

**MATTHEW  
GREGORY LEWIS**



**MISTRUST,  
OR BLANCHE  
AND OSBRIGHT**

**Matthew Gregory Lewis**

# **Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright**

**Enriched edition.**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Gavin Avery*

EAN 8596547321170

Edited and published by DigiCat, 2022



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# Introduction

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At the heart of *Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright* lies the unnerving truth that love, when gnawed by suspicion and compelled to submit to proofs it cannot humanely furnish, turns from sanctuary into snare, allowing fear, pride, and rumor to tyrannize judgment until the very qualities lovers prize—constancy, courage, purity—are converted into instruments of peril, so that the gravest dangers emerge not from battlements or wilderness but from an inward fissure widening between two pledged hearts, a fissure stoked by codes of honor and the theatrics of virtue that demand spectacle where confidence, patience, and mutual recognition should suffice.

Matthew Gregory Lewis, a keystone of British Gothic writing in the Romantic era, shaped a taste for compact narratives of dread and desire, and *Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright* sits firmly within that tradition. The piece unfolds in a medievalized, chivalric past—less a mapped locale than an atmospheric stage—where vows, reputations, and ritual gestures carry fatal weight. Its mode is Gothic romance in miniature, attentive to swift reversals, moral pressure, and the tremor of the uncanny. Read alongside his shorter tales and ballad narratives, it exemplifies the period's fascination with heightened sentiment, theatrical incident, and the dark psychology of credulity.

The premise is deceptively simple: two lovers, Blanche and Osbright, are bound by affection and oath, yet a

murmur of doubt disturbs their pact, and an attempt to silence that doubt sets events accelerating beyond anyone's control. Lewis tells the story with concentrated force, letting each episode pivot on a choice made under pressure. The voice is urgent and ceremonious, poised between tenderness and admonition, and the tone moves from courtly assurance to mounting unease. Whether encountered as a ballad-like narrative or as a compact romance, the experience is swift, vivid, and morally alert, inviting readers to supply atmosphere in imagination.

At its center is the corrosive logic of mistrust: the demand that love prove itself through spectacle, the privileging of rumor over relationship, the reflex that converts care into surveillance. Lewis exposes how codes of honor, intended to stabilize public virtue, can sanction private cruelty, especially when desire is entangled with pride. The narrative's medievalized manners spotlight the gendered asymmetry of suspicion—the disproportionate scrutiny placed upon a woman's word and the disastrous bravado expected of a man. Yet the narrative remains intimate, charting the moment when a glance, a pause, or a poorly chosen test becomes a point of no return.

Lewis crafts the action with economy and a stage-sense honed by his dramatic work, arranging scenes as stark confrontations and leaving suggestive gaps that the imagination fills with dread. Repetition and contrast generate momentum: vows answered by doubts, tenderness shadowed by public pressure, appeals to reason drowned out by performance. The language favors striking images and ceremonious address, sustaining a high emotional pitch

without losing clarity. While the supernatural hovers more as atmosphere than taxonomy, the text cultivates uncertainty about what is feared and why, letting psychological intensity do the work usually assigned to apparitions, corridors, and elaborate machinery.

For contemporary readers, the story's diagnosis of mistrust feels newly urgent. The insistence on proofs and performances echoes modern pressures to publicize intimacy, to demand constant verification, to read faint signals as decisive evidence. Lewis clarifies how fear of humiliation can deform love into a contest, and how an audience—real or imagined—can become the third party in a relationship, distorting choices. The text invites reflection on consent, boundaries, and emotional labor: what is owed between partners, and what it means to refuse a harmful test. Its economy makes the argument sharper, stripping away alibis until only responsibility and risk remain.

Approached with an ear for cadence and an eye for moral pressure, *Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright* offers a compact education in the Gothic's enduring concerns: the fragility of trust, the theatrics of virtue, and the cost of confusing certainty with safety. It stands as a companion to Lewis's better-known work, revealing his ability to compress sensation and ethics into a single arc. Readers today will find a brisk, haunting narrative that rewards being read aloud and discussed in company, not for its shocks alone but for its insight into how fear scripts behavior—and how unlearning that script remains a human task.

# Synopsis

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Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright is a narrative ballad by Matthew Gregory Lewis, an English Gothic writer active at the turn of the nineteenth century. The poem frames its story as a caution against corrosive suspicion within love, using the emblematic pair of Blanche and Osbright to explore how doubt can distort perception. In keeping with Lewis's Gothic sensibility, the atmosphere is heightened and moral stakes are clear, while the narrative moves with ballad-like directness. From its outset, the poem establishes an intense attachment threatened not by open hostility but by the subtler, inward force of mistrust, which becomes the drama's animating conflict.

The opening situates the lovers in a world where reputation and constancy are prized, and promises carry social as well as personal weight. Blanche and Osbright profess devotion, but the setting gives prominence to the fragility of such vows when tested by time and absence. Lewis carefully seeds the central tension: hints, half-heard reports, and ambiguous appearances begin to shadow the couple's exchanges. The poem stays close to the lovers' emotions, making their bond plausible and their anxieties legible, while showing how a single unsettled thought can take on the authority of certainty and invite rash decisions.

