



## Gothic Hybridities and Narrative Mysteries: Matthew Lewis's undeclared Sources and Influences from the Ancient Greeks to the Renaissance in *The Monk*

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### Abstract:

A Gothic story full of horror and mystery featuring picaresque situations that intermingle with seemingly sentimental moments, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* is a novel that creates misleading expectations. Characterised by different lines of narration, the text contains original narratological strategies. Initially a romantic comedy, it then turns into a nightmare, in particular in the claustrophobic and dramatic description of the family tragedy, involving incest and murder. Even though Lewis describes some sources in the prologue, he tends to mask the multiplicity of his influences rather ambiguously. The aim of this study is to demonstrate that among the various sources the author may have used, a Greek classical mould becomes evident especially in the last chapters and in the dramatic denouement of the narration. Among the hybridities featured in the text, Euripides' plays seem to have provided a variety of precious material for the description of the novel's deepest horrors in the finale when the main hero succumbs in a tragic way. By describing a puzzling and arid landscape announcing a fatal doom, Lewis also demonstrated the influence of Renaissance masters in the iconography of his complex and ambiguous novel.

**Key words:** Matthew Lewis, The Monk, sources, gothic

## SOME NARRATOLOGICAL ASPECTS IN LEWIS<sup>1</sup>

Like other Gothic authors such as Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, William Beckford and Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis generally uses the third person narrative in *The Monk* (1796). One exception is Raymond's story, which is narrated in the first person.<sup>2</sup> Lewis's narrative experiment was not totally new: Adeline's story in *The Romance of Forest* (1791) by Radcliffe was told in the first person whereas the whole story was narrated in the third person. Another peculiar narrative strategy could be found in Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1783) where the author interestingly experimented with a first person narration with a limited perception to convey a sense of claustrophobia. Lewis's narrative system is quite complex as his text introduces different levels of third-person narrations, which are both outside and inside the characters' viewpoints. One interesting example is in the very beginning of the novel where we can observe the scene as if we were inside the church of the Capuchins among the congregation (*The Monk* 7). The point of view progressively moves near some characters in the congregation waiting for abbot Ambrosio's to give one of his inspiring speeches. They are Leonella and her niece Antonia. Then the perspective moves with Don Christoval and his friend

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<sup>1</sup> This article is included in one of the chapters of my PhD thesis. I first introduced the ideas included in this article during a conference at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in February 2015 when I also described the progress of my doctoral dissertation. I am deeply grateful to Professor Sara Martín for her precious suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Lewis developed three major love plots in his novel that initially proceed with a sort of libertine red line, which recalls the French novels and comedies of the eighteenth century. The first is the love attraction between Lorenzo and Antonia, the second is the amorous relationship between Raymond and Agnes, and the third is the secret passion exploding between Ambrosio and Matilda inside the monastery. It is when the sentimental relationships are interrupted by different antagonists (both consciously and unconsciously interfering with the actions) that the various plots progressively change into tragedies.

Lorenzo de Medina who become interested in the girl (8). The point of view on the scene is from within the male characters, and the reader can hear the voice coming from the observed younger female character, Antonia, which is full of “delicacy and elegance” (9). At the end of the church scene when Ambrosio’s sermon has been completed, we follow Lorenzo’s viewpoint, whereas some pages later we shift to the the female characters who meet a gypsy: in this case the point of view belongs to Antonia, who observes the scene, listens to the gypsy’s song and its horrible omen (35), without really understanding it. A further example of limited perspective is when the reader can follow Raymond in his dangerous adventure in the Black Forest inn. The reader is empathically petrified when the *banditti* are going to kill Raymond (107). Another interesting narratological aspect is that Lewis never allows the reader to observe the scene from a special character: Matilda’s perspective is completely unknown whenever the character is present, thus increasing the ambiguity and reinforcing the halo of secrecy, especially when we still believe her to be a male novice. “A sort of mystery enveloped this Youth [...] and no one had ever seen his face” (*The Monk* 41-42). The binomial duality of Rosario-Matilda lies in the character’s lack of identity (after being introduced by “a Stranger [...] of distinguished rank”, he/she had been abandoned at the monastery door). Moreover, his/her undefined gender (first male then female) and his/her invisible presence (Ambrosio is apparently the only one interacting with Rosario/Matilda<sup>3</sup>) increase the uncertainty connected with such a mysterious

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<sup>3</sup> Rosario is a female name in Spanish, but it is a male name in Italy. On various occasions the characters, who are supposedly all Spanish (as the actions mostly take place in Madrid), utter Italian words. Matthew Lewis was probably more familiar with Italian than Spanish (we know from his correspondence that he read the *Orlando Furioso* and other Italian works in the original version), but he probably had the Anglo-Saxon tendency to mingle the two languages. The duality Rosario/Matilda may not be understood by a native Spanish speaker.

figure. Therefore, the character's real nature is an enigma that can never be fully grasped.

