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The 'Ungendered' Form in Lewis' *The Monk* and Lindqvist's *Let The Right One In*

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> "'Elias?'
> A weird feeling in his stomach as he said it. No, he wasn't going to get used to it. She...His name was Eli. But it was too much. Regardless of what Eli was, it was too much. He just couldn't. Nothing about her was normal".[1]

The grim humour that Lindqvist draws from this quote, and from much of the novel, lies within his exploration of a young boy's naivety. That Oskar's concerns lie not in that his potential love interest is a vampire, but rather that she may be a boy, or a girl, or indeed neither, encapsulates a central anxiety of the Gothic: the fear of the unknown. This fear often manifests itself in the 'ungendered' form, the visibly human form (though ultimately inhuman) which fails to conform to a prescribed gender distinction. Applying Judith Butler's work on gender identity theory as the central framework, the concept of transgendering will here be explored in light of its relationship to the Gothic novel's vocalisation of contemporary fears. With this in mind, I wish to suggest that the 'ungendered' form in both Lewis and Lindqvist's novels may be viewed as a necessary response to a loss of certainty in a patriarchal society. The inability of Lewis' characters to adhere to their apparent gender roles threatens the prescribed moral code of a patriarchal society, whilst in Lindqvist's novel, Eli's hermaphroditic form, and arguably Oskar's overtly feminine persona, suggests a moral code already in decline. In addition to the work of Butler, this essay will also consider Burke's concept of the sublime and Freudian theory in relation to oedipal desire, both of which have important repercussions for a gendered reading of the novels.

As Bennett and Royle suggest, when reading sexual difference into a literary text, it appears unavoidable to move beyond an essentialist interpretation.[2] In purely biological terms, this constitutes a reading of the male or female form as 'the man has a penis, whereas the woman does not', upon which are articulated various forms of gender-stereotypes: masculinity with rationality and strength for example, femininity with passivity and weakness. Butler's work takes the notion of sexual difference beyond an essentialist reading by instead arguing for the role of 'performativity' within representations of the gendered body. She writes that 'acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essences of identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured through corporeal signs and other discursive means'.[3]

If gender is, as Butler suggests, a 'fabrication' or an act, then the implication is that one cannot apply an essentialist reading to a depiction of the gendered form and thus there is no distinct male/female divide. Identity therefore, whether male or female, is in constant state

[1] John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In* (London: Quercus, 2009), p.339
[2] Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Harlow: Pearson, 2004) p.154
[3] Butler, quoted in Robert Miles, 'Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis', in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001), p.54

of flux, of division. Derrida remarks that an identity 'is never given, received, or attained', whilst the 'assertion of identity always betrays a '*disorder of identity*'[4]. The hierarchies and defined essentialist structures that govern the male/female identity relationship therefore become redundant and circulatory, and thus lead to the question of whether there truly exists the notion of a true sex.[5]

Butler argues that when gender identity has been improperly assigned (deliberately or otherwise), its claims to 'humanness' must come into question.[6] In a chapter entitled 'Bodies That Splatter', Halberstam writes that, 'improperly or inadequately gendered bodies represent the limits of the human and they present a monstrous arrangement of skin, flesh, social mores, pleasures, dangers and wounds''.[7] Building upon Butler's writings, Halberstam suggests that the construction of gender within the Gothic operates through 'exclusionary means', and therefore reproduces itself through an understanding of what is both human and inhuman. The hermaphroditic constructions of Eli and Matilda push their own identities to the boundaries of humanity and through this Otherness they are able to prey upon the carnal desires of their subjects, ultimately articulating the fears of its society. As Eli herself admits, 'I'm nothing. Not a child. Not old. Not a boy. Not a girl. Nothing'[8], thereby pushing her lack of a certain gender identity onto the carnal fears and desires of the already gender-confused Oskar.

