

***The Monk and Menopause:***  
**Gender, Medicine, and the Gothic in the Long Nineteenth Century**

By Abigail Boucher, Aston University

Set in sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Spain and following the temptation and downfall of a devout monk, Matthew Lewis's 1796 novel *The Monk* became an instant success and an exemplar of the genre that would eventually come to be known as "the Gothic" (Zigarovich 11; Ellis 83, 108; Peck 24, 37; Anderson vii). Lewis's novel, brimming with ghosts, Satanic pacts, murder, incest, bandits, crumbling ruins, religious hypocrisy, and social upheaval, is an embarrassment of Gothic riches. Most significantly for the development of the genre is the novel's tendency to locate narrative anxiety in the Other. Stability and community are threatened in *The Monk* by figures, natural and supernatural, whose motivations and workings cannot fully be comprehended. Women prove to be one of *The Monk's* most consistently Othered Gothic tropes, from the Satanic witch Matilda, to the ghost of the Bleeding Nun, to the tortured and prophetic Agnes, to the innocent Antonia, whose body becomes a source of voyeuristic frenzy for the protagonist and leads to her kidnapping, rape, and murder.

The highly sexualized nature of Lewis's Gothicism has caused many critics to expound upon his often problematic use of gender.<sup>i</sup> One area, however, that remains under-explored is the point in the Gothic field where the female body, medicine, and horror intersect: menopause. Given the prurient tenor of the novel, it is remarkable that Lewis includes just as many menopausal characters—all of whom he portrays as utterly desexualized—as he does easily exploitable and nubile young girls. I argue that Lewis,

whose perspective was supported by the medical discourse of his time, represented menopause as implicitly Gothic. Menopausal women are used in *The Monk* as further set-dressing, with female aging and a cis-gender woman's transition away from childbearing portrayed by Lewis to be a disturbing, shameful, and almost supernatural process. Though menopausal women in this text are conveyed as a minor point of horror amidst Lewis's grander contemplation of religious fanaticism, torture, and rape, his barely-concealed disgust and overt ribaldry at women who can no longer become pregnant illustrates a deep discomfort with the stage of life he did not understand and therefore viewed as an agent of fear.

*The Monk* is hardly the first or last text to represent older women as comic relief or the locus of horror. From Grendel's mother to Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, through the Victorian era's Miss Havisham, Madame Defarge, and Madame Fosco, the twentieth century's Mrs. Danvers, Baby Jane Hudson, and Minnie Castevet, and up to the present day with the identification of the "psycho-biddy" film subgenre (Shelley 1), there seems to be a consistency in art's representation of the (post-) menopausal woman as ludicrous and unsettling.<sup>ii</sup> Although Lewis certainly absorbed and borrowed from previous works, my decision to use *The Monk* as my sole case study is three-fold. Firstly, as already addressed, *The Monk* is largely considered to be one of the cornerstone texts defining the genre, and its influence over subsequent Gothic works is significant. Secondly, and as will be explored further, *The Monk* was written before any major western medical publication on menopause and before any major female-authored publication discussing the experience of menopause for any significant length; Lewis's text evidences an internalisation of the significantly deficient socio-medical rhetoric surrounding menopause.

My final reason for focusing solely on Lewis's text is because *The Monk* most thoroughly explores the limited spectrum of representation for menopausal characters at this time—and, indeed, this spectrum continues to be nearly as limiting today. I have identified three major tropes by which menopausal characters are frequently (and almost exclusively) portrayed, all of which are present in *The Monk*. These three tropes correlate to the potential paths a cis-gender woman might take when she ages out of her child-bearing years. She may become, as I have named them: the Absurd, the Aggressive, or the Appropriate. The first two categories frequently overlap with each other, and are used by Lewis and others to indicate an inherent monstrosity or Gothicism about menopause. The perceived threat of these first two tropes derives largely from the demand of women in these categories to be seen and heard. The last trope, the Appropriate, opposes the first two; a menopausal woman becomes Appropriate by fulfilling society's desire that she be neither seen nor heard, nor takes up any space or resources. The Appropriate conforms to physician Samuel Bard's 1807 advice that menopausal women should pursue "temperance in all things" (79), and reifies Hillary Mantel's classification of menopausal women in society as "the invisible generation", as she titles her article on the subject (Mantel). These tropes will be explored fully below, as they form the basis of my close reading of the text.

