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The figure of the nun and the gothic construction of femininity in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

Marie Hause
James Madison University

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The Figure of the Nun and the Gothic Construction of Femininity in Matthew Lewis's

The Monk, Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

Marie Hause

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my sister Brittany, who is horrified that anyone would voluntarily choose to write about the gothic.

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Abstract

The treatment of nuns and convents in gothic novels contributes to the presentation of various attitudes toward women who resist normative female roles. This is illustrated in the consideration of three central, and very different, gothic or post-gothic works: Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1796), and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853). These novels draw on conflicting popular associations of nuns and convents, including nuns as chaste, sexual, or tragic and convents as brothels, prisons, or liberating communities. In each novel, anti-Catholicism also comes into play in the way that nuns work as foci for explorations of female roles. Lewis's horrific figures of dying or dead nuns contribute to his novel's condemnation of sexually transgressive, active women as monstrous. Radcliffe breaks away from the presentation of female transgression as monstrous and takes a more positive view of the convent as a female community offering a limited space for female self-definition and resistance to heteronormative roles. Brontë uses Lucy Snowe's association with nuns and convents to highlight both Lucy's restraint under patriarchy and her rejection of imposed gender roles. Lucy establishes an active convent-like community of her own where she follows traditionally unfeminine intellectual and artistic pursuits, themselves connected with the nun in *Villette*. Lewis's *The Monk*, Radcliffe's *The Italian*, and Brontë's *Villette*, when viewed together, form a complex, layered picture of one gothic element that plays a varied part in the elaboration and transgression of normative roles for women in the gothic novel.

Chapter One

Introduction: The Conflicting Associations of the Figure of the Nun

Thrice blessed they, that master so the blood

To undergo such maiden pilgrimage

-William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1.1.78-79)

In these deep solitudes and awful cells,

Where heav'nly-pensive, contemplation dwells,

And ever-musing melancholy reigns;

What means this tumult in a Vestal's veins?

-Alexander Pope, "Eloisa to Abelard" (1-4)

Shadow thou hast reached my feet,

Rise and cover up my head;

Be my stainless winding sheet,

Buried before I am dead.

-Christina Rossetti, "Three Nuns" (8-11)

A few years ago, when I was studying for a semester in Oxford, I first saw Charles Allston Collins's 1851 *Convent Thoughts* (Fig. 1). In a presentation giving an overview of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, historian Dr. Elizabeth Baigent skipped quickly over a slide showing Collins's pensive nun. Dr. Baigent characterized the painting as "mawkish," "cloying," and "sentimental," saying that we know exactly what the convent thoughts are: the novice stands in devout contemplation of the passion of the Christ, which is symbolized by the passion flower she gazes at and illustrated in the prayer book she holds. She is saintly, virginal, chaste, the perfect Victorian woman. Dr.



Figure 1. Charles Allston Collins, *Convent Thoughts* (1851), oil on canvas.

Baigent moved on to less saintly, darker Pre-Raphaelite femmes fatales, but I felt that *Convent Thoughts* held more subversive potential than Dr. Baigent saw in it. A few days later, I went to the Ashmolean Museum to look at the painting in more detail, and I formed a different reading of Collins's sentimental nun. She may be the perfect Victorian woman, but how much of that perfection is forced upon her? Walled in, enclosed on her tiny island of a *hortus conclusus*, the novice contemplates passion: but is it Christ's passion, or her own?

Her fingers hold the prayer book open at illustrations of the Annunciation and the Crucifixion, the arc of Mary's life as a mother.¹ The novice has presumably given up such a role: does she rebel against repressing her sexuality, mastering her blood? Collins accompanied the painting with lines from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when he presented it at the Royal Academy in 1851 (Casteras 172): "Thrice blessed they, that master so the blood / To undergo such maiden pilgrimage" (1.1.78-79). In the passage from which the lines are taken, Theseus presents Hermia with the choice of either marrying a man she does not love or living "in a shady cloister mew'd" (1.1.74), where she may be thrice-blessed but will, "withering on the virgin thorn," forsake the "earthlier-happy" role of the "rose distill'd" (1.1.81, 80). Surrounded by flowers that symbolize both purity and fecundity, does the novice envy the earthly rose? Collins's

¹ Susan P. Casteras and Robert P. Fletcher both claim that the image is of the Nativity (Casteras 172; Fletcher 229), but the illustration—a woman kneeling in an enclosed room—more closely matches traditional representations of the Annunciation, and as such may reference both Mary's dawning sexuality and her role as a mother. The holy infant is also pictured, but in a separate, smaller, illustration on the same page. For a Pre-Raphaelite depiction of the Annunciation that emphasizes Mary's sexuality, or her status as a threatened sexual object, see Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (1850). Rachael Baitch describes Rossetti's Virgin as "shrinking against the wall in an attempt to evade the violation of the archangel's lily stem, which points directly at her womb" (5).

painting invites such questions, but does not answer them. We cannot tell if the novice is rapturously devout or romantically resigned, liberated by her vocation or oppressed by her immurement. Her convent thoughts remain hidden behind her downcast eyes.

I open with this anecdote because the difficulty of interpreting *Convent Thoughts* points to the conflicting meanings embodied in the figure of the nun. Such conflicting meanings are at play in the presentation of nuns in gothic novels as well. Nuns as chaste and virtuous, nuns as sexual and transgressive; the convent as a place of living burial and insanity for women, the convent as a place of liberation and activity for women: these and other opposing views of nuns and convents are important in considering the way that gothic novels present women who resist normative feminine roles. I will illustrate this in analyses of three central, and very different, gothic or post-gothic works: Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1796), and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853). Lewis draws on negative connections between the convent and the brothel and the prison in his portrayal of sexually transgressive, active women as monstrous, while Radcliffe takes a more positive view of the convent as a female community offering a limited space for women's self-definition. Brontë uses her protagonist's association with nuns and convents to highlight both her restraint under patriarchy and her rejection of imposed gendered roles as she establishes an active convent-like community of her own where she follows "unfeminine" intellectual and artistic pursuits.

Before discussing these novels, an overview of popular images of nuns and convents is useful. Perhaps the most obvious set of contrasting stereotypes is that of nuns as chaste and nuns as sexually promiscuous. Nuns, set apart from the world, are figures of

chaste and inaccessible female virtue. Yet their very chastity and inaccessibility also make them objects of erotic speculation. Like eighteenth-century and earlier fascination with virginity, the erotic appeal of the cloistered nun depends on a denial of sexuality that actually emphasizes a preoccupation with it. In describing medieval views of women, R. Howard Bloch notes the inevitability of an erotic element in exhortations of female chastity, saying that there is “no way of speaking about virginity that does not imply its loss, no poetics of praise that is not already complicit in the violence of rape, no magnification of the perfection of woman abstracted that is not a taking of possession” (112). This eroticized chastity manifests itself in views of the elevated fair one of the courtly love tradition, of the woman practicing the “house monasticism” of domestic continence (Bloch 93), and of the cloistered woman abstracted from the world. The novice in *Convent Thoughts* is a young, beautiful woman who forms the object of the viewer’s voyeuristic gaze, and surely part of the enjoyment the painting affords the viewer stems from the sense of invisibly violating the sanctity of the novice’s cloistered solitude. That sense of violation—of walls, of vows, of laws—is part of the nun’s attraction. In Aphra Behn’s *The Rover* (1677), the soon-to-take-orders Hellena asks the Don Juan-like Wilmore “What think you of a nunnery wall? for he that wins me, / must gain that first” (1.2.170-71). Wilmore replies, “A nun! Oh how I love thee for’t! There’s no sinner / like a young saint” (1.2.172-73). Scaling the nunnery wall adds relish to the conquest, and Wilmore assumes that nuns will be more inclined to sexual sin than other women because of their dissatisfaction with the convent’s repression.² The inaccessibility

² Such situations are not limited to dramas in Protestant countries. In José Zorrilla’s *Don Juan Tenorio* (1844), a reworking of the Spanish Don Juan legend, Don Juan is attracted to Doña Ana because she is raised within a convent. She is an innocent “pobre garza

of the chaste woman or of the walled-up nun makes her eminently desirable. In this sense, there may be a certain logic behind the seemingly paradoxical emblem tradition that represents Aphrodite, the goddess of love, as a modest veiled nun.³

Nuns may be represented as erotic because they are chaste; often, however, nuns are ironically and parodically represented as straightforwardly erotic, not chaste at all. They are young saints who are really the worst of sinners, indulgently sensual beings whose hypocritical appearance of chastity is nothing more than a veil. There is a long literary tradition, reaching back at least to Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* (1558), of stories detailing the sexual adventures of monks and nuns (Wagner 86). This view of monastic life as sexually licentious can be seen in Cornelis Von Haarlem's *The Monk and the Nun* (Fig. 2), in which a monk fondles a willing nun's breasts. The painted figures' expressions parody religious fervor: the monk assumes a factitious gravity, while the



Figure 2. Cornelis Van Haarlem, *The Monk and the Nun* (ca. 1591), oil on canvas.

enjaulada, / dentro de la jaula nacida [...] y, aún virgen a las primeras / impressions del amor” (“poor caged heron, / born within the cage [...] and, still virgin to love’s / first impressions”) (1250-51, 1261-62; translation mine). Doña Ana’s innocence, her virginity, and her religious sequestration are conflated to constitute her appeal for the womanizing Don Juan.

³ On this tradition, see W. S. Heckscher.

nun's rapture could rival that of a St. Theresa. In such tales and paintings, the titillation again stems from violation. Monks' and nuns' illicit sexual encounters are doubly exciting because doubly forbidden, and artists exploited the erotic potential that such encounters possessed.

The nun thus codes as both chaste and sexual, both spiritual and worldly. In England, the image of the nun in the time leading up and following the emergence of the gothic novel is further complicated by the nation's ever-touchy relationship with Catholicism. Ever since the sixteenth century, when Henry VIII split from Rome in his establishment of the Anglican Church, cries of "No Popery" periodically rallied the nation to the Protestant cause. Efforts to reestablish a Catholic monarchy led to bloodshed and hysteria. Under the Catholic Mary Tudor, who reigned from 1553 to 1556, more than 280 Protestant heretics were burned at the stake. The ghost of Bloody Mary haunted Elizabeth's rule, which saw the establishment of harsh laws punishing Catholics for activities like hiding priests, sending children to foreign seminaries and convents (Henry VIII had dissolved the English monasteries), and failing to swear an oath of allegiance. Under Elizabeth's act of 1563, such a failure would result in the confiscation of a Catholic's property in the first instance, and of his life in the second (Marotti 34). Laws like this were intended to halt the spread of Catholicism and to enforce the appearance of a patriotic devotion to the Anglican Church, even among those who silently disagreed with Anglican dogma (Marotti 35). The political condemnation of Catholicism was reinforced by propaganda that identified Catholic plans for regaining power in such events as the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and the "Popish Plot" of 1678-81 (Marotti 10), contributing to the nation's sense of threat from the Catholic church. Anti-Catholic

fervor, encouraged by the state and reinforced by the Protestant church, is a persistent English presence from the time of Henry VIII until the late Victorian era at least.

When the gothic novel emerged in the eighteenth century, anti-Catholic alarms were more prevalent than ever. Worry over the possibility of a Catholic Stuart monarch ascending to the throne led to the reenactment of sixteenth-century laws that did not allow Catholics to own property or to vote. The relaxation of some anti-Catholic policies late in the century, as in the 1778 Catholic Relief Act, were not well-received publicly. The Gordon Riots of 1780, in which 60,000 people protested the Act, led to over 200 deaths and the massive destruction of property, both of Roman Catholics and of institutions thought to be connected to Catholicism, such as the Bank of England.⁴ This anti-Catholic atmosphere impacted English representations of convent life. Such representations often reinforce the popular view of the Catholic Church as oppressive, hypocritical, and evil. The convents figure both as temples of pleasure in which monks and nuns held wanton, extravagant orgies, and as prisons in which beautiful, innocent young women are enclosed, seduced, and despoiled.

Representations of the clergy as sexually corrupt form part of the general political anti-Catholic discourse in England, which appears in both explicitly political literature and in literary works like gothic novels. For example, a late edition of the virulently anti-Catholic *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* condemns monasteries as places of exotic, transgressive carnal gratification: "In the days of Henry VIII, when the monasteries were fully explored in England, the abbots, priors, and monks kept as many women each as any lascivious Mohammedan could desire, and their crimes renewed the existence of Sodom and

⁴ See Colin Haydon on English eighteenth-century anti-Catholicism and the Gordon Riots.

Gomorrah” (qtd. in Norman 15). The political condemnation of corrupt monastic life became inseparable from the salacious treatment of amorous monks and nuns in fiction, a genre that had already been popular since the *Heptámeron*’s tales of monks abducting ladies and seducing too-trusting virgins (Wagner 86). This is especially true of anti-Catholic erotica. *Venus in the Cloister or The Nun in Her Smock*, a French pornographic book written by Jean Barrin and first published in 1683, was wildly popular in eighteenth-century England (Wagner 72). The work consists mainly of three dialogues between two nuns who explore Sapphic love together and discuss monks’ sexual practices. When Edmund Curll, its London publisher, found himself accused of obscene libel, he attempted to justify the book as an attack on the Roman Catholic Church, an excuse that at least one of his judges accepted (Wagner 73). Bawdy satires on the Catholic Church proliferated throughout the eighteenth century, often focused on monastic life; English works in the eighteenth century typically made no distinction between convent and monastery, one of the reasons that monks and nuns are so accessible to each other in these accounts of their amorous adventures. Two examples of anti-monastic sexual tales popular in eighteenth-century England are Antonio D. Gavin’s 1691 *The Frauds of Romish Monks and Priests*, which focuses on the sexual opportunities the confessional provides monks, and the 1755 *Memoirs of the Voluptuous Conduct of the Capuchins in Regard of the Fair Sex: Represented In a Variety of Curious Scenes, Exhibited to Public View by a Brother of the Order*, which includes a scene in which two nuns and three monks, despite being separated by grates, participate in group sex (Wagner 85).⁵ In erotica connected with nuns, the nuns are often depicted as women

⁵ See Peter Wagner 72-86 for further examples of eighteenth-century anti-Catholic

whose beauties are wasted if they are not enjoyed by men—this is a theme that runs through many representations of nuns, whether in Enlightenment erotica or in Pre-Raphaelite paintings. In one ribald broadsheet, the anonymous 1688 *Lusty Fryer of Flanders*, the nun the insatiable friar seduces is “pretty, young, and fair / As if designed for pleasure, / And pity ‘twas that she should swear / To keep her virgin treasure” (13-16); of course, the nun in the ballad does yield her virgin patent up and becomes pregnant. Sexualized representations of monks and nuns were so widespread that they would have been familiar to gothic novelists like Matthew Lewis and Ann Radcliffe; in fact, in a study of Enlightenment erotica, Peter Wagner claims that the gothic novels of the latter half of the eighteenth century, with their lecherous monks and pregnant nuns, are in a way a continuation of the tradition of anti-monastical erotica (85).

Another trend in representations of nuns and convents that can be associated with England’s anti-Catholic tendencies is the conflation of the convent and the brothel. Bawdy-houses were called nunneries, procuresses were known as abbesses, and prostitutes were “nuns.” This ironic labeling of an unchaste order of female society can be seen in such titles as the 1779 *Nocturnal Revels; or, the History of Modern Nunneries ... Comprising also The Ancient and Present State of Promiscuous Gallantry, with the Portraits of the Most Celebrated Demireps and Courtezans of this Period ... by a Monk of the Order of St. Francis* (Wagner 81). This conflation of nuns and prostitutes is evident in visual images as well. Henry Morland’s 1769 *The Fair Nun Unmasked*, originally titled *Lady in a Masquerade Habit* (Davis 5), pictures a seemingly demure denizen of the demimonde whose costume emphasizes her attractions while coyly referencing her

erotica.

profession (Fig. 3). Her veil, cross, collar, and black-edged mask suggest a veneer of nun-like chastity that is belied by the bejeweled gown's richness and its alarmingly décolleté neckline. This kind of masquerade costume indicates how pervasive the popular connection of nuns and prostitutes was. Terry Castle notes that the *parodia sacra* is a “popular eighteenth century masquerade fantasy” in which “priests and cardinals turned



Figure 3. Henry Morland, *The Fair Nun Unmasked* (1769), oil on canvas.

out to be libertines in disguise, and “Sweet Devotees” the harlots of Drury Lane” (*Masquerade* 305). Samuel Richardson’s Pamela condemns this kind of costume for the “bold nun” who flirts with Mr. B at a masquerade in the continuation of the Pamela saga (qtd. in Castle, *Masquerade* 130), though Pamela’s own much-vaunted virtue, and her preoccupation with displaying it, had previously led Mr. B to call her a “perfect nun” (Richardson 117). Morland’s unmasked nun parodies not only the sacred orders, but also

the masquerade of chastity that the social order demanded, the apparent preoccupation with virtue that creates the attraction of the Pamelas of eighteenth-century literature.

The contrasting associations of nuns with chastity and with sexual promiscuity allow nuns to figure in pornography and prostitution. An equally important set of stereotypes, however, present nuns as objects of pity, hapless victims imprisoned in gloomy, hidden cells. The convent becomes a prison or a madhouse, and the nun is an oppressed victim or a mournful, unfulfilled lover. The image of the imprisoned nun, propagated by the gothic novel and picked up by penny dreadfuls (Paz 62), became the conventional, almost inescapable representation of the convent. Convent atrocity tales and escaped nun narratives were staples of popular fiction.⁶ By 1870, the convent-as-prison was such an established concept that the *Dublin Review* records a Catholic convert's surprise at any other view being possible: "We have heard an educated convert say that after he had been a Catholic for months, he saw in the *Tablet* the suggestion that the bars and gratings on a convent window might be intended to prevent people from breaking in, not from breaking out; and it struck him at once as a wholly new idea" (qtd. in Norman 84). Victorian literary representations of imprisoned nuns, while deriving in part from gothic novels' tales of nuns locked in dungeons, was also encouraged by redoubled fears about Catholicism sparked by the Oxford Movement's revival of

⁶ Stories of imprisoned nuns existed long before the eighteenth century and even before the Reformation; for one twelfth-century account of a nun imprisoned for pregnancy, see Sarah Salih. The convent atrocity tale derives much of its power from its ability to blend sensationalized fiction with recorded incidents; see Leslie Tuttle for a discussion of the 1667 French scandal when the nuns of Sainte-Catherine-lès-Provins published a pamphlet accusing their Franciscan superiors of seducing them. Scandalous convent tales were popular in England, and convent atrocity stories came to enjoy a prominent role in North American popular fiction, especially in the wake of the 1836 *Awful Disclosures*, set in a convent in Montreal (Blair 173); on the anti-Catholic emphasis on sexual knowledge in the Canadian nun's tales tradition, see Jennifer Blair.

Anglican convents in the 1840s and 1850s (Casteras 158). One anti-Catholic reaction was the stigmatization of priests as avaricious schemers who lure women into the sisterhoods solely for the purpose of stealing their money when they take their vows of poverty (Paz 13).

The image of the convent as a prison is closely related to the convent as insane asylum. Another reaction to the emergence of Anglican convents, spearheaded by Charles Newdigate Newdegate, resulted in the sporadic, and failed, anti-Catholic attempts in the 1850s to pass convent inspection bills in the House of Commons. These proposed inspections, designed to function like the required inspections of lunatic asylums, were meant to “make sure that no nuns were being entombed alive, exploited for the sake of their money, or otherwise abused” (Paz 17). Though no such bills were passed, Newdegate did eventually succeed in forming a special committee for inspecting the convents in 1871, but by then the question of convents and their alleged abuses was no longer so pressing and anti-Catholic rhetoric had become more a matter of debate than of action (Paz 18). Yet Newdegate’s efforts demonstrate the perceived connection between convents and madhouses. This is a connection that that Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1861-62) picks up on when, in a chapter titled “Buried Alive,” Robert tries to convince Lady Audley that her life in a lunatic asylum will hold the comforts of cloistered solitude:

You will lead a quiet and peaceful life, my lady, such a life as many a good and holy woman in this Catholic country freely takes upon herself, and happily endures until the end. The solitude of your existence in this place will be no greater than that of a king’s daughter, who, flying from

the evil of the time, was glad to take shelter in a house as tranquil as this.
(391)

The irony of Robert's argument is heightened by the existence of convent atrocity tales that depict grotesque tortures at least as lacking in tranquility as those of a madhouse.

