ANN RADCLIFFE: A STUDY IN POPULAR
LITERARY TASTE

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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December, 1976
ABSTRACT


The purpose of this paper is to determine why Mrs. Radcliffe's gothic novels were popular with contemporary readers. Sources include reviews from eighteenth century periodicals, essays of early nineteenth century critics such as William Hazlitt and studies of her work by twentieth-century critics. The thesis is organized in four chapters each of which discusses one aspect of her work which particularly pleased her contemporary reviewers and critics: her invention, her attitude toward superstition, her use of poetic justice, and her outlook on nature. These aspects of her work alone did not secure for her the popularity she enjoyed, but, when combined with her ability to create suspense, helped her become one of the most popular writers of her era.
INTRODUCTION

Few people these days have read A Sicilian Romance or even Ann Radcliffe's best work, The Italian, but at the end of the eighteenth century few educated persons had failed to read at least one of Radcliffe's gothic thrillers. Playwrights appropriated her plots for use on the stage and lesser romance writers by the dozens imitated her horrific tales. That her work has since declined in popularity is not really surprising. The very elements which reviewers of her own era admired are often those likely to draw censure from twentieth century critics. Her works, after all, were not popular because they embodied any universal truths, but because as they presented scenes of terror, they also mirrored the attitudes, outlooks, and tastes of the generation for which they were written.

As we examine her work now, it often seems strange that she could have enjoyed the extensive popularity with the critics that she did. Her plots are hopelessly contrived, depending largely upon coincidence. Her heroes and heroines are insipid, so concerned with propriety as to have had no individuality. But the main reason we are more likely to find fault with her work than were her contemporaries lies in the fact that we are far removed from the type of
sentimentality and propriety that were very much a part of the literary tenor of her time. She had every reason to expect her readers to respond to the morality she preached. As a result, her works are period pieces, and as such part of their charm lies in the fact that they preserve the sentiment of another era. "A modern work," wrote Hazlitt less than fifty years after Mrs. Radcliffe's novels were printed, "is expressly adapted to modern readers. It appeals to our direct experience, and to well-known subjects; it is part and parcel of the world around us and is drawn from the same sources as our daily thoughts." This is, no doubt, one reason the faults in Mrs. Radcliffe's works glare out from the page at us while they were to a large part overlooked by her contemporary audience. She had the knack of blending the "daily thoughts" of her society with mystery, adventure, and romance, and while the romance still appeals to us—as is evidenced by the popularity of contemporary "gothic" novels—our "daily thoughts" have changed.

How well she succeeded in bringing adventure into the lives of her audience is reflected by the unusual sums she was paid for her last two novels. Her publisher paid £500 for her most famous work, The Mysteries of Udolpho. The sum was so much in excess of what was usually paid to a writer for his work, that Cadell, the renowned publisher, wagered
five guineas that it was not so. Her final novel and her best, *The Italian*, brought an even larger sum, £800.²

And her audience was not composed merely of foolish schoolgirls horrified into giddy excitement by the imagined ghosts of a ruined abbey or a mouldering castle. It was also composed of such literary men of note as Coleridge, Scott, Byron, and Keats. The playwright Sheridan and the statesman Charles Fox were both enthusiastic in their praise of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and Joseph Wharton is said to have stayed up half the night to read it.³

Not only did Mrs. Radcliffe's gothic romances fire the imagination of her readers, but so did her personal life. She shunned publicity and guarded her private life so strictly that later when Christina Rosetti wished to write a biography about Mrs. Radcliffe she was obliged to abandon the task because there was too little material available.⁴ This determination to be a recluse combined with the inexplicable abrupt termination of her literary career led to some bizarre conjectures on the part of her adoring public. Many believed she was dead a good many years before her actual demise, and tales circulated about her having driven herself mad with the horrors she had created.⁵ Others insisted that she was not dead, and instead romantically insisted she had been imprisoned in France as a spy during the Napoleonic wars. These rumors were, of course, refuted
in time, but they testify to the fascination that so many felt for the "Mighty Magician of Udolpho."

It is interesting to note that this climb to popular and critical acclaim was achieved by Mrs. Radcliffe within a span of only seven years. However, it is even more astonishing that, having reached this peak of popularity, she should abandon the writing of gothic novels. The works which she published after 1797, The Poems of Ann Radcliffe and the posthumously published metrical romance Gascon de Blondeville, were never as popular as her gothic prose and did not significantly add to her reputation as a writer; neither did her travel diary, A Journey Made in the Summer of 1794 through Holland and the Western Frontiers of Germany. As a result, these works have no significant place in this study.

