

## THE UNVEILING GAZE AND THE SUPERSTITION OF SEXUALITY IN *THE MONK*

Ahmet Süner<sup>1</sup>

---

### ABSTRACT

*In this paper, I analyze some key scenes in The Monk to argue that sexual desire, as represented in the text, acts as a superstition that defies the normativity of culture. The narrative may then be understood as the spectacularization of the conflict between unveiling desire and veiling cultural norm that becomes reformulated in the text as the conflict between superstition and religion. I rhetorically highlight the figure of the “veil” as the locus of contention between sexuality and cultural norm and contrast the gaze of Lorenzo with that of Ambrosio to show how the former gaze negotiates cultural norm, while the latter disavows it as they both veil and/or unveil their respective objects of desire.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Yaşar University, Department of English Language and Literature

## The Spectacle of Superstition and True Devotion

*The Monk* begins with an ironic rendering of the spectacle of the sermon to be given by Ambrosio at the Church of the Capuchins. Despite the remote time in which the narrative is supposed to take place (sometime perhaps in the fifteenth century, at the time of the Inquisitions), there is hardly an indication that the following lines at the very beginning of the narrative may not apply to our present time:

Scarcely had the Abbey-Bell tolled for five minutes, and already was the Church of the Capuchins thronged with Auditors. Do not encourage the idea that the Crowd was assembled either from motives of piety or thirst of information. But very few were influenced by those reasons; and in a city where superstition reigns with such despotic sway as in Madrid, to seek for true devotion would be a fruitless attempt. The Women came to show themselves, the Men to see the Women: Some were attracted to hear an Orator so celebrated; Some came because they had no better means of employing their time till the play began; Some from being assured that it would be impossible to find places in the Church; and one half of Madrid was brought thither by expecting to meet the other half. (Lewis, 2008, p.7)

The ironic gaze of the narrator contemporizes: we are told, in this story of many centuries ago, that superstition still “reigns with ...such despotic sway” in Madrid. There is no attempt to render Madrid of the past: the narrator situates the reader in a relation of contemporaneity with the city, which one might as well identify as the Madrid of the twenty-first century. The mention of “superstition” presumably manipulates the distance between those times of darkness in the past and our own enlightened times; and the “despotic sway” reminisces upon those retrograde practices of past oppression long overcome in the ever-improving progress of history.

Yet, this heavy emphasis on superstition remains unexplained and unmotivated, particularly in view of the contrast between this solemn remark on the despotic sway of superstition and the ironic cast of the following lines that describe the scene of a spectacle, or more precisely, the scene of the spectators. “Superstition” and “true devotion” set up an odd opposition, since the meaning of both terms appears ambiguous and somewhat overlapping. “True devotion” remains unexplained in the same way as “superstition” and there seems to be hardly anything in the novel that suggests a sense of opposition between superstition and “true devotion.” The supernatural elements are never explained away, as they would be in a Radcliffe novel: *The Monk* is overindulgent in its excessive use of the supernatural. In fact, “true devotion,” insofar as it is represented by the overly gullible nuns of the church, appears as a variation of superstition itself. It would also be hard to ascribe “true devotion” to the narrator of a novel that persistently flirts with the discourses of obscenity and blasphemy through its sensuous portrayals of sexual desire and its irreverent treatment of the Bible.

In light of the entire novel, it is best to consider the reference to “true devotion” in terms of an elaborate irony, a metanarrative device that discloses the duplicity of the narrator. The narrator, while being critical about the deficiency of true devotion, is perhaps as ignorant of it as the spectators around him. Indeed, his ironic gaze at the spectacle can be turned back upon him to reveal that he, himself, is an imposter of “true devotion.”

These opening lines initiate an endless play on the word “superstition,” which remains ironic throughout the narrative. In one revealing scene, the reference to “superstition” becomes truly preposterous: Matilda, the potion-and-spell-dealing sorceress employed by Satan, accuses Ambrosio, the monk, of being superstitious, when she sees him ponder the dire consequences of his immoral, blasphemous actions. She accuses the monk of being on the side of superstition when he becomes fleetingly swayed by considerations of true devotion.<sup>2</sup> Superstition, as seen in this instance, is *the* rhetorical figure of manipulation: no one, and certainly not the reader, wants to be on the side of superstition. In fact, the work of manipulation is visible in the very lines that precede the reference to superstition: “Do not encourage the idea that the Crowd was assembled either from motives of piety or thirst of information.” Considered in relation to the next sentence, both “motives of piety” and “thirst of information” seem to oppose superstition, but in two very different ways: while the “motives of piety” represent the “true devotion” of a distant past before enlightenment, the “thirst of information” appeals to the more scientific sensibilities of a disenchanted age, which continue to be those of our contemporary one.

The opposition between superstition and true devotion, perhaps, becomes less elusive when understood in relation to a much more obvious opposition that the ironic gaze of the narrator in these opening lines and in the first chapters explores: that between appearance and reality. This is also an opposition that constitutes the first modality of representation of *The Monk*, or its initial genre: social comedy. Perhaps, in keeping with the spirit of the genre, one observes an intense engagement with spectacle and spectacularity most explicitly here in the beginning, at the spectacular gathering in front of the church just before the spectacle of the sermon.<sup>3</sup> This spectacularization of the spectators may also be thought to suggest, at a metanarrative level, the spectacularization of readers and the readership of the novel, most clearly manifested in the direct

---

<sup>2</sup> Without elaborating on the function of “superstition,” Punter points out the inconsistencies in the representation of superstition in *The Monk*: “Lewis is at the same time inveighing against superstition and depicting its manifestations as real. In a sense, both [Lewis and Radcliffe] are playing a confidence trick on the reader, by using all the resources in their power to convince us of the reality of phantoms and then sneering at belief.”(2009, p. 67)

<sup>3</sup> Punter makes a similar point, noting that “[the reader] is required to see himself as a spectator at a dramatic entertainment which deliberately highlights and parades the more spectacular aspects of life.” (2009, p. 79) More generally, Miles observes that “Spectacle, not narrative, is Lewis’s motivating force.” (2010, p. 54)

address to readers, who become treated as the audience of a theatrical performance: “Do not encourage the idea that the Crowd was assembled either from motives of piety or thirst of information.” In the novel’s characteristic manner, irony proliferates: a link becomes forged between the crowd (“the Auditors”) and us, the readers, who are, with all likelihood *and* honesty, are not assembled from either of the reasons mentioned. In fact, we might not be that far from those ignorant spectators of the sermon ourselves: we pretend that we are contemplating a fifteenth century spectacle in Madrid, but we are only interested in it to the extent that we see it as a spectacle of our contemporary life, as suggested in the subtle and subtly manipulative rhetoric of contemporizing.

The opening lines hint at the theatrical arts, and particularly comedy: the spectators are whiling away their time at the church until “the play” begins, a remark that suggests the interchangeability of the spectacle of the sermon with that of the theater. The seats in the church seem to be unavailable in the same way the seats for a show may be sold out at a theatre, and the narrator consistently draws attention to the spectacular aspect of both the sermon and the spectators. Female spectators are made particularly spectacular: women show themselves, and men are there to see them. Significantly, the sexual aspect of the theatrical gathering in front of the church is mentioned immediately after the narrator observes the “despotic sway” of “superstition” and the lack of “true devotion.” Superstition oddly becomes associated with sexuality, and the narrator seems to be describing the curious state of things in a culture that cannot resolve the duality between the pious solemnity of the sermon and the superstitious frivolity of sexual desire. I would like to argue, in consequence, that it is the opposition between sexuality and cultural norm that gives shape to the otherwise meaningless opposition between superstition and “true devotion.” True devotion would imply conformity to the idealism necessitated by the occasion, but the ubiquitous sexual gaze, rendered superstitious, detracts from it.