Lewis originally introduces parallel plots and subplots, a strategy that had been used by William Godwin in *Caleb Williams* (1794) to make the story less linear and more ambiguous. The text-within-a-text providing a complication of past events that have to be deciphered, is an original narrative methodology, which would be later absorbed by Victorian novelists, such as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1848) or Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). I would argue that despite the religious tension felt by the characters throughout the story, other hypotheses seem suitable for Lewis, who demonstrates a systematic form of narrative hybridism. According to Peter Brooks, Lewis created stories-within-the-story to convey deeper concepts and introduce the supernatural. The Bleeding Nun and the Erring Jew are the most frightening episodes. These mysterious characters are not real people but embody supernatural entities. Their introduction is a technical device with "a functional role" (Brooks 254) to justify the supernatural element that enters Ambrosio's plot as well. Lewis's micro-stories deviate from the principal text. However, they also reflect the main plot's future events as a sort of *composition en abîme* whose perfect representation would be Jan van Eyck's *The Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife*. The scene of the supposed ceremony is perfectly reflected in quite smaller dimensions within the convex mirror hanging behind the two protagonists of the painting.<sup>4</sup> Radcliffe's amply criticized *bathos*, followed by a fall in the narrative tension, where mystery is rationalized in the finale, is opposed to

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<sup>4</sup> Created in 1434 by the Dutch Jan van Eyck, active between 1422 and 1441, now in the National Gallery of London, the painting has been named in different ways: *The Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife*, *The Arnolfini Marriage* (Erika Langmuir 44), and most recently *The Arnolfini Portrait* in the National Gallery Official website. The painting has been given different names because of the difficulty of clearly interpreting its meaning.

Lewis's *pathos* of his unbearably violent contents. Radcliffe's soothing conclusion are replaced by a tumultuous closure in Lewis.<sup>5</sup>

## THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND CLASSICAL DISCOURSE

Lord Henry Home Kames had addressed the preface of his *Elements of Criticism* to King George III in 1761. Kames reinforced his commitment to the aesthetic of civic humanism. Having identified a lack in the nation's education, he proposed the "support of the arts evinced by Ancient Greece" as Robert Miles highlights in "The Eye of Power" (18). The impact of John Locke's theory of the senses had brought about the philosophical precept of the "ideal presence", exalted by Kames, founded on the primacy of sight and the importance of memory. This theory may partially clarify the growing importance of the "visual" in eighteenth-century art and literature. What is most important is that according to Kames, the emphasis on Ancient Greece's ideals might have contributed to the improvement of national education by means of the "Ideal Presence". Like many of his contemporaries, he considered that Classical culture was still a symbol of knowledge, and was deemed to improve society. Kames desired to transmit this form of elevated culture to all social classes. Nevertheless, his allegations were idealistic but difficult to put into practice as Classicism, both Greek and Latin, was intrinsic to upper-class education. In the changing flux of history and literature, scholars in Europe and in Britain had steadily exalted the importance of Antiquity, which could be appreciated in the original form or in translations during all

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<sup>5</sup> Radcliffe is known for her rational explanations of the supernatural, a characteristic that even becomes obsessive in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1994). However, *The Romance of the Forest* contains mysterious visions and telepathic dreams. The supernatural remains lingering until the end and beyond (I have discussed Radcliffe's ambiguous supernatural in other articles and my doctoral dissertation).

the decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, and Samuel Johnson considered the Classics as a never-ending source for literary creations. Addison is coincidentally one of the writers mentioned in the prologue to Lewis's novel, called "Advertisement to *The Monk*", which represented a formal, however incomplete, confession of the sources Lewis had used.<sup>7</sup> Lewis's "advertisement" was probably meant to justify the hybridities and the plagiarisms in the text that the author artificially simplified in just four works.<sup>8</sup> One of them was the short story of *The Santon Barsisa*, published on 31 August 1713 in *The Guardian*, number 148. It is an anecdote (originally called "apophthegm") on human hypocrisy. The short Latin epigraph, which introduces Addison's tale, was taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (IV, 428), and featured goddess Athena's sibylline sentence, stating that "it is useful to learn from our enemies as well". The story is about a holy man, called santon Barsisa, a hermit of moral perfection. One day he

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<sup>6</sup> Translations made by different writers of one same work, were produced during the eighteenth century contributing to cultural dissemination of the Classics. John Dryden's and Alexander Pope's translations were steadily read throughout the century. All classical authors were popular during the whole of the eighteenth century. "The activity of translation is quite expressly the animating power in the English poetic tradition, and the decisive influence in canon-formation" (Stuart Gillespie and David Hopkins 19). The authors also argue that literary translations determined the progress of culture by introducing both the known and the unknown. Texts such as Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779-1781) and *Works of the English Poets, from Chaucer to Cowper* (edited by Alexander Chalmers 1810) provide evidence of the vast quantity of British poets' literary translations, which had a "profound influence on the embryonic English novel" (Adam Rounce 327).

<sup>7</sup> The story, originally included in *The Guardian* in 1713, was published again in 1822, edited by A. Chalmers, who indicated that the anecdote should be attributed to Steele, not to Addison (296).

<sup>8</sup> The literary premise by Lewis was particularly astute and served to hide his multiple sources. A text he does not mention is Jacques Cazotte's *Le Diable Amoureux* (1772), whose analogies with the novel by Lewis are blatant and were noticed by a number of reviews, in particular the one in *The Monthly Review*, Number 23, (August 1797), as reported by Markman Ellis (101) and Nick Groom (XXV). Cazotte's novel contains differences as well. The protagonist is less naïve than Ambrosio and his dialogues with the devil's emissary have a strong philosophical connotation. Cazotte (1719-1792), who had become part of the Illuminati, was guillotined in 1792. He is considered the initiator of the novels of 'fantaisie'.

requested that the Caliph's daughter, seriously ill, be brought to his cavern to cure her. In fact, the old man had secretly been advised by the devil in person to enjoy her beautiful body while she was unconscious. After his lustful act, Barsisa killed the girl, but he was discovered and condemned to death. He asked the devil for help while climbing the gibbet. Despite his promise to save him, the devil took his soul, but let him die (*The Guardian* 296-300). The short moral fable was meant as a meditation on falsity as well as the pernicious influence of devilish forces, even in the best human beings. It also shows the imperceptible but steady line that unites different writers and currents throughout the eighteenth century. Addison's (or maybe Steele's) short story follows the canons of effective brevity, which characterized many eighteenth-century and Enlightenment authors: he poses an assortment of literary precepts that include a classical approach adapted to a moral theme, placed in an Oriental setting. Interestingly, each cultural element in Addison's story will be differently developed during the eighteenth century.

