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Queer mothers: female sexual agency and male victims

[O]n genetic grounds, mother–son incest should be the rarest, brother–sister more common, and father–daughter the most common.

In examining the occurrence of mother–son incest what is striking is just how infrequent examples of mothers and sons engaged in sexual relationships are, in both literature and life. And yet, as Karen Sanchez-Eppler states, 'If father–daughter incest has been found to be most prevalent in practice, erotic relations between mothers and sons have long dominated the symbolic discourse of incest.' Her point is an important one that I believe illuminates a disjunction between the prevalence of scholarship featuring Oedipus Rex and Freud in discussions of incest and the actual limited occurrence of mother–son incest, particularly compared to father–daughter incest. The disparity between the statistics on mother–son incest compared to those on other incestuous relationships is accounted for in biological terms by the genetic disadvantages of mother–son inbreeding. Shepher’s attempt to account for the rarity of mother–son incest through its corresponding low genetic gains moves from the biological to the social. Shepher argues that the incest inhibition proscribed by the maternal act of nurturance does not exist in mothers such as ‘queens who did not have time for such everyday activities, upper middle-class mothers who were too busy with shopping and philanthropic activities, and prostitutes who had to supply their clients.’

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The shift from emphasising the incest taboo as biologically rooted to using a sociopolitical lexicon attempts to explain the conditions that lead to incest as both culturally created and unnatural. Mother–son incest is described here as a failure of women to act according to their biological nature as a consequence of social conditions that enable (or force) them unnaturally to work or otherwise abdicate their maternal obligations. Locating the socially proscribed gender ideologies that render mother–son incest unlikely as being biologically grounded or natural exposes the same understandings of mother–son incest that have underpinned both literary representations of and scholarly discourse on the topic. That research across a range of fields suggests there are links between positions of power, non-maternal instincts and dangerous sexual promiscuity illuminates the sociopolitical investment in maintaining the myth of biologically determined gender ideologies. These ideologies, enforced by the mother’s position as nurturer or deviant, are equally informed by the sexual politics of power and desire as described by scholars such as George E. Haggerty in *Queer Gothic* (2006), Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977) and Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1976). Examining the intersections of sexuality and power within the representations of mother–son incest in the Gothic reveals the complexities of the radical destabilisations of gender and heteronormativity occurring therein.6

Leo Bersani argues that attempts to subvert heteronormativity through sadomasochism fail because the nature of s/m is a reproduction of the power dynamics that it seeks to subvert.7 Bersani uses the presence of sadomasochism within gay sexual culture to demonstrate that the power dynamics of this type of sexual encounter are connected to the overall ideology of power relationships in society. In troubling the idea of sadomasochism as a challenge to authority, Bersani exposes the inadequacies of mere rearticulations truly to subvert ideologies.8 I believe Bersani’s argument can be applied to literary portrayals of rearticulated ideologies to reveal the paradoxical nature of these depictions as challenges to heteronormativity. In this respect Bersani’s argument is particularly profitable in terms of incest representations that present sadomasochist structures as inherent in these relationships and in representations that reimagine similar incestuous configurations devoid of these elements.9 Bersani states: ‘S/M profoundly – and in spite of itself – argues for the continuity between political structures of oppression and the body’s erotic economy.’10 This understanding reveals that the models of sexuality and power
available in the Gothic allow writers not merely to rearticulate, but also to literalise the political structures of oppression through incest. Such literalisations subvert the structure of male power and dominance by revealing its dangers to the male and female bodies that do not conform to heteronormative ideologies of power and desire. The Gothic, in novels by writers such as Ann Radcliffe and Eliza Parsons, challenges the notion of chaste maternity by revealing the mother as sexually desirable and aligning her rediscovery with her daughter’s sexual awakening. Gothic texts by writers such as Matthew Lewis, William Beckford, Eugenia de Acton and Charlotte Dacre rearticulate this subversion through a queering of desires that creates male victims of maternal desires or agency and disrupts cultural requirements of male dominance. Though these modes of the Gothic respond to the figure of the mother differently, both position her as aligned with sexuality and disruptive to heteronormativity’s restrictive models of sexuality.

Heteronormative fears of maternal sexuality are exacerbated by the idea that mothers could use sexual agency, in a socially disruptive way, to seduce, force or coerce their sons into a sexual relationship. As Susan McKinnon puts it: ‘Where sexual intercourse is thought to involve the “naturally” assertive, even aggressive, agency of men and the equally “naturally” passive acquiescence … of women, it follows that paternal incest would be viewed in terms that stress its relative “normalcy” at the same time that maternal incest would be viewed in pathological terms.’ In re-examining accounts that claim father–daughter incest is engendered by the mother/wife’s neglect of the family (for example, in seeking work outside the home, or if the husband is ‘relegated’ to positions such as child-minder or housekeeper) McKinnon reveals that such understandings view incest as ‘caused’ by the father/husband’s relocation into a traditionally female function in the house. The horror ‘with which women contemplate its [incest’s] possibility, is due to the “naturally” nurturant role of women as mothers’ – a role that men are presumed ill-equipped to fulfil. When fathers are forced into functions incompatible with their masculine, non-nurturing ‘nature’ that fails to contemplate incest with horror, male-perpetrated incest follows. Why then is it so monstrous for women to commit incest when it is represented as a natural consequence of their traditional position when this role is taken on by the husband? As McKinnon points out so succinctly, mothers are assumed incapable of assaulting their sons because ‘they lack the sexual equipment necessary for direct sexual agency or assault. Without a penis women are assumed
to be the acquiescent objects, not the active agents, of sexual acts. The idea of women as actively assaulting men sexually is such a troubling idea to normative definitions of female agency that the existence of such acts is often dismissed. Though McKinnon refers to the way modern Americans view the role of the mother, its applicability to the British eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic is aptly demonstrated in her assertion that: ‘the only way to account for the contravention of the “natural” is by conjuring the “unnatural” – a woman whose intellectual deficiency or psychological pathology completely undermines her maternal nature.’

This ‘unnatural’ mother, one capable of aggressive sexuality or sexual agency, is a figure often represented in the Gothic as a stepmother or similar relation. In this genre populated with incestuous relationships, mothers who are involved in sexual liaisons with their sons or daughters are hard to find. Haggerty points to the erotic mothers of Radcliffe’s novels, but he identifies an ‘erotics of loss’ rather than a physically or emotionally sexual relationship (though this does not preclude the possibility of a sexual element). The heroine’s birth mother is more often a victim of the patriarchy than a sexual aggressor. Ruth Bienstock Anolik describes this latter type of mother as a figure in constant peril: ‘the typical Gothic mother is absent: dead, imprisoned, or somehow abjected … Those Gothic mothers who are not actually dead are effaced by their husbands or other representations of the patriarchy in some way.’ This analysis of the mother is particularly relevant to scholarly discourse positioning the Female Gothic in opposition to the Male Gothic as in the latter the mother is often rearticulated into the most ‘unnatural’ mother of all: the incestuous mother capable of aggressive sexual agency or the power to refuse sexual access to the female body. An overrepresentation of mother–son incest in the Gothic written by men – predominantly homosexual men – and frequently absent mothers in the Radcliffean Gothic is apparent. Scholars such as Toni Bowers, Felicity A. Nussbaum and Ruth Perry have theorised that from the mid-eighteenth century onwards motherhood is characterised by the removal of the sexual from the maternal. The Radcliffean Gothic reworks this tradition by removing the maternal from the narrative until the heroine can reclaim her mother as she simultaneously locates her own sexuality. The Gothic as written by authors such as Beckford, Lewis and Horace Walpole responds to the mother by relocating her as the sexual centre of the text as victim or perpetrator, making the chaste maternal monstrous through mother–son
incest. Representing mothers as capable of sexual aggression and holding positions of power, male bodies are revealed as vulnerable to aggression and capable of submission. This use of the sexually aggressive incestuous mother radically destabilises the tradition of heteronormativity and conventional power dynamics that demand and naturalise male dominance and female submission. The Gothic, whether reclaiming the mother or demonstrating her sexual agency, exposes heteronormative society as at once creating and rejecting queer sexualities.

