

1998

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Recommended Citation

Holliday, Wyatt (1998) "Incest in the Gothic Novel," *Articulāte*: Vol. 3 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol3/iss1/5>

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INCEST IN THE GOTHIC NOVEL

BY WYATT HOLLIDAY '98

The human mind has a preoccupation with sex and violence but seems to be unable to reconcile itself with the extension of this preoccupation, namely violent sex such as incest. This preoccupation is nothing new; there has been incest as long as there have been people. If you believe the Judeo-Christian Bible, the entire human race is the product of incest; if God only made Adam and Eve, with whom else could their children "go forth and multiply"? This theme is also widespread and prevalent across the centuries in other literature; and it has usually evoked horror and distaste in those who encounter it. Witness Shakespeare's Hamlet (a possible Gothic hero, himself), and his opinion in 1600-ish of incest:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt ...
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self slaughter!
... within a month (of my father's death)
... (my mother) married with my uncle,
My father's brother ...
... O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets
(*Hamlet* I,ii)!

Indeed, Anne Williams lists the reasons that *Hamlet*, both the character and the play, is so important to later Gothic writers such as Walpole: it has "a castle; a ghost; a madwoman; a family secret concerning a murder; plenty of violence; and incest [emphasis mine], both actual and implicit" (31). Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* was written in the England of the 1760's and contains scads of implied and attempted incest and incestuous images. Incest as a Gothic convention is also, however, as contemporary as Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire*, which had a doubly creepy movie version which showed on the big screen the very real implications of the Louis character's kissing the Claudia character. Incest is as much a Gothic convention as a locked door. I will

attempt herein to explore how the convention of incest in the Gothic novel has played a role in the genre by examining the ways in which it has been used in the first major Gothic, Walpole's *Otranto*, and Matthew Gregory Lewis's also early *The Monk*.

In Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, incest serves several functions, one of which is to further the "dominant power structure," i.e. the patriarchy, in which lies the source of all political and economic power in the novel (Winter 18). The Gothic genre can be seen as a family romance in that it mostly concerns itself with the comings and goings, morals and mores, of one (or several) particular family unit(s). *Otranto* fits easily into this mold; the novel opens to a description of the inhabitants of the Castle, and reads almost like a cast list at the beginning of a play:

Manfred, Prince of Otranto, had one son and one daughter: The latter a most Beautiful virgin, aged eighteen, was called Matilda. Conrad, the son, was three years younger, a homely youth, sickly, and of no promising disposition; yet he was the darling of his father, who never showed any symptoms of affection to Matilda. Manfred had contracted a marriage for his son with the Marquis of Vincenza's daughter, Isabella (Walpole 15).

From this opening, we have a sense of the family politics; the stronger older child, a daughter, is ignored and unloved, while the younger, sickly boy is doted upon and already is engaged to be married. Manfred sees his son as the only acceptable heir to the paternalistic realm of Otranto, even to the point that he seems not even to recognize the Darwinistic superiority of his daughter. Manfred seems nearly mad for viable *male* heirs, because there is a prophesy which foretells the downfall of "the House of Manfred." When his wife Hippolita attempts to dissuade Manfred from his intention to marry Conrad

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off because of "his great infirmities," Manfred "never (gives) any other answer than reflections on her own sterility" (Walpole 15). This paternalistic power structure serves to set the scene for Manfred's attempt at incest. In his eyes, he needs a *son*, or at least a strong grandson, to continue the rule of Castle Otranto, and to deviate from that need is to lose what he has built up: "my fate depends on having sons" (Walpole 23). His need for an heir overrides all other concerns in his life. The irony, of course, is that, through his mad quest for an heir, he destroys his chance of having one; the action of the story ultimately leads to nothing more than the theme, of which Walpole himself speaks ill in the Translator's Preface, "the sins of fathers are visited on their children" (Walpole 5).

