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‘Under that Veil Conceal the Irregularities of her Heart’: Criticisms of Women’s Conduct Literature through the Gothic Veil Motif in Matthew Gregory Lewis’s *The Monk* and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

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“Did She know the inexpressible charm of Modesty, how irresistibly it enthralls the heart of Man [...] She never would have thrown it off” (Lewis, 179)

In 1763, the conduct book *The Lady's Preceptor* was translated from French into English and distributed to young British women. When discussing the fraught subject of female social transgression, the author writes that

> One who is guilty of all those Transgressions, which we'll rather imagine than mention, if she will but put on the Mask of Bashfulness and Modesty, will please at least in this respect, and under that Veil conceal the Irregularities of her Heart, especially from those who have not had flagrant Proofs of them (D'Ancourt, 16).

D'Ancourt dares not to tear the veil of 'Bashfulness and Modesty' from the hypothetical female transgressor, and even more cautiously feigns from indulging his female readers 'of all those Transgressions,' lest they conjure such unspeakable actions, even privately within their own thoughts. But what should happen if one should tear away this veil?

The Gothic literary tradition seeks to do just that. Growing to prominence during the end of the eighteenth-century, it is no coincidence that the Gothic tradition should gain such notoriety alongside the growing popularity of female conduct literature. Anne Williams states that Gothic literature is 'pervasively organised around anxieties about boundaries' (Williams 16). The veil – both literal and symbolic – acts as a gendered boundary; it conceals, inhibits and polices the female individual, ensuring that she abstains from those inconceivable actions that are better 'imagined than mentioned.'

Both Matthew Gregory Lewis and Ann Radcliffe utilise the Gothic symbol of the veil to criticise ideals and expectations of femininity that were perpetuated through conduct literature. Specifically, Lewis uses the veil to criticise the fetishisation of chastity, whereas Radcliffe uses the veil to encourage female readers to seek knowledge beyond the limiting dictations on female self-governance. Whilst these authors are categorised by critics, such as Smith and Wallace, and Williams, as belonging to different schools within the Gothic

tradition, it is nevertheless apparent, through an analysis of the veil motif, that both authors are united in their aim to criticise aspects of femininity demanded by conduct literature (Smith and Wallace 3; Williams 102).

Both Lewis and Radcliffe were writing contemporaneously in the 1790s and therefore responding to the same cultural and social climate. This wave of Gothicism witnessed the 'The Age of Virtue,' a cultural movement that arose during the long eighteenth-century and characterised by its exhortation of 'moral excellence [...], social graces, politeness, dignity, [and] elegance' (Morse 4). During this period, a proliferation of women's conduct literature emerged, its aim being to teach a '"'natural'' femininity in terms of negation and repression, silence, submission, [...], sublimation and passive virtue' (Jones 15). Throughout histories and cultures, the veil has been perceived as a highly gendered symbol, Jennifer Heath stating 'the veil is commonly associated with females and seems to have a kind of feminine pulse' (Heath 2). Désirée Koslin expands, stating that the veil 'resonates with [...] spiritual meanings of illusion, protection, secrecy, and submission' (Koslin 56). The symbolic meaning of the veil resonates strikingly with the femininity demanded by conduct literature, providing Gothic writers with the perfect site for interrogation of societal constructions of femininity.

Despite interacting with the same culture, both authors' works are perceived as being antagonistic. Fred Botting argues that Lewis's *The Monk* 'eschews and satires the sentimentality of Radcliffe's work', with Robert Miles expanding that 'Radcliffe looked back to the novel of sensibility, whereas Lewis opted for "Sadean" sensationalism' (Botting: 70 Miles 3). This categorisation between the two novelists is most evident in the retrospectively applied division of Male/Female Gothic genres. The term Female Gothic was coined by Ellen Moers who states that it is 'the work that women writers have done in

