

國立政治大學英國語文學系碩士論文

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中華民國一〇八年七月

July 2019

THE DOOR IN MATTHEW LEWIS'S *THE MONK*

A Master Thesis

Presented to

Department of English



by

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July 2019

To Dr. Yih-Dau Wu



Acknowledgements

Over the period of time it has taken me to accomplish this work, a number of people have been critical to my learning process. First and foremost, my deepest gratitude is to my supervisor, Dr. Yih-Dau Wu, who truly guided me with expertise and patience. He was there when it all began and helped me to navigate the way. I was extremely fortunate to find such an excellent dissertation advisor, who gave me much encouragement throughout the course of my research. He would enlighten me whenever I was heading in the wrong direction (or even getting the wrong end of the stick). I always felt that I was in the very best hands. He was always patient enough to help me solve my problems and judicious in proffering writing advice, and I appreciate that he always set deadlines for me, cared about my progress, challenged me during each discussion, and gave me suggestions during face-to-face meetings or via e-mail correspondence. I owe thanks to his tireless efforts really. I would also like to thank him particularly for his inspiration and his attention to the details of my writing. I cannot imagine how much time and effort he spent on meticulously commenting on my drafts. This dissertation would not have been realised without Dr. Wu's unflagging support of course. I have learned so much from him and I cannot thank him enough for helping me revise and ensure this dissertation comes to fruition.

Moreover, I am immensely grateful to my committee. I would like to thank Dr. Ya-feng Wu and Dr. Carol L. Yang in particular for giving me many ideas and helpful suggestions during the viva. Their thoughtful feedback and professional advice really guided me in improving this dissertation. I offer gratitude to them for their editorial eyes and truly wise and skilled council. Their oral feedback and annotation on my drafts were vital to the process of polishing this dissertation. Their precision and insight helped shape this work.

My humble gratitude also goes to the entire staff of NCCU English department. I am thankful to NCCU English department for helping me grow intellectually throughout the years and for providing me with fundamental training in English and American literature. Most of the professors have been so supportive and attentive in helping me improve my writing and critical thinking skills, and my sincere gratitude goes to those past mentors who have taught me during both my undergraduate and

postgraduate years. Additionally, I offer thanks especially to TA Jennifer Chang. She was always there to lend me a hand whenever I encountered bureaucratic impediment. Thanks also go to my fellow classmates at NCCU, particularly Yung Ling Peng, who has always shared her interesting life experiences with me. I would like to thank Sophie Su, Alice Ming-fang Cheng and Tank Tan-hsin Tsai, too, for giving me friendly advice whenever I felt muddle-headed. Special friends who accompanied me on this journey are my two best university friends, Nick Hsiao and Rita Wang. Despite our parting ways after graduation, they never failed to encourage me, amuse me with inside jokes, or offer me support when I was feeling sluggish.

Finally, I want to thank my family. My parents support me financially and always encourage me to stick to the end. Also, whenever I saw my brother occupied with writing journal articles and noticed his hectic schedule of running in and out of lab, I felt strangely motivated too. I thank my family for their love and undying support. I appreciate that they always pushed me forward towards completion of this dissertation.

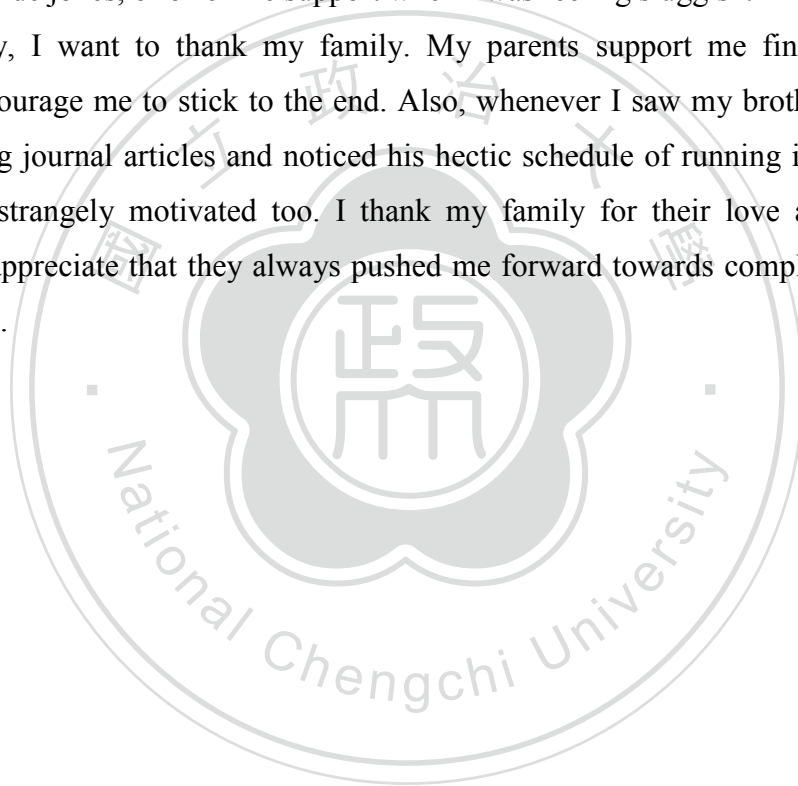
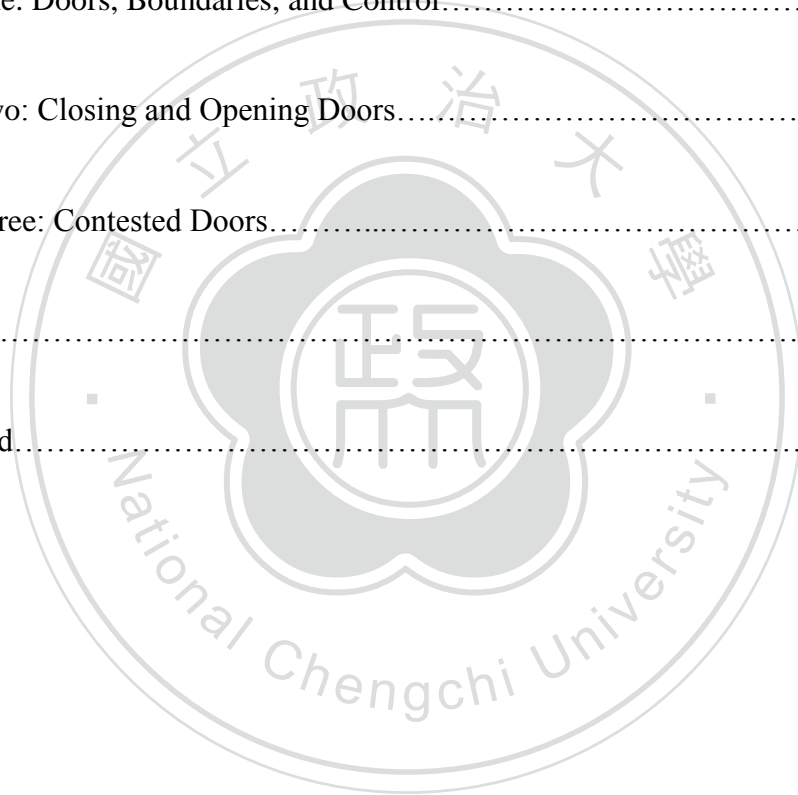


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Abstract

A door is a common object in daily life, so much so that its significance is not immediately obvious to us. This probably explains why, as far as I know, no scholars of Gothic fiction have ever scrutinised the role doors play in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, even though this novel obsessively draws readers' attention to them. This dissertation seeks to rectify this critical oversight and to explain why we need to pay attention to doors in *The Monk*.

The first chapter of this dissertation explores the issues of boundaries and control that the existence of a door necessarily brings about. I use the examples of Elvira's door and the door of the church of Capuchins to show how protection can shade into tyranny. Chapter two tries to revise Mark Madoff's view that spaces in Gothic novels tend to fall into two distinct categories: the inside and the outside. Examining the acts of opening and closing doors in *The Monk*, I show how the strict spatial dichotomy that Madoff proposes does not stand in Lewis's text. Chapter three asks what happens when the decisions to open/close and to leave/enter a door become controversial. I argue that in *The Monk*, these controversial decisions are often complicated further by the power struggle between men and women. The drama of gender dynamics and self-determination depend largely on doors.

Keywords: Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, doors, control, boundaries, opening and closing doors, gender interactions

國立政治大學英國語文學系碩士班

碩士論文提要

論文名稱：馬修·路易士小說《僧侶》中的門

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論文內容提要：

門是一個日常生活中屢見不鮮的物品，人們常將它的存在視為理所當然，無需特別重視。這也許正是為什麼，雖然馬修·路易士的志異小說《僧侶》中有許許多多對門的描述，但幾乎沒有志異小說學者仔細地評論這些描述，並解釋門在此小說中所扮演的角色。本論文希冀能填補此空白。

本論文第一章探討門、界線與控制間的關係。援引小說中的家門與教堂的門作例子，本章亦分析善意保護與嚴苛控制間的對話。馬克·麥道夫指出志異小說當中裡外空間的對立。本論文第二章試圖修正此二元對立的觀點。藉由小說中對開門與關門的描述，我們可以窺見路易士如何模糊裡與外的界線。在《僧侶》中，門是開與關，出與入的選擇所聚焦的地方。第三章分析路易士如何透過這些備具爭議性的選擇來探究兩性互動與自主的議題。

關鍵字：馬修·路易士、《僧侶》、門、控制、界線、開門關門、性別互動

Introduction

Since the emergence of the first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, in 1764, chilling myths and stories have never ceased to fascinate the public. In novels, movies, TV series, or other forms of popular literature today, the theme of horror is still prevalent and familiar to many. Essentially, Gothic literature is seen as the antecedent to the contemporary horror. From being marginalised to becoming canonised, the legacy of early Gothic writers beckons us to explore. To be more exact, only by examining the roots can we better understand or further question the influence of such literary heritage.