Part of the title of E. J. Clery’s essay on Walpole, ‘the impossibility of female desire’, summarises the extent to which female desire is viewed as unimaginable and as such already queer, already placed outside the heteronormative realm, and thus transgressive.\(^{22}\) Ruth Perry points out that ‘gothic fiction … was written in the closing decades of the eighteenth century by women and homosexual men’.\(^{23}\) Because of what we know of the authors’ sexual orientation and the genre’s fixation on transgressive sexuality, the application of queer theory to Gothic texts has been widely made use of by scholars such as Max Fincher and Haggerty.\(^{24}\) It seems particularly appropriate to apply this methodology to the instances of mother–son incest that combine the queerness of female desire with the queerness of male passivity and the queerness of incest. Bersani uses Foucauldian ways of thinking about pleasure to argue that the intolerance of homosexuality reveals: ‘a more profound anxiety about a threat to the way people are expected to relate to one another, which is not too different from saying the way power is positioned and exercised in our society’.\(^{25}\) If we replace the intolerance of queerness with the intolerance of incest, another type of sexuality that falls outside of the normative constructs, we can see how Bersani’s point about anxieties regarding power relationships applies here. The incest that is the least heteronormative of all, I would argue, is mother–son incest, because of the reasons for its rarity advanced by sociologists, anthropologists and geneticists. Mothers using sexual agency to coerce their sons thoroughly disrupts traditional understandings of passive women and aggressive men and the maintenance of power implicit in these constructions. This type of incest, like homosexuality in Bersani’s terms, reveals through its social production of intolerance similarly profound anxieties about power and social relations. What appeals to me the most about Bersani’s use of Foucault to shape an understanding of the social intolerance of homosexuality and my desire to apply it to incest intolerance (read: social revulsion) – particularly incest of the mother–son variety – is that it speaks to my overall
argument regarding power relations in the Gothic. For if, as Bersani states, there are connections between ‘the way we take our pleasure and the way we exercise power’ then there must certainly be something seriously destabilising to traditional power relationships – sexual and political – in the mere idea of mother–son sex.26

In order to explore the implications of the representations of mother–son incest I will analyse Walpole’s *The Mysterious Mother* (1768), a Gothic play involving mother–son incest in which the mother seduces her son on the night of her husband’s funeral. The text unites a condemnation of the Catholic church with anxieties over inheritance and female sexual agency. Walpole’s play is unique not only in the clear description of sexual intercourse between mother and son, but also in its convoluted publication history and contemporaneous condemnation. Though Walpole’s work is a play, the representation of incest functions much like that of mother–son incest in the Gothic novels I analyse due, in part, to its treatment as tragic and its presentation of aggressive female agency. In Beckford’s novel *Vathek* (1786), Vathek’s mother Carathis is the epitome of maternal evil. Obsessed with the dark arts and, though celibate, overly focused on her son’s sexual encounters, she is fixated on being admitted to hell with a near-sexual desire. Her ability to manipulate Vathek into evil-doings to promote their descent to the Halls of Eblis, where the forbidden can be known, is, in itself, an incestuous structure that highlights the dangers of mothers educating sons and positions female power as masculinising. In Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) the titular character murders his mother in a sexually motivated act that Radcliffe would later rework in another violent and incestuous scene. I also briefly discuss *Ernestus Berchtold; or, The Modern Oedipus: A Tale* (1819) by John Polidori, a novel in which Polidori, perhaps most famous for *The Vampyre* (1819) and his role as Lord Byron’s personal physician, depicts twin siblings haunted by their mother. Polidori’s novel represents the mother as an erotic and ghostly figure, physically effaced while remaining maternal and seductive. In analysing these texts and their accompanying criticism it becomes clear that the figure of the mother tends to be characterised in one of two ways: either as overly maternal or non-maternal. Both of these characterisations, in their incestuous incarnations, reflect an extension and conflation of the two functions already present for mothers in the Gothic: that of the nurturing good mother or the sexual bad mother. In combining and exaggerating these roles, Gothic writers trouble the either/or dichotomy of good or bad, virgin or whore, absent or present mother
that tends to dominate examinations of the maternal. Focusing on these Gothic texts that range from implied, explicit and violent depictions of mother–son incest, the absent or hyper-present mother is revealed as a figure impossible to ignore and highly disruptive to traditional models of female sexuality and desire.

THE MYSTERIOUSNESS OF MOTHERS HAVING DESIRES

Walpole’s *The Mysterious Mother* is described by David Punter and Glennis Byron as a: ‘tragic contemplation of human desire and suffering … a darker, more serious and more psychologically complex vision of what Edmund … calls “this theatre of monstrous guilt”’.27 The play depicts the Countess of Narbone’s incestuous relationship with her son Edmund and his subsequent incestuous relationship with his daughter/sister, Adeliza. On the night of her husband’s funeral the Countess discovers her son has a rendezvous planned with a servant. She disguises herself as the maid, intending to chastise Edmund, but is instead overcome with desire based on Edmund’s physical similarities to his father and has sex with him. Edmund is sent away to war and his mother has their child, Adeliza, who is raised in the nearby convent as the Countess’s ward. The Countess maintains possession of the castle and property while Edmund fights in wars for the next sixteen years, returning home to fall in love with Adeliza and marry her. This prompts the Countess finally to reveal all and go mad. She stabs herself, after which Edmund rushes to die in battle and Adeliza is sent (again) to a convent. The play has attracted much critical attention in part because of the agency of the mother in the incest scene, causing disagreement between scholars such as Robert Miles and Clery regarding the play’s subversiveness or adherence to social and political institutions.28 Regardless of the play’s intention to uphold or ridicule the legitimacy of government and religious institutions, the figure of the mother, in her sexual agency, reveals anxieties about the female body as capable of having aggressive designs on unsuspecting (or passive) male bodies. The inversion of male/female gender ideologies and their respective sexual positions as aggressor or passive receiver is realised through the mother’s desires and deviousness. Walpole queers the ‘unnatural mother’ of Gothic fiction into ultimately wielding the phallic sword on her own body in a final act of sexual aggression and suicide.

Contemporary criticism of the play is wide and varied; Haggerty points particularly to Coleridge’s take on it: ‘no one with a true spark of
manliness, of which Horace Walpole had none, could have written it."\(^{29}\) Haggerty’s reading places the ‘unmanning’ of Edmund as lying with the father–daughter incest aspect of the plot: ‘Just as Edmund, the play’s hero, is unmanned by the news that his bride is in fact his daughter, Walpole’s interest in this incest plot unmans him because it places him in lurid relation to the erotics of family life.’\(^{30}\) The ‘unmanning’ is a consequence of Edmund’s ignorance regarding the incest; he is ‘unmanned’ or ‘feminised’ by his ignorant and passive position. Haggerty believes that Walpole’s presentation of incest as a spectacle reveals his sexuality as it positions Walpole ‘outside the normativity that he would attack’\(^{31}\) Coleridge’s criticism of Walpole and scholarly understanding of the play’s status as a challenge to normativity speak to the queerness of the play’s subject matter: incestuous relationships the male hero enters into unknowingly and thus against his will. This ‘disgusting’ subject matter – men capable of victimisation at the hands of active female agents – was alluded to by Walpole himself.\(^{32}\) In a preface to the 1781 edition of the play Walpole writes that the author: ‘is sensible that the subject is disgusting … All the favour the Author solicits or expects, is, to be believed how unwillingly he has submitted to its appearance.’\(^{33}\) Walpole’s protests at letting the material out into the world unwillingly are substantiated by his hesitation to have it performed and perhaps also influenced by the play’s reception, as by the time he wrote the preface the play had been circulating for over a decade.