Superstition may then be seen as a way of referring to the despotic sway of sexual desire, which makes the search for devotion to cultural norms fruitless. The superstition of sexuality purportedly leads to the corruption of culture, but the tone of light social comedy that characterizes the beginning of the narrative hardly suggests any heavy-handed social criticism. What is lamentable could equally be seen as the despotic sway of a culture that superstitiously impedes and opposes the more compelling and the more true-seeming devotion to desire. The novel is noncommittal concerning the questions of morality that it invokes in the opening lines, in which a vaguely moral opposition between superstition and devotion is or seems to be suggested. Rather, we are made to see, as in a social comedy of manners, how the “superstition” of sexual desire operates within the parameters of a culture which ideally requires “true devotion” to its norms.

### **Veiling/Unveiling Antonia: Lorenzo's Cultural Mediations of Desire**

The exploration of the interplay between sexual desire and cultural norm commences with the unabashedly sexual gaze projected on Antonia, whose character is little more than a theatrical allegory of virginity, innocence and chastity. The initial presentation of Antonia foregrounds the spectacular aspect of the object of the sexual gaze, but Antonia is a somewhat different spectacle; unlike other women in the spectacle of the church, she does not seem to want to show herself. The tantalizingly erotic description that follows seems to revel in playing with Antonia's figure, revealing and hiding it simultaneously, in order to manipulate and prolong desire:

The voice came from a female, the delicacy and elegance of whose figure inspired the Youths with the most lively curiosity to view the face to which it belonged. This satisfaction was denied them. Her features were hidden by a thick veil; But struggling through the crowd had deranged it sufficiently to discover a neck which for symmetry and beauty might have vied with the Medicean Venus. It was of the most dazzling whiteness, and received additional charms from being shaded by the tresses of her long fair hair, which descended in ringlets to her waist. Her figure was rather below than above the middle size: It was light and airy as that of an Hamadryad. Her bosom was carefully veiled. Her dress was white; it was fastened by a blue sash, and just permitted to peep out from under it a little foot of the most delicate proportions. A chaplet of large grains hung upon her arm, and her face was covered with a veil of thick black gauze. (Lewis, 2008, p. 9)

The satisfaction of "curiosity," which stands for desire, is denied by the veil, which, in turn, becomes the figure of culture. What we have here is a mild instance of voyeurism performed under the auspices of culture. The "lively" desires of the youths (Lorenzo and Don Christoval) need to be deferred, but such deferral hardly terminates the gaze, which seeks a venue, as it scans Antonia's figure, in order to unveil it. One suspects that this deferral or detour only increases desire; what is visible acquires "additional charms" when it is somewhat hidden, just like the dazzlingly white neck which is "shaded" by Antonia's hair or like the delicate foot which is barely or "just permitted" to "peep out from under" her blue sash.<sup>4</sup> This play between hiding and revealing, veiling and unveiling,

---

<sup>4</sup> In analyzing the preponderance of the theme of the veil in this passage, Molesworth notes that "Antonia's veil seems of a different variety, since the passage grants far more attention to the media of concealment (the veil itself, the tresses of Antonia's hair, her dress) than to the object concealed or to the idea signified." (2009, pp. 409-410) Molesworth's perspicacious observation reveals what is at stake in the representation of the body according to the dictates of cultural norm or "religio": the body must be veiled, clothed, swathed against the imposing claims of unraveling desire; it must inhabit an economy of dissimulation and revelation. A fully

can also be traced in the way the language performs the description: “Her bosom was carefully veiled” draws attention to itself because of its brevity amidst a chain of more elaborate phrasings, reflecting the need to notice it and, perhaps, the frustration of not being able to unveil and describe it in more detail other than pointing to its state of being carefully veiled. The omission of further description may perhaps be understood as a feigned attempt to conform to the conventions of propriety that must hold in the descriptions of the body; the language used to refer to the bosom, which is perhaps the most obvious eighteenth-century term to represent sexuality in general and female sexuality in particular, must be carefully veiled, censored and mentioned only in passing. Nevertheless, the description succeeds in conveying the sense of sexuality that it purportedly intends to veil: it exploits the sexual potential of the suggestion of veiling the bosom carefully or with care. The interplay between the veiled and the revealed results in the distraction from the purely sexual: desire, in the full circle that represents the movement of the gaze in the description—from the thick veil at the beginning to the veil of thick black gauze at the end—becomes mediated through culture. The censorship of culture or the figure of the veil gives a certain structure to desire, which works towards an unveiling of what cultural norm seeks to veil. Desire, however, must be curbed, channeled, rechanneled and sublimated; the unveiling is permissible only to a particular point, beyond which is simply perversity, or superstition.

In her article on the representation of the veil in *The Monk*,<sup>5</sup> Sedgwick criticizes the association of the veil with psychological depth and interiority, arguing instead for the metonymic association between the veil and the surface, by showing how the veil may be said to reveal, and hence to represent the (surface of the) flesh it is supposed to dissimulate, inciting sexual desire. Her study revolves around the representational freight of the ambiguous veil: “the veil that conceals and inhibits sexuality comes by the same gesture to represent it, both as a metonym of the thing covered and as a metaphor for the system of prohibitions by which sexual desire is enhanced and specified.” (1981, p. 256) I would argue, in relation to Sedgwick’s argument and in its partial acknowledgment, that the veil, more precisely, represents an *interface*, rather than a surface. This interface holds the mediating transactions between sexual desire and cultural norm, insofar as sexual desire has to reckon with, permeate, and mediate through the veil so as to conform with what Sedgwick refers to as “the system of prohibitions” that may well enhance sexual desire, as much as it may curb it. In fact, Lorenzo’s fixation on the veil and his subsequent dream of simultaneously veiling and unveiling, which I analyze in this paper, amply demonstrates the double potential of the veil as a catalyst of and an impediment to desire. I would like to underscore, however, the processes of mediations that, in

---

exposed body, placed outside the defenses and prohibitions of veiling *religio*, ultimately fosters terror, abomination and superstition.

<sup>5</sup> For another study on the veil in *The Monk*, see Kilgour, 2006, pp. 146-153.

the last instance, validate cultural norm insofar as they include the mediation of sexual desire through norm. In contrast, it is the superstition of sexuality that positions itself above and beyond cultural norm, striving to dispense with the sense of a preexisting “system of prohibitions,” which may equally be seen as a system of deferrals and, therefore, of enhancements. There is hardly any guarantee that such blatantly unmediated dismissal of cultural norm by superstitious desire, which rapaciously unveils its objects, may signal an intensity of pleasure unmet in the case of culturally mediated sexuality, as *The Monk* repeatedly illustrates through the depiction of Ambrosio’s sexual exploits that seem never to yield pleasure or satisfaction.

The description of Antonia, then, as the object of desire, becomes immediately mediated through the veiling of culture, which act as a check on sexual desire that would, without such mediation, potentially seek to devour its object. The narrative is relentlessly ironic in the way it shows how culture continues to veil sexual desire through further representations, transforming the object of desire into a culturally appropriate form of the “beloved.” The transformation begins shortly after the initial sighting of the veiled Antonia. Lorenzo, one of the youths captivated by Antonia’s beauty, becomes infatuated with her immediately, yet is unsure whether Antonia’s taciturnity stems from her “pride, discretion, timidity, or idiotism.” (Lewis, 2008, p. 11) He endeavors to unveil Antonia further: “he advance[s] his hand towards the Gauze,” but is prevented from lifting it by Antonia. The veil is soon removed and Lorenzo is finally granted the sight of Antonia’s face, whose spectacular beauty makes him forget the possibility that the rather inexpressive Antonia may suffer from idiocy. He becomes determined to marry Antonia, despite her lack of status and wealth. He justifies his intention to Don Christoval, his friend, who, upon hearing him, cannot help questioning him further:

“I should be a Villain, could I think of her on any other terms than marriage; and in truth She seems possessed of every quality requisite to make me happy in a Wife. Young, lovely, gentle, sensible...”