Recent critical analyses have encountered difficulties separating the neoclassical Augustan age, the Enlightenment, Pre-Romanticism and Romanticism. Traditional delimitations of the various literary waves are becoming less clear-cut insofar as research progresses and discovers new unexpected analogies between authors that originally seemed incompatible.<sup>9</sup> A further confirmation of the deep connection between apparently incompatible literary movements has been provided by the analysis of Addison's articles in *The Spectator* "devoted to exploring the imagination (Nos 411-21), which attempt to build an aesthetic upon Locke's distinctions between primary and secondary qualities of objects and between real and nominal essences" (Peter Walmsley 44). Even more interesting is the

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<sup>9</sup> Gillespie's study on English translation and literary reception (2011) is illuminating to better understand the evolution of literary history.

fact that “The confluence of concerns – death, imagination(...) – pervade *The Spectator*, as both Addison and Steele return again and again, to themes of ghosts, the good death, and appropriate mourning” (45). Interestingly, what we discover is that imagination, which was both a philosophical development and an inheritance from the Ancient Classics, actually dominated the eighteenth century and not only the Gothic or the Romantic period. I would argue that the Gothic was one of most evident consequences of that latent passion for mystery, which was however imbued with Classicism. The British Augustan Age and the French Enlightenment brought about new scientific, philosophical, cultural, and literary masterpieces but at the same time promoted the appreciation of great works belonging to Antiquity and to other periods such the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Dante, Boccaccio, Ariosto were recognized to be great literary role-models belonging to an ideal era that was still considered as a single period, without the distinctions that were determined during the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

Lewis's desire to shock and frighten was not only derived from British and European literary examples that had dominated the eighteenth century but was also determined by tragic classical contexts that he had studied in his formative years. That classical inspiration was essential for writing was reiterated by various authors and essayists of the time. William Duff praised the Antiquity Muse in his *Essay on Genius* written in 1767. “It is likewise to be observed that we regard the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as works of genius, not only because there appears an astonishing display of Imagination in the invention of characters and incidents in those admired productions, but

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<sup>10</sup> Jo Tollebeek highlighted that *The Life of Lorenzo de Medici* (1795) by William Roscoe (1753-1831) and the *Histoire des républiques italiennes au moyen âge* (1807-26) by the Swiss Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi (1773-1842) introduced a special periodization and the division between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, a difference that was later developed the French historian Jules Michelet (1798-1874) that is considered as “the inventor of the concept” of Renaissance (254).

also because that imagination is regulated by the nicest judgment" (24). Duff also claims that genius is the result of education and is based on three ingredients, Imagination, Reason and Taste. Reason can control imagination and taste gives the right measure to both. Gotthold Lessing's unfinished study on classical art (and indirectly classical literature), *The Laocoön*, highlighted the relevance of classical representation: "The painter should study more precisely the work of the best painter among poets, of the poet who had the best descriptive talent, Homer, whose work is like a second nature because of its perfect representation of nature" (91).<sup>11</sup> Lessing found that painters themselves had to imitate the greatest painters of all, who actually were the poets. He claimed that the unparalleled beauty of ancient Greek and Roman architecture could only be challenged by Homer, Virgil and other classical authors' rare and superior beauty. Johan J. Winckelmann's works on Greek and Latin Antiquity had exalted the precious teachings of the Classics and launched the germ of Neo-classicism. Being part of the affluent elite, Lewis was not exempt from the cultural force of the Classics. It is true that he may have received multiple cultural influences both at home and abroad. However, his basic mental structure was moulded by the knowledge of classical authors.

## DIALECTICS OF ANTIQUITY, EURIPIDES AND GREEK DRAMA

*The Monk* intrinsically reveals that classical learning had a preponderant weight; Ambrosio, Antonia and her (their) mother Elvira are united by a tragic fate. The chain of guilt cast upon

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<sup>11</sup> "Le peintre doit étudier plus précisément l'œuvre du plus grand peintre parmi les poètes, du poète qui posséda le plus talent plastique, c'est-à-dire celle d'Homère, œuvre qui fait figure d'une seconde nature, tant la représentation qu'il fait de la nature est parfaite". The page number corresponds to the French edition. The translation from the French is my own.