Jeffrey N. Cox questions Walpole’s hesitation to have the play performed as follows: ‘the assumption has always been, from Walpole forward, that the play was unstageable because it presented mother-son incest.’\(^{34}\) Cox believes that the play indicates that regardless of the presence of religion, unrestrained sexuality will not be contained. In the play’s postscript Walpole’s own discussion of (ir)rationality and sexual urges suggests an ironic treatment of conventional sexuality, claiming that ‘in order to make use of a canvas so shocking, it was necessary as much as possible to palliate the crime, and raise the character of the criminal’ (p. 253). To achieve this, Walpole links desire, reason and grief: ‘To attain the former end, I imagined the moment in which she has lost a beloved husband, when grief, disappointment, and a conflict of passions might be supposed to have thrown her reason off its guard’ (p. 253). Walpole attempts to justify the Countess’s act of sexual agency by emphasising her grief, highlighting a lack of reason that ‘might be’ behind the incestuous encounter. But Walpole’s intentions regarding the Countess’s actions
can perhaps be understood by his postscript: ‘I have placed my fable at the dawn of the reformation; consequently the strength of mind in the Countess may be supposed to have borrowed aid from other sources, besides those she found in her own understanding’ (p. 253). Walpole explains that the Countess’s reason is beyond that found in typical weak (female) understanding and fixes on the historical context of the Reformation and its surrounding emphasis on free will. The explanation – which combines references to the Countess’s strength of mind while describing her as irrational from grief – is curiously ambivalent. Nowhere in the play does Walpole expose the strong-minded mother as influenced by anything other than rational thought or desires. His explanation of her as deranged by grief thus becomes specious at best; a palliation designed to appease rather than be believed.

Such half-hearted explanations are hardly unique to Walpole’s postscript; John Polidori makes a similar assertion in his novel *Ernestus Berchtold*. Written decades after Walpole’s play it too features themes of mother–son and brother–sister incest. Polidori claims in his introduction:

> A tale that rests upon improbabilities, must generally disgust a rational mind; I am therefore afraid that, though I have thrown the superior agency into the background as much as was in my power, still, that many readers will think that the same moral, and the same colouring, might have been given to characters acting under the ordinary agencies of life; I believe it, but I had agreed to write a supernatural tale, and that does not allow of a completely every-day narrative.\(^{35}\)

Both authors distance themselves from the ‘disgusting’ nature of their works, emphasising the impact of either grief or supernatural agency on their characters and their actions. The distinction frequently made between the explained supernatural and supernatural Gothic tales seems less important than the use authors made of these different elements to effect (or to claim to effect) the same end: abdicating responsibility for what readers would see as the disgusting subject matter of mother–son desires. The rejection of rational thinking is in fact Walpole’s deliberate manipulation of rational and irrational elements in order to justify before disrupting the generic conventions of female agency and rationality.

The play’s combination of tragedy, tale, satire and comedy resembles the generic mixture in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).\(^{36}\) In his postscript Walpole wrote: ‘The subject is so horrid that I thought it would shock, rather than give satisfaction’ and that ‘the subject is more truly horrid
than even that of Oedipus’ (p. 251). Clery describes Walpole’s delayed revelation of incest in the play as essential to its tragic effect which enabled incest to be depicted without offending audiences: ‘incest as it appears within this literary schema was by no means shocking to polite theatre goers of the eighteenth century.’ But the Reverend William Mason, a contemporary of Walpole’s who read his manuscript, found the agency of the mother objectionable: ‘In Mason’s view the Countess sacrifices all claims to pity by her active sexuality, her voluntary commission of incest.’ Rejecting the Countess’s agency shows the desire to privilege tragedy as the appropriate mode in which to portray incest. Clery suggests that ‘the reconstruction of the tale as a tragedy was an acknowledgement that in an age of sensibility, stories of female sexuality could only end in disaster’ – Walpole’s blending of forms reveals society’s conception of female sexual agency as disastrous. This adherence to viewing incest as tragic is described by Frank as a critical failure: ‘Considering that high tragedy has been the privileged mode in Freud’s centring of sexuality in the family through incest and its prohibitions, it is not altogether surprising that psychoanalytic accounts have failed to appreciate Walpole’s parodic family romances.’ Incest itself is not repugnant as a theme but the structural changes Walpole uses to depict it are because they destabilise the traditional messages conveyed in incest tales or tragedies.

Rather than read the revelation of incest as delayed, I argue that Walpole establishes secrecy and sexual transgression on the Countess’s part from the beginning of the play, self-consciously offering the reader (or viewer) the idea of incest early on. A conversation between monks regarding the Countess establishes their belief that a sexual transgression underlies her self-imposed constant prayer and atonement without confession. Benedict says of the Countess’s penance for this secret sin: ‘“this woman was not cast in human mould”’ (p. 182). The monk unwittingly voices the church’s perception of the incest that prompts her devotion as monstrously unnatural. Edmund says of his mother: ‘“she herself was woman then; a sensual woman. Nor satiety, sickness and age, and virtue’s frowardness, had so obliterated pleasure’s relish – she might have pardoned what she felt so well”’ (p. 192). He believes that his mother, a ‘real’ woman with sexual desires, would have forgiven his sexual transgression with the maid. Edmund compares his active male sexuality to that of his mother and describes her change after his night with Beatrice: ‘“her heart, never too partial to me, grew estrang’d. Estrang’d! – aversion in its fellest mood scowl’d from her eye, and drove me from her sight. She call’d
me impious, named my honest lewdness, a profanation of my father’s ashes”’ (p. 193). The anger Edmund feels from the Countess follows a lifetime of maternal indifference and neglect. Edmund thinks the sexual intercourse he engaged in was “‘honest lewdness’” and does not understand that his mother’s reaction is caused by her guilt, though it is clear to the reader that something serious is at play here. Edmund has fought in wars and is weary of his mother’s banishment: “‘to stain my sword with random blood’” (p. 194) no longer pleases him; he wants to return home. Walpole uses the Gothic metaphor of sword for penis in a typically bloody image, uniting it to incest via Edmund’s desire no longer to stain his sword with foreign blood but to return it to his native soil, into the sheath, as it were, of family.

The argument that the revelation of incest is a shock at the play’s ending becomes strained under the repetition of sexual allusions united to images of the mother, father and home; the reader expects some sort of incestuous reveal. Cox points to the Countess’s passion for her husband ‘that hurled her into the arms of her son’. While Cox’s language marginalises the mother’s agency in the sexual act, implying she was mindlessly propelled by passion rather than cunningly disguising herself to deceive her son into sex, the play suggests this incestuous agency from the very start. Peter, the porter of the castle, says of the Countess regarding her deceased husband: “‘I marvel not my lady cherishes his remembrance, for he was comely to sight, wond’rous and goodly built. They say, his son, Count Edmund’s mainly like him”’ (p. 179). The porter’s description counters a tendency to overlook the Countess’s action; comparisons between the physical appearances of (particularly cross-generation) family members often cause sexual desires. For the Countess, such desires are inspired by Edmund’s ‘wond’rous’ physical similarities to his father. The Countess calls herself a monster who has committed sins ‘unheard of’ and ‘horrors’, asking of Edmund: “‘has not a mother’s hand afflicted him enough?’” (p. 209). It is apparent her deeds are taboo transgressions rather than typical sins and she acknowledges her own agency by her reference to her hands as the cause of Edmund’s miseries. When the Countess asks Adeliza if she loves her suitor (unaware it is Edmund) she replies “‘yes, with such love as that I feel for thee. His virtues I revere: his earnest words sound like the precepts of a tender parent: and, next to thee, methinks I could obey him’” (p. 212). Adeliza’s comparison of her love for Edmund to that for her mother indicates that her passionate love is based partly in unconscious familial recognition. By loading their
speeches with the language commonly preceding familial or incestuous revelations, Walpole provides the play’s readers and viewers with a context with which they would have been familiar.

