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“Faking” Disability and Performing Gothic Narratives in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*

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ABSTRACT

There are very few depictions of physical disability in the early Gothic novels of the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries. However, there are several moments in such texts when a faked disability is used in a pseudo-drag performance by an able bodied actor, a kind of negotiation of disabled identity. Such depictions exploit patterns of eighteenth-century masquerade performance to prioritize and problematize physical identity as a space of profound socio-moral and personal destabilization. This phenomenon within the early Gothic in turn aligns the performance of identity with that of Gothic narrative, redefining self-fashioning practices in terms of “otherness.” This article will use Tobin Siebers’s work on disability performance to examine the use of “fake” disability as a means of negotiating Gothic narrative in Matthew Lewis’s 1796 novel *The Monk*. *The Monk* distinguished itself as a novel focused both thematically and strategically on the dialectic interpretation of physical performance, on “seeing” and reading identity within a fundamentally unstable universe. Disability masquerade in this text illuminates numerous ambiguities that defined personal, social, and literary identity at this time, and that also influenced later depictions of disability in the developing Gothic mode.

KEYWORDS:

Gothic, disability theory, Tobin Siebers, Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, performance, masquerade

“He became a very Proteus, changing his shape every day; but all his metamorphoses were to very little purpose [...]”
-Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, 1796, p. 207

There are very few depictions of what contemporary critics would consider actual physical disability in the early Gothic novels of the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries.¹ A birthmark or scar may identify a lost relative or secret villain, or a character may suffer from a persistent debilitating illness. Certain racial and gender identities are sometimes represented as socially or legally “different” or “inferior” within a highly regimented patriarchal hierarchy. However, while the birthmark on Theodore’s neck in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Zofloya’s identity as a Moor in Charlotte Dacre’s *Zofloya, or the Moor* (1806), or the scar on Charles Mandeville’s face in William Godwin’s *Mandeville, a tale of the seventeenth century* (1817) signal difference and perhaps fall into the category of

personal or social disability, such traits cannot be said to “substantially limit” an individual except in their own mind or in the culturally-informed perspectives of other characters (“Americans with Disabilities Act,” Section 12102). This does not mean that disabled identity is wholly absent from early Gothic novels. Rather, disability in this mode is coded as a masquerade performance and/or as a physical manifestation of Gothic narrative. This strategy constitutes a negotiation of the dialectics of invisibility, otherness, and repression within recognizable processes of self-fashioning and self-narrating identity.

Depictions moreover often fall into the category of fake disability, or what Tobin Siebers terms “disability drag” in his foundational work “Disability as Masquerade,” a study that provides readers and critics with a comprehensive framework for examining disability in terms of identity performance (Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade” 207). Such performances in the early Gothic mode draw from the traditions of the

¹ The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Section 12102) defines a disabled individual as “a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.” While those undertaking literary criticism may choose to revise this definition in response to specific texts, this legal interpretation suggests the broader contemporary view of what constitutes ‘disability.’

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eighteenth-century masked assembly, a social institution that, according to Terry Castle, inspired “revelatory” re-workings of “the notion of the self” through the celebratory adoption of false identity (Castle 4). Masquerade performances facilitate a reversal of the social and moral status quo and re-contextualize strategies for ‘passing,’ or managing an identity “discredited by law, opinion, or social convention” in a way that “preserves social hierarchies” (Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade” 2, 5). Indeed, Siebers’s examination of contemporary disability performance as a form of masquerade also illuminates anxieties regarding the personal and socio-political fall-out of performing identity in eighteenth-century masquerade. Disability’s importance within the Gothic mode as what Erving Goffman defines as a “spoiled identity” or “stigma” is complicated even further in instances where able-bodied actors choose to temporarily adopt such an identity in a pseudo-masquerade performance (Goffman 3).

Visual otherness renders the performing individual both highly visible and fundamentally invisible, prioritizes the symbolic significance of the physical identity, and challenges the audience’s understanding of social norms. This article will examine the use of faked disability as a means of constructing a Gothic identity and narrative in Matthew Lewis’s 1796 novel *The Monk*. This text depicts two instances of explicit “disability drag” in the course of its secondary plotline and is one of the few early Gothic novels to examine any kind of physical disability. Romantic adventurer and wayward aristocrat Don Raymond and his manservant Theodore both fake blindness in their attempts to pass as liminal figures, extending the novel’s examination of masquerade to include and problematize disability as a Gothicized identity within a negotiation of transgressive able-bodied identity. Both characters have similar yet distinct goals and strategies regarding their assumed disability, yet the specific disability itself eventually comes to represent a much broader engagement with Gothic identity. These performances suggest Siebers’s characterizations of “disability masquerade” and require both the exaggeration and the subversion of particular aspects of identity, as well as the audience’s complicity in the performer’s attempts, to destabilize and re-imagine reality. The result is that falsified disabled identities in *The Monk* re-define the individual characters, their places within a social hierarchy, and the essential aspects of the Gothic dialectic. Gothic authors such as Lewis use the physical performance of disabled identity to both undermine stable reality and explore “closeted” aspects of the self that Siebers and critics such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argue are “not merely concealed but difficult to disclose” (Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade” 2). Disability functions as a Gothicized identity

and as a form of moral coding, re-characterizing the disparity between internal and external selves via manipulated physical representations of otherness. Such engagements within *The Monk*, be they conscious or unconscious, true or false, in turn illuminate the development of Gothic narratives in the earliest stages of the mode’s genesis.