“Sensible? Why, She said nothing but “Yes” and “No”.”

“She did not say much more, I must confess—But then She always said “Yes” and “No” in the right place. (Lewis, 2008, p. 25)

It would be villainy or an act of perversity to push for the further unveiling of Antonia outside the act of marriage that alone would permit the ceremonial removal of the veil. It needs to be borne in mind that Lorenzo is one of the few ideal characters of the narrative and is characterized as a romantic hero of sorts, but ultimately turns into a side-character overshadowed by the villainous monk, Ambrosio. Lorenzo’s sexual interest in Antonia, therefore, must be veiled in acceptable forms of

sensibility and conduct. Antonia undergoes a series of idealizations in Lorenzo's estimation almost immediately, becoming both the ideal beloved and the ideal candidate for a spouse. Sexuality is reframed through the fantasy of love, and is to be consummated in the institution of marriage. The culturally sanctioned ideals of love and marriage cast a fantastic veil over the realities of the object of desire, creating an ironic distance between the figure exposed by desire and the same figure retouched by fantasy.

### **Lorenzo's Dream: Negotiating the Superstitious Unknown: An Instance of Veiled Unveiling**

True devotion to cultural norm necessitates the balancing of the demands of sexuality with those of culture. It is the "superstition" of the dream, however, that gives Lorenzo the opportunity to unveil Antonia further before the event of marriage. In a passage that ironically displays the contention between cultural norm and sexuality, we find Lorenzo still at the church after the sermon, ruminating over the fate of his sister, Agnes, who has taken the veil to join the convent, and over the absence of his beloved, Antonia, who has unknowingly ignited Lorenzo's infatuation by removing the veil from her face. Taking the veil in the text symbolizes an intemperate and even misguided form of devotion to cultural norm; consequently, Lorenzo seems to be at a loss while trying to make sense of his sister's self-veiling. He seems to be at an equal loss concerning the absence of Antonia, however, since he has only modestly unveiled the object of his desire, having for that purpose settled on the compromise and deferral of marriage perhaps a little too early. Sexuality is not allowed to stand over and beyond culture as "superstitio"; it is pushed back and repressed.<sup>6</sup> The dream, then, emerges as a further compromise that temporarily unveils the urgent demands of sexual desire, without dethroning cultural norm, thereby establishing its own superstition.

Lorenzo found himself unable to quit the Spot. The void left in his bosom by Antonia's absence, and his Sister's sacrifice...created that melancholy of mind, which accorded but too well with religious gloom surrounding him...The calm of the hour and solitude of the place contributed to nourish Lorenzo's disposition to melancholy. He threw

---

<sup>6</sup> It might be useful to engage the etymological sense of both religion and superstition in order to show how, in the course of the narrative, the superstitio(n) of sexuality strives to supersede the religio(n) of cultural norm. I would particularly like to highlight the sense of "standing above, over and beyond" of superstitio(n) in relation to religio(n) that relates to the social binding of cultural norm. While discussing the etymological sense of "superstition," Riess relates the term to the idea of "survival" of a particular belief even after it falls into contempt (1895, p. 41), which also suggests its being replaced or opposed by some other belief. As Riess also seems to suggest, it is hard to retrieve a meaning of superstition outside the opposition that it suggests with another belief that has proved to be more popular and powerful. The corresponding Greek term (*deisidaimon*), Riess tells us, "applies to the zealous worshipper of the gods" and in Plautus, the Latin *superstitiosus* "denotes a man gifted with prophetic power." But these vague designations seem to have been overshadowed by the more popular meaning, which derives from an opposition with a more established belief system or religio(n): "for the Romans, the use of *superstitio* [is] used for any foreign religion, and especially for the Jewish and Christian faiths" as in the writings of Pliny and Plutarch. (1895, p. 41)



himself upon a seat which stood near him, and abandoned himself to the delusions of his fancy. (Lewis, 2008, p. 27)

The “void” relates to the melancholy of mind and to religious gloom, but the same “void” also points to the repression of sexual energies left without an outlet in Lorenzo’s sensual bosom. Lorenzo’s melancholy, rendered both religious and sexual, reflects the gloomy prospect of having to forfeit sexual desire, a possibility which the consideration of the sister’s “sacrifice” strengthens. The “religious gloom” that surrounds Lorenzo may well be understood as expressive of cultural norm, as it interposes between sexual desire and its object and prohibits sexuality before matrimony. Cultural norm is religion also because it immediately relates to the etymological sense of “religio” as binding and rebinding social constraint.<sup>7</sup> Lorenzo, following the dictates of cultural norm, imposes on himself the constraint of matrimony, but this is an uneasy settlement that can hardly subdue the urgings of sexual desire which becomes manifest in the dream, or rather in the nightmare about matrimony that follows. Lorenzo “abandons himself to the delusions of his fancy”; significantly, the remark aligns fancy with delusion, suggesting a further alignment between dream and superstition. The remark, then, may be thought to anticipate the content of the dream, in which an evil agent of sexual desire, representing superstitio(n), engages in a fight with the forces of religion over Antonia’s veiled body.

The dream starts with the scene of matrimony, which also suggests another instance of veiling, this time a bridal one: “Antonia [is] arrayed in bridal white... blushing with all charms of Virgin Modesty...Half hoping, half fearing, Lorenzo gaze[s] upon the scene before him.” (Lewis, 2008, p. 27) Lorenzo’s conflicted emotions may be thought to reflect both his fear of marriage and the desire to consummate the marriage; his conflict becomes palpable when the preacher assigned to the ceremony asks Antonia where the bridegroom is. Lorenzo seems to have momentarily withdrawn himself from the dream; not seeing Lorenzo immediately, Antonia looks around “with anxiety” and Lorenzo “[i]nvoluntarily advance[s] a few steps from his concealment.” (Lewis, 2008, p. 27) Lorenzo’s prior concealment and the involuntariness of the manner in which he makes himself present at the wedding and in the dream all point to a sense of reluctance and uncertainty concerning his impulsive decision to marry Antonia. But Antonia continues to beckon him:

---

<sup>7</sup> My approach to religion is circumscribed by the analogical relationship that connects “religio” to binding cultural norm; hence, it is not invested in the debate that stems from a historical approach to *The Monk*, concerning the ways in which the representation of religion in the text maybe seen to reflect a particular ideological discourse on actual religion(s). For historical views that discuss *the Monk* in relation to Catholicism, see Miles, 2002, p. 84, Ellis, 2007, p. 84, Blakemore, 1998, p. 535, and Wright, 2007, p.89.

She saw [Lorenzo]; The blush of pleasure glowed upon her cheek; With a graceful motion of her hand She beckoned to him to advance. He disobeyed not the command; He flew towards her, and threw himself at her feet.

