

Online Proceedings

SESSION 2F

THE POETICS OF PARANOIA: USING LANGUAGE TO IMAGINE THE CONSEQUENCES OF DIFFERENCE

*Session Moderator: Phillip Thurtle, Comparative History of
Ideas*

238 MGH

3:45 PM to 5:15 PM

* Note: Titles in order of presentation.

The Fallibility of Post-Enlightenment Virtue in Matthew G. Lewis' *The Monk*

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Matthew G. Lewis' Gothic novel *The Monk* (1796) has often been read as a representation of England's disapprobative response to the violence and chaos of the French Revolution. The novel's subtle treatment of paranoia, which was a common theme during the Reign of Terror, and clear defilement of the virtuous feminine icon of ancient European government indicates a strong ambivalence toward revolutionary sentiment. It is perhaps a result of its proximity to the events of the French Revolution that its location within the latter years of the Age of Enlightenment is often overlooked. During the Enlightenment, reliance upon God as a source of meaning had dissipated in favor of understanding humanity through itself. I will argue that *The Monk's* depiction of intensely oppressive, Godless religious societies suggests the consequences of this shift. Without a connection to the sacred, humanity spirals toward damnation; the extremes of unconscious desire are inseparable from the individual and activate supernatural forces within the novel. Lewis creates a scene akin to that of Original Sin in the Book of Genesis, wherein the consequences of succumbing to temptation are not only inevitable but inescapable: the fall of humankind is unavoidable, and God's absence renders redemption impossible. Ultimately, the novel offers a reconstruction of the Biblical parable in a way that expresses ambivalence about a secularized, post-Enlightenment world from which events like those of the French Revolution can only be expected.