Butler's and Derrida's theories of performativity and identity have crucial implications for a gendered reading of Lewis' *The Monk*. Gender confusion permeates the novel as characters flagrantly disregard the rules for a pre-determined gender, so much so that Lewis' novel has been viewed as the archetypal example of queer literature, an extended drag show.[9] Butler's theory of the reconceptualising nature of drag purports the view that human identity, and specifically gender identity, becomes assimilated into society through desires shaped by laws that 'enforce a binary system of masculinity and femininity'.[10] Drag, according to Butler, is an example of gender performance, articulated as the hyperbolic enactment of culturally established norms and hierarchies which ultimately draw attention to the artificiality of the gender identity construct.[11]

Cross-dressing, the cultural appropriation of the drag aesthetic, manifests itself within *The Monk* primarily through Matilda/Rosario's propensity to slip between gender roles. Gaining entry into the monastery through 'his' appearance as a young male novice, Rosario soon reveals herself to be a woman named Matilda, whose sexual appetite ultimately leads to Ambrosio's downfall. Matilda's shifting from passive to aggressive behaviour identified through her use of both feminine and masculine language traps Ambrosio in a constant state of emotional and sexual disorientation. When she first reveals herself to him, Matilda's speech is infused with the language of submissive passion, 'my heart throbbed so rapturously at obtaining the marks of your friendship, as to convince me that I never should survive its loss'.[12] As her influence over her captor grows however, her deference turns to emboldened aggression. On the issue of Agnes' fate she advices Ambrosio to, 'redouble your outward austerity, and thunder out menaces against the thunders of others, the better to conceal your own. Abandon the nun to her fate'.[13] Brewer argues that Matilda represents sexual instability

[4] Derrida, quoted in Bennett and Royle, p. 158
[5] Bennett and Royle, p. 159
[6] Judith Halberstam, Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p.139
[7] Halberstam, p. 141
[8] Lindqvist, p. 188
[9] Kathy Gentile, *Sublime Drag: Supernatural Masculinity in Gothic Fiction (*Gothic Studies, Volume 11, Number 1, May 2009), p. 17
[10] Ibid., p. 25
[11] Ibid., p. 28
[12] Matthew Lewis, *The Monk* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 47
[13] Ibid, p. 183

and points to the irony in the success of her capture and emancipation of her beloved Ambrosio, a feat which the cavalier Lorenzo fails to emulate.[14] Yet, as Miles suggests, Matilda's 'coming out' as a 'subordinate but crafty spirit' of Lucifer complicates matters further.[15] Lucifer refers to his accomplice with the feminine pronoun 'her', yet as the devil's subordinate spirit, Matilda is, as Miles argues, in the Miltonic sense, 'a fallen angel and latently a hermaphrodite'.[16] (Interestingly, it is this very description that is apportioned to Lindqvist's Eli: 'one word had turned up frequently: angel. Oskar Erikkson had been rescued by an angel'[17]). To read this passage 'Miltonically' as Miles does is revealing, particularly as if held to be a plausible reading, then Matilda, like Eli, is seemingly neither male nor female and her sexual identity is disarmingly fractured. However, in the Biblical sense, Matilda's revelation as an angel suggests that she may be entirely male, in which case her previous actions in the guise of a woman in fact mark her out as embodying the drag aesthetic.

With regards to Butler's theory of perfomativity therefore, the ambiguity surrounding the sexual identity of Matilda encapsulates the very essence of Lewis' novel: that identity *is* a matter of disguise and performance.[18] As a noted playwright as well as author, it is perhaps unsurprising that Lewis' novel borders dangerously close to the theatrical, at times even the farcical. Frequently scenes descend into the realm of the excessive, notably in the novel's final act when, in an act of Biblical bastardisation, Ambrosio suffers six days of torment in which 'eagles of the rock...dug out his eyeballs with their crooked beaks'.[19] Furthermore, in the novel's opening scene, the narrator appears to hold the view that the act of worship itself is, in Madrid at least, an act of theatre: 'some came, because they had no better means of employing their time till the play began'.[20] The theatrical excess of the novel underlines what may be viewed to be its subliminal message; that identity is performative, a series of 'acts and gestures', which, obscured by the veil of drag, suggests a lack of certainty in the singular gendered self.

