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The Fascinating Fall of Ambrosio

Matthew Lewis' infamous gothic novel, *The Monk*, capitalizes on late eighteenth-century fears of violent colonial unrest. Yet, these fears of colonial unrest also fascinate *The Monk*—and gothic novels more generally. During the last decades of the century, slave-worked plantations like that Lewis inherited after his father's death witnessed many insurrections; while Lewis condemned the slave trade, he did not believe in emancipating slaves already yoked. Lewis's paradoxical relationship to the institution of slavery emerges in *The Monk*. A tale of the corruption and eventual fall of the diabolical monk Ambrosio, seduced by a devil's advocate in drag, *The Monk* nonetheless exhibits a profound fascination with the spectre of violent oppression. Ambrosio cements his fall when he incestuously rapes the drugged and tortured Antonia in the "long," dark, labyrinthine "passages" beneath the monastery (324).

Repeatedly described as "a treasure" worth the "riches" and "wealth" of the "Indies," Antonia—actually Ambrosio's lost daughter—represents the path of virtue the Monk ultimately rejects (328, 330). Suggesting a kind of colonial subjection, Ambrosio and Matilda have interred Antonia in the "the western aisles" of the monastery, where she shares the vault with "three putrid half-corrupted bodies" (324). While his "prey" drowsily awakes from the "opiate" he administered earlier, Ambrosio could "[scarce]...restrain himself from enjoying her while yet insensible" (323, 325). Objectifying Antonia, Ambrosio treats her as a consumable commodity; his "liberty" (324) depends not only on her incarceration but also on her inability to "ransom" her freedom with pleas. The Monk "possess[es]" Antonia "alone"; "absolutely in [his] power," she "[is] imagined dead" and

“society is for ever lost to [her]” (327). While Ambrosio attempts to “instruct” his prisoner in the “joys” of forced sex, she “struggl[es]” and “endeavour[s] to escape” (327). Enslaved to the Monk’s criminal lust, Antonia ultimately welcomes death (336). When the citizens of Madrid discover the crimes of the “immaculate Ambrosio, ‘the man of holiness’, the idol” of the city, their horror turns to “riot” and “conflagration” (336-7).

Yet, out of the fires of “riot” and “conflagration” rises a new hope for the corrupt religious system. Don Ramirez, the Duke of Madrid, controls the situation masterfully and, struck with the beauty of the innocent “Virginia,” marries her. This new hope, however, far from resolving the complications of power, merely elides them, for Don Ramirez, fearing “a repetition of the riots,” takes care “that the populace should remain ignorant” (337). In the dark labyrinths of *The Monk*, the conflicts arising from human bondage underwrite the fascinations of gothic fiction.

Work Cited

Lewis, Matthew. *The Monk*. Ed. by Christopher Maclachlan. New York: Penguin, 1998.