The reestablishment of Anglican convents also caused a resurgence of interest in the convent as an artistic topic, one often surrounded by a haze of tragic tranquility. Susan P. Casteras claims that artistic representations of nuns in the Victorian period "reinforced partly sensational, partly sentimental attitudes" toward nuns (157). The sensational aspect stems from the imprisoned nun stories that the figures of enclosed nuns evoke, while the sentiment derives from the assignment of an air of muted, melancholic romance to the nuns, who more often than not are "victims of thwarted or disappointed love affairs" (Casteras 158). The nun serves in part as "the Victorian idealization of womanhood, particularly with her qualities of virginity, docility, dedication, spirituality, and modesty" (Casteras 157). Victorian images of nuns served to encourage the idea that these paragons of womanhood should not be wasted on the convent.⁷ The paintings and engravings of nuns pensively and passively standing in courtyards or staring out windows, claims Casteras, seem to "reinforce the Protestant belief that no woman could possibly prefer the life of a nun to that of a wife and mother" (158). Casteras identifies a "rescued nun syndrome" that ties into the escaped nun tradition, in which the thwarted love affair comes to fruition after all as a lover carries the novice away to safety and wifedom beyond the convent walls (178). The tantalizing hope of such a rescue for the youthful beauties pictured in convents, Casteras speculates, may be one reason that the

⁷ On Pre-Raphaelite representations of nuns in the context of Victorian roles for women, see Baitch 2-4.

artists she discusses tend to depict postulants or novices, who could still be reclaimed, rather than nuns who had taken their final, irreversible vows (180). For example, as Casteras points out, the novice in *Convent Thoughts* wears the white habit of a postulant, not the darker habit that she would wear as a fully inducted nun.

These Victorian images of nuns point to the theme of the convent as prison, but they also highlight the sentimental treatment of the convent as a location for mourning a failed earthly love. Sarah Lewis, writing in 1863, connects this sentimental view of the convent with the idea of imprisonment: “The convent was too often the refuge of disappointed worldliness, the grave of blasted hopes, or the prison of involuntary victims” (70). The convent is the alternative to marriage not only in Shakespeare but also in sentimental novels like Eliza Haywood’s *Love in Excess* (1719), in which female characters constantly retire to convents in order to bury their forbidden loves. Mariana Alcoforda’s 1677 *Five Love Letters from a Nun to a Cavalier* connects the lovelorn nun who supposedly writes the letters with the lamenting, abandoned woman of an epistolary tradition that stretches back to Ovid. The narrator claims that convents feed women’s romantic inclinations, as the women “have nothing there to hinder them from being perpetually Intent upon their Passion” (qtd. in Quinsee 9). This is the case in Alexander Pope’s *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717), which Susannah Quinsee claims may be influenced by Alcoforda’s letters (9).⁸ The distraught, cloistered Eloisa mourns the absence of her lover, Abelard, who has also taken orders following the castration inflicted on him as punishment for their illicit affair. Eloisa, who has not mastered the blood that causes a

⁸ *Eloisa to Abelard*, with its gloomy “deep solitudes and awful cells” and its expression of repressed longing (1), is often considered to represent a pre-gothic literary strain. For one such reading, see Anne Williams 49-63.

“tumult in a Vestal’s veins” (4), finds that “[e]v’n here, where frozen chastity retires, / Love finds an altar for forbidden fires” (181-82). Pope’s forbidden fire of love burning in the convent cell again marks the contrast that characterizes many representations of nuns, that between outer “frozen chastity” and inner, repressed emotions and sexual desire.

The sentimentality, and the perceived abnormality, of the nun’s forswearing such emotions can be found in mid-nineteenth-century paintings like *Convent Thoughts*, Casteras suggests. The sense of unnatural repression and waste is also emphasized in Alexander Johnston’s engraving *The Novice* (Fig. 4). When the painting upon which the engraving is based was exhibited at the British Institution in 1850, a few lines of verse were displayed with it:



Figure 4. Alexander Johnston, *The Novice* (1850), engraving. Reproduced from Casteras 169.

This vestal cloak shall fold my fading bloom
 Of virgin vows and purity the token;
 This cell sepulchral-like shall be the tomb
 Of withered hopes, Vows broken soon as spoken

Of Love despised, of peace destroyed, and of a heart quite broken. (qtd. in Casteras 169-70)

As Casteras points out, the engraving and its accompanying lines demonstrates a preoccupation with the novice's romantic renunciation (170). She withers on the virgin thorn; like the rose cast aside at her feet, the novice's youthful bloom will fade. Ever-musing melancholy certainly seems to reign in these deep solitudes and awful cells. There is a pervading sense of mild tragedy in such depictions of beautiful, youthful, fertile women condemned to loveless, childless lives. Full many a rose is sworn to blush unseen, but, as in the *Lusty Fryer*, the artists Casteras describes express a dissatisfaction with that choice of female solitude, the same dissatisfaction that prompts the rescued nun syndrome. Society demands that the earthly rose be plucked and distilled by a man. In the artworks Casteras surveys, there seems to be a distaste towards a woman embracing a role outside those defined by a relationship to men: wife (to a husband), mother (to a son), sister (to a brother). A community of sisters alone is pictured as unfulfilling. This is one presentation of the convent that Radcliffe, and to a certain extent Brontë, work against in presenting the possibility of self-fulfillment in a conventual female community.

The various representations of nuns—as saint and sinner, prostitute and prisoner, madwoman and tragic lover—all seem to leave something out: the possibility that the nun's choice really is her own, and that her enclosure in the convent is liberating. In this sense, my finding repressed female sexuality in *Convent Thoughts* turns out to be less subversive than Dr. Baigent's focus on the novice's sincere religious fervor, mawkish though it may be. *Convent Thoughts* can be interpreted as a positive presentation of the convent as a place of intellectual and spiritual freedom for women, not merely as a gloss

on the tragedy of an immured, lovelorn life. Robert P. Fletcher argues that the painting's significance is located not in its image of "wasted fertility" (299), but in its "resistance of the viewer's efforts to enter the cloister and disambiguate the relation between body and soul" (301). The novice may contemplate mortality itself, so that her convent thoughts "cannot be reduced solely to repressed sexuality" (229). Fletcher reads Victorian poet Augusta Webster's treatments of nuns as similarly resistant to the simplistic connection of women and bodily desire. Some gothic novels, such as *The Italian* and *Villette*, can also be read as presenting the convent as a place of liberation from normative female roles, and as a place of resistance to restrictive definitions of femininity.

Yet the fact remains that most popular representations of nuns, especially in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, manifest some level of unsettledness regarding female sexuality: either the nun is aberrant, unnatural, or tragic because she is chaste; or she is monstrously perverse because she is not chaste. This absence of satisfying definitions of female sexuality and its relationship to female roles, or perhaps the absence of satisfaction with existing definitions, seems to be one reason that the nun figure appears so frequently in the period's most popular literary form, the gothic, a genre that concerns itself obsessively with female sexuality. In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick includes "the priesthood and monastic institutions" in her initial list of elements that a gothic novel is bound to contain (9); of the members of monastic institutions that glide about the pages of the gothic novel, the nuns are at least as important as the murderous monks. Frederic S. Frank's bibliography of gothic novels, focused on the heyday of gothic fiction between the publications of Horace Walpole's 1764 *The Castle of Otranto* and Charles Maturin's 1820 *Melmoth the*

Wanderer (ix), provides evidence of the regular presence of nuns and convents central enough to a novel to be included in its title.⁹ Monastic elements are so common in the gothic novel that Frank uses the classification “monastic shocker” as one of his labels for providing the type of gothic novel in each entry.

Gothic heroines are often faced with a choice similar to Hermia’s. For instance, in Ann Radcliffe’s second novel, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), Julia wavers between marrying an evil duke and taking the veil: “From a marriage with the duke, whose late conduct had confirmed the odious idea which his character had formerly impressed, her heart recoiled in horror, and to be immured for life within the walls of the convent, was a fate little less dreadful” (142). Yet the even more literal immurement of nuns, the “conventual punishment” of “live burial” (Sedgwick, *Coherence* 5), is a motif more central to gothic themes. Sedgwick connects the gothic theme of live burial not only with literally buried nuns, but also with other expressions of gothic live burial, such as sexual repression, the narrative layering of tales within tales, and the linguistic burial of the unspeakable (5). The nun imprisoned in the dungeon is an image of death in life that merely heightens the similar image that the convent already presents. The cell of

⁹ Examples of such titles include Eugenia de Acton’s *The Nuns of the Desert: Or, the Woodland Witches* (1805); George Barrington’s *Eliza: Or, the Unhappy Nun* (1803); the anonymous *The Convent Spectre: Or, the Unfortunate Daughter* (1808); Charlotte Dacre’s *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* (1805); Sophia L. Frances’s *The Nun of Misericordia: Or, the Eve of All Saints* (1807); *The Phantoms of the Cloister: Or, the Mysterious Manuscript* (1795), signed “I.H.”; Elizabeth Helme’s *St. Margaret’s Cave: Or, the Nun’s Story* (1801); Catherine Selden’s *The English Nun* (1797); the anonymous *Valombrosa: Or, the Venetian Nun* (1804); and Sarah Wilkinson’s *The Fugitive Countess: Or, the Convent of St. Ursula* (1807), as well as her *The Convent of the Grey Penitents: Or, the Apostate Nun* (1810). One gothic romance that Frank does not provide an entry on but that presumably features a nun is John Berington’s 1787 *Abellard and Heloise* (Rupp 203). For a large variety of specific instances of convents and nuns in gothic fiction, see Mary Muriel Tarr 44-72.

Johnston's novice is "sepulchral-like," the "tomb" of buried "withered hopes," and a skull sits on the windowsill. In Christina Rossetti's "Three Nuns," the first speaker says to the dark, veil-like shadow, "Be my stainless winding sheet, / Buried before I am dead" (10-11). The speaker is buried in her separation from the world, buried in her despair, and buried in a conceptual "stainless winding sheet," the veil of purity that here is also a shroud. The gothic convention of live burial is just one example of a thematic element that, intimately connected with the nuns in the novels, appears in radically different forms across authors' oeuvres and across subgenre divides and yet can be applied to the question of female sexuality in each. Other such elements—though the nature of the gothic is such that its themes, as Sedgwick demonstrates, tend to slide into each other—might include the unspeakable, which is associated with the subconscious and, like nuns, with veiling, and the ever-elusive yet never really absent gothic concern with the possibility of sexualities that transgress heterosexual norms and question gender constructions.

The gothic, more than most literary movements, takes gender as a basis for defining genre, or at least it has done so in the critical tradition that has sprung up since the feminist revision of the canon led to the revalidation of the gothic as an object of literary study. Many critics accept the division of the gothic into the subgenres of the "male gothic" and the "female gothic," though, as with the term "gothic" itself, there are nearly as many definitions of these labels as there are critics. Ellen Moers, in *Literary Women*, defines the female gothic as "work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (90); like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Moers seeks to identify a specifically female tradition of

women writers. Others have focused not so much on the author's sex as on the text's exploration of female roles and female sexuality. Juliann E. Fleenor claims that the female gothic often involves "self-fear and self-disgust directed toward the female role, female sexuality, female physiology, and procreation" (15); Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that the Radcliffean female gothic grants "respectable, secular expression" to "the process of feminine sexual initiation" (223). Of late, critics have identified the female gothic as concerned both with female roles and with the construction of those roles. To Tamar Heller, the female gothic is "a political text that not only reflects but also actively engages debates about the meaning of women's roles" (16). Diane Long Hoeveler reads the female gothic as site of an ideological struggle "between 'masculine' and 'feminine' ways of shaping desire/bodies, of containing energy, of controlling ideology" (*Gothic* 21); the female gothic is an effort at propagandizing the conduct of "professional femininity" for women (*Gothic* xv).¹⁰ Working from this last set of definitions that emphasize the female gothic as concerned with women's roles, I will treat the female gothic as a gothic literary mode written primarily for women, though not always by women, that questions the restrictive performance of gendered roles while sometimes still modeling them.¹¹

Another set of gothic subgenres, the "terror-Gothic" and the "horror-Gothic," seem to split along much the same fault lines as the female gothic and the male gothic do, but with less disagreement over the meaning of the terms. Ann Radcliffe first made this

¹⁰ For other considerations of the female gothic, see Valdine Clemens, Kate Ferguson Ellis, Kay J. Mussell, Nina daVinci Nichols, Karen F. Stein, and Susan Wolstenholme.

¹¹ As Tamar Heller has argued, it is possible to read Wilkie Collins, brother of Charles Allston Collins, as a descendent of the female gothic tradition.

distinction between terror and horror in an essay published as “On the Supernatural in Poetry”:

Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them . . . neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one. (151)

In one of the foundational essays on the terror-Gothic/horror-Gothic divide, Robert D. Hume suggests that terror as Radcliffe describes it is dependent on “suspense or dread” and can be found in the novels of Walpole and Radcliffe, while horror-Gothics like Lewis, Beckford, Mary Shelley, and Maturin attack the reader with shocking or disturbing events (285).¹² Ann Radcliffe’s explained supernatural, while it is not a technique shared by all “Terrorists,” is one way that she maintains suspense without resorting to the horrific; the ghosts that stalk through Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) in Radcliffe’s novels turn out to be bandits or fluttering curtains; the rapes and murders that occur all too openly in Lewis’s novel are kept out of sight in Radcliffe’s, where a murdered body might turn out to be just a wax figure. While critics have often been

¹² For a response to Hume, see Robert L. Platzner and Robert D. Hume’s dialogue on the topic. Platzner objects to “drawing hair-fine distinctions between ‘terror’ and ‘horror’” that are “largely irrelevant anyway, at least as far as the Radcliffean romance is concerned” (267). Platzner also objects to Hume’s attempt to separate the gothic from the romantic; the exact relationship between the two has often been debated. Hume argues that the gothic lacks “the transcendent romantic imagination” (289). See Williams for an argument that the gothic and the romantic “are not two but one” (1).

irritated by Radcliffe's explained supernatural,¹³ Terry Castle, writing on *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, claims that "the supernatural is not so much explained in *Udolpho* as it is displaced [...] rerouted, so to speak, into the realm of the everyday" ("Spectralization" 236). Fleenor similarly sees this kind of explained supernatural terror-gothic as "an expression of the heroine's predicament in what proves ultimately to be a reasonable world" (7). The differences this generic divide creates between Lewis and Radcliffe can be seen in the distinct treatments the nun figure receives in *The Monk* and Radcliffe's response to it, *The Italian* (1797): *The Monk's* supernatural, female grotesque Bleeding Nun makes no appearance in *The Italian*, and Ellena escapes the living burial that the pregnant nun Agnes suffers in Lewis's novel. At the same time, Radcliffe's female gothic approach to the question of the performance of femininity and sexuality leads her to contrast a utopian convent community with the more starkly oppressive variety to which Lewis is limited.

The figure of the nun, a staple gothic convention present in widely differing novels, works in some ways as a marker of generic differentiation, and, subsequently, of attitudes toward women; the use of the nun figure indicates participation in an intertextual conversation composed of other authors' uses of the figure. In the case of *The Monk* and *The Italian*, Lewis's and Radcliffe's mutual influence on each other make that conversation particularly evident. At the height of the gothic craze of the 1790s, Lewis's and Radcliffe's novels draw on traditional representations of nuns, with their conflicting images of femininity and their unsettled sense of female sexuality, to create their own very different reflections on the roles of women. The gothic novel as a definitively

¹³ See Rogers xxxii-xxxiv for a summary of critical complaints on the subject.

popular genre is supposed to have died down by 1820 (Frank ix), though the gothic persists in many literary and artistic forms to this day. By the time of Charlotte Brontë's publication of her "post-Gothic Gothic"¹⁴ *Villette* in 1853, Brontë could respond to the representations of nuns popularized by the gothic tradition and complicated by the establishment of the Anglican convents earlier in the century. In her inclusion of a ghostly nun that is not a ghost—and not a nun—Brontë uses the nun motif so common in earlier gothic novels in order to situate herself in relation to the genre as a whole and to elaborate her own ideas of gender construction in the context of the female gothic tradition she carries on.

In Lewis, Radcliffe, and Brontë, the resonances the image of the nun holds come into play in the depiction of femininity. The nuns serve as heightened examples of female stereotypes: women are exhorted to be chaste, nuns openly swear to be so; the sexual woman is vilified, the sexual nun participates in the female grotesque; the woman is told to keep to the private sphere, the nun is locked in a cell; women's roles are restricted by society, nun's lives are governed by the oppressive Church. And, as with *Convent Thoughts*, multiple levels of meaning may be available at once in gothic novels' uses of nuns to explore female roles. Lewis's *The Monk*, Radcliffe's *The Italian*, and Brontë's *Villette*, when viewed together, form a complex, layered picture of one gothic element that plays a varied part in the elaboration—and transgression—of gendered roles for women in the gothic novel.

¹⁴ I am borrowing this phrase from Susan Wolstenholme's chapter in *Gothic (Re)Visions* on *Villette*'s relationship with the gothic genre, "Charlotte Brontë's Post-Gothic Gothic."

Chapter Two

Erring Nuns and Animated Corpses: The Monstrosity of Female Transgression in

Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*

For my part, I have never been able to Bridle my self in my affections [...] It is the imperfection of my Genius which is an Enemy of Constraint, and will in all things act
freely.

-Agnes in Jean Barrin's *Venus in the Cloister* (3)

I hold, that a Woman has no business to be a public character, and that in the proportion that She acquires notoriety, She loses delicacy: I always consider a female Author as a
sort of half-Man.

-Matthew Lewis, in an 1803 letter to his mother¹

When Matthew Lewis published *The Monk* in 1796, critics immediately attacked it for its lewdness and sexual licentiousness. In one 1797 review, Samuel Taylor Coleridge objects that “the shameless harlotry of Matilda,” the scheming seductress of the eponymous monk Ambrosio, and “the trembling innocence of Antonia,” the virginal victim of Ambrosio’s lust, “are seized with equal avidity, as vehicles of the most voluptuous images” (374). Matilda’s and Antonia’s voluptuous bodies are indeed seized upon as objects of male desire from the very start of the novel. In the first chapter, Lorenzo’s admiring gaze on Antonia prompts the narrator to catalogue her bodily charms in a description of her skin, eyes, eyelashes, hair, throat, hand, arm, and mouth (12); when Matilda is introduced in the second chapter, she wastes no time in baring the “beauteous Orb” of a breast to the “insatiable avidity” of Ambrosio’s eye (65). The

¹ Quoted in Macdonald 31.

female bodies in the novel are not only passive, voluptuous images tempting observers and readers to sexual pleasure, though, and the novel does distinguish between shameless harlots and sexually inactive, innocent virgins. Two of the most horrific figures in Lewis's supernatural tale of horror link actively transgressing female sexuality and corporeality with monstrosity and death: the ghostly Bleeding Nun who appears at Raymond's bedside to claim his body and soul and the dying, imprisoned nun Agnes who clutches the rotting corpse of her illegitimate child in the sepulchral vaults of the St. Clare convent. The Bleeding Nun, Agnes, and Matilda all act outside of passive female roles by actively pursuing sexual pleasure, and they become figures of death, deformity, or demonic evil. Their connection to the convent as nuns, or in Matilda's case as a transvestite monk, unites the novel's condemnation of Catholicism with the presentation as monstrous of the woman who acts outside of normative feminine roles. Though hardly creating a positive view of female corporeality or desire, the grotesque female figures in the novel do indicate the vigorous, though apparently threatening and repellent, existence of transgressing women that exceed the definition of women as static objects of male desire.

The stories of both the Bleeding Nun and Agnes center on their sexual transgressions and their consequences. The Bleeding Nun and Agnes are linked by Agnes's rebellious desire to elope with Raymond. Agnes disguises herself as the Bleeding Nun, whose folkloric tale she had told Raymond "in a tone of burlesqued gravity" (137). Agnes hopes to make use of the superstition she sees as ridiculous: dressed as the Nun, she will exit the Castle of Lindenberg, and "[w]hoever meets me will be too much terrified to oppose my escape" (148). Yet, in an instance of the unexplained

supernatural, the Bleeding Nun herself appears and takes Agnes's place. This elopement takes place on the day that the Nun traditionally appears—the fifth day of the fifth month of every fifth year, a date that resonates with the uncanny magic of the pentagram—so, once the ghost's existence is accepted, it is not surprising that she should materialize on that day. Still, there is a certain logic behind the substitution of the Bleeding Nun for Agnes. Beatrice de las Cisternas, the Nun, had eloped from her convent in order to indulge her sensual desires, while Agnes, as yet innocent and not yet a nun, plans to follow her passion for Raymond in attempting to escape “the horrors of a Convent” (148), to which her jealous aunt wishes to consign her.

The moment at which Beatrice's and Agnes's stories converge, then, marks the similarity of their decisions. Critics often note the parallels between Agnes and the Bleeding Nun she impersonates before herself becoming a grotesque, dying nun. Nancy Mellerski details many of the central connections between the two figures (42-45).² Mellerski, however, argues that “Agnes's moral life in no way reproduces that of the nun” (45). In one important respect, Agnes's moral decisions do reproduce those of Beatrice: both nuns break their vows of chastity, a decision to act on sexual desire that for both leads to their later horrific circumstances. Of course, if Agnes is a version of Beatrice, she is a less culpable one. Beatrice's history, told by the (male) Wandering Jew, characterizes her as excessively, immorally sexual. Agnes is guilty of an offense that her friend St. Ursula calls “light and venial” (355), that of sleeping with her future husband before their marriage. Raymond, in telling Agnes's brother about his sexual liaison with

² Among other things, Mellerski notes Beatrice's and Agnes's inverted objectives: Beatrice wishes to be buried in the family vault, while Agnes wants to escape entombment in the “social burial vault” of the convent (43). Both eventually trade “the convent for the tomb” (44). For further similarities, see Gudrun Kauh 271-72.

the nun, understandably downplays Agnes's role in instigating their encounter, saying that "blame must fall upon me, and not upon your Sister" (186). Raymond, though, does not rape Agnes; it is only "after the first burst of passion past" that Agnes, "recovering herself," recoils from Raymond in "horror" (187). That passion is Agnes's as well as Raymond's; as Agnes says, "I could not refuse myself the melancholy pleasure of mingling my tears with his" when she meets with Raymond, and "in an unguarded moment I violated my vows of chastity" (47). In an exploration of the role of desire in *The Monk*, Wendy Jones argues that *The Monk* separates "good desire" from "bad desire" (33); Agnes's desires are good because aimed toward an appropriate marriage (133), while the Bleeding Nun's "helpless compulsiveness" makes her an "exemplar of bad desire" (142). Jones makes the case that Agnes's intended elopement and her sexual encounter with Raymond constitutes merely a "mimicking of bad desire" (142). Despite this, it seems clear that the difference between Beatrice's and Agnes's sexual transgressions and desires is one of degree, not of kind: both actively take part in forbidden sexual pleasure.

