The Making of Matilda: the Male Gothic Tradition and the Creation of Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth-century Heroines

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Abstract

The gendered paradigm of the male Gothic has been proposed by a number of critics as a male writers' literary tradition, central to which are the male protagonist, the theme of exile and alienation, and, in several queer readings, the tendency to deviate from a normative heterosexuality. While studies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century male Gothic novel usually focus on representations of the overreaching villain-hero, relatively little attention has been paid to the heroine, who is viewed as either a hapless victim or a demonic supernatural agent to be expelled at the end of the narrative. This article will argue for the importance of the figure of the heroine in the male Gothic as it tends to embody forms of social and sexual behaviour as potentially transgressive as those of its male counterpart. By examining the figure of Matilda, who is repeatedly portrayed in various ways in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Gothic novels, the article aims to show the writers' serious engagement with the heroine and the diversity of feminine behaviour, hence disputing any attempt to formulate particular patterns of the

female character in male Gothic novels. Analysis of the primary texts includes examination of the figures of Matilda in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) where she is presented as a parody of the eighteenth-century sentimental heroine, in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) where she is depicted as a homoerotic femme fatale, in Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Zastrozzi: A Romance* (1810) where she is a female criminal, and in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Mathilda* (1819) where she is the daughter of an incestuous self-torturing father. Whereas the figure of Matilda helps add nuances to the heroine of the male Gothic, the fact that Mary Shelley also appropriated the figure later in the period indicates an interwoven relationship, rather than a rigid demarcation, between the male and the female traditions of the Gothic.

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Introduction

With the publication of David Punter's seminal work, *The Literature of Terror* (1980), Gothic fiction has continually been established as a genre that not only embraces wide-ranging themes, characteristics and functions, but also invites different, often competing theoretical approaches to analyse its development and transformation across history and cultures. The gendered perspective of the Gothic is one of the approaches that attempt to impose separate categories on the genre, each comprising specific tropes and features. Feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s such as Ellen Moers, Juliann Fleenor and Kate Ferguson Ellis are among the first people who proposed the category of the female Gothic which they claimed to concentrate on the female protagonist's psychological experiences, especially from her domestic entrapment and oppressed condition in society. [1] The male Gothic, on the other hand, has been

[1] The substantial interest in the female Gothic probably started with Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976) in which Moers reads *Frankenstein* as illustrating Mary Shelley's trauma of childbirth and maternity, and *Wuthering Heights* and *Goblin Market* as encoding the Victorian female fantasy of childhood eroticism. Juliann Fleenor's *The Female Gothic* (1983) more specifically discusses how the Gothic terror and symbolism of *(cont.)*

considered as a male writers' literary tradition, central to which are the male protagonist, the theme of exile and alienation, and, for several queer readings, the tendency to deviate from a normative heterosexuality. While studies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century male Gothic novel usually focus on representations of the over-reaching villain-hero, relatively little attention has been paid to the heroine, who is viewed as either a hapless victim or a demonic, seductive agent to be expelled at the end of the narrative. This article will argue for the importance of the figure of the heroine in the male Gothic as it tends to embody forms of social and sexual behaviour as potentially transgressive as those of its male counterpart. By examining the figure of Matilda, who is repeatedly portrayed in various ways in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Gothic novels, the article aims to show the writers' serious engagement with the heroine and the diversity of feminine behaviour, hence disputing any attempt to formulate homogeneous patterns of the female character in male Gothic novels. Analysis of the primary texts includes examination of the figures of Matilda in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) where she is presented as a parody of the eighteenth-century sentimental heroine, in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) where she is depicted

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enclosed space generate a sense of fear and insecurity in female roles, status and sexuality. Kate Ferguson Ellis' *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (1989) further offers two strains of the "feminine Gothic" and the "masculine Gothic" whereby the former depicts the heroine's entrapment within the home and the latter focuses on the hero's alienation from the domestic sphere and society.

as a homoerotic femme fatale, in Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Zastrozzi: A Romance* (1810) where she is a female criminal, and in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Matilda* (1819) where she is the daughter of an incestuous self-torturing father. Whereas the figure of Matilda helps add nuances to the heroine of the male Gothic, the fact that Mary Shelley also appropriated the figure later in the period indicates an interwoven relationship, rather than a rigid demarcation, between the male and the female traditions of the Gothic.

The Male Gothic Tradition

It is worth noting that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when Gothic novels were first published, the category of the "Gothic" itself was yet to be decisively established, and readers did not necessarily gender different types of novels. The categorisation of both the female and the male Gothic, therefore, is done retrospectively by twentieth-century critics who endeavour to constitute the Gothic as a genre with steady and continuous development. As for male Gothic works, what seems to be a general "self-evident" trope for most critics, apart from being written by male authors, is the male-centred plot or the plot that concentrates on the life and progress of a male protagonist. Ellis (1989), for example, marks out the "masculine Gothic" as a narrative with a central male character and his exile and alienation from both domestic and public spheres (p. xii-xv). Anne Williams argues for a male Gothic formula that features an overreaching villain-hero, explicit and unexplained supernatural agency, and horrifying crimes that revolve around female suffering and, sometimes,

pleasure derived from female victimisation (1995, p. 99-107). Likewise, Robert Miles views the male Gothic as offering a literary aesthetics of the visual where men are voyeuristic gazers and women, as Miles puts it, "become the convenient, stigmatised other, responsible for the fragility, and irrationality, of the masculine self" (2000, p. 58). A more recent criticism of the genre has been advanced by critics of psychoanalysis and queer theory like George Haggerty who tries to explain the protagonists' exploits in terms of the authors' psychological experience, and in particular their deviation from a normative heterosexuality, hence viewing Gothic fiction as "a testing ground for many unauthorised genders and sexualities" (2006, p. 2).