The Monk has long been critically identified as one of the earliest examples of ‘Male Gothic’ in the early Gothic mode. However, while the novel fully realized visual, visceral horror in its style and themes, it is also, as Francesca Saggini notes, “built around the predominant motifs of inversion, deception, and transformation. As in a spectacular performance of ever-shifting simulacra, the power of representation supersedes actuality” (Saggini 182). The performance of individual identity in the novel is both complicated and clarified by repeated shifts between subterfuge and revelation, a theatrical superficiality that redefines reality as representation. Maggie Kilgour states that “Lewis presents himself as the complete revealer, who takes all of the terrors that Radcliffe leaves submerged and exposes them, turning gothic potentials into reality,” yet revelation in this instance does not reject the ambiguities of masquerade deception but rather embraces their subversive potential (Kilgour 142). As Terry Castle argues, eighteenth-century masquerade constructed “a sometimes devolutionary, sometimes revolutionary, anti-society founded on collective gratification,” its imagery symbolizing “a revision, not just of the psyche, but of culture itself” (Castle 74). This revision, or perhaps fracturing, of an individual and cultural psyche illuminates and indeed celebrates “the hybrid and duplicitous nature of material appearances,” a phenomenon that is interrogated in instances of “disability drag” in the novel (Castle 24). The audience is frequently made complicit in the construction of Gothic (un)realities in the text and by extension the resulting destabilization of the self therein. In fact, *The Monk* begins, famously, with a chaotic reinterpretation of reality within a Capuchin church in seventeenth-century Madrid in which “representation supersedes actuality” in a manner reminiscent of masquerade (Saggini 182). The narrator dismisses the idea that the crowd present in the church “was assembled either from motives of piety or thirst of information” (Lewis 7). Rather, “The women came to show themselves, the men to see the women [...] one half of Madrid was brought hither expecting to meet the other half” (Lewis 7). Individual and social performances in this scene prioritize and complicate acts of “seeing” as a means of dialectic interpretation, rejecting social restraints while highlighting instances of fakery in everyday self-fashioning practices.

The focus on superficial identity within public spaces

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in the novel suggests, as Siebers has argued in his analysis of disabled identity, “that social attitudes and institutions determine far greater than biological fact the representation of the body’s reality” (Siebers, “Disability in Theory” 1). In “Disability as Masquerade,” Siebers examines particular instances where disabled persons, rather than concealing their disability, engage in an act “structurally akin to passing but not identical to it, in which they disguise one kind of disability with another or display their disability by exaggerating it” (Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade” 4). The disabled body’s status is “validated by a highly visible prop” (such as a wheelchair, a hearing aid, or, in the case of *The Monk*, an eye-patch denoting partial blindness), while social assumptions regarding “spoiled identity” position the disabled body as an “open secret” that is “strategically ignored” (Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade” 1, 2, 3). This performance undermines and re-works strategies of “passing” by resisting the practice of concealment in favour of an explicit exaggeration more closely aligned with discourses of the grotesque. Such a performance tends to distil disability into a single, symbolic object such as a wheelchair or eye-patch, or at least to emphasize the signifiers of disabled identity as much as the disability itself. Siebers includes performances of fake disability by able-bodied actors, what he terms “disability drag” because “the performance of an able-bodied actor is usually as bombastic as a drag performance,” in his analysis, and moreover identifies this practice as an important form of disability masquerade (Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade” 16-17). This inclusion in itself blurs the political goals of identity performance by aligning the able-bodied “drag show” with the disabled performer’s attempt to “develop new narratives of the self” (Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade” 8). However, when this falsification of identity constitutes disability masquerade in the early Gothic novel, disability performance in turn comes to reflect the developing Gothic identity within a new literary tradition, the willing adoption of “other” identity for the purpose of constructing a narrative. Carol Margaret Davison points out that “Lewis seems to revel in the disintegration of his hero’s identity,” yet anti-hero Ambrosio and those around him do attempt to manage Gothic instability and their own identities by reinterpreting symbols and signifiers and negotiating performances of otherness (Davidson 131).

The aristocratic Don Raymond and his servant Theodore, the protagonists of one of *The Monk*’s secondary plotlines, continue this pattern in their own masquerade performances. Both fake blindness as part of two separate adopted disguises in order to gain access to the convent of St. Clare in Madrid. Donning eye-patches and disguising

themselves as a gardener and a beggar, respectively, they are two of the first characters in early Gothic fiction to make the link between physical disability and the performance of a self-constructed Gothic narrative. Their disguises are a reversal and rejection of their original identities as able-bodied, educated men of an aristocratic or upwardly mobile class, and moreover trigger a series of sexual, social, religious, and even literary violations within the structures around them. Creating and exaggerating rather than concealing a visual stigma, their masquerade performance constitutes a conscious manipulation of a physical identity and results in a corresponding breakdown of boundaries.

