"Authorship is a mania, to conquer which no reasons are sufficiently strong; and you might as easily persuade me not to love, as I persuade you not to write."1 In this comment to his page Theodore, a budding author as well as man-friday, Raymond, the protagonist of Matthew G. Lewis’s gothic thriller The Monk, draws an analogy between narrative and desire that would be taken up enthusiastically by critics and theorists nearly two centuries later. Indeed, we now believe that narrative motivates desire, is represented within it, is the precondition for storytelling and is even a form of desire itself: in short, the imbrication of desire and narrative has assumed an almost ontological status in current theory.2 Yet despite The Monk’s foregrounding of this imbrication, which is evident in specific instances such as Raymond’s comment as well as in the intricate narrative structure of the novel as a whole, most critics have tended to consider its narrative qualities only briefly and to discuss The Monk primarily as a social document, an index of its historical moment.3 While my own reading also ends by considering the historical significance of The Monk, I hope to show that its narrative qualities are inextricable from its political content. I begin by discussing The Monk’s repeated insistence on the alignment of narrative and desire, then show how this alignment forms the basis of its own narrative structure, and finally, suggest that theme and structure are constitutive of its social/political argument: a defense of the concept of individual desire and of the right to articulate that desire in both speech and action.4

The Monk aligns desire and narrative most obviously through its content, which consists primarily of love stories. The three primary narratives, those of Raymond and Agnes, of Lorenzo and Antonia, and of Ambrosio, all aim at erotic fulfillment. Both of the young couples are in love and want to marry, while the wicked monk Ambrosio experiences several erotic obsessions. These narratives are repeatedly interrupted by several kinds of secondary narratives:
historical narratives such as the story of the Bleeding Nun; personal reminiscences such as Leonella’s account of Elvira’s marriage; verse narratives such as Theodore’s two poems; and prophetic dreams, visions and prophecies such as the Gypsy’s warning to Antonia (which anticipates the ending of the novel). A rough count suggests that there are no fewer than twenty-three of these minor narratives, nearly all of which are stories of erotic desire.5

Through self-reflexive moments, the text draws attention to this linking of desire with narrative: it is often allegorized within the stories themselves. For instance, Theodore’s poem “Love and Age” thematizes the connectedness of desire and narrative by suggesting that they are interdependent and analogous. In Theodore’s poem, the love poet Anacreon, grown “morose and old,” scolds Cupid for having made his youth miserable with the torments of jealousy and unrequited love. Cupid defends himself by reminding Anacreon that love has given him happiness as well as pain, and then casts a spell to regain Anacreon’s devotion. Cupid’s magic has two effects: Anacreon feels erotic desire and he is simultaneously inspired to compose poetry. “His bosom glows with amorous fire” while he “sings the power and praise of love” (200, 203). Thus, Theodore’s poem links desire with literature, and consequently with narrative, by their simultaneous rebirth in Anacreon.6 Both art and love are engendered by an ideal creative energy. Cupid here personifies more than narrow eroticism; he is the Platonic, Freudian Eros, the embodiment of a force that finds expression in both creation and procreation.

Narrative is also shown to have a performative function in relation to desire; that is, the telling of tales is capable of evoking and empowering desire. Raymond tells Lorenzo his long history in order to gratify two wishes: to retain Lorenzo’s friendship despite his seduction of Agnes (Lorenzo’s sister) and, as a corollary, to fulfill his erotic desires by gaining Lorenzo’s consent to marry Agnes. The seductive power of narrative, not even necessarily one’s own narrative, is illustrated by Raymond’s relationship with Donna Rodolpha, Agnes’s shrewish aunt. In order to win her good will, Raymond spends hours every day reading romances to her and, consequently, she falls in love with Raymond. Donna Rodolpha interprets the attentiveness involved in the act of telling as a sign of love.

The famous mirror episode allegorizes this seductive aspect of narrative. Matilda, the demon-temptress who has corrupted the monk Ambrosio, reveals that she has been able to observe his ac-

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tions in a magic mirror. She encourages Ambrosio to share the power of this talisman with her and he agrees, hoping to see Antonia, whom he obsessively longs to possess. Matilda utters some magic words and thick smoke arises from the “various strange and unknown characters” (268) on the borders of the mirror. It disperses over the surface of the glass to form a series of moving images. Ambrosio gets his wish with a vengeance and beholds Antonia in a particularly provocative situation.

She was undressing to bathe herself. The long tresses of her hair were already bound up. The amorous monk had full opportunity to observe the voluptuous contours and admirable symmetry of her person. . . . Though unconscious of being observed, an inbred sense of modesty induced her to veil her charms; and she stood hesitating upon the brink, in the attitude of the Venus de Medicis. At this moment a tame linnet flew towards her, nestled its head between her breasts, and nibbled them in wanton play. The smiling Antonia strove in vain to shake off the bird, and at length raised her hands to drive it from its delightful harbour. (268–9)

As a result of this fantasy, Ambrosio is so overwhelmed with passion that he decides he must possess Antonia whatever the cost to his body or soul. “‘I yield!’ he cried, dashing the mirror upon the ground: ‘Matilda, I follow you! Do with me what you will!’ ” (269).

