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Let's Talk About Sex: Confessions And Vows In *The Monk*

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Critics of *The Monk* stress its pornographic elements and the opposition of natural, subversive libidinal forces against the cultural order. However, discourses about love and sex prevail against depictions of sexual acts. *The Monk* exemplifies Foucault's observation of the increasing discursivization of sexuality by transferring confessions and vows from the religious into the private sphere. Significantly, these discourses not only serve to control but also to elicit desire, which is less hidden and repressed but constitutes the focus of an obsessive concern. The lovers do not represent anarchic or innovative forces because they merely repeat the cultural pattern of arousing and hedging desire. Lovers, families and the church rival each other for power in the field of sexuality without any significant differences in the structure of their behaviour, so that *The Monk* criticizes the sentimental view of the private sphere.

"Let's talk about sex" could be the appropriate motto for Lewis's novel *The Monk* because discourses about desire and sex prevail over depictions of sex. Not only did the novel make its readers talk about sex, it also made literary critics write about its discourse of sexuality, i.e. of sexual acts or sex in short, and of the will to have sex or desire.[1] Most of the critics who write about the novel focus on the repression theory or its reversal. Advocates of the former theory state that the prevalent cultural order represses sexuality. The reversal of the repression theory argues that the laws restricting sexuality enhance the value of sexuality.[2] Following Foucault's argument, I would

1 Nina daVinci Nichols, for example, considers *The Monk* to be a "failure as a Gothic romance" and a "success as pornography, defined as a consuming interest in sexuality at the service of power". "Place and Eros in Radcliffe, Lewis and Bronte," in *The Female Gothic*, ed. Julian E. Fleenor (Montreal: Eden, 1983), p. 205.

2 See Michel Foucault, *Der Wille zum Wissen*, 6th ed. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 13, 101. According to Anderson and Madoff, the order in society opposes or represses the chaos of sex. See Howard Anderson, "Gothic Heroes," in *The English Hero, 1660–1800*,

not deny that Christian culture restricts sexuality, but would also stress that an increasing variety of discourses rather than repressing sexuality explores it.[3] However, Foucault's and the literary critics' focus on sexuality has to be expanded. Lewis deals with *love*, which is shown as *affection*, *passion* (roughly equivalent to desire), and as the *sexual act*. Love is not a positive natural force outside discourses and order, but a field of struggle between the church, the family, and the lovers. Especially confessions and vows focus on love in *The Monk*, serving the interests of desire and power in a surprisingly similar way in religious, love and parental relationships. Love-relationships are not opposed to the church and the family, and do not primarily question their order; instead they rival with the other institutions for power.

I. Concepts

Foucault (79f) mentions "*confession*" as a predominant discursive form which elicits sexual secrets in the history of Christian societies. Confession combines two aspects in social relationships: power and truth. Confession presupposes a relationship between a penitent and a confessor, who has the power and the right to condemn or to forgive. Secret or hidden information (thoughts, words or acts) demands its revelation in this specific situation. The

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ed. Robert Folkenflik (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982), p. 216; Mark S. Madoff, "Inside, Outside, and the Gothic Locked-Room-Mystery, "in *Gothic Fictions. Prohibition/Transgression*, ed. Kenneth W. Graham (New York: AMS Press, 1989), p. 59. Brooks, Fierobe, and Madoff describe repressed sexuality with the spatial metaphor of the hidden inside, society with the obvious outside. See Peter Brooks, "Virtue and Terror: *The Monk*," *ELH*, 40 (1973), pp. 257, 262; Claude Fierobe, "Ordre et chaos dans *The Monk* de M. G. Lewis," *Bulletin de la société d'études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles,* 21 (1985), pp. 171–2; Madoff, p. 51. Daniel P. Watkins dissolves the opposition between sexuality and society: the conflict between the forces arises from "the inappropriate exercise of sexuality by individuals who are not empowered by social tradition". See "Social Hierarchy in Matthew Lewis's The Monk," *Studies in the Novel*, 18 (1986), p. 122, and Wendy Jones, "Stories of Desire in *The Monk*, " *ELH*, 57 (1990), p. 133. But prohibition of illegitiamate sexuality is only one side of the exercise of power, intensification and control of desire the other side.