Non-disabled bodies remain the status quo as this kind of masquerade “represents an alternative method of managing social stigma through disguise, one relying not on the imitation of a dominant social role but on the assumption of an identity marked as stigmatized, marginal, or inferior” (Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade” 5). Siebers notes that “disability drag” allows for the affirmation of able-bodied desirability by emphasizing “the most obvious markings of disability as a spoiled identity” (Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade” 17). Exaggerated disability is presented as “a façade overlaying able-bodiedness” while the able-bodied actor ultimately returns to their original identity, thus reassuring an audience that “the threat of disability is not real, that everything was only pretend” (Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade” 18). This subversion of relatively stable identity renders Raymond and Theodore vulnerable as characters, but also allows them to become more fully realized Gothic representatives. In this they embody a Bakhtinian reading of carnival and masquerade ideology as the “suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” while also articulating anxieties about the stability of social hierarchy and able-bodied desirability (Bakhtin 10). They enact a willing exchange of a socially dominant identity for that of the social and physical “other” in order to enforce a deviant political and moral agenda, yet the parameters of that performance, unstable as they are, come to fundamentally modify their roles within the text.

In this, identity in *The Monk* is constructed as an outward-facing performance complicated by the fact that the individual self is often defined by a character’s social rank, such as Raymond’s aristocratic background, or by personal and political belief systems, which in Raymond and Theodore’s case suggest an anti-monastic Libertinism. As Jerrold Hogle has argued, Lewis’s novel exposes “an ideological endeavor to fashion a viable selfhood for the class-climbing, mostly bourgeois person that employs hollowed-out signs of more

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antiquated Western power-centers (ghosts of counterfeits) as ways to market or 'sell' the acquisitive and uncertainly grounded self in an increasingly capitalist world" (Hogle 2). Flesh and blood characters manipulate these "hollowed-out signs," but acts of deception and masquerade, Raymond and Theodore's included, ultimately destroy both individuals and the sacred institutions that moderate social behavior more profoundly than the performers or audience can fully anticipate. Supernatural entities manifest physically in the form of fortune-telling gypsies, the Wandering Jew, and the Bleeding Nun, embodying the "totality of history" and Gothic identity in a fiercely invasive way (Hogle 3). The monk Ambrosio is both the victim and embodiment of unstable self-hood, unaware of his own parentage (and the full extent of his incestuous desires) and unintentionally faking his identity, his virtues twisted into vices within the confines of a monastic order where "humility's semblance combated with the reality of pride" (Lewis 31). His seducer, Matilda, first appears as the male novice Rosario in a transvestite performance. She later reassumes her female shape before burlesquing a portrait of the Virgin Mary and finally transforms into a demonic being and minion of Satan. Such performances destabilize the systems that inform self-fashioning practices and provide parallel evaluations of inherently unstable cultural and personal identities.

Shifting, unstable identities, tenuously grounded in the superficiality and subversion of the institutional status quo, flip social restraints and personal faith systems on their heads. Anxieties may reflect the vulnerability of the interior spiritual self, but identity in this text is primarily grounded in the physical reality, in one's ability to move, change, and present a particular face to the world. Physical disability, therefore, plagues most characters in *The Monk* in a variety of covert ways, and Gothicizes everyday life insofar as physical differences suggest the insidious presence of an othered identity. Such physical fluidity illuminates, according to Jacqueline Howard, "a world in which there is no universal or rational order" but where "rapid physical transformations [...] may be seen as undermining notions of psychic unity, whether these transformations are read simply as symbolic of a fragmented, unstable self, or, in a more complex Lacanian more, as 'attempting to depict a reversal of the subject's cultural formation'" (Howard 224). The concept of cultural "reversal" in particular suggests the Renaissance Carnival system in which the upper echelons of society were degraded in public performances and the lower-class "clown" was correspondingly made "king for a day." This phenomenon is pervasive yet problematic in a society that found the "systematic anarchy" of masquerade both seductive

and threatening to society and to the individual (Castle 5). Re-imagined performances of a physically othered identity illuminate Lewis's literary negotiations and responses to the developing mode, as well as the ideological tensions arising between "an older and more static [...] order" or process of self-fashioning and a developing system based on "individual merit" (Henderson 224).

The first instance of "disability drag" in *The Monk* is described in Don Raymond's tale, a self-contained inset narrative in which Raymond attempts to verbally reclaim an identity that has been physically, socially, and morally compromised throughout his adventures. It is worth noting that long before he himself fakes blindness, Raymond demonstrates a willingness to engage in subterfuge. He initially hides his aristocratic social position and masquerades as a "private gentleman" on the advice of a family friend who suggests that this will enable Raymond to form relationships based on "your good qualities, not your rank" (Lewis 73). This identity gives him some mobility, but also makes it easier for his lover Agnes's family to dismiss him as an undesirable suitor. It is a moment of masquerade in which Raymond is caught within the larger machine of socially-informed identity (itself subject to the manoeuvrings of hypocritical family members and amoral social institutions), and as a result is forced to adopt a more explicitly "spoiled" identity in order to evade these imposed restraints. His superficial identity suggestively proves more potent than his "good qualities," indicating both the primacy and inherent instability of physical identity performances in Lewis's Gothic world. Raymond also, rather tellingly, frequently fails to see past the disguises of other people, suggesting a problem with reading as well as transcribing visual signifiers. Taking the friendly attitudes of a group of banditti at face-value, he very nearly falls into a deadly trap and is only saved by Theodore's mother, a figure whom Raymond initially and wrongly dismisses as "harsh and repulsive" (Lewis 74). He also mistakes the ghost of the Bleeding Nun (a pseudo-disabled and socially marginalized figure) for Agnes during an elopement gone wrong. This error highlights Raymond's failure to properly appreciate and perform Gothic identities and leaves Raymond physically incapacitated in a parody of gendered passivity that again parses notions of power within masquerade culture (Castle 90). Raymond's inability to "see" and "read" other characters and his impotency in the face of the chaotic reversals of masquerade suggest that in fact his later performance of physical blindness is indicative of a more profound hubris on Raymond's part. It also illuminates a distinct Gothic universe in which reality itself is unreadable

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and prone to individual and cultural shifts.