This shared transgression seems to lead to both figures' presentation as monstrous. While the Prioress calls Agnes a "Monster" who does not deserve to live (353), the Wandering Jew paints Beatrice as monstrously devoted to her unrestrained passions. Forced into taking the veil at "an early age," Beatrice soon demonstrates her "warm and voluptuous character" in freely following "the impulse of her passions" (173). She elopes from her convent with the Baron Lindenberg, living "as his avowed Concubine" (173). She is excessive in every way:

All Bavaria was scandalized by her impudent and abandoned conduct. Her feasts vied in luxury with Cleopatra's, and Lindenberg became the Theatre of the most unbridled debauchery. Not satisfied with displaying the incontinence of a Prostitute, She professed herself an Atheist... (173)

A concubine, a Cleopatra, a prostitute, an atheist, Beatrice rebels against her vows and against the cultural expectations of women as pure, passionless, and passive, not to mention opinionless. Beatrice has "a character so depraved" that she soon desires a second lover (174), and conspires with the man of her choice, the Baron's younger brother, Otto, to murder the Baron. She stabs the Baron in bed, acquiring the accessories that would characterize the Bleeding Nun, a bloody dagger and a lamp. Otto, who had promised Beatrice marriage, instead kills her with the same dagger she used to kill the Baron; Beatrice of course then haunts her murderer and returns periodically to the castle long after his death.

In Beatrice's history, then, her fate stems from her sexual excess and her "violent and atrocious character" (175). When Raymond finally sees the face of the ghost he mistakes for Agnes, he is horrorstruck. Beatrice is monstrous and deathlike: "I beheld an animated Corse. Her countenance was long and haggard; Her cheeks and lips were bloodless; The paleness of death was spread over her features, and her eye-balls fixed stedfastly upon me were lustreless and hollow" (160). Beatrice's physical appearance, the result of her sexually, transgressively violent life and death, repels Raymond, who "gaze[s] upon the Spectre with horror too great to be described" (160).

Raymond's strong reaction to Beatrice indicates the active power she exercises as a figure of female transgression. Beatrice's power over Raymond begins even before he

realizes that she is not Agnes, when Raymond, caught up in the moment of his supposed elopement with Agnes, rapturously chants “*Thou art mine! / I am thine! / Thine my body! Thine my soul!*” (156). The Bleeding Nun takes him at his word; when she appears by his bedside, she repeats him in a “sepulchral” voice: “*I am thine! / Thou art mine! / Mine thy body! Mine thy soul!*” (160). In traveling with Raymond and claiming his vows, and in her nighttime visits to Raymond’s bed, where she kisses him, Beatrice seems to repeat her earlier elopement and provide a cold echo of the sexual desires she pursued in life. She transfixes Raymond with terror:

My blood was frozen in my veins. I would have called for aid, but the sound expired, ere it could pass my lips. My nerves were bound up in an impotence, and I remained in the same attitude inanimate as a Statue. [...] Her eyes were fixed earnestly upon mine: They seemed endowed with the property of the Rattle-snake’s, for I strove in vain to look off her. My eyes were fascinated, and I had not the power of withdrawing them from the Spectre. (160)

Such is the apparition’s power that she temporarily makes Raymond more dead than she is; while she is “animated,” he is “inanimate” (160); the bloodless nun freezes Raymond’s blood and her fixed eyes fix his gaze. The nun “grasp[s] with her icy fingers” Raymond’s hand, more motionless than her own as it “hung lifeless upon the Coverture,” and when she leaves, Raymond falls to his pillow “lifeless” (161). In this, Raymond’s reaction seems a milder version of that of Otto, whose “alarm” at the ghost’s appearances “at length became so insupportable, that his heart burst” and he is found “deprived of warmth and animation” (175). The Bleeding Nun’s subsequent one o’clock appearances

to Raymond repeat the same enervating effect. Even the attendants Raymond tries to set up as witnesses to his nocturnal visitations are inevitably seized by “irresistible slumber” at the moment of the ghost’s appearance (163). Though she is monstrous, Beatrice is still not passive; she renders her male observers the immobile objects of her power and her gaze, inverting the power structure she had rebelled against in life.

Beatrice’s haunting of Raymond is due to her separation from her dead, decaying physical body, the “mouldering skeleton” in the cavern she visits once every five years (176). As Beatrice reveals when the Wandering Jew conjures her, she will not cease to visit Raymond until he buries her bones in his family vault. He does so, and it is only then that, presumably, Beatrice regains all the attributes of inanimate death and Raymond is freed from the deathly effects of her visitations. The similar, though less heightened, impact of the vision of the imprisoned Agnes on Lorenzo occurs for opposite yet related reasons. Beatrice is horrifying because, though dead, she is active and unburied; Agnes is horrifying because, though living, she is immobilized and entombed. Yet, undead and half-dead, the two figures coalesce as images that link transgressing women with the profound, paralyzing horror of the men who gaze at them. The transgressing women are horrifying because of their actions and because of their corporeality, but that horror makes them powerful in a way.

When Lorenzo finds Agnes in the St. Clare vaults, where the Prioress chains her after her pregnancy is discovered, Agnes, like the Bleeding Nun, mixes attributes of life with those of death. Lorenzo sees

a Creature stretched upon a bed of straw, so wretched, so emaciated, so pale, that He doubted to think her Woman. She was half-naked: her long

disheveled hair fell in disorder over her face, and almost entirely concealed it. One wasted Arm hung listlessly upon a tattered rug, which covered her convulsed and shivering limbs: the Other was wrapped around a small bundle, and held it closely to her bosom. A large Rosary lay near her: Opposite to her was a Crucifix, on which she bent her sunk eyes fixedly... (369)

Wasted, bloodless, skeletal, with fixed eyes, Agnes's appearance reiterates that of the Bleeding Nun. Barely animate herself, Agnes holds the inanimate corpse of her child, treating it as if it were alive. The dead Beatrice kisses the live but paralyzed Raymond, who lies with limbs "chained in a second infancy" (162); the live but chained Agnes kisses the dead infant. Like Beatrice, who wears her bloody habit "in memory of her vows broken to heaven" (175), Agnes is accompanied by a rosary and crucifix that recall her abandoned vocation. Agnes's voice, like Beatrice's, is "hollow" in her sepulcher (369).

Lorenzo, like Raymond, is sapped by the vision of the deathly nun before him:

He was petrified with horror. He gazed upon the miserable Object with disgust and pity. He trembled at the spectacle; He grew sick at heart: His strength failed him, and his limbs were unable to support his weight. He was obliged to lean against the low Wall which was near him, unable to go forward, or to address the Sufferer. (369)

Both Raymond and Lorenzo are motionless, strengthless, voiceless. Raymond's gaze is fixed on Beatrice, and Lorenzo cannot turn away from Agnes; he watches Agnes's sufferings and listens to her laments for two pages before he recovers enough to approach

her. Agnes, unlike Beatrice, is an object of pity, which reflects the milder nature of her sexual trespass. She is also, however, an object as disgusting as the rotting Bleeding Nun.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick takes the similarity of appearance between the Bleeding Nun and Agnes, who had failed to successfully use her disguise as the nun but who now resembles her, as an example of the veil as “the locus of the substitution of one person for another, in the service of an indiscriminate metonymic contagion of its own attributes” (258 “Character”). Sedgwick makes an argument that character is presented in the gothic through interchangeable, conventional signs, thus privileging the surface play of signs over psychoanalytic depths of meaning. The similarities between Beatrice and Agnes do demonstrate a superficial communication of attributes, which in part infect their observers as well. In this case, though, Beatrice’s and Agnes’s appearances, including their veils, connect the characters not only with each other but also with the violence and death that seems to be presented as a result of their active sexual transgressions. Figuratively, both Beatrice and Agnes have rejected their nun’s veils through their actions, Beatrice through her elopement from her convent and Agnes through her amorous encounter with Raymond in the convent garden. The bloody veil that the Bleeding Nun wears is similar to the “winding-sheet” that is the imprisoned Agnes’s only garment (412). Both are women’s garments are torn, Beatrice’s by the knife that killed her and Agnes’s in order to wrap her dead infant, and both are associatively related to death. Beatrice’s veil carries her own blood and the Baron’s, and Agnes’s winding-sheet forms her child’s shroud and is nearly her own.

The corpse-like appearance of the undead, unburied Bleeding Nun and of Agnes in her living burial reinforces a seeming connection between women’s bodies and death, a

motif that runs throughout the novel. Agnes's dead infant, which the Prioress stigmatizes as a "Creature" conceived in "monstrous" guilt (410), is the literal product of Agnes's sexual indiscretion. In telling her tale, Agnes presents the reader with all the gruesome details of the infant's decomposition. The infant is an "emblem of mortality" (412), a "mass of putridity" (412), that the imprisoned Agnes stares at hour after hour, attempting "to retrace its features through the livid corruption, with which they were over-spread" (413). Like Agnes when Lorenzo finds her, the dead child is "a loathsome and disgusting Object" (412). Agnes, staring at this memento mori born of her own body, surrounded by the "Skulls, shoulder-blades, thigh-bones, and other leavings of Mortality" that fill the St. Clare sepulcher (404), dying herself and already an entombed "absolute skeleton" (416), is as much a figure of death as is the "animated Corse" of Beatrice (160). The horror created by the figures of the Bleeding Nun and the imprisoned Agnes is due in part to this connection between death and the female body, especially the sexually assertive female body. Their monstrosity is that of unnatural living death.

Of course, the connection between death and the female body is not limited to the unchaste Beatrice and Agnes.³ Death in gruesome and violent forms stalks many women in the novel. The virtuous, if overprotective, Elvira is smothered by Ambrosio, becoming "a Corse, cold, senseless and disgusting" (304). The merciless Prioress who imprisons Agnes is torn apart by a mob that swears that "by break of day not a Nun of the St. Clare's order should be left alive" (357); many women die in the "devastation and horror" of the climactic burning of the convent (358). Antonia, like Beatrice, is stabbed to

³ The dead female body, or the female body associated with death, is an important component of much eighteenth and nineteenth century literature and art. For a consideration of the aesthetic roles of femininity and death from the late eighteenth century onwards, see Elizabeth Bronfen.

death. After Ambrosio rapes Antonia, he kills her with Matilda's dagger and leaves her "a Female bleeding upon the ground" (391).

As this image of a prone, violently penetrated and bleeding female body suggests, Antonia's dying body is sexually suggestive. So too is her seemingly dead body before she awakens from her drugged sleep: Ambrosio can hardly "restrain himself from enjoying her while still insensible" (379). Though the "objects of mortality" in the crypt are "ill-calculated" to inspire a matching ardor in Antonia (383), to Ambrosio the sepulcher is "Love's bower" (381); it is a place where the female body can be a source of male pleasure when it is on the cusp of, and surrounded by, death. The vaults where Antonia is raped and Agnes is imprisoned are filled with the dead female bodies of nuns. Indeed, it is possible to read the crypt itself as related to the female body. As Clara D. McLean hints, Lorenzo's penetration of "the dark female secrets" of "the convent's interior regions" in pursuit of the discovery of the "physical" truth of a woman's body may have sexual overtones (111). If the interior spaces of the convent's vaults can be seen as connected with the interior spaces of the female body, then surely it is a body that is filled with death, just as Agnes's body gives birth to death. The cavern in which Beatrice is killed, which is possibly the same cavern where Raymond waits for Agnes, could have a similar significance: the womblike cavern holds Beatrice's rotting body.⁴

⁴ Still, it is not certain that the caverns and sepulchers of the novel consistently evoke the female body. They could be, as William D. Brewer suggests, a space of gender ambiguity where Matilda enjoys power "denied the other members of her sex" (199), or they may be, as Peter Brooks argues, a representation of "an area of the mind where our deepest and least avowable impulses lie" (258). Certainly, as Brooks notes, the catacombs are a location of "erotic impulses gone berserk" (259); in a novel that treats female erotic impulses negatively, this reading is consistent with seeing the caverns as linked to the female body.

The sepulchre, while possibly representing a deathlike female body, is certainly a location for dead female bodies that persistently present the reader with the connection between women and repulsive corporeality. Presumably, since Elvira is buried at St. Clare (308), the bodies in the vault include that of Antonia's mother. The novel's other ghost, Elvira appears to Antonia to tell her that they will meet again in three days; in Antonia's living death in the crypt, Antonia rejoins her mother even before she is killed. The necrophiliac treatment of Antonia's body in the vault, the corpse-like images of Beatrice and Agnes, and the other descriptions of death associated with women are elements of *The Monk* that seem to insist on the inescapable, and inescapably degrading, corporeality of women. As Vartan P. Messier suggests, scenes of dying or deformed bodies, like the depiction of Agnes in her cell or the description of the death of the Prioress, echo Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque dying or dead body that contains elements of physical excess emphasizing corporeality (40). Such scenes of death in *The Monk* suggest a female embodiment that is through death linked with decay, disgust, and fragmentation. It is as if all women are animated corpses.

In the cases of Beatrice and Agnes, the narrative links their grotesque, deathly bodies to their transgressive sexual actions. Beatrice and Agnes are also, to a certain extent, presented as unfeminine, perhaps suggesting that the active breaking of feminine roles masculinizes women. Agnes is certainly feminine when Raymond first meets her and instantly falls in love with her "light and elegant" person and her "gay, open, and good-humoured character" (130). When Lorenzo finds Agnes in the convent vaults, however, she is so changed that he "doubt[s] to think her Woman" (369). Though Lorenzo is Agnes's brother, he does not recognize her until she recovers enough to tell

who she is. The Bleeding Nun, as William D. Brewer observes, reverses gender roles with Raymond in their uncanny wedding, as she effeminizes Raymond with paralyzing fear and “appropriates Raymond’s triumphant song of masculine possession” when she comes to his bedside (202).⁵ The desexing of Agnes and the masculine actions of the Bleeding Nun contribute to the horror they provoke in their male observers.

Though such gender ambiguity or reversal plays only a marginal role in the condemnation of Agnes’s and Beatrice’s exercise of active female sexuality, it is central to the novel’s presentation of Matilda, the most transgressive woman in *The Monk*. Unlike Beatrice and Agnes, Matilda is never presented as a figure of grotesque, deathly horror. She is something worse than a human corpse, even an animated one. At the novel’s close, the Devil reveals that Matilda, who has seduced Ambrosio and urged him on in raping and murdering his sister, is actually a “crafty spirit” who has assumed a human form at the Devil’s command in order to tempt Ambrosio (440). Given the Devil’s affinity for lying, some have questioned whether or not Matilda is a demon or merely a mortal woman who practices witchcraft.⁶ It seems likely that Matilda is what the Devil claims; after all, the Devil also reveals the fitting and believable fact that Antonia is Ambrosio’s sister, a disclosure that is hinted at throughout the text but that is only confirmed by the Devil. Even if we do not take Matilda to be a demon, the Devil’s statement that she is one is enough to stigmatize her actions. A writer for the *Analytical Review* in October 1796—possibly Mary Wollstonecraft (Macdonald 129)—objects to

⁵ Steven Blakemore also discusses the Bleeding Nun’s adoption of a “male role” in her relationship with Raymond (530).

⁶ Brewer, for example, treats Matilda as a woman rather than a demon. See, however, Peter Grudin, who argues that Matilda’s infernal origins are compatible with her motives throughout the novel.

“the calling up a spirit from Hell to borrow a female shape” as “[t]he monk, in fact, inspires sympathy because foiled by more than mortal weapons; yet nothing was done by Matilda which could not have been achieved by female wiles” (qtd. in Howard 214). Yet it is precisely Matilda’s female wiles, her active, aggressive seduction of Ambrosio, that render her demonic. It is through them that, according to the Devil, Matilda achieves Ambrosio’s spiritual downfall at the Devil’s orders.

Matilda, a monk who turns out to be a woman who turns out to be an ambiguously gendered demon, is a notoriously slippery figure when it comes to gender.⁷ In her disguise as the monk Rosario, Matilda enjoys a close friendship with Ambrosio that has given rise, with good cause, to readings of homoeroticism in *The Monk*.⁸ Soon after revealing herself as a woman, Matilda declares that “[t]he Woman reigns in my bosom, and I am become prey to the wildest of passions” (89). She successfully seduces Ambrosio, who quickly becomes tired of her. Ambrosio is repelled by the masculine attributes he sees in Matilda, attributes that appear only when her aggressive female sexuality has replaced her submissive male disguise:

But a few days past, since She appeared the mildest and softest of her sex, devoted to his will, and looking up to him as to a superior Being. Now She assumed a sort of courage and manliness in her manners and discourse but ill calculated to please him. She spoke no longer to insinuate, but command: He found himself unable to cope with her in argument, and was unwillingly obliged to confess the superiority of her judgment. Every moment convinced him of the astonishing powers of her mind: But what

⁷ On Matilda’s various gender reversals, see Brewer 195-202.

⁸ See for example George E. Haggerty and Clara Tuite.

She gained in the opinion of the Man, She lost with interest in the affection of the Lover. He regretted Rosario, the fond, the gentle, and submissive: He grieved, that Matilda preferred the virtues of his sex to those of her own... (231-32)

Of this passage, Jacqueline Howard observes, “[f]emale sexuality is thus construed as dangerous, while initiative, courage, and ‘powers of mind’ are deemed masculine qualities which can only be unnatural and threatening in a woman” (201). Brewer further suggests that Ambrosio’s discomfort with Matilda’s “masculine” qualities stems from his “inability to fit his own definition of manliness” (198). In Matilda’s assumption of what Ambrosio sees as masculine aggression, she abandons her role as a mild, passive, inferior woman who is paradoxically more feminine when disguised as a man. For Ambrosio at least, Matilda’s seeming masculinity, beginning with her threatening control of their sexual relationship, marks her as repellent. Ambrosio turns from the “Concubine” and “Prostitute” Matilda to the feminine, because passive, Antonia (224, 244), a woman who is so far from acting on sexual desires that she “knows not in what consists the difference of Man and Woman” (17). Matilda, the easy woman, the demon, stands at one extreme of the novel’s spectrum of women, while Antonia, the sinless and witless, only attainable through rape, lies at the other.

That the sexually aggressive, masculinized Matilda is a supernatural monster from hell seems to indicate a negative attitude within the novel toward women breaking away from female passivity through the exercise of sexuality, as does the monstrous image of death presented by Beatrice and Agnes. This negativity toward transgressing women is enhanced by all three figures’ connections with the institutions of Catholicism. Agnes

and Beatrice seem doubly transgressive, since they break not only the cultural taboo against women displaying and exercising sexual desire, but also because they break their vows. Matilda, too, seems worse than a common prostitute, because she seduces not a man of the world but a man of God. At the same time, the novel's anti-Catholicism also functions to present Agnes, Beatrice, Matilda, and other women in a negative light, as they take part in forming and are contaminated by the anti-Catholic stereotypes connected with the convent.

A strong, obvious anti-Catholic discourse pervades *The Monk*—after all, the novel is about a monk who is an incestuous rapist and murderer. Such literary anti-Catholicism would have been accepted and expected in eighteenth-century England, especially following the 1780 Gordon Riots.⁹ Numerous critics have identified anti-Catholic elements in *The Monk*.¹⁰ Steven Blakemore concentrates on “the linkage between misogyny and the feminine, Catholic ‘Other’ in eighteenth-century Protestant discourse” (522), focusing especially on the “feminine position” of Ambrosio as a virginal, chaste monk whose trajectory follows that of the traditional fallen woman (522). Yet the connection between Catholicism and misogyny in the novel works the other way as well. Not only is Catholicism “sexually demonized” in *The Monk*, but sexuality, especially female sexuality, is demonized as Catholic (524). This is evident in the way that *The Monk* draws on two seemingly contradictory but pervasive views of the convent and the monastery (institutions that, for Lewis as for most gothic writers, are interchangeable): the convent as a place of unnatural sexual repression leading to diseased minds and

⁹ On anti-Catholicism in eighteenth-century England, including the Gordon Riots, see Colin Haydon.

¹⁰ See for example Steven Blakemore, Melanie Griffin, and Lisa Mulman.

bodies, and the convent as a place of sexual licentiousness that belies Catholic claims to purity.