As murmurs swell into private suspicion, the poem traces how inference displaces trust. Innocent circumstances appear incriminating once filtered through fear, and

everyday tokens of affection are reinterpreted as signs of betrayal. Osbright's resolve hardens under the pressure of wounded pride, while Blanche, distressed by the shift she perceives, struggles to make fidelity communicable. Lewis presents mistrust not as a sudden rupture but as an incremental drift, in which hesitation replaces candor and the lovers' shared language falters. The narrative momentum builds toward a test of truth neither has fully chosen yet both increasingly feel is inevitable.

Separation follows—partly compelled by circumstance, partly by the logic of doubt—and distance sharpens unease. The poem's middle stanzas emphasize thresholds and delays: messages that arrive late or imperfectly, meetings deferred, and journeys undertaken in a state of agitation. External scenes mirror internal weather, with unsettled conditions underscoring the instability of judgment. Lewis uses the ballad's brisk pacing to compress time while preserving the sense of a prolonged trial, creating a rhythm in which hope flickers and dark interpretations regain ground. Each attempt to clarify intentions is complicated by timing, chance, and the inertia of suspicion.

A pivotal encounter arrives when an opportunity to verify loyalty presents itself in stark form. The lovers are placed in a situation where words seem insufficient and actions must speak for belief or doubt. The sequence is marked by urgency and misapprehension, dramatizing how even well-meant efforts can harden into irrevocable choices once trust has thinned. Lewis keeps the focus on the moral pressure of the moment rather than on elaborate incident, so that the reader senses the cost of acting prematurely and the peril of

waiting too long. The scene holds its tension by balancing competing claims of honor, fear, and affection.

What follows enforces the poem's governing lesson without relying on elaborate explanation. Consequences flow from the earlier erosion of confidence: gestures meant to protect become instruments of harm; appeals to certainty reveal their brittleness. The resolution is shaped by the ballad's clear moral economy, in which the internal fault—mistrust—finds its echo in outward fate. Lewis refrains from diluting the impact with extended moralizing, allowing the narrative outcome to register as both particular to Blanche and Osbright and exemplary of a wider human pattern. The closing emphasis remains on the missed opportunities for candor that might have changed the course.

Beyond its immediate story, *Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright* exemplifies Lewis's contribution to the Gothic ballad: concentrated narrative, emotional clarity, and a sharp ethical focus. It speaks to perennial anxieties about honor, communication, and the interpretive leaps that turn uncertainty into accusation. The poem's endurance lies in its precise naming of a common experience—the creeping authority of doubt—and its warning against mistaking suspicion for knowledge. In presenting love undone not by overt malice but by inward distortion, the work retains resonance as a cautionary tale, inviting reflection on the habits of mind that sustain trust amid ambiguity.

# Historical Context

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Matthew Gregory Lewis composed Gothic verse and drama in Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century, when London's booming book trade and circulating libraries fostered rapid popular dissemination. After the notoriety of *The Monk* (1796), he developed shorter narrative ballads that could be read aloud or reprinted in collections. Britain was at war with Revolutionary France from 1793, and domestic culture favored strongly moral, sensational entertainment that affirmed social order while indulging taste for terror. *Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright* belongs to this climate, adopting a medievalized setting of courts, castles, and vows to explore the peril of suspicion and the costs of broken faith.

English interest in old songs had been fanned by Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), which popularized "recovered" ballads and encouraged modern imitations in archaic style. Antiquarian societies, medievalizing architecture, and pseudo-historical romances made chivalric themes fashionable. Authors framed new compositions as if they were traditional lays, lending authority to moral lessons embedded in tales of honor and shame. *Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright* draws on this ballad revival, staging feudal honor codes and the fragility of reputation; its medieval coloration allows contemporary concerns about virtue, oath-keeping, and rumor to be

dramatized at a safe historical distance for a broad readership.

German literature strongly shaped Lewis's Gothic. He learned German in the early 1790s and helped introduce English readers to ballads by Gottfried August Bürger and others, whose rapid rhythms and apparitional justice electrified Britain. William Taylor's 1796 translation of Bürger's *Lenore* set off a "Lenore-mania," inspiring numerous imitations with spectral lovers and fatal vows. Lewis translated and adapted several German pieces and disseminated them in his anthologies around 1801. Within this transnational exchange, *Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright* aligns with moralized supernatural ballads, using sensational episodes to enforce cautionary lessons about rash jealousy, credulity, and the irrevocable consequences of misjudged passion.

Contemporary theater amplified Gothic taste. Under the Licensing Act of 1737, new plays required approval, yet spectacular melodrama flourished at the patent theaters of Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Lewis's own *The Castle Spectre* (1797) became a sensation through its ghosts, music, and castle tableaux. Printed ballads benefited from this stage vogue: they were easily recited in parlors, pleasure gardens, and miscellanies, delivering thrills without censorship risks or costly scenery. *Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright* reflects this performative milieu in its compressed, scene-like storytelling and emotive contrasts, channeling theatrical excitement into a compact narrative that underscores the dangers of suspicion and calumny.