Finally free from other entanglements yet too late to stop Agnes's unwilling initiation as a novice nun, Raymond attempts to liberate Agnes from the convent of St. Clare. He takes a job as a convent gardener in order to obtain access to the convent and Agnes, donning an outfit that suggests a social and physical self-effacement: "Disguised in a common habit, and a black patch covering one of my eyes, I was presented to the lady prioress, who condescended to approve of the gardener's choice" (Lewis 135). This disguise is not a complete rejection of Raymond's previous identity but rather, like the eye-patch itself, an exaggeration of a single aspect – working as a gardener allows Raymond use his knowledge of botany, just as the physical eye-patch emphasizes his blindness (Lewis 135). The disability itself is moreover symbolic of both Raymond's goals and his own character, as he demonstrates his own lack of foresight and his need to impose blindness on all except Agnes, the person who must and should recognise him. This performance of disabled identity by an able-bodied actor problematizes disability itself by, Siebers argues, "insinuating ability into its reality," though this exercise is complicated in this instance as Raymond's goal is not to affirm the status quo but rather to disrupt and destabilize socio-moral identities (Siebers, "Disability as Masquerade" 18). Able-bodied identity is perhaps affirmed as the norm here, especially since the reading audience is aware of Raymond's deceit, but the novel's thematic focus on "seeing" as part of the pattern of transgressive desire and punishment, as well as the later problems that befall Raymond-as-performer and Agnes-as-audience, all redefine faked disability as a more profound performance of Gothic identity.

Raymond and Agnes's interactions suggest a complex and on-going interpretation of masquerade. Raymond describes how: "Fearing to alarm my lovely mistress, I drew near her gently, intending to discover myself by degrees. But who for a moment can deceive the eyes of love? She raised her head at my approach, and recognized me in spite of my disguise at a single glance" (Lewis 136). Raymond's performance, as Siebers suggests, further "disrupts the structural binary that represents passing as an action taking place between knowing and unknowing subjects" by re-defining the parameters of Raymond's narratorial abilities (his performance of blindness) and Agnes's reading skills (her resistance to blindness) (Siebers, "Disability as Masquerade" 2). Raymond attempts to impose the same partial blindness he has adopted onto Agnes, yet Agnes's "eyes of love" are given almost inhuman powers of perception, and she sees through Raymond's disguise easily.

Again, the focus on "seeing" as a dialectic methodology cannot be entirely coincidental given the novel's thematic problematization of the gaze as a site of desire. There is, of course, a rich literary tradition in which sight, insight, and love are symbolically conflated, and this tradition is in turn interrogated by Raymond's willingness to impose a temporary blindness on himself and others, including his beloved. This performance moreover suggests Lewis's larger focus on explicit Gothic horror as opposed to the implied terror characteristic of the Female Gothic style, and as such Raymond's choice to fake this particular disability is intentionally symbolic of the novel's generic engagements and innovations. Preoccupation with the surface-self is further Gothicized in that, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has established, "individual identity, including sexual identity, is social and relational rather than original and private; it is established only *ex post facto*, by recognition," and is thus a negotiation of the "imagery of the surface" as much as the discovery of hidden depths (Sedgwick, "The Character in the Veil" 256, 255). However, the process of recognition in this instance problematizes negotiations of the surface identity by making it a space of deception and masquerade.

For, while Raymond is not a villainous character, he is also not at this moment in the plot acting as "Raymond" – he is rather a man at a masked assembly, part of a social-moderated (un)reality in which a particular kind of sexual freedom is prevalent. His rejection of his actual identity in favour of a false one, and one in which his physical and moral vision is compromised, results in Agnes's ruination, her subsequent pregnancy and torture, the death of her and Raymond's child, and the destruction of the convent of St. Clare in a violent pseudo-revolution. This turn of events is politically coded as the denigration of hypocritical social and moral structures in favour of Raymond's pseudo-libertine ideology, though the physical destruction of the convent also echoes the violent excesses of the French Revolution in a work that, as Saggini notes, is "rife with instances of punishments inflicted on those who – prey to *concupiscentia oculorum* – have dared to gaze" (Saggini 184). Moreover, Raymond's seduction of Agnes is framed as a kind of Original Sin, with Raymond cast as a serpent-seducer who invades the sacred space of the garden and sets off a chain of events that ends in widespread destruction and death. Agnes in turn blames her mistaken reading of Raymond's deviant performance for her fall, again privileging and problematizing acts of "seeing" within a masquerade system: "I looked upon you as my friend, my protector: I trusted myself in your hands with confidence, and relying on your honour, though that mine ran no risk" (Lewis 138). Raymond's masquerade is a subversion of

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his moral identity, a reversal that constitutes a very real threat and perhaps even, as Howard suggests, functions as a medium through which the “isolated wish or desire *becomes* the demonic force” (Howard 220).