3 See Foucault, pp. 22f. Catherine Belsey denies theories of repression, and regards sexuality as a basis for the affirmation and surveillance of the subject in Foucault's sense. According to Lacan, she locates censored transindividual meanings in the unconscious. Since desire needs an object that is different from the subject, she interprets discourses which are different from and incompatible with rationality as manifestations of unconscious desire in *The Monk*; "The Romantic construction of the unconscious, " in *1789: Reading Writing Revolution*, ed. Francis Barker et al. (University of Essex: 1982), pp. 67–80. Eve K. Sedgewick also repudiates the image of sex as depth and repression in a highly suggestive article. Sexuality is on the surface in *The Monk*. For example, the Bleeding Nun's veil serves "as metonym of the thing covered and as a metaphor for the system of prohibitions by which sexual desire is enhanced and specified". Thus, the "attributes of veil and of flesh are transferable and interchangeable"; "The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel, " *PMLA*, 96 (1981), pp. 256–7.

value of the confessional discourse depends upon its truth, the correspondence between what is said and what is thought or was done by the penitent. Not the denial of sexuality, but rather its discursive "penetration" by confession seems to be a central concern of Christian societies.

Confession in religious, love and marital relationships implies a virtual accusation that norms were violated: the charge and the guilt are internalized. However, the individual's internal control cannot be trusted but has to be supervised by a confessor. The penitent subjects himself to the confessor. An actual accusation presupposes a specific violation of norms, forcing the accused to defend himself. Both confession and accusation entail that the subject be condemned and punished or forgiven and exonerated. Confession compares favourably to the defective trials in *The Monk*, because the "judges" are bent on punishment, not heeding mitigating pleas: the Prioress wants Agnes to perish in the vault, the mob to tear apart the Prioress, the inquisition to extort from the Monk what they want him to confess. But the important function of confession in the private sphere recalls structures of legitimate trials, and subverts a strict opposition of the positive private and the negative public realm.

A "*vow*" or a "promise" complement confessions. Promises presuppose a relationship between the one who promises to someone else, who has the right to demand the fulfilment of the promise. The promise concerns something that usually is valuable to the other (otherwise it is a menace). The value of the promise depends upon its truth, the sincerity or will to fulfill it. Confession and vow imply the speaker's responsibility or commitment to the listener. Both discourses depend upon and constitute hierarchical relationships, and imply the listener's control over the speaker.

Vows and confessions connect individuals and institutions. Problems arise because three institutions conflict with each other: the family, the church, and love-relationships. Love-relationships, as depicted in *The Monk*, do not constitute a space of freedom that is separate from society, but are of high social value if they use established norms of behaviour and discourses, and constitute (usually male-dominated) hierarchies. All of these institutions claim the control of the individual in the field of sexuality. Most of the individual characters assume different hierarchical positions in conflicting institutions at the same time. In the main plot, Elvira, representing the head of the family, conflicts with the Monk Ambrosio, her unknown son and her superior in religious terms, because Ambrosio desires his sister Antonia. Antonia is subject to the power struggle between Elvira and Ambrosio. In the subplot, Lorenzo represents the head of the family to his sister Agnes since the death of their parents. But he has to face Elvira's opposition to his love for Antonia, an ironic reversal of power. Lorenzo opposes Agnes's suitor Raymond at the beginning because their illegitimate child violates his family's honour, and because of her commitment to the convent. Lorenzo, however, loves Antonia

and thus also needs her uncle Raymond's consent to his love suit. Confessions and vows initiate actions, counteract each other, complicate and unravel the conflicts concerning love between the characters. One of the most intriguing features of the novel is the interrelationships and contradictions between the institutions, and the conflicts in the love-relationships which try to manœuvre between the Scylla of prohibition and the Charybdis of the intensification of desire.