Late eighteenth-century conduct literature—by writers such as Hannah More and John Gregory—underscored female reputation, obedience, and prudence, while valorizing male guardianship and honor. Novels and ballads routinely dramatized how gossip, forged proofs, and impulsive tests of fidelity could destroy households. Such works offered moral exempla rather than psychological nuance, warning against credulity and the precipitancy of passion. In this climate, *Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright* centers on the vulnerability of promise and the ease with which jealousy corrodes trust. Its focus on reputation, oath, and righteous or misplaced vengeance mirrors contemporary debates about virtue's proofs and the social penalties of slander.

Commercial institutions sustained Gothic's reach. Circulating libraries, cheap chapbooks, and miscellanies from houses such as Lane's Minerva Press placed sensational verse within middle-class budgets and provincial towns. Ballads were excerpted, pirated, and repackaged with woodcut vignettes, encouraging rapid, repeated encounters with favorite pieces. Editorial prefaces typically defended Gothic materials as morally edifying because vice met retribution. *Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright* fits this ecosystem: its concise narrative and clear moral bearings suited anthologizing and aloud reading, while the medieval frame and supernatural hints met audience expectations for fearful pleasure coupled with an instructive close about the ruin sown by mistrust.

British politics in the 1790s were marked by alarms over Jacobinism and repression at home: the Seditious Meetings

and Treasonable Practices Acts (1795) curtailed radical association, and loyalist propaganda promoted order, duty, and religiosity. Literary culture responded by channeling anxieties into safely remote settings where transgression attracted swift consequences. Lewis, criticized for *The Monk's* improprieties, increasingly emphasized orthodox moral payoffs in popular forms. *Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright* conforms to this tendency, presenting breaches of trust as socially catastrophic and justice as inexorable, a stance that resonated with audiences seeking reassurance that disorder—whether private or public—would be corrected.

The work also stands at a threshold between late Enlightenment Gothic and early Romantic balladry. In 1798 Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* reoriented the ballad toward psychological inwardness, yet Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* demonstrated the durable power of supernatural narrative. Lewis's ballads retain brisk, moralized storytelling while adopting atmospheric effects and sensational turns. *Mistrust, or Blanche and Osbright* exemplifies this hybrid moment: medievalism, vivid incident, and didactic closure coexist with an emerging interest in intense emotion. As such, it registers a culture testing how fear, faith, and feeling could instruct as well as entertain an expanding reading public.

# **MISTRUST, OR BLANCHE AND OSBRIGHT**

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# CHAPTER I

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--"The bird is dead[1q].

That we have[19] made so much on! I had rather

Have skipped from sixteen years of age to sixty.

To have turned my leaping time into a crutch.

Than have seen this!"

CYMBELINE[20].

Peace was concluded, and the waters of the Rhine[2] again flowed through plains unpolluted with blood[2q]. The Palatine[1] 1 saw his enemies at his feet[3q]; it rested in his own pleasure to trample or to raise them, and the use which he made of the victory proved how well he merited to be victorious. His valor had subdued his enemies; his clemency converted those enemies into friends[4q]. The Duke of Saxony,<sup>2</sup> the hereditary foe of his family, had been made his prisoner in the last engagement; he restored him to liberty without ransom or conditions; and he could have framed none so binding as those, which this fearless generosity imposed on the Duke's gratitude.

Henry of Saxony became from that moment his firmest ally[5q]; and the Palatine found in his powerful friendship more real strength than if he had surrounded his whole dominions with a triple wall of brass.

The Saxons departed to their own country; the Palatine dismissed his feudatory troops; and their chiefs led back their vassals, loaded with the presents of their liege-lord, and proud of the wounds which they had received in his service. Among these warriors few had displayed more valor

than the youthful Osbright of Frankheim; but no sooner was the war concluded than none panted with more impatience for the permission to depart. It was given, and the next hour saw him spring upon his courser; he committed the care of his vassals to a gray-headed knight, in whose prudence he could confide; and then, while his heart swelled high with joy and expectation, he gave his horse the spur, and sped toward his native towers.

But it was not the recollection of those native towers, nor of any one whom his castle-walls contained, which now made his cheeks glow and his eyes blaze with such impatient fire. It was not to embrace his beloved and loving mother; nor to kneel at the feet of his respected father, who held his two sons precious as the two apples of his eyes; nor yet to behold once more his little darling, the young Joscelyn, who looked upon his elder brother as the masterpiece of creation; none of these was the motive, which now hurried Osbright onward: none of these, while the mountains, woods, and wilds were left behind him with inconceivable rapidity, made him wonder at the unaccustomed sluggishness of his courser. No! It was the hope of once more 1 A ruler (count) of the Palatinate, one of two districts in Southwest Germany.

2 Henry the Lion<sup>[3]</sup>, Duke of Saxony (in Northwest Germany) and Bavaria, died in 1195...beholding the avowed enemy of himself and of his whole house, that being to whom he was an object of the wildest alarm, and by whom his very name was held in abhorrence; this was the hope, which made the young warrior's heart swell with eagerness almost to bursting.