Gothic fiction flourished in the 1790s and early 1800s. Early Gothic novels can be traced back to Horace Walpole's *The Castle Of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797), as well as Matthew G. Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). What is worth noting is the achievement of the last example. With its lurid content and preoccupation with overly dark subject matters, *The Monk* was regarded as highly scandalous at the time, so much so that its publication in effect attracted controversy and was followed by general condemnation of its obscenity. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was particularly disturbed by the novel. Coleridge not only criticised the fact that the author of *The Monk* was actually an MP (and therefore set the worst example ever) but also lambasted the publication of Lewis's *The Monk* as some kind of pollution to the literary market due to its very mixed nature (Hogle 8). Jerrold Hogle offers a succinct account of this point.

By 1797, when Samuel Taylor Coleridge reviewed Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), for many the archetype of the horror Gothic then and since [...Gothic fiction] has become associated with both an oxymoronic, class-mixing style ("phrases the most trite and colloquial" applied to exalted subjects requiring "sternness and solemnity of diction") and a "level[ing]" of "all events...into one common mass" where events from different spheres of existence "become almost equally probable" [. . .] The Gothic has thus become the subject of intense debate, which continues today, over its blurring of metaphysical, natural,

religious, class, economic marketing, generic, stylistic, and moral lines (Hogle 8).

If Gothic fiction specialises in erasing boundaries in various kinds, *The Monk* should be seen as a Gothic novel *par excellence*. As I shall show in my dissertation, the door in this novel underlines the existence of blurred boundaries, especially those between the inside and outside, between the powerful and the powerless.

The Monk is a quintessential Gothic novel in another way. As Fred Botting has aptly observed in his book, *Gothic*: “Gothic signifies a writing of excess. It appears in the awful obscurity that haunted eighteenth-century rationality and morality” (1). The world under Lewis’s pen is indeed a world of excess, and my research will focus on his excessive use of the door imagery in particular. Preliminary findings conducted via searching the keyword of “door” in the text of *The Monk* indicated 171 search results in total, which prompted this research in the first place. Compared to the mere 66 examples of the word “door” in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, a novel that specifically mentions *The Monk* yet deliberately distances itself from the Gothic mode, this number is rather shocking. Such large number evidently suggests how a tangible, erected object—namely a door—can be productively used to create the Gothic imagination.

Literature review

For many scholars, Gothic fiction is a highly conventional genre and Gothic conventions can be easily recognised. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick singles out these conventions in her early groundbreaking work, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980). In this key text, Sedgwick identifies many important features of Gothic literature: “an oppressive ruin, a wild landscape, a Catholic or feudal society. You know about the trembling sensibility of the heroine and the impetuosity of her lover. You know about the tyrannical older man with the piercing glance who is going to imprison and try to rape or murder them” (9). According to Sedgwick, Gothic formula can be seen as effective, reliable means to project similar psychological terror onto characters. Her claim that any analysis of Gothic conventions must ultimately ground itself in characterisation and effect is considered a cornerstone of the critical defense of the Gothic as a genre. I agree with Sedgwick on the idea of how certain Gothic tropes may elicit fear in the reader. I will build on her argument that Gothic structures

such as castles, chambers, and tombs can be seen as spaces of isolation. But I will go one step further to argue that doors play an important role in creating an oppressive space characteristic of a Gothic novel.

Another critic who has traced the historical development of the Gothic and its evolution into the genre of horror is David Punter, an eminent scholar in Gothic literary studies. In his now classic *The Literature of Terror* (1980), he provides valuable insights into the literary-historical context within which Gothic works can be explained, drawing on psychoanalytic criticism to further elucidate the ways in which fear is elicited by Gothic works. Likewise, Fred Botting had the formulaic plot and certain tropes in Gothic fiction in mind when he wrote *Gothic* (1996). His work offers a broad historical overview and re-evaluates both ancient and modern Gothic texts. Tracing the origin of Gothic fiction and the transformation of the gothic from the eighteenth century to the modern day, Botting points out the various styles and essential features that define Gothic as a genre. Key elements such as the supernatural, monsters, and mysterious or sublime settings are mentioned. To demonstrate his point, he examines a number of important Gothic texts and discusses them in the context of their respective cultural and historical moments.

Apart from identifying Gothic elements, it is also possible to read Gothic novels through a historical lens. In this light, *The Monk* can be read within the historical context of the French Revolution. Carol Margaret Davison in *Gothic Literature 1764-1824* (2009) examines early British Gothic novels from the socio-historical perspective. She looks at works by Horace Walpole, Matthew Lewis, Ann Radcliffe, William Godwin, and Mary Shelley and identifies key themes in those texts. While the third chapter of this book focuses on the discussion of female Gothic, the fourth chapter primarily deals with male Gothic fiction, as represented by William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*. Davison quotes Marquis de Sade and explains the profound impact of revolutionary fervor in the 1790s on the development of Gothic fiction. She also emphasises the historical background of the Inquisition and the French revolution and explains how certain historical events made Gothic fiction flourish in the 1790s. Another little-known aspect of Gothic literature that Davison addresses is the relationship between Gothic aesthetic and German secret societies, which remains underexplored for scholars. According to her, the emergence of secret societies reflects a sense of distrust and conspiracy in that period.

Similarly, Joseph Crawford in his book, *Gothic Fiction and the Invention of*

Terrorism (2013), notes the importance of understanding Gothic novels within their historical context. Crawford argues that early British Gothic novels in effect arise out of the British experience of the French Revolution: “In a very real sense, the Revolution *created* Gothic, transforming a marginal form of historical fiction chiefly concerned with aristocratic legitimacy into a major cultural discourse devoted to the exploration of violence and fear” (x, original emphasis). Crawford further argues that radical writers like William Godwin and Matthew Lewis were influenced by Thomas Paine’s political ideology and saw their gothic romance as a substitute for serious political pamphlets that conveyed anti-aristocratic ideas to the mass population. Even though the French Revolution is not explicitly mentioned in their works, there are episodes that unmistakably allude to it. Europe before and after the French Revolution was in the grip of political fervor and social unrest, and Lewis’s work maps the public fear and cultural anxiety onto his own revolutionary tale. I agree with Crawford on the connections between the French Revolution and Gothic fiction, but I disagree with him on the part where he stresses Lewis’s activism and gothic romance as political propaganda. On the contrary, I see Lewis’s attitude as somewhat ambivalent, if not outright conservative. One strong proof of this point is that by the end of *The Monk*, Lewis demonstrates the catastrophic aftermath of losing control, as shown in the scene of a mob destroying a convent. This scene reproduces the chaos of the Storming of the Bastille, and if *The Monk* can be seen as Lewis’s literary response to the French Revolution, that response is closely related to the obsession with the consequence of losing control. I will elaborate on this point in the second chapter of my dissertation. In particular, I will show how Lewis relies on doors to express his fear of social chaos.

Perhaps more detailed in demonstrating the social-historical approach, however, is Angela Wright’s *Gothic Fiction: A Reader’s Guide to Essential Criticism* (2007), which deftly negotiates its way through varied forms of criticism to analyse Gothic novels. The chapter on the influence of the French Revolution particularly highlights connections between the development of Gothic literature in Britain and the revolutions in France back in the 1790s. Tracing the connotations of the word “gothic” back to the argument between Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft, Wright tells us that, while Burke appropriated gothic language in an open letter to criticise revolutions in France and to justify the old social and political structure in Britain, “gothic” became a derogatory term used by Wollstonecraft to attack Burke’s

conservatism. With this historical reference in mind, one can see that Lewis is not alone in commenting on the political atmosphere of the late eighteenth century through Gothic vocabularies.

Social codes as detected in Lewis's *The Monk* cannot be overlooked, either. Daniel P. Watkins in his essay "Social Hierarchy in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*" (1986) affirms how Lewis's work should be read in terms of social conservatism, for it ultimately ends on a rather conservative note that embraces normalcy and social order. Watkins observes that despite its sensational elements, *The Monk* celebrates the old class system, as evidenced in the happy ending of pairing up aristocratic families and victimising all socially inferior characters. Watkins' insight lies in pointing out that conservatism can lie at the heart of a novel otherwise known for its radically sensational plot. Instead of dwelling on binary oppositions, as Watkins does, I wish to argue in this dissertation that *The Monk* is more interested in merging otherwise polarised ideas, such as the internal and the external, powerful men and weak women. I believe doors in this text provide the key to understanding this merging process.