This article acknowledges motifs explored by the scholars above as dominant in male writing, all the while keeping in mind that there is no such thing as a simple and straightforward gendered classification of the genre. Recent studies of the female Gothic by E. J. Clery and Gary Kelly, for example, have emphasised the diversity of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women's Gothic which does not only include tales of women's physical and psychological oppression in a male-dominated society, but also a narrative of female sexual desire and violence like Charlotte Dacre's Zofloya, or The Moor (1806).[2] There are likewise varieties of the male Gothic during this period. William Godwin's *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams (1794)*

[2] See E. J. Clery, *Women's Gothic: From Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2000), and *Varieties of Female Gothic,* ed. Gary Kelly, 6 vols (London: Pickering, 2002).

and James Hogg's The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner (1824), for instance, focus on the doubling of the two male protagonists and the theme of pursuit and persecution that are specifically bound with Godwin's political philosophy in the 1790s and Hogg's fictional depiction of the contemporary controversy on religious Calvinism. Instead of adopting a male-centred plot, Sir Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) is simply a tragic romance of star-crossed lovers set in the social and political unrest in Scotland in the 17th century. Written in a complex structure of tales-within-tales, Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) rarely brings forward its eponymous protagonist, who is apparently a tormented victim rather than a victimiser.

While it is true that there are varieties of male Gothic novels, both feminists and other critics' configuration of the male Gothic is not to be overlooked since it helps, to a significant extent, differentiate between works of female and male writers. Apart from highlighting the physically and psychologically oppressed heroine, female writers, as Fred Botting observes, are "usually more solidly middle-class in origin" and thus "remain more concerned with the limits of eighteenth-century virtues, careful to interrogate rather than overstep the boundaries of domestic propriety which, because of their gender, were more critically maintained" (1996, p. 60). Indeed, many historians have claimed that during the period between around the 1760s and the 1820s Britain started to witness a series of cultural shifts that signified the gradual decline of aristocratic cultural hegemony and a more vigorous self-assertion on the part

of the middle classes, which sought to regulate aristocratic extravagance or excess, in all its manifestations.[3] Women writers, who, according to Mary Poovey, were generally discouraged from any public expressions of professional ambition and desire for monetary reward, could be seen to conform to the conventional social norms that put an emphasis on female modesty and propriety (1984, p. 40-41). On the other hand, many male writers of Gothic fiction in this period such as Horace Walpole, William Beckford and Matthew Lewis are from "aristocratic" families[4] and hence are willing to, in Botting's words, "lean towards representations of irrationality and the supernatural, exercising the privileges and freedoms conferred by gender and class position" (1996, p. 60). Gothic fiction, in this sense, could provide certain male writers with a means of resisting emergent middle-class ideologies and values. Whereas female writers were mainly preoccupied with discretion, propriety and literary

[3] See, for example, Colin Jones and Dror Wahrman, eds., *The Age of Cultural Revolutions: Britain and France, 1750-1820* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002); Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740-1830* (London: Weidenfeld, 1987); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Pimlico, 1992); and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London: Routledge, 1987).

[4] By the term "aristocratic" here I mean being aristocratic, not by birth, but by a social and economic position. While Walpole's father, Sir Robert Walpole, was the first prime minister of England, Beckford's father was twice elected as Lord Mayor of London and Lewis's father was appointed Chief Clerk in the War Office and, later, Deputy-Secretary at War. In addition to holding prominent public roles, Beckford's and Lewis's parents also obtained vast fortunes from their West Indian plantations, making them become a self-styled upper class whose affluence and social status enabled them to compete with the aristocracy by imitating its manners and habits.

merits, a number of male writers would make great play of imaginative excess and morally ambiguous content.

Reading male writers' Gothic fictions, one will find protagonists who variously involve themselves in incest, adultery, rape, murder and, sometimes, homoerotic play. If novels in the female Gothic tradition tend to focus on the figure of the endangered heroine, male Gothic writers commonly appeal to the Faust myth, adapting its characterisation of the high-born protagonist who errs yet daringly refuses to give up, and readily faces the outcome of his criminal deeds. Despite the fact that these works punish their protagonists in the end, they tend to be sympathetic towards, sometimes even celebratory of, their characters' overreaching, transgressive energy. Probably the earliest representative work of the male Gothic is Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). After the accidental death of his son during his wedding, Manfred, the tyrannical ruler of Otranto, decides to divorce his wife and relentlessly pursue his daughter-in-law Isabella to continue his lineage. Theodore, the descendant of the rightful owner of Otranto, is attracted by Manfred's daughter, Matilda. Though attempting to help Isabella, he does not perform any heroic deed and even confuses Manfred, causing him to mistakenly kill his own daughter, before a gigantic knight statue bursts the castle into ruins and announces that Theodore is Otranto's true heir. While using an Oriental setting, Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) presents its eponymous hero in an obviously more Faustian light. Tempted by the Giaour who persuades him to abjure Mahomet in exchange for the promise of treasures in the Palace of Subterranean Fire in Istakhar, Vathek proves himself an absolute hedonist and takes a long journey