One anonymous eighteenth-century writer describes Catholic vows of chastity as unhealthy and even uncivilized: “In popish convents, as well as nunneries abroad, how many are the diseases attendant on celibacy; all which there is but one way of curing: and that nature points out every member of society, however savage; to which the more civilized give sanction by laws” (qtd. in McCormick 173). Such criticism of the convent’s unhealthy restraint occurs in *The Monk* as well. St. Ursula, in her attempt to “rend the veil from Hypocrisy” by relating the tale of the nuns’ abuse of Agnes (350), suggests that the “disappointment, solitude, and self-denial” of convent life makes the nuns who condemn Agnes inhumanly hard-hearted (352). Agnes, who is educated by nuns, realizes before she takes orders that she is “not born for solitude” (131); after she thinks herself abandoned by Raymond and takes the veil, Agnes still warns Virginia of the “continued restraint” she would suffer if she joined the convent (396). Yet this criticism of the convent as inhumanly repressive does not necessarily indicate an approval of the transgressive desires that convent life restrains. In part, Lewis uses the Protestant view of the Catholic convent as sexually repressive to show that the Church’s emphasis on repression leads to the very excesses it seeks to prevent. Blakemore notes this in relation to Ambrosio when he claims that “Lewis’s point is that Catholic vows of chastity feminize monks whose sexual ignorance makes them vulnerable to temptation and hypocrisy” (522). It is also evident in relation to Beatrice, who when she first enters the convent is “too young to regret the pleasures, of which her profession deprived her” (171). Once she begins to seek those pleasures, though, the “obstacles only added new

force to her desires” (173); Beatrice’s “early repression,” as Howard suggests, plays a role in her subsequent depravity (208). By making all sexual desire taboo, the nuns’ and monks’ vows of chastity increase the desire for forbidden pleasure.

In *The Monk*, then, the repression of the convent helps create the opposing popular anti-Catholic image of the convent as a place of sexual excess.¹¹ Bawdy anti-clerical literature presented tale after tale of monks and nuns engaged in scandalous amorous exploits. One example, widely popular in eighteenth-century England, is Jean Barrin’s French work *Venus in the Cloister, or the Nun in Her Smock* (1683).¹² In this set of three dialogues, the young nun Agnes, who like Beatrice cannot “Bridle” her affections (3), discovers sexual pleasure with the more experienced Angelica while they talk about the sexual adventures of priests and monks like Father Rancourt, who makes use of the confessional to seduce women, including a nun named Virginia. Lewis may not have had this earlier Agnes in mind when he wrote *The Monk*, but Lewis does reproduce many anti-Catholic stereotypes of the lascivious lifestyles of those in Catholic orders. In the sexual tension between Ambrosio and the seemingly male Rosario/Matilda, Lewis draws on the tradition that the strict sexual segregation of monasteries and cloisters fostered same-sex desire, though there is little evidence in *The Monk* of Sapphic love, like that explored by Barrin’s Agnes and Angelica.¹³ The fear that priests abused the

¹¹ Max Byrd describes eighteenth-century literary connections between the madhouse, the whorehouse, and the convent, focusing on the shared theme of incarceration. He includes a discussion of the convent in *The Monk* (273-76). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the convent, as a place of mental disease through restraint and, at the same time, of hypocritical sexual license, is often described in terms of the madhouse or of the whorehouse.

¹² On the publication history of *Venus in the Cloister*, see Peter Wagner 72-73.

¹³ It could be noted, though, that St. Ursula, who seeks revenge for the perceived murder of Agnes, shares a close connection with Agnes that, if it is not Sapphic, follows the

privileges of the confessional is also apparent in *The Monk*; Ambrosio, after tiring of Matilda, lusts after the women who confess to him—“[t]he eyes of the luxurious Friar devoured their charms” (239)—though Ambrosio, unlike Father Rancourt, does not then act on that lust. Most important, however, are the sexual transgressions of the nuns and monks in the novel. Beatrice flies the convent in order to pursue her desires, but Agnes and Raymond make love in the convent garden itself. Matilda exposes herself in the garden, and she and Ambrosio meet in her monk’s cell; Ambrosio, of course, also rapes Antonia in the convent’s vaults. These actions reinforce the image of the convent as hypocritically filled with sex; at the same time, by aligning the convent in *The Monk* with these anti-Catholic stereotypes, the novel seems to further condemn Agnes’s, Beatrice’s, and Matilda’s sexual actions as not only monstrous in their rejection of passive feminine roles, but also monstrously Catholic.

Of course, one of the most obvious elements of anti-Catholicism in the novel is the imprisonment of Agnes.¹⁴ St. Ursula’s description of this “most cruel, most inhuman” punishment helps incite the mob to the final riot that destroys the Prioress and the convent (351). Agnes’s living burial is one of the strongest elements of horror in the novel, and that horror helps to condemn the perceived Catholic cruelty that demands Agnes’s punishment for a venial sexual crime, as well as to literally condemn the convent

pattern of the female romantic friendship. St. Ursula says of Agnes, “She entrusted to me every secret of her heart; I was her Friend and Confident, and I loved her with sincere affection” (351). After Agnes’s pregnancy is discovered, St. Ursula visits Agnes’s cell late at night, where she attempts to comfort her in a way that recalls Agnes’s garden rendezvous with Raymond: “I mingled my tears with those, which streamed down her cheek, embraced her fondly” (352-53).

¹⁴ While in Paris in the summer of 1791, Lewis saw Boutet de Monvel’s *Les Victimes cloîtrées* (1791), a French anti-clerical drama that Lewis later translated. He may also have known of Benoit Joseph Marsollier’s *Camille ou le Souterrain* (1791); both dramas feature live burial as a conventual punishment (Macdonald 101).

itself. Agnes's dungeon cell is like a heightened microcosm of the secluded and repressive convent. In being imprisoned, the Prioress says, Agnes will be "shut out from the world and light for ever, with no comfort but religion, no society but repentance" (408); to a lesser extent, Agnes is already shut out from the world by being enclosed in the convent. The mob's, and presumably the reader's, disapproval of Agnes's sentence works in Agnes's favor; she is the pitiable "Victim of Cruelty and tyrannic superstition" (351), languishing in unwarranted suffering. As this sympathy for Agnes suggests, it would be too simple to argue that Lewis, or his novel, is making the straightforward statement that women who depart from the standard of feminine passivity by following their sexual desires must and should be punished with fates of deathlike monstrosity. We are meant to feel sympathy for Agnes and to condemn the Catholic laws that imprison her. Rather, it seems that monstrosity and active female transgressions of passive feminine roles, including sexual roles, are subtly linked in *The Monk*, as are death and the female body, even though these connections are not always elaborated in the surface arguments of the narrative.

For example, such subtle connections can be found in the scene that culminates with the death of the Prioress. The mob's attack on the Prioress is immediately preceded by a Catholic procession in honor of St. Clare. In this procession, the female body is displayed as an object of still, statue-like beauty, centering on the lovely Virginia, who represents St. Clare and whose description recalls that of the Madonna image Ambrosio lusts after. At the same time, the procession is predicated on the fragmentation of the female body. The St. Lucia figure carries two eyes in a basin, recalling the dismemberment that is many female martyrs' fate. More importantly, though, the core of

the procession is the dead, disintegrated body of St. Clare, “the reliques of St. Clare, inclosed in vases” (347); St. Ursula carries St. Clare’s heart. The scene ends with the destruction of another female body, that of the Prioress. Her body becomes grotesque in death: “Yet though She no longer felt their insults, the Rioters still exercised their impotent rage upon her lifeless body. They beat it, trod upon it, and ill-used it, till it became no more than a mass of flesh, unsightly, shapeless, and disgusting” (356).¹⁵ The Prioress is not, like Beatrice and Agnes, guilty of sexual indulgence, but she is, like Matilda, a masculinized figure. She is, as Brewer observes, “easily the most patriarchal character in the novel” (195). It is Beatrice’s, Agnes’s, and Matilda’s varying degrees of rejection of their roles as passive women, mere objects, that makes their sexuality threatening and therefore horrific; the Prioress also rejects normative female roles as a “proud, scrupulous, forbidding” leader without pity (351), a character trait that Ambrosio sees as “so natural, so appropriate to the female character” that Matilda’s lack of it makes her less feminine (232). The crowd neutralizes the Prioress’s threat and makes her body, like that of the spectral Beatrice or the emaciated Agnes, a deformed object of horrified disgust.

I have, so far, been speaking negatively about the implicit connections that seem to exist in *The Monk* between the transgression of passive female roles and bodily

¹⁵ The mob’s violence, as a number of critics have noticed, seems related to fears about the mass violence of the French Revolution; see Ronald Paulson 534-37 and David Punter 206-207. Punter sees the Prioress’s death as “a postponed representation of rape” that is aligned with sexual excess as a fear related to the Revolution (206). The anxieties the Revolution raised about “masculine” women could also be significant in considering violent, transgressive women like the Prioress, Matilda, Beatrice, or Marguerite; on such fears, see Madelyn Gutwirth 307-40.

deformity, and between the female body and the disgust of fleshly decay.¹⁶ Indeed, such connections seem to have at their root a misogynist impulse to greet the female body, especially the transgressive female body, with horror. However, that very horror is what makes the transgressive women in the novel such powerful figures. The existence of such figures, even if they carry negative connotations, points toward the acknowledgement of the existence of women who actively exceed the boundaries of patriarchal definitions of feminine submission, objectification, and sexual inactivity.

The existence of powerful, transgressive women in the novel is partly what has led some critics to identify varying degrees of feminist sentiment in *The Monk*. Jacqueline Howard, while acknowledging that the novel “comes close to rejecting female sexuality as an active, independent force altogether” (203), responds in part to Agnes’s story when she says that “one is tempted to posit a narrative voice sympathetic to women’s freedom and spontaneity in love over and against the demands of conventional morality and religion” (198). Others, less guardedly, have hailed the consummate boundary-breaker Matilda as undermining “previous literary constructions of femininity” (Wright 49), as “the one truly progressive voice in the story” who reveals “the potential energy and power of women” (Watkins 120), or as a symbol of the “possibility of female autonomy” (Brewer 193). I would not want to go too far in arguing for a latent feminist message in Lewis’s novel, however. What power the novel’s transgressive women have—especially in the cases of Beatrice, Agnes, and Matilda—stems from the horror

¹⁶ Though such grotesque images of death seem most closely associated with women in the novel, they are not limited to women. Ambrosio, of course, also dies mangled and torn. At the same time, Blakemore, who sees Ambrosio as a feminized “fallen woman” (526), interestingly reads Ambrosio’s death as a metaphoric rape by the Devil, an instance of the punishment of “deviant ‘women’” in the novel (535).

they evoke as a result of their transgressions, through their supernatural or grotesque punishments or through their literal demonization.

In this sense, the horrific images of Beatrice and Agnes could be seen as functioning in a way akin to the female grotesque as described by Mary Russo. The grotesque, for Russo, “emerges as a deviation from the norm” (11). Since “the female is always defined against the male norm” (12), the female is always grotesque, and the terms “female” and “grotesque” often “seem to collapse into one another in very powerful representations of the female body as grotesque” (12). Beatrice and Agnes are physically grotesque in their deviation from the norm of the living body; Beatrice, Agnes, and Matilda are grotesque as characters in their deviation from the male-created norm of women as passive receptors of male desire. As with the carnivalesque unruly women Russo describes in the chapter “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory” (53-74), the negative depiction of transgressing women in *The Monk* reinforces the condemnation of their rebellion against normative feminine roles, yet through their existence they still undermine the social structures they rebel against.

The deep horror that the corpselike Beatrice and Agnes evoke in Raymond and Lorenzo is also akin to the revulsion of abjection as described by Julia Kristeva in *The Powers of Horror*. For Kristeva, abjection displaces both subject and object in a vertiginous denial of meaning: both the object and the abject are “opposed to *I*” (1), but the object “through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it” (1), while the abject “the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (2). The experience of abjection as Kristeva treats it

applies to the psychoanalytic development of the infant as a subject, but it also applies to moments of extreme horror experienced throughout life. In such moments, the subject recoils from an erasure of boundaries between self and other, life and death. Kristeva describes the living person's reaction to a corpse as one example of this kind of horror of the abject. The corpse is "a border that has encroached upon everything" (3):

In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (4)

In the spectacle of Beatrice's and Agnes's living corpses, Raymond and Lorenzo confront death infecting life. The corpse of Agnes's infant also marks her own abjection, as she stares at a dead body that was a part of her own body, an other that is herself and yet that, through death, is nothing.

Kristeva's discussion of abjection related to the "devouring mother" also seems applicable to Beatrice and Agnes (54). The "desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside the maternal body" seems to make the mother that the pre-verbal infant separates itself from synonymous with the threat of the abject engulfing the self (54); abjection recalls "what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from

another body in order to be—maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out” (10).¹⁷ Agnes kissing her dead child and Beatrice kissing the powerless, infantilized Raymond recall such a pre-objectal relationship in which the self is undifferentiated from the other. At the same time, though, the horror experienced by Raymond and Lorenzo marks their recoiling from such undifferentiation with the maternal body, from the death of the self in the engulfing abject. In Lewis’s novel, it is as if the maternal body is itself an object of horror, a reminder of the chaos preceding subjectivity and of the nothingness of death.

Whatever power we see emerging from the horrifying female bodies in *The Monk*, it is clear that the women who take on an unfeminine, active role in relation to sexual desire become either monstrous or demonic, eliciting a male response that seems related to their status as transgressing women. The men confronted with the grotesque spectacles of Beatrice and Agnes are petrified and disgusted; Ambrosio is repelled by Matilda’s masculine aggressiveness and intellect. At the same time, the female body, by Aristotle’s definition a departure from the perfection of the male body, comes in for some of the disgust associated with these transgressing women, as death emphasizes women’s feminine because corporeal, rather than masculine because intellectual, embodied existence. The novel’s anti-Catholicism also contributes to the demonization of transgressing women and of women in general.

Lewis’s presentation of women who break social boundaries is at times sympathetic, yet the novel seems to suggest the monstrosity of such transgressions. The presence of ghosts, demons, and magical rites in *The Monk* mark it as horror-gothic, but it

¹⁷ For a feminist overview of the abject maternal in Kristeva’s work, see Mary Caputi.

is this attitude toward women and their roles that separates the novel from the female gothic genre. Ann Radcliffe, in contrast, responds to Lewis with a terror-gothic, female gothic exploration of female self-definition in *The Italian* (1797). Radcliffe is herself a transgressing woman in Lewis's eyes; as a female author she is "half-Man" in her loss of delicacy through public notoriety (qtd. in Macdonald 31). Radcliffe attempts to counter the negative, horror-ridden visions of transgressing women in *The Monk*, presenting a heroine in *The Italian* who never obviously departs from traditionally feminine standards of behavior and delicacy. Yet Radcliffe is also concerned with women who wish to escape from imposed patriarchal definitions of identity. In her treatment of the convent as a positive and possibly liberating female community, itself a transgressive concept, Radcliffe moves away from Lewis's use of the figure of the nun as a negative image of female transgression. For Radcliffe, a nun might be able to construct her own sense of feminine identity, even if she is challenged by and ultimately still contained within the societal structures that attempt to define femininity for her. In the gothic construction of femininity, Lewis's transgressing, monstrous, male gothic nuns are opposed to Radcliffe's more subdued female gothic use of the associations of the nun and the convent to question women's options for behavior and self-definition.

Chapter Three

“Awful Memorials” and Safe Refuges: The Convent and Resistance to Normative Female Roles in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian*

Its long, damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel, were to be within her daily reach, and she could not entirely subdue the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun.

-Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (143-44)

It is easier to retire from the public, than to support its disregard. The convent is to them a shelter from poverty and neglect. Their little community grows dear to them.

-John and Anna Letitia Aikin, “On Monastic Institutions” (116)

When Jane Austen wrote her first version of *Northanger Abbey* in the 1790s, the gothic novel had reached its height in popularity with the celebrated works of Ann Radcliffe. In Austen’s gentle parody of the gothic, Catherine Morland expects all the trappings of her favorite novels when she visits Northanger Abbey, but she is disappointed: secret passageways, ancient manuscripts, and murdered mothers are only a few of the gothic staples Catherine fails to find. Catherine hopes to discover “some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun” at Northanger (144), but this gothic element is also missing from Catherine’s mundane world. In pointing out the absence of such gothic ingredients from her novel, Austen signals the distance of her everyday world from gothic unreality at the same time that she constantly points out Catherine’s departures from the unrealistic perfection of Radcliffean gothic heroines.

Strange to say, Ann Radcliffe’s use of the gothic conventions surrounding the portrayal of nuns and convents works in a similar way in *The Italian* (1796). Radcliffe

does not distance herself from the gothic—she typifies it, after all—but she does move away from portraying supernatural and grotesque injured or ill-fated nuns like those in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, published earlier the same year. In doing so, Radcliffe, like Austen later, is concerned with the presentation of her female characters; the unrealistic perfection that Austen rejects is in part a reaction to the supernatural monstrosity of Lewis's women. Yet, in rejecting Lewis's negative images of nuns and convents, Radcliffe is also concerned with the identity options open to her heroine. Ellena's experiences in the contrasting convents of the evil San Stefano and the utopian Santa della Pietà allow Radcliffe to model a passive, partial resistance to imposed definitions of femininity and female roles. The convent appears as an option for a retreat from the roles of wife, mother, and heterosexual lover that eighteenth-century English society expected of women. Unsurprisingly in the work of a female writer, Radcliffe connects such a physical withdrawal with the mental separation from society implied in an attempt to define the female self against normative roles for women, especially through artistic pursuits. Yet both literal and representative refuges connected with the convent in *The Italian* appear as nothing more than that: refuges that are cut off from society, that do not change the surrounding circumstances, and that are often only temporary.

The simplest aspect of a resistance to female stereotypes in *The Italian* comes from Radcliffe's avoidance of misogynistic images of excessive, sensual nuns like those in *The Monk*. Despite the speed with which Radcliffe would have had to complete *The Italian*, published in December of 1796, after reading *The Monk*, published in March of that year, the content of the novel makes it clear that *The Italian* responds to *The Monk* in

many ways.¹ In Lewis's novel, the negative representations of nuns extend to women as a group. So too in Radcliffe's novel do the more positive images of nuns show Radcliffe's effort to portray women in a better light. Radcliffe sets up some parallels between the dark convent of San Stefano and Lewis's atrocity-filled convent of St. Clare, but she avoids the images of dead or immobilized sexually transgressive nuns with which *The Monk* abounds. The Bleeding Nun in *The Monk* had in life "abandoned herself freely to the impulse of her passions" and eloped from her convent, "displaying the incontinence of a Prostitute" (173). In death she is a spectral incarnation of the female grotesque, as Raymond's description of the ghost he mistakes for Agnes shows: "I beheld an animated Corse. Her countenance was long and haggard; Her cheeks and lips were bloodless; The paleness of death was spread over her features, and her eye-balls fixed stedfastly upon me were lusterless and hollow" (160). Agnes, another nun who breaks her vows of chastity, becomes similarly deathlike. When Lorenzo finds her chained in a cell under a tomb, she is "a Creature stretched upon a bed of straw, so wretched, so emaciated, so pale, that He doubted to think her Woman" (369). Agnes is "half-naked," with "sunk eyes" (369), and she clutches the rotting corpse of her infant to her bosom in a parody of the Madonna and

¹ Readings of *The Italian* in the light of *The Monk* are common: see Joseph F. Bartolomeo, Syndy Conger, Robert Reno, Yael Shapira, and Kari J. Winter for only a few examples of such intertextual readings. Bartolomeo focuses on the narrative confessions in the two novels, Conger sees Radcliffe as responding to Lewis's adaptation of her version of the sensational, Reno claims that Lewis and Radcliffe engage in a debate over the presentation of evil in their novelistic worlds (155-209), and Winter distinguishes between Lewis's male gothic and Radcliffe's female gothic. Shapira argues that Radcliffe asserts an aesthetics of delicacy in *The Italian* in order to counter the impropriety of the overwrought physicality of *The Monk*, a novel which threatens Radcliffe's own reputation as a woman writer of gothic romances.

child.² Such images in *The Monk* seem to suggest that women inevitably transgress sexual boundaries and that such transgression obliterates their femininity and even their humanity, making the sexual woman a monster. In *The Italian*, there are no spectral nuns and no pregnant nuns. This is an absence that, though it does not go far toward affirming the potential existence of a natural female sexuality, at least moves away from portrayals of women as monsters, or as demons—as in the case of another woman in religious orders in *The Monk*, Matilda, who disguises herself as a monk and turns out to be a devil.