If Lewis' use of hyperbole conforms to Butler's hypothesis that drag is an allegory of gender norms[21], then it is important to note how this appears to conflate with ideas of the sublime. Heiland's analysis of *The Monk* in light of Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime has particular significance to a consideration of the 'ungendered' form in Gothic literature.[22] In a 1757 treatise, Burke outlines his concept of sublimity and beauty, stating that the former involves a confrontation between the perceiving subject and the overwhelmingly powerful object. It arises out of anything that is vast, obscure, irregular, uncontainable and fundamentally isolating. Beauty, in contrast, is small and smooth; it 'wins us over by charming deception, rendering us as weak as the beautiful object we perceive.' [23] Ferguson suggests that Burke's central claim is that the sublimity is a 'necessary rebellion against the unnoticed and almost unnoticeable tyranny of beauty'.[24]

Burke's argument has important repercussions for a gendered reading of Lewis' novel, and in particular in his subversive depiction of Matilda. Though it is not until the final chapter that we discover that Matilda is entirely without gender (as she is without humanity), when we are first introduced to her in her 'true' form, i.e. as a woman, the description of her bears the hallmarks of a vision of Burkean beauty; her 'exquisite proportion of

[14] William D. Brewer, *Transgendering in The Monk* (Gothic Studies, Volume 6, Number 2, November 2004 , pp. 192-207(16)), p. 195
[15] Miles, p. 53
[16] Ibid.
[17] Lindqvist, p. 517
[18] Miles, p. 55
[19] Lewis, p. 351
[20] Lewis, p. 3
[21] Gentile, p. 19
[22] Donna Heiland, *Gothic & Gender: an Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004)
[23] Heiland, p. 35
[24] Ferguson, quoted in Heiland, p. 36

features...profusion of golden hair'.[25] Lewis' description here appears to conform to the conventions of beauty, typically associated in Burke's writings with femininity.[26] What is interesting however is that the narrator reveals next how Matilda bears the exact resemblance to Ambrosio's 'admired Madona [sic]'.[27] As Heiland notes, by immediately aligning her with the divine, Matilda's beauty is tempered by the sublime.[28] By the time she and Ambrosio have become lovers, Matilda's beauty has paled in light of the increasingly sublime power of her sexuality; after an impassioned and violent speech, Matilda's 'eyes were filled a delicious languor: her bosom panted: she twined her arms voluptuously around him.'[29] No longer the unassuming, though nonetheless deceptive, vision of Beauty, Matilda, in her transgendering state of sublimity incarnate, comes to represent the corrupting, empowering paradox of feminine sublimity. Moreover, in her final appearance she is described as bearing a countenance of 'wild imperious majesty'[30], and as Heiland points out, though adorned with a female dress, she appears, figuratively at least, 'a man in woman's clothing'.[31] Restructured within a framework of Burkean sublimity, Matilda's constant transgendering therefore appears to subvert the received norms of eighteenth-century society. Marked by beauty and sublimity, she threatens the power of patriarchy by undercutting the force of certainty in traditional hierarchical values, embodied here as both masculinity and religious authority. Through his exposition of the literary form as a 'kind of Gothic male drag show'[32], Lewis is hinting, ostensibly without agency, at the destabilising power of the sublime female form.

If Matilda's transgressing of gender roles threatens Ambrosio's own sexual identity, what then must a reader infer from this? Through the secluded protection of his monastic upbringing, Ambrosio is immediately situated in the feminine position of chastity; as Lorenzo remarks early on, 'he knows not in what consists the difference of man and woman'.[33] Ambrosio's energies, it may be suggested, have been so constricted by his monastic upbringing that they have turned inwards, creating a self-imprisonment of 'obsession', which in turn ultimately both propagates and arises as a result of demonic 'possession'.[34] In anticipation of this, Lewis employs heavily 'feminised' language when describing Ambrosio. About to enter Antonia's bedchamber, his heart is 'more timid than a Woman's[35]', and at various points throughout the novel, he is tremblingly weak and fearful ('[he was] confused and terrified at his weakness[36]'). Similarly, after his seduction at the hands of Matilda, he reacts with the remorse and 'shame' that 'typifies the seduced woman in eighteenth-century novels'[37]: 'Pleasure fled, and Shame usurped her seat in his bosom. Confused and terrified at his weakness He drew himself from Matilda's arms'[38]. The irony here is that it is Ambrosio, the male figure, who appears violated, encapsulated through Lewis' 'feminised' lexicology: references to 'his bosom', 'his weakness', and so on. The final description implies also that it is Matilda who has her arms around him, not vice versa, thereby placing her in the dominating, masculine position.