The mirror shows Ambrosio a narrative; Antonia’s “bath” consists of a succession of events. The mirror thus creates a text, whose discursive space is defined by the borders that “frame” it, demarcating it from its surroundings and marking it as a visual/narrative object, much like a movie screen. Its status as a verbal as well as a visual icon is asserted, however, by the fact that its images arise from the writing on its borders, thereby mimicking the formation of the written text. Letters constitute pictures on the surface of the mirror much as they constitute words on the written page. The mirror further allegorizes textuality by suggesting (in an exaggerated, parodic fashion) that the reader both produces and is produced by what he reads. Ambrosio passively observes the mirror’s images, which then influence his actions; yet they obey the grammar of his own desire. The narrative may or may not be fictitious—is Antonia really undressing for her bath?—but the important point is that it possesses the literary criterion of verisimilitude—holding the mirror up to nature so to speak. Moreover, because the mirror’s tale accomplishes the seduction of Ambrosio, it is a suitable em-

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blem of the novel that gives rise to it, emphasizing that in *The Monk*, narrative serves the ends of desire. The mirror is thus simultaneously erotic narrative, catalyst of the wicked monk’s desires, and metaphor for the text that contains it.

If Theodore’s poem and Matilda’s mirror suggest that the phenomenon of telling is bound up with desire, this implication is worked out in extended narratives throughout *The Monk*. Agnes’s story, for example, repeatedly associates erotic desire with freedom of articulation; the suppression of her sexuality is always accompanied by the loss of her ability to tell her story (and vice versa). In order to ensure that Agnes will enter a convent, her relatives prevent her from communicating with her brother Lorenzo, who is likely to oppose their plans. The renunciation of Agnes’s sexuality depends upon her silence. Subsequently, when Agnes thinks that Raymond has abandoned her, she becomes a nun of her own free will, an act that involves relinquishing both speech and desire; monastic institutions often require vows of silence as well as of chastity, and they also insist on isolation from the outside world—from the interaction with others in which telling is so important a part. Later, to punish Agnes’s sexual transgression, the abbess virtually buries her alive, holding her prisoner amidst the vaults of the dead. This apparently stifles forever both her ability to articulate her desire and to tell her story. Moreover, Agnes’s incarceration results in the suppression of the knowledge of her “sin” and of its physical evidence, the pregnancy, thereby ensuring the silence of others who might say compromising things about the convent.

Agnes’s story ends with her rescue and consequently, like “Love and Age,” with the rebirth of a character who is near death. More importantly, again as in Theodore’s poem, this regeneration of life also involves the simultaneous return of desire and of narrative. Agnes’s first act following her miraculous recovery is to tell the story of her imprisonment which the text foregrounds as *a narrative* by setting it apart: it appears under the heading “Conclusion of the Story of Agnes of Medina” and ends with a line that visually demarcates it from the remainder of the text in which the narrator resumes his voice. Furthermore, Agnes’s story serves not only to chronicle her sufferings but also to affirm her desire for Raymond, thus once again illustrating that the telling of tales accomplishes the ends of desire. The moral of her story is that her transgression and even her punishment constitute a fortunate fall: “Raymond,” she says, “affection for you betrayed me. . . . Had it not been for the
consequences of that unguarded moment, my resolution [never to see him] had been kept. Fate willed it otherwise, and I cannot but rejoice at its decree” (397).

II

To emphasize the mutual implication of desire and narrative, I have so far been considering desire as an undifferentiated phenomenon. The Monk suggests, however, that there are two types of desire—what I’ll call “good desire” and “bad desire.” This duality corresponds to two valuations of sexuality put forth by Freud at different points in his work. In the earlier work, Freud had viewed sexuality as an essentially subversive force. But by the time he wrote Beyond The Pleasure Principle, he had come to regard the death instinct as destructive and demonic, and to associate sexuality with the constructive life instinct, Eros, “which holds all living things together.” The Monk represents these two versions of sexuality as different forms of desire, associating good desire with the young couples and bad desire with Ambrosio, whose story uncannily and proleptically allegorizes Freud’s own connections between repetition, the death instinct and the uncanny.

Good desire is permissible. Its objects are sexually appropriate and its fulfillment never violates the laws of God or man. Because this desire can speak its name, its desiring subjects, those who feel its power, are aware of its true objects: the displacements which screen improper objects are not necessary. And since it does not generate slippages from object to object, good desire is satiable. When Raymond and Agnes are finally united, they are happy and wish for nothing further. Allowed to run its natural course, the predictable result of good desire is the happy marriage.

Bad desire, on the other hand, is repressed desire, which can never know its true object and is therefore incapable of satisfaction. The violence of repression both perverts it and adds fury to its pent-up force. When it breaks free of its constraints, it takes twisted and destructive forms. The primary exemplar of bad desire is Ambrosio, whose compulsive desire leads him to rape and murder Antonia. Since the text dwells on tracing the development of bad desire rather than good, I will discuss Ambrosio in some detail.

The monks who raise Ambrosio are only too eager to repress his natural instincts. “In order to break his natural spirit, the monks terrified his young mind, by placing before him all the horrors with which superstition could furnish them” (238). These repressed in-

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stincts include "the natural warmth of his temperament" (103) or in other words, his sexuality.10 Even more importantly, the monks encourage Ambrosio's repression of a childhood trauma. At the age of two, he is separated from his mother and placed in the monastery. He is too young to remember his family and the monks keep his past secret. Because Ambrosio never resolves the trauma of sudden separation from his mother, he is unable to bind his past, to make the past truly past. His unknowable and secret desire for his mother haunts him throughout his life and he is obliged to search for its satisfaction through metonymy, always believing that the next object of desire is the real object of desire. It is significant that Ambrosio is one of the few characters who does not tell a retrospective narrative; his view is always forward to the promise of a satisfaction that can never be his.