Radcliffe explicitly points out her avoidance of such images, signaling her divergence from Lewis and his condemnation of transgressing women. In the convent of San Stefano, the narrative seemingly demands that Ellena undergo a live burial like Agnes's, but Ellena escapes that fate. The kindly nun Olivia tells Ellena of a nun who had received such a punishment, like Agnes “left to languish in chains and darkness, receiving only an allowance of bread and water just sufficient to prolong her sufferings” (146). Olivia warns Ellena that this is likely to be her own punishment if she does not submit to the Abbess's demands that she either take the veil or marry the man the Marchese has chosen for her. Later, as Ellena flees the convent with Vivaldi, she passes through a chamber with an air “like that of a sepulchre” and suspects that it is “the death-room of the unfortunate nun” (165). Ellena stares in horror at the “dreadful hieroglyphic” of the “mattress of straw” in which she imagines that “the impression it still retained, was

² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick takes the similarity of these descriptions of the Bleeding Nun and the imprisoned Agnes as evidence of the gothic use of the veil as “the locus of the substitution of one person for another, in the service of an indiscriminate metonymic contagion of its own attributes” as characters take on the “pallor, attenuation, insentience once proper to the veil” (*Coherence* 258-59). The veil, a pervasive trope in *The Italian*, is here in *The Monk* linked with death and the female grotesque through the metonymic contagion Sedgwick describes, especially in connection with the Bleeding Nun's bloodstained veil.

that, which her form had left there” (165). This is the sort of awful memorial Catherine wishes to find in Northanger. Here, the hieroglyphic of the empty mattress marks Radcliffe’s separation from Lewis’s portrayal of grotesque nuns, as the transgressive nun remains only a distant story.

As Ellena herself realizes, circumstances seem to imply that Ellena will fill that mattress of straw herself: “It was in this chamber, then,” she exclaims in terror, “that a nun was suffered to perish! and I, no doubt, am conducted hither to undergo a similar fate!” (168). Yael Shapira, who argues that Radcliffe’s adherence to the code of delicacy causes her heroines to see death as a humiliating, dehumanizing departure from decorum, observes that “the laws of the convent and the laws of the genre identify Olivia’s tale as a prophecy for Ellena” (472). It is a prophecy Ellena fails to fulfill, and Shapira takes this failure as a comment on Radcliffe’s narrative strategies as a female writer concerned with decorum: “*The Italian* repeats the conventional Gothic tale of a woman transformed by imprisonment into a corpse, but frames it as a problem for the polite female narrator” (472), as “Olivia’s hesitant recitation mirrors Radcliffe’s role in the dialogue with Lewis: Radcliffe too is a reluctant storyteller” (472-73). Yet Ellena’s escape from Agnes’s fate demonstrates more than Radcliffe’s concern with delicacy when it comes to narrating the corporeal. Radcliffe resists deploying the erotic associations of helpless dead or buried nuns, and frees Ellena from the debilitating lack of agency of such victims. Ellena remains mobile and self-reflective even when imprisoned in the convent tower.

Gothic descriptions of dead or immobilized nuns like the Bleeding Nun or the entombed Agnes play into what Courtney Wennerstrom has identified as “the scopophilic tendencies of the masculine eye to fetishize woman in *death* through anatomical

representation and practice” (194). The imprisoned women in gothic fiction can be seen as fetish objects, women controlled and enclosed in a death-like living burial.

Wennerstrom describes Radcliffe’s earlier resistance to such erotic exploitation of the dead female body in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), in which the wax figure of the flagellated monk behind the black veil is not the expected female corpse but a jarring “remnant of a punishment inflicted on a male body, by other men—a monument to homoeroticism” that unsettles the male gaze (204). Ellena’s escape from an imprisonment similar to Agnes’s marks Radcliffe’s continued resistance to the fetishization of the immobile female body.³

In fact, the gothic convention of live burial seems displaced onto male characters in *The Italian*. When Ellena is imprisoned, it is either in a cliffside cell with access to a balcony or in an airy seaside house. Vivaldi, on the other hand, is twice imprisoned underground. When he and Paolo are shut in a room at Paluzzi, Paolo observes that they are “buried, as one may say, under ground” (93), and Vivaldi is later shut in the deep dungeons of the Inquisition—with a “pillow of straw” (367), no less—as is Schedoni.⁴ The “Gothic topos” Shapira identifies, of “the metamorphosis of an imprisoned woman

³ The erotically charged scene in *The Italian* in which Schedoni approaches the sleeping Ellena, dagger drawn, demonstrates that such elements are not entirely absent from Radcliffe’s gothic, though even here Schedoni is startled by proofs of life that keep Ellena from entire immobility, even in her sleep: before Schedoni finds the miniature, he already hesitates to kill Ellena when he sees the “slight convulsion” of her face and hears her talking in her sleep (271). See Diane Long Hoeveler, “Dying Brides: Anti-Catholicism and the Gothic Demonization of Fertility” for the connection of the gothic “death-fetish” with anti-Catholicism (147). See also Winter, who argues that the “horrible spectacles of sexual violence, gore, and death” in *The Monk* differentiate Lewis’s male gothic from Radcliffe’s female gothic (91), which displays an alarm with the “death-fixated, misogynist creations of male Gothic novelists” and focuses on the terror of the familiar rather than of the grotesque (92).

⁴ In addition, another “awful memorial” that strikes Ellena is the ruins of the tower that supposedly buried the Baróne di Cambrusca (306).

into a corpse” (472), is subverted, as it is Schedoni’s imprisoned body, not Ellena’s, that becomes a “livid corse” with “haggard and fixed” eyes (466).

Radcliffe resists Lewis’s negative portrayals of monstrous nuns through such absences, but she also counters them with positive images. In so doing, Radcliffe attempts to move away from the conflation of women with monstrosity, even and especially in the cases of women who transgress societal norms. The convent of the Santa della Pietà, of course, is the polar opposite of a convent of unmitigated hypocrisy and atrocity like Lewis’s St. Clare. In *The Italian*, the two main convents contrast with each other: San Stefano, in which Ellena is imprisoned, is an example of the repressive, nightmarish convents of anti-Catholic atrocity tales, while Santa della Pietà, with its closet-Protestant abbess, is a happier, healthier community of women. Even in the convent of San Stefano, which parallels Lewis’s convent, Radcliffe sets up contrasts with Lewis’s nuns. San Stefano is a place of repression, like St. Clare, and the hard-hearted Abbess of San Stefano, “occupied with opinions of her own importance” (80), resembles the cruel Prioress of St. Clare, who punishes Agnes in order to give Ambrosio an impression of “the strictness and regularity of her House” (48). In contrasting the San Stefano convent with the Santa della Pietà one, Radcliffe seems to show that, in the case of San Stefano, even an enclosed community of women separated from society can perpetuate its restrictive, oppressive imposition of normative roles on women.

Not all the nuns in San Stefano are oppressive, though. In Olivia Radcliffe creates a nun whose virtues far outshine those of the guilt-stricken St. Ursula, the most vaguely sympathetic of the senior nuns of St. Clare. It is easy to see where Ellena gets her inhuman perfection: Olivia, her mother, is the ideal virtuous nun, the ideal virtuous

woman. Olivia's religious devotion gives her a "seraphic grandeur" when Ellena first sees her (102), and Olivia's angelic qualities only seem to multiply as Ellena pursues her acquaintance with her. Olivia is a woman of sensitivity, who takes pity on the imprisoned Ellena and who takes pride in having been punished for comforting the ill-fated nun whose story she relates to Ellena (147). Ellena recognizes Olivia's good qualities immediately, describing her rapturously as having "a most touching countenance; frank, noble, full of sensibility; and there is a gentle melancholy in her eye, which cannot but interest all who observe her" (103). Olivia, before becoming a model nun, had also been a model wife, whose beauty and virtue were attractions for her brother-in-law, Schedoni. As a mother, Olivia is also a paragon. Radcliffe contrasts the consequences of her "generous compassion" with those of Schedoni's vices: "the virtues of Olivia, exerted in a general cause, had thus led her unconsciously to the happiness of saving her daughter; while the vices of Schedoni had as unconsciously urged him nearly to destroy his niece" (443). Olivia is compassionate, sensitive, and sincere, the opposite of hypocritical nuns like the Abbess, or hypocritical mothers like the Abbess's friend, the Marchesa de Vivaldi.

Though Ellena never takes religious vows, she does participate in convent life, and she too provides an image of female propriety. Ellena is shocked by the impropriety of the nuns in San Stefano, of the vain Margaritone and of the noisy young nuns in the refectory. Ellena sees feminine decorum as inherent in the nun's position, symbolized by her veil:

Here she was not less surprised than embarrassed to observe, in the manners of young people residing in a convent, an absence of that

decorum, which includes beneath its modest shade every grace that ought to adorn the female character, like the veil which gives dignity to their air and softness to their features [...] No one displayed the nameless graces, with which a generous and delicate mind delights to reanimate the modest and the unfortunate. (110).

Unlike Olivia, these rude, selfish nuns lack the delicacy of mind that would lead them to comfort Ellena with a display of emotional sensibility. Fortunately, Ellena, who is usually veiled although she never takes the veil, has more than enough decorum to make up for their lack. In contrasting Ellena with the San Stefano nuns she criticizes, Radcliffe sets Ellena up as more nun-like than a nun, more chaste, pure, sincere, and above all, decorous.⁵

Radcliffe resists Lewis's misogynistic depictions of women through her own portrayals of Olivia, Ellena, and the happy Santa della Pietà community, but through her heroine's conformity to a code of modest decorum she hints at the possibility of passive resistance to the larger ideological systems that impose definitions of femininity on women. Ellena takes decorum to an extreme, consciously performing the delicacy expected of her. Diane Long Hoeveler, in *Gothic Feminism*, argues that gothic heroines' conformity to such imposed codes of behavior manifests a certain amount of female agency as part of a "cultivated pose, a masquerade of docility, passivity, wise passiveness, and tightly controlled emotions" that she terms "professional femininity" (xv). For Hoeveler, this performed femininity contributes to the female gothic's "victim

⁵ On Ellena's, and Radcliffe's, conformity to the eighteenth-century code of female decorum, see Shapira. On the "eighteenth-century polite feminine ideal" that Shapira finds in eighteenth-century conduct literature (457), see Nancy Armstrong, Mary Poovey, and Vivien Jones.

feminism,' an ideology of female power through pretended and staged weakness'' (7). Hoeveler's reading of the female gothic suggests that Ellena's careful decorum, manifested, Shapira argues, in Ellena's desire to "flee the 'body' constructed around her by culture" (Shapira 468), may work in some ways as a means of resistance to outside impositions of identity.⁶

In Ellena, Radcliffe demonstrates the importance of female attempts at self-definition. Shapira argues that the San Stefano masquerade scene, in which Ellena mistakenly raises her veil for a stranger, believing him to be Vivaldi, demonstrates the importance of "the decorous management of the body" to Ellena and to Radcliffe (454). The code of decorum allows women to attempt to control how their bodies are read and defined, as Ellena does in this scene, even though the same code restricts those definitions. Radcliffe's insistent portrayal of Ellena's decorum is thus one aspect of her presentation of a model of partial mental resistance to outside impositions of identity. Through Ellena's experiences in the convents of San Stefano and Santa della Pietà, Radcliffe suggests that such a mental, or even physical, removal from society's strictures on femininity creates a space for female self-definition, but she also demonstrates that this resistance is ultimately limited.

The convent appeals to Ellena as a place of refuge from the oppressive demands of society. Through its physical withdrawal from society, the convent represents an internal separation from societal definitions of identity. Ellena's independence of spirit and of means is marked early on by her connection to the convent of the Santa della

⁶ See, however, Helene Meyers, who problematizes simplistic readings of gothic victim feminism. Meyers argues against Hoeveler's "belief that in a poststructuralist universe, female victimization is a 'pose' and a discourse constructed primarily by and for women" (158n).

Pietà, where she finds a network of female support for her efforts towards economic independence. Before she meets Vivaldi, Ellena lives in Villa Altieri “innocent and happy in the silent performance of her duties and in the veil of retirement” (14), in a small female community consisting of her aunt Bianchi and her servants. This veiled, convent-like existence is sustained through Ellena’s handiwork. She embroiders silks that she sells to Neapolitan ladies through the intermediary of the Santa della Pietà nuns. Ellena uses this commercial arrangement to assert her independence from society’s “contempt”: “it was to protect herself from this effect of the narrow prejudices of the world around her, that she had so cautiously concealed from it a knowledge of the industry, which did honor to her character” (13). Ellena’s connection with the Santa della Pietà convent allows her a “virtuous independence” (13), but it is one that entails a silent concealment of her activities from the world; her attempt at self-definition is accompanied by restraint. Ellena’s early interaction with this convent leads to her decision to stay there immediately following Bianchi’s death. The positive associations the convent holds for Ellena make Vivaldi’s exaggerated fear at their parting, that the nuns “might win her from the world, and sacrifice her to the cloister” (70), seem like a real possibility.

Ellena’s intended stay in the Santa della Pietà is long postponed, as she is kidnapped and conveyed to the oppressive San Stefano. Ellena is imprisoned there, in a room that “rather deserved the denomination of a cell than of a chamber” (81), and taking the veil no longer appears in such an attractive light. Presented with the Abbess’s ultimatum, Ellena steadfastly refuses to profess or to marry, claiming her right to define her own identity. “I will neither condemn myself to a cloister, or to the degradation with which I am threatened on the other hand” (99), Ellena calmly tells the Abbess, and she

later publicly protests an attempt to force her noviciation. In taking this stand, Ellena sees herself as acting with independence and integrity. She objects to Olivia's statement that she is "subjected to the power of injustice and depravity" (112), claiming that she has "chosen the least of such [sufferings] as were given my choice" (112). Though she might incur punishment, she has not forfeited her "peace of mind" (112). Ellena's resistance to the power structures surrounding her is in this case limited to a refusal to choose, a passive rebellion against the proposed roles of wife and of nun.

Yet Ellena still recognizes that the convent should be a "sanctuary" although it is "prophaned" to "become a prison" (100). Even San Stefano is not without its attractions. The tower room that Olivia provides for Ellena becomes a safe haven of aesthetic self-definition for her. In this tower, Ellena can lose herself in the landscape, gaining a temporary sense of freedom: "The consciousness of her prison was lost, while her eyes ranged over the wide and freely-sublime scene without" (105). Ellena takes great comfort in this tower:

To Ellena, whose mind was capable of being highly elevated, or sweetly soothed, by scenes of nature, the discovery of this little turret was an important circumstance. Hither she could come, and her soul, refreshed by the views it afforded, would acquire strength to bear her, with equanimity, through the persecutions that might await her. (108)

When Olivia leaves books of poetry and history in the turret for Ellena, she attempts to "banish every painful remembrance from her mind" (111). Ellena turns her prison cell into a room of her own, where she can take pleasure in solitude while enjoying aesthetic pursuits. Ellena tells Olivia that, with books and drawing materials, she could "almost

forget my sorrows there” (109). Olivia’s reply suggests that she is amused by Ellena’s naiveté: ““Could you so?” said the nun, with an affectionate smile” (109). Olivia seems aware of the limitations of Ellena’s retreat. The turret is a place of mental resistance to persecution and of escape from oppression, but the escape is not complete. Ellena may be invigorated, but she is still imprisoned.

Ellena’s enjoyment of the terraces during her later stay at the Santa della Pietà parallels her use of the San Stefano turret. On the terraces, Ellena spends her “most soothing, though perhaps most melancholy hour” each day (426). She is “alone, and unobserved” (349), able to “yield to the melancholy which she endeavored to suppress in society” and to “deceive, with books and the pencil, the lingering moments of uncertainty concerning the state of Vivaldi” (349). Observing the “magnificent scenery of the bay” (426), Ellena is “alone and relieved from all the ceremonial restraints of the society, and her very thoughts seemed more at liberty” (426). Ellena here paints mental pictures of her memories, reading the landscape like a book. The view brings to Ellena’s mind “the many happy days she had passed on those blue waters, or on the shores, in the society of Vivaldi and her departed relative Bianchi” (426), and Ellena’s imagination pictures “in tints more animated than those of brightest nature” the aspects of the scene that “the veiling distance stole” (426). This terrace overlooks the convent but is still “a part of its domain” (426). It is not a prison, but it is still a part of the convent, still separate from the outer world. Both in the turret in San Stefano and on the terrace at Santa della Pietà, Ellena finds solace in solitude and artistic endeavors, surveying landscapes and memories, allowing her thoughts a freedom divorced from the restraints of society. The

tower room and the terrace, like the convents themselves, represent a mental escape from defining ideological structures, though they still carry with them a sense of restraint.

The tower room and the terrace are two instances of an enclosed space for female self-definition in *The Italian*. The veiling motif as it relates to Ellena's identity in the novel provides a similar sense of restrained freedom, or of freedom through restraint. Veils allow Ellena to disguise her identity and to express it. Ellena uses "the disguise of a nun's veil" the banquet scene at San Stefano and as she flees the convent (148), hoping to avoid recognition. This veil, though, is a gift from Olivia, and by wearing it, Ellena connects herself with her as-yet-unrecognized mother. Susan C. Greenfield, who influentially explores the possibility of a homoerotic bond between Ellena and Olivia in "Veiled Desire: Mother-Daughter Love and Sexual Imagery in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*," claims that Olivia's veil, "consistently associated with female sexuality" (80), gives the image of Ellena wrapped in that veil "erotic implications" (80). Later, Ellena's continued use of this veil gives the false officials of the Inquisition an excuse to snatch Ellena from her abortive wedding with Vivaldi, as they claim that Ellena's nun's veil proves that Vivaldi has "stolen a nun from her convent" (218). Greenfield claims that the veil "enables Ellena to continue her heterosexual resistance" through this "interrupted wedding" and so contributes to a narrative that "privileges female bonds and alludes to homoerotic desires" (81). Ellena's veils, which already carry sexual implications,⁷ allow

⁷ As Sedgwick observes, the veil as a symbol is "suffused with sexuality" (*Coherence* 256). "Like virginity, the veil that symbolizes virginity in a girl or a nun has a strong erotic savor of its own, and characters in Gothic novels fall in love as much with women's veil as with women" (Sedgwick, *Coherence* 256). On the erotic significance of the veil, see also Elaine Showalter 144-168, who is concerned with *fin de siècle* gender formulations but whose consideration of the veil as a symbol is relevant to earlier periods as well. Sedgwick identifies the role of the veil in the initial attraction of Vivaldi toward

her to disguise herself and to veil her sexual desires, whether they are for Vivaldi or for Olivia. While the veil in *The Italian* allows Ellena to carry out her ostentatious display of decorum, as Ellena's veils are manifestations of the symbolic veil of decorum Ellena criticizes the San Stefano nuns for lacking, they are not, however, as Shapira suggests, merely "a symbol of the body's scrupulous effacement by women themselves" (468). The veil marks Ellena's attempts to control how others perceive her social and sexual conformity. Through its associations with possibly transgressive sexual desires and with the female community of the convent, the veil also allows Ellena to search for her own identity and to hint at her potential nonconformity to the oppressive systems through which she moves.⁸

Ellena's affinity to one veil in particular, the disguise of Olivia's nun's veil, suggests her desire for Olivia; as Greenfield claims, "because it represents her attraction to Olivia, Ellena's unconscious attachment to the veil also suggests that she is uncontrollably drawn to a woman" (81). It also shows, thought, that she is attracted to the convent and the community of women it represents, and participation in such a

Ellena and of Lorenzo toward Antonia, who are both veiled and at church when their would-be lovers first see them (256). Greenfield notes that the scene in which Ellena first sees Olivia "repeats, almost word for word, the earlier description of Vivaldi's desire for Ellena" (79), including Olivia's situation, veiled and in a church.

⁸ For further treatments of Radcliffe's veil imagery, see Elizabeth P. Broadwell and Ford H. Swigart. These earlier readings of Radcliffe's veils tend to focus on the connection of veiling to the sublime, in landscape descriptions and their "veiled surfaces" (Swigart 56), and in the terror-gothic figurative veil of "man's own projection of his fears" that separates him from the sublime (Broadwell 84). Broadwell is concerned with a "social veil" that hides the self under polite manners (79). This is one of the readings that Sedgwick objects to as privileging the depths rather than the surface; Sedgwick denies that the veil is only "a cloak for something deeper and thus more primal" and sees the Gothic treatment of veils, flesh, countenances, and other potentially inscribed surfaces as promoting a view of identity that is "social and relational rather than original and private" (*Coherence* 256), as much a matter of the veiling surface as of the veiled depths.

community marks Ellena's desire to differentiate herself from normative female roles. Part of the attraction of such a community for Ellena would be Olivia's presence. Olivia palliates the negativity of San Stefano for Ellena, and once she arrives at Santa della Pietà, Ellena's contentment there hints at a temptation to abandon Vivaldi and, with him, heteronormative societal demands. At San Stefano, Ellena relies on Olivia for human connection. Olivia's regard "was not only delightful, but seemed necessary to her heart" (104), and her smile "threw one gleam of comfort, even through the bars of her prison" (104). Ellena's show of "affectionate sorrow" when she parts from Olivia incites Vivaldi's jealousy (159), as (with some reason) he asks Ellena, "do I then hold only the second place in your heart?" (160). If Ellena's affection for Olivia makes her weep to leave the otherwise undesirable San Stefano, it gives Ellena "joy and surprise" when Olivia (427), obeying Ellena's parting injunction to "remember the convent della Pietà!" (160), arrives in that positive conventual retreat. If Ellena had decided in the end to remain permanently at Santa della Pietà, her affection for Olivia, her desire to belong to the community containing Olivia, would surely have played a part. Santa della Pietà offers Ellena a means of resisting the imposition of heteronormativity, if not through female romantic friendships then at least through a celibacy that precludes sexual relationships with men.⁹

Such a desire does not appear on the surface of the narrative in the descriptions of Ellena's final stay at Santa della Pietà. Ellena is portrayed as a stereotypical melancholy, romantic nun, longing for her lover. In the tranquility of the convent, Ellena "vainly

⁹ Adrienne Rich's postulation of a "lesbian continuum" allows her to find manifestations of a lesbian existence in communities of women which denied marriages with men, like the twelfth- and fifteenth-century Beguines or the "Chinese marriage resistance sisterhoods" (651).

endeavored to moderate her solicitude respecting the situation of Vivaldi” (346). This is the melancholy Ellena indulges in on the terraces. Ellena, in this sense, seems akin to the “victims to the pride of family, to avarice, and superstition” that travel-writer John Moore claims populate the convents near Naples in his 1792 *A View of Society and Manners in Italy* (109). These nuns are “in the full bloom of health and youth, and some of them were remarkably handsome” (109). Moore, like many who depict nuns as victims, seems to regret the nuns’ wasted fertility and beauty.¹⁰ Ellena, whom Olivia exclaims at San Stefano is “designed for happier days than you may hope to find within these cloisters!” (104), seems to be portrayed as such a woman whose potential would be lost were she to remain in the convent. Ellena’s seeming devotion to Vivaldi positions her as a woman waiting to be rescued from the convent and made useful to men in her roles as wife and mother.