the three characters is complicated. Apart from marrying above her social level, Elvira abandoned her first-born Ambrosio, and transformed him into an orphan, destined to years of solitude in a monastery. Ann Williams considers this aspect the source of Ambrosio's unconscious hate and desire for revenge, making him a Gothic version of a tragic *Oedipus*. This fatality is one of the tragic mistakes that involve Elvira's responsibility for her family's destiny. She is equally guilty towards her daughter because the girl's education is based on censorship that dooms Antonia to dangerous ignorance of the world's cruelty. Because of her linguistic and social dumbness, Antonia becomes insensitive to clearly uttered messages that concern her. Elvira's incomprehensible mistake is when she interrupts the idyll between Antonia and Lorenzo de Medina and imposes a cruel separation. Her misunderstanding of events is even more dangerous than Antonia's cognitive "inertia" as Robert Miles defines the girl's lack of understanding in *Gothic Writing* (156). In fact, Lorenzo is the only one who could have helped Elvira obtain her inheritance and could have protected Antonia from evil. The tragic family circle succumbs to Ambrosio destroying his own blood - a terrible predestination that the hypocrisy of "void repentance", as Williams and Elisabeth Napier call it, does not preserve him from final horror. The three characters' fate involves a sort of tragic mythology, which denotes classical prominence in the work. The matricide scene is disturbing, conveying gory details that are thrown at the readers, surrounded by an aura of excessive naturalism. The genesis of *The Monk*'s horrible scenes is not simply dictated by juvenile inexperience or a kind of provocative experimentation. I would argue that the mother's murder transcend the novel boundaries to travel back in place and time in order to reach the tragic *locus* of a mythical past. My claim is that Lewis created horrid images that could be found in Greek tragedies.

Aristotle considered *pathos* as tragedy's essential ingredient. Lewis does not follow all Aristotelian rules strictly. However, the horror of events that progressively degenerate into a final catastrophe involving innocent victims, complies with the Aristotelian dictum. Lewis also adheres to Seneca's dramatic criterion, which includes spirits and entities, necessary to strengthen the sense of inevitable calamity that cannot be controlled by humans.<sup>12</sup> *The Monk* is shocking for its sudden changes of register: comic moments are followed by frightening occurrences. Brooks' statement is in this sense illuminating (255): "And as happens more than once in *The Monk*, the forces which we deny, mock, put down, are precisely those that assert their reality and smite at us (a situation familiar to Euripides)". Coincidentally, the playwright mentioned by Brooks, Euripides, seems to play a major role in Lewis's most tragic circumstances. Together with Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides is part of the great dramatic triad of Ancient Greece.<sup>13</sup> After John Dryden's critically acclaimed adaptation of *Oedipus*, which remained in the repertory for various decades, "several turn-of-the-century playwrights followed Dryden and Nathaniel Lee in rewriting Greek tragedians, mainly Euripides" as he seemed to offer what audiences particularly appreciated, "*pathos* and women in distress" (Paulina Kewes 247-48) - two points that are developed in the Gothic and in Lewis's text. Kewes clarifies that "the hierarchy of the three tragedians are revised in the

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<sup>12</sup> It might be interesting to notice that ghosts populating Lewis's novel are the spirits of women who had a tragic and violent death within the story. The ghosts appearing in the two major plots (Raymond's narration and Ambrosio's tale) belong to women, respectively the Bleeding Nun and Elvira. Their basic difference is that the nun belongs to the past, while Elvira is still part of the present and her character is shown both in bodily and spiritual form. The spirit in *Otranto* was masculine and represented the patriarchal order of the past. Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* features a male ghost as well. Adeline's father helps her through her dreams.

<sup>13</sup> Euripides lived in the fifth century BC. He is said to have produced at least ninety plays of which only less than twenty survive today, although this is more than we have inherited from Aeschylus and Sophocles. Many of his titles feature female protagonists: *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Electra*, *The Trojan Women*, *Medea*, *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, *Bacchae*, and *Helen*.

Restoration. Aeschylus had been seen as the most primitive of the trio, and none of his plays had been either translated or adapted for theatrical presentations. With Aeschylus largely neglected, Sophocles was universally seen as the most refined of the three tragedians, and Euripides as the most adept at representing extremes of emotions" (248).

Matricide is a dramatic feature, which was not uncommon in Greek tradition. In particular, Euripides' *Electra* presents Orestes murdering his mother Clytemnestra out of revenge. Even though Orestes consciously plans the murder to honour his father Agamemnon's heroic and political figure as an inevitable vengeance, the abomination of his act has an appalling emotional impact. As far as Ambrosio is concerned, although his crime is provoked by his delirious passion for the sister that he does not recognise, the murder scene contains the perception of ineluctable and tragic fate. It might be worth noticing that both Orestes and Ambrosio are not totally responsible for their crimes. Electra persuaded Orestes with all possible justifications to kill his mother. Matilda pertinaciously pushes Ambrosio to commit his crimes. Unlike Orestes, Ambrosio is not conscious of the true nature of his murder, which he wrongly feels is abruptly determined by his lustful anxiety to have carnal intercourse with the one he does not recognize as his sister. In the end, both characters are punished for their crimes: Orestes is pursued by the Erinyes, whereas Ambrosio is tormented by hideous insects. Matricide and incest turn the characters into highly dramatic figures. They are the manifestations of ill-fated predestination, where ancestors' crimes are transmitted to their scions. Elvira and her counterpart Clytemnestra typify the figures of guilty mothers. Elvira's guilt is passed down to her children. In his complexity, Ambrosio is also a Gothic version of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, because he is symbolically blind when he can see, and is physically blind during his final torment when he discovers the

terrible truth. He is also a reversed version of Sophocles' tragic hero because he kills the mother instead of the father. The desire for the mother's body, which is unconsciously felt by the Greek hero, is not present in Ambrosio. The aspect that Oedipus and Ambrosio share is the lack of recognition of the parental connection. Oedipus kills the tyrant (the father) and marries the woman (the mother) to bring order to society whereas he unconsciously actually unchains disorder and despair. Despite its tragic intensity, Ambrosio's act is not heroic. Orestes consciously kills his mother to honour and avenge his father's memory, unchaining chaos and the gods' fury. While Lewis describes every gesture of Ambrosio's murder, Euripides does not show the act directly. Clytemnestra has entered her house after a long explanatory dialogue with her daughter Electra, who is unmovable in her deep hatred. Orestes goes inside the house and the public can simply hear his mother's cries of despair:

*Chorus* Heard you in the house her cry?