A challenge to patriarchal power comes, as it often does, in the form of inheritance disruption. Clery finds in the Countess ‘hints that female desire … might be impervious to the social desiderata of sexual reproduction and the patriarchal family, that it might even be at war with them’. The disruption that female desire presents to the patriarchal family is manifested in the disordering of patrilineal inheritance caused by the Count’s love for his wife. This excessive love, resulting perhaps from the Countess’s noted strong sexual desire for her husband, puts her in the unusual position of power in her role as mother and wife. Anolik writes: ‘Gothic representations of marriage as dangerous and confining to the wife, and of motherhood as resulting in the disappearance of the mother, work to literalise and thereby reveal the horror implicit in two legal principles that governed the lives of women in England through the middle of the nineteenth century: coverture and primogeniture.’ Because the Countess defies this disappearance through the inheritance disruption, she becomes a highly dangerous figure: her rearticulation of the power structure has successfully destroyed the tradition of primogeniture. Frank ties the inheritance of property to the inheritance of transgressive desires that she describes as perversions: ‘the very means by which Edmund seeks to secure his patrimony invalidate it; his desire to marry Adeliza, his own daughter, reveals that in place of his father’s estate, he has inherited his mother’s perversion.’ The description of incest as an inherited trait bears resemblance to the generations of incest in other Gothic novels such as Regina Maria Roche’s Clermont (1798) and Selina Davenport’s The Sons of the Viscount and the Daughters of the Earl (1813), but Frank sees it as a perversion rather than an inversion that disrupts inheritance structures. Edmund’s naïve hope that a marriage to Adeliza might reconcile his mother with him gestures ironically towards this genealogy of past and future incestuous acts: a multi-generational destruction caused by uncontrollable desires.

The consequences of the Countess’s sexuality and sexual agency, which have already proved inimical to patrilineal inheritance, continue to derange social structures. Clery writes: ‘the incest which is a consequence of female desire must blow the family apart.’ The Countess, who believes Edmund is dead, faints upon seeing him alive. Edmund says: ‘stand off, and let me clasp her in my arms! The flame of filial fondness shall revive
the lamp of life, repay the breath she gave, and waken all the mother in her soul”’ (p. 216). Of course, Edmund’s ‘filial flame’ is the precise ‘fondness’ that has led to his banishment and the loss of his mother. On reviving, the Countess repeatedly asks if Edmund is Narbonne, a confusion of husband and son that confirms the idea that this conflation has happened before. Clery’s point about Walpole’s blending of the two types of incest narratives is evident here; Walpole implies a confusion or mistake between Edmund and his father (as occurs in incest tragedy), but it is by design (as in the incest tales) that the Countess has slept with her son. The Countess asks Edmund: “art thou my husband wing’d from other orbs to taunt my soul? What is this dubious form, impress’d with ev’ry feature I adore, and every lineament I dread to look on! Art thou my dead or living son?”’ (p. 217). The confusion underscores the physical likeness and desirability of both father and son. When the Countess pulls away in horror from Edmund he says: “to thy eyes I seem’d my father – at least for that resemblance-sake embrace me”, to which his mother replies: “horror on horror!” (pp. 217–18). It becomes clear that this confusion between father and son brings back the memory, now horrifying, of the Countess’s sexual transgression. Walpole plays with the possibility of observing the tragic form, but it is already here implied that this text’s seeming adherence to the accidental nature of incest in tragedy has been undermined by the Countess’s agency and desires.

The Countess further troubles convention in her use of the knife/metaphoric penis of Gothic fiction. When she reveals her daughter is the child of sin she says: “pity would bid me stab thee”’ (p. 229). She is tempted to wield the phallic knife usually found in the hands of violent male aggressors against her daughter, but does not. Rather than simply invert the paradigm of male aggression and violence, Walpole implicitly acknowledges the limits of such inversions. Instead, Walpole mirrors the incest act by having the Countess take the sword from Edmund and stab herself with it. When the Countess explains her actions to her son she says she was in a state of grief and disappointed desire for her dead husband: “my fancy saw thee thy father’s image … while thy arms twin’d, to thy thinking, round another’s waist, hear, hell, and tremble! – thou didst clasp thy mother!”’ (p. 246). Edmund’s reply reveals his impotency to act against his mother: “my dagger must repay a tale like this! Blood so distemper’d – no – I must not strike – I dare not punish what you dar’d commit”’ (pp. 246–7). The Countess orders him: “Give me the steel – my arm will not recoil!”’ (p. 247). As she stabs herself with Edmund’s
sword, the Countess takes agency, again, away from her son in a final act of suicidal, metaphorical rape. The play concludes with Edmund rushing off to war as he commands the clergy to take Adeliza to become a nun. He says: “to th’ embattl’d foe I will present this hated form – and welcome be the sabre that leaves no atom of it undefac’d” (p. 248). He commits his ‘hated’ and fetishised body – hated for its submission to his mother’s sexual agency and for its likeness to his father that made him the victim of maternal desires – to death by sabre. It is no coincidence that Edmund’s attempt at suicide is a final act of submission to the sword of an other – this time, a male. His inability to perform the act himself is concretised in these lines as is the mysterious, disastrous, gender-neutralising results of female sexual agency that disempower the male at the hands of the mother. Beckford takes up these notions of male disempowerment caused by an active mother in Vathek, wherein transgressions of gender ideologies pervert the natural development of masculinity and femininity.

THE EVILS OF MATERNAL INFLUENCE

William Beckford, an Englishman notorious in his own time for his love affairs with adolescent males and his immense fortune, wrote the Oriental Gothic novel Vathek, which frequently has been analysed in relation to Beckford’s sexuality and his relationship with his mother. Though scholars such as Roger Lonsdale have questioned the designation of the novel as Oriental, Donna Landry argues that for Beckford, ‘an Orientalised eroticisation of everyday life offered a licence for transgression, and a means of protesting against English society by pursuing queerness in various forms’. It is this ‘Orientalised eroticisation’ that forms the basis of Vathek, a work preoccupied with transgression and queerness. Landry’s analysis of Vathek points to Beckford’s ‘attraction to things that are horrifying … and the illicit pleasure associated with that attraction’ and underscores the extent to which the novel is discussed in light of its author’s sexuality and personal life. The novel follows the journey of the Caliph Vathek, who is a ‘most curious’ man ‘much addicted to women’ with ‘indulgencies unrestrained’, on his descent into hell. Vathek fluctuates between focusing on the Caliph’s desires for adolescents and his use as the tool of his manipulative and evil mother, Carathis. Carathis, while given influence and importance in the narrative, is presented as evil, immoral and wicked in her desires. Incapable of
maternal feelings, Carathis has incestuous desires towards Vathek that become apparent in her intrusions into his sexual relationships and her control over him. Fincher points to Carathis’s ‘implied incestuous desire for her son’ as being located in her hatred of his lover, but I argue it is grounded in her position of gender-ambiguous power and her corruption of the chaste ideal of motherhood. Maternal desires of all varieties are presented as uncontainable and dangerous forces with sexual connotations, highly disruptive and transmitted to the son via the powerful influence of the mother’s position.

Beckford aligns the insatiable appetites of Vathek and his mother with sexuality but depicts the mother’s to be a darker, more evil and destructive type that involves the control and manipulation of her son. Carathis is described as ‘wicked, as woman could be’ (p. 24), a woman ‘passionately attached … to the infernal powers’ (p. 26). Vathek ensures that his mother’s unrestrained appetite for experiments in the dark arts is sated when he is absent from the kingdom, telling her servant: ‘“Take care to supply whatever her experiments may demand”’ (p. 31). He tries to appease her appetite by giving her a male substitute. We are told that Carathis ‘enjoyed most whatever filled others with dread’ (p. 71). This description is similar to the words Calantha uses in Elizabeth Thomas’s Purity of Heart, or, The Ancient Costume (1816) when she describes her potential for incestuous love: ‘“As if love is not twenty times more attractive, when it is forbidden, and sinful.”’