Despite this narrative attention to Ellena’s romantic melancholy, the narrator’s descriptions of Ellena’s thoughts during her final stay in Santa della Pietà are ambiguous, suggesting the possibility that she desires to remain in the convent. Santa della Pietà “seemed to open a secure, and, perhaps, a last asylum” for Ellena (350), who “could not avoid perceiving how menacing and various were the objections to her marriage with

¹⁰ Moore goes on to note the particular attractions of young nuns: “There is something in a nun’s dress which renders the beauty of a young woman more interesting than is in the power of the gayest, richest, and most labored ornaments” (109). This attraction seems to be related to the nuns’ tragic backstories. “This certainly does not proceed from any thing remarkably becoming in black and white flannel” (109), Moore dryly remarks. “The interest you take in a beautiful woman is heightened on seeing her in the dress of a nun, by the opposition which you imagine exists between the life to which her rash vows have condemned her, and that to which her own unbiassed inclination would have led her. You are moved with pity, which you know is a-kin to love, on seeing a young blooming creature doomed to retirement and self-denial, who was formed by nature for society and enjoyment” (109-10).

Vivaldi” (350). If Ellena had known of Schedoni’s role in her trials, says the narrator, she might have “relinquished what is called the world, and sought a lasting asylum with the society of holy sisters” (351). This still seems like a real possibility, and the narrator makes clear that if Ellena did decide to take the veil, it would be “by her own choice” (351). Ellena’s thoughts on the matter seem conflicted: “Even as it was, she sometimes endeavoured to look with resignation upon the events which might render such a step desirable; but it was an effort that seldom soothed her even with a temporary self-delusion” (351). Ellena is described as sorrowful, but she never manifests that sorrow. She calmly takes her place in the everyday lives of the nuns, seemingly tranquil:

Yet she regularly partook of the various occupations of the nuns; and was so far from permitting herself to indulge in any useless expression of anxiety, that she had never once disclosed the sacred subject of it; so that, though she could not assume an air of cheerfulness, she never appeared otherwise than tranquil. (426).

Such descriptions leave open the possibility that Ellena’s true self-delusion is the romantic sensibility she feels compelled to internalize—but not to display. In spite of her concern for Vivaldi, Ellena is able to participate in convent life and to contemplate a permanent devotion to that life with every appearance of tranquility. At one point, she even seems to regret not having broken off her engagement with Vivaldi when she had the chance. Vivaldi’s silence makes Ellena think that perhaps he has forgotten her at the command of his family, which causes Ellena to upbraid herself: “Ah! why did I leave the opportunity for that command to his family; why did I not enforce it myself?” (425). Of course, Ellena immediately counters this “self-reproach” with the conviction “that

Vivaldi could not so resign her” (425)—not, notably, that she could not so resign Vivaldi. This moment, urged by Ellena’s independent “pride” (425), suggests that she is sometimes able to look with more than resignation on events that would allow her to stay in the safe asylum of the convent: that in fact she at times wishes for those events.

For Ellena, the asylum of the convent represents a mental removal from the constraints of society. A woman’s individual aesthetic pursuits, like those that Ellena enjoys in the turret and on the terrace, and her independence of pride and spirit, maintained for Ellena by her conventual refuge from persecution and by her early monetary arrangement with Santa della Pietà, allow her a certain limited space for self-definition. Like a convent, such a space implies a separation from society rather than an alteration of it, and like a convent, this space is enclosed and restricted. Radcliffe seems to use Ellena’s convent experiences to point out the possibilities and the limitations of a passive, submerged resistance to outside definitions of female identity. At the same time, the convent is also a physical space of resistance, a female community separate from the outside world. In her treatment of the convent Santa della Pietà, which bears remarkable similarities to the female community described by Mary Astell in her 1694 *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Radcliffe suggests that the physical separation of such a community from the world and its restrictions is also potentially liberating and yet limited.

Astell, who rants against “Tyrant Custom” (67), proposes “to erect a *Monastery*” that “shall have as a double aspect, being not only a Retreat from the World for those who desire that advantage, but likewise, an institution and previous discipline, to fit us to do the greatest good in it” (73). Astell hopes to provide a place where women can receive

an education equal to that of men and where they can focus more on their intellects and spirits than on their bodies. Astell is careful to distinguish her proposed “monastery” from Catholic institutions “abus’d by superstitious Practices” (73), but her word choice connects her proposal with a host of other English formulations of “Protestant nunneries.”¹¹ In the same way that Ellena and Vivaldi are English Italians, the nuns in Santa della Pietà, especially the Abbess, are Protestant Catholics. The Abbess, in fact, must disguise her liberal leanings:

Her religion was neither gloomy nor bigoted; it was the sentiment of a grateful heart offering itself up to a Deity, who delights in the happiness of his creatures; and she conformed to the customs of the Roman church, without supposing a faith in all of them to be necessary to salvation. This opinion, however, she was obliged to conceal, lest her very virtue should draw upon her the punishment of a crime [...] (347).

If Astell’s proposed community would be a kind of Protestant nunnery, Santa della Pietà is its superficially Catholic version.

¹¹ On this recurring idea in England from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, see Bridget Hill. Hill connects this long-lived theme with the “inadequacies of female education” (129), noting that most proposals for Protestant nunneries have in common “the belief that only by getting away from men could women hope to pursue uninterruptedly their education” (130). Hill also acknowledges that joining a sisterhood might allow women to fulfill “a positive desire to integrate into a community of women” (128). In discussing the Catholic convent, not just its proposed Protestant counterpart, eighteenth-century writers rarely acknowledge its potential as a nurturing female community. An exception is John and Anna Letitia Aikin’s surprisingly positive, albeit condescending, reflections on convents in “On Monastic Institutions” in their 1773 *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose*. Women who “have no agreeable prospects in life” have no reason not to enter a convent, they say (116): “Why should not these be allowed to quit a world which will never miss them? It is easier to retire from the public, than to support its disregard. The convent is to them a shelter from poverty and neglect. Their little community grows dear to them” (116).

Astell's imagined community seems very similar to Santa della Pietà. It is characterized by an enjoyable devotion to charity: "No uneasy task will be enjoy'd you, all your labour being only to prepare for the highest degrees of that Glory" (74), Astell tells her readers, and they will employ themselves in educating themselves and others and in "spiritual and corporal Works of Mercy" (84). In Santa della Pietà, the Abbess employs herself in instructing the sisters in "moral duties" (347). This is not the broad education Astell advocates, but the Abbess's mild instruction does create the kind of unified community that Astell seeks. The evening sermons work to "soften and harmonize the affections" and promote "the practice of universal charity, and the most pure and elevated devotion" (347). The Abbess's instruction helps to make the "society" seem like "a large family" rather than "an assemblage of strangers" (348), much like the "happy Society" that Astell hopes "will be but one Body, whose Soul is Love" (87). Both Santa della Pietà and Astell's academy are examples of intimate female communities characterized by harmony and love and set apart from the roles that society assigns women.¹²

One striking parallel between Santa della Pietà and Astell's proposed community is the type of amusements the societies allow. Writes Astell, "as this institution will strictly enjoyn all pious and profitable Employments, so does it not only permit but recommend harmless and ingenious Diversions, Musick particularly, and such as may

¹² Ruth Perry claims that Astell's "choice of celibacy" in her writings has "the ring of emancipation" as it allows women to confront the dangers facing the "biological female" in their culture (141). Chastity allowed women to avoid the dangers of childbirth and to claim the time necessary for artistic production, Perry argues. For Perry, Astell's "advocacy of chastity" is "but a veil for the protective love and ambition she felt for other women" (153). It allows them to seek physical safety and intellectual self-fulfillment, as well as to privilege friendships with women over relationships with men.

refresh the Body without enervating the Mind” (85). Part of what makes Santa della Pietà a society “such as a convent does not often shroud” is its allowance of similar enjoyments (347). The Abbess “encouraged in her convent every innocent and liberal pursuit, which might sweeten the austerities of confinement, and which were generally rendered instrumental to charity” (348), and the narrator immediately adds that the sisters “particularly excelled in music” (348). Their touching performances reflect “the well-regulated sensibility of their own minds” (348). Here again, aesthetic pursuits play a part in a female separation from society.

Even if Radcliffe did not have Astell in mind in her description of Santa della Pietà, the convent, like the Protestant nunneries imagined by Astell and other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers, provides a place where women can live in a self-defining, self-enclosed community outside the boundaries of the larger world. Yet Ellena does not remain in Santa della Pietà. The muted description of Ellena’s marriage to Vivaldi underscores the difficulty of sustaining resistance, whether mental or physical, to imposed constructions of femininity. Most of the paragraph describing Ellena’s feelings at her wedding is taken up with a description of the sorrows of the previous interrupted wedding, and Ellena weeps, ostensibly with “joy and gratitude” (473), as she approaches the altar. It is only in contrast with the “anguish” of the past that Ellena becomes “sensible of the happiness of the present” (473)—hers is hardly the ecstasy of an enthusiastic bride. Ellena seems most “cheered” not by the wedding itself but by remembering that “the vicinity of Vivaldi’s residence to *La Pietà* would permit a frequent intercourse with the convent” and her mother Olivia, its inhabitant (474). The descriptions of the wedding and its fete carry an almost melancholic tone, despite Paolo’s

insistent exclamations of “*O! giorno felice!*” (474). This tone indicates, perhaps, Ellena’s own melancholy at leaving the safe refuge of Santa della Pietà, or the maybe the narrator’s melancholy on Ellena’s behalf.

Ellena’s ultimate abandonment of Santa della Pietà can be read as Radcliffe’s knowing smile to the female reader, like Olivia’s smile to Ellena, condoning the strategies of partial mental resistance to outside impositions of identity represented by Ellena’s convent experiences, but acknowledging their ultimate insufficiency. Greenfield reads the second half of *The Italian*, following the interrupted wedding, as “the story of Ellena’s forced acceptance of the conventions of heterosexuality” (81), and indeed the novel does end on a conservative note, apparently reaffirming the dominant power structures of Ellena’s society. Like the temporary refuge of Ellena’s San Stefano turret, Radcliffe seems to suggest, passive resistance based on a separation, whether mental or physical, from an oppressive system is not the same as liberation. Female communities like the one imagined by Astell might provide options for women outside of the roles defined for them by their culture, but those communities would still exist in opposition to that culture. A mental refuge, like Ellena’s determined pride and her enjoyment of artistic pursuits in solitude, may also provide a kind of space for resistance to outside impositions of identity, but this space too is infringed upon by and imbricated in the ideological constructs it resists.

Of course, Radcliffe’s conservatism may be more deep-seated than I have suggested. Radcliffe certainly counters Lewis’s misogynistic female images, but her portrayals of Ellena’s gestures towards an independent, individual construction of female identity remain submerged and incomplete. Never, for example, does Radcliffe

straightforwardly elaborate an objection to heteronormative ideals or even to marriage, despite all the suggestive details that point in such directions. Radcliffe's own reticence suggests the difficulty of expressing such objections, and perhaps the difficulty for a woman in her position of imagining them in the first place. Still, regardless of Radcliffe's intentions, the text's transgressive moments allow the reader to question stereotypical female roles. As Coral Ann Howells suggests, Radcliffe's "subtle transgressions" of stereotypes and plot conventions are "what is ultimately seductive in a Radcliffean novel" as they "evade the constraints of conventional narrative and social order, lifting the veil to reveal other possibilities not contained within the conventional story at all" (152).¹³

The convents in *The Italian* provide Ellena with such transgressive moments, but for Radcliffe, such moments are only temporary and their resistance to outside definitions of female identity is only partial. Like Ellena surveying the San Stefano landscape, a woman may remove herself from an oppressive system and take pleasure in solitude, but that system still surrounds and restricts her and awful memorials of oppression remain. Charlotte Brontë's treatment of the convent leads to a similar, though possibly even more subversive, view of female self-definition. Lucy Snowe, like Ellena, finds independence in the convent-like community of learning that she establishes in the conclusion of *Villette* (1853). Lucy goes farther than Ellena, though, in challenging gender roles and in claiming an active artistic, intellectual, and economic independence.

¹³ Howells focuses on "the transgression of a woman writing and asserting the freedom of the creative imagination as an artist's right" (153).

Chapter Four

“A Role Not Mine”: The Nun and Lucy Snowe’s Independence in Charlotte Brontë’s

Villette

A cold name she must have; partly perhaps on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle—partly on that of the fitness of things for she has about her an external coldness.

-Charlotte Brontë, letter to W.S. Williams, November 6, 1852¹

Yet what passion, what fire in her! Quite as much as in George Sand, only the clothing is less voluptuous.

-George Eliot on Brontë, after reading *Villette* (91)

He wanted always to give me a rôle not mine. Nature and I opposed him.

-Lucy Snowe in *Villette* (318)

In Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), the ghostly nun Beatrice and the imprisoned nun Agnes form horrific figures of female transgression. Lewis’s male gothic, horror-gothic novel draws on the associations of the figure of the nun with Catholic excess and female sexual excess to create negative images of the convent and its inhabitants. In contrast, Ann Radcliffe’s female gothic *The Italian* (1796) eschews Lewis’s ghastly figures of female horror. Her heroine avoids the conventual punishment of live burial: in *The Italian*, the convent does not have to be a horrifying prison, but it can be a place of possible liberation for women. Like Lewis’s nuns, Radcliffe’s central female characters transgress normative roles for women; unlike Lewis, Radcliffe presents this transgression in a positive light and finds a restricted space for it in the enclosed female community the convent represents. Female agency as exercised by nuns and

¹ Quoted in Gaskell 218.

possibly evidenced in convents is vilified in Lewis and limited in Radcliffe. Writing half a century later and retrospectively employing gothic conventions in an age of realist novels, Charlotte Brontë also uses images of nuns and convents in her presentation of her protagonist's efforts to exercise agency and define herself in contrast to the roles imposed on her. In *Villette* (1853), Lucy Snowe's identification with the ghostly nun and her experiences in the convent-like pensionnat contribute to the presentation of Lucy's final liberation as an intellectual, a professional, and an artist in her own independent establishment.

Brontë's treatment of the nun is more complex and more subversive than either Lewis's or Radcliffe's. The nun is linked with anti-Catholic elements that, as in Lewis, emphasize Lucy's oppression in a patriarchal society. The gothic theme of live burial also recurs, as Lucy's repressed emotions are identified with the buried nun whose restless ghost supposedly haunts the pensionnat. Some may see Lucy's oppression and repression as a demonstration of her defeat and resignation, but as Lucy struggles to define herself against patriarchal norms and to find a way of expressing and acknowledging her own emotions, both of these associations of the nun show Lucy's progress toward her self-defined liberation through her ultimate rejection of the self-burial the nun figures. Equally important, though, are the liberating associations of the nun in *Villette*, associations that have often been overlooked in criticism. The nun ties into motifs of cross-dressing and of female artistic expression in the novel, and so is significant in Lucy's questioning of gender roles and in her adoption of her own role as an artist.

In the sections that follow, I will first establish Lucy's identification with the nun and the pensionnat's identification with a convent, and show how this identification

works with the novel's anti-Catholicism and its motif of live burial to present Lucy as both externally oppressed and internally repressed. I will then show that the apparitional nun connects to the cross-dressing motif in the novel and thus contributes to Lucy's own questioning of gendered roles. I will also demonstrate the nun's connections with Lucy's, and Brontë's, concerns about the role of the female artist. Finally, I will read the novel's conclusion in light of these concerns to show that Lucy's ultimate, nun-like position in a pensionnat of her own suggests that Lucy achieves some measure of liberation from gendered norms and that she is able to exchange self-repression for self-expression.

1. Lucy as a Buried Nun

The ghostly nun appears five times in *Villette*, at key moments in the plot, as both Charles Burkhart and Mary Jacobus have noted. Each of these five appearances emphasizes Lucy's uncanny connection with the nun. For Burkhart, the nun shows Lucy's progress toward a resigned rejection of sexual desire, and so the nun appears at moments of intense romantic emotion. For Jacobus, the nun's appearances work on a formal level as eruptions of the novel's repressed, gothic undercurrent that challenges "the monopolistic claims of realism on 'reality'" (235); the nun also shows Lucy's repression of her emotions, as the nun does not appear "until passion threatens to reassert itself" (236). While I will argue that the nun is connected with Lucy's liberation as well as her repression, and that the nun certainly plays a much larger role than merely representing Lucy sexual desires, it is clear that, as both Burkhart and Jacobus observe, the nun's appearances demonstrate a deep connection between the nun and Lucy's internal life. They show that, on some level, the nun is Lucy herself.

The nun first appears when Lucy withdraws to the attic to read her letter from Graham. Deep in the joy of receiving a letter from the man she loves, Lucy suddenly wonders if “there are evil influences haunting the air, and poisoning it for man” (244). She asks the reader to draw her own conclusions about the appearance of the nun: “Say what you will, reader—tell me I was nervous, or mad; affirm that I was unsettled by the excitement of that letter; declare that I dreamed: this I vow—I saw there—in that room—on that night—an image like—a NUN” (245). Whatever she invites the reader to think, Lucy dislikes Dr. John’s idea that the nun is a “spectral illusion” resulting from “mental conflict” (249), as he suggests in the furor following this first appearance: “‘You think then,’ I said, with secret horror, ‘she came out of my brain, and is now gone in there, and may glide out again at an hour and a day when I look not for her?’” (249). In some ways, this fear is justified. The excitement of the letter, Lucy’s inner turmoil, does seem to lead to the nun’s appearance. When the nun briefly visits the attic and is seen by Lucy again, it is also at a moment of intense excitement for Lucy. She is preparing to visit the theatre with Graham, and she sees, but ignores, “a solemn light, like a star” in the dark recesses of the garret (256). We later learn that the light comes from the tip of de Hamal’s cigar, but the moment is appropriate for an appearance of the ghostly nun, especially one manifested through fire: Lucy is about to witness the fiery performance of the Vashti, a performance so profoundly moving to Lucy that it makes narrative sense that it sets the theater itself on fire. The nun’s third appearance, just after Lucy buries her letters from Graham, is also of course deeply connected with her internal life. When Lucy tries to “bury a grief” by interring the bundle of letters under the tree where the nun is buried, she gets her first long look at the nun’s bandaged face: the “snowy-veiled woman” has “no

face—no features: all below her brow was masked with a white cloth; but she had eyes, and they viewed me” (297). This is also the first time that Lucy attempts to confront the nun: she steps forward and reaches for it. It is as if, in the moment of burying her life, Lucy sees and steps toward the blankness she thinks is staring her in the face.

The nun’s fourth appearance is the only one of the five that is witnessed by someone other than Lucy, but it still seems very connected with her inner life. Lucy walks with M. Paul in the garden as they try to convince each other that the nun who haunts the Rue Fossette can have no grudge against their growing affection for each other. The nun interrupts them, emerging from the tree under which Lucy had buried her letters. To Burkhart, this appearance shows that “the birth of love and the turbulent re-activation of repression occur simultaneously” (237). Certainly, Lucy describes the apparition in terms of birth, not burial, asking as the tree shakes before the nun emerges “What Dryad was born of these throes?” (368). Lucy’s love, buried with the letters, is reborn in her love for M. Paul, and the buried nun rises from the grave.

Though the nun’s appearances eventually receive an earthly explanation, Lucy’s final confrontation with the phantom most closely connects her own identity with that of the nun. The nun’s fifth appearance suggests that on some level, the nun receives its animation from her. After returning from her opium-aided trip to the park, where Lucy embraces the ecstatically allegorized “TRUTH” of M. Paul’s plans to marry another (467), Lucy sees a dark shape in her bed and attacks it:

In a moment, without exclamation, I had rushed on the haunted couch; nothing leaped out, or sprung, or stirred; all the movement was mine, so was all the life, the reality, the substance, the force; as my instinct felt. I

tore her up—the incubus! I held her on high—the goblin! I shook her loose—the mystery! And down she fell—down all round me—down in shreds and fragments—and I trode upon her. (470)

The “movement,” “life,” “reality,” and “force” are Lucy’s, not the ostensible ghost’s. In the park, Lucy eulogizes Truth: “Truth stripped away Falsehood, and Flattery, and Expectancy, and here I stand—free!” (467). Here, Lucy performs the same action on the nun, stripping it down to “shreds and fragments” and exultantly treading on it in her effort to discover the truth behind the veil.