It was the gothic novel which established Mrs. Radcliffe's literary reputation in the first place, and though modern critics may be far removed from the Weltanschauung of the eighteenth century, it is her work in this genre which maintains for her that place she holds in literary history. But it was not merely her ability to terrify her readers that made her so popular with the critics and the public alike. The purpose of this work is to point out some of the other aspects of her work which aroused a sympathetic response in her readers. Her inventiveness, her common-sense approach
to superstition, her romantic approach to nature, and her love of poetic justice all contributed to her popularity.
NOTES


6 Ibid., p. 124.
CHAPTER I

THE CHARM OF INVENTION

It has been implied that the success of Ann Radcliffe's novels at the close of the eighteenth century can be explained because "she liked tales of terror and the public liked them, too."\(^1\) This explanation, while no doubt it has some validity, is obviously too simplistic. Scores of other writers wrote gothic romances, or at least attempted to do so; yet none of those writers comes close to competing with the popularity of Mrs. Radcliffe. One of those qualities which raised the works of Radcliffe above the works of the run-of-the-mill novelist is what her reviewers called "a happy vein of invention."\(^2\) This invention manifested itself in her imaginative use of setting, character, and plot.

The setting of a gothic novel is what makes it "gothic." The name is taken from that type of architecture characterized by pointed arches and flying buttresses.\(^3\) Thus, the genre is largely dependent upon a setting involving crumbling castles and ruined abbeys. Walpole, who originated the genre, did little more in his Castle of Otranto than to create an interesting--though uninspiring--setting. A background alone, however, is scarcely enough to carry a novel, and since the Castle of Otranto has little else to offer, the work is far from terrifying.
No such accusation can be made of Radcliffe's works. She was unsurpassed in taking those gothic props instituted by Walpole and in using them to create that terrifying atmosphere sadly lacking in his novel. In this respect, she outstripped not only her predecessors, but her imitators as well. For while the latter filled their literary offerings with every variety of gothic paraphernalia—dark, gloomy corridors, hidden chambers, secret passages, ancient manuscripts, chiming castle clocks, and real or imagined apparitions, none of them could equal Radcliffe for "narrowing up the soul with imaginary terrors."

But this ability to use the various gothic elements to create a mood of suspense really does not manifest itself in her first work, the rather immature short romance *The Castles of Athlin and Dumbayne*. It is really not surprising that this attempt at gothic fiction was received with little enthusiasm by reviewers. In fact, those very elements that she later used to advantage in *The Romance of the Forest* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* are criticized in reviews of this first work. A writer for the *Monthly Review* laments that she attempts to "elevate and surprise" her readers by the rather childish means of "trap doors, false panels, subterranean passages, etc." He adds, "This kind of entertainment, however, can be little relished but by the young and uninformed mind. To men who have passed, or even attained, the meridian
of life, a series of events, which seem not to have their foundation in nature, will ever be insipid, if not disgustful."\textsuperscript{5}

In spite of such discouraging reviews, a survey of Ann Radcliffe's romances will show that she never did completely abandon these gothic accoutrements. What she did do was learn how to use them to advantage. In her later novels, her hidden staircases, trap doors, and sliding panels no longer seemed to jump out at the reader--or reviewer--as an absurdity or contrived coincidence. As a result, contemporary criticism of them almost completely disappears after \textit{A Sicilian Romance}.

And yet, \textit{A Sicilian Romance} is a remarkable improvement over Mrs. Radcliffe's first work. Among the improvements is the author's handling of these gothic props. But, unfortunately, so much in the way of plot depends in this work upon these artificial contrivances that one reviewer, while admitting that the work is "developed with skill," still advises the author "not to introduce so many caverns with such peculiar concealments, or so many spring locks which open on only one side."\textsuperscript{6}

But as great an improvement as \textit{A Sicilian Romance} is over Ann Radcliffe's first work, it should still be viewed primarily as a stepping-stone to her first really significant work, \textit{The Romance of the Forest}. It was this work which firmly established Mrs. Radcliffe as the foremost romance writer of her day. The reviewers were enthusiastic about her
characters, the descriptions, and her plot and ceased complaining about her gothic gimmicks. Here the gothic trappings come into their own and become the raw material from which Radcliffe weaves her spell. The following passage is an example.

The horses being now disengaged from the carriage, the party moved towards the edifice. As they proceeded, Peter, who followed them, struck a light, and they entered the ruins by the flame of sticks, which he had collected. The partial gleams thrown across the fabric seemed to make its desolation more solemn, while the obscurity of the greater part of the pile heightened its sublimity, and led fancy on to scenes of horror. Adeline, who had hitherto remained silent, now uttered an exclamation of mingled admiration and fear. . . .