II. Confessor and Penitent

The Monk understands that his vow of chastity, one of the most important commitments in the monastery, forces him to repress his passions.[4] He derives considerable pride from his self-denial and the resulting high reputation (40). However, his religious duties do not only cage the sexual animal, but rather provoke it. The Monk represses but does not deny his passions. On the contrary, he intends to subject himself to temptation in order to prove his control over his own sexuality (40). The first object of his desire is an effigy of the Virgin Mary, that he adores in sexual terms.[5] Matilda alias the novice Rosario resembles the effigy, becomes the object of his desire, and allows the Monk finally to realize his passion. The development of the relationship is a combination of secret desires, confessions, and vows that bind the Monk and Matilda to each other in a relationship of power and love. The Monk and Rosario/Matilda are abbot and novice, confessor and penitent, father and son to each other (58). She confesses her gender and claims that her affection for him would not rival his bride, i.e. religion (59), but her confession incites his desire (62). The conventional parallelism of religious and parental relationship is complicated by her affection because it indicates the relationship of lover and beloved. His vow not to expel her from the monastery because of her confession conflicts with his duty not to allow any women within the walls of the monastery. By inviting the Monk's vow not to expel her, Matilda checks his power as confessor. Soon, he confesses to Matilda that he would not be able to resist her charms if she stayed (70). Her confession of her desire to sexually possess him is the last preface to their sexual intercourse (89–90). The series of confessions of affection and desire gradually intensifies desire and leads to sexual acts. The prohibition of sexuality in

4 See Matthew Gregory Lewis, *The Monk*, ed. with an introduction by Howard Anderson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 17, 40. Further references will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses.

5 Erotic untertones in the veneration of the Virgin Maria were not infrequent at the end of the Middle Ages. Although Ambrosio's desire comes close to idolatry, it matches perfectly with the cultural idealization of a virgin as a desirable woman.

the monastery does not necessarily abolish sexuality but demands its confession: the secret can be shared only between the confessor and the penitent, which causes a special bonding.

The Monk's double bind maintains the suspense. His giving in to her attraction tilts the balance between the confessor and the penitent, since now his social and religious position are at stake if she reveals their secret. After her secret use of black magic about which the Monk promised not to enquire, she dominates him. The Monk doubts Matilda's affection because she withholds secrets from him. The Monk demands her confidence, which is supposed to be a key element of a love-relationship; but coerced confidence shows close affinities to obligatory confession. However, Matilda refutes his claims to power and returns: "Though I forgive your breaking your vows to heaven, I expect you to keep your vows to me" (234). She assumes the power of the confessor and of the dominant partner in the love-relationship, and sets a greater store by personal than by heavenly vows. Vowing and confessing, forgiving and condemning are institutionalized habits in love relationships, parallel to and rivalling the church's claims to power.

Finally, their sexual attraction to each other wanes, but Matilda still controls the Monk because she knows all about his desire for Antonia. Her magic omniscience and power to promote his desire for Antonia subjects the Monk completely to her. Significantly, not sexual possession but total knowledge about sexuality and her ability to intensify his desire increase Matilda's power. Lewis shows the gradual transition from a religious relationship to an affectionate one, to a sexual one, and to complete subordination in reversal of the initial position of knowledge and power. At all stages, the discourses that demand truth about secret sexual desires and that create or promote power work in similar ways. The transition from the monastic prohibition of sexuality to Matilda's mastery over the Monk due to her total knowledge about his desire seems to be an allegory of the historical process sketched by Foucault. In his view, history from the Middle Ages onwards shows the extension of confession from its limited use in religious penance to education, medicine, psychology, and psychiatry.[6] Matilda's omniscience through magic corresponds to the will to know of the "*scientia sexualis*."[7] The growing knowledge about sexuality by increasing discourses about it gradually replaces prohibitions, in order to allow more control over individuals by exploring their secrets and prescribing norms. The observation and classification of sexual practices, the moral and legal prescription of sexual norms and digressions makes possible the persecution of "perverts."[8] Readers of *The Monk* observe Ambrosio's sexual digressions and punishment. They can be

6 See Foucault, pp. 75–81.
7 Foucault, pp. 75.
8 Foucault, pp. 58ff.

voyeurs and judges. *The Monk* represents the aesthetic "penetration" of sexuality parallel to its scientific exploration in history.