She retreated for a moment; Then gazing at him with unutterable delight; "Yes!" She exclaimed, "My Bridegroom! My destined Bridegroom!" She said, and hastened to throw herself into his arms. (Lewis, 2008, pp. 27-28)

This histrionic burst of emotion momentarily obliterates the ceremony, along with the preacher. In fact, one may as well say that no ceremony has ever taken place, and when Antonia addresses Lorenzo as her "destined bridegroom," she somewhat implies that he has not yet officially—that is, through the sanctioning of religion—become one. Antonia's blush that previously suggests "the charms of virgin modesty" becomes clearly sensualized when recast as "the blush of pleasure," and the scene begins to intimate sexuality before marriage, with Lorenzo flowing towards her and Antonia throwing herself in his arms. Their union, however, is hindered by an unknown agent of superstition:

But before He had time to receive her, an Unknown rushed between them. His form was gigantic; His complexion was swarthy, His eyes fierce and terrible; his Mouth breathed out volumes of fire; and on his forehead was written in legible characters — "Pride! Lust! Inhumanity!"

Antonia shrieked. The monster clasped her in his arms, and springing with her upon the Altar, tortured her with his odious caresses. She endeavoured in vain to escape from his embrace. (Lewis, 2008, p. 28)

The Unknown is of course Lorenzo himself, or rather the superstitious personification of his desire that demands immediate fulfillment, refusing the mediation of cultural norm in the form of religiously sanctioned matrimony.<sup>8</sup> This furiously sexual monster externalizes and embodies the guilt of unsanctified sexuality that Lorenzo disavows: it is he and not Lorenzo who is committed to the horror of ravaging virginal Antonia, desecrating the altar with his unstoppable advances. There is no

---

<sup>8</sup> In exploring "the moment at which the natural yields, cedes, gives way to the imperative solicitations of the supernatural" in *The Monk*, Brooks, who analyzes the novel's famed "Bleeding Nun" episode, suggests that the emergence of the supernatural elements in the novel is concomitant with the rise of sexual desire: "Throughout the novel the state of exacerbated passion—nearly always erotic passion—is what leads to the production and intercession of the supernatural...In *The Monk*, the forces of the supernatural enter the realm of human experience in response to man's excessive erotic drives, as a representation of the forces within himself which he must recognize and struggle with." (1973, p. 257)

uncertainty as to what this Unknown might represent: the allegory is legibly inscribed on his forehead, and, perhaps, too legibly, being punctuated with the requisite exclamation marks that cannot help suggesting irony. It is universal lust, proud and inhuman, that is inherent in the sexual gaze of Lorenzo, who is otherwise the very emblem of moderation, modesty and humanity. Despite all the odium that the scene suggests, Lorenzo's sexual gaze persists with the same persistence of a superstition that will not forfeit itself in the face of the incontrovertible revelations of "true" divinities:

...Lorenzo flew to her succour, but ere He had time to reach her, a loud burst of thunder was heard. Instantly, the Cathedral seemed crumbling into pieces; The Monks betook themselves to flight, shrieking fearfully; the Lamps were extinguished, the Altar sank down, and in its place appeared an abyss vomiting forth clouds of flame. Uttering a loud and terrible cry the Monster plunged into the Gulph, and in his fall attempted to drag Antonia with him. He strove in vain. Animated by supernatural powers She disengaged herself from his embrace; But her white Robe was left in his possession. Instantly a wing of brilliant splendour spread itself from either of Antonia's arms. She darted upwards, and while ascending cried to Lorenzo,  
"Friend! we shall meet above!"

At the same moment the Roof of the Cathedral opened; Harmonious voices pealed along the Vaults; and the glory into which Antonia was received, was composed of rays of such dazzling brightness, that Lorenzo was unable to sustain the gaze. His sight failed, and He sank upon the ground. (Lewis, 2008, p. 28)

The violence in the scene hints at the Unknown's violent sexual act, but any explicit reference to coitus or rape seems to have suffered the censorship of the dream and been replaced with extravagantly infernal imagery and symbolism, which implicate the destruction of the foundations of culture or of "religio" and its replacement with the reign of sexual "superstitio." The cathedral crumbles into pieces, the monks disperse, the altar sinks down; strange and sublime nature that harbors all the monstrous forces of sexual desire erupts into the scene to wreak havoc, and does so in a way that allegorically suggests the act of sexuality. When the altar sinks, it is replaced with "an abyss vomiting forth clouds of flame" and the Unknown, uttering "a loud and terrible cry" that evokes alternately a sense of desperation and ecstasy, "plunge[s] into the Gulph, and in his fall, attempt[s] to drag Antonia with him." It would be hard to miss the sexual connotations of the abyss, the "Gulph," the Unknown's plunge into it, or the vomited "clouds of flame" that comes from the abyss, which the altar has become during the sacrilegious act of unsanctified sexuality, and when the

“monster” wants to drag along Antonia in his fall, we understand the intended fall to be one that is decidedly lapsarian.

Lorenzo’s terrible nightmare comes to an end with the sacrifice of Antonia, which also evokes the sacrifice of Lorenzo’s sister, who takes the veil. Yet, this is also a happy ending for Lorenzo; the dream knows a way to negotiate desire even when such negotiation may have morbid consequences. Antonia becomes suspended between two equally formidable powers, that is, between abysmal superstition and heavenly grace, before being reclaimed by the latter. It is in this moment of suspension that she becomes completely unveiled, the white bridal robe left in the Unknown’s possession, permitting Lorenzo to contemplate her naked body. Lorenzo’s gaze must be more than a momentary one or a mere peek; it must take some time before the dazzling brightness of the heavens prevents Lorenzo from “sustain[ing] the gaze.” Whatever the duration of the gaze might be, Lorenzo seems to have fulfilled his desire to unveil Antonia, a desire that persists from the moment of their first encounter, during which he begins to remove the veil from her face. The dream, then, compromises the ravenous form of the Unknown’s sexuality, which seeks to establish the superstitious reign of desire, by substituting it with Lorenzo’s harmless voyeurism that goes almost undetected around cultural norm.

Significantly, the description of the dream immediately strives to veil Antonia’s naked body, by distracting (from) the sexual gaze: “Instantly a wing of brilliant splendour spread itself from either of Antonia’s arms,” a description, which, in a more unveiled universe, must stand for the revelation of her naked breasts. Having been sacrificed in the battle against the dark powers of the Unknown, who represents Lorenzo’s sexuality in both its irrepressible and superstitious form, Antonia instantly begins to assume the form of an angel ascending to the heavens. Her transformation into an angel demands that she be seen as representing “religio” (or the superstition that one calls “religio”) in the very same moment when she becomes completely disrobed and available for Lorenzo’s sexual gaze. Negotiations, mediations and reconciliations must persevere between pleasure and guilt, perversity and devoutness, desire and norm, veiling and unveiling both in wakefulness and in dreams: Lorenzo’s sexual gaze, therefore, must be hidden in the religious prodigy, which turns Antonia, the object of desire, into a martyred saint or an angel. The glory of an angel, however, seems too perverse an idea to sustain along with the glory of a sexual beauty; and one might indeed claim that Lorenzo is ultimately punished for his overreaching imagination by the ambiguously ecstatic “dazzling brightness of the heavens” which destroys Lorenzo’s dream-sight, blinding him and awakening him at once. Hence, the same heavenly brightness may also be thought to suggest the forceful light of reality that will not always tolerate the delusions of superstitious fancy.

The dream, then, displays the perversity of seeing Antonia as simultaneously a winged angel and a sex object; yet, such perversity remains disguised in a way that does not and cannot challenge

the reign of religio(n). The superstitious Unknown, who represents the particular disguise of the dream, is vanquished by the forces of religion, which transfer Antonia to a glorious afterlife; consequently *and* conveniently, Antonia becomes unavailable for any matrimonial prospects, including Lorenzo's much feared ones. The earthly wedding is completely destroyed, and Antonia's intimate address to Lorenzo ("My destined Bridegroom!") shifts to a more distant one ("Friend!"), as demanded by the solemnity of the glorious occasion that only vaguely foreshadows a conjugal meeting in heaven. The dream's ultimate tone is melancholy, but the melancholy, here, is not one of absolute loss; rather, Antonia is both lost and gained, or, gained and lost, within the fluctuating movement of mediations and negotiations between sexual desire and cultural norm.