*Clytem* Ah, me, ah me!

*Chorus* I too lament thy fate,

Fall'n by the children's hands. Th'avenging god

Dispenses justice when occasion calls.

Dreadful thy punishment; but dreadful deeds,

Unhappy, 'gainst thy husband did'st thou dare.

Stained with their mother's recent-streaming blood,

See, from the house they come, terrible proof

Of ruthless slaughter. (*Electra* 192)

The tragedy unfolds when the mother, the daughter and the son are reunited after years of separation. Coincidentally, Ambrosio strangles his mother when also Antonia is present after years of separation. Euripides' drama stresses the fatality of parents' and ancestors' sins. Clytemnestra has betrayed and killed her husband Agamemnon. Her crime is evident and her punishment inevitable. Elvira, conversely, is presented as an

innocent victim and her sacrifice is incomprehensible. However, we may argue that her fault is of a moral nature. Elvira's choices had baneful consequences: she abandoned Ambrosio, when still a baby, thus causing his life in solitude, and kept Antonia dangerously ignorant and separated from the one person that could protect her (Lorenzo). Ambrosio acts unconsciously against the mother he does not know and destroys the sister he cannot acknowledge. He is a tragic hero but is not entitled to tragic nobility.

Further classical elements can be traced in *The Monk* and they are varied and complex. Euripides' prominence can be found once more in the central tale within the tale, “*un roman à tiroirs*” according to Brooks (256), which is represented by Raymond's narration of his story to his friend Lorenzo. After a dangerous adventure in the forest “cottage”, the young aristocrat manages to escape from a risky situation and save a Duchess and her niece. The Duchess's misinterpretation of Raymond's amorous interest, originally seen as an amusing episode in the style of Marivaux's comedies, acquires a tragic tone when the deceived Duchess becomes a cruel antagonist, partially moulded on Euripides' enraged Phaedra in *Hippolytus*.<sup>14</sup> Her desire to destroy Raymond resembles Phaedra's cruel fury, ready to punish the contemptuously indifferent Hippolytus who has rejected her love. Donna Rodolpha's rage suddenly replaces her loving feeling just as the Maenads suddenly unchain their violence against Pentheus in

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<sup>14</sup> Phaedra's tragedy can be retrieved in Ovid's *Heroides*, a text that “combines a collection of single letters in elegiac verse imagined as written by deserted heroines of epic and tragedy with several paired letters featuring epistles of men answered by women”(...). Ovid's letters “attained great popularity” and became a model for writers such as Pope that used them for his *Eloisa to Abelard* (Garth Tissol 204-205). They included Phaedra's dramatic letter to Hippolytus. A *Sicilian Romance* includes the young Count Hippolitus [sic], who is Maria de Vellorno's object of passionate desire. Offended and enraged by the young man's firm rejection, she tries to take revenge on her step-daughter Julia, Hippolitus' only love. Humiliated and doomed, she commits suicide. We might infer that Ann Radcliffe was acquainted with the Greek tragedy as well.

*The Bacchae*, also by Euripides. Whereas the Bacchae are guided by a supernatural power, the Duchess is controlled by her infinite cruelty.

Amnrosio faces a destiny similar to Euripides' young hero. Hippolytus, unjustly disgraced, and Ambrosio, justly punished, are different as the former is apparently innocent and the latter is guilty. They are united in a similar traumatic *finale*. While riding his chariot away from his country after his father Theseus exiled him, Hippolytus is followed by a dangerous mythical creature sent by Venus and Poseidon. The monstrous creature throws him down the side of high mountains. Hippolytus' flesh is beaten and bruised, he is covered in blood and his suffering is immense. So is Ambrosio, "thrown upon steep mountains", left to die a miserable death, "blind, maimed, helpless and despairing" (Lewis 442). Unquestionably, Hippolytus' and Ambrosio's horrid deaths are similar. The Euripidean influence played an important role in the creation of Lewis's cruel denouement. Hippolytus's final moment is narrated by a group of men who were accompanying him in his exile, forced by his jealous father:

So we made our way  
Up toward the desert region, where the bay  
Curls to a promontory near the verge  
Of our Trozén, facing the southward surge  
Of Saron's gulf. Just there an angry sound,  
Slow-swelling, like God's thunder underground,  
Broke on us, and we trembled. (*Hippolytus* 62)<sup>15</sup>

Hippolytus is approaching a solitary "desert region", which is analogous to the place where Ambrosio meets his death. The young Greek hero is riding his chariot as if he is flying to separate himself from his father and his land. The strange and

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<sup>15</sup> Seneca's *Phaedra* (ca. 54 CE) develops following Euripides' mould. However, the emphasis is on Poseidon's ravaging sea-storm, which causes Hippolytus' death. I would exclude Seneca's influence in the description of Ambrosio's end.

frightening “sound” that can be heard announces supernatural agents ready to envelop the victim. Ambrosio, by contrast, is taken to the desert by a demon who carries him towards his horrendous death whereas Hippolitus is still in control of the action:

Then straight upon the team wild terror fell.  
Howbeit, the Prince, cool-eyed and knowing well  
Each changing mood a horse has, gripped the reins;  
Coiled them around his body; and then, as strains  
A sailor backward 'gainst his oar, so swung  
Back in the chariot straining. (62-63)

A formidable hunter and expert rider, Hippolytus is convinced that he can face nature's fury and disengage himself from the dramatic chains of events threatening him. Before being captured by the Inquisition, Ambrosio is equally assured that he can overcome all incidents until he is carried away by the demonic being. Ambrosio shares Hippolytus' tranquillity before the tragedy.