the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic' (Moers 90). Moer's definition here is undoubtedly problematic and has prompted debates amongst scholars as to whether 'the gender of the author correlates with a specific aesthetic' (Ledoux 3). Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace offer a redefinition, arguing the Female Gothic is 'a coded expression of women's fears of entrapment' (Smith and Wallace 1). Contrastingly, the Male Gothic is characterised by an indulgence in actualised 'cruelty, violence, and supernatural horrors' (Williams 109). Miles expands, arguing 'there is an inherent misogyny generally expressed as woman's monstrous otherness or her 'artificiality'' (Miles 81). Although this reading holds merit, it is problematic. Firstly, it discounts female-written pieces in which women are positioned as monstrous, such as Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*. Secondly, it fails to acknowledge that rather than possessing an 'inherent misogyny' as Miles claims, women within the Male Gothic genre are depicted as monstrous or artificial as a response to the societal *construction* of contemporary femininity, rather than the *actualities* of womanhood. Thus, although these definitions can be helpful when classifying the sub-genres of individual Gothic works, imposing this categorisation can pigeonhole the fundamental united aims of authors' works.

Moving away from Moer's explanation, Carol Margaret Davidson suggests a more 'uncontroversial definition' in delineating the categorisation of Male/Female Gothic texts; she suggests that it should defined by 'its narrative focus': a text, according to Davidson, should be defined by the gender of its protagonist, as opposed to its author (Davison 91). But this definition also proves problematic when faced with female-authored works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, authored by a woman but employing a male protagonist, and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, authored by a man but centring a female protagonist. Davidson's method of delineation proves problematic as it alienates numerous works that

do not adhere within the categorisation. Ultimately, it is clear that the key differentiating factor between *The Monk* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is down to each works' style, form and aesthetic, rather than a gendered characteristic. Lewis utilises the veil as a visual signifier whereas Radcliffe uses it as a tool of suspense, yet both do so in order to criticise the same form of femininity.

Although it is questionable whether Lewis himself would have actively read women's conduct books during this period, he would have undoubtedly sensed their impact upon eighteenth-century society; Nancy Armstrong asserts, '[s]o popular did these books become that [...] virtually everyone knew the ideal of womanhood they proposed' (Armstrong 70). Within these books, chastity was of the highest value and a necessary component in the teachings of female self-governance. Often written by male authors, and from a masculine point of view, conduct literature possessed a voyeuristic desire through its infiltration into the mind of the female reader, addressing them as 'angels,' 'our belles,' (Gregory 43, 21) and 'fair virgin' (de Villemert 48), urging their readers that 'virgin purity is of that delicate nature (Marriott 21). With conduct books determining 'what men were supposed to desire in women, and what women, in turn, were supposed to desire to be', it is clear that the most desirable quality was chastity (Jones 11). Recognising this emphasised fixation of female purity, Lewis utilises the Gothic veil motif as a visual symbol that encompasses all that was desired from women during the period, posing it as a sexual instigator to critique the fetishisation of chastity within conduct literature.

Set in medieval Madrid, *The Monk* follows the once-pious Ambrosio as he descends into depravity, eventually brutally murdering and raping his estranged sister, Antonia. From the outset, Antonia is distinguished as a champion of the values within conduct literature; she is endearing due to'her sweetness and sensibility' and verbally incapacitated

by ‘an ‘excess of timidity’ (Lewis 10). However, it is not these features that initially attract the attention of two male onlookers, Lorenzo and Christoval: it is her veil. Upon hearing Antonia in a crowd, the two men are frustrated by ‘curiosity to view the face to which [the voice] belonged. This satisfaction is denied, as ‘Her features were hidden by a thick veil’ (Lewis 8). During this scene, both men project the idealised eighteenth-century construct of femininity upon Antonia; her ‘dazzling whiteness’ symbolises her ‘undeviating purity’, (Moore 1) and her ‘symmetrical features’ (Lewis 8) would ‘certainly suffice to categorise her as “beautiful” in Burke’s terms’ (Heiland 40). Catherine Spooner states that, in this passage, Lewis illustrates how ‘the concepts of modesty and coquettishness are understood to be coextensive’ (Spooner 30). Positioning the reader visually within the perspectives of the two male onlookers, Lewis infuses the language with their lustful gaze and places the reader as a complicit voyeur.