*The Monk* suggests repeatedly that Ambrosio's unquenchable sexual desire is a displacement of his desire for his mother. He is first sexually aroused by a painting of the Madonna, which he worships privately in his cell. In a particularly uncanny moment, the figure of the mother par excellence (the painted Madonna) is defamiliarized through Ambrosio's recognition of her as an attractive woman, so that the repressed object of his infantile desire becomes the conscious object of his lust. The part of woman's anatomy that Ambrosio finds most irresistible is the breast, the universal synecdoche of the mother. He is first seduced by the sight and touch of Matilda's breast, and he gives in to his impulse to possess Antonia after the vision of her in the magic mirror, a vision that fetishizes her breasts. Moreover, Antonia turns out to be his long-lost sister. This consanguinity suggests that she is a metaphorical substitute for the mother and that Ambrosio unconsciously recognizes his mother in her. His initial feelings for Antonia are appropriately fraternal. But the mother Ambrosio covets is irrevocably lost. Even his name signals her absence, referring to the food of the gods, which mortals crave but are never allowed to taste.

III

If *The Monk* invites us to associate narrative and desire in a general sense, it also suggests that one purpose of writing is to articulate differentiated forms of desire. Once again, the text uses Theodore to make a point about writing itself. Although he is only a minor character, Theodore functions as a figure for the author. He is the only character who professes to be a writer and the only one
who shows his work for judgment.\textsuperscript{11} Theodore's name, which means "gift of god," alludes to a familiar trope of literary composition. Indeed, Theodore's own poem "Love and Age" is an allegory of divine/literary inspiration as well as of the regenerative, constructive power of love.

Theodore's other poem, "The Water King," depicts desire in its destructive form. The eponymous Water King disguises himself as a knight in order to pose as a suitor for the hand of a lovely maid. He carries her off on his steed, ostensibly to take his bride home with him, but instead drowns her in the ocean. While the Water King's ultimate object is the death of the lovely maid, his quest and murder are eroticized through the sexually suggestive language of the poem. The Water King asks his mother, "How I may yonder maid obtain" (284) and on seeing her he exclaims, "Oh! lovely maid, I die for you!" (285). In addition, the Water King's ruse of courtship and his ride with the lovely maid on horseback suggest that the murder is a metonymy for rape as well. (After all, Theodore recites this poem to a group of nuns and can't be too explicit.) The lovely maid is clearly a double for Antonia, another victim of rape and murder. She is even called "lovely maid" by the gypsy who tells her fortune (63).

By illustrating that literature is dominated by the duality of desire, Theodore's poems offer us a crude model of The Monk's own reading and writing: differentiated desire in fact constitutes the structuring principle of the text. The Monk consists of primary and secondary narratives that repeatedly interrupt one another, as if the text itself were in love with narrative and digressed for the sheer pleasure and variety of new narrative lines. The design of these interruptions is not random, however: the difference in the dynamic of the two types of desire operates at the level of structure to determine the plotting of events.\textsuperscript{12}

When we consider the junctures at which the primary narratives intercept one another, a notable pattern emerges. Ambrosio's wishes are always gratified, while those of the good characters are continually blocked. Whenever Ambrosio's narrative is interrupted by one of the other primary narratives, he has just achieved a goal or removed an obstacle to the fulfillment of his desires. But when the narrative line of one of the other main characters is interrupted, it is always at a moment of non-fulfillment. For instance, as soon as Ambrosio has been successfully seduced by Matilda at the end of chapter two, his story is interrupted for the next two chapters, in

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which Raymond tells of his and Agnes’s misadventures. The narrative thus abandons Ambrosio directly following a moment of sexual gratification. Raymond’s narrative then continues through chapters three and four, after which the story changes focus to follow Lorenzo’s courting of Antonia. Although at the end of Raymond’s narrative Lorenzo agrees to help him in another attempt to elope with Agnes, the lovers have yet to be united. Furthermore, the reader knows that Agnes’s plans have been discovered by Ambrosio and revealed to the nuns, and that Raymond’s plan is therefore doomed. The text thus leaves Raymond at a point at which gratification appears distant if not impossible. Given the types of desire associated with these characters, this is obviously an ironic reversal. Although Ambrosio’s designs are never frustrated, Ambrosio himself is never satisfied. For the others, satisfaction is indeed possible, yet their wishes are repeatedly thwarted until the happy ending.

These delays for the good characters are essential to the narrative dynamic of good desire. Their stories are propelled forward by frustration, as are the stories of protagonists in most novels. Moreover, these narrative interruptions are the structural correlates of the deferrals of gratification taking place in the story; that is, the narrative interruptions and the blockages of desire are simultaneous. Consequently, The Monk makes explicit the ordinarily tacit analogy between personal and textual desire; the stories of its characters are interrupted and deferred by other narratives just as the fulfillment of their desires is interrupted and deferred by events in the story.

But Ambrosio’s narrative is plotted according to the dynamic of bad desire and therefore departs from the normative rules of narrative. It seems to proceed from one achieved objective to the next, thereby replicating the trajectory of his desire—a metonymical slide from one point of gratification to the next whose only possible end is death. Although Ambrosio’s story, like those of the good characters, is also about thwarted desire, this desire is qualitatively different: it cannot become conscious and therefore cannot be addressed. Ambrosio’s narrative thus moves forward when his wishes have been fulfilled precisely because such fulfillment is inevitably empty. Frustration propels his narrative forward, although it appears ironically in the guise of fulfillment. While desire remains the driving force of the narrative machinery of Ambrosio’s story, its
plotting follows an unconventional pattern, a deviation which is the sign of his desire’s difference. Following the logic of displaced desire, Ambrosio’s narrative is therefore interrupted at points of accomplishment, moments whose expected enjoyment metamorphose into dissatisfaction as soon as he attempts to savor them. His post-coital depression illustrates this perfectly. After Matilda: “The burst of transport was passed: Ambrosio’s lust was satisfied. Pleasure fled, and Shame usurped her seat in his bosom” (226). And after Antonia: “Scarcely had he succeeded in his design, than he shuddered at himself, and the means by which it was effected” (368).  