Calantha’s words, like the description of Carathis, are used to display the monstrous and dreadful appetites of these women for the transgressive. Carathis’s manipulation of Vathek is demonstrated through her ability to reason with him when he is in a rage: ‘her tears and caresses called off his attention’ (p. 8). Her depiction as capable of soothing and controlling Vathek encompasses male and female gender ideologies; she possesses the seemingly nurturant ability to soothe her son’s passions but does so to use him to attain a position of power.

Representations of rampant sexual or deviant appetites, evil or witch-like behaviour, manipulative and power-seeking desires are part of the myth established by a threatened patriarchy to denounce and destroy any non-conforming woman in a position of power. The rhetoric designating Carathis as aberrant is similar to that in the propaganda Lynn Hunt identifies that depicts Marie Antoinette as having monstrous sexual appetites leading to incest: ‘a creature whose voracious sexuality knows no limits and no gender differentiation (or, for that matter, class differentiation).’ Fincher describes Carathis as a mother who: ‘connotes deviance and a
dominant sexuality, traditionally associated with masculinity. All transgressive sexualities are united as dangerous in their non-heteronormative queerness. Fincher writes: ‘Throughout the eighteenth century the term “monstrous” was used as a constructive synonym for the bodies and desires of queer men,’ a point that strengthens the link between monstrous as descriptive of the transgressive nature of both mothers and queer men. Homosexuality, much like voracious female sexuality, was linked to a dangerous blurring of gender, class, power and sex threatening to the patriarchy and found (re)articulation in the Gothic.

Carathis’s appetites are portrayed in a deliberately ambiguous sexual/asexual light, affording her words and actions sexual and incestuous hints within a patently nonsexual framework. Part of this nonsexual framework is built upon descriptions of Carathis as ‘chaste’, although these foundations are destabilised by their conjunction with her deliberate self-insertion into her son’s sex life. In a scene rife with actions emblematic of the tearing of a hymen, Carathis enters a tented pavilion area where her son is bathing with his teenage lover. ‘Carathis … broke through the muslin awnings and veils of the pavilion … Carathis, still seated on her camel, foamed with indignation, at the spectacle which obtruded itself on her chaste view’ (p. 74). Carathis performs a traditionally male act as she not only penetrates the veils but then ‘foams’ with indignation on viewing her son and his lover together. Fincher describes this scene as establishing Vathek’s virility through a spectacle or performance but I contend that it is rather destructive to the ideas of masculinity and male virility. The consummation is frustrated by the intrusion of the mother. It is her self-insertion that denies Vathek’s insertion, rendering him impotent rather than virile and positions the mother as more masculine than the son. Much like the Countess in Walpole’s play, Carathis’s aggressive agency, usually only wielded by men, makes her monstrous. This is not the first time Carathis has attempted to control or restrain Vathek’s passions. When the evil Giaour restored Vathek’s health, Vathek ‘leaped upon the neck of the frightful Indian, and kissed his horrid mouth and hollow cheeks, as though they had been the coral lips and the lilies and roses of his most beautiful wives. Nor would these transports have ceased, had not the eloquence of Carathis repressed them’ (p. 13). Here Carathis inserts herself between two men, cutting off a scene of potential same-sex desires. Carathis, the bad mother, acts as a barrier to a homoerotic experience, repressing her son’s enthusiastic embrace of the Indian with her overflowing words.
Vathek sees Carathis’s evil nature as the reason for his ultimate eternity in the hellish underworld, the Palace of Eblis. He ignores his own appetites, desires and actions that led him to commit acts of murder and torture, blaming his damnation on his mother. Carathis has driven him towards acts of violence much like the mother in Charlotte Dacre’s Zofloya (1806), who, Haggerty concludes, has a murderous nature and is responsible for her daughter’s inability to have a significant relationship.68 Haggerty’s reading locates the mother as a powerful figure who controls the sexual development of the child in her absence or presence, a notion Vathek subscribes to in his mother-blame.69 Vathek claims that “the principles by which Carathis perverted my youth, have been the sole cause of my perdition!” (p. 91). He heaps further blame on his mother when Carathis is brought to Eblis’s palace: “execrable woman! … cursed be the day thou givest me birth! … [How] much I ought to abhor the impious knowledge thou hast taught me” (p. 92). The knowledge imparted by the mother is impious and cursed; the mother who desires power inevitably fails as an educator because such knowledge from a woman is tainted by its non-conformity: she can provide only a perverted education. Carathis, unlike Vathek and Nouronihar, is undeterred by the terrible things she sees in the palace or the words of the condemned Soliman: ‘nothing appalled her dauntless soul’ (p. 93) and ‘she even attempted to dethrone one of the Solimans, for the purpose of usurping his place’ (p. 93). This final attempt to appropriate the ultimate male position of power is denied. Carathis, in spite of her lack of fear or penitence, turns into one of the countless wanderers of the palace, whose hearts are consumed by fire and in eternal agony. Again, comparisons to the paradigm of the voracious, monstrous mother of sociological understandings of incestuous mother–son relationships are easily drawn. As Landry argues, Carathis is ‘the character whose excesses exceed even her son’s … the power behind the throne, this mother of all caliphs and sultans’.70 Carathis seems the epitome of the conceptualisations of mothers whom McKinnon describes as displaying ‘a sexual agency that is fully active and aggressive, one that does not display “proper” female reserve, control, and modesty’.71 Much like Fincher’s description of queer men who endanger ‘the authenticity and stability of masculinity or femininity’, Carathis’s assumption of traditionally masculine qualities troubles such gender ideologies.72

This voracious mother is continually indicated as responsible, through her unmotherly urgings and non-maternal neglect, for her son’s actions, sexual desires and appetites.73 Vathek’s insatiable desire for Nouronihar
stems, in part, from his ability to view her as a mother substitute because of her relationship with her cousin/lover, Gulchenrouz, with whom she has an eroticised maternal bond. Gulchenrouz is described as a highly effeminate male who ‘seemed to be more feminine than even herself [Nouronihar]’ (p. 53). Positioned as a feminine child, Gulchenrouz treats Nouronihar as a mother: ‘nestling, as usual, in the bosom of Nouronihar, [he] pouted out his vermillion little lips against the offer of Sutlememe; and would take it, only, from the hand of his cousin’ (p. 55). Vathek angrily pronounces him an emasculated infant and asks Nouronihar’s father: ‘“would you surrender this divine beauty to a husband more womanish than herself”’ (p. 55) describing him further as ‘“a girl dressed up like a boy”’ (p. 67). Gulchenrouz’s childlike dependence on Nouronihar, who treats her lover as a son, causes Vathek to view her as the good mother he lacked. The Caliph’s desire for her increases on seeing her maternal interactions with her cousin/lover as he wants both her maternal nurturance and desires her sexually.

The depictions of Nouronihar and Gulchenrouz are reimagined in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) in the relationship of the maternal Cathy and her effeminate, sickly, cousin/lover Linton, who is equally despised by the masculine and powerful Hareton. It is also possible to view Vathek’s desire for Nouronihar as a substitute for his same-sex desire for the adolescent, childlike Gulchenrouz. We have already seen Vathek engaged in a scene with naked male youths when the Giaour demands the blood of fifty beautiful, noble-born children. Vathek plots to feed them to the voracious Giaour by having a competition: ‘the fifty competitors were soon stripped, and presented to the admiration of the spectators the suppleness and grace of their delicate limbs’ (p. 22). He commands the crowd to let the boys come to him one by one as he has a gift for each, starting with his jewels and ‘to the rest, each a part of my dress, even down to my slippers’ (p. 22), giving away pieces of his attire to the naked and beautiful boys as he throws them (he believes) to the cannibalistic genie. Vathek’s violence and transgressive sexuality are revealed to be the product of both his innate desires and his mother’s demands and show his willingness to feed the monstrous, taboo appetites of individuals who command him to do so.

