Ann Radcliffe

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Ann Radcliffe was the most popular writer of her day and almost universally admired. Contemporary critics called her the mighty enchantress and the Shakespeare of romance-writers. Her popularity continued through the nineteenth century; for Keats, she was Mother Radcliffe, and for Scott, the first poetess of romantic fiction

Little was or is known about Radcliffe's life, so not surprisingly apocryphal stories sprang up about her: it was reported that she had gone mad as a result of her dreadful imagination and been confined to an asylum, that she had been captured as a spy in Paris, or that she ate rare pork chops before retiring to stimulate nightmares for her novels; several times she was falsely rumored to be dead. She seems to have been happily married and to have been fortunate in having a husband who

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encouraged her to write. There is no explanation for why, at the age of thirty-two, the most popular writer of her times stopped publishing; there is of course much speculation by her biographers and by literary critics. In 1833, years after her death, her husband published some of her poems and a historical romance, *Gaston de Blondville*; it is not clear that she intended to publish these works. *Gaston de Blondville* is of interest because it is her only novel that does not explain away the supernatural happenings and because it contains, apparently as a preface, her thoughts on the sublime and Gothic fiction, "On the Supernatural in Poetry".

RADCLIFFE AND SENSIBILITY

Radcliffe created the novel of suspense by combining the Gothic romance of Walpole with the novel of sensibility, which focused on the proper, tender heroine and emphasized the love interest. In all her novels, "a beautiful and solitary girl is persecuted in picturesque surroundings, and, after many fluctuations of fortune, during which she seems again and again on the point of reaching safety, only to be thrust back into the midst of perils, is restored to her friends and marries the man of her choice" (J.M.S. Tompkins). Her novels are as much about interrupted courtship as terror. In fact, for a writer classified as a "terror novelist," there is relatively little terror in her novels in proportion to her descriptions of nature and her focus on the sensibilities of her virtuous characters.

More recent critics of of Radcliffe have demurred from the earlier perception of her as the high priestess of sensibility and of her novels as an affirmation of the value of sensibility; what Radcliffe is really doing, they suggest, is pointing out the dangers of excessive sensibility. Many of the heroine's problems and distresses arise from her acute sensibility, particularly when it yields to imagination; she must learn to use reason to guide her sensibility. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the heroine's dying father warns her of the dangers of excessively exercising her sensibility:

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Above all, my dear Emily... do not indulge in the pride of fine feeling, the romantic error of amiable minds. Those who really possess sensibility ought early to be taught that it is a dangerous quality, which is continually extracting the excess of misery or delight from every surrounding circumstance. And since, in our passage through this world, painful circumstances occur more frequently than pleasing ones, and since our sense of evil is, I fear, more acute than our sense of good, we become the victims of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them.

The heroine must learn to respond to the seemingly inexplicable with reason, not yield to the emotionalism of sensibility: "mystery ... by exciting awe and curiousity, reduced the mind to a state of sensibility, which rendered it more liable to the influence of superstition in general" (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*)

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CHARACTERS

Her villains, like Montoni in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Schedoni in *The Italian*, contributed to the development of the Byronic characters and are her most striking characters. Otherwise, her characters lack individuality, for the most part; the reader cares about them because they are embroiled in thrilling situations, not because they are interesting or compelling in themselves. Because of the lack of individuality, some critics have suggested that her novels do not bear rereading.

Ellen Moers sees in Radcliffe's heroines an expression of literary feminism which she calls heroinism. (Literary feminism and feminism are not the same, and she is certainly not calling Radcliffe a feminist.) Heroinism takes many forms, such as the intellectual or thinking heroine, the passionate or woman-in-love heroine, and the traveling heroine. Radcliffe's heroines fall into the category of the traveling heroine, "who moves, who acts, who copes with vicissitude and adventure." Threatened and beset, the heroine is forced to flee her home or her refuge; her flight allows her to experience exciting adventures. Her traveling also occurs within doors, where she explores corridors,

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vaults, abandoned wings, locked rooms in the castle or abbey or the caves under them. Moers notes, "It was *only* indoors, in Mrs. Radcliffe's day, that the heroine of a novel could travel brave and free, and stay respectable." And Julia, in *A Sicilian Romance*, is concerned about the proprieties, as are Radcliffe's other heroines. Moers suggests, furthermore, that Radcliffe's propensity for sending her heroines traveling, whether indoors or outdoors, makes the Gothic novel a female equivalent of the male picaresque novel.