From hence, the veil becomes a key visual signifier throughout *The Monk*, serving to illustrate the paradoxical nature of eighteenth-century idealised femininity; it simultaneously represents chastity whilst also becoming sexually charged by the men who gaze upon it. Vivien Jones expands on this paradox within didactic literature, writing that ‘moral discourse of chaste conduct evokes precisely the desires and fantasies it claims to police’ (Jones 108). This is further reinforced as Lorenzo and his servant sit inside a church, lustfully waiting to watch the nuns from the nearby convent de-veil during their evening prayers. Both men eagerly sit with a ‘gaze of such impure eyes’, excited to visually consume ‘some of the prettiest faces in Madrid’ (Lewis 24). Like with Antonia, it is not the women themselves that the men are excited about, it is the notion that they are chaste and veiled. Elizabeth Napier states that, through the veil, Lewis communicates ‘a standard of beauty [...] that is distinctly erotic, based upon imaginative projection and

partial concealment' (Napier 116). Throughout the novel, the reader is situated alongside the male gazers and invited to indulge in the 'imaginative projection' of fetishised chastity on veiled female characters, ultimately yielding to these perverse fantasies.

This fetishisation of veiled women is intensified throughout the novel as Ambrosio is introduced to Antonia. Having become disgusted by Matilda after having sex with her, he perceives her as a 'harlot' that 'glories in her prostitution' (Lewis 179). With the imagined veil of purity torn away, Ambrosio deplores, 'Did She know the inexpressible charm of Modesty, how irresistibly it enthralls the heart of Man [...] She never would have thrown it off' (Ibid). Lewis's use of the phrase 'thrown it off' here may suggest that 'the inexpressible charm of Modesty' is not an intrinsic feature of femininity, but rather an idealised projection, fetishised by the male gazer. As Ambrosio's lust for Antonia grows uncontrollable, Lewis presents Antonia's purity and innocence as the primary sexual instigator. Her physical veil is now replaced by the metaphorical veil of innocence; watching her sleep, Ambrosio perceives 'there was a sort of modesty in her very nakedness, which added fresh stings to the desires of the lustful Monk' (Lewis 220). Spooner states that Lewis positions the veil of modesty as a 'provoking incentive', highlighting how from the male perspective, it is perceived as a 'sexual invitation' (Spooner 31). Similarly, Ambrosio voyeuristically gazes upon Antonia through a magic mirror as she bathes, perceiving that a 'sense of modesty induced her to veil her charms', causing 'his desires [to be] worked up to phrenzy' (Lewis 200). Her modesty is like a veil upon her naked body, not donned by Antonia knowingly herself as she is physically unconscious, illustrating that this construction of fetishised modesty is purely from Ambrosio himself.

Ambrosio's lust ultimately culminates, leading him to drug Antonia in order to assault her in the vaults of his monastery. As he 'permitted himself the most indecent liberties' upon her 'limbs so white, so soft, so delicate' (Lewis 279), her resistance 'seemed only to inflame the Monk's desires and supply his brutality with additional strength' (Lewis 280). After the attack and the veil of Antonia's innocence has been torn, both the metaphorical veil of modesty and the literal hymeneal veil, Ambrosio looks upon her with 'disgust', 'aversion and rage' (Lewis 281). He fulminates 'What seduced me into these crimes [...] Fatal Witch! Was it not thy beauty?' (Lewis 282). Now devoid of the illusion of purity, Ambrosio is no longer attracted to Antonia as he is unable to fetishise her (Lewis 282). Yael Shapira reads Lewis's visceral literary techniques as demonstrating 'his lack of concern for the reader's moral well-being' and a means to develop his position as a 'spectacle-maker' (Shapira 179). However, considering the contemporary social climate surrounding conduct literature's construction of femininity, it is clear that Lewis does not discount the moral well-being of his reader, but rather positions it as his primary focus. Recognising the overt fetishisation of female chastity, Lewis's visceral depiction of Antonia's rape aims to hold up a mirror to the reader. Having positioned the reader as a complicit voyeur throughout the novel, the gruesome, climactic rape scene is depicted in order to reinforce the cruel outcome of indulging in this fetishisation; Lewis's utilizaton of voyeurism implicates his readers as well as his characters. Just like the magic mirror Ambrosio uses to gaze upon Antonia, the novel itself is employed in a remarkably similar way, acting as a visual manifestation of the projected image of fetishised chastity placed upon women through conduct literature. Ultimately, Lewis's use of the veil – literal and symbolic – as a simultaneous image of chastity and sexual instigation communicates his criticism towards the fetishised femininity perpetuated by conduct literature.

Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* follows the story of Emily St Aubert, an orphan who is sent to live with her aunt and her new husband, Montoni. Echoing Lewis's depiction of Antonia, Markman Ellis similarly reads that Radcliffe's characterisation of Emily turned 'to the sentimentally validated qualities of chastity, humility, innocence and modesty' (Ellis 52). The first volume of the novel centres on Emily's life in her home in La Vallée while her parents are alive. Her father, St Aubert, joys in cultivating Emily's talents that he felt 'were congenial to her taste', taking pride in making her 'an early proficient' (Radcliffe 3). Not only does he control her education, but he also policed Emily's self-governance 'to counteract those traits in her disposition, which might hereafter lead her from happiness' (Radcliffe 5). Within the idealised, paternalistic world of volume one, Emily is guided by her father step-by-step as she constructs her sense of self. Although it is arguable St Aubert has the best intentions, his strict education leads him to 'create a daughter very much in his own image', an image that fully aligns with the femininity demanded in eighteenth-century didactic literature (Hoeveler 45).

Radcliffe's characterisation of St Aubert is a caricature of the authoritative masculine voice within the conduct book. Soile Ylivuori states that during the eighteenth-century, a widespread fear existed surrounding the inherent irrationality within the female character. During this period, women 'were believed to have a diminished capability to control their urges and, therefore, to be vulnerable to all sorts of weaknesses of the flesh' (Ylivuori 45). In order to police this, 'women were thought to be in special need of the refining effects of heterosociability and polite education'; this education was distributed through conduct literature (Ibid). Infusing St Aubert with this ideology, Radcliffe writes of his efforts to 'enure [Emily] to habits of self-command', lest she should indulge in her inherent emotional unruliness, actualising the masculine fear of female irrationality (Radcliffe 5).

Furthermore, William Kenrick's conduct book, *The Whole Duty of Woman,* dictates to its female reader: 'Discover not the knowledge of things, it is not expected thou should understand' (Kenrick 33). This echoes a scene within *Udolpho* in which St Aubert is seen by Emily crying over a portrait 'of a lady, but not of her mother' (Radcliffe 26). Adding to this mystery surrounding the portrait of the unknown woman, St Aubert commands Emily upon his deathbed to burn undisclosed documents, with a strict emphasis to do this 'without examining them' (Radcliffe 60). Often returning to the image of this portrait of an unknown woman, Radcliffe subtly suggests throughout the narrative that Emily was of illegitimate birth, her mother and ultimately the woman in the portrait being the deceased Marchioness de Villeroi. However, it is revealed that the Marchioness was instead Emily's aunt, murdered by Laurentini. St Aubert's reason for concealing this secret was down to his 'tenderness to Emily', 'whose sensibility he feared to awaken' (Radcliffe 660). St Aubert's justification for veiling this secret from Emily is resonant with the eighteenth-century 'fear of overloading the delicate mind or transgressing an allotted role' (Jones 100). Therefore, this requirement of female nescience in fear of their inherent irrationality is symbolised through the mysteries within the relationship between Emily and her father and his veiling of knowledge.