It turns out that the Truth Lucy masochistically praises is deceptive—M. Paul has no intentions of marrying his ward—and the truth of the nun is no less elusive. Nothing inhabits the shredded habit that takes Lucy’s place on her bed. The truth, like the reality, is all Lucy’s own. Lucy equates the “illusion” created by the nun’s garments with the self-delusion that she had said perpetuates the myth of the ghostly nun (470). When she first describes the legend of the buried nun, Lucy says that “moonlight and shade” look like the nun’s white veil and black habit to “timid eyes” as they “fluctuate in the night-wind through the garden-thicket” (106). On finding nothing but a bolster within the nun’s costume, Lucy tells the reader that “[h]ere again” is “the film of cloud, the flicker of moonshine” (470). Lucy, the controlling narrator, imbues her visions of the nun with the multiple significances they hold for her—of emotional denial, of transgression, of isolation. These are realities that, like others’ mistaken visions of the ghost, exist more within the viewer than within an external specter. “The nun of the attic bequeaths to Lucy Snowe her wardrobe” (470), reads the note with the costume. The note makes Lucy the inheritor of the nun’s identity, but it was hers all along.

The nun's five appearances at key moments in Lucy's internal life mark the nun as her doppelganger, but even before the enigmatic nun makes its first appearance, Lucy is associated with nuns and convents. Her morbidity, her silence, and her modest gray dress make her nun-like. She lives in solitude with the "stern and morose" Miss Marchmont (37), a woman who, like the romantic nuns of Victorian art, isolates herself in sorrowful contemplation of a past romance. When Lucy arrives at Rue Fossette, she enters a onetime convent—Madame Beck's school for young ladies "had in old days been a convent" (106), and Lucy sleeps in dormitories that "had once been nuns' cells" (68). She is like a nun herself, sleeping in those cells and frequenting the alley where the vowbreaking nun is rumored to be buried. Alfred de Hamal calls Lucy "revêche comme une religieuse" (111), which Tim Dolin translates as "cross-grained as a nun" (509).

The pensionnat as convent links the oppression Lucy experiences there with that thought to be experienced by cloistered nuns. In *Jane Eyre* (1847), Brontë had similarly criticized Lowood school by comparing it to a convent. At Lowood, the young Jane faces starvation, harsh physical punishment, humiliation, and emotional deprivation; Rochester, learning of her time there, says "You have lived the life of a nun" (155). The comparison is much more elaborated upon in *Villette*, where the school truly once was a convent and is still located in a Catholic country and run on Catholic principles. Lucy often refers to the pensionnat as if it were a convent, calling it a "demi-convent" (98), "our convent" (108), a "conventual ground" (115), and "this convent" (451). Indeed, in entering Madame Beck's school, Lucy is like a novice who discovers and must attempt to survive the cruel oppressions of convent life. Maureen Moran reads *Villette* in the context of nineteenth century convent exposé literature, showing that in the Rue Fossette Lucy

encounters many of the same elements that contribute to the condemnation of the convent in such anti-Catholic literature: claustrophobia, secrecy, physical punishment, insanity, and surveillance (77-103). Madame Beck, who is “secret, crafty, passionless; watchful and inscrutable” (74), keeps the school under constant “surveillance” (72), like the controlling Prioress found in many anti-clerical works, including Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796). Later, as Diana Peschier notes, Madame Beck is further connected to the stereotypical image of the cruel, domineering Prioress when her jealousy leads her to attempt to punish Lucy (155), first by confining Lucy to the school during the vacation, and later by trying to keep M. Paul from her. The pensionnat is like a convent governed by a merciless Prioress, and Lucy like a nun who suffers from the cruelty of conventual punishment and Catholic restraint.

Lucy as oppressed nun raises the vexed question of Brontë’s anti-Catholicism. *Villette* has long been seen as a violently anti-Catholic work. Lucy often virulently criticizes the Catholic Church and its tenets. For example, in a description that connects the pensionnat with the institutions of Catholicism, Lucy satirizes the Church as an indulgent promoter of self-serving ignorance:

There, as elsewhere, the CHURCH strove to bring up her children robust in body, feeble in soul, fat, ruddy, hale, joyous, ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning. “Eat, drink, and live!” she says. “Look after your bodies; leave your souls to me. I hold their cure—guide their course: I guarantee their final fate.” (127)

This negative attitude toward Catholicism often surfaces throughout the novel as the Protestant Lucy strives to keep herself separate from her Catholic surroundings in

Labassecour, a “land of convents and confessionals” (100). However, critics have lately begun to take a more nuanced view of Brontë’s use of such anti-Catholic rhetoric. For Moran, for example, Brontë’s employment of motifs from sensationalist convent exposé literature does not necessarily indicate an anti-Catholic agenda; instead, it may work toward “a new model of female autonomy that challenges marriage and domesticity as a woman’s sole destiny” (79). Diana Peschier sees Brontë’s anti-Catholicism as a stylistic and thematic technique used to critique the patriarchal oppression of women, which for Peschier parallels the Catholic oppression of Lucy.²

This is, I believe, an accurate statement, though there is more to the anti-Catholic sentiment in *Villette* than patriarchal oppression. As the above passage illustrates, Lucy connects Catholicism not only with oppression, but with sensuality, with the bodily delights of being ruddy, hale, joyous, happily eating and drinking in a thoughtless life. Lucy, with her continuous self-control and the “severe charm” of her reliance on Protestant reason (494), denies herself such indulgence. The attraction belied by her attacks on Catholicism is thus a part of Lucy’s inner contest between passion and restraint. In this sense, the nun, when it appears, represents not only the repression of Lucy’s sexual desires, as many have argued, but also, paradoxically, the possibility of the indulgence of such desires.³ The legendary nun whose ghost Lucy at first thinks the

² Others have similarly noted that the Catholic power system in *Villette* evokes that of patriarchal society or of English values; see for example Rosemary Clark-Beattie. Some have noted a pronounced sympathy for Catholicism in *Villette*: Michael Schiefelbein emphasizes Lucy’s “thinly disguised fascination with Catholicism” (320), while Tonya Edgren-Bindas reads Lucy as “metaphorically a nun” and M. Paul as a Christ-like figure, so that the two are wed spiritually since a nun is the bride of Christ (254).

³ For two influential readings of the ghostly nun as marking forms of repression, see Gilbert and Gubar 425-28 and Charles Burkhart. See also E.D. H. Johnson, who notes

apparition might be was supposedly “buried alive, for some sin against her vow” (106); Lucy imagines her bones lying under the garden’s pear tree, a symbol of carnal desire. The nun does not just indicate chaste restraint and suffocating self-control. She is also a woman who breaks her vows and is punished for it.

This medieval nun, like Agnes in *The Monk* and like the unfortunate nun that Ellena hears about in the San Stefano convent in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797), is the victim of a living burial. The story of the buried nun, and the visitations of something that seems to be her ghost, are some of the clearest markers of *Villette*’s gothicism, as many critics have noted.⁴ Lucy, of course, associates the punishment of the passionate nun with her own burial of her passion for Graham, symbolized in her burial of his letters. Lucy’s emotions, like the nun, are buried alive: “Was this feeling dead? I do not know, but it was buried. Sometimes I thought the tomb unquiet, and dreamed strangely of disturbed earth, and of hair, still golden and living, obtruded through coffin-chinks” (362). Lucy’s living burial applies to her repressed emotions, as well as to her oppressed situation as a plain and poor single woman. Lucy imagines her self-control as a kind of living death: “And in catalepsy and a dead trance, I studiously held the quick of my nature” (109), she says of her thoughts as she frequents the garden where the nun is buried. Physically, Lucy herself suffers a kind of living burial in her long, lonely vacation at Rue Fossette, when she grows ill from “conventual silence and stagnation” (190-91).

that the nun’s appearances mark Lucy’s emotional ordeals, and Robert Heilman 128, who remarks on the emotional sensitivity the nun’s appearances evoke.

⁴ For example, Heilman sees the ghostly nun as a manifestation of “old Gothic” reworked into the depth of Brontë’s “new Gothic” (127), and Michiko Soya notes the “Gothic uncanniness” throughout the novel that makes the ghostly nun seem believable (18).

Further resonances of the ghostly nun with living burial and repressed emotions are provided by its connection with a more recently deceased nun, Justine Marie, whose portrait Lucy sees in Madame Walraven's mansion. Justine Marie, her love for M. Paul forbidden by her relatives, withdraws to a convent and dies. At the nun's first appearance, as she reads the letter from Graham, Lucy wonders if the nun is one of the "wicked things, not human, which envy human bliss" (244). Similarly, Lucy imagines Justine Marie as another unquiet dead nun who attempts to block her way to emotional fulfillment: "Was the picture of a pale dead nun to rise, an eternal barrier?" (398). Just before the nun appears to them, Lucy and M. Paul tell each other not to be troubled by "morbid fancies" that "a saint in heaven perturbs herself with rivalries of earth" (408); in both their minds M. Paul's dead former lover and the restless nun seem connected.

The nun, as an emblem of the deprivations and strict control of women under Catholicism (and patriarchy), evokes the oppression Lucy experiences as an impoverished single woman, and through its connection with Lucy's desires and hopes, it also evokes Lucy's determined repression of those desires. The nun is thus associated with Lucy's repression, with her external coldness and her buried emotions. This is probably the strongest significance of the nun figure in *Villette*. It is certainly the one that has received the most critical attention. However, one aspect of the illusory nun that many critics tend to skirt around or dismiss is the final revelation of who, on the surface level of the plot, has been wearing the nun costume. This is because the solution to the mystery is so seemingly incongruous with the intense, uncanny associations built up around the nun. It turns out that Alfred de Hamal, Ginevra's beau, has donned the habit of a nun in order to gain entry to the school. Instead of a supernatural figure of terror

there is a laughable fop; instead of a doomed, spectral woman there is a living, lighthearted man. This anti-climactic explanation may be an example of what Robert B. Heilman calls Brontë's "anti-Gothic" strand (127), as "Gothic yields to farce" (128). It may also, as Gilbert and Gubar claim, show that, after the park scene, Lucy believes herself to be liberated from the sensuality that the shallow Ginevra and de Hamal represent for her (436). Yet the surprising fact that de Hamal enacts the ghostly visitations of the nun is not wholly disconnected from earlier motifs raised in the text. De Hamal's disguise ties the nun to the motifs of cross-dressing and artistic performance that run throughout the novel. The nun's signaling of Lucy's live burial contributes to a demonstration of her final liberation as she fights against the restraints her burial symbolizes, but through these other motifs, the nun also shows Lucy already claiming some measure of independence through the questioning of gender roles and through her attraction to artistic self-expression.

2. The Cross-Dressing Nun and the Performance of Gender

De Hamal's cross-dressing performance as the nun is the culmination of a series of performances that question the rigidity of gender roles and that relate such questioning to the female artist. The nun's relationship with these themes may be worked out in a more subtle way than is the nun's connection with Lucy's emotions, but it is still important in considering Lucy's establishment of her independence. As Lisa Surridge argues, Lucy's interactions with the theater "portray the heroine shifting dramatically from spectatorship to action, silence to speech, and self-effacement to display" (4). Surridge focuses on Lucy's performance in the school vaudeville, on her perceptions of

the actress Vashti, and on her theatrical experience in the park.⁵ Yet theatrical performances pervade *Villette* beyond these three central scenes, and such performances often lead to a questioning of the boundaries of masculinity and femininity in relation to self-display, not only in Lucy, but also in those she observes—and she ceaselessly, relentlessly observes those around her.

To Lucy, the people who surround her play roles open to her criticism. For some, the nature of their everyday roles seems cross-gendered. Madame Beck, with her cool surveillance and calm rule, is “a right sort of Minos in petticoats” (72), to Lucy not wholly feminine in her overall method of behavior. De Hamal, as a “womanish” fop (205), is also not wholly masculine. For others, specific moments transgress gendered appearances or behaviors. Even the tiny Polly, the doll-like model of femininity, performs male roles for Graham’s amusement. She imitates his friends and teachers: “Some she learned to mimic: an undermaster, who was an aversion of young Bretton’s, had, it seems, some peculiarities, which she caught up in a moment from Graham’s representation, and rehearsed for his amusement” (25). Mrs. Bretton disapproves of this activity, presumably because it is unfeminine to imitate men or to perform creatively. This small scene thus presents questions that are later elaborated upon in Lucy’s theatrical performance and in the Vashti’s.

Graham, the novel’s strongest model of masculinity, also has his amusing moment of cross-dressing, not in performance but in attire. At the concert Lucy attends with the Brettons, Lucy wins a cigar-case in the lottery and Graham wins “a most airy sort of blue and silver turban” (222). Graham wishes to make an exchange, but Lucy

⁵ For other readings of the treatment of the theater and theatricality in *Villette*, see Janet Gezari and Joseph Litvak.

stubbornly “could not be brought to hear reason” and keeps her male accessory (222). Later, as Graham is sleeping, Mrs. Bretton dresses him in the turban: “I brought out the sky-blue turban, and handling it and him with gingerly precaution, I managed to invest his brows with this grand adornment. I assure you it did not at all misbecome him; he looked quite Eastern, except that he is so fair” (273). Lying in repose, outfitted in a flowing turban, the fair, “bonny” Graham recalls the portrait of the sensual Cleopatra (273). In the picture that Lucy scrutinizes with such attention and to which Brontë devotes an entire chapter, an Eastern “dark-complexioned gipsy-queen” lies “half-reclined on a couch” (200), wearing yards of drapery that still manage to constitute “insufficient raiment” (200). In the same letter, Mrs. Bretton takes an attitude toward Graham that is similar to M. Paul’s attitude toward Lucy: Mrs. Bretton says that “he needs keeping in order, and correcting, and repressing” (272), while M. Paul chastises Lucy for what he sees as her rebellious vivacity and her disorderly freedoms of conduct. “This idea of ‘keeping down,’” Lucy says, “never left M. Paul’s head; the most habitual subjugation would, in my case, have failed to relieve him of it” (363). Both Graham and Lucy through him are associated with the Cleopatra, whose excess of flesh and disorderliness Lucy criticizes; this brief scene sets up unexpected connections among the three figures. Mrs. Bretton’s dressing Graham in the turban is only one moment when identities and gendered attributes slide into each other.

Lucy’s performance in the vaudeville provides a far more important example of this, as it marks her own adoption of traditionally masculine traits, especially in relation to artistic expression. When M. Paul forces Lucy into acting the part of a fop in the dramatic production of the school’s annual fête, she is reluctant to don male attire: “I had

consented to take a man's name and part; as to his dress—*halte là!* No. I would keep my own dress; come what might" (138). Instead, Lucy creates her own costume, a mixture of male and female attire. She keeps her "woman's garb" (139), the "gown of shadow" she had made for the festival (131), but adds "a little vest, a collar, a cravat, and a paletot of small dimensions" (139). Her performance is also hybrid. Lucy's character in the production is a "butterfly, talker, and traitor" meant to act as a foil to the protagonist, "a good and gallant but unpolished man" (134), and to lose to him in the competition for the heart of Ginevra's character. Lucy, seeing Dr. John as similar to the part of the "sincere lover" (141), changes her role to rival him on stage. Together, Lucy and Ginevra alter the play: "Ginevra seconded me; between us we half-changed the nature of the *rôle*, gilding it from top to toe" (141). Lucy woos Ginevra as a male character in both male and female attire, representing the foppish de Hamal and yet enacting Lucy's own desire to punish Dr. John, and perhaps also her desire for her constant companion, the "fascinatingly pretty" Ginevra (138). "I new not what possessed me," says Lucy, "but somehow, my longing was to eclipse the 'Ours:' *i.e.*, Dr. John" (141). Genders, sexual desires, and identities mix freely in this scene.

Lucy's own cross-dressed performance is paralleled by de Hamal's. De Hamal's disguise as the nun breaks as many expectations about gender as Lucy's vaudeville performance does.⁶ Not only is he a man where a woman would be expected, but also he is a womanish man where a womanizing rake would be expected. Lucy's first disparaging description of de Hamal emphasizes his effeminacy:

⁶ See Christina Crosby 707-10 for the fullest treatment of the way that de Hamal's doubling of Lucy "set[s] in motion the presumably fixed terms of the sexual antithesis" (703).

He was a straight-nosed, very correct-featured, little dandy. I say *little* dandy, though he was not beneath the middle standard in stature; but his lineaments were small, and so were his hands and feet; and he was pretty and smooth, and as trim as a doll: so nicely dressed, so nicely curled, so booted and gloved and cravated—he was charming indeed. (146-47)

This “refined gentleman of superior taste and tact” replaces the heroic ardent lover who scales the convent walls in Victorian paintings to rescue the fair young novice from her loveless life (205). Yet, in de Hamal’s elopement with Ginevra from the erstwhile convent, even these roles are reversed: he is the nun, and Ginevra, far from leading a buried conventual life, is a social butterfly. De Hamal’s cross-dressing in a character similar to the repressed Lucy also connects him with Lucy’s cross-dressing in a character similar to the foppish de Hamal. As Christina Crosby points out, de Hamal’s social crimes in disguising himself as a nun are twofold and are shared by Lucy in her vaudeville performance: they are crimes of “assuming the dress of the opposite sex and of courting one of the Madame Beck’s girls within the pensionnat itself” (707). That the girl that is wooed is the same in both cases only increases the odd (or queer) similarity between Lucy and de Hamal.

De Hamal’s plot to elope with Ginevra also repeats, but with a difference, Raymond’s plot to elope with Agnes in *The Monk*. The situation is similar: the couple plans to take advantage of the legend of a ghostly nun in order to rendezvous with each other. The plot reference to an earlier gothic narrative reinforces the gender reversals of de Hamal’s disguise: instead of the woman dressing as a nun to flee the enclosing structure, de Hamal dresses as a nun in order to break into it. The Bleeding Nun does not

suddenly appear to cut short the proceedings and haunt the bedside of the stricken lover, but the spectral nun does haunt Lucy's bed. When Lucy sees the nun costume in her bed, it is sexually threatening: "What dark, usurping shape, supine, long, and strange? Is it a robber who has made his way through the open street-door, and lies there in wait?" (470). Though only the empty habit now lies in Lucy's bed, the sense of sexual menace is justified in the nun's earlier appearances. It is, after all, a masked man who faces Lucy in an "obscure alley" at night and who smokes a phallic cigar in the dark attic (297), surrounded by women's clothing.

What does it mean, then, that Lucy is identified with the nun that is performed by an ambiguously gendered man? De Hamal's performances as the nun highlight Lucy's own questioning of gender roles, a questioning that is suggested by her theatrical performance, by her observations of others, and by details like her determination to keep the cigar case she wins at the concert. The nun, then, does not merely signal Lucy's repressed passivity in a lonely existence at the Rue Fossette, where she longs for love like one of the romantic, tragic nuns so popular in Victorian art. It also signals Lucy's determination to exercise her own agency in actively seeking roles that may transgress or combine societal and gender norms for behavior. This transgression culminates in Lucy's carving out for herself a male-coded role in independently running her own school and participating in both intellectual and professional spheres of existence. It is also connected to Lucy's role as an artist, a role that the text sets up as transgressive in itself.

3. The Nun and the Female Artist

Lucy's vaudeville performance does not just indicate her affinity for pushing the bounds of gender roles. It also taps into her ardent desire for self-expression. She begins

“[c]old, reluctant, apprehensive” as she acts “to please another” (141), but soon “warming, becoming interested, taking courage, I acted to please myself” (141). The performance opens the door to a form of artistic expression that Lucy finds dangerous and tells us she rejects:

A keen relish for dramatic expression had revealed itself as a part of my nature; to cherish and exercise this new-found faculty might gift me with a world of delight, but it would not do for a mere looker-on at life: the strength and longing must be put by; and I put them by, and fastened them in with the lock of a resolution that which neither Time nor Temptation has since picked. (141)

During her correspondence with Graham, Lucy writes two versions of her replies, one bursting with passion and warmth and one cold and terse; she destroys the first and sends the second. She here similarly suppresses the threatening delight and expressive warmth of her artistic performance. It removes her from the role she constantly reminds her readers she has chosen to perform, that of a “mere looker-on at life.” Yet despite this assertion of a position of passive observation, Lucy knows that she is in a sense always on stage, and she knows that she is constantly misinterpreted: “What contradictory attributes of character we sometimes find ascribed to us, according to the eye with which we are viewed!” she exclaims (301), and then lists the roles in which others see her. Madame Beck sees her as “learned and blue”; Ginevra as “caustic, ironic, and cynical”; Mr. Home as “the pink and pattern of governess-correctness”; and M. Paul as “rash and fiery” (301). “I smiled at them all” (301), says Lucy. Graham sees Lucy as “an inoffensive shadow” (317). When he tries to make her his go-between to Paulina, Lucy

realizes “his entire misapprehension” of her “character and nature” and says that Graham “wanted always to give me a rôle not my own” (318). Lucy rejects the role that Graham gives her, just as throughout the novel she works to reject the roles that society would confine her to as a woman.