to Istakhar only to find that the Giaour is in fact a moral agent who in the end sends him to damnation. Similarly, Ambrosio, the abbot of the Capuchin church in Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), succumbs to the seduction by the beautiful Matilda and then plunges into more brutal crimes of matricide and incest. Matilda, as the novel reveals, is a demon, who drags Ambrosio away to Lucifer to receive his eternal punishment. Adapted from Dacre's *Zofloya, or The Moor,* Shelley's *Zastrozzi: A Romance* introduces a hero who tempts Matilda to kill Verezzi and his lover, and later feels contented, in spite of the punishment he receives, that he has successfully gained revenge on Matilda, the daughter of his mother's old enemy.

As biographies of these male Gothic writers have shown, the presentation of violence and the villain-heroes' social and sexual transgressions might be seen as part of the writers' "aristocratic" jeux d'esprit rather than a serious attempt to establish themselves as novelists, the indecent profession notorious for its commercial, pecuniary interest.[5] Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto,* for example, was initially written to be circulated among his close friends and relatives. Beckford, Lewis and Shelley wrote their Gothic novels early in their lives— Lewis, in particular, employed anonymity in the first edition of *The Monk* and later, after revealing his identity, simply renounced the novel as a juvenile amusement. Despite such possibility of being the authors' private diversions, however, these works were published for public

[5] See, for instance, W. S. Lewis, *Horace Walpole* (London: Hart-Davis, 1961); Boyd Alexander, *England's Wealthiest Son: A Study of William Beckford* (London: Centaur, 1962); and Louis F. Peck, *A Life of Matthew Lewis* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1961).

readers and engaged more or less with other works in the literary market. In the preface to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto,* Walpole clearly stated that he attempted to create "a new species of romance" (2003, p. 70) by "blend[ing] the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern" (ibid, p. 65), the first referring to the medieval tales of marvellous adventures and the latter the more realistic, contemporary novels. Beckford's copious notes to *Vathek* show his deep interest and extensive research of the Oriental, as Lord Byron distinguished *Vathek*, in his notes to *The Giaour* (1813), for its "correctness of costume, beauty of description, and power of imagination" (1986, p. 246). Shelley apparently borrowed characters' names and themes in *Zastrozzi* from *Zofloya*. Lewis, while composing *The Monk*, admitted to his mother that he had commenced "a Roma[nce] in the style of the Castle of Otranto" and was later "induced to go on with it by reading 'the Mysteries of Udolpho,'" which, he thought, was "one of the most interesting Books that ever have been published" (Peck, 1961, p. 208).

In terms of characterisation, moreover, the Faustian protagonists of the male Gothic have continually been a subject of interest to literary critics and scholars as they seem to offer a different dimension and ambiguity to the character that lies between a hero and a villain. In contrast to this type of male protagonist, the female characters receive relatively little attention from critics since they tend to appear, according to Williams, chiefly as "sexual being[s], either as subject or object"—either as the femme fatale or the victim whose female virtue is "threatened and often violated" (1995,

p. 105), thereby serving an inferior function of reinforcing the crimes and punishments of the villain-heroes. This article aims to reconsider these female characters and it will argue that they hold no less significant roles than their male counterparts in the male Gothic tradition. An example of this can be seen through the exploration of the characters named Matilda in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Lewis's *The Monk* and Shelley's *Zastrozzi*, whose recurrence, as the article will elaborate, is not a mere coincidence, but an attempt on the writers' part to borrow, revise and rewrite earlier female characters of male Gothic novels and to distinguish their works from others. Mary Shelley's appropriation of the name and its characterisation by earlier male writers in her novella, *Matilda*, further reflects how a female writer could employ the male Gothic tradition to identify herself more fully with the more competitive and less decorous world of male writers.

Matilda and the Creation of Literary Heroines in Gothic Works

The female proper name Matilda, according to the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of First Names,* derives from Germanic terms literally meaning "mighty in battle." With such meaning, the name was indeed popular for female leaders in European history from the 10th to the 12th century. Examples are Saint Matilda (c.895 – 968), Holy Roman Empress, wife of Henry I the Fowler, King of East Franks; Matilda of Flanders (c.1031 – 1083), Queen of England, wife of William I, the Conqueror; Matilda of Tuscany (1046 – 1114), Countess of Tuscany; Matilda of Scotland (c.1080 – 1118), wife of Henry

I of England; Matilda of England (1102 – 1167), daughter of Henry I of England, wife of Holy Roman Emperor Henry V and later claimant to the throne of England in the reign of King Stephen (1135 – 1154); Matilda of Boulogne (1104 – 1152), Queen of England, wife of King Stephen; and Matilda of England, Duchess of Saxony (1156 – 1189), daughter of Henry II of England. Though Matilda (sometimes spelt Mathilda) has become one of the most popular names for baby girls in English-speaking countries today, there is no clear evidence whether the name was widely used in England from the 13th to the 19th century. At least the name seems to disappear from the genealogies of kings and queens of England from the 13th century onwards, when names such as Mary, Anne, Margaret and Elizabeth became more popular, probably because they sounded more English. In the 18th century there are no records of well-known people named Matilda, except for its being used with fictional female characters in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and a few novels afterwards.