But the young  
Wild steeds bit hard the curb, and fled afar;  
Nor rein nor guiling hand nor morticed car  
Stayed them at all. For when he veered them round,  
And aimed their flying feet to grassy ground,  
In front uprose that Thing, and turned again  
The four great coursers, terror-mad. But when  
Their blind rage drove them toward the rocky places,  
Silent, and ever nearer to the traces,  
It followed, rockward, till one wheel-edge grazed,  
The chariot tript and flew, and all was mazed  
In turmoil. Up went the wheel-box with a din,  
Where the rock jagged, and nave and axle-pin. (63)

A monstrous devilish creature has appeared in the form of a bull to punish Hippolytus for his blasphemy in the eyes of the goddess Venus. The young man is at the mercy of the savage creature. Horror and terror become the dominant factors. The

young man had been actively reacting against dark forces but now loses control. He turns into a passive victim, like Ambrosio.

And there – the long reins him – there was he  
Dragging, entangled irretrievably.  
A dear head battering at the chariot side,  
Sharp rocks, and ripped flesh, and a voice that cried:  
Dash me not into nothing! (...)  
All beside,  
The steeds, the Horned Horror of the Tide,  
Had vanished – who knows where? – in that wild land. (64)

Hippolytus' tragic destiny is brutally accomplished. Euripides' progression of the dramatic scenes is based on desolate landscapes, whose outline recalls the place where Ambrosio is thrown by the demon and draws his last breath. Lewis imitates Euripides' description of Hippolytus' violent death. The supernatural atmosphere brought about by devilish creatures confirms the analogies between the two young men's terrifying ends. Hippolytus has not committed the hideous crimes that Ambrosio has perpetrated. However, in the eyes of the divinity, his actions were sacrilegious because he did not show respect for Venus' commandments of passionate love. A strange paradox can be found in their different crimes as Hippolytus is guilty for not loving and rejecting passion, whereas Ambrosio is guilty because he has given in to an excess of love that has turned him mad and murderous.

The influence of the Classics and the Greeks is particularly pervading in *The Monk*. An interesting minor episode in Raymond's plot, a sort of interlude between the adventure with the Bleeding Nun and the return to Madrid, further confirms the reference to Greek literature. It concerns Raymond's servant, Theodore and his poetical composition. After the master has listened to the verses, he makes an interesting comment. The passage is not only a meta-literary meditation but it is also an ironic passage, imitating Sterne and Fielding's parodic style:

Your little poem pleases me much [...]. An Author whether good or bad, or between both, is an Animal whom everybody is privileged to attack; For though All are not able to write books, all conceive themselves able to judge them. A bad composition carries with it its own punishment, contempt and ridicule. A good one excites envy, and entails upon its Author a thousand mortifications. He finds himself assailed by partial and ill-humoured criticism: One Man finds fault with the plan, another with the style, a Third with the precept, which it strives to inculcate; and they who cannot succeed in finding fault with the Book, employ themselves in stigmatizing its Author". (*The Monk* 199)

Theodore's poem "Love and Age" is made in imitation of the Greek Anacreon. Whereas David L. Macdonald (*Monk Lewis* 187) has analysed the scene to refer to Lewis's homosexuality, my intention is to show that influence of Greek literature permeates various parts of Lewis's novel. Greek was among the subjects that Lewis had studied but it is not possible to know whether he read the work in the original Greek version or in a translation. Kewes explains that "in contrast to classical poetry and prose, which were translated for scribal and print publication, classical drama was in this period rendered in English to be performed" (240). Apparently, the Greeks were less known than the Latins: "Roman plays were more accessible, better known, and more frequently translated and adapted than Greek ones" (241). Kewes also specifies that while Aristophanes was not completely translated until the nineteenth century, the "tragic triumvirate of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, on the other hand, steadily grew in stature. By the mid-1780s their entire *oeuvre* was accessible to the English reader, and their assimilation to the corpus of translated literature had become one of the major developments of the reception of the Classics in the period. By the end of the eighteenth century, virtually all extant classical drama, with

the exception of Aristophanes, was available in English in a variety of modes (literal versions, paraphrases, free imitations) and media (rhyming couplets, prose, and blank verse)" (241). It may be plausible that Lewis read the original Greek pieces and translated them as a linguistic exercise, which was common in the didactic process of the period, but it could equally be possible that he had the chance of consulting English versions of the Greek dramatists. Being a theatre *aficionado*, as can be evinced from his correspondence and also his later literary works, it is probable that he had seen more than one classical tragedy.

