for her crimes but also for occupying the position of power, which involved staging public events, and thus annulling the division between separate spheres. The consequences of women's public activity, as the Revolution evidenced, were believed to be devastating for women. Their growing "interference in politics" was severely criticized in Britain, especially after the outbreak of war in 1793 (Kromm 131), and British iconography of the period best demonstrates the condemnation of women's public involvement. Significantly, the representational appeal of the 1790s' prints rests on situating female activity "within the satirical discourse of madness" and "sexualised monstrosity" (Kromm 131, 130).

As has been shown, the Parisian September massacres brought not only execution, but also the mutilation of the bodies of their victims, and, in the case of women, the mutilation of their bodies became almost public dissection, as was the case with the barbarous treatment of the Princesse de Lamballe. The extent of its defilement can be seen gruesomely foreshadowed in what at the time seemed the mere artistic representation of unfathomable hyperbolic savagery of Gillray's *A Family of Sans Culottes*.[5] In this cartoon Gillray depicted a sans culotte household, in which human bodies are dissected, dismembered and then devoured. The final act of execution is carried out post-mortem, so that it is not the act of death, but the mutilation of the bodies that is the final infliction of justice. A severed head on a platter, an eyeball on a spoon, human entrails in a bucket, a bare female breast squeezed by one of the ravenous revolutionaries' buttocks are for him metonyms of the new bestial political practice. Gillray was one of those cartoonists who "anatomized politics, revealing it to be a theatre of cruelty in which the body was incessantly battered" (Porter 242).

In *The Monk*, the linking of execution with eroticism and a public display of the female body is introduced in the opening scenes, when in a dream vision Lorenzo sees Antonia snatched by a dreadful "Unknown" who tortures her "with his odious caresses" (28). With the aid of supernatural powers she manages to escape and ascend to heaven, but "her white Robe was left in his possession." Naked, she darts upwards. The barbarity and profanity of the revolutionaries is echoed in the tripartite inscription on the monster's forehead, "Pride! Lust! Inhumanity!"—a blatant mockery of the new religion of "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*."[6] However, the example of linking execution with eroticism carried out with greatest finesse in the novel is in the final scenes of the procession. Here, Lewis merely mentions the names of the saints who are personified by beautiful novices. They were all early Christian martyrs who died executed for their faith by the defilement of their bodies, so the procession becomes a public celebration of their mutilation. It is certainly no coincidence that Lewis chooses to depict the figures of St. Lucia, St. Lucy, sentenced to

[5] The maiming of de Lamballe's body is differently conveyed by historians; however, in popular consciousness it remains remembered as one of the most horribly publically abused. All accounts confirm that her head was severed and then "stuck on a pike" to be "carried in triumph through the streets of Paris" and in front of the queen, who fainted before she saw "the blond curls" of her confidante bob "repellently in the air" (Schama 635). Imagined to be a partner of Marie Antoinette in Sapphic orgies, according to other reports, apparently just after the trial, the Princesse de Lamballe was handed to the mob, lynched, then her breasts were cut off and genitals sliced (Davenport-Hines 170).

[6] I mention this scene in my analysis of the abject in Walpole and Lewis. Cf. "Convention, Repetition and Abjection: The Way of the Gothic," *Text Matters* 4 (2014): 190.

defilement in a brothel (Bridge 414), and St. Catherine of Alexandria, tortured when she refused to yield to her suitor, emperor Maxentius, and declared she had consecrated her virginity to Jesus (Clugnet 445–46). The last of the personified saints is St. Genevieve, the patron saint of Paris, whose prayers saved the city from destruction by the barbarians when the troops of Attila and his Huns were marching through Gaul in 451 (MacErlean 414). In these two scenes—involving the assumption of Antonia escaping the profane monster, and the novices parading as abused saints—Lewis is critical of certain elements of Catholic theology, and its need for female victimization. A woman must be degraded and her body defiled. Only then, its bejewelled and beautified representation can be elevated, and she can become a revered, martyred symbol of faith. But, by depicting the monster's sacrilegious intrusion into the interior of the church, Lewis seems to be equally critical of the radical spiritual and material erasure of all religious tradition, and its ideological replacement the Revolution attempted.

