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This is a preliminary version of a book chapter published in the *Encyclopedia of the Gothic*. Edited by William Hughes, David Punter and Andrew Smith. It is the accepted version of the text, prior to publishers typesetting.

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Matthew Lewis

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Matthew Lewis was born on July 9th, 1775 in London. He was the oldest of the four children of Frances Maria and Matthew Lewis, and the heir to his father's large fortune. Lewis senior was Deputy-Secretary at the War Office and the owner of two slave plantations in Jamaica. Shortly after Lewis's sixth birthday his mother left her husband's house and ran off with a music master, named Harrison. The probable result of this union was the birth of a daughter, a Miss Lacey who was provided for in Mrs Lewis's will. When Mrs Lewis was traced she was compelled to leave her lover. Lewis's father tried in vain to obtain a divorce, however, though estranged from his wife, he continued to support her financially.

The affair was not embroiled in as much scandal as we might like to assume. Matthew Lewis saw both his mother and father, was attached to both, acted as "umpire" (Peck, 8) between them on occasion and seemed to suffer little more from the circumstance of his mother's elopement than having to pretend, when with his school friends, that she was dead. Lewis's first biographer, Mrs. Margaret Baron-Wilson, in a decorous work, managed to make of his mother both a young heroine and a religious yet still fashionable older woman writing of her "natural delicacy of complexion and sweetness of expression,

which with a courtly bearing, an elegance of deportment, and unaffected good-breeding, she retained to the last” (8) and mentioning her connection with “old Mrs Wesley” (14) (mother of Charles and John). The fundamentally virtuous mothers in Lewis’s work, from Elvira in *The Monk* (1796) to Adalgitha (eponymous heroine of *Adalgitha* (1806)), who by the “fruits of a single error” (subtitle of *Adalgitha*) of one sort or another have such a disastrous effect on their sons, might owe their existence to some of Lewis’s complicated feelings about his family situation. Certainly the consequences of women’s lapses from strict conducts of virtue are repeatedly worked out in a variety of ways in Lewis’s writing: from Adalgitha’s series of disasters to Agnes’s ghastly penance in *The Monk*, and the happy, though contrite, ending for Zorayda in the comedy *The East Indian* (1800). Perhaps also the sense of being injured whilst in infancy might be linked to some curious passing references in Lewis’s work to babies receiving throat wounds which they bear as scars when adults (Angela in *The Castle Spectre* (1797); see also *Adalgitha* IIi).

Lewis was educated at Marylebone Seminary until the age of eight, then attended Westminster School. In the holidays he lived with his father at Devonshire Place. His mother, after the scandal, resided for a while in France then returned to England, living in Leatherhead. Lewis was in constant contact with her. He was a fairly precocious teenager and wrote his first comedy in 1792 at the age of sixteen; it was to be produced successfully eight years later as *The East Indian* at Drury Lane. In the summer of 1792 he was sent off to Weimar to learn German, and whilst there imbibed much of the spirit of German Romanticism, reading widely in works of the *Sturm und Drang* writers

(including Schubart, Schiller and Veit Weber) and meeting Goethe. In 1794, newly graduated from Oxford, Lewis was sent off travelling again, his father hopeful that experience in diplomatic service would fit him for a career in politics. He spent five months as attaché to the British Embassy at the Hague but, plagued by boredom, started writing a romance, the major part of which he is supposed to have written in ten weeks. What he produced was the work for which he is best known, *The Monk* (eventually published in 1796), and with which his name was ever after linked. “Monk” Lewis’s career in politics was nowhere near as long lasting as his literary success. He sat in parliament from 1796-1802 (bizarrely enough taking up the seat for Hindon, Wiltshire, just vacated by William Beckford), but proved luke-warm in his attendance, enthusiasm and voting habits.