The reason why Walpole chose the name Matilda for his heroine is unclear. Certainly he did not intend to create characters that are English since the story is set in Italy and in the frontispiece of the novel's first edition, Walpole presented it as a translation of an Italian manuscript written by "ONUPHRIO MURALTO, CANON of the Church of St. NICHOLAS at OTRANTO" in the early sixteenth century (2003, p. 57). While Walpole's discussion of the novel's historical background in the preface of the first edition is confusing and unresolved, his preface to the second edition admits that the novel is actually a counterfeited

medieval text and is written only to offer a new kind of romance that blends the supernatural in medieval fiction with the probable in the modern novel. However, the names such as Manfred, Conrad, and Matilda correspond more or less with historical figures and it is possible that Walpole picked these names randomly to create his romance. Manfred, for example, was crowned king of Sicily in 1258, after having been the vicar of Italy and Sicily for his half brother Conrad IV and then, upon Conrad's death, sought to establish himself as a king. Walpole's fictional Manfred and his desire for absolute power, in this sense, can be seen to be outlined upon the real figure. Matilda, on the other hand, was the countess of Tuscany and was renowned for the loyalty and military support she gave to Pope Gregory VII in his struggle against the Holy Roman emperor Henry IV in 1077. Walpole's heroine, however, is entirely different from the Italian Matilda and if her character is drawn upon any historical figure, it seems to correspond more with Saint Matilda in the 10th century who was revered for beauty and virtue, as Theodore praises her as being filled with "innocent beauty and virtuous modesty" (Walpole, 2003, p. 144). Indeed, in the novel Matilda appears as a woman of "gentle timidity" (ibid, p. 78) who stands beside her mother in the time of troubles and who subserviently obeys all her father's commands, including marrying his ally Frederic. When Theodore is imprisoned in the castle, she leads him through the subterranean passage to guide the way out for him to take sanctuary at the church of St. Nicholas, an assistance that causes Theodore to remember her as his "divine protectress" (p. 124). At the end of the story, Walpole also has Matilda receive the deadly blow

from Manfred, a sacrifice that makes Manfred lose his principality and reestablishes Theodore as the legitimate successor of the house of Otranto.

Though serving as a tragic victim of circumstances, Walpole's Matilda is more complex and ambiguous than she appears to be. Throughout the novel, she is the rational and practical voice to the hero. In their first conversation, when Theodore does not do anything but sigh over the fate of himself and Isabella, Matilda advises him to escape and take refuge in the church of St. Nicholas. When he keeps on praising Matilda's beauty and generosity in the prison, Matilda simply cuts the conversation short, stating that "I run no risk…but by thy delay" (p. 124) and quickly pointing the way out to Theodore. The death of Matilda, moreover, can be seen as the turning point of the story that effectively ends the tyranny of Manfred. This scene, however, is rather grotesque than tragic, for the sentimental language of love and loyalty that Walpole adopted from the contemporary modern novel tends to make the rather estranged and patriarchal relationship between Manfred and his daughter absurd and unconvincing in the midst of the shocking disaster. Being stabbed by Manfred, Matilda rambles endlessly to comfort, instead of reproach, her father and reprimands Theodore for cursing Manfred, calling him a "[c]ruel man!" who "aggravate[s] the woes of a parent!," and praying to heaven to "bless my father and forgive him as I do!" (p. 159). Manfred's misplaced penetration, in addition, is also viewed by several critics as an instance of sexual perversion no less threatening than his desire to wed his daughter-in-law. The implications of the scene, as Haggerty

asserts, "reach beyond the terms of polite literary expression," connoting an "excess of passion" that "effect[s] both absolute mastery and a type of incestuous violation in a single stroke" by Manfred (1986, p. 344).

Walpole's Gothic story that fixes on the domestic crises of forced marriage and even incest carries a shock-value that clearly sets it apart from other novels published earlier and around the same time, works which pay tribute to an advancing morality of companionate marriage and virtuous family life. Richardson's *Pamela*, though it begins as a fiction about a heroine pursued by a malevolent gentleman, ends with the reformation of the latter and the happy marriage of the couple. Richardson's emphasis on his heroine's virtue, as the subtitle of "Virtue Rewarded" attests, embodies what Michael Mckeon terms the "progressive ideology" which sought to transform the age-old aristocratic value of honour as (pre)determined by external factors such as rank and pedigree (p. 131, 153). The novels' focus on the heroines's moral distinction and emotional sensitivity also participated in "the culture of sensibility" which, as G. J. Barker-Benfield explains, purported to reform the immoral, and libertine behaviour especially associated with men from the upper classes (p. xxvi). Unlike other novels in the period, *The Castle of Otranto* ends without Manfred's repentance and reformation, and with a somehow "forced" marriage between Theodore and Isabella since it is the death of Matilda that brings the couple together rather than love and companionship, as Theodore persuades himself that "he could know no happiness but in the society of one with whom he could forever indulge the melancholy that had taken the possession

of his soul" (p. 165).