It is important to remember, however, that Manfred's attempt at incest in fact is what destroys his first chance to have an heir, and that his other chance for an heir is consumed in a situation that, at least from a Freudian standpoint, contains imagery which seems to imply incest. The presence of incest in the action foretells certain ruin, because incest stands in direct opposition to the family paradigm which is central to the Gothic as family romance. As Anne Williams sets forth in her excellent *Art of Darkness*:

Foucault ... argues that "sexuality" was superimposed upon alliance," creating a situation in which the demands of family, property, social order, and tradition conflict with the new idea that the desires of the private self should constitute the fundamental basis of private behavior. ... It follows ... that such an arrangement would regard incest, the paradoxical "law" of forbidden love, as the horror of horrors, the unspeakable crime (93).

The idea of incest is so problematic because the truth of sexual experience are expected to fit within "an already determined range of facts," and this range of "fact" does not now and never has included the idea of incest, which is seen as "the 'universal' taboo" (Williams 93-94). Because Manfred involves himself in situations of incest, he is doomed from the start.

However, there is another side to the use of the incest theme in this novel: from early in the novel, the theme adds a bit of irony and black humor to the proceedings, at least when read from my late-twentieth-century viewpoint. Ironic foreshadowing appears

from the start, on the first page of the novel: "(Isabella) had already been delivered by her guardians into the hands of Manfred, that he might celebrate the wedding as soon as Conrad's infirm state of health would permit" (15). This is, of course, exactly what happens; when Conrad's state of health allows him to be dead, Manfred makes a very focused effort to celebrate a wedding with her. Manfred later remarks to Matilda "I do not want a daughter" (21), after which he decides to take Isabella, his daughter(-in-law)-to-be, for use as an "heir oven." The instances in which Manfred's single-minded determination to have an heir are the subjects of foreshadowing recall in my mind such diverse sources as the sexual double-talk and innuendo that is such a feature of Shakespeare's comedies, and the traits of the stock characters in Moliere's French restoration comedies such as *The Miser*, in which the main character's cheapness overshadows all of the other concerns in his life. These comic connections were not lost upon the public of Walpole's day; they were equally horrified by the suggestions of incest and amused by the (sometimes) clunky way in which it was presented.

Even later in the novel, when Manfred broaches the subject of incest with Isabella, there is a sense that her horror is a bit too overdone to be really disturbing. She responds to Manfred's offer of himself as replacement for his giant-helmet-fallen-from-the-sky-killed son with the cry "Heavens!" and goes on to use too many exclamation points to be taken very seriously: "What do I hear! You! My Lord! You! My father-in-law! the father of Conrad! the husband of the virtuous and tender Hippolita!" (Walpole 23). As Ian Duncan suggests, "the writing mimics its own theme of degradation into triviality" (32).

There is a further scene which furthers the idea that "that strain of ironical trashiness" will lead to "Gothic and Camp remain[ing] on intimate terms" (Duncan 32) (a phenomenon proved by the tremendous success of the movie *Scream* last year). In trying to suggest the depths of depravity which are plumbed by Manfred's suggestion of marriage with his former-soon-to-be-daughter-in-law, Walpole (unintentionally?) writes one of the most humorous scenes in all of Gothic literature:

Manfred (was) advancing to seize the Princess. At that instant the portrait of his grandfather, which hung over the bench where they had been sitting, uttered a deep sigh, and heaved

its breast. ... The picture ... began to move ... quit its pannel, and descend(ed) on the floor with grave and melancholy air (24).

Recalling Hamlet's Father's ghost, the specter motions for his errant descendant to follow; when Manfred tries to follow, thinking the specter is come to impart knowledge upon Manfred, the ghost shuts a door in his face. This scene is interesting because it deals with the implications of incest on two levels: that it is so horrific that the mere suggestion of it causes Manfred's dead ancestors to get up and leave the room, while at the same time imparting the rather comic image of Manfred's dead ancestors getting up, leaving the room, and slamming the door in his face.