Given that my reading of Lewis's novel is centered on gender, I must also address the male- and female-Gothic critical divide, in which Lewis is firmly in the camp of the former. Despite *The Monk*'s transgressiveness on certain matters (such as a monk's sexual attraction to a young boy who turns out to be a cross-dressing woman), I posit that the novel substantively conforms to other early Gothic novels which "make absolutely clear the genre's concern with exploring, defining, and ultimately defending patriarchy"

(Heiland 8). While critics have clarified the divide between male- and female-authored Gothic texts, with the latter serving as “one of the few venues in which women might express [...] their perception of the restraints on feminine experience” (Brock 3), many male-authored Gothic texts reinforce patriarchal authority and the trope of Woman-as-Other: Alison Milbank states that “Women protagonists abound, but they are objectified victims” (11) and Robert Miles argues that early Gothic literature is a site of misogyny where “women become the convenient, stigmatized other, responsible for the fragility, and irrationality, of the masculine self” (63). Lewis ultimately and definitively reinforces patriarchal structures by thoroughly denying his female characters any voice regarding the female experience; further, he overtly ridicules elements of that female experience in his portrayal of menopausal characters.

It must be noted that my application of the term “menopausal” to characters in *The Monk* is somewhat fluid, and includes, for reasons illustrated below, both “pre-” and “post-” menopause. Lewis never directly discusses his characters’ menstrual cycles or reproductive capacity. As the onset age of menopause is hugely variable amongst women and there is no overt reference in the novel to any character’s menstrual status, I am reliant upon two conditions which connote menopause with limited accuracy. The first of these conditions is approximate age, with all female characters over forty falling under the general purview of “menopausal”. Despite menopause being potentially decades away for a forty-year old character, Lewis’s schism between youthful and aged women begins roughly around forty years old. The second condition by which I determine menopause is the language used to depict these female characters, much of which stems directly from medical texts on menopause and aging. In particular I reference language which implies

death and decay, and language which reiterates the character's long past. The unspoken but clearly inferred term in this rhetoric is always "reproductive": reproductive death, reproductive decay, reproductive past. All female characters over the age of forty in this text are described in these terms, and these terms are only applied to female characters over forty. These two conditions are therefore heavily interconnected, and reinforce both each other and my application of the term "menopausal" to them. With the parameters of 'menopausal' thus defined as specifically as the medical and fiction rhetoric allows, it is my intention to avoid categorising characters by such terms as "older" or "mature", as these necessarily imply a baseline of normality: older than what? mature compared to whom? I will adhere as much as possible to categorising characters as physically and physiologically "menopausal", since this is ultimately the demarcating line for Lewis and the term is (despite its necessary fluidity in this article) more accurate.

I must also address, before I may proceed with my analysis of the novel, an abbreviated theoretical framework surrounding studies of menopause. I will also provide a brief history of medical and scientific engagement with menopause up to (and briefly after) the point of *The Monk's* publication in order to illustrate Lewis's assimilation of socio-medical attitudes surrounding menopause, and their perhaps unconscious incorporation into the thematic structures of the novel.

### **Menopause and Theory**

In recent years, gerontology has gained traction in research communities, both in the sciences and the humanities. This is especially true in some feminist groups, which have come to embrace aging as an issue under their purview, either implicitly or through

intersectionality.<sup>iii</sup> Mary O'Brien argues in *The Politics of Reproduction* that western patriarchy in general is shaped by assumptions and interpretations made about reproduction, saying that "it is not within sexual relations but within *the total process of human reproduction* that the ideology of male supremacy finds its roots and its rationales" (8) and, by extension, aging out of that reproductive system carries its own equally problematic social connotations. In her significant examination of menopause in western culture and art, Jeannette King argues that "From the moment we are born, we are all ageing. In Western culture, however, the term 'ageing' implies decline and deterioration and—for women—the loss of sexual identity [...] [W]omen's bodies inevitably become invisible, if not objects of disgust, when they no longer perform the reproductive functions for which they were designed" (xii-xiii). King illustrates over the course of her work that it is not only the perceived irrelevance of menopausal women which causes social unease, but also their demands for voices and agency in spite of that perceived irrelevance. Indeed, the sociological and political responses to the large number of single, older women living in Britain during the nineteenth century has been well-documented (King 16-18; Boehm, Farkas, and Zwierlein 1-2); although on the surface the issue was presented as an economic one, the rhetoric frequently veers toward Gothicising older women. Beginning by portraying older women as an unproductive, surplus demographic and a drain on community resources, some nineteenth-century commentators made a short leap to qualifying older women as monstrous. Or, in the words of English essayist W.R. Greg in his definitively titled 1862 article, "Why are women redundant?", single older women are "abnormal", "indicative of an unwholesome social state" and a "distorted civilisation" (436; 440).