### **Desacralizing The Madonna: "The Art of the Dark Spirit" of Superstitious Sexuality**

Ambrosio's reveries, however, are of a very different mold to Lorenzo's. He almost never relinquishes the effort to unveil his object of desire, and mediation appears to be merely a second thought that remains external to his thinking. The appreciation of material beauty, and in particular, woman's beauty, instigates the superstition of Ambrosio's subjective will, which vies to possess the object of desire regardless of the constraints and interdictions imposed by cultural and religious norm. Being a student of divinity, and hence, ideality, Ambrosio, the monk, is rather unschooled in the often duplicitous mediations between ideal norm and real desire that may call for hypocrisy or double-playing.<sup>9</sup> If his ruminations on the picture of the venerable Madonna are both perverse and perverted, this is because he cannot resolve the ambiguity of the representation as both the picture of a sensuous woman and of a religious figure, unlike Lorenzo, whose dream manages to negotiate Antonia's naked figure with that of an angel:

"What beauty in that countenance!" He continued after a silence of some minutes;  
"How graceful is the turn of that head! What sweetness, yet what majesty in her divine eyes! How softly her cheek reclines upon her hand! Can the Rose vie with the blush of

---

<sup>9</sup> Punter makes an insightful, albeit problematic observation concerning the theme of hypocrisy in the novel, without sufficiently elaborating on it, focusing instead on the representation of the same theme in Radcliffe's novels: "[B]ehind the novels [of Lewis and Radcliffe] is a concern with hypocrisy: with that fine dividing line between the kind of social and sexual hypocrisy which is encouraged by, and perhaps necessary to, regularized social intercourse, and that kind which is destructive and repressive." (2009, p. 70) That the destructive version of hypocrisy is represented by the monk, Ambrosio, has regrettably turned into a truism, also reiterated by Punter, in the absence of counterarguments. It is true that insofar as Ambrosio wants to retain his position in the capacity of a virtuous monk, he is guilty of hypocrisy. But, as the opening scene of the *Monk* suggests, such guilt is ubiquitous: indeed, the word "hypocrisy" may be democratically applied to the conduct of the larger part, if not all, of the audience attending the Monk's sermon. What may be truly destructive in the monk's conduct may be precisely the very disavowal of hypocrisy in the way it gives full rein to the forces of desire, without forcing them through the mediation of the system of "regularized" social intercourse, which, as Punter aptly describes, encourages and even necessitates hypocrisy as a practical mode of double-playing or acting.

her cheek? Can the Lily rival the whiteness of her hand? 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!...Away, impure ideas!...Never was Mortal formed so perfect as this picture...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!...Fear not, Ambrosio!...Reflect that you are exempted from Humanity's defects, and defy all the arts of the Spirits of Darkness..." (Lewis, 2008, pp. 40-41)

Ambrosio's gaze at the Madonna's picture at the beginning of the passage can hardly veil its sexual underpinnings: the rose and the lily, which are recalled from a clichéd set of literary conventions to describe the beauty of the represented woman, fail at distracting from and disguising his unbending sexual appetite. The contemplation of the rosy cheek reclining upon the lily hand only acts as a temporary check on the sway of desire; the rhetoric of beauty, manifest in the ironic sequence of two parallel rhetorical questions ("Can the Rose vie with the blush of her cheek? Can the Lily rival the whiteness of her hand?"), serves only to aggravate Ambrosio's sexual longing, which strives to destroy any sense of distance or obstacle between him and his object of desire, including rhetoric itself. As a result, the rhetoric breaks momentarily, before rapidly undergoing contamination through brazen sexual imagery that reflects scandalously "impure ideas." The cultural references of the Madonna become voided, when Ambrosio begins to see her as a "creature" to be possibly enjoyed according to his own will; and his covetousness receives a further emphasis when he declares his wish to "press with [his] lips the treasures of that snowy bosom." Ambrosio's gaze disavows the ideality of the contemplated object that dictates a detour through cultural norm; the figure's treasurable body promises immediate material enjoyment.

This scandalous stripping from the figure of all its (idealizing) cultural references is possible through the perverse superstition of sexuality that will not recognize the limitations imposed by cultural norm. A substantial part of Ambrosio's soliloquy strives to reestablish the rule of religio(n) over the persistent demands of sexuality; the ideas of "painter's skill" and of "divinity" are recalled as possible mediations that might assuage his inordinate "enthusiasm": both ideas, however, appear overly theoretical and unpersuasive. Ambrosio's denigration of his own desire concerns all the ideas that sexuality connotes: reality, femininity, mortality, humanity, and finally, superstition. In a statement that seeks reassurance against the destructive powers of sexuality, Ambrosio views himself as "exempted from Humanity's defects" and wants to "defy all the arts of the Spirits of Darkness." This explicit association between sexuality and superstition foreshadows the emergence

of the sorceress Matilda, who bears an exact physical resemblance to the representation of the Madonna in the picture and who accompanies Ambrosio inside the church in the undetectable, because transgendered disguise of a young male novitiate, Rosario, before she unveils her true identity as a woman who is emotionally and sexually obsessed with the monk. But the same association may also be read as an observation, ironically reminiscent of iconoclasm, on the inexorable ambiguity of art or artistic representation, as it concerns the representation of the sensual human figure. As long as the picture is offered to the defective human gaze for contemplation, it inevitably partakes in the propagation of the superstition of sexuality, regardless of its purported idealisms, making it impossible to determine for sure whether the picture belongs to the arts of darkness or of divinity.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Perverse Desire that Stands Beyond Language and Sometimes Devours it**

Unlike the picture of the Madonna, *The Monk* is not committed to any idealism: it knowingly manipulates the sexual gaze in order to expose its intrinsic superstition as it circumvents, transgresses and flouts cultural norm. The sexuality of Matilda cannot be mediated and deferred through culture; Matilda unveils herself to Ambrosio in what may be called both a reverse and perverse sequence that upsets conventions and triggers Ambrosio's unchecked sexual appetite. Having confessed her disguise as Rosario, without taking off the disguise of the habit, and fearing that she will not be able to see Ambrosio anymore, an infatuated Matilda feigns suicide with a dagger:

The Friar's eyes followed with dread the course of the dagger. [Matilda] had torn open her habit, and her bosom was half exposed. The weapon's point rested upon her left breast: And Oh! That was such a breast! The Moon-beams darting full upon it, enabled The Monk to observe its dazzling whiteness. His eye dwelt with insatiable avidity upon the beautiful Orb. A sensation till then unknown filled his heart with a mixture of anxiety and delight: A raging fire shot through every limb; The blood boiled in his veins, and a thousand wild wishes bewildered his imagination. (Lewis, 2008, p. 65)

The scene indulges in the exploitation of the voyeuristic gaze and its attendant pleasures, which seem only to be heightened through the proximity of the idea of self-inflicted violence and death.

---

<sup>10</sup> In relation to the same passage, Kilgour makes some apt, but brief and somewhat elliptical observations concerning the representation of art in the narrative. "To the idealist," she notes art is beautiful because it is not real; it remains pure and untouched in the realm of the mind. But this ideal will become real [in *The Monk*]." This is because, Kilgour continues, "art is perversely used as a medium of sexual seduction. The spiritual ideal is thus both opposed to a fleshly reality, and directly leads to it." (2006, p. 157) In fact, this "perverse" use of art is consistent throughout the narrative as might be seen in my following discussion of the references to the use of the Medicean Venus or mythological art, and works, more precisely, to evacuate the ideality of whatever is represented in order to reveal it as "fleshly reality" rendered available to a devouring voyeuristic gaze.