There is, of course, more to the treatment of incest in *Otranto* than just camp and irony. There is real commentary upon the grossness of the idea of incest. After all, incest does, in the end, cause the downfall of the present principality, leave dead bodies strewn about, and send people into religious vows. The real grossness of the incest is best shown in the scene in which Isabella, Matilda and Hippolita are crying about the, at that point, seemingly inevitable divorce/incestuous marriage which would come about as a result of Manfred's quest for an heir. A careful examination of the diction of the scene reveals a deep-seated abhorrence for the suggestion of the divorce/incestuous marriage. Manfred is reviled as a an "impious man," a "murderer, an assassin," "odious," and my personal favorite, "execrable" (Walpole 90-1). Near the beginning of the section, Isabella responds to Hippolita's assertion that she cannot hear ill of her husband by saying that "the purity of your own heart prevents your seeing the depravity" implicit in Manfred (90). Isabella is horrified at the thought that her own father, whom she describes as "too pious, too noble," (91) may agree to Manfred's request, a situation which she believes to be a most terrifying prospect: "I was contracted to the son? can I wed the father?—no, Madam, no; force should not drag me to Manfred's hated bed. I loath him, I abhor him: Divine and human laws forbid" (91). This statement shows the depth of Isabella's disgust: in the society in which Isabella finds herself, "women are, at best, passive receptacles of men's ideas" (Winter 20). In declaring herself independent of the society in which "it is not ours [meaning women's] to make election for ourselves: Heaven, our fathers, and our husbands must decide for us (Walpole 91-2), Isabella is saying

that the very idea of incest is so abhorrent that she is willing, basically, to take on the world rather than to submit to it.

Of course, in the end, Manfred does not wed Isabella; but he does commit a final quasi-incestuous act which removes his final hope for an heir. Manfred, "whose spirits were inflamed" with "wine and love" (Walpole 108), violently stabs one whom he thinks is Isabella with a dagger, killing her. His reasoning for this act being something like "if I can't have her, no one can," Manfred accidentally kills his own daughter, Matilda, and in doing so, runs afoul of Freud. The Freudian analysis of this scene would see the knife as a phallic symbol which is plunged "into the bosom of the person that spoke" (109); with the phallic knife representing male sexuality, and the female breast representing female sexuality, this scene can be examined as a rape as much as a murder. As the recipient of that fateful thrust, so to speak, is Manfred's blood kin, his daughter, there is at least the implication of incestuous rape in this scene.

While the situations of incest in Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* are either implied or involve an unconsummated attempt, those of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* are graphic and violent. However, like *Otranto*, there is in *The Monk* a consciousness of "the repression of the female to the Law of the Father" (Williams 120), i.e. that the patriarchal nature of the premises on which the play is based eventually lead to destruction of the characters. However, the intent of the villainous characters reveals the differentiation between Manfred and Ambrosio. Manfred was mostly interested in continuing his line, which at least suggests that he was interested in issues beyond his libido; while in *The Monk*, Ambrosio was really only interested in the sex, or rape, really, and the attendant feelings of possession, domination and power.

The occurrence of incest in this novel occurs within a nest of other "sins," all perpetrated by Ambrosio, the man lauded as peerless in the opening pages of the novel:

In the whole course of his life He has never been known to transgress a single rule of his order; The smallest stain is not to discovered upon his character; and He is reported to be so strict an observer of Chastity that He knows not in what consists the difference of Man and Woman (Lewis 17).

It is, however, from this paternalistically-en-

forced "innocence" of the Catholic priest that the urge and drive to be promiscuous arises. Steven Bruhm proposes that in breaking free from the dictates of the church, Ambrosio swings too far in the opposite direction, gaining an unconscious revenge on a symbol of the Church, the Madonna-esque Antonia: "so while we may applaud his transgression against authority, we recoil against his transgressions" (130). Much in the way the readers of *Otranto* were equally horrified and amused by the juxtaposition of the vile and the comic, it could be argued that there is a possible duality in the reader's response to Ambrosio in the beginning sections of the novel. However, I would assert that as we delve into the novel, we come realize that Ambrosio's "fight the power" impulses ultimately manifest themselves in his acts of murder, rape, and the eventual "sale" of his soul to Satan.

Lewis's tale lacks the humor which made *Otranto* a pleasurable read; instead, the plot of *The Monk* does "not depend on comedy or tragedy but rather on suspense, anxiety, and fear" (Winter 18). The scenes of degradation are wholly degraded; we know, or at least suspect, early in the novel that any sexual congress between Ambrosio and Antonia would be incestuous, as the novel is loaded with hints and dual images involving these two characters, right down to their names. Ambrosio's quest for the consummation of his sexual fantasy echoes Manfred's quest for an heir, in that it seems to wholly consume him, to the point that he loses sight of all else; however, while Manfred is the villain of the novel, he is not (really) really *vile*. Ambrosio, on the other hand, is possibly the most despicable character we have encountered in Gothic literature: he trades his soul to the Devil so that he may have the opportunity to kidnap, rape and murder his sister.