Mike Hepworth, who has authored dozens of academic texts on aging, asserts that “age is still at the stage where gender and race used to be: hidden by its supposed foundation in the body” (141). It is this supposition which continues to make age such a relevant lens through which we can read texts of the long nineteenth century—because when it comes to concepts of age and menopause, we have never fully left the long nineteenth century. Modern understanding of the long nineteenth century places an often inextricable link between the body and personal value, be it moral, intellectual, economic, or social value. Body theorists Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla argue that in the long nineteenth century, “the belief that moral character and psychological features were fundamentally tied to biology came to the fore with a vengeance” (1); in her work on disease and the body, Pamela K. Gilbert provides a class-based reading, stating that “in the same way that phrenology located character in anatomy [c]lass could be read as an essential trait, in the way that gender was” (67). I extend Gilbert’s argument to include amongst other external readings of internal character (and vice versa) the “essential trait” of age, which gained its essentialism perhaps more subtly than any other.

### **Menopause and Medicine**

For all that menopause is significantly under-discussed today, it was considerably less discussed at the end of the eighteenth century, with European physicians only just beginning to undertake serious research on the subject (O’Dowd 359). In part, this is because women’s medical issues in general were not as well-documented or researched as men’s medical issues (or those in which the sex of the patient was irrelevant). It wasn’t until 1703 that an English work on women’s cycles was written (John Freind’s *Emmenologia*), although this text did not focus on menopause specifically; and it wasn’t

until 1733 that anyone even bothered to publish an illustration of a female skeleton (Gallagher and Laqueur ix). Freind's *Emmenologia* was followed by William Buchan's 1769 lay medical guide, *Domestic Medicine*, which amongst other things, contained a section on women's medicine. Buchan wasn't the first to write this sort of medical text, but his was easily the most successful. Rather embarrassingly for the medical field, Buchan's guide remained one of the leading pieces of research on menstruation and menopause for roughly 100 years (see Wendy Mitchinson's 1991 *The Nature of Their Bodies; Women and Their Doctors in Victorian Canada*; Jordanova 33). It speaks volumes about society's attitudes toward older women that one of the most prominent works on menopause provided only a casual and considerably outdated understanding of the process.

We must, of course, consider that on the rare occasions in which menopause was written about at all in the eighteenth-century, it was also largely from a male perspective; it must be assumed that the very foundation of Lewis's social and medical knowledge about menopause was already influenced by gender biases and inaccuracies built into the scientific system. In fact, Jeannette King avers that the failings of medical research on menopause are directly responsible for the negative eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artistic portrayals of older women, saying, "These caricatures were, however, merely endorsing the dominant medical and sociological discourses of the period, which laid the foundation for the ideological construction of older women as undesirable surplus" (3). With the under-representation of women and women's biological or health issues in general, it is hardly surprising that conditions and processes pertaining to older women were further erased from the conversation.

At the time of Lewis's writing, menopause did not even have a clinical word ascribed to it. The term menopause was only introduced (as "*menespausie*") in 1816 by French physician Charles Louis Pierre de Gardanne, who wrote the first major work on menopause (O'Dowd 359), although there wouldn't be an equivalent English-language text until physician Edward Tilt wrote *On Diseases of Menstruation and Ovarian Inflammation* (1851) and *On the Elements of Health and Principles of Female Hygiene* (1853), more than thirty years after Lewis's death. Until this point, menopause was instead referred to in euphemistic and frequently negative terms as "the Climacteric", "the Climacteric Disease", "the changes", "Indian summer", "suppressed menstruation", "the last great crisis", and "the physical Rubicon", among many others. The term "Climacteric" is derived from the Greek *klimakter* or *klimax*, meaning "a rung of a ladder", with the image of a ladder standing in as a metaphor for the span of human life: each rung equals a period of seven years, with the ninth rung, or the sixty-third year, being the "grand climacteric" (O'Dowd 359).

Given the euphemistic nature of eighteenth-century language surrounding menopause, its lack of clinical terminology, and the scarcity of scientific research on it in general, it is unsurprising that menopausal women were viewed and portrayed in popular literature in terms of reduced identity. Taking into account, as well, that at the time of *The Monk*'s composition a great majority of women did not live to see menopause, it is perhaps easy to understand Lewis's connections between menopause, death, and the Gothic. (O'Dowd and Philipp 317) Although some medical professionals described menopause more benignly, others were not above connecting menopause directly to the supernatural: one medical writer in 1851 claimed that a menopausal woman "is little less than a she-

fiend” (anon. 35). With medical and scientific communities referring to it in hushed tones, using language that connotes death, decay, and horror and—due to the short average lifespan of women—the relative scarcity of menopause in the general populace at the time, the very concept seemed to be embedded in terms of Otherness and the unknown. Menopause is therefore coded as both unknown and sinister; it renders one insignificant and yet at the same time abominable. This medical coding of older women’s bodies provides Lewis with the perfect Gothic trappings to furnish his novel.