Significantly, Ambrosio has not yet seen Matilda's face, which remains hidden in the cowl of her habit even after she reveals her breast. Although the scene confirms the womanhood of cross-dressing Matilda, the mystery of her partially revealed body continues; Matilda only gradually unveils herself before finally revealing that she has the same face as the Madonna in the picture. The perverse way in which Matilda unveils her disguise as the male Rosario only accentuates sexual desire that will "tear open [the] habit" of religio. The passage exposes the mechanics of sexual desire that refuses to negotiate with cultural norm in general, and the conventions of literary language in particular. Language is not permitted to lead to any distraction from the object of desire, giving way, instead, to a scandalously and shockingly direct description; we are certainly far away from the carefully veiled language used to describe Antonia's veiled bosom. This directness reflects the perverse doggedness of the sexual gaze as it remains fixated on its object, trying to unveil it further and disavowing the censorship of cultural norm. The gaze also repudiates the state of melancholy that might result from recognizing its own limits in a possible negotiation with cultural norm.

What results, then, is the superstition of sexual desire, as it stands over its object, refusing to release its hold or surrender it to "religio." The object, in the hold of the gaze and placed at the very margin of culture, is made to feed from the senses and sensations of the beholder; it becomes sensationalized. This might be observed rhetorically in the sensationalism of the metaphor in the passage above: the "moon-beams" heighten the sight of the naked breast, accentuating its "dazzling whiteness" and transforming it into "a beauteous orb," which, in turn, evokes the orb that is the moon, as if returning to it after a full circle: moon-beams-whiteness-orb-moon. Yet, the rather elaborate metaphor becomes entirely eclipsed when coupled with Ambrosio's sensation of "insatiable avidity" which is also evident in "the treasures of that snowy bosom" that Ambrosio desires to press with his lips. Ambrosio's avidity and insatiability imply a voracious appetite which may also be said to apply to rhetoric: the superstition of sexuality devours metaphor. What is left from the otherwise graceful movement of metaphoric substitutions and metonymic associations between the moon and the breast is the mere shape of the orb; Ambrosio's sexual avidity strips everything else away. Just like "the treasures of the snowy bosom," the "beautiful orb" becomes comically and tantalizingly distasteful. The sensation of "insatiable avidity" overtakes the metaphor, taking over the object; consequently, the object is surrendered to the bare mechanics and bare metaphoricity of sensation. Not surprisingly, the "beauteous orb" is followed by "a sensation till then unknown" whereby the description of the object becomes equivalent to the observation of sensation. Metaphors continue: the heart fills, a fire rages and shoots through every limb, and blood boils with sensation; and, if all this happens without any hint of inappropriateness or comicality that characterizes the "beauteous orb," this is perhaps because all these clichéd metaphors are already chewed and devoured so that they may unobtrusively give way to the free flow of desire.



### **Towards a Pagan Unveiling: Antonia and Venus(es)**

The scene ends with Ambrosio calling Matilda an enchantress and beseeching her to “hold,” which may mean to refrain from taking her own life or from continuing to expose herself. As the later events in the narrative reveal, Matilda is indeed a sorceress who is employed by Satan and whose function is to propagate the superstition of sexuality. She soon becomes Ambrosio’s mistress, but when Ambrosio, ever insatiable and avid, loses interest in her sexually and becomes obsessed with sexually unavailable Antonia, Matilda resolves to become Ambrosio’s companion in perversity in what seems to be a spirit of resignation. She promises to help Ambrosio possess Antonia—at this point in the narrative, there is very little uncertainty regarding the sexual nature of such possession—only if he agrees to accompany her to the sepulcher to witness her ritualistic sorceries. Ambrosio is reluctant to accept Matilda’s offer, fearing it will involve “the arts of the spirits of darkness”; yet, he becomes fascinated by the superstitious device of the magical mirror, which Matilda shows him in order to tempt him to accept her offer. The mirror has the ability to reflect the current state of whoever is on the mind of the beholder, and when Ambrosio sees Antonia in the mirror as she is taking a bath, it becomes obvious that the mirror is a device of voyeuristic pleasures that is more likely to reflect Ambrosio’s “delusions of fancy” than Antonia’s reality. The scene in the mirror, which is revealed to Ambrosio’s gaze, both parallels and opposes Lorenzo’s dream of Antonia’s revelation:

The scene was a small closet belonging to her apartment. [Antonia] was undressing to bathe herself. The long tresses of her hair were already bound up. The amorous Monk had full opportunity to observe the voluptuous contours and symmetry of her person. She threw off her last garment, and advancing to the Bath prepared for her, She put her foot into the water. It struck cold, and She drew it back again. Though unconscious of being observed, an in-bred sense of modesty induced her to veil her charms; and She stood hesitating upon the brink, in the attitude of the Venus de Medicis. At this moment a tame Linnet flew towards her, nestled its head between her breasts, and nibbled them in wanton play. The smiling Antonia strove in vain to shake off the Bird, and at length raised her hands to drive it from its delightful harbour. Ambrosio could bear no more: His desires were worked up to phrenzy. (Lewis, 2008, p. 271)

This is the second reference to Venus de Medicis; the first reference occurs in the scene previously discussed, in which Lorenzo, who seeks out every opportunity to get a partial view of Antonia’s carefully veiled body, is granted a glimpse of the neck: “the crowd had deranged it sufficiently to

discover a neck which for symmetry and beauty might have vied with the Medicean Venus.” (Lewis, 2008, p. 9) But unlike the first reference, which merely recalls Antonia’s beautiful white neck, the second reference concerns the physical attitude of Venus and reflects the almost naked state of Antonia, who is ready to take a bath. Both descriptions refer to the Greco-Roman statue that is known as Medicean Venus or Venus de Medicis, but they may equally be thought to refer to Botticelli’s “The Birth of Venus,” one of the most renowned paintings of the Renaissance commissioned by the Medicis. Considering the similarities in the posture of the deity, it is obvious that the picture draws its inspiration for the physical representation of Venus from the Medicean Venus. There is one striking difference, however: the pictured Venus is physically less revealing than the sculpted one whose bashful arm gesture proves insufficient to veil her genitalia. Antonia in the scene is perhaps more similar to Botticelli’s Venus, who, despite being naked, succeeds in hiding herself more efficiently compared to the Medicean Venus. The painting depicts Venus as she is being drifted to the shore on a seashell by wind gods, who appear on the left of Venus. Another female figure on the right, who might be a nymph or a Grace, waits for her on the shore with a drapery in her hands, gesturing in a way that suggests her intention to veil the naked Venus.<sup>11</sup> While the theme of the painting is predominantly “pagan,” the movement of Venus towards the shore implicates the transition from a pagan state of naked physical exposure to a state of culture, and cultural norm, represented by the idea of veiling, which also evokes the Biblical story of original sin. The movement, then, may be thought to suggest the transition from a pagan idea of beauty, which shamelessly displays the naked body and inexorably incites voyeuristic pleasures, to a culturally mediated idealization of beauty that deploys the veil to drive away the suggestion of any explicit or “raw” notion of sexuality inherent in the display. The veil intends to allegorize beauty by distracting the sexual gaze so that Venus could become the personification of ideal beauty, and not just any arbitrary material instantiation of beauty that could be debased through projections of sexual

---

<sup>11</sup> In an extended study on the figure of Venus in Botticelli’s paintings, and particularly in “Primavera,” Gombrich intends to show how the figure may be related to a Neoplatonic understanding of Venus propounded by Marsilio Ficino, the mentor of Botticelli’s patron, as well as to other literary sources that may have had an impact on the particular representations of Venus. He quotes the description of Venus by Apuleius, a classical author, as a possible literary source of particular Venus representations:

After these there entered one of outstanding and wondrous beauty, whose ambrosian hue indicated Venus, as Venus was when she was a maiden; her naked and uncovered body showed her perfect beauty, for nothing but a flimsy silken garment veiled the lovely maiden. A prying wind now lovingly and lasciviously blew it aside so that the flower of her youth was revealed to the sight, now with a wanton breath made it cling to her, the more graphically to outline the voluptuous forms of her limbs. But the colour of the Goddess was of a twofold nature-her body was shining, because she comes from heaven, her garment azure, because she returns to the sea. (Quoted by Gombrich, 1945, p. 23)

Given the similarities between this passage and Lewis’ description of Antonia, one wonders whether Apuleius’ description might have served as one of Lewis’ copious plagiarisms.

interest. Venus will eventually be rendered to the shore of “religio,” which, in veiling the body, will overcome the pagan state of nakedness as well as the superstition of sexuality.

