

'Ambrosio' Taylor Coleridge: Investigating Three Issues in Banning *The Monk*

Derek Lantz

Abstract

This paper investigates the banning in 1897 of Matthew Lewis's novel *The Monk*, taking special interest in the dismissal of the text by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Sources reveal how British decency laws and the French Revolution together create a public repression which the Gothic novel both threatens and relieves in the 1890s. By highlighting journalistic reliance on Gothic terminology, the paper argues that banning art to protect citizenry is often a result of public insecurity rather than immoral content.

Introduction

The Monk was labelled dangerous to its audience. This happens to art sometimes. Of Ambrosio, titular monk of Matthew Lewis's 1796 novel Gothic novel, fellow character Lorenzo says, "His established reputation will mark him out to Seduction as an illustrious Victim... Very few would return victorious from a contest so severe" (174). When art offends someone, they often describe it in similar terms, a temptation towards moral failing. *The Monk* was characterized as so seductive to the moral fabric of its readership that the book was ultimately banned. Contextualizing *The Monk's* censure, however, reveals a blind spot in English morals, stemming more from national repression and political anxiety than immoral art. National panic over the French Revolution and a need to define Englishness by personal restriction makes clear that Lewis's novel was removed from the hands of readers not for inciting immoral acts, but highlighting them.

Issue #1: Artists Aren't Art

Critical reception to Lewis's novel varied. Great praise came to him for his poetry, his mastery of prose, and his deft reworkings of folktale (Montague, 38). Once he added his name to the second edition, however, *The Monk* came under severe critical outrage. Lewis was forced to submit redacted sections for the third through fifth editions to keep his chair in Parliament (Bomarito, 33).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge highlights the novel's sensuality in his infamous dismissal of *The Monk*: "Both the shameless harlotry of Matilda, and the trembling innocence of Antonia, are seized with equal avidity, as vehicles of the most voluptuous images. The most painful impression which the work left on our minds was that of... great genius employed to furnish a *mormo* for children, a poison for youth, and a provocative for the debauchee" (48). In the eighteenth-century, "not admitting to carnal thoughts or activities seemed to be an English speciality" (Langford, 161). In fact, it was not until shortly before Lewis completed *The Monk* that the emotional extremes of Gothic fiction became palatable to the Brits. "As late as 1788 [the Gothic] seemed no more than a passing fad, and might very well have remained had the events

of the French Revolution not given a new relevance to the genre” (Crawford, 71). The whole fad derives from a need for an emotional outlet.

In “An Apology for *The Monk*” the pseudonymous ‘A Friend To Genius’ notes how critical reception went beyond a review of the novel to claim a failure of character in Lewis himself (Anonymous, 48). The idea of an artist’s moral character being inextricably linked to their produced art rises from, as novelist Fenimore Cooper described, “a nation where propriety pervades society from its summit to its base” (1832). Historian Paul Langford defines propriety as “enter[ing] into the religion, morals, politics, the dwelling, the dress, the equipages, the habits, and, one may say, all the opinions of the nation” (Langford, 159). England is, at the time of Lewis writing *The Monk*, a place where decorum was instilled, ‘to the point of dullness” (Langford, 157). In this context, the inherent emotional responses caused by art makes artists seem dangerous to the moral fabric of English society.

Coleridge seems acutely aware of the Terror genre’s corrupting ability for daring to expose readers to what the English viewed as literally unspeakable: their own emotions. He opens his review of *The Monk* by saying, “[Cheaply] as we estimate romances in general, we acknowledge, *The Monk: A Romance*, a work of no common genius” (46). This general distaste for the Gothic mode is little explored in his review of *The Monk* but serves as a grounding focus for his dismissal. Even in decrying Lewis’s genre, he is forced to admit the art has value in its execution. For a critic operating under this mentality, if the craft is undeniably strong, it is the *effect* of the artist’s work which must be held in contempt. Here, Coleridge conflates artist and audience. The effect of art occurs in the audience, not the artist, and is personal to each individual. Artists do not define the interpretation of their work. This mistake is pervasive in English morality of the eighteenth century. As the Swede Geijer put it, “the English could not practise vice with decency” (19). It is perhaps a personal response to the novel which so drives Coleridge’s projections that others would be sexually corrupted in response to it.