### **Menopause and *The Monk***

As discussed in the introduction, Lewis funnels his menopausal characters into three main streams of clichéd representation, which I have named the Absurd, the Aggressive, and the Appropriate. Although he is hardly the first to do so and was, in fact, merely repeating previously ingrained socio-medical tropes, Lewis nevertheless helped to legitimize such perspectives in Gothic fiction through his adherence to them.

#### The Absurd

The Absurd menopausal woman creates an easy introductory space to prepare readers for the forthcoming Gothic horror of Lewis’s novel, in large part because the anxiety she creates is easily muffled by, or at least equally accompanies, the laughter she generates. The Absurd menopausal woman is characterized by her ignorance of the opinions of those around her, her continued adherence to sexual identity and romantic desire, and her persistent belief that she is young, beautiful, and desirable. She is frequently portrayed as pitiable, simpering, vain, and lustful over young and handsome men who have no interest in her. Jeannette King argues that in popular culture, the attempt of a woman to avoid the

“monstrous condition” of menopause “becomes the occasion for ridicule” (15), but although “the Old Maid might be caricatured and ridiculed, the laughter to which she gave rise concealed the fear generated by all these women existing outside the bounds of marriage” (18). Both the horror and humor of the Absurd woman spring from the perceived grotesqueness of her insistence on a sexual life (despite the views of the narrator and other characters that she is desexualized through her age) and her affirmation that she has a right to exist (despite society’s attempts to underplay, if not fully eradicate, her presence).

Lewis’s Absurd menopausal woman is Leonella, the spinster aunt of the beautiful fifteen-year old heroine, Antonia. Remarkably, Leonella is the very first character seen in the novel. Given the little importance that Lewis attaches to older women in his text, his decision to open the novel with Leonella must be analysed. She is given this position of honor with a sense of irony: when she departs the narrative in its second half, her absence is all the more conspicuous after the first half of the novel, in which she inserted herself into social situations where she was not wanted:

the old Woman continued to move forwards. In vain were exclamations of displeasure vented against her from all sides: In vain was She addressed with – ‘I assure you, Signora, there are no places here.’ – ‘I beg, Signora, that you will not crowd me so intolerably!’ – ‘Signora, you cannot pass the way. Bless me! How can people be so troublesome!’ – The old Woman was obstinate and on She went. By dint of perseverance and two brawny arms She made a passage through the Crowd, and managed to bustle herself into the very body of the Church (8).

Lewis places her in the reader’s gaze so he can eventually remove her from that gaze; she is considered unworthy of it. Further highlighting this unworthiness is the fact that she is initially referenced only in accordance with her age. She is called “The Old Woman” four times before her name is finally introduced a few pages into the narrative, though it is

introduced by the heroine, Antonia, not by the narrator; the narrator is determined to identify Leonella solely by her age and stock character type.

Her first act is to elbow her way through a crowd, causing others to cry out about the harm she is causing, as she searches for a place to sit. There is, quite literally, no place for Leonella in Lewis's world and her presence causes social discomfort. It is only through her connection to the beautiful Antonia that seats are given up for them by men who are sexually interested in the teenager. Antonia has a place. Leonella does not, but she insists that she does. Her asserted presence in a public space is quickly exploited by Antonia's new suitors, one of whom flatters and distracts Leonella so the other might conduct a more private conversation with Antonia. The flatterer complains to his friend, "How will you reward me for having suffered so grievously for your sake? What can repay me for having kissed the leathern paw of that confounded old Witch? Diavolo! She has left such a scent upon my lips, that I shall smell of garlick [sic] for this month to come!" (24). Irony and hypocrisy are rife in this scene, and largely dependent upon the joke of Leonella's age: it is only due to Leonella's, the chaperone's, presence (and, indeed, over-presence) that the young girl can be wooed without a chaperone; the one meant to be dissuading sexual encounters in others is overtly pursuing encounters for herself; and the one responsible for preserving her charge's modest dignity and respectability, in fact, all but demands that her charge strip off clothing in public: when Antonia demurs, at her suitors' request, to take off her veil, Leonella upbraids her charge, saying:

Do not you see, that the other Ladies have all laid their veils aside, to do honour no doubt to the holy place in which we are? I have taken off mine already; and surely if I expose my features to general observation, you have no cause to put yourself in such a wonderful alarm! (11).