He [La Motte] opened the door of the great hall, and they entered: its extent was lost in gloom. "Let us stay here," said Madame de la Motte, "I will go no further." La Motte pointed to the broken roof, and was proceeding, when he was interrupted by an uncommon noise, which passed along the hall. They were all silent--it was the silence of terror.

The suspense about what sort of ghostly being is causing this noise is continued for another three pages before the sound is explained away as having been bats. Radcliffe was as well aware of the value of suspense in a tale of terror, as she was of the value of trap doors, spring locks, or hidden passages.

In The Romance of the Forest, these gothic elements become not so much essential to a rather strained, contrived plot, as essential material in an atmosphere of suspense. In The Mysteries of Udolpho these materials serve the same
purpose of suspense, but she seems to do it more often. One critic said of *Udolpho*, "We will not hesitate to say, in general, that, within the limits of nature and probability, a story so well contrived to hold curiosity in pleasing suspense, and at the same time to agitate the soul with strong emotions of sympathetic terror, has seldom been produced."  

In her final and best work, *The Italian*, the scenery and the architecture are used with more discretion. The first time Vivaldi, the hero of the work, is imprisoned, his servant, Paulo (almost as if he had read Mrs. Radcliffe's other novels), searches frantically, but vainly, for a secret panel, but no secret passage provides an easy escape for the two hapless victims. Instead, they find that after a night in their cell, someone has left the door open. The second time the hero is imprisoned, it is by order of the Inquisition. We are calmly led to understand that there is little chance for Vivaldi to escape from this institution's secret horror chambers. There is, to be sure, a secret passage into Vivaldi's chamber, but Radcliffe uses it to better purpose than simply allowing the hero to escape. This passage allows the shadowy figure of the Monk of Paluzzi to slip in while the prisoner sleeps and thus frighten both the waking hero and the startled reader.

But the terrors in *The Italian* are as often caused by tangible dangers as by ghostly ones, for Mrs. Radcliffe
reveals with chilling clarity her notion of the procedures of The Inquisition. The scenes wherein poor Vivaldi is questioned by the tribunal are undoubtedly the most unnerving in the work.

The voices drew nearer, and, the door again unfolding, two figures stood before Vivaldi, which, shewn by a glimmering light within, struck him with astonishment and dismay. They were cloathed, like his conductors, in black, but in a different fashion, for their habits were made close to the shape. Their faces were entirely concealed beneath a very peculiar kind of cowl, which descended from the head to the feet; and their eyes were only visible through small openings contrived for the sight. It occurred to Vivaldi that these men were torturers; their appearance was worthy of demons... Whatever motive might have occasioned their horrific appearance, and whatever was their office, Vivaldi was delivered into their hands, and in the same moment heard the iron door shut which enclosed him with them in a narrow passage, gloomily lighted by a lamp suspended from the arched roof... The uncertain sounds that Vivaldi had fancied he heard, were now more audible, and he distinguished, with inexpressible horror, that they were uttered by persons suffering.

It is little wonder that one of Mrs. Radcliffe's contemporaries was so struck with these descriptions as to say that if Mrs. Radcliffe had "wished to transcend the horror of the Inquisition scenes in The Italian, she would have to visit hell itself." And yet, there are no scenes of actual torment in the work. Such blatant scenes would not be at all in Mrs. Radcliffe's style, which is to terrify by that which is only half seen, to horrify by that which is not clearly understood.
While few can deny Mrs. Radcliffe's ability to set a terrifying stage, a modern reader might well be surprised to find her powers of characterization praised by her contemporaries. To us, her heroes and heroines seem woefully conventional. The latter are sensible, pretty, virginal young ladies of the late eighteenth century who are transferred by the author into romantic settings in sixteenth-century France or Italy. They often seem either conceited or priggish in their attempts to be proper. And the heroes are no better. Hazlitt says of them, "Mrs. Radcliffe's heroes and lovers are perfect in their kind; nobody knows anything about them. They are described as very handsome, and quite unmeaning and inoffensive. Her heroes have no character at all." But Hazlitt is quick to perceive the advantages of such vagueness; it allows the reader to color in the hero's character for himself.

The perceptive reader may deplore the fact that Mrs. Radcliffe made her good characters so angelic as to be unbelievable, but it is well to keep in mind that the kind of work she was writing did not demand extensive characterization. The reviewers of her works realized this limitation, and one of them, in reviewing The Italian, expressed his conviction that a novel which explores, in depth, the intricacies of a particular character (Clarissa or Tom Jones) is a higher form of fiction than the romance. But he also
maintains that "whatever is perfect in its kind is better than an imperfect and unsuccessful attempt at anything higher."\textsuperscript{13} In light of this observation, it is perhaps not too surprising that reviewers often thought her characters "drawn with bold and decisive strokes."\textsuperscript{14}

Yet such statements refer more often to her villains than to her heroes, for she used her much-praised "invention" to far greater advantage in the creation of the former. La Motte, the minor villain in \textit{The Romance of the Forest}, is one of the few characters in any of her romances who exhibits a mixture of good and bad qualities. While he cheats his creditors, resorts to highway robbery, and agrees to deliver an innocent young girl into the lascivious hands of the arch-villain, he does at last save poor Adeline from being murdered, and by the end of the tale has repented and seems on his way to some sort of redemption.