Another critical branch is to read the Gothic from gender perspective. Sedgwick in her pivotal essay on the veil imagery in Gothic fiction deals with gender politics. In "The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel" (1981), she shows the interconnectedness of aesthetic, textual, and social metaphors of the veil specifically in Lewis's *The Monk* and Radcliffe's *The Italian*. In addition, she proposes to relate the presence of this common object to such various issues as individualism, Gothic landscape, and power struggles of women. Inspired by her paper, I will consider the metaphoric understanding of doors, too. Sedgwick's argument that the veil should be read as an erotic symbol is indeed interesting. Her feminist reading exposes the ways in which female characters may be oppressed in a patriarchy society. In gender terms, it is patriarchy that determines the wearing of veil as a sign of chastity or femininity. Yet I wish to depart from this exclusively feminist reading. For my thesis, I will focus on the door instead of the veil as the dominant visual imagery. While Sedgwick is interested in the purpose of concealment inherent in wearing a veil, I am more interested in the problem of control that the presence of doors brings about.

Yet another way of interpreting Gothic fiction is through queer reading. The intersection of space and gender in Gothic writing is explored in Gero Bauer's *Houses, Secrets, and the Closet: Locating Masculinities from the Gothic Novel to Henry James*

(2016). Bauer approaches both Gothic and sensation novels through the lens of gender and power, suggesting a fundamentally queer element of Gothic narratives. Although its gendered connotations are not totally relevant to the trajectory of my research, Bauer's comment on the closet imagery in Gothic fiction as an essential space for male homosexual secrecy certainly provides food for thought. In *The Monk*, secrets are often hidden behind closed doors. Closed doors in this novel, as I will show in the following chapters, focus readers' attention on such issues as prohibited desires and private selves.

From the perspective of space and objects, Gothic literature can be somewhat reduced to the genre of quasi-detective because critical attention has been paid exclusively to the use of "the locked room." Notably, W. M. Verhoeven argues that the signature locked-room motif in detective fiction actually derives from the gothic locked-trunk motif. In her essay "Opening the Text: The Locked Trunk Motif in Late Eighteenth-Century British and American Gothic Fiction" (1995), she stresses the important feature of locked box/trunk in Gothic works for the advancement of plot, with a detailed analysis of *Caleb Williams*. By the same token, Dorothy Van Ghent's seminal article "The Window Figure and the Two Children Figure in *Wuthering Heights*" (1952) concerns material objects and spatiality in Gothic fiction.

Notably, Mark S. Madoff affirms in "Inside, Outside and the Gothic Locked-Room Mystery" (1989) that the inside/outside spatial metaphor may be manipulated and juxtaposed to create a sense of mystery for both characters in and the reader of Gothic fiction. He also suggests a closer examination of the significant "locked room" setting, which can invite a fresh look on the relationship between detective fiction and Gothic fiction. Not only does the setup of a locked room produce a sense of confinement, but it can also function as a narrative device that conveniently withholds precious information from characters and the reader. What is most important, however, is that Madoff elaborates his idea by categorizing the "inside" as a realm of violence, rupture and terror, the outside as a relatively neat and orderly world in which "sexuality flows regularly into courtship and marriage" (51). Singling out the locked room as a crucial motif, he asserts: "The locked room mystery is characteristic of the Gothic. It nearly is the Gothic" (49). A locked room presupposes the existence of a closed door. What role do closing and opening doors play in *The*

Monk? This is a question that I would examine more thoroughly in chapter two of my dissertation.

“Castle criticism” remains central to the study of early Gothic writing. Norman Holland and Leona Sherman in their article “Gothic Possibilities” (1977) believe that the castle in a Gothic novel may carry different meanings and thus should be viewed as a flexible, fluid space. In other words, they see the castle as a “potential place” and a central image in Gothic novels that connects reality and fantasy (283). While the established critical consensus of the castle as a Gothic trope may seem intriguing, I wish to point out that it does not fully apply to *The Monk*. There is only one single castle in the novel, not to mention that it only shortly appears in a subplot. The main spaces that serve the function of castles in Lewis’s work are actually religious houses (the Capuchins church, monastery, and convent) alongside one domestic household (Elvira’s house). Far from being places of refuge, they are depicted as spaces of rupture, violence, and barbarity that contain horrible crimes and corruption.

Castle criticism tends to view the castle as a staple in Gothic literature and as an embodiment of imprisonment or human psyche. Also musing upon the significance of the castle for Gothic writers, Kate Ferguson Ellis in *The Contested Castle* (1989) investigates the idea of home as presented in Gothic fiction and observes that the Gothic heroine is always engaged in fighting patriarchal society and asserting her own place. In fact, Ellis affirms the distinction between feminine Gothic (Radcliffean) and masculine Gothic (Lewisite) and claims that in both types of Gothic, women are seen locked in and oppressed in the castle/home. Her feminist reading shows that Gothic texts tend to portray the oppression of female victims by patriarchal society and that the castle is a place for female captivity. Notably, Ellis argues that the domestic home, represented by the castle in Gothic novels, is a contested site where women are locked in and men are locked out. Of course, her concern lies in the issue of female agency. She sees Lewis’s heroines, in particular Antonia, as generally oppressed. I observe that this point is potentially mistaken. Ellis’s reading of *The Monk* is termed “The Outsider’s Revenge,” and she focuses mainly on the patriarchal oppressor (Ambrosio) and elaborates on how the naiveté of Antonia (resulting from the maternal control over her life) leads to her passivity, and how that passivity ultimately dooms her to death. I only partially agree with her on this viewpoint. While Elvira, Antonia’s

mother, does exert overt control over her daughter, Antonia is still a female character who knows how to struggle to defend herself.

On the other hand, Ellis singles out Agnes as a character who successfully exerts her own agency to barter for a better life. Probably because Agnes embodies a rebellious woman's sexual appetite, Ellis argues that Agnes is an active heroine able to direct the course of her life. This observation is problematic, too. Arguing against Ellis's observations, chapter three of my dissertation will show that the reverse is true.

Chapter plan

This thesis will comprise three sections. The first chapter, "Doors, Boundaries and Control" will discuss the door as an object steeped in the problem of social control. Doors can be seen as visual apparatuses that bespeak limits and rules, and I seek to point out the interchangeable meanings of door, control, and boundary in *The Monk*. In fact, these three words can converge to show the social structures that govern human behaviour. Chapter one begins by associating doors with boundary building. I will examine two doors in particular: Elvira's door and the door of the Capuchins church, to show how doors embody and interrogate the value of social control.

The second chapter, "Closing and Opening Doors," will focus on the issue of boundary crossing in relation to the acts of door-opening and door-closing in *The Monk*. Chapter two introduces Madoff's observation of spatial dichotomy in Gothic novels and seeks to complicate his view. *The Monk* is as much about separating the inside from the outside as it is about making these two spaces infiltrate each other. The infiltration is seen most clearly when Lewis dramatises the simple actions of door-closing and door-opening. Drawing on such examples as Ambrosio's secret worship of Virgin Mary in an erotic way behind a closed door, Rosario/Matilda's door-knocking, and the act of door opening that is an integral part of the Bleeding Nun episode, I will demonstrate why Lewis describes closing and opening doors as potentially subversive and how they contribute to the effects of destabilising boundaries in his narrative.

The third chapter, "Contested Doors," will analyse the ways in which Lewis uses doors to dramatises the power dynamics between men and women. Remarkably, the

representation of doors in *The Monk* frequently focuses our attention on physical struggle, and such struggle is expressed most tellingly in how characters in this novel run towards doors or push against them in desperation. Their desperation results from tyrannical oppression and their yearning for freedom. In addition, in *The Monk*, whether or not to open a door often arouses serious debate between a man and a woman. In this sense, doors in this novel can be seen as a contested site for staging the debate on issues such as female self-determination.



Chapter One: Doors, Boundaries and Control

Dorothy Van Ghent's seminal article "The Window Figure and the Two Children Figure in *Wuthering Heights*" (1952) concerns material objects and spatiality in Gothic fiction. In this essay, she discusses the famous ghost scene at the beginning of Brontë's work and singles out the window as a deeper structural layer within the text. Attached to the coffin-like bed which contains all the unknown secrets to Lockwood, the window triggers his worst nightmare and serves the function of both separating and connecting two opposing realities: the dream world and the outer world. Her analysis of the window as a multi-dimensional device—of letting in, letting out, and even seeing through—illustrates how a common object may be a vehicle for reflecting the unconscious mind, or even a site of tension (190-91). Whilst Brontë employs the window imagery to engineer fear, Lewis employs doors to achieve similar effects. But fear in *The Monk* is associated not so much with apparitions as with developing distrust in seemingly benevolent human figures who keep the social order alive. Indeed, it appears that Lewis considers doors, given its non-transparent nature, to be a better medium for creating suspense and horror, not least because doors evoke a sense of alienation or help shield secrets of hypocritical people, or both. Most importantly, however, Lewis interweaves the ideas of the door, boundary, and control, and these elements can converge and resurface time and again to affect the lives of Lewis's characters.