Contrary to the movement in the painting, however, Antonia in the scene above is drifted towards further paganism, further exposure: Ambrosio’s sexual gaze, rendered superstitious through the medium of the magical mirror, works to unveil her completely. Just like Venus, whose veiling gesture already reveals a pre-consciousness of the shore of cultural norm where bodies must be veiled, Antonia exhibits “an inbred sense of modesty [which] induce[s] her to veil her charms.” Unlike the painting, however, Antonia may be thought to be moving away from the shore of modesty as she tries, hesitatingly, to step into the bathing water in a series of erotic gestures: “She put her foot into the water. It struck cold, and She drew it back again.” Ambrosio’s desire is prolonged and whetted precisely by Antonia’s “inbred sense of modesty,” which, as virtue, functions as a reminder of cultural norm, and perhaps, religion. But his desire also dictates that such inapposite modesty be superseded so that she can be rendered fully available for his voyeuristic pleasures. The following may then be understood as a piece of pornographic paganism as suggested in the appearance of the linnet and its subsequent unveiling of Antonia, which recalls the Greek myth of “Leda and the Swan.” Echoing the myth, Antonia becomes simultaneously beleaguered and seduced by the “tame” linnet that quickly becomes untamable in this most explicit depiction of sexual foreplay, during which we observe her both struggling with it and smiling at its “wanton play.” Just like the superstitious Unknown in Lorenzo’s dream, the linnet is summoned to act out Ambrosio’s fantasies and may therefore be seen as a further invention of the superstition of sexuality that must destroy any “inbred sense of modesty.” Antonia, after trying unsuccessfully to drive away the linnet, “at length” raises her hand and surrenders, in complete nakedness, to Ambrosio’s sexual gaze. The “wanton play” also becomes reenacted rhetorically: when “the smiling Antonia str[ives] in vain to shake off the Bird,” one feels that the tame little linnet has grown in stature and begun to assume considerable powers as “the Bird,” now performing as an unambiguous phallic representation.

Unlike Lorenzo’s dream, however, the scene of Ambrosio’s fantastic gaze admits no concession to religio(n); there is only the “wanton play” of desire without any sense of guilt or shame and without any hint of distraction from the sexual gaze that will not recognize any boundaries in its excessive zeal to unveil its object.<sup>12</sup> Such unveiling is perverse to the extent that it continually seeks

---

<sup>12</sup> In her study of the workings of narrative desire in the *Monk*, Jones makes a useful distinction between good and bad desire, as these are represented by the virtuous characters in the novel and Ambrosio, respectively. Indicating the presence of an “ironic reversal,” she remarks that “[a]lthough Ambrosio’s designs are never frustrated, Ambrosio himself is never satisfied. For the [good characters], satisfaction is indeed possible, yet their wishes are repeatedly thwarted until the happy ending...Ambrosio’s narrative is plotted according to the dynamic of bad desire.” (1990, p. 136) It is precisely “good desire” that acknowledges delay and deferral; Ambrosio’s bad desire, however, repudiates deferral and refuses to be tied or bound to the narratives (and

to strip away the markers of cultural norm from its object; the sexual gaze repudiates any recognition of and negotiation with the norm. Granted, both the explicit references to Venus and the implicit ones to “Leda and the Swan” perform as reenactments of myth and consequently may be considered as cultural mediations, but they are recalled, in the narrative’s wanton play, to destroy the normativity of culture. Lorenzo’s eyes in his dream are ultimately blinded by the sight of the naked angel in a religious prodigy; in contrast, Ambrosio’s gaze becomes ever more searching and persistent as it strives to eliminate her sense of modesty in order to increase its pleasures. If Ambrosio’s gaze previously perverts the pictorial representation of The Madonna, seeking signs of sexuality instead of those of divinity or artistic achievement, this is because it deploys those figures of culture that possess, in comparison with the figure of The Madonna, infinitely more potential to be interpreted perversely. Venus is not to be thought of as a representation of ideal beauty, but as a pornographic item; “Leda and the Swan” is not a depiction of the inevitability of fate, but an alluring source of inspiration for sexual rapaciousness.

### **Unveiling the Shroud: Superseding the Gothic**

This perverse sexual gaze, in superstitiously standing over and above cultural norm, exposes the margins of culture where it plays wantonly with the boundaries between acceptability and abomination. *The Monk* is consistent in its scandalous zeal to push these boundaries, as may be attested in the scene in which Ambrosio rapes Antonia. The scene contains all the usual elements of gothic horror, with skeletons and corpses by Antonia’s side as she lies intoxicated in the sepulchral vaults of the convent, having drunk the magical potion of Matilda, who acts as Ambrosio’s partner in crime. This particular intoxication displays all the symptoms of death; Antonia, taken for dead, has been entombed alive. Ambrosio, who is resolved to take advantage of the situation which he has occasioned, lifts the grate over Antonia’s tomb and sees the enshrouded “sleeping beauty” that lies “by the side of three putrid half-corrupted Bodies” (Lewis, 2008, p. 379):

A lively red, the fore-runner of returning animation, had already spread itself over her cheek; and as wrapped in her shroud She reclined upon her funeral Bier, She seemed to smile at the Images of Death around her. While He gazed upon their rotting bones and disgusting figures, who perhaps were once as sweet and lovely, Ambrosio thought upon Elvira, by him reduced to the same state. As the memory of that horrid act glanced upon his mind, it was clouded with a gloomy horror. Yet it served but to strengthen his resolution to destroy Antonio’s honour. (Lewis, 2008, p. 379)

---

narrativity) of the ever binding “religio,” remaining external to it in a gesture of indifferent and only tangential (super-)standing.

By this time in the narrative, Ambrosio has killed Elvira who is Antonia's mother, but is not suspected of murder since Elvira is believed to have died of natural causes. Ambrosio's gaze is scandalously sexual in that it will not recognize the solemnity of the tomb as an impediment to desire; in fact, its gross irreverence of the circumstances intimates that it is not averse even to the possibility of necrophilia. The "lively red," which is "the forerunner of returning animation" implicitly sexualizes Antonia, whose reclining position and smile "at the Images of Death" seem to further incite Ambrosio's advances. Antonia's ambiguous smile suggests the return to life from the horror of death, but it also lends itself, through Ambrosio's distorting gaze, to the perverse suggestion that it mocks death in negating it. The gaze, as it is located at the fluid boundary between death and sexuality, seems to refuse to take death as a reference with respect to which life must be reasserted. Normatively speaking, desire must be vanquished in face of the "Images of Death," and the notion of life, indicated in the returning animation, must be retrieved from its opposition with the sight of the corpses that incite horror and disgust. In fact, the "Images of Death," as figured in the "rotting bones and disgusting figures," function as grave reminders of cultural norm. If life returns, it must do so from the culturally marked margin of death, recognizing its finitude and acknowledging mortality. Therefore, the gothic scene with all its horror and disgust is to be viewed as a scene of humanity, in which human finitude must be constituted both in recognition of and in contradistinction to the "Images of Death."