The endings of these narratives provide additional instances of the difference in the dynamics of plotting both good and bad desire. The narrative delays for the good characters ensure that their stories will achieve their proper endings. As Peter Brooks observes in Reading for the Plot, narratives typically teeter on the edge of improper endings: “It is characteristic of textual energy in narrative that it should always be on the verge of premature discharge, of short-circuit. The reader experiences the fear—and excitation—of the improper end.” The “formalizations” that give rise to textual delays “create a . . . postponement in the discharge of energy, a turning back from immediate pleasure to ensure that the ultimate pleasurable discharge will be more complete.” The narrative of Raymond and Agnes nearly reaches an improper end both times that they attempt to elope. Were they successful, they would have married without family approval, a guarantee for disaster in The Monk.  

For Ambrosio, of course, these delays are unnecessary since his story cannot have a happy ending. It consists instead of a series of “short circuits.”  

As the narratives of the good characters move toward their conclusions, they progressively merge so that by the end of the novel the stories of Raymond and Agnes and of Lorenzo and Virginia constitute one narrative line.  

This streamlining of plots follows the principle of Eros, which aims “to establish even greater units and to preserve them thus—in short, to bind together.”  

Once again we see that these plots function according to the impulse of constructive, creative desire, desire that has its fulfillment and expression in marriage, another type of binding or union. Ambrosio’s desire, on the other hand, is destructive; it doesn’t bind or build unities but rather shatters and destroys. His narrative follows suit:
it cannot merge with the other narratives but must remain outside them; his story can touch the others only tangentially. Neither his desire nor his narrative operates by binding.

In a final expression of its unbind-ability, Ambrosio’s story is concluded (and excluded) in a chapter that follows the happy ending of double marriages allotted to the other characters. This extension past the conventional ending of the novel figures the boundlessness of Ambrosio’s desire as well. As the energy that fuels Ambrosio’s narrative can never be discharged or contained, and as Ambrosio’s desire always seeks gratification past the expected point of fulfillment, his story continues past the proper ending of the novel, beyond the denouement which is the sign of satisfaction. In a final chapter, a chapter dealing exclusively with Ambrosio and thus structurally underscoring his alienation, he is impaled on the point of a rock by the demon to whom he has sold his soul.

Antonia’s fate also illustrates the otherness of Ambrosio’s narrative. She is caught by the wrong kind of narrative as she is destroyed by the wrong kind of desire. Ambrosio’s seizing of her is a figural as well as a literal kidnapping; she is wrenched away from her proper narrative. If *The Monk* allowed Antonia a conventional novelistic ending, she would be rescued by Lorenzo at the last minute, marry him and live happily ever after. This in fact is more or less the ending of Agnes’s story. This resolution would involve the binding of the two narratives (Lorenzo/Antonia, Raymond/Agnes) through the bonding of the lovers in marriage. In this way, characters and stories would be contained within a symmetrical system of family and love relationships: a sister and a brother would marry a male and female cousin; the rescue of Lorenzo’s cousin (Antonia) would also be the rescue of his sister (Agnes); both matches would overcome the obstacle of familial disapproval. *The Monk* hovers near to this conventional ending. Lorenzo need only have found Antonia a few moments earlier to have saved both her life and her honor. Yet this proper ending is not allowed and she becomes a part of Ambrosio’s story instead, participating in its violence through her victimization.

Even so, this narrative injustice is only temporary, as Lorenzo’s prophetic dream of Antonia’s Clarissa-like ascension to heaven assures us. In this dream, Antonia is carried off by a monster who obviously stands for Ambrosio (cf. The Water King): “His form was gigantic; his complexion was swarthy, his eyes fierce and terrible;
his mouth breathed out volumes of fire, and on his forehead was written in legible characters—‘Pride! Lust! Inhumanity!’” (53). He tries to drag her down with him into the pit of hell but she escapes: “He strove in vain. Animated by supernatural powers, she disengaged herself from his embrace; but her white robe was left in his possession. Instantly a wing of brilliant splendour spread itself from either of Antonia’s arms. She darted upwards, and while ascending cried to Lorenzo, ‘Friend! we shall meet above!’” (53-4). If Antonia is denied a conventional happy ending, she will nevertheless be rewarded with a place in heaven. After all, evil triumphs only temporarily in eighteenth-century novels, although such heavenly victories as Antonia’s and Clarissa’s might be small consolation for earthbound readers. Antonia’s unhappy earthly ending thus serves to thematize the difference between good and bad desire while Lorenzo’s dream of her ascension to heaven preserves the balance of textual justice. Moreover, the positioning of this “ending” within the first chapter of the text—the reverse of Ambrosio’s ending which occurs after the “end”—assures us that Antonia’s story ultimately binds with the others: as her ending is included firmly within the center of the narrative, her story will ultimately return to its rightful narrative line, even though this convergence must take place beyond the boundaries of the text.

IV

The Monk’s explorations of desire and its narrative consequences are framed by the related issue of marriage, which underscores the significance of desire as a social as well as a personal phenomenon. The Monk abounds in marriages and, as we have seen, marriage is constitutive of both good desire and the conventional happy ending. But as The Monk differentiates desire itself, so it also investigates the possibility of different types of marriages. And as it valorizes good desire, it endorses a relatively recent marital ideal, the marriage for love, and concomitantly, a new definition of love itself.