Elvira's Door

In *The Monk*¹ Lewis explores the issue of boundary building through his representation of doors. Essentially an artificial product, doors are designed for one particular purpose: to delineate a certain boundary and to create a sense of control for the door-owner. One notable example illustrating this point is the door of Elvira's house.

Elvira is a social climber in *The Monk*. The daughter of a shoemaker, she defies class distinction and marries a nobleman. Her late husband was the son of the Marquis de las Cisternas, and her husband's aristocratic family fiercely opposed their match.

¹ Hereafter, this novel is referred to as *M*. Quotations from this text will be cited parenthetically with pagination.

Unfortunately, the wrath of her father-in-law at his son's marrying a shoemaker's daughter was so much that Elvira and her husband were forced to abandon their infant son and flee to the Indies. Not only did the couple live in exile for years without any allies or support, but also their son was believed to be murdered in the midst of chaos. Although she remained with her husband all throughout their marriage, her husband was depressed and eventually died in melancholy in a foreign land. This sad history has made Elvira very sensitive to and wary of social boundaries separating different social classes. Therefore, when Lorenzo, the nephew of a Duke, declares his wish to marry her daughter, Elvira insists that he must obtain the consent of his uncle first.

Remarkably, Lewis puts the word "door" into Elvira's mouth when she expresses her conditional acceptance of Lorenzo as her son-in-law. She says: "Should the Duke, your Uncle, give his consent, you need not doubt obtaining mine, and my Daughter's: But without his, hope not for ours [. . .] If the sanction of your Relations authorises your addressing her as your Wife, my Doors fly open to you" (*M* 218). Here Elvira uses the doors of her house to establish two boundaries: the boundaries between strangers and family members and those between upper class and lower class. Elvira is willing to open her doors to Lorenzo and treat him like a family member only when Lorenzo's relatives are willing to erase class distinctions so obvious to their eyes.

What is equally important to notice is that, although Elvira has no power either to sway the mind of Lorenzo's relatives or to erase class distinctions herself, she insists on her power to police the boundary marking strangers from family members. She has the power to shut her door in the face of Lorenzo, as if he is an unwelcome stranger. In other words, she is in full control of the size of her family.

Precisely because Elvira interferes with the love life of her daughter Antonia, her conditional acceptance of Lorenzo should also be read in terms of maternal control. Probably because of her own unhappy romance, Elvira keeps a very close eye on her daughter Antonia. She censors her reading materials and even steps forward to decide who is suitable to be Antonia's husband. Elvira's maternal protection easily shades into tyrannical oppression that throttles her daughter's free will and natural development. For instance, because her mother has carefully chosen what books are available to her, sanitising all "improper" materials along the way, Antonia has little knowledge about the evilness existing in human societies. Furthermore, her trenchantly held stance not only suggests her towering role in the family but also complicates the supposedly romantic affair of Antonia. After all, the mother's conditional offer seems unjustifiable.

She asserts her parental control by verbal manipulation. Elvira's over-protection of her daughter and the consequent disappearance of Antonia's own voice find eloquent expression in how Elvira uses the word "doors". This is best manifested by her phrasing of words: "*my Doors fly open to you*" (M 218; my emphasis). The emphatic use of "my doors" signifies Elvira's tenacious involvement in the situation. In this fashion, the mother's consent *is* the daughter's. The mother's refusal equals that of the daughter. Antonia has zero voice in her own marriage prospect. As if to demonstrate her utmost control of the future of her household, Elvira describes the doors of her house as entirely hers, conveniently forgetting that, because Antonia lives with her, the mother and the daughter in fact share the same doors. By using "my Doors" instead of "our doors," Elvira shows that she has full control both of her house and her daughter, so much so that she needs not consult her daughter before giving her conditional consent to Lorenzo. The boundary between maternal protection and tyrannical control is blurred.

Ambrosio and the Church Door

The first 30 years of the life of Ambrosio, the hero of *The Monk*, exemplifies the tension between timely protection and oppressive control. This tension is dramatised through the door of a church in front of which the infant Ambrosio was left.

The late Superior of the Capuchins found him while yet an Infant at the Abbey door. All attempts to discover who had left him there were vain, and the Child himself could give no account of his Parents. He was educated in the Monastery, where He has remained ever since. He early showed a strong inclination for study and retirement, and as soon as He was of a proper age, He pronounced his vows. No one has ever appeared to claim him, or clear up the mystery which conceals his birth; and the Monks, who find their account in the favour which is shewn to their establishment from respect to him, have not hesitated to publish that He is a present to them from the Virgin. In truth the singular austerity of his life gives some countenance to the report. He is now thirty years old, every hour of which period has been passed in study, total seclusion from the world, and mortification of the

flesh. Till these last three weeks, when He was chosen superior of the Society to which He belongs, He had never been on the outside of the Abbey walls (*M* 16-17).

The infant Ambrosio is abandoned at the Abbey door because his parents, Elvira and Gonzalvo, need to escape the oppression of Gonzalvo's family. They leave their son in front of a church presumably because they believe that he stands good chance of being taken into this religious establishment and protected from danger.² And indeed Ambrosio receives the protection that his parents expect. The church adopts him, provides him with food and shelter, and eventually gives him a career. The Abbey door, in other words, marks the boundary between safety and danger, between life and death.

But the passage above also reveals that this protection comes hand in glove with strict control. First, we see how the church holds sway over the narrative of Ambrosio's life. Lewis insinuates that the late Superior of the Capuchins has fabricated a myth regarding Ambrosio's birth, claiming that he is "a present from [. . .] the Virgin" (17). This fabrication may be understandable, because "No one has ever appeared to claim him, or clear up the mystery which conceals his birth" (17). But Lewis takes care to show us that, having established this narrative concerning Ambrosio's history, the monks in this church uphold it earnestly. They "have not hesitated to publish" (17) this version of Ambrosio's history and draws on "the singular austerity of his life" (17) to support it. In addition, the church controls not only the life story of Ambrosio but also his body. Ambrosio is forbidden to step outside the door of the church. Instead, he spends virtually all of his time in "total seclusion from the world." The clergymen in this church would have us believe that this physical confinement is a matter of Ambrosio's own choice. After all, to stress that Ambrosio chooses to stay inside the church further strengthens the publicized myth that he is a gift from Heaven and that he is destined for religious asceticism: "In

² There are three different accounts of how Ambrosio arrives at the church door. They are respectively narrated by Antonia's aunt early in chapter one (*M* 13), the narrator in chapter three (*M* 236-37), and Antonia in chapter three (*M* 252). The first two suggest that it is Ambrosio's grandfather who puts him at the church door. The last one indicates that Ambrosio's parents put him there. Lewis does not clarify which version is true. But considering how urgent Elvira's escape is and how fiercely Ambrosio's fraternal grandfather hates the marriage of Ambrosio's father, I am inclined to believe that Ambrosio is discarded by his parents at the church door in the midst of their flight.

truth the singular austerity of his life gives some countenance to the report [of his celestial origin]" (17).

In other words, the door of the Capuchins Church introduces Ambrosio to a carefully controlled environment in which he is perfectly sheltered to the extent that he is utterly ignorant of the outside world. In this sense, Ambrosio is not protected but rather imprisoned. Steven Blakemore argues that: "From the beginning, Ambrosio is situated in a "feminine" position: like a young virgin who is protected and sheltered so she can keep her "innocence" and "virtue," Ambrosio is similarly ignorant and innocent of the world and its temptations" (522). Blakemore reckons that the narrative of the church is responsible for forcing Ambrosio to assume the role of a passive and virtuous woman. In revealing the church tyranny, Blakemore judiciously presents a reversal of gender roles here. Paradoxically, the religious prototype of the Father of the Church, the main male villain in the novel, is deeply rooted in and occasioned by the feminisation of Ambrosio in the first place. It is important to notice that Ambrosio does not choose to lead a cloistered life and religious education voluntarily. The sentences describing Ambrosio's life and education are curiously couched in the voice of a third person: "He early showed a strong inclination for study and retirement, and as soon as He was of a proper age, He pronounced his vows" (*M* 17). This third-person perspective is highly suggestive. It implies that Ambrosio's course of life is directed by a third party, that is, by the church. He has no agency in showing his preference "for study and retirement" (17). He has no say in deciding when the "proper age" for taking up a religious career is. Indeed, later in the novel, Lewis shows us that, if Ambrosio could choose his own fate, he would realise that the church is not the best place for his character development: "It was by no means his nature to be timid: But his education had impressed his mind with fear so strongly, that apprehension was now become part of his character. Had his Youth been passed in the world, He would have shown himself possessed of many brilliant and manly qualities. He was naturally enterprising, firm, and fearless: He had a Warrior's heart, and He might have shone with splendour at the head of an Army" (*M* 236).

The door of the church of Capuchins, in other words, opens up as many opportunities for Ambrosio as it shuts down. Demarcating the boundary between a holy and peaceful environment and the outside world full of temptations and troubles, it first induces Ambrosio's parents to leave him there, with the hope that Ambrosio can be admitted into a tranquil and protected realm untroubled by the conflicts that

drive his parents into exile in the first place. Crossing this boundary means escaping oppression. But what Ambrosio's parents fail to predict is that, having escaped familial oppression, their son experiences religious one. His life and body are carefully controlled by the church. The fact that Ambrosio's life story begins at the church door, therefore, should not be dismissed as a simple plot device. The issues of boundary and control inherent in the presence of a door are exactly what characterise the first thirty years of Ambrosio's life.