Lucy finds a power in theatrical performance and yet she discards the activity. She also expresses ambivalence when she is confronted with the actress Vashti, who besides Lucy herself is the strongest figure of a female artist in the novel. When she attends the theater with Graham, Lucy is strongly moved by the performance of the famous actress. The Vashti is based on the historical Rachel Félix, a French actress who mesmerized London audiences with the power of her performances.⁷ Brontë saw her in London in 1851, and wrote of the experience to Amelia Taylor: “I have seen Rachel—her acting was something apart from any other acting it has come in my way to witness—her soul was in it—and a strange soul she has—I shall not discuss it” (*Letters* 634). She later writes that Rachel is “I know not what, I think a demon” (*Letters* 652). If Lucy is not quite a man and not quite a woman when she is onstage, the Vashti is not quite human:

For awhile—a long while—I thought it was only a woman, though a unique woman, who moved in might and grace before this multitude. By-and-by I recognized my mistake. Behold! I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. (257)

Lucy recognizes the power of the actress’s art and is deeply moved by it, saying that it was “a marvelous sight: a mighty revelation” (258). Yet, as with the revelation of Lucy’s own acting talent, Lucy shies away from it: “It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral”

⁷ John Stokes provides an overview of novelistic responses to Rachel Félix, who was immensely popular on the London stage from 1841-55 (771).

(258). It is a spectacle, perhaps, in which Lucy recognizes herself: the nun's appearance in a spark of fire just before Lucy's trip to the theatre indicates not only the Vashti's fiery performance, but also Lucy's own. After the vaudeville, M. Paul connects Lucy's performance with the heat of her inner nature. Her "passionate ardour for triumph" is revealed in her performance, he says: "What fire shot into the glance! Not mere light, but flame" (155). The flame of Lucy's nature sets the theatre on fire as much as the Vashti's does.

At various points in *Villette*, Lucy realizes that the expression of her own strange soul could expose her to criticism because she is a woman. Graham, unlike Lucy, is not moved by the Vashti's performance. He looks at her "not with wonder, nor worship, nor yet dismay, but simply with intense curiosity" (259). Lucy discovers that Graham "judged her as a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgment" (260). Brontë objected to George Henry Lewes's similar judgment of her own work in a review of *Shirley*. She wrote to him, "after I had said earnestly that I wished critics would judge me as an author not as a woman, you so roughly—I even thought—so cruelly handled the question of sex" (*Letters* 332-33). Brontë, of course, performed a kind of literary cross-dressing: she published *Jane Eyre* under the pseudonym "Currer Bell," and, though her gender had been revealed by the time of the publication of *Villette*, Brontë retained the androgynous pen name. As George Eliot writes, Brontë does not wear clothing as "voluptuous" as the notorious cross-dressing writer George Sand (91); Brontë's cross-dressing is on the page, not on her body. Yet, like George Sand and George Eliot, Currer Bell writes to be judged not as a woman, but as an artist.

Perhaps Lucy locks up her delight in theatrics in part so that she will not receive a branding judgment from men like Graham. Yet, Lucy's formation of herself through scholarship also opens her to criticism by men. M. Paul, while rigorously educating Lucy, simultaneously chides her for her "pride of intellect" (351): "I was vaguely threatened with, I know not what doom, if I ever trespassed the limits proper to my sex, and conceived a contraband appetite for unfeminine knowledge" (351). M. Paul tells Lucy that "women of intellect" are "a sort of 'lusus naturae,' a luckless accident, a thing for which there is neither place nor use in creation, wanted neither as wife nor worker" (354). When M. Paul again forces Lucy into an impromptu performance that unleashes her artistic powers, Lucy uses her fiery essay on Human Justice to lash out at the two men who had insulted her on her first night in Villette. Here, her anger matters more to her than repressing herself or avoiding criticism. She waits for "no comment" when she leaves the men with her essay (402).

It is thus in some ways fitting that the nun associated with Lucy should turn out to hide a man who has feminine attributes. She is a woman who claims masculine attributes, through the intellectual pursuits that M. Paul calls unfeminine, and through determination to make her way independently in the world, observing rather than merely being observed. The nun's gender ambiguity thus relates to Lucy's concerns about the female artist and the female intellectual. The manner of the nun's appearances also seems connected to these concerns. The nun is thought to haunt the same attic where Lucy is locked to rehearse for the drama, and it later appears to her there just before she visits the theater to see the Vashti. The school's legend runs that the nun occasionally emerges from behind "an old russet curtain" in the garret (135). The red curtain recalls a similar

motif in *Jane Eyre*, associated there with the powers of the imagination. The young Jane sits behind the “red moreen curtain” of the window-seat to separate herself from the world through aesthetic and intellectual pursuits as she reads Bewick’s *History of British Birds* (39), and she is locked in the terrifying red room, where she, like Lucy, fears the ghosts of her imagination. That the nun appears in an attic is also significant, of course, partly in relation to Lucy’s questioning of her sanity—the garret appearances of the nun make Lucy seem like a madwoman in an attic—but also partly in relation to the attic’s association with the uncontrollable inner female self, the same self that Lucy fears to expose to the world. The nun is thus associated not only with Lucy’s romantic and sexual emotions, but also with her concerns about the way independent women are perceived and the way that the imagination transcends gender.

4. Lucy’s Independence

In this way, Lucy’s identification with the nun, her inheritance of the nun’s habit, is one indicator of her progress toward the not entirely feminine artistic and economic independence she eventually attains. In reading Lucy as ultimately achieving a self-assertive independence that combines artistic expression with economic security, I differ from those who would see Lucy as a perpetual victim, finally defeated with the apparent death of her second-choice lover. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who call the novel “perhaps the most terrifying account of female deprivation ever written,” see Lucy as “defeated from the start,” the culmination of the “progression of deterioration in spirit and exuberance” in Brontë’s heroines (400). It is possible to read the conclusion as Lucy’s spiritless submission to a final defeat, of course—to say that, with M. Paul’s seeming loss at sea, Lucy faces a forlorn and loveless life of the solitude and deprivation

she has always known. But the story of *Villette* does not end where the plot concludes. Lucy, the narrator who speaks to us with hair “white under a white cap, like snow beneath snow” (45), is not the same as Lucy the hopeful bride. The narrator is a Lucy who can relate her past with poignancy and wit, and who has come to terms with that past. She is a Lucy who has not left Graham’s letters buried and who now reads them with a less partial eye than she once did: “I read them in after years” (253), Lucy says, “they were kind letters enough,” mellowed to a “mild quality” by time (253). Most importantly, she is a Lucy who, despite what she tells the reader, has certainly unlocked her theatrical delight in self-expression: the narrative she composes, with its passion and self-abnegation and tantalizing unreliability, is Lucy’s dramatic production, and Lucy the narrator is the star performer, baring her strange soul to her readers. This Lucy is not defeated. This Lucy, I would argue, is not unfulfilled.

Lucy’s identification with the nun points toward her embrace of this dramatic, artistic, self-expression that breaks the bounds of feminine decorum and that unleashes her repressed emotions and uncanny imagination. After Lucy visits a confessional in an attempt to break the conventual solitude of her long vacation at the pensionnat, she imagines two possible paths for her life: had she returned to the priest and allowed him to convince her of the kindness of Catholicism, she says that she “might just now, instead of writing this heretic narrative, be counting my beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent on the Boulevard of Crécy in Villette” (163). Yet, in writing her heretic narrative, Lucy does adopt some of the attributes of the nun that haunts her and that she could literally have become—she performs a defeminized identity as an artist and an intellectual. At the same time, Lucy’s involvement in the onetime convent of Madame

Beck's school, and her final position as a woman of intellect situated outside the bounds of marriage, but not of the male working sphere, makes her independence in her own school seem nun-like as well. Like Madame Beck, Lucy founds her own pensionnat. She is the directress, not the novice, in her own convent. In this way, even before the novel's solemn-sounding conclusion, Lucy achieves fulfillment through an economic independence that is based on her intellectual activity. There, in not just a room but also a role of her own, Lucy is in control and is beholden to no one, especially if M. Paul is lost at sea.

In running the school at the Faubourg Clotilde, Lucy brings to fruition a long-held ambition, one that seems as important to her as her desire to be loved. When Lucy buries her letters from Graham, she is thinking about more than just her luckless passion for him, as she later reveals. As her time at the Rue Fossette goes on, Lucy elaborates plans to further her independence. One afternoon, walking in the nun's alley and wondering if the nun will appear, Lucy considers these plans:

I paced up and down, thinking almost the same thoughts I had pondered that night when I buried my glass jar—how I should make some advance in life, take another step toward an independent position; for this train of reflection, thought not lately pursued, had never by me been wholly abandoned; and whenever a certain eye was averted from me, and a certain countenance grew dark with unkindness and injustice, into that track of speculation did I at once strike; so that, little by little, I had laid half a plan. (360-61)

The eye and the countenance belong to M. Paul, Lucy's despotic, variable instructor. Her plans for staking her own claim to an independent life do not begin with his displeasure, though. When Lucy buries the letters, she is not concerned with M. Paul, but she does experience a feeling similar to that which led her to leave her hometown and seek employment in new environments. After the impromptu epistolary funeral, Lucy tells us, "I felt then as I had a year ago in England" as she watched the aurora borealis (296). She is "not happy, far otherwise, but strong with a reinforced strength" as she plans how she will take the next step toward an independent position in life (296). The night that she saw the aurora borealis, soon after Miss Marchmont's death, Lucy experiences a similar feeling of strength: "Some new power it seemed to bring. I drew in energy with the keen, low breeze that blew on its path. A bold thought was sent to my mind; my mind was made strong to receive it" (44). Acting on that bold thought, Lucy travels to London and then to Labassecour, where she finds a position at Madame Beck's school. When Lucy buries the letters from Graham, the nun's appearance follows directly on her feeling of strength and her plans to take a new step toward independence; the nun's appearance seems called for by the intensity of those feelings as much as by Lucy's emotions of unrequited love. The nun is thus evoked as much by Lucy's determination to actively define for herself her own role in life as it is by her repression.

As this might suggest, Lucy's experiences in the convent-like pensionnat are not all oppressive. Like *The Italian's* Ellena in the Santa della Pietà convent, Lucy finds a refuge in the pensionnat. Madame Beck's offer of employment means that Lucy is not forced out again onto the night streets of Vilette, to be accosted as a streetwalking prostitute by menacing men. It also means that, in a community of women—and one man

who “would flash through our conventual darkness a reflex of a brighter world” (327)—Lucy has the opportunity to exercise her mind and define her roles outside of the customary ones of wife or lover or even paid companion. Once she moves from the nursery to the classroom, Lucy has the satisfaction of an active, varied life:

My time was now well and profitably filled up. What with teaching others and studying closely myself, I had hardly a spare moment. It was pleasant. I felt I was getting on; not the stagnant prey of mould and rust, but polishing my faculties and whetting them to a keen edge with constant use. Experience of a certain kind lay before me, on no narrow scale. (82)

Lucy values her intellectual pursuits, even if they are not womanly: “Whatever my powers—feminine or the contrary—God had given them, and I felt resolute to be ashamed of no faculty of His bestowal” (352). Lucy also values the social self-determination she can claim as a teacher. Despite the surveillance and the restraint of Madame Beck’s pensionnat, Lucy unhesitatingly chooses to remain there when Paulina offers her a position as her companion. Mr. Home offers Lucy three times what she is paid at the Rue Fossette, but Lucy tells her readers that she would have declined even if she were poorer and had a “more stunted narrowness of future prospect” (298). “I had not that vocation,” Lucy says: “Rather than be a companion, I would have made shirts, and starved” (298). She values her liberty, and at times her solitude, saying that the shadowlike nature she chooses to display does not make her a “bright lady’s shadow” (298). Lucy claims her “dimness and depression must both be voluntary—such as kept me docile at my desk ” or “alone, at my own bedside” or “in the alley and seat which were called mine” in the convent garden where Lucy engages in introspection (298).

Lucy's position as a teacher in Madame Beck's pensionnat allows her a kind of intellectual and personal freedom that she would not have as a companion, or as a wife.

Lucy's freedom only increases when she establishes her own school. This is the plan that Lucy formulates when she buries the letters under the pear tree and when she paces the pensionnat's garden alley: after saving a thousand francs, she will rent a house and set up a class, following the model of Madame Beck's successful establishment of her own large and prosperous school from "no higher a starting-point" (361). As it turns out, M. Paul facilitates Lucy's plan. He rents a house for her and finds her first pupils. On the eve of his departure, when M. Paul shows Lucy the house at the Faubourg Clotilde and reveals what he has done for her, she responds much more excitedly to the news that she is the directress of a school than to his proposal of marriage. The sight of the prospectuses with her name on them throws her into such an agitated state that the moment is "wildered and whirling, dim as a wheel fast spun" in her memory (486), and the first thing she can recall is, she says,

the consciousness that I was speaking very fast, repeating over and over again:--

"Did you do this, M. Paul? Is this your house? Did you furnish it? Did you get these papers printed? Do you mean me? Am I the directress? Is there another Lucy Snowe? Tell me: say something." (486)

When M. Paul asks Lucy to share his life, this agitation is absent. The reader gets a section break and an expository description of the walk back to the Rue Fossette.

Lucy runs the school for the three years between M. Paul's departure and his projected return: "Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life," she tells us

(493). She is able to be happy and fulfilled without M. Paul's presence. She is fully occupied in expanding the business of the school, which she successfully does. Lucy inherits money from a relative of Mrs. Marchmont, turns her day-school into a boarding school, and lives in a haze of hope in which "few things had importance to vex, intimidate, or depress" her (494). Unlike Ellena in her convent, Lucy in her pensionnat finds a way of existing actively in the world and in society, infringing on the male sphere of public occupation yet independently enclosing herself in the female community of her school. As an independent single woman of business and of intellect, Lucy challenges the Victorian idea that every woman must be cared for by a man and must belong to a man. Lucy's activity and independence make her more similar to the sisters of the Anglo-Catholic orders that sprang up in England in the 1840s and later than to the cloistered, immured nuns of anti-Catholic legends.⁸ These orders were active and mission-oriented rather than contemplative and cloistered. They were attractive to women for the quality of training they provided, and some consider them to have been "in advance of the general development of a professional life for women" (O'Brien 115). Lucy, an unmarried professional instructor who follows her own intellectual pursuits, creates a space for herself like that of these nuns, separate from society and its patriarchal rules, and yet active within it.

Of course, *Villette's* famously ambiguous ending leaves Lucy's fate open to interpretation. Does Lucy fall into despair after her happy three years, having defined herself in relation to M. Paul's love and placed all her hopes for future happiness in him? Conversely, if M. Paul returns, are the previous three years the happiest of Lucy's life

⁸ On Anglo-Catholic nuns and their work in nineteenth-century England, see Susan O'Brien.

because she finds that she is, after all, less satisfied under his domineering control than she is on her own? My sense is that Lucy, always strong with reinforced strength, relishes her independence and finds fulfillment in her work and, at least eventually, in her art. The heightened haze of happiness she experiences while waiting for M. Paul may be gone, but perhaps she finds something more enduring instead. However, that may be only the hope of a sunny imagination. Lucy the narrator resolutely does not reveal what happens between the close of the plot and the time from which she narrates, any more than she reveals the events of her childhood. Like the novice in *Convent Thoughts*, Lucy remains inscrutable in the end, withholding from her readers her thoughts on her isolated yet possibly liberating role in life.

Brontë's introspective post-gothic novel goes further than standard gothic works such as *The Monk* or *The Italian* in questioning the bounds placed on women by the supposedly natural constraints of their femininity. The figure of the nun in *Villette* works in some expected ways, drawing on traditional ideas about nuns to emphasize the deprivations imposed on women, like those supposedly suffered by chaste, walled-up nuns or romantically tragic women who turn to the convent for the consolation of a pale imitation of life. The nun also, less centrally in the plot but perhaps more importantly to its outcome, connects to Brontë's gothic destabilization of gender through doubling, scenes of performance, and cross-dressing; that questioning of gender roles also relates to gendered perceptions of the female artist. Lucy, whose identity is connected to the nun's, finds a role for herself that is not traditionally feminine. As a professional and an artist in her own independent establishment, Lucy inherits the more liberating possibilities of the role of the nun who runs cross-grained to society: she defies patriarchal expectations of

feminine submissiveness and dependence on men, finds her own fulfillment in intellectual pursuits, and aesthetically explores her soul.

Conclusion

As I wrote this thesis, a print of *Convent Thoughts* hung beside my desk. It is clear why this painting held such an attraction for me at a time when I was deciding to devote myself to academia: as a literary scholar, I, like the novice in the painting, stand with book in hand, contemplating passion. My own questioning of the combined restraint and liberation inherent in such a role leads me to believe that the polyvalent figure of the nun may be applicable to many explorations of female identity. Here, I have attempted to show such exploration and questioning at work in the use of the nun figure in *The Monk*, *The Italian*, and *Villette*.

I have only skimmed the surface of the possible significances of nuns and convents in gothic novels. Many related areas of interest deserve in-depth exploration. I have at times suggested that anti-Catholicism works in the exploration of women's roles through the nuns in gothic novels. In *The Monk*, the condemnation of the nuns' sexual excesses contributes to and is influenced by the novel's condemnation of Catholic excesses; in *Villette*, Lucy's oppression under patriarchy is imaged in her oppression in the Catholic pensionnat. I do not investigate, though, the changing attitudes toward Catholicism in England, especially with the advent of the Oxford movement, and the way that such shifts in perception influence portrayals of nuns. It would also be valuable to explore the ways in which the English literary use of nuns to explore questions of female transgression and self-definition may simultaneously work to feminize Catholicism; the exploration of gender identity through anti-Catholic images is also an exploration of religious and philosophical, as well as national, identity through gendered images.

I have also hinted throughout that the convent in the gothic novel may be associated with transgressive sexual, as well as social, roles for women. The convent as a space of resistance to heteronormativity is a topic that merits further investigation in the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century treatments of female sexuality. The relationship between the convent and the ideal female community is another topic that could fruitfully receive much more exploration.

Moreover, though I look at the convent or the convent-like pensionnat as a place of artistic or intellectual fulfillment for women in the chapters on *The Italian* and *Villette*, this is an aspect of the convent's liberating possibilities for women that plays into eighteenth- and nineteenth-century treatments of nuns and convents, including in the gothic, and that deserves a much fuller exploration than I have provided. The convent is historically not only an alternative to marriage, but also an option for education and scholarly activity for women. Hildegard von Bingen, Heloise, Julian of Norwich, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: such women found in the convent a space for literary and intellectual pursuits. The societal denunciation of such roles for women could contribute to the negative treatment of nuns and convents in some works, or to negative reactions to works that may celebrate the liberating aspects of convent life for women.

For example, an 1851 *Punch* lampoon of *Convent Thoughts*, "Punch among the Painters," laments the novice's rejection of the roles of wife and mother, but it also mocks her apparent intellectual engagement within the convent. The passion flower the novice holds could represent the anti-conventual passion of MPs Richard Spooner, H. E. Lacy, and Henry Drummond, all political figures involved in activism against the resurgence of convents in England, the author says, but it could also symbolize

the passion that the young lady is in with herself, at having shut up a heart and life capable of love and charity, and good works and wifely and motherly affections and duties, within that brick wall at her back—whether the flower regarded, and the book turned aside, are meant to imply that the life of nature is a better study than the legend of a saint, and that, therefore, the nun makes a mistake when she shuts herself up in her cloister, we are not sufficiently acquainted with MR. COLLINS’S ways of thinking to say. By the size of the lady’s head he no doubt meant to imply her vast capacity of brains—while by the utter absence of form and limb under the robe, he subtly conveys that she has given up all thoughts of making a figure in the world. (219)

This reaction to Collins’s painting raises many of the issues that are at work in the presentation of nuns in gothic novels and in the wider English culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The rejection of “wifely and motherly affections and duties” is seen as a waste; the nun is tragic in her self-denial and her loss of the “life of nature”; the nun is desexualized through her chastity and her separation from the outer world (in which, apparently, the only way for a woman to cut a figure is through the exploitation of her female figure). In this *Punch* article, that desexualization or defeminization also seems connected to the novice’s overlarge head—like M. Paul in *Villette*, who tells Lucy that her studies are unfeminine, the author of “Punch among the Painters” sees a life of study, whether of nature or of saints, as no life for a woman.

In considering ways that the presentation of nuns in gothic novels interacts with the transgression of normative roles for women, the influence of anti-Catholicism on such

treatments and the liberating social and sexual possibilities of the convent as a female community deserve to be further considered, as does the convent as a place of intellectual activity for women. Such considerations are still relevant in a society where gender roles continue to be imposed and enforced. Today, sexual, social, or professional deviations from societal expectations for gendered behavior are still often greeted with disapproval; the constriction of the female roles transgressed by nuns in the gothic novel is not as inapplicable to women in the modern day as we might like to think.

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