In deliberately denying himself his full sight Raymond cannot clearly see the moral reality of his actions, and his adoption of disabled identity makes him not only a temporary villain, but also a potentially demonic and destructive Gothic entity, a man without a stable identity. His actions have serious consequences for those around him, and Raymond himself succumbs to a more permanent form of figurative and physical disability as punishment for rejecting the status quo of able-bodied desirability. Agnes responds to his performance and amoral actions by condemning Raymond to full blindness – “Shame upon you, villain, you shall never see me more!” – and by suggestively empowering the monastic surveillance state that threatens to destroy her – “I live in all the agonies of terror: every eye which is fixed upon me seems to read my secret and my shame” (Lewis 138, 140). “Disability drag” indeed becomes a bombastic and exaggerated kind of un-identity or hyper-identity in its symbolic emphasis on “seeing” and its reduction of Raymond’s personhood within a sexual and moral exchange. Raymond becomes a Gothicized being and a corresponding narratorial force through his use of the potent signifiers of disabled identity in a masquerade performance. Gothic identity moreover fights back and refuses to let Raymond return to his original self. This performance soon renders Raymond a figuratively blind, passive object while imbuing the forces of moral moderation with God-like omnipotence. Masquerade subverts Raymond’s role as a moral, socially elevated, able-bodied figure and emphasizes his hidden identity as a sexual transgressor and pseudo-revolutionary before ultimately denying him a stable identity altogether.

Raymond is effectively punished for abandoning his identity and taking on the role of a disabled social inferior – he thereafter is rendered impotent by grief. Disability, this time in the form of an illness that leaves Raymond virtually comatose, becomes an all-encompassing signifier and punishment, an alternative identity that ultimately threatens to destroy Raymond. Raymond performs an exaggerated “spoiled” identity, yet because the identity is too effective, or perhaps because he himself is secretly othered by his experiences and rendered morally if not physically blind, Raymond does not fully manage to return to the able-bodied identity he rejected. Denied Agnes, he deteriorates physically, and even when Agnes is finally rescued from the convent, the loss of their child suggests a failure to pass on a stable self to the next generation.

However, we must resist reading a simple moral lesson into Raymond’s transgression and punishment. Lewis places much blame on hypocritical social and political institutions that force characters to pursue alternative, potentially Gothic identities, institutions that are in turn punished and in some cases completely undermined. Moreover, the Gothicizing of disabled identity (real or false) as the identity of the other ties Raymond’s performance to those of similar characters within the texts and to the figure of the Gothic author, the creative force that builds Gothic realities. Raymond’s limitations perhaps manifest because Raymond is himself defined by the parameters of transgressive desire and social responsibility. By contrast, Raymond’s manservant Theodore operates with relatively few social or morally imposed restraints, and his use of “disability drag” is not only more complex but also suggests a more conscious engagement with Gothic narrative and authorial identity. Raymond and Theodore’s relationship and their dual exploitation of a particular disability performance embodies the breakdown of social boundaries enacted in eighteenth-century masquerade performances, and constitutes a further examination of the symbolic potentiality of disability masquerade within a larger meditation on literary and political identity.

Theodore personifies Gothic narrative long before he performs explicit “disability drag.” He distinguishes himself as a servant narrator and surrogate for the Gothic author through the written and oral composition of poems, songs, and several outlandish Gothic tales that he then essentially markets to various audiences throughout the plot. His own background is also highly detailed and suggestively genre-specific – Theodore’s father was a nobleman turned banditti who kept “the horrible circumstances” of his profession from his wife, who was herself “of respectable parents” and later becomes the unwilling prisoner of a criminal gang (Lewis 92). This story suggests the vulnerability of social identity, and indeed the tendency for “respectable” middle class females in particular to develop deviant (Gothic) tastes in literature and, potentially, morph into female Quixotes as a result. Theodore embodies the popular characterization of the Gothic mode in that he is literally the child of the excessive passion of his mother (a type of passion present in almost every sub-plot in *The Monk*) and the subterfuge of his father, an extension of these characters’ roles as archetypal signifiers and a stand-in for Gothic authors and readers.

Theodore is initially introduced within Raymond’s inset tale, but his literary productions and masquerade performances are presented independently within the larger

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narrative structure. When Agnes is entombed in the convent, Raymond, assuming that she is dead, becomes paralyzed with grief and obsessed with finding the truth. While Raymond remains housebound, however:

Theodore was the only one who exerted himself to realize his master's chimeras. He was eternally busied in planning schemes for entering the convent, or at least of obtaining from the nuns some intelligence of Agnes. To execute these schemes was the only inducement which could prevail on him to quit Don Raymond. He became a very Proteus, changing his shape every day; but all his metamorphoses were to very little purpose: he regularly returned to the Palace de las Cisternas without any intelligence to confirm his hopes. (Lewis 207)

Theodore becomes the active extension of Raymond's desires, and his social liminality allows for his personal and political development as a character and as a Gothic authorial metonym. Theodore's uncertain social identity (is he a nobleman or a banditti, a servant or a master?) is particularly note-worthy as Daniel P. Watkins argues that "a major emphasis in the novel is on the distortion, horror, crime, and ultimately social collapse which results from violations of social hierarchy" (Watkins 117). Theodore already represents the destabilizing elements that enable the social violations of masquerade, so his ability to become "a very Proteus" reinforces his role as an active, highly Gothicized narrative agent.