More than the effects of art, Coleridge is afraid that an artist willing to create indecent art might also be a moral agent in British society, writing, “Yes! The author of *The Monk* signs himself a LEGISLATOR!– We stare and tremble” (48). The English government was so heavily invested in moral quietude that a parliamentary debate was described as “speaking to dead men by torchlight” (Langford, 157). It is this emotional dissonance between Lewis’s two professions which sets off Coleridge and many other critics. Prior to the second edition of *The Monk* being printed in 1796, only one negative review can be found. Once an MP’s name is attached to the title the reviews become nearly universally outraged (Parreaux, 87).

Interestingly, the idea of a morally questionable government official was acutely distressing not for its repugnancy, but its allure. The English concept of decency Coleridge defends is a socially-fabricated bulwark rather than a natural-born trait. The British did not define themselves by their restraint as a display of inherent morality, but as a response to the perceived barbarism with which the island nation had long been defined (Crawford, 46). With “the insecurity the events of the French Revolution had made [English Legislators] feel,” *The Monk* was easy to be used as a scapegoat for the ways such moral backsliding could occur (Crawford, 68). British decency laws form a necessary context to understand reception to Lewis, as the excessive response of the British is partially grounded in the incorrect idea that artists are responsible for the moral character of their audience.

Issue #2: Art Isn't Moral

Coleridge's dismissal illuminates another glaring inconsistency in British decency around the time of Lewis publishing *The Monk*. Consider Coleridge's own Gothic drama, *The Fall of Robespierre* [1794]. Coleridge introduces the work by saying "it has been my sole aim to imitate the impassioned and highly figurative language of the French orators... on a vast stage of horrors" (I). What is immediately striking is this highly emotional register in Coleridge's (and co-author Sothey's) play about Robespierre, which he so despises in Lewis. Joseph Crawford does an excellent job tracking a conjoined rise of journalistic "terror terminology" and the Gothic novel's popularity in *Gothic Fiction and the Invention of Terrorism*, explaining how British journalists reacted to the onset and eventual fallout of the French Revolution by borrowing terms from the popular genre's emotional register. "Gothic writing," he says, "did not so much reflect the events of the Terror as invent them" (Crawford, 42). Phrasing Englishness as increasingly defined by reserve and unemotionality, he continues, "a literature of terror was useful precisely because it could deliver the kind of sharp shocks to the nervous system that were so lacking in modern life" (40). He further highlights how, "there is an unconscious undefinable relationship between the Terrors of the French Revolution and the Novel of Terror in England" (40).

With these fears in mind, "it is impossible to notice the sort of communal psychosis which permeated British society in the 1790s fed by propaganda... which encouraged the British public to comprehend events in France... not as a series of political incidents but as a great moral offence against virtue, nature, and God" (Paulson, 68). Coleridge seems acutely aware of an underlying English immorality when he writes Robespierre declare traitors as, "wish[ing] to clog the wheels of government,/ Forcing the hand that guides the cast machine/ To bribe them to their duty – English patriots!" (Coleridge, 1.1, p. 8) The British man had for centuries been seen as exceedingly violent against his continental brethren (Langford, 28). In response, Britain encouraged civil quiet. Into this stifled, increasingly restrictive culture, Lewis injects passages such as a recently beaten and murdered prioress shown "every insult, the mob loaded her with mud and filth... tore her one from another... spurning her, trampling her..." (Lewis, 390). Seeing violent flames rise on the continent brought panic to the English upper class who saw in their fellow lower-class Britons a similar fire waiting to be kindled, perhaps by reading about Spanish mobs murdering overbearing authority figures.

Yet Coleridge never shies away from using similar Gothic language to describe the leader of the French 'Terrorists' in his own drama. Repeatedly, "a process in which fiction and non-fiction drew upon one another in an evolutionary symbiosis" muddled the register of the English journalist and Gothic novelist (Crawford, 41). The English could not help but use the extreme emotional tone of the Gothic to put words to their real-world fears. Terms of barbarity, despotism, immorality, and sheer violence define Coleridge's Robespierre as readily as they do Lewis's Matilda or Satan. Consider the following passages from both *The Fall of Robespierre* and *The Monk*:

"What! Did th' assassin's dagger aim its point/ Vain, as a dream of murder, at my bosom?" (Coleridge, 5)

“She had torn open her habit, and her bosom was half exposed. The weapon’s point rested upon her left breast.” (Lewis, 203)

“There are who wish my ruin—but I’ll make them/ Blush for the crime in blood!” (Coleridge, 8)

“I threw him on the ground; I grasped him tighter;... Marguerite wresting the dagger from his hand, plunging it repeatedly in his heart...” (Lewis, 237).