Ultimately, McKinnon’s conclusion about the assumptions made regarding mother–son incest can be seen in Beckford’s portrayal of the dominant and ‘masculine’ Carathis and the effects of this voracious mother on Vathek. ‘Descriptions of maternal incest offenders often
stress that these women ... are sexually compulsive, indiscriminate, and conspicuous. The sexuality of incestuous mothers is more “male” than “female.” Maternal incest is thus blamed on a non-traditional family structure: an overwhelming mother and a passive father who does not pose enough of a ‘castrating fear’ in his son; the father is condemned for his passivity, the mother for her agency, and maternal incest is understood as a consequence of ‘unnatural’ gender positions in the home. Carathis is delineated as the aggressive and powerful mother who has taken on the function of the absent father and disastrously miseducated her son, driving him to acts of violence with sexual undertones. Her deliberate and active presence in his sexual relationships causes incest by proxy. Beckford’s mother–son relationship reveals impossible-to-resolve anxieties over the figure of the mother, her influence, power and control over her son’s sexuality and education. This rearticulation of power dynamics results in a display of misplaced appetites and aggressions exposed as being as violent and voracious as those of the traditional structures. Carathis’s assumption of the father’s role and her control of her son’s sexuality are reworked in Lewis’s The Monk. Lewis employs Elvira, the chaste and ideal mother turned active protector of her daughter, and Matilda, the image of the Virgin Mother who corrupts and incites her ‘son’ to ever greater sexual depravities, to depict the two extremes available to the maternal role.

The danger of mothers denying male pleasure

Matthew Lewis’s novel The Monk traces the descent of the pious monk Ambrosio into evil, who, after being corrupted by the beautiful, gender-ambiguous Matilda/Rosario, murders his mother and rapes and murders his sister. Matilda, the image of the Madonna painting to which Ambrosio prays, epitomises both the chaste ideal of motherhood and the ultimate monstrous, evil mother in her sexual corruption of Ambrosio. Anolik’s point about the effacement of women after marriage and motherhood in the Gothic is perhaps nowhere more apparent than when Ambrosio murders his mother in an attempt to remove her as an obstacle to his rape of her daughter. Peter Brooks points to these scenes of rape and murder as culminating in ‘disgust’ and contextualises the novel’s exposure of repression’s consequences, illuminating the relevance of both feminist and queer readings of the text. In finding her mother and restoring her in the family, Anolik argues that Radcliffe alters traditional
eighteenth-century narratives positioning the mother as the daughter’s enemy. Lewis’s removal of the mother inverts the Radcliffian model (itself a reversal) of locating and reuniting with the mother. In its representations of violence and sexual assault Lewis’s use of incest resembles the violent usurpation of female wealth and title by uncles, wherein female positions of power are attacked by younger-brother uncles intent on acquiring the dominance denied them by social institutions. Lewis’s depictions of mothers reiterate the implicit violence of heteronormativity and the consequences of institutional demands for conformity.

Bersani’s examination of political structures of oppression evidenced through the body in sadomasochism is seen in Ambrosio’s sexually charged murder of his mother. In this scene bodily oppression is depicted via the suffocation of the mother, a literalisation of the political institution’s oppression of female agency. The attack, a physical manifestation of the ideology of male dominance over female bodies, effaces the mother’s textual presence. Elvira challenges the dominant hegemony by taking on the traditionally male role of protector and, in her defence of her daughter, denies her son’s sexual desires. Ambrosio’s violent aggression stems from his adherence to the ideology privileging male (sexual) power that we have seen, not only historically and within the Gothic, but also in the scholarly accounts that understand mother–son incest as monstrously unnatural. In this context, Ambrosio’s actions are the consequence of heteronormative ideology. The murder Ambrosio commits in order to rape his sister is rife with erotic, incestuous undertones and sadomasochism.

[W]ith one hand he grasped Elvira’s throat so as to prevent her continuing her clamour, and with the other dashing her violently upon the ground, he dragged her towards the bed … 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 … [L]ong did the sufferer struggle to disengage herself; but in vain. The monk continued to kneel upon her breast, witnessed without mercy the convulsive trembling of her limbs beneath him, and sustained with inhuman firmness the spectacle of her agonies.

The sexual allusions are ubiquitous in the description of the violent attack and Lewis blends the scenes of murder and attempted rape in a way that implies that the emotions experienced by the monk while suffocating his mother are akin to the desires he feels for his sister. Not only does the killing occur in a bedroom, but Ambrosio also uses a pillow from
his sister’s bed to smother his mother, symbolically uniting the murderous attack with the sexual one. As his mother struggles beneath him, Ambrosio ‘sustained with inhuman firmness’ this spectacle; a description more suggestive of rape than murder. While the incestuous aspect of his crimes is yet unknown to Ambrosio, their existence causes Lewis’s work to posit violent incest and matricide as the result of a patriarchal ideology. But in spite of the aggressive, sexually motivated attack, many scholarly accounts deliberately overlook the implicit incest here.

Steven Blakemore mentions only that Ambrosio is ‘the aggressive killer of his mother’ and nothing about the incestuous relevance of this scene, of the sexual connotations that position Ambrosio as more than just a killer. Blakemore is not alone in ignoring the incestuous subtext. In analysing the differences between Lewis’s scenes of violence and Radcliffe’s, Vartan P. Messier writes that ‘in contrast to Radcliffe, Lewis is considerably more daring … By making unprecedented use of transgressive elements, his strategy is one of unconcealed, unadulterated shock and horror.’

While Messier notes the connection between sex and violence in the scenes of Antonia’s attempted rape and later rape and murder he concludes that Radcliffe: ‘substituted Lewis’ incest episode … by having Schedoni spare Ellena when he realises she might be his daughter.’ Such critical comparisons of Lewis and Radcliffe overlook the incestuous implications in either one or both of these scenes. Messier’s deliberate placement of Radcliffe’s scene as outside the incestuous framework is meant to attest to its correspondence to a kinder, gentler (Female) Gothic novel than Lewis’s. Of course, Radcliffe’s representation of the evil Schedoni’s very phallic knife that so nearly penetrates his niece’s dress just as closely literalises sex and violent aggression as Lewis’s novel does. In claiming that Lewis makes ‘unprecedented use of transgressive elements’ Messier ignores the spectacles of incest and violence in earlier Gothic novels by Radcliffe and others. Such a reading suggests that Radcliffe intended readers of her novel to infer that Schedoni’s failure to rape and/or murder Ellena is due to his scruples regarding incest rather than a combination of his surprise at the discovery of kinship and greed when he realises how the familial bond could benefit him. Scholarly reproductions of the positioning of Radcliffe as writing a weak, feminine Gothic novel in comparison to Lewis’s aggressive male version mirror the gender ideologies these writers strove to disrupt.

Images of disgust at female bodies dovetail remarkably neatly with Haggerty’s understandings of male forms in peril. Haggerty’s argument
that ‘abject, passive masculinity challenges the status quo with the “dis-
gusting” proposition that some men are victims too … expos[ing] the

crack in normative masculinity’ illuminates how writers of the Gothic

use the genre to explore the dangers of heteronormativity for men as

well as women. After Ambrosio’s murder of Elvira, her body becomes
disgusting, a thing of repulsion to him: ‘Ambrosio beheld before him

that once noble and majestic form, now become a corpse – cold, sense-

less, and disgusting’ (p. 264). He is similarly disgusted by the body of

his sister, Antonia, once he has raped her, as he was repulsed by Matilda

after having sex with her. Haggerty’s treatment of the fetishised male

allows us to see how these writers based the model for the fetishisation

of the wounded or vulnerable male body on the figure of the effaced

mother. The figure of the wounded, murdered, imprisoned and/or

emaciated mother literalises the dangers of heteronormative society

that dictates the legal and social subjugation of women. Similarly,

Haggerty finds Lewis’s inversions fetishise male bodies, citing the ema-
ciated and chained body of Reginald in Lewis’s The Castle Spectre (1797)
to argue: ‘the lurid discovery here is the spectacle of pale, broken, and
effectively castrated masculinity.’