On the opening page of *The Monk* Lewis writes, “The Women came [to the cathedral] to show themselves, the Men to see the Women” (1); but Leonella, who is the only woman we see willingly unveiling herself, is dismissed, while Antonia, who has no desire to show herself, is the only one pursued. Female flesh is desired in the text, but that which is offered freely is spurned. There is an inverse relationship between access to the female body and its perceived value. Leonella, either blindly ignorant to the gentlemen’s disinterest in her or perhaps subconsciously spurred on because of it, removes her veil and offers her physical body up for visual consumption. Leonella self-objectifies and self-fetishizes, imagining herself being viewed voyeuristically through male eyes which do not want to look at her. John Berger argues in *Ways of Seeing* about the passivity of the female body and female gaze in western art and culture, saying, “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (47). Leonella both conforms to and inverts this argument in that she submits to, and even desires, passivity under the male gaze; however, in attempting to force and direct that gaze, she reifies her body and announces her desires—both of which others would like to render invisible or non-existent. The dichotomy of the men and women’s inverse reactions to undressing creates a parody of voyeurism, which will later drop its parodic context as the novel grows more sinister and the lack of female consent is given more erotic weight by Lewis. It is through Leonella that Lewis unintentionally illustrates a double standard of sexual relationships and gender: the men who pursue Antonia over the course of the book are close to twice her age, and she is scarcely beyond puberty; Leonella is close to twice the age of the man she pursues, and they are both adults.

The humor Lewis attempts to bestow upon this early scene is rooted in the fact that Leonella is perpetually consenting, when her age should theoretically nullify the potential

for any sexual activity. In an upside-down world, Leonella consents when men do not consent. She possesses a sexual drive seemingly at odds with the demureness expected not only of her gender, but also of her station and age. King writes, “If women’s sexuality was only legitimate as a means to reproduction, after the menopause that sexuality became an embarrassing surplus to requirement. The existence of desire in women who could no longer bear children was neurotic or monstrous” (136-137); in 1809 Samuel Bard wrote in *A Compendium of the Theory and Practice of Midwifery* that some menopausal women are tempted into “stimulating” behavior “from the desire to have children, or from a ridiculous vanity of appearing young [which is] at this time of life very improper and highly dangerous” (80). The misalignment of Leonella’s socio-physical traits with her behaviors and desires creates a tension that is at first comedic, but quickly boils down to Gothic when that tension is applied to other characters or scenarios. The lack of an easy classification that is rooted clearly in the body is one of the most central elements of Gothicism. Imprecise categories become twice as threatening when one considers rhetoric surrounding menopause, which is firstly mysterious in its own right due to a lack of scientific knowledge, and which is, secondly, particularly ominous when one perceives it as a destabilising force for that which *is* known and easily classified: women under forty, whose sexualisation and reproductive capacity ostensibly inform their purpose, identity, and the social and physical spaces they occupy. The idea of menopause as a looming, transformative power which turns the safe and familiar into the dangerous and unfamiliar is a common sentiment in medical writing, which feeds heavily into fictional representations of women over forty. They “became fretful, grew stout, accumulated fat at the base of the neck, their breasts became hard and flat, their abdomen enlarged, hair grew

on their face, and their voice grew harder” (Mitchinson 95). William Buchan, in the three brief paragraphs he dedicates to menopause in his 700-page *Domestic Medicine*, writes:

That period of life at which the *menses* cease to flow, is likewise very critical to the sex. The stoppage of any customary evacuation, however small, is sufficient to disorder the whole frame, and often to destroy life itself. Hence it comes to pass, that so many women either fall into chronic disorders, or die about this time (529).

Lewis illustrates through his portrayal of the Absurd menopausal woman—who is coded as diseased, disordered, defective, and dangerous—that horror is twice as alarming when prefaced with laughter.

Laughter at the Absurd comes not only from the narrator and, presumably, the reader, but also from the characters in the text. After meeting the suitors, Leonella and Antonia come across a gypsy fortune teller reading palms for members of a crowd. For Leonella the gypsy has the following prophecy:

‘Your fortune? You are now so old,  
‘Good Dame, that 'tis already told [...]  
‘Astonished at your childish vanity,  
‘Your Friends all tax you with insanity  
‘Believe me, Dame, when all is done,  
‘Your age will still be fifty one;  
‘And Men will rarely take an hint  
‘Of love, from two grey eyes that squint.  
‘Take then my counsels; Lay aside  
‘Your paint and patches, lust and pride [...]  
‘Think on your Maker, not a Suitor;  
‘Think on your past faults, not on future  
‘And think Time’s Scythe will quickly mow  
‘The few red hairs, which deck your brow.’ (37)

The crowd roars with laughter at Leonella’s humiliation, only to be shocked into silence a few moments later when Antonia’s palm is read: her future has nothing but sorrow and destruction in store. It is telling that Leonella’s prophecy contains no prophecy at all:

common rhetoric claims that there is no future for a menopausal woman. The fortune teller goes so far to instruct Leonella that she should prepare for her death with quiet dignity and stop creating social discomfort. That Leonella can even contemplate a future is depicted as ludicrous and as insulting to Lewis and the implied reader as her presumption to romantic attachment without the potential for bearing children.