The Monk was a run-away success. It went through four editions in two years and was known all over Europe (by 1810 there had been four German editions). It acquired the status of a cult book in part because of its reputation for blasphemy and lewdness. The Reverend Thomas James Mathias wrote of it as “a new species of legislative or state parricide” (Wright, 18). More recently Markman Ellis has pointed out its anomalous position as “a gothic libertine novel for young ladies” (96). One of its major contributions to the development of the British Gothic novel was the way it married the fervid style and shocking subject matter of German horror Romanticism with English prose and did so in an explosive, energetic, integrated and mould-breaking manner. (Although a work such as Peter Teuthold’s *The Necromancer* (1794) had introduced British readers to the delights of the German horror novel it is little more than a clumsy

translation). Lewis's use of German sources in *The Monk* was, however, to draw charges of plagiarism upon him. Indeed he became extremely sensitive to charges of plagiarism in his later work, citing influences, derivations and making attributions when what he is using seems to a modern reader to be merely part and parcel of Gothic paraphernalia. Perhaps this was part of his genius, though: a sharp eye for all those traits which worked well in the works of others and which he in turn passed on to a further Gothic readership/audience.

The Monk has something wonderfully mercurial about it, and demonstrates an ability to investigate and abandon any style or tone that might, or might not, be deemed suitable for the subject matter. It veers from the grotesque to the comic and even the parodic; from poetry to fervid prose; from the theatrical to novelistic social realism; from bizarrely allegorical starkness to trivial banter. It decisively inaugurated the masculine Gothic mode, which as Kate Ellis argues "gives the perspective of an exile from the refuge of home". (Ellis, xiii) Ellis also notes that Lewis' outsiders "appear to be more sinned against than sinning, and the burden of blame is shifted toward social institutions and away from the villains themselves." (Ellis 132). *The Monk* was equally significant in its establishment of a tradition of horror. Terrors are not averted, the novel follows through with the worst of fears. Ghosts are real, violations successful, murder happens in the present rather than the past and instead of gruesome effigies we are shown gruesomely decomposing bodies and an abundance of blood. In conjunction with this, Lewis's characters turn out to be much more morally ambiguous than their counterparts in earlier

Gothic novels. His villains are almost accidentally villainous, his heroes and heroines amiable rather than virtuous.

The Monk's emphasis on the body and its anatomization of desire, combined with its gender confusions, have made it attractive to many modern critics who have chosen to look at the novel through the lens of Queer Theory. Dale Townshend considers Ambrosio as one of the "queer fathers of Gothic writing [who] are nothing if not polymorphously perverse" (30) Max Fincher considers how in the novel "the misinterpretation of the body is foregrounded and ... the body changes the order of things, not least how gender and desire are perceived and understood." Lauren Fitzgerald links Lewis's attitude to literary borrowing/plagiarism, his "circumventing the primacy of origins" to a queering of "the history of the sexuality of authorship." (Evidence for Lewis's own sexuality is circumstantial rather than definite: anecdotal evidence suggests an interest in handsome young men.)

Some critics have pointed out the dramatic resonances of *The Monk*: Robert Miles notes that "[S]pectacle, not narrative is Lewis's motivating force" (54) and Peck proffers the hypothesis that large portions of the novel had originally been conceived in dramatic form (41). Lewis worked not only in prose narrative: he was also a writer of poetry and of dramatic works. Between 1796 and 1801 Lewis had eleven works produced on stage (seven more were to follow in the next eleven years). He composed not only melodrama, tragedy, monodrama, but also comedy and farce. Lewis showed himself to be both an astute judge and creator of public taste. His most celebrated play, *The Castle Spectre* was

performed 47 times between December 1797 and the following June: this was an extremely lengthy and lucrative run for a play at this time, (Jeffrey Cox notes that “Before the first three months of its run were over, Lewis’s drama was said to have brought £18,000 into the Drury Lane treasury.” (176)) *Alfonso: King of Castile* (1801) with ten performances was the most popular new tragedy of its generation. As Cox points out, Lewis “exemplifies the power of the Gothic at the box office and on the page: and he explores the boundaries of the Gothic – the borderland between popular and ‘high’ literature” (50)