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a shift in the ideology of the upper and middle ranks of English society to a new marital ideal that privileged the desires of the prospective spouse as the proper foundation for marriage. According to Lawrence Stone, who calls this ideal the companionate marriage, “Choice [of a spouse in this type of marriage] is made by the children themselves, on the understanding that it will be made from a family of more or less equal financial and status position,
with the parents retaining the right of veto.”\textsuperscript{18} In other words, the marriage for love was seen as not only respectable, but desirable. This vision of marriage stood in opposition to an older, aristocratic ideal, the marriage of interest, which regarded marriage as a means to further the political, social or economic interests of the family and denied children any choice in the marriage decision. As Erica Harth notes, “this felt moral imperative among England’s upper classes marked a notable change from an earlier period in which these classes wanted the matrimonial motives of prudence and affect kept separate and distinct.”\textsuperscript{19} The marriage of interest had to compete with the marriage for love by which it was eventually supplanted in all but the highest ranks of society.

While romantic love was certainly nothing new, the ideal type of love associated with the new marriage was somewhat different: a hybrid of passion and reason.\textsuperscript{20} It in fact resembles what I have called good desire: it is involuntary but not compulsive; strong but not destructive. Yet one need only pursue its definition a bit further to see that this new ideal, or ideology rather, contains inherent contradictions. Love must be both rational and irrational, considered yet spontaneous.

Readers of Richardson will immediately recognize this logical double bind, which repeatedly appears in particularly transparent forms throughout his novels. In \textit{Sir Charles Grandison}, for instance, Harriet Byron assures her friend Lucy Selby that Lucy need not be ashamed of having fallen in love. “What better assurance can I give to my Uncle, and to all my friends, that if I were caught, I would own it, than by advising you not to be ashamed to confess a sensibility which is no disgrace, when duty and prudence are our guides, and the object worthy?”\textsuperscript{21} The paradox is clear: the lover must be “caught,” surprised by love, yet at the same time guided by motives that preclude such a passive and unconsidered entanglement. When Harriet herself falls in love, she pines and grows pale like any conventional courtly lover, yet it is Grandison’s goodness that attracts her, not his looks or position, the usual motives for marriages of either sexual passion or of interest. These Richardsonian paradoxes form a point of departure for the ideologies of love that haunt the novel throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

If the various ranks of society waged an ideological debate over the virtues of love as opposed to interest, everyone agreed that of all the motivations for marriage, sexual passion was the most immoral,
the most to be feared, abhorred, and above all, avoided. In this light, the double bind of the new ethos becomes doubly problematic: how does one distinguish this new form of love that comprises passion as well as reason from bad desire? Furthermore, how does one make this distinction while retaining the spontaneity and involuntariness that distinguishes the new ideal from interest? Our consideration of the conflation of narrative and desire has already yielded an answer for The Monk. As we have seen, The Monk insists that desire takes an essential form—it must be either good or bad—and asserts the validity of this distinction by turning it into a narrative principle. Only through this recourse to essentialism—by a repeated insistence on this differentiation of desire at both the surface and depths of the text—could The Monk maintain the distance between lust and love.

The Monk therefore endorses good desire simply because it is good, even when it is transgressive or threatening to established authority. Agnes and Raymond break two important rules—unforgiveable breaches in most other contemporary novels. They attempt to elope after Agnes’s family has forbidden their union and they make love before marriage, in the convent garden no less! Both of these errors have elements in common with bad desire, for they express the lack of restraint and defiance of the moral code that governed the new ideal. Both elopement and sex before marriage, even between engaged couples, were transgressive according to sexual codes that governed the behavior of both the middle and aristocratic ranks.

Although Agnes and Raymond must expiate their sins through intense suffering (and characteristically Agnes suffers far more than Raymond), they are eventually absolved by both religious and secular authorities. The Cardinal Duke of Lerna pardons Agnes, granting her dispensation from her monastic vows and permission to marry. Her brother Lorenzo, now the head of their family, also forgives Agnes and approves her marriage. Moreover, The Monk presents their transgressions in a sympathetic light; textual affect is all on their side. Raymond’s account of his seduction of Agnes is an eloquent description of the natural, forgiveable impulses to which they succumbed:

Reflect upon our situation, our youth, our long attachment. Weigh all the circumstances which attended our assignations, and you will confess the temptation to have been irresistible: you will even pardon me when I acknowledge that, in an un-
guarded moment, the honour of Agnes was sacrificed to my passion. (193)

Finally, these secret meetings and attempts to elope are not motivated by love alone. They are also a response to the fact that Agnes is being forced to lead a monastic life she no longer wants. As in the case of Clarissa Harlowe, extenuating circumstances excuse actions that strictly speaking are wrong.

In a sense, the trials of Agnes and Raymond represent the purging of all taint of bad desire from their love, and the distinction of the new and paradoxical sensibility from the destructive forms of passion with which it was in danger of being identified. The need for this catharsis explains why the first elopement conjures up the ghost of the Bleeding Nun, another exemplar of bad desire, whose likeness Agnes assumes in order to escape her aunt’s castle.24 In a macabre chiasmus, Raymond’s and Agnes’s mimicking of bad desire, itself figured by Agnes’s disguise as the Bleeding Nun, evokes the real Bleeding Nun who impersonates Agnes dressed as herself. Although the young lovers’ lack of restraint is fundamentally different from the helpless compulsiveness associated with bad desire, its superficial similarity is enough to unleash purgative forces. The Bleeding Nun is a warning.