This sense of utter vileness is apparent in the passages which contain the actual rape. Ambrosio not only ruins a virgin (and figuratively, the Virgin), but he does it in a setting which suggests necrophilia, possibly the only sexual act which is seen, by and large, as more foul than incest. The sense of disgust which the rape engenders is furthered by the setting in which it occurs:

By the side of three putrid half-corrupted Bodies lay the sleeping beauty. ... A s wrapped in her shroud She reclined upon the funeral Bier, She seems to smile at the Images of Death around her. While he gazed upon

their rotting bones and disgusting figures, who perhaps were once as sweet and lovely...(the images) served to strengthen his resolution to destroy Antonia's honour" (Lewis 379).

It should be noted that, at this point, to Ambrosio, Antonia still serves as a representation of the Madonna, the Divine, the Perfect. He desires *that* aspect of Antonia as much as or more than her human "woman-ness": "what charms me, when ideal and considered as a superior Being, would disgust me, become Woman and tainted with all the failings of mortality" (Lewis 41). While it is ambiguous, I do not think that Ambrosio is "turned on" by the necrophilic imagery so much as by the dichotomy of those images and the transcendent beauty of Antonia. However, the act of the rape removes from Antonia the veil of divinity which she had to that point worn; she "becomes a woman," as the euphemism goes. I would assert that this sweeping away of perfection causes in Ambrosio a recognition, first of the rather immediate necrotic imagery in which he and Antonia are surrounded, and secondly, on some level of the incestuous nature of the rape. Lewis tells us that at the aftermath of the consummation,

Nature seemed to recoil at the touch. He felt himself at once repulsed from and attracted towards her, yet could account for neither sentiment. There was something in her look which penetrated him with horror; and though his understanding was still ignorant of it, Conscience pointed out to him the whole extent of his crime (387).

The word choice here is very interesting. That Antonia "penetrated" him with "horror" obviously recalls his earlier penetration of her sexually.

To further this look at word choice, one need only examine the diction of the rape scene to understand the utter disgust and degradation which the idea of the incestuous rape causes. The language which Lewis uses to describe the rape is frightening. Lewis portrays Ambrosio as "an unprincipled Barbarian" (383), who is wholly overcome with lust:

In the violence of his lustful delirium, [Ambrosio] wounded and bruised her tender limbs. Heedless of her tears, cries and entreaties, He gradually made himself Master of her person, and desisted not from his prey, till he had accomplished his crime and the dishonor of Antonia (383-4).

The act of rape is presented in the most sickening light possible. Not only is Ambrosio forcing himself sexually upon the, at this point, helpless Antonia, but he is also so wrapped up in himself that he is physically destroying her. Words like "violence," "wounded, and "bruised" impart a sense outrage and injustice when applied towards Antonia, of whom we are told in our first glimpse that "the delicacy and elegance of whose figure inspired...the most lively curiosity to view the face to which it belonged. ... Her figure...was light and airy as that of a Hamadryad" (Lewis 9). The image of a "Barbarian," large and hairy, ignoring the "tears, cries, and entreaties," and overwhelming the defenses of a "light and airy Hamadyad" is very powerful; I doubt that Lewis could have written a rape scene which aroused more disgust and outrage than the one he did. Indeed, "from the moment of its publication, *The Monk* scandalized readers with its sexual explicitness and its scenes of virtue violated" (Williams 115).