While a novel such as Pamela intended to *"set forth in the most exemplary Lights, the* Parental, *the* Filial, *and the* Social Duties" (p. 3), Walpole's narrative, as Matilda's dying speech attests, seems also to adopt a similar plan only to parody the language of sentimentalism. Indeed, Walpole had a rather low opinion of contemporary fiction. *The Castle of Otranto*, as he told Madame du Deffand in a letter of 13 March 1767, was not "the book for the present age, which seeks only *cold reason*" (Frank, Appendix A, p. 262). As for Richardson, Walpole was disdainful of the sentimentalism and didacticism of his works, viewing *Clarissa* (1747-48) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-54) as "pictures of high life as conceived by a bookseller, and romances as they would be spiritualised by a Methodist teacher" (Walpole, 1926, p. 196-97).[6] "Richardson," he told Monsieur de Beaumont in a letter in March 1765, had made the novel "insupportable" and this was why "a god, at least a ghost, was absolutely necessary to frighten us out of too much senses" (Walpole, 1906, Vol. 4, p. 333). Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, which subsumes the use of the marvellous and the presentation of the grotesque and potentially transgressive heroine, can therefore be seen as an index by which Walpole positioned himself against other mid-eighteenth-century novelists.

One way that male Gothic writers employed to license their morally ambiguous content is to use Catholic or

[6] Here, Walpole slightly misrepresented Richardson, for he was not a bookseller, but a printer.

continental countries as their setting. In Britain, fear and hostility towards Catholicism had been entrenched for centuries. In the Protestant English imagination, Catholicism was associated with superstition, irrationality, and rigid and repressive monastic orders. Catholic countries, moreover, were also linked to sexual excess: a number of accounts of the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century mentioned extramarital relationships, prostitution and sodomy as commonplace in continental countries, and some writers even reported of sexual activities in places such as monasteries and convents.[7] It was, therefore, not a coincidence that Walpole would choose medieval Italy as a site to depict Manfred's incestuous sexual aggression. Lewis's *The Monk* likewise locates sexual, and also religious, crimes in a Catholic country, sixteenth-century Spain. From the outset, Ambrosio, the abbot of the Capuchins, is described as having passed all his time "in study, total seclusion from the world, and mortification of the flesh" (p. 19)—a "Man of Holiness" (p. 20) whose only weakness is the harshness or severity of his judgement on others. The trial of his virtue comes in the form of temptation by Matilda, who first disguises herself as a young novice Rosario and then, after disclosing her sex, seduces Ambrosio and persuades him to corrupt and rape Antonia and murder her and her mother Elvira. The two victims, as the story reveals, are his long lost sister and mother. Ambrosio is finally arrested by the Inquisition and, after the last temptation by Matilda, professes to give

[7] See Jeremy Black, *The British Abroad: The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century* (Stroud: Sutton, 1992) 189-201; and Haggerty, *Queer Gothic*, Chapter 4: "The Horrors of Catholicism: Religion and Sexuality in Gothic Fiction" 63-83.

his soul to Lucifer and hence is dragged away to his ultimate punishment by the devil.

Lewis's Matilda, in a sense, seems to be built upon Walpole's Gothic heroine in the threat that the character imposes on the male protagonist. However, while Walpole's Matilda appears as a submissive and virtuous figure, Lewis's illustration of his character is blatantly threatening to conventional constructions of gender and sexuality. Matilda's disguise as a young novice, Rosario, both conceals and legitimises Lewis's exploration of homoeroticism in his novel. The conversation between Ambrosio and Rosario in the grotto of the abbey-garden resembles that between lovers, as the latter wishes to unveil his suffering and Ambrosio expresses his willingness to listen and help; as he confesses, "I perceived sensations in my bosom till then unknown to me; I found a delight in your society which no one's else could afford" (p. 54). In the convent Matilda hires a painter to paint her image as the Madonna, whose beauty increases Ambrosio's "wonder and adoration" (p. 39). When she reveals her true identity as a woman and threatens to stab herself, tearing open her clothes and half exposing the "dazzling whiteness" of her breast, Ambrosio finds it impossible to resist the temptation:

> *[H]is eye dwelt with insatiable avidity upon the beauteous 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. (p. 60)*

The "sensation till then unknown," referred to in the passage above and in the grotto scene points to the sexual awakening that Ambrosio experiences when he sees Matilda, both as the disguised Rosario and a woman, who he later calls a "dangerous," "seducing object" (p. 71). Matilda's sexual advances and her influence over him afterwards dissolve the traditional conception of passive, subservient femininity.