This mixing of the two spheres, the public and the domestic, is also a quality that features in the representations of the Revolution in both Burke's response and in the caricatures by Gillray, like *John Bull's Progress* (1793) or *The Blessings of Peace, the Curses of War* (1795). One of the most memorable images Burke uses in his argumentation against the events in France is the image of the royal family captured in a domestic scene, where he appropriates into political rhetoric the aesthetic load of "beauty in distress" from *A Philosophical Enquiry*, which was later to become one of the favourite Gothic tropes. In this passage Burke appeals to emotion in a manner comparable with Gillray who likewise speaks through images of domestic familiarity rather than those featuring politicians:

> [O]n the morning of the 6th of October, 1789, the king and queen of France, after a day of confusion, alarm, dismay, and slaughter, lay down, under the pledged security of public faith, to indulge nature in a few hours of respite, and troubled, melancholy repose. . . . A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with . . . blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced with a hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked, and, through ways unknown to the murderers, had escaped to seek refuge at the feet of a king and husband, not secure of his own life for a moment.
>
> This king, to say no more of him, and this queen, and their infant children, (who once would have been the pride and hope of a great and generous people,) were then forced to abandon the sanctuary of the most splendid palace in the world, which they left swimming in blood, polluted by massacre, and strewed with scattered limbs and mutilated carcases. Thence they were conducted into the capital of their kingdom. (*Reflections* 68–69)

Surprised by a band of assassins at night in her bedroom, Marie Antoinette is suddenly stripped of the privileged position she was born to, brought up in and then married to, denied the protective shield of the divine aura of royalty, exposed and turned into a mere "persecuted woman." Her tragic plight is additionally underscored by the fact that, as Burke imagines it, to seek relief at the feet of the king, her man, himself a persecuted victim at the mercy of the ruffians, the queen ends up on her knees in front of him.

This particular detail of the capture of the royal family reveals Burke's poetic licence with a historical moment. Firstly, the public reputation of the king had by then long been destroyed—Louis XVI was no longer envisioned as Father-of-the-*Patrie* to look up to or appeal to for help—and, secondly, in his married life too, traditional roles had long been reversed, quite contrary to the established Bourbon ways. Just as Louis was notorious for being "awkward, secluded and retiring," his wife gained a reputation for enjoying her freedoms and being "brazenly outgoing" (Schama 213). Therefore, Burke's envisioning of the capture reads as a wishful restoration of a long-lost royal reputation. Putting the queen at the feet of her husband, he creates a pictorial representation of a respectable traditional family, with the woman obediently subscribing to the norms of domesticity, a far cry from the reality in the household of the last of the Bourbons. This visual manipulation, with the reader as a sympathizing spectator, is part of Burke's political rhetoric, which turns the queen's apparent nakedness from an emblem of her notorious libertinism into a signifier of the ruffians' brutality. Their violence is encoded in her nakedness, in her "naked, shivering nature" fully exposed, just as it is in the "scattered limbs and mutilated carcasses" of the domestics (Burke, *Reflections* 74, 69). Marie Antoinette in this scene is but an ordinary being. Caught unawares, she is not given a chance to put on her royal garment, a weapon of reverence, a shield that defies any form of opposition. What is left in a moment such as this is humanity laid bare, the queen degraded to the position of being "but a woman" (Burke, *Reflections* 74). And, according to Burke, "a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order" (74).

This scene—especially the historically disproved exposure of Marie Antoinette—can be seen in the light of pre-revolutionary, anti-royalist propaganda. Daring and explicit seditious writings made the body of the queen public property, and appropriated it to epitomize the corruption of nobility. These texts draw on scenarios set out by popular imagination which linked the "political constitution of the state" with the moral and "physical constitution" of the royal court (Schama 211), especially of its female constituent. They resulted in the creation of what Schama calls "sexual demonologies," which contributed to the "phenomenally rapid erosion of royal authority in

the late 1780s" (225).[7] One of the schemes employed in the pathetic deconstruction of the image of the queen rested on using Marie Antoinette's love for the neoclassical informality of simple, cotton and muslin gowns, and the directness with which she represented her own femininity. It was seen as confirmation of her "casual disregard for propriety," and then turned into pornographic material (Schama 220).[8] As a consequence, "the conflation of sexual and political crime" became a fact and the need for Revolution was expressed in terms of the debauchery of the queen's body, whereby her "sexual perversions . . . were often treated as political stratagems" (Schama 226, 225).