## A PAINTING FROM THE RENAISSANCE AS A FINAL SETTING

It is difficult to determine sources of imagery in *The Monk*'s. Unlike the novels that had preceded it, the iconography of *The Monk* concentrated more on characters than on landscapes. Lewis's descriptions of nature are limited to the essential but the sporadic sections where nature is present are particularly important. Tracing the relationship between visual arts and the imagery in Lewis is rather complicated. However, the historical and cultural dynamics of the period can help us determine the impact of the visual arts, and in particular, of Italian art, which was remarkably strong in Britain. C.P. Brand claims that there was "a flood of Italian art" coming to England during the French Revolution and The Napoleonic Wars. Brand explains that this phenomenon was due to a series of reasons. The first one was that French noblemen's art collections had been ravaged and sold (when not destroyed) during the Revolution. The second is that Italian collectors and aristocratic families preferred to "sell their art-treasures rather than risk having them plundered". Then French ships carrying art works were often intercepted by British ships. All of this contributed to an

important art market dominated by British collectors (Brand 138). Then there was a huge market dedicated to the reproduction of famous paintings by known painters. Robert Sayer (1725-1794) was a publisher and made maps and prints. He also made large copies of engravings of famous painters of the day - in particular, he reproduced paintings by a German expat who had established his residence in England after a long stay in Rome. He became his friend and associate: he was Johan Zoffany (1733-1810), a painter who, in spite of being a popular artist and one of the most famous portraitists among Royal families during the second half of the eighteenth century, has been frequently overlooked until recently.<sup>16</sup> His *Tribuna of The Uffizi*, now in The Windsor Royal Collection, was completed in 1778. It shows in a single painting major masterpieces of the recently inaugurated Florentine Museum. The so-called "gallery paintings", which were introduced by Baroque Dutch artists in the seventeenth century, had turned into forms of encyclopaedic representations *à la mode* in the eighteenth century. Art and gallery paintings showed the opulence and luxury of museums, merchants and art collectors but they also had a didactic and informative role because they showed paintings in other countries that could not be admired directly. I would assert that Lewis had a good knowledge of art as he may have discovered paintings thanks to his various journeys or by observing engravings and prints, which were fashionable in the period.

Some images in *The Monk* capture the attention for their strong iconographic effect. One of the most vivid ones is the image of the solitary mountains, which are the setting for the protagonist's final tragic moments. The contrast between the wretched monk and the arid surrounding landscape may be

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<sup>16</sup> Zaffany's biographies have been written by Penelope Treadwell and Martin Postle among others, highlighting the importance of the visual production of this artist for the second part of the eighteenth century, including his informal portraits of the Royal Family and theatrical scenes with famous actors of the time.

found in a work by Domenico Veneziano, made c.1445/1450, where Saint John's body represents a contrast with the whitish mountains in his solitary wandering through the desert. The figure of the saint is unusual, as explained in the presentation by the Washington National Gallery of Art. The image turns out to "classical in appearance (...), but it is a fusion of pagan and Christian ideas". The naked body of the young man represents the classical canon while the sharp peaks still remind us of a Gothic context. The description provided by Lewis has a strong resemblance with the painting:

The disorder of his imagination was increased by the wildness of the surrounding scenery; by the gloomy Caverns and steep rocks, raising above each other, and dividing the passing clouds; solitary clusters of Trees scattered here and there. (439)

The analogy with Domenico Veneziano's representation of the desert is impressive. The red cape that the saint is holding in his hands seems to be a metaphor for the profusion of blood coming out of Ambrosio's body. The image anticipates the saint's future suffering. I would posit that this is a further analogy with the final context in the Monk, even though Ambrosio's path will take him to hell. The images of mountains surrounding desert zones were common in the Renaissance and later, an iconographic inheritance from Pliny and his *Natural History*, in Latin *Naturalis Historia*, written between 77 and 79 AD (Sarah Blake McHam).<sup>17</sup> The classical Greek mould is united with Renaissance imagination in the very last moments of the novel.

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<sup>17</sup> Sarah Blake McHam is one of the various Latin scholars that posits the importance of Pliny the Elder's encyclopaedic work on nature for visual arts. Langmuir equally supports the hypothesis that Pliny's descriptions of deserts influenced painters from the late Gothic to the Renaissance, such as Giovanni di Paolo (1417-1482), Adam Elsheimer (1578-1610) and many others (113).

## FURTHER HYPOTHESES

Lewis's novel is essentially contradictory and although the writer aimed at *grandeur*, he was unable to obtain unanimous recognition. The textual ambiguities leave questions unanswered. In Groom's words that partially contradict Maggie Kilgour's definition of the story, *The Monk* is a failed *Buildungsroman* (xxxvi) where experience does not improve the characters. It may be argued that the all story's plots share a common tragic theme of failure. It could be interpreted as a representation of the inadequate power of men, who are the victims of fate. Ambrosio as well as the other male protagonists Lorenzo and Raymond perform actions that are either futile or excessive. Raymond and Lorenzo cannot save the women they love and Ambrosio destroys the one he desires. *The Monk* is a novel that creates misleading expectations of a romantic comedy that turn into a nightmare, in particular in the claustrophobic and dramatic description of the family tragedy. The text introduces different and opposing lines of narration. Picaresque situations intermingle with sentimental moments. One example is Raymond's adventure in the cottage in the middle of the Black Forest, which develops into a sort of crime story made of fear and suspense, where the protagonist has to take violent action against dangers in an unexpected way. A parallel narrative line misleads the reader towards a romantic development during the first moments of Ambrosio's *tête à tête* with Antonia. The monk intends to give her the rudiments of philosophy and at the same time to start a deep emotional relationship with her. The context is reminiscent of the philosopher and theologian Abelard and his passionate but tragic love, whose dramatic story was described in Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717). It is also connected to Rousseau's epistolary novel *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1776) where the unfortunate Saint-Preux is divided between Julie's love and