The close proximity of laughter and fear in this scene is significant in classifying Leonella's age as intrinsically Gothic. The tone of the novel shifts dramatically from merriment at Leonella's expense to the horror of Antonia's future, in part because Leonella's series of bungling romantic pursuits is a stepping stone to establishing some of the main themes of the novel: unwanted sexual attention and social unease. One must also consider that the Gothic genre's use of time and history is personified in Leonella. The Gothic frequently uses historical settings, ruined castles, and supernatural events to set the mood; the ghastly menopausal woman is merely an extension of this, and Leonella's comic "ruined", "unnatural body" is a gentle introduction to impending harsher Gothicism. In yet another systematic reduction of Leonella's identity, she is only ever a stepping stone and never part of the central action. While she is utilized as an introductory source for more brutal tropes and themes, her desires are comical and never something of serious contemplation. Although Leonella is reviled by Lewis, she is never complex or important enough to be a genuine threat to anyone in the text. Her only connection to the plot is through her beautiful niece, and Leonella is quickly removed from the text about halfway through, once Gothicism has been fully introduced—making way for the horrors of the Aggressive menopausal woman.

The Aggressive

The trope of the Aggressive menopausal woman overlaps considerably with the Absurd menopausal woman, but it also illustrates the shift from impending Gothicism to full Gothicism. She is frequently characterized by her hostility, passion, pride, and strength which are portrayed negatively as unfeminine. Again the issue of miscategorisation is key: the Absurd woman's behaviors are those of a young woman, while the Aggressive woman's behaviors are those of a man. The Aggressive menopausal woman trope also frequently includes the same unrequited lust that characterizes the Absurd; however, no matter how preposterous her desires and behaviors may be portrayed, the Aggressive refuses to become an object of ridicule and her passions take on an air of predatory masculine entitlement. In Lewis's writing, and indeed in the wider rhetoric surrounding menopausal women, this is cause for terror. For if one cannot laugh at a woman, how can one control her?

Lewis's Aggressive woman is Rodolpha, another peripheral character whose only connection to or bearing on the plot is her beautiful young niece, the secondary heroine, Agnes. It's notable that these characters are childless aunts instead of mothers. This is Lewis's attempt to condemn these characters further. Not only do they not have any current reproductive use, but they have never had use. His one barometer of female worth centers exclusively on what happens to a woman's reproductive organs, and their status as childless women is meant to discredit them further in our eyes. Rodolpha's plotline is similar to Leonella's in that it is short, irrelevant, and based solely on her age. Rodolpha falls in love with a young suitor whom she believes is paying court to her, when in reality he is in love with her young niece. When she discovers the truth, she foils their elopement plans by exercising her power and locking Agnes away. In this scenario, which is similar to

Leonella's in content and yet drastically different in tone, menopause is no longer comedic: Rodolpha does not attempt to gain her ends through conventionally feminine means, like Leonella, but instead uses her not-insignificant influence to punish her rivals and underscore her social authority. In addition to Rodolpha's masculine clout, the comedy of the menopausal woman is further eroded when the effects of menopause have direct consequences for a younger generation—for those viewed as more stable and easily understood. For Lewis, Rodolpha is not only a woman who has failed in her capacity for reproduction but who is also trying to stop reproduction on Agnes's part by denying Agnes a husband. The would-be husband says with vitriol, "In this I easily recognize Donna Rodolpha's perfidious character. Every word of this account is stamped with marks of her malice, of her falsehood, of her talents for misrepresenting those whom She wished to injure" (94). In defiance, Agnes, who ends up in a convent, consummates her relationship and bears a child as a novice nun. The child is illegitimate, Agnes breaks her vows and defies authority, and Agnes is tortured by the more senior nuns—themselves Aggressive menopausal women who resort to physical violence and murder—before she is again locked up with her child to die slow deaths. She is rescued at the last moment and goes on to marry her lover.