Haggerty argues that the spectacle ‘exposes the vulnerable centre of
heteronormativity itself’, just as Anolik’s arguments point to this func-
tion of the imprisoned or absent mother. Anolik focuses on the mother’s
role in exposing the realities of legal and social conventions that cause
the erasure of women, while Haggerty locates the violence implicit in
such representations. Both arguments demonstrate the importance and
ambivalence surrounding the figure of the mother. Using Joanna Baillie’s
De Montfort (1807) as an example, Haggerty argues that the play’s homo-
erotics are eventually replaced with incest and establish Baillie’s work’s
similarity to ‘Walpole’s fascination with similar tropes’. These cultur-
ally inscribed representations of mother, incest and wounded male are
merged in the Gothics written by Lewis, Beckford, Dacre, Baillie and
Walpole to show the similar subjugation and vulnerability of or vio-
lence towards those outside of heteronormative culture. In this sense, the
mother and the man who defies normative sexuality share many of the
same qualities (the mother/whore dichotomy is similar to the mascu-
line man/non-masculine way that Coleridge describes Walpole) and are
subject to the same treatment. The queering of the Gothic becomes a

crucial mode of theorising the role of the mother and understanding her
placement in the genre, as well as allowing us to view depictions of similarly positioned men in a more complex way.

While some scholars understand The Monk's conclusion and Ambrosio's death at the hands of the demon as Lewis's correction of a dangerous inversion, such a stance privileges the very gender ideologies that Lewis subverts. Blakemore concludes: ‘writing … when the French Revolution seemed to be inverting the “natural” order of things, Matthew Lewis, in the end, restores the natural order.’ The ‘natural order’, simultaneously upheld (through an aggressive male act of sexual violence) and inverted (through the eventual revelation of the transgression) via the incestuous murder of his mother and rape and murder of his sister, seems far from restored. It is at the novel's end that the first mention of incest is made when the virgin/whore mother turned gender-ambiguous demon says: ‘“That Antonia whom you violated, was your sister! That Elvira whom you murdered, gave you birth! Tremble, abandoned hypocrite, inhuman parricide, incestuous ravisher!”’ (p. 361). Ambrosio ignores the disclosure, complicating how the revelation should be treated; he is uninterested in the incestuous aspect of his crimes and instead worries that he will be killed by the demon. His attitude toward his mother correlates to a line in Walpole's play in which Benedict says of the Countess: ‘‘I cannot dupe, and therefore must destroy her’’ (p. 222). The passage summarises the way Ambrosio comes to murder Elvira – she sees through his mask of piety – and the attitude of patriarchal institutions towards women who defy them: such women must be smothered, suppressed or effaced. Blakemore's conclusion points to Lewis's novel as ultimately upholding the dominant social institutions and ideologies that contributed to the incestuous rape and murders because it ignores the presence of mother-son incest. Yet Lewis's unifications of murderous and incestuous desires indicate that the novel is extremely critical of such institutions.

Ambrosio's discovery of his mother's identity reinforces his guilt for his destruction of the eroticised, subversive mother who held the key to his identity. As we have repeatedly seen in the Gothic, the heroines' quests for their maternal origins are linked to their ultimate happiness. But in the case of Lewis and Polidori the heroine's quest is inverted into the villain/hero's discovery of the dead rather than of the living: knowledge only concretises these men's incapability of having a maternal figure. Polidori links the ghostly apparitions of Ernestus Berchtold's mother with the yearnings experienced by the titular character, uniting the sexual appetite to an immaterial presence with whom such physical desires
are impossible to realise. The portrayal of Berchtold relating the appearance of his mother in ghost form suggests a breathless confusion at the tantalising vision: ‘a figure; I cannot describe it to you. … [H]er white drapery, breathed on by the wanton breeze, now betrayed the delicate form of her limbs, – now hid them from my sight’ (p. 19). The ‘wanton breeze’ hints of Zephyrus, Greek god of the west wind who transports Psyche to her sexual union with Cupid and carries a wealth of associated images of marriage, death, birth and desires. These authors locate their male characters in the framework of incestuous mother–son relationships while denying the presence or realisation of desires to which the very structure of the relationships and depictions attests. Diana Wallace emphasises the importance of the mother to lineage and identity in the Female Gothic, if often as a ghost or haunting presence. The further disruption of paternity through missing or dead fathers makes impossible the villains’ ability to legitimise their desires through knowledge of their fathers; as demonstrated in Vathek and The Mysterious Mother it forces their development in relation to the unknowable mother. This type of inversion and reversal of the Radcliffean Gothic show the conjunction between what are viewed as two distinct modes of gendered Gothic writing. Rather than functioning as separate genres, the Gothic texts analysed in this chapter use similar methods to those explored in the rest of this book, one model relocating the missing mother to reclaim a matriarchal tradition and the other eliminating the mother in order to show the paradoxical inevitability and impossibility of queer desires in a heteronormative ideology.

Mother–son incest is unilaterally viewed by sociologists, geneticists and anthropologists as the most abhorred and unnatural incestuous relationship of all. But, as McKinnon points out, this most taboo of forbidden relationships seems to dominate the discourse on incest even while it remains the least practised. When Haggerty’s observation that the ‘disgusting’ notions of male victims in the Gothic are assessed in conjunction with the horror of mother–son incest, a clearer picture emerges. Male victims of sexual assault or abuse are disgusting, particularly so at the hands of a woman who is meant to be a passive maternal ideal. The queerness of active, sexually aggressive mothers, like representations of chained and fetishised male bodies, disrupts conventional gender ideologies. The Gothic as written by Radcliffe, Parsons and Roche tends to locate the mother as the missing meaning of self rather than as a sexual aggressor. Concerned with exposing the dangers of patriarchy and
heteronormativity to women, these texts have less need to use mother–
daughter incest as a convention because society demands female victim-
isation through its ideology of legally and socially sanctioned violence
against and domination of women. Gothic texts by authors such as
Baillie, Dacre, Polidori, Beckford, Walpole and Lewis depict the mother
as either the instigator or victim of incestuous sexual desires, employing
mother–son incest to demonstrate the inability of heteronormative soci-
ety to acknowledge male victims or permit the thwarting of male desires.
These authors make spectacles of sexuality in which men are dominated
or manipulated by the figure patriarchal society typically positions as the
most passive, most invisible, least powerful and least capable of sexual
agency of all: the mother. The figure of the mother, while seeming to ful-
fil irreconcilably different roles in what have been viewed by scholarship
as the two types of Gothic, instead provides in both a subversion of the
constraints imposed by heteronormative society and its gender and sex-
ual ideologies that reveals the categories of Male and Female Gothic as
ultimately reductive. Destabilising traditional power relationships, the
figure of the incestuous mother is eventually recovered and it is at her
mysterious, active hands that fetishised male bodies remain constant vic-
tims. Such a destabilisation remains paradoxical in its rearticulation of
the power structures it disrupts, inverting the normative to stress het-
eronormative society’s simultaneous and perpetual construction and
destruction of queer sexualities.

NOTES
1 Joseph Shepher, Incest: A Biosocial View (New York: Academic Press,
2 Karen Sanchez-Eppler, ‘Temperance in the bed of a child: incest and social
3 Many scholars who study incest note that, while it is impossible to give clear
numbers on rates of incest in society, estimates show boys are the victims
in only 10 per cent of the cases. www.faqs.org/health/topics/68/incest/html
[accessed 11 March 2011].
4 Shepher, p. 97.
5 Shepher, p. 113.
6 Judith Butler, ‘Critically queer’, GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies,
1:1 (1993), 17–32. Butler examines ‘the extent that homosexual attachments
remain unacknowledged within normative heterosexuality’ (25).