Theodore suggestively employs the same symbol of disability that Raymond used earlier in his quest to invade the convent. After numerous failed attempts to gain information: "one day he took it into his head to disguise himself as a beggar. He put a patch over his left eye, took his guitar in hand, and posted himself at the gate of the convent" (Lewis 207). Raymond originally used disabled identity as a form of self-effacement, making himself and his intentions invisible to the prioress and Agnes, and to a certain extent his performance suggests what Siebers identifies in disability masquerade as the tendency to "disguise one kind of disability with another," since of course this disguise hints at Raymond's actual moral foibles (Siebers, "Disability as Masquerade" 4). However, Theodore already functions as a Gothic figure and actively reworks the previous connotations of Raymond's disability identity to suit his role as an authorial metonym. As a servant, Theodore's proactive position within the text is already highlighted, as is both the distance and overlap between Theodore and

Raymond's social identities. This disability performance is an interesting moment of doubling between the two characters that undermines the sanctity of individual identity and illuminates the masquerade reversal of social status. There is a queering of their relationship that emphasizes the co-dependency between Raymond and Theodore at the expense of Raymond and Agnes's relationship, and this exchange even takes on somewhat Faustian connotation when Theodore develops almost demonic "protean" powers while his master is correspondingly drained of life. As an extension of his relationship with Raymond and as part of a Gothic performance that threatens to subsume and redefine their established identities, Theodore wears an eye-patch, a symbol of disability that has already been used as a tool of seduction and violation and that carries specific connotations for the Raymond-Agnes relationship and for the text's larger interrogation of "sight" and desire. For Theodore, however, disability allows for a more fundamental re-evaluation of desirability and identity.

Theodore actively redefines his already unstable identity in his performance of disability, but at the same time his plan hinges on the possibility that he will be recognized by the right person, as per the Gothic mode's focus on individual identity's role as "social and relational rather than original and private" and "established only ex post facto, by recognition" (Sedgwick, "The Character in the Veil" 256, 255). Having disguised himself, Theodore positions himself outside of the convent doors and begins to sing, hoping that "if Agnes is really confined in the convent," thought he, "and hears my voice, she will recollect it, and possibly may find means to let me know that she is here" (Lewis 207). The process of recognition is thus defined by the performance of a narrative that both confirms and denies the performer's identity. Indeed, much like Lewis, Theodore seeks to both identify recognizable patterns within the developing Gothic mode and change them to suit his own authorial goals. He adopts a Gothic persona in his physical performance and presents recognizable and romantic songs and stories in order to superficially appeal to his audience and encourage at least one audience member, Agnes, to read his narrative more closely.

Once outside the convent Theodore attracts the nuns' attention with "his sweet voice, and in spite of his patched eye, his engaging countenance," turning his verbal and non-verbal narrative self into a Gothic space and inspiring visual interest both in spite of and because of his disability performance (Lewis 208). In fact, Theodore's performance as a physically othered yet appealing troubadour is an obvious homage to Gothic literary figures. Earlier engagements with the sexually deviant figure of the Bleeding Nun and Theodore's tongue-

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in-cheek description of the Wandering Jew as “An Arabian astrologer,” “Doctor Faustus,” or “The Great Mogul incognito,” are re-defined in terms of Theodore’s own performance of a physically distinctive and disabled yet creative identity, his masquerade representation of Gothic romance complete with elements adopted from more established otherworldly figures (Lewis 124). This particular performance suggests Siebers’s reading of disability aesthetics as both “a critical framework that questions the presuppositions underlying definitions of aesthetic production and appreciation” and “as a significant value in itself, worthy of future development” (Siebers, “Disability Aesthetics” 543). Indeed, Theodore’s performance of disability both undermines traditional assumptions about desirability and, in itself, constitutes a Gothic narrative with serious political and moral consequences.

For it is not just the physical performance that defines Theodore’s engagement – it is also his parallel verbal performance. Theodore’s physical and verbal responses suggest a self-conscious assumption of authorial identity – he recognizes his audience as specifically Gothic readers and shapes a corresponding narrative both in his songs and in his physical otherness. Theodore is popular with the nuns “who all flocked with eagerness to a scene which promised some diversion,” much like a readership might flock to a Gothic novel in the 1790s (Lewis 209). Once he has captured his audience’s attention, Theodore’s capacity for Gothic storytelling is matched only by the nuns’ eagerness to hear more:

One asked where he was born, since his accent declared him to be a foreigner: another wanted to know, why he wore a patch upon his left eye: sister Helena enquired whether he had not a sister like him, because she should like such a companion; and sister Rachael was fully persuaded that the brother would be the pleasanter companion of the two. (Lewis 209)

In response, Theodore constructs Gothic mini-tales that echo his own physical performance of otherness and “amused himself with retailing to the credulous nuns for truths all the strange stories which his imagination could invent. He related to them his supposed adventures, and penetrated every auditor with astonishment [...]” (Lewis 209). Theodore engages with verbal excesses and exaggerations that match his physical performance of disability in order to construct Gothic narrative and create a cycle of literary supply and demand reflecting the popularity of Gothic fiction by the end of the Eighteenth Century. Given the “absence of interiority in *The Monk*” noted by Robert Miles, the persistent focus on surface identity

moreover emphasizes that, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states, the “self is at least potentially social, since its ‘character’ seems to be impressed on it from outside and to be displayed facing inward” (Miles 261; Sedgwick, “The Character in the Veil” 261). This complex dichotomy between the surface and the self is apparent when Theodore performs Gothic narrative, infects those around him with an enthusiasm for Gothic un-identity, and is in turn re-made as an inset Gothic tale that inspires new narrative responses from his audience.

