

The Originality of *The Monk* – designed to introduce and contextualise Lewis's novel to an undergraduate class.

The narrative tone of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* is uneven: at times, it seems to recall the stern moralizing of an eighteenth century sermon, and at times, as its detractors have constantly noted, it seems to luxuriate in the very excesses it affects to condemn. The accusation of hypocrisy is not, of course, an unusual one in the eighteenth century, when the newly-emergent novel form was attracting the same kind of censure which the seventeenth-century Puritans directed at Shakespeare's playhouse. What gives the claim some momentum in Lewis's case lies in the circumstances of its production. In this essay, a brief survey of the influences on Lewis will be attempted in an effort to decide whether *The Monk* is an original and important literary document of the late eighteenth century, or if it represents merely an opportunistic cashing-in on a contemporary literary fashion.

A literary researcher would certainly have cause to doubt the originality of 'the most daring, the most shocking and the most Gothic of eighteenth-century English Gothic romances'¹ when Lewis's account of its composition is examined. In a letter to his mother he boasts of having written 'in the space of ten weeks, a romance of between three and four hundred pages octavo.'² If we add to this his well-attested recent reading of Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and the influence of Schiller and the *Schauerroman* on his work, even a cursory reading of *The Monk* reveals a high degree of borrowing, certainly in terms of Gothic sensibility.

What is perhaps most at issue is how much was 'lifted' by the prodigiously well-read Lewis from other printed sources, not only in terms of atmosphere and local colour, but also items of plot and characterisation. The most grievous blow on Lewis's originality was landed by J.M.S. Tompkins, who supported Herzfeld's claim that 'two-thirds of the book are taken, almost word for word, from a German romance.'³ Summers refutes that claim, and seems to show that the reverse is true, and that the German romance under consideration was in fact a translation of the latter part of *The Monk*. Nevertheless, the influence of contemporary German literature, particularly the *Schauerroman*, which itself borrowed from English Jacobean tragedy, is evident in Lewis's work.

Parallel to, and influenced by the Gothic mode in English fiction initiated by Walpoles's *The Castle of Otranto*, the German tradition of the *Schauerroman*, with its emphasis on sensational horrific images was clearly an influence on Lewis. Indeed, he acknowledges his debt in the 'Advertisement' that precedes the text of the novel. Interestingly, the element of the folk-lore which Lewis incorporates in his fiction is also acknowledged there. He notes that the Bleeding Nun 'is a tradition still credited in many parts of Germany; and I have been told that the ruins of the castle of Lauenstein, which she is supposed to

¹ C.A. Howells, *Love Mystery and Misery*, p.62

² quoted by Montague Summers, *The Gothic Quest*, p. 210

³ *The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800*, p.245

haunt, may yet been seen upon the borders of Thuringia.'⁴ Lewis's use of this element prefigures that of, for instance, Maturin in *Melmoth the Wanderer*.

Quite clearly, Lewis's borrowings did not stop there. Contemporary reviewers added their own lists of sources to those admitted by the author, suggesting that little in the plot is the author's own creation. Where, then, does its originality lie? Paradoxically, it can be argued that one of the most startlingly original features of *The Monk* grew out of the popularity of the work of another author, Samuel Richardson, in *Clarissa*. The claustrophobic setting, the theme of the imprisoned maiden, and the attempt to deal with psychosexual *mores* can all be discerned in Lewis. Where *The Monk* moves on from *Clarissa* is in the prominence it gives to the scenes of confrontation and the way in which the excesses of Ambrosio lend, ultimately, an air of fantasy to the whole: the reader is shocked by the rape of Clarissa, but it is an entirely different matter when we reach the rape of Antonia. Where Lewis's originality shows itself is in the blending of Richardsonian psychological detail with the excesses of the *Schauerroman*. In addition, the echoes of Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedy, which *are* just echoes in Radcliffe, are of course foregrounded in Lewis's narrative. As in the work of, say, Webster and Tourneur, Lewis uses the ready-made complex of associations surrounding clerical (especially Catholic) corruption, hot-blooded Latin temperaments and Faustian demonology, to provide a distancing exoticism to his narrative. As was the case with the audience at the Jacobean playhouse, the subscribers to the circulating library could read *The Monk* as a fantasy that had nothing to do with their own lives in England.

In fact, the nature of obsession – which is at the heart of *The Monk* – is arguably the feature that sets it apart from other Gothic romances and gives it lasting value, as well as redeeming it from the charge of pornography to which it was, and sometimes still is, subjected. In the central character of Ambrosio, we can see a man reduced to a cipher: as Howells points out, 'male sexual fantasy seems to be the informing principle of *The Monk*.'⁵ Lewis may have turned the tensions within Ambrosio to melodrama, but there is a discernible concern with psychological realism:

Guilt was new to him, and He fancied that every eye could read the transactions of the night upon his countenance. He strove to pray; His bosom no longer glowed with devotion; His thoughts insensibly wandered to Matilda's secret charms. But what He wanted in purity of heart, He supplied by exterior sanctity. The better to cloak his transgression, He redoubled his pretensions to the semblance of virtue, and never appeared more devoted to Heaven as since He had broken through his engagements. Thus did He unconsciously add Hypocrisy to perjury and incontinence;⁶

⁴ Lewis, *The Monk*, p.xvii

⁵ *Love Mystery and Misery*, p.65.

⁶ *The Monk*, p. 226.

This is crude, certainly, as is Lewis's lengthy description of Ambrosio's childhood, in which he explicitly links the deprivation he suffered as a child and a young man to the susceptibility he reveals in maturity. Nevertheless, in the context of the Gothic romance, which depended so much on exterior action, this kind of introspective detail marks a new departure, and in some respects moves the development of prose fiction away from romance to novel. It is remarkable how Radcliffe's one-dimensional villain Montoni in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* becomes the much more rounded Schedoni of *The Italian* following Radcliffe's reading of *The Monk*.