Like Matilda, Lindqvist's Eli fluctuates between the beautiful and the sublime, though arguably with less distinction between the two. Oskar describes her when they first meet as

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[25] Lewis, p. 62
[26] Heiland, p. 34
[27] Lewis, p. 62
[28] Heiland, p. 44
[29] Lewis, p. 178
[30] Lewis, p. 340
[31] Heiland, p. 47
[32] Gentile, p. 16
[33] Lewis, p. 11
[34] Carol Ann Howells, *Love, Mystery and Misery* (London: The Athlone Press, 1978), p. 68
[35] Lewis, p. 299
[36] Lewis, p. 223
[37] Stephen Blakemore, *Matthew Lewis' Black Mass: Sexual, Religious Inversion in The Monk* (Studies in the Novel 30 (1998), p. 223
[38] Lewis, p. 177

'like one of those paper dolls in the *Family Journal*. Very...pretty'[39], yet this is tempered by frequent comments made upon her 'strangeness'. The implications of this previous description are telling. Firstly, the combination of the childlike, almost inconsequential term 'paper dolls' with the archaic homeliness of '*Family Journal*' suggest an innocence and vulnerability. Coupled with the highly feminised choice of adjective 'pretty' this seems more akin to Burke's idea of beauty and does not yet suggest the full extent of her frightening sublimity. Instead, in the rare moments when the reader is afforded a further glimpse of Eli's true nature, it is kept hidden behind a veil of confusion and obscurity, precisely what Burke claims as a 'sublime possibility', that which 'keeps us from having a 'clear idea' of the terrors that await us'.[40] If, as Heiland argues, Lewis' novel plays upon the idea that if the desire to protect beauty has the potential to spark the overthrow of a seemingly sublime force (the mob's destruction of the Prioress' grip of terror for example), then in Lindqvist's corrupted world sublimity always has the capacity to supersede beauty. The paedophilic Håkan dotes upon Eli seemingly because of her allure, the promise made to him that he will one day become intimate with her. However, as Oskar's decision to leave Blackeberg indicates, Eli's dominance over her victims cannot be solely accredited to the 'unnoticeable tyranny of beauty', but the isolating terror of the sublime. Where the two novels do intertwine, it may be argued, is in the suggestion that excessive sublimity may corrupt the world of the beautiful.

Sensitive and physically weak, Oskar's overtly feminine persona marks him out as a victim of masculine aggression and, as a consequence, he must rely on Eli for protection, ultimately leading to exile from his community. Similarly, Ambrosio's downfall arises through his desire to exert a masculine identity in a cloistered, feminised environment, the construction of which may implicitly be read as a critique of the Catholic monastic tradition. Blakemore suggests that *The Monk* is archetypal in the respect that it is a work of Protestant tradition which sets out to demonise Catholicism as the mutant, alien Other.[41] Through an institution of sexual repression and an apparent adherence to the worship of 'unnatural' female spectres (i.e. Mary), Catholicism appears to deviate from the norm and ultimately feminise and alienate its followers. With this in mind, Lewis' transgendering of his novel's central figure may be viewed through the lens of the anti-Catholic spirit of the late eighteenth-century. The monastic life in particular was viewed by many as a closed and oppressive institution, guarding a closed book of secrets and corruption.[42] The alignment of gender confusion with the constricting environment of the Church appears to centralise a central theme of Lewis' work; that, with reference to the work of the Marquis de Sade, desexualised imprisonment 'can give to unhealthy and even dangerous thoughts'.[43]

The cultural implication of a gendered reading of *Let the Right One In* is more difficult to ascertain, simply because of the depths of issues the novel may be perceived to address. As Auerbach, in her study 'Our Vampires, Ourselves', writes, 'The alacrity with which vampires shape themselves to personal and national moods is an adaptive trait their apparent uniformity masks'.[44] In Lindqvist's novel, the evil that infiltrates the cloistered safety of Oskar's apartment block in Blackeberg, where 'nothing shitty had ever happened to him'[45], preys upon fears that operate within every reach of twentieth-century society: loss of stability in the family home, the exposure of paedophilia, and the relentless monotony of a life governed by drugs and alcohol. With this in mind, Bruhm argues that the Freudian