The verbal process of questioning (by the nuns) and “retailing” (by Theodore) is particularly noteworthy, for it anchors the narrative in an economic discourse that commercializes and arguably legitimizes authorial identity (Lewis 209). Theodore’s verbal narratives give his physical performance literary value, albeit through emphasizing a pleasing façade over moral worth. More troubling for a “complete revealer” such as Lewis or Theodore-as-Lewis is that such narrative also elicits admissions of desire and discontent from the nuns and indicates a deeper and more problematic repression within their indiscriminate consumption of Theodore’s performance (Kilgour 142). In the nuns’ eagerness to accept and enjoy a blatantly false performance, they prioritize entertainment value over truth, a tendency that suggests the pitfalls of poor reading practices and a larger criticism of superstition and Catholic belief systems. This reflects specific themes within the text and broader anxieties about institutional stability and the development of the Gothic as a commercially popular literary mode. The desire for “such a companion” as Theodore (be they female or male) in particular implies both transgressive sexual desire on behalf of the individual nuns and a deeper impulse to embrace a false, “spoiled,” Gothicized identity. Theodore’s relationship with his in-text audience suggests John Ruskin’s readings of the “grotesque” (or othered identity) as a “forceful instrument of teaching [...] of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself; the gaps, left or overleaped by the haste of the imagination, forming the grotesque character” (Ruskin 132). Embodying separate identities for both the gullible nun-audience and the self-aware reading audience, one “real” and one an overt falsehood, Theodore’s fake disability becomes a space in which larger issues are laid bare.

Theodore’s disability performance takes on a new aspect when he comes up with a fantastic explanation for his physical appearance, claiming that he lost sight in one eye by gazing at a denuded statue of the Virgin Mary. Theodore’s alleged sin is his curiosity, but it is also curiosity tied to sexual transgression. Theodore describes how, while on a pilgrimage

to Loretto:

I stood near the altar in the miraculous chapel: the monks were ordered to array the statue in her best apparel. The pilgrims were ordered to close their eyes during this ceremony: but though by nature extremely religious, curiosity was too powerful. At the moment... I shall penetrate you with horror, reverend ladies, when I reveal my crime!... at the moment that the monks were changing her shift, I ventured to open my left eye, and gave a little peep towards the statue. That look was my last! The glory which surrounded the Virgin was too great to be supported. I hastily shut my sacrilegious eye, and never have been able to uncloset it since! (Lewis 210)

As Siebers points out in his analysis of “disability drag,” able-bodied performances of disability are different from traditional drag shows in that the audience is often not aware that they are watching an unrealistic performance. The nuns, who not only believe Theodore’s story but also “promised to intercede with the blessed Virgin for the recovery of his sight,” become complicit in their own humiliation while the reading audience is forced to revise their views of social norms and reading practices (Lewis 210). An elderly nun later manages to correctly interpret Theodore’s performance, presumably by applying common sense when listening to Theodore’s more outlandish tales, and offers her own responding Gothic narrative in a creative literary exchange. However, she is the exception rather than the rule, and external readers are required to re-evaluate their own reading practices in terms of this micro-performance. Theodore uses his disability prop to make a mockery of the Catholic hierarchy and the nuns of St. Clare. This tale ostensibly confirms the beliefs and traditions of the Catholic Church in its description of an alleged miracle, but as the reading audience is perfectly aware of Theodore’s deception and of the nun-audience’s credulous reactions to his narrative, the actual result is the denigration of moral and social institutions, a satirical reading of faith that suggests a carnivalesque cultural inversion.

By exploiting Catholic superstition and sexualizing the Virgin Mary and her acolytes in his story, Theodore re-defines the physical eye-patch as a symbol of sexual transgression and as an echo of the Raymond-Agnes relationship. Spiritual responses are transposed onto physical signifiers and Gothic narrative facilitates what Bakhtin would identify in early modern literature as the “lowering of all that is high, spiritual, and abstract” to “the material level, the sphere of earth and body” (Bakhtin 19, 20). Theodore’s tale, false as it is, hints at

the consequences that followed Raymond’s performance of disability – deviant sexuality is punished by a quasi-permanent disability. Moreover, we as readers understand both the fakery of Theodore’s performance and the later, very real consequences this performance has for social structures and performing individuals – namely, the complete destruction of innocent and guilty alike during the attack on the convent, an attack directly inspired by the information gained by Theodore during his performance at the convent walls. The result of Theodore’s narrative performance suggests, as Siebers argues, that “exaggerating or performing difference, when that difference is a stigma, marks one as a target, but also exposes and resists the prejudices of society” (Siebers, *Disability Theory* 118). Theodore stretches the boundaries of Raymond’s performance, which used disability as invisibility, to turn an overtly faked disability performance into a Gothic narrative, a narrative that allows him to invade the sanctity of the convent and “penetrate” his audience. The result is not just an implied sexual violation and revelation, but also political and literary ones – the stability of both individual readers and larger institutional restraints are undermined by a mini-Gothic tale, a physical and verbal performance of otherness. The promise that “I shall penetrate you with horror [...] when I reveal my crime” itself echoes a famous line from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* frequently quoted by early Gothic authors such as Ann Radcliffe, suggesting an alignment with an established Gothic literary identity. By adopting the sign of fake disability, the eye-patch, Theodore makes himself a Gothic text and therein mocks and manipulates the belief systems that inform the identities of the in-text audience, redefining the Gothic mode, its goals, and its strategies.