It is not just her heroines who travel; the heroine's pursuers, the heroes, and other main characters (like Madame de Menon) also travel. All this movement gives Radcliffe repeated opportunities to describe scenery, which is generally sublime or romantic, and its influence on the character.

SCENERY, THE SUBLIME, AND OBSCURITY

For most contemporary readers, the charm and much of the originality of Radcliffe's novel lay in her descriptions of landscape, which were influenced by her favorite painters–Salvator Rosa, Claude, and Gaspar Poussin. However, from the time of their original publication, other readers have complained about the number and extent of her nature descriptions; contemporary critics have suggested that the scenic descriptions are one of Radcliffe's main interests, if not the main interest. Radcliffe's scenery is often obscure or perceived through a dim light: "To the warm imagination, the forms which float half-veiled in darkness afford a higher delight than the most distinct scenery the sun can show" (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*). In preferring obscurity to clarity, she conforms to Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Idea of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Burke's treatise, the definitive essay on this subject in the eighteenth century, provides a theoretical basic for the contradictory emotions of pleasure and fear that the Gothic novel arouses in readers The sublime, he asserts, has only one cause, terror: " Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever

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is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror."

He assigns obscurity a key role in creating the experience of the sublime:

To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Every one will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings.

S.L. Varnado sees hints of the numinous reality behind the everyday world in Radcliffe's use of the sublime and in her subtle rendering of the apparently preternatural. (The numinous is the divine and the spiritual, or it may be the revelation or suggestion that a god is present; always, it inspires awe and reverence.) The foremost theorist of the numinous is Rudolph Otto, who identifies it as the non-rational, awe-inspiring, and fascinating mystery on which all religion is based. In *The Idea of the Holy*, he explains the attraction and fear inspired by the Gothic as a reaction to the numinous. The most obvious expression of the numinous in her novels is the characters' perception of a higher force or presence in nature. As Madame de Menon wanders through a sublime landscape, "The scene inspired madame with reverential awe, and her thoughts involuntarily rose, 'from Nature up to Nature's God'" (p. 104).

MYSTERY

Her novels emphasize action, not, as the picaresque novel often does, for its own sake but as a way to engender suspense, create mystery, and rouse amazement. The mysteriousness of the characters' world derives not only from inexplicable happenings but also from their unfamiliarity with the castles or abbeys they are residing in. Although Julia and Emilia have lived their entire lives in the Castle Mazzini, neither of them set foot in the abandoned south wing until impelled by anxiety for

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Ferdinand's safety.
Also contributing to the sense of mystery is the obscurity of the sublime. Obscure sounds, inexplicable happenings, and dimly-perceived figures justify the distresses and anxieties of the characters– until the mysteries are explained, of course.

MORALITY

Radcliffe's emphasis on morality has caused her to be accused of didacticism. In the introduction to *The Romance of the Forest*, she prides herself on "the attention given in the following pages to the cause of morality." It is precisely this emphasis which contributed to her popularity, in E.B. Murray's view:
For her Gothic terrors had in some way to be moral dilemmas for her heroines–they are quite as titillating to her and should be to her readers as the decorously modified terrors she took over from Walpole, or the sublime landscapes she took over from the paintings of Salvator Rosa and made part of her Gothic art.
Thus, Radcliffe combined thrilling content with irreproachable morality. Moreover, she combines them with aesthetic considerations in her emphasis on taste, which the *OED* defines as "The sense of what is appropriate, harmonious, or beautiful; esp. discernment and appreciation of the beautiful in nature or art." For Radcliffe, virtue was related to taste–"Virtue and taste are nearly the same, for virtue is little more than active taste" (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*)–as well as to sensibility.