III. Parent and Child

The Monk's masculine appearance and powerful religious sermons fascinate Antonia, whose innocence and beauty in turn enchant the Monk. Attempting to seduce Antonia, he pretends to be her friend, not only her (religious) father. He appeals to her "sincerity" (260), and asks her to reveal her knowledge or experience of love. Again, the demand for truth and confidence resembles closely the obligation to confess. Antonia confesses her love to him, unwittingly inciting his desire. He would have raped her if Elvira had not intervened. One might surmise that Elvira's attitude to love and sexuality is narrowly Puritan because she purges the Bible of all indecorous passages before she hands a copy over to her daughter Antonia (259). Thus, she proves that sexuality and its dangers are always on her mind, and not hidden in the unconscious. In similar terms as the Monk Ambrosio, Elvira asks Antonia to acknowledge her most secret thoughts, i.e. her affection for Lorenzo. The parental demand for confidence subjects the child to parental judgement. Educating Antonia, Elvira is primarily concerned not to let her daughter repeat the mother's negative experience of an inter-class marriage, which her husband's father did not consent to. Consequently, she confines Antonia and prohibits her contact with the noble Lorenzo. She controls her daughter's love because she wants to keep her within the marital and social order.

But her behaviour towards the Monk, her confessor, is different. It is primarily motivated by the will to uncover his sexual desire (263). Elvira regards Antonia as potential object of desire (210), and knows that Antonia and Ambrosio are attracted to each other. Far from prohibiting the Monk from talking to Antonia, she tolerates their contact in order to prove her suspicion about his designs. Thus, she intensifies Ambrosio's desire, but also fosters her daughter's temptation. Her "discovery" of his attempt at rape does not come as a terrible surprise, but is her triumph: "Her plan had succeeded" (263). She will keep it secret, a power in reserve, because the Monk's influence is too great to unmask him now. Elvira controls Antonia's and the Monk's love by prohibiting the sexual act, but intensifying their desire. Contrary to the medieval and feudal principle of alliance which demands legitimate love, Elvira also displays the "modern" will to analyze desire in a sort of controlled experiment. Elvira and Antonia represent the (defective) nucleus of an 18th-century middle-class family with their emphasis on affection and confidence. The 18th-century sentimentalization of the family idealizes confidence in the private realm as a counterpart to the treacherous world

outside, and increases attention not only to affection, but also to desire and sex. The similarity between the confessor and seducer Ambrosio and the more or less respectable mother Elvira in relation to Antonia constitutes a further scandal besides sadism and incest. The Monk (ab)uses his powerful position as the trustworthy confessor to elicit secrets about love, which in turn increase his desire. The mother (ab)uses the confidence of her child because knowing about their mutual attraction, she uses her as a lure to tempt Ambrosio. In *The Monk*, the monastery and the middle-class family combine prohibition with the deliberate intensification of desire.

IV. Lover and Beloved

Confessions and vows are of central importance to the sub-plot as well. Half of the second part of the book consists of Raymond's long confession to Lorenzo. Lorenzo has discovered that Raymond passed a letter on to Lorenzo's sister Agnes, who is a nun in the convent of St. Clare (31). Lorenzo assumes a violation of the family's honour and demands to know about the secret communication. Lorenzo's relationship to Raymond is ambivalent because they were friends, who are now adversaries concerning Lorenzo's honour. In addition, Lorenzo needs Raymond's assent for marrying Antonia (92). Interests of love and family are reciprocal.