“Th’ enthusiast mob, confusion’s lawless sons—” (Coleridge, 11)

“Lorenzo bad the People remember, that She had undergone no trial, and advised them to leave the punishment to the Inquisition.” (Lewis, 389)

Coleridge’s justification is that in his work he vilifies through imitation while in *The Monk* Lewis encourages through imitation. Regardless, his worry that a reader might be emotionally stimulated by Lewis to the point of moral denigration ought to be as easily applied to his own work when they are using the same “*empassioned and highly figurative*” language. It is, after all, exposure to temptation on which he bases his dismissal of *The Monk*. The hypocrisy of critics decrying a genre for licentiousness while writing pieces in the same genre reveals how contradictory English definitions of decency were.

The church, the moral centre of England, might be an authority to preside over the moral debate over art. Like Coleridge, however, its critical responses also don’t find solid ground. The congregation of the Capuchin Church in *The Monk* is introduced as: “collected by various causes, but all of them were foreign to the ostensible motive” (Lewis, 165). Lewis shrewdly saw that the church was not an institution of holiness, but a menagerie of men and women selling something. His church is faithless, a public display; its priests and prioresses actors to an entertainment-seeking public. The contrast between Ambrosio’s social status and his private human nature gives the man a grace high enough to fall from. Reading the pornographic depictions of Ambrosio’s fall happening within the church’s walls encapsulates *The Monk*’s shock value.

The intended shock seems to have happened. Founded by The Society for the Reformation of Principles, *The British Critic* was especially outraged as the novel gained success. Parreaux writes that The Society was “one of the most puissant defenders of Christianity in The British Isles” (89). Strange then that it is not the explicit content, the graphic descriptions of Satan’s genitalia, the hollowness of the Church, nor the undead German spectres which so offends *The British Critic*. Rather, it is Lewis’s passages of the Bible as “indecent” which appears as a critical point in every negative review lobbied against *The Monk*. *The British Critic* are especially offended that Elvira compares the holy book to “the annals of a

Brothel,” in reference to its sexually explicit content (Lewis, 323). Outrage looks more like a competitor’s defensiveness in this context.

Nowhere do critics ask if the characters who live in Lewis’s novel gain or lose by their indecency. An overlooked but key element to Lewis’s work is that nearly every character suffers from the unjust world they live in. Don Raymond marries a dead woman for beating a servant of his love interest for three days. Antonia gives birth in an underground chamber to a dead child for getting pregnant while wearing the vestments of faith. Elvira suffers for spurning the Good Book. These are punishments for sins. The book necessitates the vividness of its imagery by establishing character immorality according to the perspective of the very church *The British Critic* claims is being wounded.

While a moral tale might show a good person’s refusal to fall to temptation, it might equally be framed as a description of the downfall of a person who succumbs. Foreknowledge of immorality prepares citizens to rebuff it. The British were concerned with exposure leading to temptation and decided to remove the offending material altogether. The issue is that sanitation of immoral evidence does not indicate moral standing, rather, moral control.

Issue #3: Women Aren’t Art

The novel is quite brutal and explicit, an often-critiqued trait of Gothic literature. However, where fellow author Shelley put a behemoth of ugly masculinity on the page for a monster, Lewis used femininity to evoke monstrosity. In doing so, his novel came under uniquely fierce criticism. Frederick S. Frank’s 2008 article *A Concordance of Bosoms* takes a comic look at *The Monk*’s eroticism by contextualizing all one hundred and twenty-eight uses of the word ‘bosom’, which seems erroneous until Frank points out that the word occurs once every three and a half pages (2). The constant erotic element suggested to peers that Lewis hid a sexual deviancy. Much of English morality was coded as decency to protect women falling from grace into temptation, a code for losing their virginity before marriage (Langford, 63). Like Penny Dreadfuls to come, *The Monk* was mostly seen as corrupting for women.