The horror of the incestuous rape is restated a final time at the end of the novel by Satan himself. A good rule of thumb is that if Satan finds you morally reprehensible (much as if the Marquis de Sade feels "apparently unalloyed admiration" [Williams 115] for your work, as he was reported to have for *The Monk*), it is a good indication that you have done, to use a colloquialism, some pretty sick shit. Satan tells Ambrosio that "hell boasts no miscreant more guilty than yourself" (Lewis 439). Old Scratch then reveals that Elvira was his mother and Antonia his sister; it only takes another quick look at diction to reveal the absolute depths to which Ambrosio has aspired (remember that this is the DEVIL, the Prince of Darkness, talking here, not someone's grandmother). Words like "abandoned Hypocrite," "inhuman Patricide, and "incestuous Ravisher" (Lewis 430) are loaded upon Ambrosio. He is accused, in addition to murder, incest and rape, which are taken for granted, of "vanity," "pride, and "blind idolatry," (430), all sins in the eyes of Christian doctrine. As a final thought, Lewis's painting of Ambrosio's myriad sins could possibly be seen as a revolt, a "transgression," against the "oppressive regime of the Catholic Church" (Bruhm 130), making Lewis, himself "at least a latent homosexual" (Williams 115), a sort of "Gothic terrorist" (Winter 29) who employed both "the terror of power [and] the power of terrorism" (Winter 18) in his attack on Catholicism.

One of the most critically praised elements of *The Monk* is the frame tale of the Bleeding Nun, an aspect which was suggested in class as possibly the central element of the novel based on its position as the deepest "story within a story" in the novel. The Bleeding Nun can be seen as a double for several characters in *The Monk*, most importantly Ambrosio, and as such I would assert that, when also examined from its position as the inner-most frame story, it could possibly be seen as Lewis's final comment upon the novel. Beatrice de las Cisternas (a.k.a. the Bleeding Nun) joined a convent early in life at the insistence of her parent. From this point, her story is basically a retelling of Ambrosio's:

She was then too young to regret the pleasures, of which her profession deprived her: But no sooner did her warm and voluptuous character begin to be developed, than did She abandon herself freely to the impulse of her passions; and seized the first opportunity to procure their gratification. This opportunity was at length presented, after many obstacles which only added force to her desires (Lewis 173).

This "gratification" was followed by an elopement and the beginnings of a life of "most unbridled debauchery" in which she "display(ed) the incontinence of a Prostitute" and "professed herself an Atheist" (Lewis 173). Then comes our interest in the story: "possessed of a character so depraved, She did not long confine her affections to one object. Soon after her arrival at the Castle, the Baron's younger Brother attracted her notice" (174). The Brother, Otto, persuaded Beatrice to kill his brother, her lover, in exchange for his affection; once again, the action of the Gothic narrative recalls *Hamlet*. We are told that "the Wretch consented to this horrible agreement" (174); but instead of marrying her as he had promised, Otto used the same knife which she used to kill her lover to kill her.

This story obviously parallels Ambrosio's (He took his vows before he knew better, grew lustful, consummated his lust at first opportunity, became enamored in an incestuous way, was helped and prompted to consummate that lust, killed someone with a knife, and was finally killed himself by the person who prompted him); and it contains several comments upon the nature of incest according to Lewis, and possibly, according to the early Gothic

genre, which I think bear stating (or repeating, at least). First, whenever a someone becomes involved in an incestuous relationship, that person is doomed. But secondly, and of paramount importance, I would assert that the presence of incest in at least these two Gothic novels displays the ultimate power of the Christian (or Catholic) Church. Beatrice cannot "rest" until she has come back to God, in the symbolic gesture of the Christian burial in her family's tomb. She also requires that "thirty masses be said for the repose of my Spirit, and I trouble the world no more" (Lewis 172). Manfred, in the end, "took on ... the habit of religion in the neighboring convents" (Walpole 115). And Ambrosio, having in the end utterly renounced God by selling his soul to Sa-

tan in return for his escape, is thrown from a mountain-top by the same Satan, left alive where he falls so that the birds, animals and bugs may pick his body apart while he still breathes.

With this final image of horror, it is obvious that the convention of incest within the Gothic genre was used for the most part to invoke disgust and abhorrence, and to signal the downfall of any who become involved in it. While only early Gothic novels were examined herein, this sentiment holds true in later Gothic works as well: Darl ends up in an asylum only after noticing that his sister's "wet dress shapes ... those mammalian ludicrosities which are the horizons and the valleys of the earth" (Faulkner 150), i.e. that Dewey Dell has a nice rack.

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