In Lewis's novel, too, the overthrow of the convent, which is inspired by the coming to light of the greedy and murderous nature of the Prioress, and which causes the disclosure of Ambrosio's "proud, vain, ambitious, and disdainful character" (237), is engineered by means of sexual agency and abuse of the bodies of Agnes and Antonia. However, whereas Burke victimizes the passive body of the queen, and implies the demand for a chivalrous sheltering of her from shameful exposure—so that she is restored to the status of more than a woman, that of the queen—the undercurrent directing Lewis's positioning of female characters is radically different. First of all, he seems to confer a certain political agency on to his women without the immediate aid of male agency. A decisive voice in the overthrow of the convent is, after all, given to St. Ursula, who courageously discloses the dealings of the Prioress. As has been said, though her action is deemed highly inappropriate by eighteenth-century standards, which considered it unnatural for a woman to participate in the public sphere—"the language that dignified a public man, demeaned a public woman" (Colley 251)—St. Ursula is not demeaned during her public appearance. Neither is Agnes, who, after the overthrow of the convent, emerges from its vaults "so wretched, so emaciated, so pale" that Lorenzo "doubted to think her Woman" (369). At work in this scene is a mechanism similar to the one used by Burke: Agnes's physical degradation, her emaciation and paleness, speak not of her feminine weakness, but of the Prioress's inhumanity, and justify the zeal, destructive though it became, of

[7] This seditious writing continued after the outbreak of the Revolution. The titles of the works produced then bear testimony to the extent of the deterioration of the queen's reputation: *The Vaginal Fury of Marie-Antoinette, Wife of Louis* (1791), *The Scandalous and Libertine Private Life of Marie-Antoinette from the Loss of Her Maidenhead to the First of May 1791* (in two volumes) (Arcand 133).

[8] The unconventional and unaffected way the queen fashioned her femininity was captured in the paintings of one of her most important friends, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (Schama 216). For a detailed analysis of the increasing informality of the court and its effects on the perception of the queen, see Catherine Spooner's *Fashioning Gothic Bodies*, chapter 2: "Revolution and Revealment: the Gothic Body and the Politics of Décolletage," esp. 23–38.

the convent's destroyers. It is this animalistic femininity—here one "not of the highest order" to quote Burke (*Reflections* 74)—that Lewis spares for survival, whereas chastity, epitomized in the figure of Antonia, and propriety, written in the character of her mother, are made to die.

Agnes's emergence from incarceration in the vaults of the convent can be additionally read as a humanist comment on the last public performance of Marie Antoinette, one of the many she did not stage. The sight of the emaciated and pale Agnes echoes the last glimpses of the queen as she was led in an open carriage from the Conciergerie to the guillotine, in the final spectacle of degradation. The queen turned into "a shrunken, white-haired woman," "gaunt," "thin and wasted" (Schama 799, 796). And, if in a fabricated scene, Burke elevated her traditional role of a wife, the Revolution systematically stripped her of all her social roles, finally also of that of a mother, as the tragic story of her son, the last of the Bourbons, illustrates. So when Agnes walks out with the rotting remains of her child, Lewis seems to be commenting on the recent tragedy of Marie Antoinette—the mother, who was punished for her role of a queen. He seems to be enacting the scenario that Burke could not have envisioned writing his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* back in the early 1790s, the separation of the mother from her only surviving child, who then died of malnutrition and neglect, abandoned to the care of a shoemaker. As *The Monk* nears its end, despite its undeniable aesthetic and ideological radicalism, Lewis's message appears first and foremost humanist.