While the modern world still represses or denigrates female sexuality, there has been a trend away from regulating it as a legal issue, preferring instead to call it personal dysfunction. Across the twentieth century, Christian morals became no longer foundational to society, replaced with a blend of personal liberty and interpersonal respect in the laws and philosophies of the English. In reality, eighteenth-century “preoccupation with decency had more to do with manners than morals” (Langford, 172). Cooper agrees by saying that in England, “the great mistake is the substitution of the seemly for the right” (4). The English put much effort into seemliness and repressed the discussion of whether their morality went deeper than social norms. *The Monk* challenged this seemliness and was banned. For Britain, “the function of civility was to eliminate potentially irritating oddities of behaviour in the interest of communal life” (Langford, 292). Thus, to attack English sensibility was to attack England herself. It was her social institutions which encouraged a civility unobstructed by personal want or wantonness. It is a call to defend England and Englishness which forced critics to decry *The Monk*, which explains harsh treatment of *The Monk* but does not justify it. It is only acknowledging that one of these ‘irritating oddities of behaviour’ was the feminine sexual experience that fully contextualizes what is so threatening, repulsive, and seductive about *The Monk* to its critics.

Britain was obsessed with “raising girls away from the contaminating influence of worldly men and women, so that they may be taught to ‘reverence themselves’” (Langford, 160). A parallel to Ambrosio’s early seclusion in the church is readily evident. *The Monk* is to the English what the painting of the Madonna is to Ambrosio: at once innocent art, yet steeped in corrupting potential (Lewis, 204). The restrictions which Britain cast over its women in the name of protection were really just restrictions. The French Revolution was described as a falling into barbarity at its time, but now as a necessary political action for reformation. In the same way, women were then valued for little more than their reproductive qualities, whereas we have now rightly located the liberation of their agency as foundational to human justice. Ultimately, England banned *The Monk* out of fear over a moral failing founded on a patriarchal, colonial view of sex, gender, and social roles.

Conclusion: Art Isn’t Immoral Either

Modern critical review of *The Monk* tends to view its explicitness more in line with the unnamed *Friend To Genius* than it does Coleridge. The contexts of a public more interested in entertainment than faith, the untested resolve of moral leaders, repression struggling to remain repressed, and the inability for social institutions to deeply impart morals are now seen to justify *The Monk*’s explicit depictions. In contrast to Coleridge or *The British Critic*, Jack G. Voller in his 2002 synopsis on Lewis calls *The Monk* “the most celebrated novel of Gothic excess, and for good reason” (256). Voller summarizes rather than moralizes on the plot, deciding it “packs as much Gothic energy into its three volumes as possible” (257). The book does not seem as offensive to the sensibilities of the twenty-first century as it did to the eighteenth. Its lack of emotional restraint is now a positive critical point. While still salacious, it is accepted as well-wrought and firmly Gothic. Considering how responses have shifted, the banning of *The Monk* in 1798 is clearly because it was an unfortunate scapegoat to the sexual repression of the time of its production.

Being a critical review of its own society, it is unsurprising that reactions to *The Monk* upon publication were outraged. In reading *The Monk*, the audience was necessarily a double for Ambrosio: naïve to the ways of the world from being brought up in an insular society. Readers were seen not even as Jesus in the desert knowing he will be tempted, but Eve at the apple, kept unaware of discernment by walls built up around them. This is a foolish conception of humans living in the real world though. People need not be protected from art and its responses, but by those who try to define which human emotion is acceptable or not. There is no code of ethics over how one experiences life, only the ways humans might act or respond. On these grounds, no art is moral or immoral, it simply interacts with the morality of human agency.

Crucially, these same systemic repressions are not an incident reflective only of eighteenth-century Britain. Art is banned or labelled dangerous even to this day. People who struggle for freedom still get branded terrorists. Excessive violence is preferable to even modest sexuality in media. “When a whole society loses the capacity to see that its public virtue is a mask for private vice, all become implicated in a gigantic act of self-deception” (Langford, 172). Britain mistook artist for audience, conflated experience and action, and assumed feminine responses were immoral actions. Understanding banning *The Monk* as an incident reflective of

moral sanitation rather than a defence of righteousness, we ought to wonder who will look back at today's banned book lists and scoff at our small-mindedness as we scoff at that of Coleridge today.

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