Rodolpha, however, is hoisted by her own Aggressive petard: she dies offstage from a ruptured blood vessel triggered from "an excess of passion" (193), her masculine physiognomy at last catching up with her. Aggressiveness and masculinity in menopausal women was a significantly recurrent theme in medical texts, as were the physical and mental dangers brought on by this aggressiveness. Edward Tilt, in his 1851 *On Diseases of Menstruation and Ovarian Inflammation* writes that a symptom of reproductive

failure—especially one rooted in the ovaries—leads to “the arrest of that characteristic luxuriance of form which we admire in women, and by their assuming the drier texture, the harder outline, and the angular harshness of men” (xxxix) . Lewis vilifies Rodolpha for having goals and behavior typically associated with men, and for continuing to live beyond her reproductive usefulness; he then kills her with what he considered to be a symptom of that extended and non-gender normative life. That her death happens offstage and is revealed to the main characters in the most nonchalant of terms again undercuts any limited power Rodolpha may have held. Like Leonella, Rodolpha exists to introduce Agnes’s story and she ultimately has little influence on the plot. That Rodolpha’s death is also the result of natural causes illustrates her state of impending breakdown. Her body is portrayed as flawed, and yet she somehow seems to bring her death upon herself. Lewis writes, “*She broke a blood-vessel*” (193, italics mine), a sentence which lays any blame for Rodolpha death directly at her own feet. By rooting her supposedly flawed behavior in her supposedly flawed body, Rodolpha becomes somehow complicit in and culpable for a natural process outside of her control.

Another shared feature of Leonella’s and Rodolpha’s depictions in the novel is their mutual disappearance roughly in the middle of the narrative. Although likely not intentional on Lewis’s part, if the text is treated as a metaphor for female lifespan and life-cycle, both the Absurd and the Aggressive women are banished from view as soon as they reach the middle. It is only the Appropriate menopausal woman who is permitted to continue on—or at least for a short while longer.

### The Appropriate

The trope of the Appropriate menopausal woman is rooted in her ability to be easily classified, to reduce instead of increase social anxiety, and to oppose the Absurd and the Aggressive; all three, however, juxtapose youth. The Appropriate is rooted firmly in traditional and unwavering gender norms, is gentle, humble, quiet, and content with her lot. Her mild behavior is frequently rewarded with the continuation of her beauty, a further connection of moral behavior and biology. Often described as “handsome” or “still attractive”, the physical form of the Appropriate menopausal woman becomes a site of contradiction. For happily remaining invisible, she is allowed to be pleasant to look at. For not craving sexual desire on her own part, she may still inspire lust or admiration in others. For making way for a younger generation of women, she is allowed to remain in the text.

Lewis’s Appropriate menopausal woman is Elvira, the sweet and wise mother of the heroine Antonia and the sister of the Absurd Leonella. Of Elvira, Lewis writes:

In spite of her being the Mother of Antonia, Lorenzo could not help expecting to find in Elvira Leonella’s true Sister [...] He beheld a Woman whose features, though impaired by time and sorrow, still bore the marks of distinguished beauty: A serious dignity reigned upon her countenance, but was tempered by a grace and sweetness which rendered her truly enchanting. Lorenzo fancied that She must have resembled her Daughter in her youth (203).

Elvira, a widow with a grown daughter, keeps quietly to her home with her one goal being the selfless protection of her daughter’s health and virtue. It is through this desire, which Lewis deems legitimate, that Elvira is allowed to have an impact on the plot, though her impact is tied strictly to her gender and age. When Elvira is stricken ill, dying from an unspecified disease or condition, it is her expiring body which brings the anti-hero, Father Ambrosio, into her home to pray over her. His lust for Antonia grows with each interaction and Elvira forces her body to recover from its illness when she begins to suspect that Father

Ambrosio's intentions toward her daughter are not of the spiritual variety. "By degrees Elvira's constitution recovered itself. She was no longer troubled with convulsions [...]. Ambrosio beheld this re-establishment with displeasure. He saw, that Elvira's knowledge of the world would not be the Dupe of his sanctified demeanor, and that She would easily perceive his views upon her Daughter" (258). Elvira's recovery is an issue of gender, in which the naturally weak and sinful female body (as convention would have it) may, on occasion, be countered and matched by a virtuous woman's exceptional spiritual and moral strength. More than gender, this mind-over-matter recovery not only reinforces the socio-medical connection between behavior, morality, and the body, but also underscores Lewis's perspective that menopause is a process that is one part supernatural and one part choice: all three women choose the social and behavioral path they will take upon reaching menopause, which in Lewis's world has direct biological and medical influence. Leonella chooses lust and ridicule which lead to physical grotesqueness, and Rodolpha chooses anger and power which lead to her death. Elvira, who cheerfully chooses desexualisation and disembodiment, finds it therefore easy to overcome the obstacles, illnesses, and decay presented by that body.