If *The Monk* is to be read as digesting certain revolutionary horrors, by employing a string of ambivalences, Lewis makes it clear that it is not the Prioress, for all her murderous brutality, hidden under the glitter of religious sham, nor the Monk, for all his dissipation, hypocrisy and moral weakness, that should be made the culprits of revenge. With Ambrosio and the Domina we see a tyranny of institutionalism that curbs personality by denying free access to the world and its ideas; with Antonia, the conduit for this tyranny is her own mother. Lewis detects abuse not in its effects, but in the source: the despotism of educational limitations and institutionalized authoritarianism of religion. For Ambrosio, the beginnings of his monastic education are marked by antagonism between his "real and acquired character" (237). In the process of his instruction, virtues "ill-suited to the Cloister," like benevolence, compassion, and frankness, were "carefully repressed" (237). Seeking reasons for the corruption of the court at Versailles, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), Mary Wollstonecraft makes a similar claim. The minds of the royals "instead of being cultivated" were, like that of Ambrosio, "warped by education" (Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication* 8). Four years later, following her argumentation from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of*

the French Revolution (1794), she maintains that "education, and the atmosphere of manners in which a character is formed, change the natural laws of humanity" (322). In the case of both the king and "the unfortunate queen of France," their "opening faculties were poisoned in the bud" (Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View* 323). The king's education "only tended to make him a sensual bigot"; the queen's, concentrated on preparing her for the role she was to play, making her "a complete actress, and an adept in all the arts of coquetry that debauch the mind," encouraging her to spend time "in the most childish manner; without the appearance of any vigour of mind" (Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View* 324).

For Burke, to perform her social function of a queen, a woman needs to be redefined through the glitter of her imperial dress, because, as Spooner points out, he sees humanity "dependent precisely on qualities such as illusion, romance, imagination, chivalry, figured specifically through sartorial metaphor." That is why Marie Antoinette requires a vast wardrobe to reign in "this realm of illusion" (Spooner 33). In order to secure the position of more than a woman, she needs the protective chivalry of men, of the state, which in turn requires imperial, sartorial metaphor for the upkeep of imagistic idolatry. What comes to the surface in Lewis's novel, for all his love of theatricality, is a disdain for the hypocrisy of such imagistic reverence, and recognition of the sham of visual illusion. That is why those who use and abuse these mechanisms are exposed and brutally eliminated in *The Monk*. However, when the convent is besieged "with persevering rage" and the rioters "battered the walls, threw lighted torches in at the windows, and swore that by break of day not a Nun of St. Clare's order should be left alive" (357), Lewis is making a political statement. He is drawing his readers' attention to the fact that the same people who now overthrow the convent only a few moments ago were the devoted "Dupes of deceptions so ridiculous" and prey to "monkish fetters," and are the same people who flocked to gaze at the parade, those whose hearts were "filled with reverence for religion" (345). Lewis exposes the ambivalence of such upheavals in the indiscriminate treatment of both the vile and the innocent, but he also exposes the extent to which it is the expectations of others that make a man what he is. The same mob who desires the glitter and bestows esteem on artifice, will indiscriminately turn against the figures of authority and veneration. The silent winner of the Lewisean Reign of Terror is multifaceted femininity, animalistic in appearance, beaten by experience, which triumphs without the Burkean glitter. Lewis's is a version of the French Revolution which un-robes it from unnecessary artefacts and idolatry, unglitters its heroines, and guillotines only the most vile personages, the Monk and the Prioress, allowing unadorned humanity to triumph.

All ideologies rely on images for the creation of their identity and authority in the popular consciousness, and Lewis's text can be read as grappling with images of women, brought to the public eye, often in their dutifully domestic robes, in his turbulent times, fecund in political, but also the resultant social changes. The same female breast, for centuries an object of religious veneration, as in numerous depictions of Madonna Lactans, was appropriated by official Jacobinism to become in "a secular reworking of traditional images of Virgin Mary" an icon of liberty and prosperity, "an emblem of egalitarian inclusiveness" as in Boizot's *La France Républicaine* (Schama 768). In a ridicule of such transformations, of conflicting ideologies patched to the same image, Lewis adds one more, the most celebrated, "beauteous Orb" of Matilda (65), the sight of which brings about Ambrosio's moral downfall. In a conflation of images which is a vortex of symbols from the religious, political and iconographic reservoir, Lewis creates a transgressive vision which condemns all fanatical zeal. He tears off layer after layer of meaning orbiting the notion of femininity, all in order to get to and elevate its most vital core—bare humanity.

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