Raymond relates that he had to coerce Agnes to confess her love for him (132). He may have wanted to protect Agnes's reputation in her brother's eyes, but the need to coerce her reveals that her confession constitutes his power as dominant partner and subjects her to him. Not only conventional modesty, but possibly her resistance to subjection accounts for his need to force her admission of love. Raymond's story of impeded love mirrors his present situation: Raymond's and Agnes's love conflicts with her consignment to the convent and her aunt's, Donna Rodolpha's, resistance to their union. Ironically, Raymond unintentionally wins Donna Rodolpha's heart instead of her assent to his union with Agnes. When he confesses his love to Donna Rodolpha, the aunt attributes it to herself and confesses her passion for him (134–5). The mismatched confessions enfuriate the Baroness, who threatens vengeance. Like Agnes's confession to the Monk, Raymond's confession initiates an action contrary to his intention. Their attempt to elope fails; Agnes has to confess the plan to her aunt who deludes her about Raymond's true intentions and persuades her to take the veil (166). Raymond succeeds in gaining Agnes's trust again, but passion overwhelms them in the convent garden. Since Raymond's intentions were, in spite of the "lapse from virtue" (191), honorable, Lorenzo considers the "temptation too great to be resisted" (192), forgives Raymond, and promises to help him in liberating Agnes. Raymond's confession and Lorenzo's forgiveness and

promise trigger the positive counter-action. The sexual transgression has been revealed at the end of a long mitigating narrative. The two noblemen's goal is to repair the shame by marriage, which integrates and controls sexuality according to both their interests. A Papal dispensation from Agnes's vows is supposed to remove the religious obstacle to the marriage (181).

Unknown to the noblemen, the Monk accidentally discovers Raymond's letter. The letter does not only inform Agnes about the means to escape from the convent, but asserts Raymond's claims: "Remember that you had promised to be mine, long ere you engaged yourself to the church" (46). (He forgets or rather ignores that Agnes's mother already had vowed that if she survived an illness her daughter should go to the convent of St. Clare.) Agnes confesses her violation of chastity, and supplicates the Monk to conceal her crime from the Prioress. The Monk does not accept her contrition and her promise to expiate her fault. He does not absolve her from her sins but considers penance and mortification as necessary to save her soul (46–7). The Prioress sadistically punishes her. The repression of sexuality shows itself to be perverted. Agnes's sexuality is the field of struggle between the lover's, the brother's, and the Monk's/Prioress's claim to control, because her illegitimate child conceived from Raymond is a violation of the vows of chastity demanded by the family as well as the church.

V. Conclusion

Ambrosio and Agnes are fallen virgins, whose endings contrast with each other, largely due to the degree of their violation of norms, and their ensuing attitudes. The Council of Trent prescribes basically three stages of perfect penance: (1) "cessation from sin", contrition, and the decision to begin a new life, (2) "confession and absolution", (3) necessary amends, and works of satisfaction.[9] Agnes regrets her violation of chastity, confesses her sin, suffers from temporal worldly punishment by the Prioress, and is absolved from her vow by the Pope. Agnes again confesses her sin to her brother and Raymond, mitigates it by attributing affection, not passion, as the cause for her failure, and promises "exemplary" conduct for the future (417).

Ambrosio, however, shows "attrition" only (426). He regrets his sins because he fears punishment, not because he is truly sorry for what he has done. He doubts God's mercy (426). His extorted confession at the inquisition is false because he confesses everything they want him to (431). Torn between the fear of being burned alive, and of eternal torments (425), he sells his soul to the Devil to escape the Auto da Fé (437). The Devil, how-

9 "Confession," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. III (1971), p. 840.

ever, shows the Monk the full extent of his atrocious sins, inflicting additional mental suffering on the Monk. Not only did Ambrosio commit the first of the seven deadly sins by being excessively proud (440), but also the most fundamental deadly sins Christianity knows: idolatry, murder, and incest (439–40). As accusation replaces the necessary confession, punishment replaces absolution. Whereas the father would put his hand on his kneeling child's head to bless it, the Devil punishes Ambrosio by "darting his talons into the Monk's shaven crown" (441). The Devil carries him up, mocking an ascent into heaven, only to let him fall. This does not result in an escape from punishment; the Monk suffers six days from worldly and temporal torments before his infernal and eternal ones start, in a reversal of creation.