Lewis’s dramatic works are notable for their sense of the possibilities of the stage. Cox notes that *The Wood Daemon* (1807) contained “grand processions, an extravagant dream sequence, ghostly portraits who step down from the wall, a bed that descends into a magic chamber where the villain worships the wood daemon, and a spectacular appearance of the wood daemon in a chariot drawn by dragons.” (39-40) Peck notes that Lewis’s “knowledge of theater’s new mechanical resources, of what mechanics and carpenters could do if they had to, made him bold in planning spectacles, and managers quickly learned that money was well invested in them.” (110) Lewis had a keen sense of how to exploit stage technology to represent the supernatural. He dramatized the object endowed with uncanny life - the walking armour in *The Castle Spectre*, the portrait which comes to life in *The Wood Daemon* – and, despite criticism, the ghost.

His plays, however, were not just known for their spooky, sometimes terrifying effects (the monodrama *The Captive* (1803) had to be withdrawn after one performance after

sending several audience members into hysterics), they were also characterized by an exuberant physicality, akin to that of Hollywood films of the 1940s and 50s. Lewis's characters, male and female, fought and made daring escapes and, using the opportunities provided by new stage scenery, they performed impressive stage leaps. In *The Castle Spectre* the hero Percy jumps from a tower to safety, despite the fact that some contemporary critics thought that such physical display in a hero was in bad taste. Princess Zorilda in *Timour the Tartar* (1811) leaps from a tower to a terrace, then to the sea. Her son, Agib, leaps a horse over a parapet and disappears.

Timour the Tartar "A Grand Romantic Melo-drama in Two acts" (title page description) was celebrated for the introduction of what the advertisement called "New Performers" to the stage: horses. These marvellous animals came at call, played dead, bowed and appeared to rise from the sea. His stage works are notable also for the exciting roles given to heroines. Angela, of *The Castle Spectre* (played by the celebrated Mrs Jordan) firm of purpose, kills her would-be rapist, Osmond with a dagger. Lewis's interest was not limited to young virginal heroines. Zorilda, who arrives to rescue the young prince in *Timour*, who appears as the commanding and seductive warrior princess, dressed as an Amazon, and who leaps so impressively around the palace, is the prince's mother. Adelgitha (played by Mrs Powell who had earlier taken the part of Angela's mother in *The Castle Spectre*) was a gift of a role to a mature actress; the central character displays not only beauty, wisdom, fortitude and bravery - snatching a javelin at one point to rescue her husband - but also a more interesting fatal passivity and cowardice. She, like Angela, kills the tyrant who is about to rape her. Lewis's plays are also notable for other

experimental dramatis personae: the deliberately unfunny Father Philip in *The Castle Spectre* (an experiment which he freely admitted wasn't very successful) and the group of anachronistic African servants, in particular the misanthrope Hassan, in the same play, who give voice to outrage over the loss of liberty and to the ruinous effects of slavery on the human character.

Lewis's literary career was inevitably linked with his need to make money to support himself, his mother, and occasional protégés. When his father died in 1812, Lewis was 36. They had quarrelled over his father's attempts to have his mistress, Mrs Ricketts, accepted by his family and as a result had not spoken for nine years, only becoming reconciled on his father's deathbed. However, Lewis was not written out of his father's will. As the main heir, Lewis became a wealthy man and his writing for money ceased. There was a well-received volume of poetry from that year, then nothing till the posthumous publication of his *Journal of a West India Proprietor* (1834). Lewis, however, kept himself busy and went travelling. He had always been a very sociable, if rather argumentative, man and was not shy of exploiting the potential of his literary fame. He enjoyed some celebrated literary friendships, most importantly with Walter Scott, whom he advised on matters poetical, and with whom he later collaborated. He travelled for eighteen months in 1815-16, visiting Byron at the villa Diodati where he also met the Shelleys. He also twice travelled to Jamaica in order to improve conditions for his slaves (he would not countenance full emancipation, fearful of the consequences for the white inhabitants of the island). Lewis died of yellow fever at sea whilst returning from the West Indies on 16th May 1818 at the age of 42.

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Mini Biography

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