Other violations of the prevailing moral code evoke similar trials. Elvira (the mother of Antonia and Ambrosio) is the daughter of a cobbler who elopes with a nobleman. To flee the wrath of his family over this unequal marriage, they are forced to exile themselves to Cuba where the hard living conditions destroy most of their family. Marguerite, the mother of Theodore, lives “in sin” with a man who is compelled by economic necessity to become a robber. At his death, his wicked brother forces her to marry him despite her repugnance, and to witness the bloodshed from which her first lover had shielded her. Yet as with the love of Raymond and Agnes, the loves of these characters are forms of good desire gone somewhat astray. Marguerite speaks for all when she explains to Raymond, “My nature was licentious and warm, but not cruel: my conduct had been imprudent, but my heart was not unprincipled” (139). Only Elvira’s life ends tragically with her murder at Ambrosio’s hand, and this is an instance of the type of narrative deviation we saw in Antonia’s story, and hence only a temporary, earthly mishap. In The Monk’s system of reward and punishment, only the perpetrators of bad desire are condemned to the ultimate and irrevocable punishment of eternal damnation. If these judgments
sometimes seem illogical, it is because the text itself replicates the contradictions within the new ideology of love.

The problems of desire that The Monk resolves through its plotting—problems whose solution yields a form of desire that is appropriate to society—are precisely the issues that worried realistic fiction and the novel of manners throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Marriage was the idée fixe of the English novel and for each novel to arrive at the right marriage for its protagonists (the proper ending), improper alternatives had to be considered and rejected. As in The Monk, the method of novel after novel was to represent a spectrum of possible sexual relationships in order to differentiate and select among them. Each novel’s solution was itself part of a larger body of novelistic discourse that continually asserted, defended, and eventually modified the ideology of love.

Although representations of the new marital ideal were primary concerns of the novel, the significance of this ideal extended beyond the separate sphere of novel readers and beyond the “personal” issues of love and marriage. For the defense of the marriage for love—the right kind of love, that is—was emblematic of an extensive defense of Enlightenment values, including, most importantly, the value of individual desire. As is well known, individual desire was the prime mover of Enlightenment philosophy and subsequently of revolutionary discourse. Men have a right to “the pursuit of happiness,” happiness being a chameleon signifier for individual will. Marriage was simply one area of the social field in which the right to exercise individual desire (through the choice of a spouse) had gained validity.

Yet, while the assertion and valorization of individual desire must be the starting point of an ethos based on subjectivity, the society that gives rise to that ethos must distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable personal wishes if it is to continue to exist at all. Taken to an extreme, the Enlightenment emphasis on individual choice was in danger of resembling pure anarchy, much as good desire was in danger of collapsing into its opposite. The individuation of a “good” desire therefore constituted the very ground of possibility for an ideal, enlightened society. In her discussion of Rousseau’s Social Contract, Nancy Armstrong observes that a society constituted by the social contract was a theoretical
impossibility unless some provision were made to mold individual desire to the proper form: "Something must be there from the beginning to individuate and direct each man's desire toward the common good."28 For Rousseau, and to some extent in The Monk (at least as far as Ambrosio is concerned), this individuating force is shown to be education. The differentiation of desire, in other words, was an issue at all levels of the superstructure, social, political, and philosophical. Taking into account the need to ensure that desire took the correct form, both The Monk and The Social Contract, as well as countless other eighteenth-century texts, insist on the value of desire as a ground of all thought and action.

The corollary of the right to self-fulfillment is the right to self-expression: in order to make one's desires known one must be able to voice them, even with impunity. Paine's Rights of Man, for instance, is concerned primarily with insisting on these two freedoms. As a novel that defends and ratifies such values, The Monk follows suit, associating self-expression with individual desire through its alignment of desire and narrative. If The Monk represents social desire in the register of the erotic, a common trope of gothic writing, narrative functions as a synecdoche of all forms of discourse. It is the privileged form of expression for both characters and narrator; there is very little that is not articulated through the telling of tales, either framed or unframed. As we have seen, the silencing of narrative, of the telling or even the knowledge of one's story, is a mark of oppression.

Finally, The Monk asserts the value of individual desire through its condemnation of characters and forces that deny the individual's right to the pursuit of happiness. It shows that disastrous consequences, including the intervention of the supernatural, are incurred only when characters respond to oppressive forms of authority. While disaster is always evoked by some form of rebellion, the chain of causality begins not with the rebels but with the tyrants. As Ronald Paulson notes, both Ambrosio's destructive sexuality and the angry citizens' attack on the convent are cases of justification followed by horrible excess. Ambrosio deserves to break out and the mob is justified in punishing the evil prioress, but Ambrosio's liberty leads him to the shattering of his vow of celibacy, to repression, murder and rape not unlike the ecclesiastical compulsion against which he was reacting: the mob not only destroys the prioress but . . . the whole community and the convent itself.29

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The criticism of abusive authority had obvious political significance in the late eighteenth century, a point which *The Monk* underscores by topical allusions to the real events in revolutionary France. To name some salient instances: Sister Ursula condemns the guilty nuns using the rhetoric of the revolution (*J'accuse*), and the destruction of the convent recalls the massacres of September 1792.30 Tyrants in *The Monk* are therefore always identified with the ancien régime which the text figures as both parents (and parent figures such as Agnes’s aunt) and monastic institutions. Where it shows conflict between generations, parents, who are literally older, represent an older aristocratic ethos. Agnes’s parents, by insisting she take the veil and denying her the power of veto, follow the aristocratic marital code, here forcing her into a marriage with God. The association of Catholicism, and particularly monasticism, with oppressive authority is conventional.