THE UNCONSCIOUS

Was part at least of her success due to (inadvertently) tapping into the unconscious? As the unconscious is not limited in time or space, so Radcliffe's novels are often vague about location (the south of Italy) or time (the sixteenth century). And the content of her novels consists of the kind of fears and experiences which we push into the unconscious. The standard situations in her stories are those which recur in everyone's nightmares–wandering along in an unrecognizable, eerie place, or tying

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to flee from unidentified but frightful pursuers in an endless tunnel or staircase, or being imprisoned in a tiny cell that seems to be closing in. No matter how crudely Mrs. Radcliffe described these things, she had the knack of stimulating the readers own dream-making function, which took over and supplied the private horrors of each individual imagination. Probably, too, her central theme–a pure, pale maiden persecuted by a vicious but dominating sadist–became a powerful sex symbol for both male and female readers (Lionel Stevenson).

Cynthia Griffin Wolff offers a different interpretation of the disguised sexuality in Radcliffe's novels: Radcliffe, whose heroines are torn between an evil, sadistic villain and a virtuous, benevolent hero, is expressing the "Devil/Priest" syndrome. This syndrome is the female version of the male stereotyped view of women as being either virgins or whores, the "Virgin/Whore" syndrome. In Wolff's view, Radcliffe unconsciously acknowledges women's active sexual feelings by projecting them onto men. The Freudian equation of "inner space" with female sexuality–the caves, secret rooms, dark passageways, tunnels, bedrooms in which heroines may be locked–supports sexual readings of Radcliffe's novels. Wolff sees the Gothic building as a "way of identifying a woman's body (in imagination, of course, the reader's own body) when she is undergoing the siege of conflict over sexual stimulation or arousal."

POLITICS AND SOCIETY

The English upper classes generally perceived the French Revolution as threatening the basis and stability of society and endangering their social position and personal safety. Radcliffe's novels, it has been suggested, allowed them a safe expression of anxieties about disruption and chaos while finally affirming conservative social values, traditional morality, and the (political) status quo. For instance, did Radcliffe deny her submissive heroines full powers of choice, independent judgment, and achievement in order to uphold patriarchal ideals, as Nina de Vinci Nichols theorizes?

Dissent took other forms than revolutionary bloodshed. In the late

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eighteenth century, protest against the limitations on women led to a debate about the nature of women and their role in society. Mary Wollstonecraft, a radical feminist, argued for women's natural equality and right to social and political freedom and urged women to assert themselves. Such protest threatened the status quo and male dominance, and Radcliffe's novels reflect this controversy, though she affirms, finally, the status quo:

... in her romances Radcliffe investigates specifically the paradoxical role sensibility plays in simultaneously restricting women and providing them power and an arena for action. Moreover, in the process of her investigation, Radcliffe uncovers the root cause of the late eighteenth-century turmoil, the economic aggressiveness currently victimizing defenseless women of sensibility. But despite her penetrating insight, Radcliffe does not abandon sentimental values; instead, she retreats from the terrifying implications of her discovery and simply dismisses the threat sentimentalism cannot combat. Rather than proposing an alternative to paternalistic society and its values, she merely reasserts an idealized–and insulated–paternalism and relegates the issues she cannot resolve to the background of her narrative (Mary Poovey).

The fact that her heroines disappear into marriage and idyllic tranquillity at the end reassured readers and set to rest the anxieties aroused by the novel.

RADCLIFFE'S INFLUENCE

Radcliffe was an innovator in her use of the supernatural and landscape; she also showed how suspense could be used to structure a novel. To the Gothic machinery which Walpole introduced, she added the abbey and the monastery. And she inaugurated a new type of Gothic novel–the supernatural explained; the mysterious, supernatural or horrific events which terrify readers are eventually shown to have natural explanations. That she influenced the flood of Gothic writers who followed her is undeniable; a few contemporary writers adopted titles and pseudonyms meant to mislead readers into thinking their works had been written by

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Radcliffe. E.B. Murray sardonically comments, "It may be no small praise to have been one of the most influential mediocre writers that English literature has produced, and, there is no one with a better claim to that distinction than Ann Radcliffe." It is much harder to prove direct influence in fiction generally, though Sir Walter Scott, who wrote appreciatively of Radcliffe, seems to have followed her lead in some of his novels.

Her influence spread to the Continent, where she was admired by Balzac and influenced Victor Hugo, Dumas, and Baudelaire. Her magic continued to work its spell on the modern horror story; H.P. Lovecraft praised her for adding to the genre "a genuine sense of the unearthly in scene and incident which closely approached genius; eery touch of setting and action contributing artistically to the impression of illimitable frightfulness which she wished to convey."

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