The gothic character of the scene, however, becomes overshadowed by Ambrosio's scandalous refusal to mediate life through death, as this happens in an interesting movement of thought in which the rotting bones and disgusting figures that lie beside Antonia incite Ambrosio's memory of his having murdered Elvira. Through its alliance with the images of death, the memory is supposed to engender a sense of guilt and of conscience; yet, such sense becomes immediately obliterated by the force of Ambrosio's desire that contaminates even those rotting bones and disgusting figures with the suggestion of sexuality. When Ambrosio "gaze[s] upon [the] rotting bones and disgusting figures, who perhaps were once as sweet and lovely [as Antonia]," it is clear that the imagined sweetness and loveliness must yield the comparison between images of death with those of life, which would, in turn, suggest the human(istic) notion of finitude. The rhetoric, however, only feebly veils the sexual implications of the same sweetness and loveliness which describe Antonia as she is held in Ambrosio's unrelenting sexual gaze. The sexual, then, spills onto the images of death, leading to endless perversion; the potentially humanizing memory proves to be inconsequential; and, even worse, it further instigates Ambrosio to proceed with his resolution to rape Antonia. The sexually charged sensations of sweetness and loveliness stand over memory, preventing any mnemonic "deepening" or any mediation through time and death. Desire evades memory and death, but it also evades gothic horror. Such evasion underscores the perversity of the superstition of

sexuality, which has the potential to supersede any humanly measure of emotions as such emotions are normally (and normatively) engendered by particular situations or circumstances. Even the gothic setting of the tombs, skeletons and putrid bodies proves to be insufficient to contain Ambrosio's desire as he seeks to unveil Antonia's shroud:

...He repeated his embraces, and permitted himself the most indecent liberties...[Antonia] was sensible of her danger, forced herself from his arms, and her shroud being her only garment, She wrapped it closely round her. (Lewis, 2008, p. 382)

Antonia's shroud becomes the symbol of cultural norm, just like in the preceding instances where various other veils perform a similar function.<sup>13</sup> This ultimate veil that accompanies the body to the tomb is also charged with the echoes of the notions of finitude, mortality and humanity; if it evokes the horizon of death with respect to which there is no protection—the shroud surely cannot prevent the natural decomposition of the corpse—it can only do so since it veils the materiality of the body. The feeble and certainly futile protection it offers is perhaps not so much against death as against the superstitious gaze that, tempted by the material body, may indeed be distracted from all those ideal considerations of life and death. Ambrosio's is precisely such a gaze; it will not heed any sign, symbol, image of death; even more, it will not at all recognize the gothic setting as a limit to desire. Antonia's desperate cry, therefore, may be thought to reflect Ambrosio's utter indifference regarding the gothic:

“Unhand me, Father!” [Antonia] cried, her honest indignation tempered by alarm at her unprotected position; “Why have you brought me to this place? Its appearance freezes me with horror! Convey me from hence, if you have the least sense of pity and humanity” (Lewis, 2008, 382)

Something is horribly amiss; the terrible scene cannot generate in Ambrosio the Aristotelian emotions of horror and pity; and as a consequence, humanity fails. What is monstrous in this scene is not just the crime of rape, but also the misrecognition of the gothic setting, which is hence incapable of returning a sense of humanity. Such misrecognition becomes further underscored in an excessively strange remark, so ludicrously obvious that it requires an explanation:

She shrieked for assistance with all her strength. The aspect of the Vault, the pale glimmering of the Lamp, the surrounding obscurity, the sight of the Tomb, and the

---

<sup>13</sup> While discussing Ambrosio's desire in relation to Antonia, Brooks notes that “Ambrosio with growing urgency discovers the need to violate, defile, to soil and profane the being who has come to represent for him the summum of erotic pleasure precisely because she is most clothed in the aura of the Sacred, and most protected by taboo.” (1973, p. 259) This present instance, in which the shrouded Antonia “is clothed in the aura of the Sacred and most protected by taboo,” illustrates, in the very extreme, Ambrosio's dogged refusal to relinquish his desire.

objects of mortality which met her eyes on either side, were ill-calculated to inspire her with those emotions, by which the Friar was agitated. (Lewis, 2008, p. 383)

Obviously, Antonia is not sexually excited, and cannot be excited, given the gothic setting that includes obscurely lit vaults and tombs and other “objects of mortality.” Antonia’s unwillingness functions to set off, by way of establishing contrast, Ambrosio’s unwavering desire that upsets all conventions of sexuality. These conventions are hinted at in the veiled reference to the economy of emotions; if the list of the gothic effects in the scene is “ill-calculated to inspire [Antonia] with [sexual] emotions,” this is because they succeed in engendering the anticipated emotions of horror in Antonia. Not observing the normative economy of emotional calculation, measure or convention, Ambrosio’s sexual desire places him in a relation of excess in relation to the gothic excess surrounding him.

It is, then, possible to view this episode, where the shroud is unveiled, as another, albeit extreme, example of the narrative’s preoccupation with the superstitio(n) of sexuality with respect to the religio(n) of cultural norm. What is unique in this example is the way in which Ambrosio’s sexual desire is made to stand above the gothic setting, which, with its horrifying objects of mortality, images of death and putrid bodies, is here to reenact cultural norm by way of marking a limit or a boundary. It is from this boundary that the human must return (to himself/herself) with a calculated and measured sense of emotion. That one experiences an emotion often associated with excess, i.e. horror, in this gothic boundary is perhaps less significant than the humanizing return to the normative measure of emotions. Despite all its excess, therefore, the gothic may readily become an expression of religio insofar as it points to the field of calculated emotion. The horror of sexuality, however, consists in the possibility that it may lie beyond all calculations of horror and hence circumvent the gothic, which must otherwise work to dissolve or curb it. Desire may be monstrous precisely because it may prove to be monstrously indifferent to what is normatively monstrous.

## References

- Blakemore, Steven. (1998). Matthew Lewis's Black Mass: Sexual, Religious Inversion in The Monk. *Studies in the Novel*, 30 (4): 521-539.
- Brooks, Peter. (1973). Virtue and Terror: The Monk. *ELH*, 40 (2): 249-263.
- Ellis, Markman. (2007). *The History of Gothic Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Gombrich, E.H. (1945). Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Neoplatonic Symbolism of His Circle. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 8: 7-60.
- Jones, Wendy. (1990). Stories of Desire in The Monk. *ELH*, 57 (1): 129-150.
- Kilgour Maggie. (2006). *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Lewis, Matthew. (2008). Oxford: Oxford World's Classics.
- Miles Robert. (2002). Europhobia: The Catholic Other in Horace Walpole and Charles Maturin. In Avril Horner (Ed.), *European Gothic*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- . (2010) The 1790s: The Effulgence of the Gothic. In Jerrold E. Hogle (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Molesworth, Jesse M. (2009). Syllepsis, Mimesis, Simulacrum: The Monk and the Grammar of Authenticity. *Criticism*, 51 (3): 401-423.
- Punter David. (2009). *The Literature of Terror, Vol.1*. Essex: Longman.
- Riess Ernst. (1895). On Ancient Superstition. *Transactions of the American Philological Association (1869-1896)*, 26: 40-55.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. (1981). The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel. *PMLA*, 96 (2): 255-270.
- Wright Angela. (2007). *Gothic Fiction: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.