This is not to say that *The Monk* condones revolutionary violence but rather that it insists that such violence is rooted in injustice. While bourgeois desire might lead to occasional but recuperable abuses, the aristocracy alone is capable of creating monsters of excess. Ambrosio is himself the product of a society that deprives people of their “natural rights,” condoning everything from forced and loveless marriages to class exploitation. When the monks deprive Ambrosio of his hereditary rights, including the right to lawful desire, he in turn becomes a tyrant. It is not surprising that Ambrosio resembles that stereotypical, aristocratic figure, the rake; his spiritual relative is Lovelace. The parallels with *Clarissa* that echo throughout the text are not gratuitous, for they form part of its critique of aristocratic tyrants, both real and literary.31

VI

In light of its defense of individual liberties, *The Monk*’s publication history provides an ironic footnote to its content. Under the pressure of adverse criticism and the threat of legal prosecution, Lewis amended the fourth edition, taking out all words and episodes that could be construed as indecent or offensive.32 *The Monk* was criticized for several reasons, first and not surprisingly for its explicit sexual content; sexual desire and fulfillment are not couched in circumlocutions and euphemisms as they are in other eighteenth-century novels. Secondly, as Marilyn Butler notes, unusual literature was often suspect in the reactionary 1790s: “All the more innovatory styles of 1760 to 90 were to fall under suspicion for
political reasons in an England at war with a revolutionary enemy. Alarmists . . . at different moments detected subversion in an entire range of fashions acceptable in the 1780s.33 Needless to say, The Monk's allusions to the French Revolution didn't help matters. Finally, and this is perhaps the most interesting of The Monk's controversies, contemporary readers objected to the novel because it advocated expurgating the Bible for young readers. Elvira gives Antonia an abridged copy of the Bible because the complete edition, which "frequently inculcates the first rudiments of vice, and gives the first alarm to the still sleeping passions" (258), is not suitable: "Many of the narratives can only tend to excite ideas the worst calculated for a female breast: every thing is called plainly and roundly by its name; and the annals of a brothel would scarcely furnish a greater choice of indecent expressions" (258). This is certainly an unexpected passage in a novel that implicitly argues for freedom of expression. These sentiments, however, belong not to the narrator (or the implied author) but to Elvira, whose overly scrupulous protection of Antonia's innocence does more harm than good.34 The danger of remaining ignorant of vice and sexuality is a dominant theme in The Monk. Such ignorance allows Antonia to be easily manipulated by Ambrosio's clumsy machinations. Ambrosio's supreme ignorance in the form of untested virtue is responsible for his downfall. Paradoxically, the one passage of The Monk that argues for censorship against the grain of the rest of the novel (which certainly contains indecent expressions worthy of the annals of a brothel and which was certainly intended for female readers) was seized on by critics to enforce censorship of the novel as a whole. As a result of this censorship, the suppression of sexuality and the suppression of narrative were connected outside the text as well as within. The Monk was thus inadvertently caught in a conflict that involved its own themes of individual desire and oppressive authority, ironically demonstrating just how timely and important these issues were for Lewis's contemporary readers.

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NOTES

1 Matthew G. Lewis, The Monk, ed. Louis F. Peck (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1959), 204. All further references will be to this edition and will appear in the text.

2 The literature on narrative and desire is extensive. A short list of central texts would include the following: Roland Barthes, S/Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York:


4 Following Sedgwick, I am using the word “theme” to encompass both subject-matter and ideas. See Sedgwick, “Character in the Veil,” 268.

5 Some of my categories overlap. For example, Raymond’s long reminiscence of his relationship with Agnes also constitutes one of the primary narratives.

6 Verses in The Monk that are characterized as poetry per se as opposed to hymns or songs are always narrative. In this way, literary production seems to be tagged as narrative.

7 Raymond F. Hilliard argues that all eighteenth-century fiction is critical of desire. But Hilliard does not take into account the nicety of distinction with which the literature itself was concerned. The novels he discusses, including The Monk, are critical of characters who are motivated by the wrong kind of desire or alternatively, whose desire is directed at inappropriate objects. Even Johnson’s Rasselas (a key text for Hilliard), which seems to be about the futility of desire, implicitly endorses the desire for heaven. See Raymond F. Hilliard, “Desire and the Structure of Eighteenth-Century Fiction,” in Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture, Vol. 9, ed. Roseann Runte (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 357–370.


9 Good desire can, however, transgress social codes. Its objects can be inappropriate, but never illegal. See in the text below.

10 This phrase is used as a euphemism for Ambrosio’s sexual desire: “At length his attachment to the feigned Rosario [Matilda], aided by the natural warmth of his temperament, seemed likely to obtain the victory [Matilda’s seduction]” (103, italics mine).

11 Raymond’s lecture to Theodore about writing (which includes the quotation that begins this article) suggests that he is familiar with the trials of authorship. As Howells comments, “The language and sentiments are reminiscent of Lewis’s verse preface to The Monk and we cannot help identifying the voice of Theodore’s amiable critic with the author’s own voice in a private and prophetic dialogue with
himself” (66). Nevertheless, as Raymond himself tells us, he is much more of a lover than an author. In any case, we never see his literary compositions.

12 Following Peter Brooks, I use the word “plotting” rather than “plot” to suggest “the dynamic aspect of narrative . . . that which moves us forward as readers of the narrative text.” See Reading for the Plot, 35.

13 “In The Monk . . . the hero’s main recurrent motive for further action is post-coital depression: Ambrosio transgresses over and over, in thought and deed, against virginity and modesty, and after each transgression his heart becomes “despondent.” Sedgwick, “Character in the Veil,” 257.

14 For the quotations, see Brooks, Reading for the Plot, 109, 101–102. Elvira’s unsanctioned marriage results in the misery of her family, her separation from Ambrosio and ultimately if indirectly in her own murder and in Antonia’s rape and murder.