Apart from using her charms, Matilda also introduces Ambrosio to the world of magic, presenting him a "constellated myrtle" (p. 238) that gives him access to Antonia's chamber at night, and a magic mirror that enables him to watch Antonia in her every move, even, as the novel graphically describes, when she bathes herself. After brutally raping Antonia in the church's dungeon, Ambrosio kills her with the dagger that Matilda offers. At the last moment of his life, he is seen to hold on to a book that Matilda leaves in the prison fixing on magical words that ensure what he believes to be the means of his liberation, the selling of his soul to Lucifer. Indeed, this type of the evil, seductive and controlling woman does not definitely belong to the English literary tradition of the time. As the *Monthly Review* noted in 1797, Lewis's novel seemed to be plagiarised from the recently published work of the French author, Jacques Cazotte, *Le Diable Amoureux* (1772, translated as *The Devil in Love* in 1793) (Peck, 1953, p. 406). In Cazotte's novel, the protagonist, a Spanish soldier and a dabbler in magic, is lured by Beelzebub in disguise as the beautiful Biondetta. As Louis F. Peck points out, the subject of devilish temptation through a seductress was commonplace even before the publication of *Le Diable*

Amoureux, but what made Lewis's novel so like Cazotte's narrative in the eye of his contemporaries was probably the vivid and sensuous detail of the allurement, especially the unveiling of Matilda's breast and sexual identity in the grotto (p. 407). It is difficult to say whether Lewis did copy *Le Diable Amoureux*, but he obviously did not follow the English tradition, which tended to concentrate much more on the didactic end-point of such a story rather than the graphic and descriptive process of temptation itself.

More importantly, Cazotte's sensational novel might be seen to be in the style of the eighteenth-century French pornography which, as Robert Darnton has elucidated, sold along with other forbidden religious, philosophical and political writings that purported to challenge or attack the Old Regime and conventional social and moral values before and after the period of the French Revolution (p. 4). Many writings, engravings and portraits claimed to base their stories on reports of the trials concerning the sexual misdemeanors of French priests, and on scandals about the licentious private lives of courtiers. Others were fictional, but their similar plots and sensational narration equally fed the public's scepticism and antagonism towards the monarch and the church. Lewis's association of the Church with sexual activity and crime is, in this respect, reminiscent of contemporary French anticlerical pornography, most famously exemplified by the writings of the Marquis de Sade such as *Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu* (1791) and *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795). Although Lewis's work was written in a different context and lacks the systematic political resonance that propelled Sade's narration, it nonetheless seems to embrace the same kind of libertinism

inherent in Sade's writing, particularly the scene of Antonia's rape which is portrayed with an excess of sexual violence. While the Catholic background offers a licence for Lewis to explore various transgressive forms of sexual behavior, his alliance with the contemporary French pornographic tradition, which entails the characterisation of Matilda, can therefore be seen as part of Lewis's scheme to distinguish his work from other English novels of the time.

By the end of the eighteenth century, Matilda, as the article has shown, is no longer a virtuous, subservient type of female fictional character. What Lewis invested in the figure is the dark, alluring, demonic characteristics of the femme fatale who transgresses moral, social and sexual codes. This image of the late eighteenth-century fictional Matilda is, in a sense, closer to the etymological meaning and historical illustrations of powerful, authoritative women. The most obvious example is the Empress Matilda in the 12th century who ruled England in 1141 and, when her father Henry I died, did not hesitate to lead military campaigns to claim the crown of England against her cousin, Stephen of Blois. Though the claim was unsuccessful, it proved Matilda a mighty battler and, just like Lewis's heroine, a contriver excellent in disguise, as she was said to escape from Oxford Castle in a white garment across the snow-covered field and also from Devizes as a corpse being removed for burial. Indeed, such a strong, domineering, and protean identity becomes more distinct in the early nineteenth century when the influence of Lewis's *The Monk* led both male and female writers to revise the character of Matilda in more various and provocative manners. Charlotte Dacre,

for example, assumed "Rosa Matilda" as her pseudonym combining the names of the novice Rosario with that of the demonic heroine. As depicted in the drawing plate of Rosa Matilda's portrait, the writer is a sensual figure, wearing a white satin dress and looking as seductive as Lewis's temptress. Her Gothic heroine, Victoria, in *Zofloya, or The Moor,* is an indulgent and vengeful heroine who cruelly torments and kills the innocent Lilla out of her jealousy and passion for Lilla's lover, Henriquez. In contrast to Lewis's romance, Dacre presented a female protagonist tempted by her Moorish servant, Zofloya, who later turns out to be Satan himself. Unlike Lewis's Matilda, Zofloya's temptation starts from his moral corruption and ends with his seduction of the young Victoria, making Dacre's novel transgress acceptable moral, social, sexual and racial standards, and also deviate from the dominating virtue-rewarded formula of the female Gothic.

Dacre's use of male Gothic conventions, though blatantly offensive, was readily received and adopted by several novelists. Shelley, for instance, borrowed the outline of *Zofloya* to create an equally disturbing Gothic novel, *Zastrozzi: A Romance* in which there is no exploitation of the supernatural. The name of his eponymous hero is borrowed from Dacre's Megalena Strozzi, the commanding and diabolical seductress and destroyer of Victoria's husband, Berenza, in *Zofloya*. His evil mission is to corrupt Matilda and induce her to kill Julia and her lover Verezzi, who, as the novel reveals, is his half brother, a son of his long perished father who ravishes and deserts his mother—a scheme of revenge with Matilda as a tool to accomplish his purpose.