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That the Female Gothic is closely aligned to what is known as Male Gothic when it represents instances of uncle–niece incest, which rely on literalising the inherent violence in the power structures of this relationship, while in father–daughter, brother–sister and cousin relationships these heteronormative structures are eliminated, demonstrates the inherent instability of such gendered generic distinctions.

Examples of mothers used as objects of sexual desire in the Gothic include Olivia in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797), Louisa Bruyere in Eliza Parsons’s *An Old Friend with a New Face* (1797), Lady Correlia in Sarah Sheriffe’s *Correlia, or The Mystic Tomb* (1802) and Camilla in Elizabeth Thomas’s *Purity of Heart, or The Ancient Costume* (1816).

Examples include Mrs Ashwood in Charlotte Smith’s *Emmeline* (1788), Maria de Vellorno in Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), Signora di Laurentini and Madame de Chenon in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), The Bleeding Nun in Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) and the Countess of Dunreath in Maria Regina Roche’s *The Children of the Abbey* (1796).

Sexually aggressive or promiscuous women in the genre often suffer disastrous consequences. Examples include Mrs Ashwood in Charlotte Smith’s *Emmeline* (1788), Maria de Vellorno in Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), Signora di Laurentini and Madame de Chenon in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), The Bleeding Nun in Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) and the Countess of Dunreath in Maria Regina Roche’s *The Children of the Abbey* (1796).


We see such ‘unnatural’ mothers in more peripheral positions or as stepmothers in Gothic novels such as in Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance, The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Sheriffe’s *Correlia, or The Mystic Tomb*.

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23 Perry, p. 396.

24 See Max Fincher’s *Queering Gothic in the Romantic Age: The Penetrating Eye* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and Haggerty’s *Queer Gothic*.

25 Bersani, 11.

26 Bersani, 12–13.


28 Robert Miles argues in *Gothic Writing, 1750–1820: A Genealogy* (London: Routledge, 1993) that ‘the mother/son incest suggests the origin of this taboo is the nexus of father/church/state, the play’s offended parties. As the Gothic aesthetic insists (through its idealisation of Romance) these taboos are rationally rooted in a providential nature, supporting political and familial legitimacy’ (p. 119) while Clery finds the play resistant to its contemporaneous political hegemony.


32 Marcie Frank, ‘Horace Walpole’s family romances’, *Modern Philology*, 100:3 (2003), 418. Frank argues that Walpole was aware of his play’s themes being ‘subsum[ed] under the rubric of sexual perversity and homosexuality’.


36 See Chapter 1.

37 Clery, p. 32. Clery defines incest tales as bourgeois conduct lessons and incest tragedy as representative of larger social chaos and attributable to no personal fault (p. 31).

Clery, p. 37.

Frank, 428.

Clery, p. 32. Similarly, Jill Campbell in her article “‘I am no giant’: Horace Walpole, heterosexual incest, and love among men”, *The Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 39:3 (1998) writes of the incestuous references in Walpole’s letters and works that: ‘their most surprising feature has to do with tone: these stories are consistently given comic or satiric rather than Gothic or high tragic treatment’ (243).

Clery points to this crucial difference between Walpole’s Countess, who lacks maternal feeling, and other mothers in incest tales who typically have strong maternal bonds with their sons prior to the incest (p. 36).

Cox, 133.

Mary Shelley’s *Matilda* (1959) also employs the convention of similar physical characteristics between mother and daughter to presage the father’s incestuous desires for his daughter as does Sheriffe’s *Correlia, or The Mystic Tomb* (1802) while Emily Brontë uses cross-generational doppelgangers in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) partially to explain sexual attraction.

Clery cites ‘conjugal passion’ as responsible for the Countess’s replacement of Edmund as his father’s heir (p. 36).

Anolik, 26.

Frank makes a similar argument to Anolik, noting that ‘incest blocks inheritance’, pointing to incestuous behaviour as threatening to the proper means of transferring wealth and property (417).

Frank, 420.

Clery, p. 37.

Clery, pp. 30–2.

This is somewhat similar to Mary Robinson’s Gothic novel *Vancenza; or, The Dangers of Credulity* (1792), in which the lovers discover they are siblings just before their wedding; the sister dies of a fever and the brother joins the army hoping to die in battle.


Landry, p. 169. Landry also links the work with the Gothic: ‘reliving in memory and imagination, the ruinous and doomed give Beckford’s writing a certain affinity with the Gothic’ (p. 169).
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58 Fincher, p. 85.

59 Marie Mulvey-Roberts offers an excellent treatment of Gothic women and the consequences of their ‘excessive desire to know’ in her chapter ‘From Bluebeard’s Bloody Chamber to Demonic Stigmatic’, in Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (eds), *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 98. Mulvey-Roberts’s analysis of forbidden knowledge makes use of Georges Bataille’s assertion that transgression and taboo are inseparable, a notion readily applicable to Carathis’s quest for knowledge. This appetite for forbidden knowledge is also discussed in Landry’s chapter, in which she argues Carathis’s ‘quest for occult knowledge becomes itself a field sport’ (p. 189).


62 Fincher, p. 84.

63 Fincher, p. 69.

64 Landry points to Carathis’s chasteness as an allusion to Diana, the huntress (p. 189).

65 See Chapter 2, p. xxx.

66 Fincher, p. 74.

67 Alethea Brereton Lewis’s novel *Nuns of the Desert: or, The Woodland Witches* (1805) includes a similarly power-hungry and sexually voracious mother, Beatrice, who has affairs with young soldiers while she colludes with her husband’s and son’s plans to sexually assault her daughters’ friends.

68 Haggerty, *Queer Gothic*, p. 74. Haggerty views Victoria’s shortcomings as the ultimate consequence of having a mother who does not provide the bond that allows for female–female, non-heteronormative (and thus safe, non-sadomasochistic) desires to form.

69 Haggerty’s use of this Freudian model to read Carathis requires a nurturing mother for healthy psychical development, a model of maternity that McKinnon assesses as based on a flawed ideology.

70 Landry, p. 188.
Beckford’s portrayal of Vathek shares similarities with scholarly readings of the heroine’s psychosexual development in the Female Gothic as related to imagining bad fathers – see Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), p. 56 – or relocating good mothers – see Haggerty, *Queer Gothic*, p. 31; Robert Miles, *The Great Enchantress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 106. This further troubles the Gothic’s division into Male, Female or Queer categories.

Fincher argues that Vathek’s interactions with the fifty children and with Gulchenrouz are metaphoric of sexual desires and penetration (pp. 73–6).

Anolik argues Elvira ‘must be disposed of before the narrative can follow its course … the author of the equally exciting and equally deviant Gothic text feels threatened by the presence of the normalizing and censoring mother’ (27).


Anolik concludes that this causes the Gothic to be of ongoing use to writers desirous of subverting the patriarchy (32–40).

See Chapter 3 for an examination of representations of uncle–niece incest in the Gothic.


Ambrosio’s smothering of his mother is equally a (sm)othering of his (m)other in that the murder renders his biological parent forever unknowable to him; he permanently others his other mother.

Likewise, scholars frequently overlook the incestuous threat in Radcliffe’s reworking of this scene in *The Italian* (1797), discussed in Chapter 3.


Messier, 41–2.


Anolik, 23–46.


91 Blakemore, 536.
92 Anolik points to the mother as subversive through her categorically dangerous position, being neither virgin nor whore (30). Similarly, Kelly A. Marsh argues that ‘the mother’s story is potentially subversive’ in ‘Jane Eyre and the pursuit of the mother’s pleasure’, South Atlantic Review, 69:3/4 (2004), 85.