Claire's friendship. However, the Ambrosio-Antonia plot shifts towards the libertine style and ends in a Sadean atrocity. It may be true that Lewis shows a tendency to punish his characters, especially women, in a cruel way - an aspect which has been interpreted by various critics as a latent deep misogyny. I would argue that the motivation may be found in the classical matrix of Greek and Latin works.<sup>18</sup> The novel denotes and confirms the presence of multifarious influences that can be traced in several parts of the story, which is partly a jigsaw puzzle that the reader must solve and partly an incongruous construction of "apparently nonsensical dead ends" in Groom's words. I would rather justify *The Monk*'s apparent incongruousness. Lewis's imitation of classical tragedies and medieval texts show that the writer wanted to give his characters a higher literary status.<sup>19</sup> The novel is complex and contains many different voices of past and contemporary authors. Its eclectic style generates contradictory elements where opposing aspects co-exist. Lewis's manuscript contains many corrections by a different hand and it was not signed - a fact that may imply his mother's collaboration. There is one curious letter where Lewis has a strange reaction to the possibility that his mother may publish her writings. He did not want her to publish anything, and he was particularly worried about this, even frantic. He was obsessed with the idea of a family scandal, but what can be clearly understood from the letter is his fear that public opinion may have thought his

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<sup>18</sup> For Ovid's influence, see Maria Teresa Marnieri, "The Early Gothic, the Classics and Ovidian Echoes in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796)", *European Academic Research*, Vol. V, Issue 10, January 2018, pp. 5806-31. This article may be considered complementary to the present to confirm Lewis's literary hybridism.

<sup>19</sup> As far as Dante's and Boccaccio's sources in Lewis, see: Maria Teresa Marnieri, "Infernal Imagery: Dante in William Beckford's *Vathek* and Matthew G. Lewis's *The Monk*", *European Academy Research*, Vol. V, Issue 7, October 2017, pp. 3027-53; Maria Teresa Marnieri, "Boccace et le *Décaméron* entre syncrétisme culturel et visions de modernité. Prolepse du gothique dans les contes IV, 5 (Lisabetta de Messine) et V, 8 (Nastagio degli Onesti)", *Revista de Lenguas Modernas*, n. 26, 2017, pp. 77-87.

mother was the writer of *The Monk*.<sup>20</sup> My claim here is that the hypothesis of heavy intervention by his mother on the text may not be excluded, as the novel contains adult perspectives that could not realistically come from an eighteen-year-old.<sup>21</sup>

Lewis's ambiguous novel is not only a Gothic story but also a rich cultural catalogue, summarizing various and different forms of literature, and is worth analysing for the wide range of hypotheses it may offer. However, the classical mould in Lewis is a constant presence in his adolescent literary experiments such as *The Effusions of Sensibility* (Baron Wilson II: 242), as well as in his more mature works. One of the most interesting ones is his poetic composition dedicated to *Danaë*, written in imitation of the Greek poet Simonides (c.556-468 BC). The beautiful Danaë, once seduced by the mighty Jove in the form of golden rain, must face the dangers of the night alone at sea with her infant child (302). Lewis's love for

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<sup>20</sup> On 18 March 1804 he wrote to his mother (italics and orthography are reproduced as in Lewis's writing): "Our opinions, certainly on the subject of our last letter, seem to be very different; for I hold that a woman has no business to be a public character, and that in proportion as she acquires notoriety, she loses delicacy. I always consider a female author as a sort of half-man". After mentioning the publication of a novel written by his protégé's mother, he writes about his novel and the problems he had after its publication. "I never before heard of *your* being *accused* of having written '*The Monk*'. This goes nearer to put me out of humour with the book than all the fury of the 'Pursuits of Literature &c'. What the world knows I care not, provided *I* do not know it". Later he formally asks his mother to avoid publishing: "But surely it is not worth while to take the trouble of composing a work, when 'to avoid the dangers of authorship your only safety, perhaps, would be in the want of genius in its composition'. You will equally avoid those dangers by *not* publishing your work, and, at the same time have the advantage of keeping your want of genius a secret. *Au reste*, I should much doubt there being a single soul at present existing who thinks '*The Monk*' was written by any body but myself" (Margaret Baron Wilson I: 278-281).

<sup>21</sup> The constant need for money may have pushed Lewis and his mother to work out a solution to obtain financial advantages from publishing after the separation from her husband. H. Anderson, the creator of "the most authoritative scholarly edition of the work", admits that some of the changes between the manuscript and the first edition are 'rare and problematic' (Rudolph Glitz 24). In his note on the text which is reproduced in every Oxford edition of *The Monk*, Howard Anderson also considers the possibility of changes made by a compositor (Anderson, xxxii). Doubts have not been cleared and some mystery about the changes in *The Monk* manuscript may persist. They do not apparently correspond to editing activities. His mother may have been involved in the process of writing, but publishing in her name would have been out the question. The former Mrs. Lewis still carried the stigma of her elopement with her lover.

classical authors and his literary syncretism are evidently much more deep-rooted than previously argued.

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