This satirical re-evaluation of identity via a faked disability performance becomes a means through which Lewis examines the dialectic strategies of masquerade and its consequences for the developing Gothic mode. Theodore suggests a fairly obvious sexual burlesque of the Virgin and again links the act of “seeing” with transgressive desire and “spoiled” or false identity. His tale transforms him into a grotesque figure for both the nuns and the reader – the use of the eye-patch suggests the “defamiliarization of the human body” that inspires both laughter and repulsion in the audience, as does the accompanying story (Edwards and Grauland 94). However, his story, and indeed the complex coding of the disability signifier and the disability-as-deception, also suggest a kind of ability, an insight into the transgressive, the forbidden, and “the glory” frequently denied to the average individual (Lewis 210).

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Disability within Theodore's narrative is a punishment, but also a reversal of the sign of disability – Theodore claims to wear the eye-patch because he is partially blind, but he is blind because he has seen the divine, recounting an act of insight that renders him othered. In this, he re-characterizes Raymond and Agnes's sexual transgressions as part of a cautionary tale, but also suggests the potential rewards gained when one sees beyond veil, be it in a romantic subplot, an analysis of institutional hypocrisy, or an examination of literary practice. Theodore's narrative follows the layout of a human interest story in which "ability trumps disability, creating a morality tale about one person's journey from disease to cure, from inhumanity to humanity" (Siebers, "Disability as Masquerade" 16). In this case, however, the reading audience is aware that the listening, in-text audience is being deceived, and the emotional response inspired is one of both amused disgust at the credulity of the nuns and self-conscious complicity in a patently false "morality tale" that paradoxically elevates transgressive knowledge even as identifies it as dangerous. Theodore is othered by his performance, as is the increasingly ridiculous listening audience and the self-aware reading audience. However, the able-bodied status quo that Siebers identifies as crucial to "disability drag" is not confirmed within the double grotesquery of Theodore's physical and verbal deception, but rather folded into a collapsing system in which no figure is fully "normal" and in which all identity, Theodore's included, is complicated by his manifestation of a fluid, performance-oriented Gothic narrative. Within this world, "seeing" is crucial to the construction of identity, even when aligned with transgressive narrative selves, and the Gothic author and readers are both the manipulators and the tools of profound reversals and re-imaginings.

Social and individual destabilization is, to a certain extent, the goal of both "disability drag" in *The Monk* and disability masquerade more generally. Raymond uses his disguise to gain access to the convent and to seduce Agnes, while Theodore similarly slips past set boundaries in order to lampoon convent life, undermine the moral sanctity of the monastic tradition, and eventually gain a piece of illicit information that kick-starts a brutal revolutionary uprising. Theodore, notably, is not given an opportunity to reclaim a more mainstream identity, but rather disappears from the narrative proper following this incident. His narrative performance lays the groundwork for the novel's denouement and, through its own construction and its place within in the larger plot structure, illuminates the practices of literary banditry and appropriation that came to define the

developing Gothic mode, though Theodore himself is rendered almost moot therein. These subversive yet critical narrative performances by Raymond and Theodore are performed half unwittingly, complicating the dialectic practices of "seeing" and "reading" even while implying that all characters are at least partially blind within a Gothic universe. This is in keeping with Lewis's particular style, and illuminates a more general Gothic anxiety about identity performance. Siebers argues that disabled identities "possess great theoretical power because they reflect perspectives capable of illuminating the ideological blueprints used to construct social reality" (Siebers, "Disability as Masquerade" 8). In the Gothic mode, where identity is understood to be particularly vulnerable to deviant forces, both external and internal, the use of physical difference as an identity signifier constitutes a profound engagement with otherness. Raymond and Theodore's performances and the resulting conflicts embody Bakhtin's descriptions of early modern "popular-festive system of images," in which "abuse and thrashing are equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis. Abuse reveals the other, true face of the abused, it tears off his disguise and mask" (Bakhtin 197).

The disabled outsider's myriad roles as victim, villain, and creative force exploit eighteenth-century masquerade practice as a contextualized means of destabilizing gendered, social, and moral identities, facilitating a cathartic, if sometimes destructive, reversal and reconstruction of individual and cultural formations. Disability performance and in particular "disability drag" casts the performer as a deviation from the norm, but also enables him and his audience to negotiate social and moral boundaries more effectively. The consequences are complex, but indeed the act of "disability drag" itself suggests a lack of moral order and a re-evaluation of socially-approved identity. Siebers argues that "disability drag" exposes and performs an able-bodied audience's "fantasies and fears" about disability before comforting them with a return to able-bodied normalcy as the actors reassume their original identities (Siebers, "Disability as Masquerade" 18). However, can that return ever be truly complete in an unstable Gothic universe? Neither Raymond nor Theodore fully returns to their original selves after their masquerade, if indeed they ever really conformed to the status quo in the first place. Instead, they are irrevocably changed by their performance as Gothic texts and authors, reflecting a Gothic dialectic in which the enactment and reading of identity is inherently fluid. Their fake disability and very real otherness illuminates who they actually are as characters, and indeed throughout the text various forms of

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physical and moral disability are shown to be both pervasive and beyond normal boundaries. The act of playing a part, and often one that reverses all standard identity signifiers as well as the power structures built around them is intertwined with deeper anxieties regarding the nature of Gothic identity at a time when the mode was still in its early stages of literary development. The symbolic potency of the specific disability of blindness and the act of fakery performed in *The Monk* has profound implications for the development of Gothic identity as a composite structure and as a re-evaluation of previously marginalized literary influences, though (mis)readings within the novel also suggest the unstable potential of such signifiers.

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