The institution of family in matthew lewis' the monk

Matthew Lewis' The Monk makes extensive use of the institution of family in order to underscore the implied author's ambivalent position towards the French Revolution and its aftermath. The novel recounts the tale of two families: Antonia's family, which consists of her mother, Elvira, her step-uncle Raymond, her aunt Leonella, and her brother, Ambrosio (although their kinship remains unbeknownst to her until her death), and Agnes' family, which includes her mother Inesilla, her father Gaston, her brother Lorenzo, her Aunt Rodolpha, her uncle, the baron Lindenberg, her ancestor Beatrice, and her deceased child. The novel also deals to a lesser extent with Marguerite's family, which consists of her father, her first husband, her second husband Baptiste, and her two children, among whom Theodore becomes an important character. Through these three families the implied author explores the equivocal role of the family, as either a protective force that saves its members from annihilation, or an oppressive institution that is excessive in and of itself, and also breeds excess in others. The two matriarchs, Elvira and Inesilla, embody the destructive aspect of the family, when it becomes an institution that indulges in excess. Elvira is excessively overprotective of her daughter: she conceals from her any and all information regarding sexual relations between men and women, she refuses to allow Lorenzo access to her until he receives his uncle's consent to marry her, and she refrains from revealing to Antonia the whole truth of her suspicions regarding Ambrosio. She even goes so far as to censor the Bible in a scene that contributed much to the novel's infamy. If Elvira had been more moderate in shielding her daughter from the world, then her tragedy, as well as her daughter's, may well have been averted, either by Antonia's immediate marriage to Lorenzo or by a more wary attitude towards Ambrosio on Antonia’s part. Hence, Elvira’s excessive overprotection is one of the central causes of the doom that befalls her family. Inesilla is the mother figure antithetical to Elvira: she is excessively selfish towards Agnes. She condemns Agnes to monastic life in St. Clare’s, in order to solicit divine grace and thus save her own life, and after she recuperates and gives birth to Agnes, she abandons her to the jealous and vindictive Donna Rodolpha, with the intent of concealing her design from Don Ramirez and Lorenzo. This excessive selfishness also leads to disaster, although to a lesser extent than that which befalls Elvira and Antonia: Inesilla dies, as does Agnes’ baby, but Agnes is rescued after long weeks of suffering. It is important to note that these two matriarchs do not only personally display excess, but also instill excess in their progeny. Elvira’s excessive overprotection inculcates Antonia with excessive innocence, to the extent that even after Ambrosio sexually molests her for the first time, she still feels that he “ contributed essentially to compose her ruffled spirits” (282). Inesilla’s excessive selfishness causes Agnes’ passion for Raymond to become excessive, as is evident in her rash surrender to his sexual solicitations, because she is forced into a way of life she abhors and is bereft of any hope of marriage. Furthermore, Elvira and Inesilla are especially poignant symbols of excess, in light of the French Revolution’s emblem of the motherly young lady, who stands erect with naked breasts, as Liberty offering her milk to the children of the revolution. Thus, I suggest that the implied author’s critique of Elvira and Inesilla, as matriarchs whose excess leads to their downfall, reflects his condemnation of the radicalism that permeated the National Assembly following the first stages of the French Revolution, when its dogmatism becomes so extreme that it instated a Reign of Terror in which thousands of people were executed in an excess of violence. The positive aspect of the family institution is embodied in Lorenzo. Lorenzo is the epitome of the faithful brother, who sees through the web of deception woven around Agnes, exposes the iniquities of the prioress, escapes the enraged mob, overcomes superstition and descends into the tombs of St. Clare's convent in order to liberate his sister. The fact that it is her brother, not her lover, that saves her, is significant, especially when we take into account the other pair of siblings in this novel: Antonia and Ambrosio. Lorenzo's heroic rescue of Agnes exemplifies the power of brotherly love to protect, heal, and restore justice. Conversely, Ambrosio's rape and subsequent murder of Antonia exemplifies the catastrophic damage that siblings can inflict on one another. These two paradigms of sibling relationships resonant strongly with the French Revolution: if we consider all members of a nation as brethren on some level, then the Reign of Terror may be deemed mass fratricide, since both the judges of the Revolutionary Tribunal and the people they condemned to death were French citizens. I therefore argue