Matilda, on the other hand, is a figure taken from various sources. Like Lewis's devilish seductress, she appears as a beautiful, bewitching character, as Shelley described how "[h]er night robes floated on the night air—her shadowy and disheveled hair flew over her form, which, as she passed the bridge, seemed to strike the boatmen below with the idea of some supernatural and ethereal form" (p. 82). Her full title "La Contessa di Laurentini" is borrowed from a minor character in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Laurentini di Udolpho, whose violent passion prompts her to persuade the Marquis de Villeroi of his wife's unfaithfulness. Shelley's Matilda, moreover, strikingly resembles Dacre's Victoria in her uncontrolled passions and aggressive direction of her jealousy onto the innocent lover of the man she adores. Matilda's character, as Verrezi describes, "could excite nothing but horror and detestation: he regarded her as a woman of strong passions, who, having resisted them to the utmost of her power, was at last borne away in the current" (p. 84). In contrast to Julia who possesses a "fragile form" and "feminine delicacy," Matilda is noted for "the scintillating eye, the commanding countenance" and "the bold expressive gaze" (p. 84). Like Victoria, Matilda's atrocious murder of Julia surpasses any earlier descriptions of female villainy in novels:

> *Nerved anew by this futile attempt to escape her vengeance, the ferocious Matilda seized Julia's floating hair, and holding her back, with fiend-like strength, stabbed her in a thousand places; and, with exulting pleasure, again and again buried the dagger to the hilt in her body, even after all remains of life were annihilated. (p. 142)*

Shelley, however, does not seem to create his female protagonist merely as a bloodthirsty criminal to be punished at the end of the narrative. Though eventually surrendering to her fate with repentance, throughout the novel Matilda is portrayed as a sympathetic victim of the vindictive Zastrozzi who seeks revenge upon Verezzi and leaves Matilda nothing but despair and sorrow. Revenge is indeed a major theme of the novel which above all contains Shelley's early belief in atheism—*Zastrozzi,* it is worth remarking, was written around the same time that Shelley published his essay "The Necessity of Atheism" (1811). His epigraph on the title-page is a quotation from Milton's *Paradise Lost* in which Beelzebub persuades a host of fallen angels how "their God/ May prove their foe," and through the destruction of his creatures, Adam and Eve, the event can lead them to a rebellious reaction upon God (p. 59). As Zastrozzi tells Matida, he is "alive to nothing but revenge," asking her to abandon her belief in Providence and instead embrace an unrelenting pursuit of happiness. Matilda gradually absorbs Zastrozzi's idea. When Verezzi ardently refuses her love, even after she has saved him from the murderous hands of Zastrozzi, she becomes infuriated and resolves to give up her belief in God: "Where, then, is the boasted mercy of God…if he suffers his creatures to endure such agony as this?" (p. 108) Having seen Verezzi commit suicide and then directed her anger and disappointment upon Julia, Matilda laments: "is it for horror, for torments such as these, that He, whom monks call all-merciful, has created me?" (p. 143) Shelley's Gothic heroine, hence, partakes in the author's radical philosophy and religious skepticism.

The fact that Shelley's works should have an influence on his second wife, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, is not surprising. Shelley's atheistic worldview in *Zastrozzi* and other writings can be seen to be fictionally elaborated and complicated further in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a Gothic novel with a male-centred plot which focuses on the monster's persecution of and revenge upon his creator. In 1819 Mary Shelley worked on a novella entitled *Matilda*, but this was not published until 1959 due to its offensive content which deals with an incestuous relationship between a father and a daughter. Shelley's interest in the theme of incest was not new in the early nineteenth century. In the same year Percy Bysshe Shelley published a verse drama, *The Cenci, A Tragedy, in Five Acts,* which recounts an abominable crime of rape that a tyrannical father of a 16th-century Italian family commits upon his daughter who later murders him and is executed for parricide. Earlier, around 1817, Lord Byron had also written *Manfred*, a closet play on incest which makes use of the male Gothic Faustian framework and bears a number of similarities to Mary Shelley's *Matilda*. Byron's Manfred, first of all, is reminiscent of Walpole's protagonist in *The Castle of Otranto,* who defiantly struggles against moral and religious precepts as well as the controlling supernatural force of the legitimate owner of the castle. In the opening scene of the play, Manfred summons a host of spirits to grant him oblivion for a past wrongdoing that he wants to forget. As the spirits cannot give him what he asks, Manfred isolates himself in the state of exile in the mountainous areas of the Alps—the past deed that causes him distress, as the play suggests, is his incestuous relationship with a woman who has unfortunately died. Defying both the spiritual

power and religious consolation of redemption from sins, Manfred chooses to die, suggestively by suicide, in his own castle and with the hope that he will be reunited with his lost love. Byron's purpose of using the Faustian convention, it seems, is to flout and break it, and to present his title character as an absolute rebel—the Romantic Byronic hero who rejects social norms and decorum.