The Monk cannot escape into atheism (425), which would spare him his fears of eternal torment. His lack of remorse, and his attempt to escape worldly punishment reveal the necessity of a strict external control. In comparison, Agnes's internalized control, her sincere contrition for her guilt, which is much less than Ambrosio's of course, seems to safeguard her reintegration into society. So far, *The Monk* seems to carry a conservative message. The bad are punished, the good or reformed are saved.[10]

On the other hand, the parental and love-relationships depicted in *The Monk* are far from being a safeguard or a retreat from the evil world.[11] They

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10 Most critics seem to favour the interpretation of the Gothic novel as an expression of conservative middle class values. Paulson and Punter relate the Monk's rebellion and the Prioress's killing to Burke's use of sexual imagery in the depiction of the turmoils of the French Revolution. Punter regards "the exile of desire" in France as the reverse side of the English myth of their stable society; see "1789: The Sex of Revolution, " *Criticism*, 24 (1982), pp. 202, 214. Paulson interprets the Gothic as the sublimation and catharsis of fears concerning the cycle of social injustice, revolution, and repeated oppression by the mob that came to power then; see "Gothic Fiction and the French Revolution, " *ELH*, 48 (1981), p. 536. Bernstein plausibly explains the form of the Gothic narratives through their function in bourgeois ideology: crime disrupts social stability, which is recovered in the end, entailing the restoration of lost property to their rightful owners, whose romantic love ends in approved marriage if it links partners of the same class. Gothic novels legitimize the "burgeoning capitalist power, a dark fairy-tale assurance that the propertied, after surviving their troubles, could maintain their ascendancy in terms of political and economic power"; see "Form and Ideology in the Gothic Novel," *Essays in Literature*, 18 (1991), p. 161. The structural similarity of power and control found in the despised church, the family, and the love-relationships in *The Monk*, however, do not necessarily favor these institutions as much as the readers might wish. The text may be taken as support of traditional anti-Catholic sentiments. But it is also possible to compare Ambrosio to a Puritan. Despite all the differences due to the Catholic setting, both the Monk and the Puritan are individually responsible to God. Both are required to closely analyze their thoughts and deeds. Both cannot be certain of God's mercy. Ambrosio lacks self-scrutiny, which his order and position would demand. He indulges in sinful thoughts and acts without severely suffering from spiritual pangs. Ambrosio could also be seen as the ultimate example of a Puritan who fails to follow his most important duties, self-analysis and individual responsibility in relation to God.

11 Kate F. Ellis investigates the relationship between the middle-class idealization of home and the popularity of the Gothic novel from a marxist and feminist point of view. According to her analysis, Gothic novels construct and subvert gender-relations, because the alleged

are not opposed to the evil and corrupt Catholic church, but are complementary to the criticized institution. Vows and confessions in families and the church do not only prohibit love, but may also intensify it. The lovers's vows and confessions do not only intensify love, but also control it. The controlling mechanisms of the church as an institution are transferred to the family and love-relationships. Love-relationships become institutionalized, because affection and passion are not pure instincts, but controlled by the demand for truth in discourses that constitute power, especially male dominance. The parallel structure of the use of confessions and confidence questions the idealized positive value of confidence in the family and between lovers. What seems to be a long ago and far away feature of the despised medieval Catholic church becomes very topical to *The Monk*'s readers. The scandal of *The Monk* is not only the combination of sex and violence, but the destruction of the fiction of the family as a protected haven and moral safeguard of society, and the fiction of love as a tender, romantic relationship beyond cultural restrictions, a realm of freedom, the last earthly Elysian fields.

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harmony of the sexes in the protective privacy of the home often conceals unequal power relations, exposing male violence and the idealization of home; see *The Contested Castle. Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989).