Importantly, Botting considers in his study the importance of repetition within Gothic narratives: "Gothic excesses and transgressions repeatedly return to particular images and particular loci" (13). This is especially true for Lewis's *The Monk* as the door figure crops up time and again in this text. In addition, in defining the Gothic, Botting argues that early Gothic novels specialise in presenting moral, sexual, and social transgressions. He further discusses the notion of boundaries and boundary crossing in Gothic fiction: "In its crossing of boundaries, however, Gothic is a mobile and specific form" (13). Taking my cues from Botting's insight, I would like to examine in the next chapter the extent to which doors intersect with and intensify the problem of boundary-crossing in *The Monk*.

Chapter Two: Closing and Opening Doors

Mark S. Madoff has argued that Gothic novels tend to dichotomise space and engineer the inside/outside difference. He writes:

Outside is the modern, civilized, orderly, banal, decorous place, where the Gothic protagonist, like the reader, begins and, probably, ends. It is a place where appearance and reality are trusted as a reliable match, where word and deed seem to complement each other. Sexuality flows regularly into courtship and marriage, violence into lawful resolution of conflicts, desire and passion into commerce. In history, the Gothic outside opens toward the present, in which its typical faculties of mind—reason, common-sense, and sympathy—will dominate human affairs. Outside contains those actions and attitudes proudly called modern, civilized, enlightened.

Inside is the ancient, barbaric, disorderly, passionate, indecorous place where the Gothic protagonist, like the reader, arrives only through apparently accidental transgression (51).

Madoff's observation is generally true. But Matthew Lewis is interested as much in separating the inside from the outside as in exploring the intersection between these two opposites. Doors in *The Monk*, I argue, provide a useful lens through which we can clearly see this point. This is because a door can be closed and opened at the will of its owner. While closing a door clearly indicates a yearning for privacy and the rejection of outside stimulants, opening a door allows such stimulants to come in, whether one likes them or not. On the face of it, closing and opening doors may be quotidian activities that usually pass off as insignificant. But in *The Monk*, they become significant moves, inasmuch as they focus our attention on the problems of desire and transgression.

Ambrosio is a hypocrite in *The Monk*. In public, as the head of the Capuchins Church, he appears a saint and is venerated by his colleagues and followers alike. But

such publicly-displayed glamour and piety only conceal a troubled heart beleaguered by vanity and desire. Lewis dramatises this contrast between Ambrosio's public self and private self through a door. Having ended a religious ceremony, Ambrosio, accompanied by his colleagues, returns to his own room.

The monks having attended their Abbot to the door of his Cell, He dismissed them with an air of conscious superiority in which Humility's semblance combated with the reality of pride.

He was no sooner alone, than He gave free loose to the indulgence of his vanity. When He remembered the Enthusiasm which his discourse had excited, his heart swelled with rapture, and his imagination presented him with splendid visions of aggrandizement. He looked round him with exultation, and Pride told him loudly that He was superior to the rest of his fellow-Creatures (*M* 39).

What is worth noting is that, before entering his room, Ambrosio inhabits a semi-public space, where he is forced to keep his public persona and austere aura intact. He is "attended" by the community of friars whilst moving through this liminal, in-between space, and he claims the authority to "dismiss[]" them" at his doorstep as if they were more like his slaves than brothers. In fact, this "conscious superiority" is a mixed result and divulges the never-ending process in which his pretended humility is to be "combated" against by his massive ego. The threshold³ as a transitional space duly represents Lewis's unmasking of the abbot's two-facedness. The disparity is shocking. Before Ambrosio closes the door of his room and retreats to his own private world, he assumes a very public persona: a humble and respectable leader whose asceticism sets an example for everyone in his church. But even when Ambrosio stands outside his door and therefore inhabits what Madoff calls "the modern, civilized, orderly, banal, decorous place" (51), he is influenced by his private self, by the inside world that he is about to step in. Lewis's sentence tells us that at the

³ For a more detailed discussion about thresholds and the significance of crossing thresholds for Gothic heroes/heroines in general or more specifically in Radcliffe's novels, see Eugenia C. DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

threshold, Ambrosio's apparent humility is counteracted by "an air of conscious superiority" and "the reality of pride." Both qualities can only flourish when Ambrosio moves into what Madoff calls the "inside," "the ancient, barbaric, disorderly, passionate, indecorous place" (51). Indeed, Lewis tells us that, as soon as Ambrosio closes his door, all the appearance of humility disappears: "He was no sooner alone, than He gave free loose to the indulgence of his vanity." Standing in front of the door of his own room and facing a group of his fellow clergymen, Ambrosio straddles the inside and the outside. While Madoff suggests that the inside and the outside are mutually exclusive, Lewis shows that former can infiltrate the latter.

Such is Lewis's insistence on destabilising the dichotomy between the inside and the outside that closing a door does not necessarily help Ambrosio to keep his public persona at bay. Instead, precisely because closing his door enables Ambrosio to indulge his private fantasy, it also exacerbates the conflict between his private and his public selves. After Ambrosio closes his door and retreats to his private world, he goes to worship the Holy Madonna, whose portrait Ambrosio hangs in his own room. As the only female presence in the male-dominated monastery, this portrait arouses passionate and inappropriate desire in Ambrosio's heart. Musing upon the link between spiritual passion and erotic desire in *The Monk*, Joseph Drury argues:

Ambrosio is not just the object of . . . erotic adulation; it quickly becomes clear that the "blind idolatry" (375) he himself feels for the picture of the Virgin Mary he keeps in his cell is also rooted in sexual rather than spiritual passion. Though he tries to reassure himself that it is the "Divinity" the image represents that he adores, he cannot help fantasizing about "such a creature" actually existing, so that he might run his fingers through her "golden ringlets" and kiss her "snowy bosom" (39). Just as idols in *The Monk* turn out to be made of flesh and blood, so idolatry is revealed to be a precariously mediated form of sexual desire. Far from acting as an example to others that opens a path towards piety, the virgin idol is a provocation, an incitement to erotic fantasy that seduces rather than transcends the body. (223)

Drury's observation emphasises Ambrosio's transgression. He should not have allowed his pious worship to descend into erotic desire. He should have seen the Virgin Mary as a disembodied divinity rather than as a beautiful woman.⁴ In addition, what deserves our attention is the painting *per se*. It presents itself as a genius device inasmuch as it is based upon the portrait of Rosario/Matilda.⁵ The belated disclosure of the model for the painting once again shakens up the boundary, one between holy and secular; between carnal and spiritual. Also, considering the androgynous manner exhibited by the character of Rosario/Matilda, Ambrosio's homoerotic⁶ inclination can be further probed into as well.

Essentially, Drury points out the formulaic Protestant rhetoric grounded in Lewis's narrative. The erotic representation of Ambrosio's icon worship blatantly exposes the traditional Protestant fears and Catholic stereotypes. The anti-Catholic prejudice is almost unmistakable. It seems that under Lewis's pen, the articulation of Protestant fantasy about Catholic idolatry is resurrected⁷, and it serves as a reminder that there existed an ongoing Protestant-Catholic conflict in England in his time. This is, of course, a conventional way of reading the episode. But Drury's interpretation overlooks the fact that Ambrosio's descent from pious worshipping to indulging impure passion is not straightforwardly smooth. He does struggle inwardly and oppose blasphemous thoughts. Interestingly, this struggle takes place in his own room and behind a closed door. Lewis dramatises this inner struggle in great details.

Oh! if such a Creature existed, and existed but for me! Were I permitted to twine round my fingers those golden ringlets, and press with my lips the treasures of that snowy bosom! Gracious God, should I then resist the temptation? Should I not barter for a single embrace the reward of my sufferings for thirty years? Should I not abandon...Fool that I am!

⁴ In his book *Queer Gothic*, George Haggerty also comments on "[t]he connection between Catholicism and bodily lust" (69).

⁵ Hitherto Matilda is disguised as Rosario still in order to gain the monk's trust on a personal level. Rosario is the young male novice whom Ambrosio feels emotionally attached to and affectionately addresses as "my Son" (*M* 41).

⁶ For a more detailed queer reading of Ambrosio's relationship with Rosario/Matilda, see Haggerty (26-27).

⁷ We can only safely assume that Lewis had Protestant inclination due to the lack of clear historical references regarding his religious belief. Nevertheless, David Lorne Macdonald does mention in his biography of Lewis that he "regarded his Christian names with 'horror' and 'abomination' (30). See also the epistolary writing of Lewis to his mother in *A Life of Matthew G. Lewis* by Peck, Louis F. In several letters, Lewis affectionately writes "God bless you, my dear Mother" (183; 258; 266).