This critique of women and veiled knowledge is further symbolised in Radcliffe's 'notoriously regarded' scene of the literal black veil in Castle Udolpho (Williams 73). Exploring the castle, Emily and her servant, Annette, enter a gallery, coming across a hidden frame 'concealed by a veil of black silk' (Radcliffe 233). Overcome with curiosity, Radcliffe writes '[t]he singularity of the circumstance struck [Emily], and she stopped before it, wishing to remove the veil, and examine what could thus carefully be concealed, but somewhat wanting courage' (Ibid). The suspense is further enhanced as Annette's

‘countenance [grew] pale’, telling Emily she had ‘heard there is something very dreadful belonging to [the veil] —and that it has been covered up in black ever since—and that nobody has looked at it for a great many years’ (Ibid). Despite Emily’s pleas, Annette refuses to lift the veil with her, and she decides ‘when daylight should have reanimated her spirits, to go thither and remove the veil’ (Radcliffe 234). The buildup of suspense created throughout this scene positions the reader alongside Emily, yearning to know what lies beneath the black veil. Diane Hoelever states that within the Female Gothic, heroines ‘appear to be conforming to their acceptable roles within the patriarchy but [...] actually subvert the father's power at every possible occasion’ (Hoelever 6). This is exactly what Radcliffe’s heroine does in going ‘thither and remov[ing] the veil’ (Radcliffe 234). Despite her education being based upon shielding her ‘delicate mind,’ Emily defies her father’s teachings, and ‘with a timid hand, lifted the veil’ (Radcliffe 248). However, before divulging what lies behind, Emily ‘dropped senseless on the floor’ (Radcliffe 249).

The psychological suspense created by Radcliffe surrounding the veiled picture is important in communicating her criticisms surrounding conduct literature. Although what lies behind the veil is in reality rather mundane, it is the use of suspense that communicates Radcliffe’s critique. The narrative positions the reader within Emily’s curious perspective, aligning them with her desire to go against the social shielding of her late father and make her own decision without a paternal protector. It is important to note Radcliffe’s primary audience: Edward Jacobs states that during Radcliffe’s contemporary, ‘libraries gained a reputation for mainly renting fashionable novels to frivolous women’ (Jacobs 55). Thus, with a significant proportion of the literary market being women, Radcliffe encourages her female readers to identify with Emily, psychologically pushing them to lift their own veil of limited knowledge. Thus, through the veil motif, not only is

Emily herself defying conduct literature's advice to 'discover not the knowledge of things,' but this message is communicated to female readers.

In response to this, Jane Austen pays homage to Radcliffe's aims and techniques in her own novel, *Northanger Abbey*. Austen's heroine, Catherine, is enamoured by Radcliffe's *Udolpho* and perceives the world around through the lens of a Gothic novel. Staying in an abbey with the Tilney family, Catherine 'indulges in wild speculation at a time when she is effectively outside of [...] paternal control' (Morrison 3). Having 'got to the black veil' scene in *Udolpho* (Austen 22),, Catherine's imagination is so gripped by suspense that she fabricates her own 'wildly improbable Gothic fantasies' (Morrison 8). The way in which Austen interacts with Radcliffe's use of the Gothic veil is double-edged; she criticises how it can lead female readers to seek out fantasies and disregard real threats, but also pays homage to the suspense the veil creates, acknowledging it has the ability to push young women to seek information regarding their surroundings that would conventionally be concealed from them.

Both Lewis and Radcliffe's application of the Gothic veil technique reveals that both novelists wove their own social commentary and criticisms towards constructions of femininity perpetuated by conduct literature. As this paper has shown, both novelists clearly deploy the veil motif through contrasting techniques; Lewis's as a visceral, sexual instigator that symbolises the fetishisation of female chastity, and Radcliffe's as a psychological tool to create suspense and intrigue in order to encourage her female readers to actively seek knowledge beyond the boundaries of conduct literature. Thus, it is evident through each novel's use of the veil technique that the binary conception of Male/Female Gothic categorised through the gender of the author or protagonist imposes reductive limitations. In analysing each author's use of the veil motif, it is clear that both novels do

share the same fundamental aim to criticise the idealised femininity perpetuated by eighteenth-century conduct books.

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