that Ambrosio's cruelty towards Antonia, which stems from his lack of awareness that she is his sister, critically reflects on the Revolutionary Tribunal's death sentences, which are arguably predicated on the Tribunal members' refusal to acknowledge that the men they condemn are their kindred. Hence, the novel's opposition between the loving relationship of Lorenzo and Agnes and the victimizing relationship of Ambrosio and Antonia serves to dramatize the implied author's approbation of the French Revolution's original ideal of fraternity, while denouncing the Reign of Terror as a betrayal of this ideal. The domestic upheavals in the novel and lack thereof also accentuate the implied author's ambiguous position regarding the French Revolution and its aftermath. The fate of Beatrice and Ambrisio illustrate his denunciation of absolute rebellion, because they are the most extreme rebels in the novel – they revolt not only against the institutions of family, religion, and aristocracy, but also defy basic human morality by committing the capital crimes of murder and rape – and their doom is far worse than that of any of the other characters: they suffer extensively, and in Ambrosio's case probably eternally, the torments of the afterlife. However, the implied author does not endorse the opposite extreme of utter submission to institutional authority, as is evident in his treatment of Antonia: her tragic end is a direct result of her inability to contest her mother or Ambrosio. What the implied author does support is moderate, calculated rebellion against authority, if and when the need arises. This is evident in the plot twists and dénouement of Agnes and Marguerite's narratives. Agnes rebels against the matriarch and the patriarch of her family twice: first, when she agrees to elope with Raymond and even takes the initiative and contrives an ingenious escape plan, and second, when she makes love to Raymond in the convent. I suggest that the suffering she endures in the dungeon of St. Clare's convent is the implied author's method of punishing her for her second transgression, which is caused by an outburst of excessive passion, as she admits later on in the narrative: " Raymond, affection for you betrayed me." (355). Conversely, Agnes' relatively happy end may be construed as the implied author's endorsement of her first transgression, which was much more intelligent and restrained. This reading is supported by Marguerite's story, which mirrors Agnes' narrative. Like Agnes, Marguerite transgresses against her father out of excessive love for a man, and is consequently punished: " Chagrin and discontent preyed upon my constitution…the dejection of my countenance denoted the sufferings of my heart.” (109). Yet when she rebels against Baptiste, her second husband and therefore the new patriarch of her family, by concocting and carrying out a plan to save Raymond, Rodolpha and herself, she is rewarded by a second chance at life. Thus, the implied author rejects the extremes of rebellion out of excessive emotion on the one hand, and of absolute compliance to authority on the other hand. Instead, he supports temperate rebellion against authority, if and when this authority becomes tyrannical and unjust. This attitude towards domestic upheaval positions the implied author as a supporter of the first, relatively moderate, stages of the French Revolution, while adamantly opposing the radicalism that followed. By the end of the novel, all the protagonists have either died or reintegrated into a new domestic sphere. Agnes and Raymond, Lorenzo and Virginia, become married couples, and even Leonella weds an apothecary. None of the major characters remain alive and single, aside from Theodore, who throughout the novel has been situated on the border between a gentleman and a servant, and in this case may be deemed the latter, thereby exempting him from the necessity to wed. Moreover, the implied author has purged the novel of children who were born outside of wedlock: Agnes’ child is dead, and Antonia has died before she had any chance of giving birth, even assuming that Ambrosio has impregnated her. Thus, the implied author reestablishes the family institution as the only framework in which his protagonists can consummate their love and bear progeny. However, the new domestic spheres are not identical to their antecedents: the protagonists have learned and matured through their hardships. They will not send their daughters to a convent, nor will they excessively protect them from the world. Instead, they will probably instill their children with their newfound peace, which enables them to make the best of their fate and “ think lightly of every succeeding woe” (358). It is this golden path between change and stability which the implied author postulates as a new and better vision of the future, one that incorporates the original ideals of the French Revolution into moderate, well thought out actions, and in which violence caused by excess is a thing of the past.

BibliographyLewis, Matthew. The Monk. London: Penguin Books, 1998.