Whither do I suffer my admiration of this picture to hurry me? Away, impure ideas! Let me remember that Woman is for ever lost to me. Never was Mortal formed so perfect as this picture. But even did such exist, the trial might be too mighty for a common virtue, but Ambrosio's is proof against temptation. Temptation, did I say? To me it would be none. What charms me, when ideal and considered as a superior Being, would disgust me, become Woman and tainted with all the failings of Mortality. It is not the Woman's beauty that fills me with such enthusiasm; It is the Painter's skill that I admire, it is the Divinity that I adore! Are not the passions dead in my bosom? Have I not freed myself from the frailty of Mankind? Fear not, Ambrosio! Take confidence in the strength of your virtue. Enter boldly into a world to whose failings you are superior; Reflect that you are now exempted from Humanity's defects, and defy all the arts of the Spirits of Darkness. They shall know you for what you are!
(M 41)

This long passage stages a conflict between Ambrosio's private desire and his public persona. First, having spent thirty years cultivating his reputation as a venerable saint apparently impervious to worldly desire,⁸ Ambrosio feels weary of such sustained efforts and wishes for a change, however briefly it lasts: "Should I not barter for a single embrace the reward of my sufferings for thirty years?" (41) But he soon realises that his reputation and religious calling outweigh the satisfaction of his desire: "Fool that I am! Whither do I suffer my admiration of this picture to hurry me? Away, impure ideas!" (41) Even in his private room, Ambrosio clings onto his public self. He draws on his widely-celebrated religious piety to crush his yearning for a female companion: "It is not the Woman's beauty that fills me with such enthusiasm; It is the Painter's skill that I admire, it is the Divinity that I adore!" (41). Closing the door, for Ambrosio, does not mean obtaining a space where he can indulge his private self. On the contrary, by exposing him to the intrusion of private desires and arousing an earnest attempt to suppress them, it reveals how domineering Ambrosio's public persona is.

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the ways Ambrosio's desire plays out in the convoluted plots in the novel, see Wendy Jones's article "Stories of Desire in *The Monk*," *ELH* 57 (1990): 129-50.

The inability of a door to keep the public self at bay is shown clearly in *The Monk* when Ambrosio's private fantasy is disturbed by someone knocking at his door:

Here his Reverie was interrupted by three soft knocks at the door of his Cell. With difficulty did the Abbot awake from his delirium. The knocking was repeated.

'Who is there?' said Ambrosio at length.

'It is only Rosario,' replied a gentle voice.

'Enter! Enter, my Son!'

The Door was immediately opened, and Rosario appeared with a small basket in his hand. [. . .]

'Pardon my intrusion, Father,' said Rosario, while He placed his basket upon the Table; 'I come to you a Suppliant. Hearing that a dear Friend is dangerously ill, I entreat your prayers for his recovery. If supplications can prevail upon heaven to spare him, surely yours must be efficacious.'

'Whatever depends upon me, my Son, you know that you may command. What is your Friend's name?'

'Vincentio della Ronda.'

'Tis sufficient. I will not forget him in my prayers, and may our thrice-blessed St. Francis deign to listen to my intercession!— (*M* 41-43)

In this passage, the sound of knocking⁹ confirms both the existence of boundary and the instability of it. The fact that Rosario needs to knock at Ambrosio's door suggests that Ambrosio's privacy is not completely open to all prying eyes. But, penetrating into Ambrosio's room and interrupting the monk's fantasy, the sound of Rosario's

⁹ Lewis was not the first one to muse upon the act of door-knocking, of course. Preceding him was William Shakespeare, who already explored it and subtly manipulated the auditory dimension of knocking when writing *Macbeth* (Act II, Scene 3). Thomas De Quincey wrote a famous short essay, "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*" (1823) to analyse the effect of door-knocking after the murder of King Duncan in the play. He argues that Shakespeare exploits the sound of knocking to focus the audience's attention on the murderer rather than the murdered. Whilst De Quincey is intrigued by the affect the knocking produces and by how it serves as a mediator to solicit or even shift readers' sympathy, I am more interested in the issue of merging boundaries propelled by knocking in Lewis's text. For a more detailed analysis of Shakespearean use of knocking, see De Quincey's essay.

knocking indicates that this boundary is not iron-cast. Ambrosio's door fails to secure him a perfectly private space away from unwanted disturbance. In other words, the untimely knocking once again implies the destabilised line between the inside and the outside.

By opening his door and welcoming Rosario in, Ambrosio further complicates the apparent dichotomy of the inside and the outside. For one thing, the dialogue between Ambrosio and Rosario suggests that Ambrosio is in his public mode. Rosario comes to Ambrosio to ask him to pray for his ill friend. Ambrosio's consent suggests that he has already assumed his professional role as a benevolent abbot and that he has banished his illicit fantasies. Ambrosio and Rosario, that is, appear to inhabit what Madoff describes as the "outside", a "civilized, orderly, banal, decorous place" (51). But in reality they stay in Ambrosio's room, which, as the monk's recent fantasy suggests, more closely resembles what Madoff classes as the "inside", "the ancient, barbaric, disorderly, passionate, indecorous place" (51). There is another detail suggesting that Madoff's classification of spaces in Gothic novels does not apply here. The conversation between Ambrosio and Rosario, characterised by the latter's innocent request and the former's consent to lend her a professional hand, seems perfectly civil and above board. This seems to indicate that their interaction takes place in the "outside" world, where "appearance and reality are trusted as a reliable match, where word and deed seem to complement each other" (51). But the presence of Rosario in fact introduces mystery. The narrator tells us that "A sort of mystery enveloped this Youth" (*M* 41) and that "no one had ever seen his face" (*M* 42) due to the fact that "[h]is head was continually muffled up in his Cowl" (*M* 42). Significantly, the veil here is used as a device to build up suspense. The veil registers some calculation, withholds the real motive of the boy novice, and enables Rosario's penetration to Ambrosio's room as part of the grand workings of Satan's plan.

In effect, the timid novice Rosario carries a secret with him and will later reveal himself as a woman, Matilda. And his/her innocent request here in fact is his/her first attempt to seduce Ambrosio. There exists a gap between his/her appearance and reality, between his/her word and deed. In other words, the boundary between the outside and the inside no longer holds. On the face of it, by opening the door of his room, Ambrosio chooses to suspend his inner fantasy and enters the outside world. But in fact this move only merges the outside and the inside. Not only does the effect of such merging frustrate the dichotomy between ordinary life and the extraordinary

within the novel, but it also beckons us to reflect upon human frailty as a universal experience. On the face of it, Ambrosio's ability to close and open his door at his own will confirms a common assumption that opening a door is an easy activity that clearly evidences human agency and one's ability to control his/her own life. But the Bleeding Nun episode in *The Monk* overthrows this facile assumption, not least by situating the simple act of door opening in the context of the supernatural forces beyond human control. Agnes first tells us the story of the Bleeding Nun:

But at the end of five years the Exorciser died, and then the Nun ventured to peep abroad again. However, She was now grown much more tractable and well-behaved. She walked about in silence, and never made her appearance above once in five years. This custom, if you will believe the Baron, She still continues. He is fully persuaded, that on the fifth of May of every fifth year, as soon as the Clock strikes One, the Door of the haunted Chamber opens. (Observe, that this room has been shut up for near a Century.) Then out walks the Ghostly Nun with her Lamp and dagger: She descends the staircase of the Eastern Tower; and crosses the great Hall! On that night the Porter always leaves the Gates of the Castle open, out of respect to the Apparition: Not that this is thought by any means necessary, since She could easily whip through the Keyhole if She chose it; But merely out of politeness, and to prevent her from making her exit in a way so derogatory to the dignity of her Ghost-ship. (*M* 133)

In this passage, human agency is doubly undermined. First, legends have it that, human beings have consistently and persistently tried to shut the door of the room where the Bleeding Nun resides. However, all human efforts are in vain. Every five years, "the Door of the haunted Chamber opens" automatically to let the Bleeding Nun out, mocking the presumption of humans to control a single door. In addition, the Porter's decision to "leave[] the Gates of the Castle open" no longer simply testifies to human power to control a single object. This door-opening in fact evidences the Porter's awareness of how powerless humans can be in front of the supernatural forces. The Porter "respect[s]" "the Apparition." He opens the castle gate not because

he wants to pass the gate but because he wishes to make it more convenient for the Bleeding Nun to pass through the gate. Here we see human deference to the apparition. Having tried repeatedly to shut the door of “the Door of the haunted Chamber” but still failed to prevent the apparition from wandering outside the chamber, humans finally realise how powerless they can be compared with the supernatural forces in the world. The Porter’s decision to open “the Gates of the Castle” evidences this belated understanding.

The Bleeding Nun episode develops in such a way that further confirms the powerlessness of human beings in the face of ghosts. Agnes and Raymond are two characters in *The Monk* who refuse to believe that the Bleeding Nun really exists. They regard the Porter’s decision to open the castle gates as ridiculous superstition that unjustifiably prioritises supernatural forces over human agency. Dismissing this superstition as nonsense, they nevertheless wish to exploit it to help Agnes escape from the castle. The plan is that, on the night when the Bleeding Nun supposedly will visit the castle and when the castle doors are opened for this unusual visitor, Agnes will dress up like a Bleeding Nun and walk out of the castle easily. And her lover Raymond will stay outside of the castle and elope with her. Their plan, however, backfires. The real Bleeding Nun does visit the castle, as legends predict. Mistaking the real Bleeding Nun for his lover Agnes, Raymond elopes with the apparition. Their carriage breaks down and Raymond is seriously injured. Raymond’s refusal to believe in the existence of the Bleeding Nun and his arrogant presumption that humans can fully control their own fate incur serious punishment. Remarkably, door opening plays an important role in this punishment. In particular, the Bleeding Nun returns to haunt Raymond, opening the door forcibly despite Raymond’s attempt to close it. Raymond tells us this horrifying experience: “I now heard the heavy steps ascending the staircase; The Door [i]s thrown open, and again the Bleeding Nun st[ands] before me” (*M* 162).” Opening and closing a door no longer testifies to human autonomy. Dramatising the conflict between humans and the supernatural forces, they can reveal human powerlessness in this conflict.