[39] Lindqvist, p. 40
[40] Burke, quoted in Heiland, p. 34
[41] Blakemore, p. 5
[42] Ibid., p. 12
[43] John Phillips, *How to Read Sade* (London: Granta, 2005), p. 43
[44] Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 16
[45] Lindqvist, p. 16

machinery that is self-consciously exploited within the modern Gothic form typically centres on the problem of a lost object, 'the most overriding basis for *our* need for the Gothic'.[46] In Lindqvist's novel, three of the young characters - Oskar, Tommy and Jonny - all live without a father figure in their lives and turn to various means of escape to overcome this loss. Oskar lives in a fantasy world in which he enacts imaginary yet horrific means of revenge upon his tormentors, Jonny is one of these tormentors, whilst Tommy spends his evenings sniffing glue with his moronic cronies. Furthermore, when a father figure does emerge in his life, Tommy reacts by stealing Staffan's prized shooting trophy and, in an act of Freudian vengeance, considers melting the phallic object down and selling the metal off. I would argue that the desire driving each of these male characters is the desire to find that which has been lost and which will, as Bruhm suggests, 'unify an otherwise fragmented subjectivity'.[47] As in Freud, the lost object being searched for is feasibly the absent father, the embodiment of the dislocated penis and the shattered identity of the male.

It is this last point that is worth exploring further, particularly as Freudian analysis and the notion of the fractured self has important repercussions for a gendered reading of *The Monk*. If, as Doyle suggests, Freud's theory of Oedipal conflict may be seen as the desire to return to an 'impossible origin', or, in the Lacanian sense, to be 'whole again and unshattered'[48], then Ambrosio's constant state of multivalent psychoanalytic confusion is revealing. Eternally striving to respect the wishes of an 'at-best distant, at-worst vicious Catholic God-father'[49], Ambrosio careers between a series of maternal substitutions, including the image of Madonna, the actuality of Matilda, and the idea of Antonia. In an ultimately un-ironic conclusion of events, Ambrosio eventually subsumes power to the epitome of the tyrannical Father, Lucifer.

In a similar way, it may be argued that the lack of paternal authority in Oskar's life enforces his own Oedipal shift towards the figure of Eli, who is herself (initially at least) a sort of mother presence, though with subsequent revelations becomes both a paradoxically loving-mother and distant-father figure. As a figure that is both male and female, young and old, Eli encapsulates the fragmented nature of identity, which is projected in the Freudian sense onto the persona of Oskar. Just as Ambrosio's quest to conquer his objects of desire threatens the unity of his own self-image, Oskar's decision to leave the unprotected 'feminised' world of his suburban existence and give himself over to the violent 'masculine' protection of the vampiric Eli encapsulates what Doyle describes as the 'advancement of the self and the fall of the self'.[50]

As Brewer succinctly argues, transgendering in *The Monk* is perceived as threatening, in as much as it destabilises the hierarchical, Catholic, positions of authority[51]. As power is transferred from a member of a dominant group to a member of a subordinate group, so say the dominance of the 'novice female' Matilda over the apparently superior Ambrosio, the rigid hegemony of a patriarchal society begins to tear at the seams. The threat of transgendering in *Let the Right One In* is arguably less clear-cut, in so much as it would appear that the foundations supporting the social hierarchies of Blackeberg were rotten even before Eli arrived. As father figures remain either an absent or an inebriated presence, the certainty of gender and self-identity inherited by their offspring then becomes less transparent. This may in turn suggest that Eli's uncertain gender identity allows Oskar and

[46] Stephen Bruhm, 'The Contemporary Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 263
[47] Bruhm, p. 263
[48] Lacan, quoted in Barry Doyle, 'Freud and the Schizoid in Ambrosio: Determining Desire in *The Monk',* (Gothic Studies, Volume 2, Number 1, May 2000 , pp. 61-69(9)), p. 63
[49] Doyle, p. 62
[50] Ibid., p. 68
[51] Brewer, p. 198

the other inhabitants of the suburb to address their own fissured self-identities, ultimately realising that they themselves lack the 'metaphysical oneness' that society demands of them.

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