Elvira may be the catalyst for much of the action, but when she becomes its main impediment—when she demands her own bodily presence and uses it to shield her daughter—she is quickly and viciously dispatched by Father Ambrosio, who murders her during his attempted rape of Antonia:

He grasped Elvira's throat [...] dashing her violently upon the ground, He dragged her towards the Bed. Confused by this unexpected attack, She scarcely had power to strive at forcing herself from his grasp: While the Monk, snatching the pillow from beneath her Daughter's head, covering

with it Elvira's face, and pressing his knee upon her stomach with all his strength, endeavoured to put an end to her existence (303).

Despite the violent beating and fatal suffocation she's suffered, the doctors who examine her body suppose that, due to her age and recent illness, she has died of a seizure. Although this diagnosis is likely a matter of literary expedience on Lewis's part, his doctors reaffirm medical discourses: they provide little investigation into the conditions and causes of female health, and instead classify Elvira's own body as a source of death and destruction based purely on her age. Lewis writes:

of [murder] no one entertained the least suspicion. Elvira was subject to strong convulsions [...] too violent to be resisted by her already enfeebled state of health [...] This idea was firmly credited by the few people, who interested themselves about Elvira: Her Death was esteemed a natural event, and soon forgotten by all save by her, who had but too much reason to deplore her loss (309).

Elvira may be Appropriate but, for Lewis, there is no escaping the Gothicism of her age and the lack of social interest in her once she has reached that age. It is her manifestation of menopause that ultimately leads her down the path of destruction, in addition to the eventual death of her daughter. After Elvira's murder, she appears to Antonia as a ghost. The ghost, like the menopausal woman, is presented as a supernatural figure trapped in a liminal space: alive but not alive, a woman but not a woman, with a body but without a body. Elvira's ghost promises Antonia that they shall meet again in Heaven in three days. The incident causes Antonia to fall into a shock-induced coma, in which a menopausal woman—like Rodolpha's interaction with Agnes—robs a teenage girl of physicality and leads to her bodily decline. Echoing medical texts of the day which averred that menopause “was a concrete sign of the beginning of the end, a sign that men did not have” (Mitchinson

96), Lewis's menopausal woman is a site of Gothic declassification which radiates decline and affects the rest of the population.

The Absurd, the Aggressive, and the Appropriate are implicitly Gothic in that they revolve around social breakdown and reside in the murky area somewhere amongst morality, biological essentialism, and the supernatural. Borne out of and reaffirming the medical rhetoric of their time, these tropes—once identified—highlight the further misogyny of both early Gothic writings and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century male-dominated medical sphere, which frequently leaned on and borrowed from each other to perpetuate the need for neat categorisation. These tropes may purposefully occupy liminal, messy, and mysterious spaces to serve as literary or medical warnings, but they were also, ironically, kept too tidy, simplistic, inauthentic, and categorical to reach any true understanding of menopause. These representations of menopause also go far beyond Gothicism, or are at least implicitly mutable enough to embed Gothicism into other genres, often unnoticed; centuries of these representations have conditioned reader and viewers to accept aging, and especially female aging, as a Gothic, ridiculous, fearsome, and undesired process, regardless of its medical realities or the genre in which it is presented. And, indeed, much like the anxious eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portrayals of menopause which impeded socio-medical enlightenment and a reduction of that anxiety, modern society still often clings to the Gothic and rejects more balanced narratives. My delineations of these tropes are necessarily broad and unnuanced because they represent the lack of nuance around menopausal women in society, both at the time of Lewis's writing and in the present day. The Absurd, the Aggressive, and the Appropriate, in *The Monk* and elsewhere, are

expressions of social desire for menopausal women: be invisible to society and gain its grudging acceptance, if not respect, or visible in any capacity and gain its censure.

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<sup>i</sup> Lewis's biographer, D. L. MacDonald, speculates that Lewis's treatment of women is related to his early abandonment by his mother, saying, "The erring women in Lewis's works are unusually numerous and often sympathetic but always sternly disciplined; the frequency with which they recur suggests a preoccupation that Lewis was never able to work through" (19). Other critics who explore Lewis's sexually violent tendencies toward his female characters include Markman Ellis (85-88); Donna Heiland (39-41); David J. Jones (46-47, 58-59); Alison Milbank (11-12); Daniel P. Watkins (118-120); and Michael Gamer (1047-52), who analyses *The Monk* in his investigation of early Gothic and pornography.

<sup>ii</sup> The "psycho-biddy" genre is also known as "hag horror", "hagsploitation", or "Grande Dame Guignol cinema" (Shelley 1).

<sup>iii</sup> For a more substantial overview of discussions on ageing, see Jeannette King's *Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism* (2013), Karen Chase's *The Victorians and Old Age* (2009), Kay Heath's *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain* (2009), Boehm, Farkas, and Zwierlein's *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Aging in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (2013) as well as the dozens of publications by Mike Hepworth and Mike Featherstone.