Ambrosio opens and closes the door of his own room without any opposition. Given her supernatural power, the Bleeding Nun passes through the gate of the castle of Lindenberg and later opens the door of Raymond’s room without meeting any difficulties. But what if opening and closing a door become a controversial issue?

What if passing through a door becomes or appears to be a difficult task? I will explore these questions in the next chapter.



Chapter Three: Contested Doors

In her important book, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (1989), Kate Furguson Ellis observes that, at the heart of many Gothic novels in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century usually lies a literal or metaphorical castle, a building that either arouses either humans' yearning to gain admittance into it or provokes their earnest efforts to quit it. Ellis argues that the representation of such a building reflects the interest of many Gothic novelists, male or female, in the ideal of home. She writes: "[Gothic novels are] preoccupied with the home [. . .] the failed home [. . .] from which some (usually "fallen" men) are locked out, and others (usually "innocent" women) are locked in" (xi).¹⁰ Rarely can a home exist without a door. But Ellis does not draw our attention to this daily object in her discussion of Gothic novels, even though this object is vital to the construction of a castle or a home. If a castle or a home can be an object of serious contention in Gothic novels of Lewis's age, I would argue that so can a door. In *The Monk*, as I shall show in this chapter, the simple decision to open or shut a door can ignite fierce debates and the simple act of passing through a door can be a matter of life and death.

Early in *The Monk*, Lewis shows us the power of an apparently innocuous door to arouse controversy. Agnes is a nun who is not disposed to living in a convent. Before she enters the convent of St. Clare, she has a romance with Raymond and is about to marry him. Accidents separate them. After they meet each other again unexpectedly, they plan an elopement from the convent. Raymond delivers a letter secretly to Agnes, informing her of when and where she should meet him and leave the convent. Unfortunately, during one of Agnes's trip to Ambrorio's confessional room, she drops that letter unwittingly. Ambrosio takes up the letter, reads it with indignation, and is determined to give the letter to the Prioress, the leader of Agnes's convent. To do so, he needs to open the door of the confessional room, where, at the moment of discovering this letter, he and Agnes stay alone.

Shocked and dismayed, Agnes tries to stop Ambrosio, well aware that, if the door opens before she gets her letter back, her secret plan of elopement will be divulged and that severe punishment will ensue. Agnes says:

¹⁰ While Ellis's claim is generally convincing, she argues that Antonia is a passive female character as opposed to the assertive, active female characters such as Agnes and Marguerite in *The Monk* (136-39). My observation in fact differs from hers, which I shall proceed to present in this chapter.

‘Hold! Father, Hold! Hear me but for one moment! Tax me not with impurity, nor think that I have erred from the warmth of temperament. Long before I took the veil, Raymond was Master of my heart: He inspired me with the purest, the most irreproachable passion, and was on the point of becoming my lawful husband. An horrible adventure, and the treachery of a Relation, separated us from each other: I believed him for ever lost to me, and threw myself into a Convent from motives of despair. Accident again united us; I could not refuse myself the melancholy pleasure of mingling my tears with his: We met nightly in the Gardens of St. Clare, and in an unguarded moment I violated my vows of Chastity. I shall soon become a Mother: Reverend Ambrosio, take compassion on me; take compassion on the innocent Being whose existence is attached to mine. If you discover my imprudence to the Domina, both of us are lost: The punishment which the laws of St. Clare assign to Unfortunates like myself is most severe and cruel. Worthy, worthy Father! Let not your own untainted conscience render you unfeeling towards those less able to withstand temptation! Let not mercy be the only virtue of which your heart is unsusceptible! Pity me, most reverend! Restore my letter, nor doom me to inevitable destruction!’ (M 47)

In this passage, Agnes is actually responding to Ambrosio’s earlier claim that she is an immoral woman who cannot regulate her desire: “Unworthy Wretch! [My] lenity would make me your accomplice. Mercy would here be criminal. You have abandoned yourself to a Seducer’s lust; You have defiled the sacred habit by your impurity; and still dare you think yourself deserving my compassion?” (M 47). Agnes acknowledges that she violates the vow of chastity, yet she defends herself by saying that “the purest, the most irreproachable passion” as opposed to “the warmth of temperament” has motivated her to do so. In other words, Agnes and Ambrosio are engaged in a debate about whether it is acceptable for a nun to break her religious vow. For a Gothic scholar Valdine Clemens, Agnes’ self-defence is more persuasive and deserves our sympathy: “Not only the emotional power of Agnes’s desperate and passionate pleading but also the validity of some of her arguments render her case far

more persuasive than Ambrosio's rigid reliance on convent rules. Her final appeal is the most unanswerable: "take compassion on the innocent Being, whose existence is attached to mine. If you discover my imprudence to the Domina, both of us are lost" (47). [. . .] Ambrosio seems to act more like a rigid, intolerant Puritan than a Catholic monk; he orders her to release him and calls anxiously for the nuns [to open the door of the confession room and step in]." (75-75)

In their respective attempt to open and close the door of the confession room, Ambrosio and Agnes do not only debate about proper female behaviour. They also debate about whether women should be allowed agency and whether women are able to control themselves. Agnes's admittance that she violates the religious vow may suggest that women are too weak to be entrusted the task of self-regulation. Yet Agnes's plea for mercy suggests that she is ready to exert herself and go back to the right track: "Look with indulgence on a Woman's weakness, and deign to conceal my frailty! The remainder of my life shall be employed in expiating this single fault, and your lenity will bring back a soul to heaven!" (M 46). This sentence suggests that, if women are given the opportunity to direct the course of their own life, they will prosper, despite temporary lapses into mistake.

But Ambrosio entertains a very different view about female agency and self-regulation. He believes that women are too weak to govern their passion and that men should intervene on their behalf. This belief manifests itself in his response to Agne's plea: "No, Daughter, no! I will render you a more essential service. I will rescue you from perdition in spite of yourself; Penance and mortification shall expiate your offence, and Severity force you back to the paths of holiness. What; Ho! Mother St. Agatha!" (M 47). Ambrosio argues that Agnes cannot be left to her own devices, that she needs "a more essential service" and that only a man's assistance can save her soul.

Finally, the controversial door is open and Agnes, knowing that her freedom is lost forever, becomes mad.

The door of the Vestry opened, and the Prioress entered the Chapel, followed by her Nuns.

'Cruel! Cruel!' exclaimed Agnes, relinquishing her hold.

Wild and desperate, She threw herself upon the ground, beating her bosom and rending her veil in all the delirium of despair. The Nuns

gazed with astonishment upon the scene before them (*M* 48).

Agnes's temporary madness ("the delirium of despair") and her inability to control her violent emotions on this occasion, once again focus our attention on the issue of female agency and self-regulation that informs her previous debate with Ambrosio. Deprived of the freedom to direct her own life, Agnes also loses her power to govern her passion. Men's intervention does not help women to learn to govern themselves better, as Ambrosio would have us believe. Instead, they contribute to destroying a woman's control of her own mind. To open or not to open a door: that is a serious question fueling gender dynamics in *The Monk*.

Ambrosio does not always have the power to override female self-determination. In fact, as the plot of *The Monk* develops, we see him gradually succumb to the seductive and corruptive power of Matilda. Lewis dramatises the rise of Matilda's power over Ambrosio through another contested door, more specifically, through Ambrosio's strong desire to enter Elvira's door in order to see Antonia. After he has grown weary of Matilda, Ambrosio falls in love with Antonia. In order to meet her in person, Ambrosio breaks his habit of always staying in his monastery and visits Elvira when she is ill. During one of his visits, Ambrosio cannot control his passion and embraces Antonia against her will. Elvira suddenly appears and stops the monk's harassment. Although Elvira pretends that she is ignorant of Ambrosio's improper behaviour, she politely yet firmly tells him that his visit to them is no longer welcome. In other words, she shuts her door permanently against him. No longer able to gain access to the house of Antonia, Ambrosio feels humiliated and frustrated as a result. Much to his joy and relief, his ex-mistress Matilda tells him that she has the power to open the door of Elvira's house. She tells Ambrosio: "Receive this constellated Myrtle: While you bear this in your hand, every door will fly open to you. It will procure you access tomorrow night to Antonia's chamber" (*M* 278).