15 Lorenzo eventually marries Virginia, a substitute for Antonia, as her name, which connotes purity, indicates. Introduced near the end of the novel, her only function in terms of the narrative is to provide Lorenzo with a happy ending; she is of no consequence otherwise.


17 Compare Lorenzo’s dream with Lovelace’s dream in Clarissa: “I thought I would have clasped her in my arms: when immediately the most angelic form I had ever beheld, vested in transparent white, descended from a ceiling, which, opening, discovered a ceiling above that, stuck round with golden cherubs and glittering seraphs, all exulting: Welcome, welcome, welcome! and, encircling my charmer, ascended with her to the region of seraphims; and instantly, the opening ceiling closing, I lost sight of her, and of the bright form together, and found wrapped in my arms her azure robe (all stuck thick with stars of embossed silver), which I had caught hold of in hopes of detaining her; but was all that was left me of my beloved Miss Harlowe.” Samuel Richardson, Clarissa (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 1218.


Stone gives the following as the motives for the companionate marriage: “personal affection, companionship and friendship, a well-balanced and calculated assessment
of the chances of long-term compatibility, based on the fullest possible knowledge of the moral, intellectual and psychological qualities of the prospective spouse” (271). While my definition of the sort of love that ideally motivates the marriage of love includes these qualities (e.g., Raymond is Agnes’s friend as well as her lover), passion is also a motive. See in the text below.

19 Harth, 124.

20 Harth comments on the rise of this new ideal, which she defines in terms similar to my own: “In the eighteenth century a new affective constellation of desire and prudence called ‘sentiment’ came to have a moral value when attached to marriage” (124). Harth associates the rise of a new ideal of love with virtue in particular.

Romantic love is different from this new ideal. Stone defines romantic love, which he associates with literature, as “a disturbance in the mental equilibrium resulting in an obsessive concentration upon the virtues of another person, a blindness to all his or her possible defects, and a rejection of all other options or considerations, especially such mundane matters as money” (272). In the list of motives for marriage, I would distinguish this from sexual passion, although romantic love, like the new ideal, comprises sexuality as one of its features. The Monk, however, conceptualizes love in a simple fashion, dividing it between sexual passion, interest and the “new love.” I am therefore leaving romantic love out of my discussion of The Monk; nevertheless, it is crucial for other contemporary novels.


22 “Evidence of hostility to sexual desire as a basis for choice of a marriage partner can be found in every commentator of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (Stone, 281). Love can refer either to traditional romantic love or the new ideal I am defining.

23 Harth also observes this dilemma: “Socially acceptable love was a denial of the two ‘extremes’ of sex and money” (146).

24 The Bleeding Nun is one of Raymond’s ancestors. She is murdered by her lover after a short life, replete with lust and murder. She appears at Donna Rodolpha’s castle at the stroke of midnight once a year.

25 The question of the gothic’s similarity to other fictional modes conjures up an old debate. Earlier critics tended to view the gothic as an escapist form of literature and an aberration in the development of the novel, whereas more recent critics have tended to focus on its similarity to other novels in terms of audience, theme and convention. Critics who make a point of the gothic’s relatedness to other fictional modes include most recently David Punter, The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day (London and New York: Longman, 1980), who discusses the audience of the gothic, and Eve Sedgwick, who in The Coherence of Gothic Conventions (New York: Arno Press, 1980) and “Character in the Veil” discusses formal conventions. Howells maintains that the gothic has much in common with more realistic modes, but its unrealistic devices and characters offer a protective distancing for the reader. This is “the secret appeal of Gothic fiction, whose deliberate mode is to separate passion and instinct from everyday life, so allowing their indulgence but effectively controlling the threat of the irrational by forcing it back into the realms of fantasy” (79).

26 In the nineteenth century, the novel gradually began to shift to the modern point of view, which endorses the marriage for love no matter what the difficulties or social disparities of the lovers. Novels of the eighteenth century generally insist on appropriate social matches (still sanctioned by love).

27 Of course, Enlightenment ideas about individual liberty almost always applied exclusively to men. I am arguing, however, that marriage (the personal sphere) was
one area in which women were beginning to be accorded certain natural rights. For the right to exercise individual desire, see Stone, 273. "It is obvious that at the root of both these changes in the power to make decisions about marriage, and in the motives that guided these decisions, there lie a deep shift of consciousness, a new recognition of the need for personal autonomy, and a new respect for the individual pursuit of happiness."


31 Paulson notes that "Gothic and Jacobin novels had a similar ancestry in Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa*.” “Gothic Fiction and the French Revolution,” 538. Howells notes that "the obvious model for the main narrative of sexual obsession is Richardson’s *Clarissa*” (64).

32 For a fascinating account of the various controversies accompanying the publication of the *The Monk* see Andre Parreaux, *The Publication of “The Monk”: A Literary Event 1796–1798* (Paris: Didier, 1960). It is not known, however, whether Lewis was prosecuted or not but the likelihood is that he responded to threats. See Parreaux, 112–14.


34 This statement is gender-coded: the Bible’s danger lies in its capacity to excite the passions in the female breast. Again, this is Elvira’s erroneous opinion. This is not to deny that *The Monk* is a deeply misogynistic text. With the exception of Ambrosio’s gruesome death, women do all the physical suffering (which the text depicts in agonizing detail) and are punished far more severely than men even when both are equally guilty as in the case of Raymond and Agnes. Nevertheless, *The Monk*’s misogyny is complicated in the same way as that of Hitchcock’s films: at the same time that it tortures women, it also exposes their oppression and criticizes patriarchy. There are few other (if any) eighteenth-century novels addressed to a middle/upper-class readership that would allow a fallen woman such as Agnes to make a happy marriage and to retain her position within her class and country.