Mary Shelley's *Matilda* can be seen as a revision of Byron's *Manfred* and a novel no less provocative than Byron's work. Unlike *Frankenstein, Matilda* seems at first to follow the female Gothic tradition by adopting a female-centred outline of a young heroine searching for her long lost father. The narrative is told from the first-person perspective in the form of a long letter that Matilda writes to her friend, Woodville, on her deathbed to reveal to him her tale of "sacred horror" (p. 151). From the outset, however, Matilda compares herself to Oedipus in exile confessing that she is "alone—quite alone—in the world" and lives "in a lone cottage on a solitary, wide heath" (p. 151). Such an outcast state had never occurred to any female Gothic protagonist before Mary Shelley's. The "faults" that Matilda subsequently revealed, moreover, rather align her with earlier male Gothic heroes, most obviously Byron's Manfred, who transgresses moral and social conventions yet daringly accepts his tragic fate without repentance and reformation, as Matilda asserts to Woodville: "[M]y faults may easily be pardoned; for they proceeded not from evil motive but from want of judgment, and I believe few would say that they could, by a different conduct and superior wisdom, have avoided the misfortunes to which I am the victim" (p. 152). As the story reveals,

Matilda, after being abandoned for 15 years, is reunited with her father. They live happily together for a while before the father gradually becomes melancholic and isolates himself as if he had a secret that troubles his mind. The father then confesses his love for Matilda, escapes and dies alone in the wild mountains. Matilda follows and, unable to save him from his death, decides to end her life to be eternally united with her father.

What is so shocking about Shelley's novella is the potentiality that her heroine might intentionally orchestrate all the disastrous events herself rather than being an innocent victim of patriarchal villainy. In her childhood, Matilda usually imagines scenes of the meeting with her father. Her "favourite vision," as she states, is "that when I grew up I would leave my aunt, whose coldness lulled my conscience, and disguised like a boy I would seek my father through the world" (p. 159). Unlike other female Gothic novels which more or less set out a model of maternal femininity, Shelley's *Matilda* pays no attention to other female characters and instead concentrates on the relationship between Matilda and her father. Matilda's vision of her disguise like a boy, as Diane Long Hoeveler suggests, displays a fantasy of a girl's desire to be more acceptable and closer to her father by changing her sex (p. 166). The father's words that Matilda often imagines, "My daughter, I love thee!" (p. 159), become a wish fulfillment as her father subsequently repeats the sentence in reality. Indeed, after the first meeting, Matilda gradually takes the position that continuously occupies her father's thoughts and imagination. During the day, they "perpetually made excursions together" (p. 163).

In retirement at home, Matilda often brings up the conversation on Vittirio Alfieri's play, *Myrrha*, a Greek tragedy on incest. When her father shows signs of grief, Matilda tries every way to extract the secret from him. In the climactic moment of the story, Matilda directly questions her father whether he hates her, causing him to ironically confess: "Yes, yes I hate you! You are my bane, my poison, my disgust! Oh! No!...you are none of all these; you are my light, my only one, my life.—My daughter, I love you!" (p. 173). Driving her father mad and urging him into such a licentious speech, Matilda, as Kathleen Miller points out, can be seen as "active participant in the seduction scene by repeatedly revealing herself as sexual aggressor" (p. 298). Even when her father dies, his death is implicitly the result of Matilda's power of imagination, as she earlier dreams of his escape into the woods to commit suicide by jumping off a huge cliff. Shelley's heroine, in this sense, is outrageously threatening to the traditional virtuous heroine in novels since she is, in Miller's words, "a woman [who] consciously constructs a female Oedipus narrative," a woman who "performs and controls a dramatic narrative through deployment of an incest myth in an attempt not to be victimised and submissive" (p. 298). Assuming the role of a Romantic heroine, Matilda chooses to die by her own hands and with the fulfillment of her desire to rejoin her father through death, the only means that can liberate them from moral and social restrictions: "I know that I am about to die and I feel happy—joyous" (p. 151).

As the article has shown, the study of the female (anti-) heroine in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century

male Gothic tradition can be no less fruitful for literary analysis and criticism than concentrating simply on the overreaching male protagonist and his crimes. Through the analysis of the figure of Matilda, who is repeatedly depicted and rewritten in Gothic novels of the period, the article has elaborated not only the writers' various ways to distinguish their works from others' but also how they used such a female character to represent ideologies and values that were in opposition to the middle-class concept of moral and social propriety. While Walpole's Matilda proves to be a parody of the virtuous, sentimental heroine in novels, Lewis's demonic heroine can be seen to participate in the French pornographic tradition that enabled illustrations of sexual excess and libertinism. Percy Bysshe Shelley made use of his female criminal Matilda to elucidate his atheistic view, and Mary Shelley chose to break the female Gothic conventions and instead juxtaposed her heroine to the defiant and morally transgressive Romantic hero. Not a mere hapless victim or devil in disguise, the Gothic heroine like Matilda can assume a diversity of feminine behavior, hence a multi-dimensional character. The continual interest and engagement with the figure, above all, bears evidence that the Gothic is indeed a public production where both male and female writers could appropriate a certain tradition to suit their purposes.

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