Matilda's "gift" in fact comes with a price. In order to procure this magic myrtle, she needs to summon the help of "a fallen Angel" (*M* 267). Ambrosio's religious upbringing tells him that any connection with "The Enemy of Mankind" is wrong, so he vehemently opposes Matilda's engagement with the devil: "Rash Matilda! What have you done? You have doomed yourself to endless perdition; You have bartered for momentary power eternal happiness! If on witchcraft depends the fruition of my desires, I renounce your aid most absolutely. The consequences are too horrible: I

doat upon Antonia, but am not so blinded by lust as to sacrifice for her enjoyment my existence both in this world and the next” (M 268). What follows is a heated debate between Matilda and Ambrosio, during which the former gradually breaks down Ambrosio’s resistance and directs his course of life. Responding to Ambrosio’s fear of the supernatural forces, Matilda tries to awaken his masculinity: ““You *dare* not? How have you deceived me! That mind which I esteemed so great and valiant, proves to be feeble, puerile, and grovelling, a slave to vulgar errors, and weaker than a Woman’s” (M 268 original emphasis). In order to refute Ambrosio’s claim that enlisting the help of “Sorcery” is “a crime so monstrous, so unpardonable,” Matilda argues: “Where then is your constant boast of the Almighty’s infinite mercy? Has He of late set bounds to it? Receives He no longer a Sinner with joy? You injure him, Ambrosio; You will always have time to repent, and He have goodness to forgive.” (M 269-70) In contrast to her previous strategy of displaying female charm through Rosario, Matilda now resorts to using wits and verbal fallacy. Her aggressiveness becomes obvious, and her persuasive speech alternates between gender perspective and religious perspective. In fact, her rhetorical skills smack of Satanic temptation, because her words are precisely what Satan would use to entice human beings into disobeying God’s command. Eventually, Matilda succeeds in conquering Ambrosio’s reasonable hesitation. In this respect, the forbidden door of Elvira’s house reverses the gender politics of an earlier scene, when Ambrosio can dominate a woman’s life and deprive her of self-determination. Here, it is a woman, namely Matilda, who is able to dominate Ambrosio’s life, crush his ability to control his own passion, and direct him towards a sinful path. Of course, it is arguable that Matilda’s success comes from Satan’s strategy rather than from her own female power, especially after she inadvertently reveals her masculine side and frustrates Ambrosio’s affection and lust for her. While it is true that Matilda’s agency is inspired by or even subordinated to Satan’s contorted rhetoric about God’s forgiveness, this is not to say that female charm no longer plays a crucial part in seducing Ambrosio and ultimately in bringing the monk to his downfall. In fact, the female charm is merely displaced onto another woman, Antonia.

This fact is cleverly narrated in the episode in which Matilda proffers a magic mirror to Ambrosio in order to ignite his fiery passion and sexual lust again. Through the magic mirror, Ambrosio sees the naked Antonia bathing, totally radiating with female charm and even inviting birds to nest upon her breasts (M 271). The seduction

trick of Matilda proves to be working immediately. The voyeuristic pleasure intoxicates the monk, so much so that Ambrosio finally caves in: “‘I yield!’ He cried, dashing the mirror upon the ground: ‘Matilda, I follow you! Do with me what you will!’” (M 271) Shockingly, the monk’s sudden change involves his renouncement of self-will and his decision to follow Matilda's guidance. Notice how Ambrosio relinquishes his agency by stressing words such as “follow” and “[d]o with me what you will” to Matilda. His passiveness suggests his blind following (which recalls his blind worship of the Holy Madonna painting earlier in the novel) and once again asserts Matilda’s undiminished female power over his body and mind. One can see that through the temporary displacement of female charm to Antonia, Matilda successfully reestablishes her own influence in Ambrosio’s life.

Dramatising the power dynamics between men and women, the door in *The Monk* does not only produce verbal debate but also bring about physical struggle. To pass or not to pass through a door becomes a decision leading to violent confrontation. Near the end of *The Monk*, Ambrosio succeeds in bringing Antonia to an underground dungeon and attacking her. The unfortunate Antonia begs him to allow him to leave this dungeon and promises that she will never reveal his crime if her request is granted. On the face of it, Antonia under this circumstance is entirely powerless and at the mercy of Ambrosio. Just as Ambrosio can control the life of Agnes, so he now can determine the fate of Antonia. But Lewis engineers another contested door to show that that is not the case.

When Ambrosio is thinking about how to deal with Antonia, he forgets that one door remains open:

At this moment the Abbot heard the sound of distant voices. He flew to close the door on whose concealment his safety depended, and which Matilda had neglected to fasten. Ere He could reach it, He saw Antonia glide suddenly by him, rush through the door, and fly towards the noise with the swiftness of an arrow. She had listened attentively to Matilda: She heard Lorenzo’s name mentioned, and resolved to risque every thing to throw herself under his protection. The door was open. The sounds convinced her that the Archers could be at no great distance. She mustered up her little remaining strength, rushed

by the Monk ere He perceived her design, and bent her course rapidly towards the voices. As soon as He recovered from his first surprize, the Abbot failed not to pursue her. [. . .] She folded her arms round a Pillar which supported the roof, and shrieked loudly for assistance. In vain did the Monk strive to threaten her to silence. (*M* 390-91)

The door in this passage is important for both Ambrosio and Antonia. We are told that it is the object which conceals Ambrosio's crime from the archers coming to this dungeon to investigate and to provide succor, especially after they hear the piercingly loud cries from Antonia from afar. This unfastened door is also Antonia's only chance of escape. Both Ambrosio and Antonia wish to take advantage of this door for their own sake. Lewis's passage shows that it is Antonia who has the upper hand in this scene. She manages to sneak out of the unfastened door before Ambrosio notices her. She shrieks so loud for help that the archers realise that some atrocious crime has happened, so much so that they insist on finding out the criminal. Antonia's shriek has nullified the protection this door allegedly can offer Ambrosio. Lewis's account of what happens after Antonia's attempt to escape from the door draws our attention to this point: "In the meanwhile, though closely pursued, Ambrosio succeeded in regaining the Vault. The Door was already fastened when Don Ramirez arrived, and much time elapsed, ere the Fugitive's retreat was discovered. But nothing can resist perseverance. Though so artfully concealed, the Door could not escape the vigilance of the Archers. They forced it open, and entered the Vault to the infinite dismay of Ambrosio and his Companion" (*M* 393). This apparently insignificant door, behind which Ambrosio perpetrates his crime, turns against him. It enables Antonia to exert herself and to defy the masculine power threatening her happiness.

If, as Kate Ellis has convincingly demonstrated, a contested castle in Gothic novels can show how these novels investigate the ideal of home, I believe a contested door in *The Monk* can reveal the power struggle between men and women, a struggle that fuels much of the dramatic tension in this novel. In particular, Ambrosio's ability to dominate a woman's life is demonstrated through his ability to determine whether to open a door. His defeat by the rise of women's power and self-determination also finds expression in his inability to control a door, be it the door of Elvira's house or the door of an underground vault. A door in *The Monk* is never an ordinary object that

we can take for granted. To fully understand the gender relationship and the power structure underpinning it, we need to carefully examine how men and women struggle to control a door.



Conclusion

In his essay, “On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*,” Thomas de Quincey ponders over how the ordinary sound of knocking can mark the transition from a world of excess and horror back to the world of normalcy. He writes:

the retiring of the human heart and the entrance of the fiendish heart was to be expressed and made sensible. Another world has stepped in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires . . . and the world of devils is suddenly revealed. But how shall this be conveyed and made palpable? In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers, and the murder, must be insulated—cut off by an immeasurable gulph from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs—locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into a dread armistice: time must be annihilated . . . Hence it is, that when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the reestablishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them (392).

De Quincey’s observation of Shakespearean strategy invites a comparison. Indeed, the dramatic effect of knocking at a door lies in the way it pulls us back to the reality. Just as Shakespeare singles out the door to “make[] us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis” bespeaking the effect of eerie time lapse succeeding the murder in *Macbeth*, so Lewis draws his characters and readers alike near doors to accentuate the effect of horror in *The Monk*. A door is more frequently and commonly owned by one individual, who can decide who can enter or exit it. Also, a door exists presumably because there is a need to separate insiders from the outsiders. I believe the issues of

boundary crossing and the dramatic effect initiated by the door that Shakespeare notices are explored in Matthew Lewis's novel, *The Monk*. Lewis's dramatisation of doors in this novel elicits our deepest fear, makes it possible for the reader to straddle the inside and outside imaginatively with characters, and stages doors as contested sites of power display .

One measure of how important doors are in *The Monk* is that the life of almost every major character in this novel is seriously affected by it. The infant Ambrosio is left at the door of the church of Capuchins. Elvira shuts her door against unwelcome suitors of her daughter, Antonia. Agnes entreats Ambrosio passionately not to open the door of a confessional room. Matilda negotiates with a devil and procures a magic myrtle which can open the door of Elvira's house. Antonia manages to sneak through an unlocked door to pursue her freedom. These examples combine to indicate that doors in *The Monk* are not simply quotidian objects that we can take for granted. Instead, they dramatise the (dis)appearance of boundaries, the (in)ability to control one's course of life and the power struggle between men and women. *The Monk* is an extraordinary Gothic novel not so much because it features sensational and supernatural events as because it endows an ordinary object with unusual significance.

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