But most of Radcliffe's villains are as one-sided as their virtuous counterparts. Even Shedoni, her most triumphant creation, is almost unmitigated evil. He plots without remorse the murder of an innocent young woman simply because she stands in the way of his ambition; and when the menial he has hired for the task refuses to carry it to completion, he picks up the dagger to do so himself. Yet he stops short of driving the blade into the bosom of the sleeping Ellena when he sees the miniature she wears at her throat, for he believes it signifies that she is his daughter.
This scene was a favorite with the critics. Some were happy that Mrs. Radcliffe had chosen to soften Shedoni's character by having him refuse to kill Ellena, the heroine, while others objected to this modification. But regardless of his opinion of the scene, nearly every reviewer comments upon it. And the fact that this scene seems to be a key point in determining the character of Shedoni perhaps backs up Hazlitt's comment that the effectiveness of the character of this monk can be attributed, not to Radcliffe's ability to portray the character powerfully, but to her power to create for him a compelling background.

Thus the "invention" which Mrs. Radcliffe displays in portraying her characters is not the dramatic power of the psychological novelist who explores the hidden desires and motives of his creations, but rather is the cleverness of the puppeteer who can maneuver his marionettes in such a way as to make us, for a time, believe them human.

Part of the reason that we so readily accept the marionettes is that they engage in delightful activities: escaping from banditti, fleeing from murderers, or confronting skeletons and dead bodies. Radcliffe's ability to plot is one of the most admirable aspects of her works, although her propensity for creating exciting incident at times had its drawbacks.

This attention to lively incident on the part of Mrs. Radcliffe led her to put so much action into her second work,
A Sicilian Romance, that the reader ends nearly as exhausted as poor Julia, who has been for so many pages barely eluding the grasp of the evil Duke de Luovo. The Critical Review says of it that while it certainly "engages the attention," it has "numerous 'hair breadth scapes' too often repeated."¹⁷

One might fancy that Mrs. Radcliffe read the reviews of her work with scrupulous attention and took the critics' comments to heart, for her next work, The Romance of the Forest, is a much more unified work. The plot is simpler, and many needless wanderings and close calls are eliminated. So successful was this pruning of incident that it might account for her receiving this approbation in Monthly Review. "The principal personage of the romance, Adeline, is a highly interesting character, whom the writer conducts through a series of alarming situations, and hair-breadth escapes, in which she has very skilfully contrived to hold the reader's curiosity continually in suspense, and at the same time to keep his feelings in a state of perpetual agitation. Through the whole of the first two volumes, all is business, hazard, and alarm. . . . We have seldom met with a fiction which has more forcibly fixed the attention, or more agreeably interested the feelings throughout the whole narrative."¹⁸

In fact, so beautifully organized was The Romance of the Forest that some critics, Mrs. Barbauld among them, felt that the more popular work which followed it, The Mysteries of
Udolpho, was not as well unified a work. There is certainly a bit more wandering about of both the plot and the heroine in Udolpho. In addition, there are two ghost-ridden castles for the reader to contend with and two adoring admirers for Emily to manage.

Yet in spite of the more intricate plot, the Mysteries of Udolpho enjoyed an almost unequalled popularity. More sophisticated readers than Catherine Morland of Austen's Northanger Abbey read it with delight. For while it is certain a number of schoolgirls might have called it "the nicest book in the world," many more notable readers such as Sheridan and Fox spoke of it favorably, and Joseph Wharton—who was then Headmaster of Winchester—began reading it one evening and found that he could not go to sleep until he had finished it.19

The reviewers, too, were quick to perceive the appeal of the work. The writer in the Monthly Review begins his comments by saying, "If the merits of fictitious narratives may be estimated by their power of pleasing, Mrs. Radcliffe's romances will be entitled to rank high in the scale of literary excellence. There are, we believe, few readers of novels who have not been delighted with her Romance of the Forest; and we incur little risque in predicting that the Mysteries of Udolpho will be perused with equal pleasure."20 The writer goes on to commend "that rich vein of invention, which supplies an endless variety of incidents to fill the imagination of
the reader." Yet even so enthusiastic a reviewer could not help expressing a wish that she had dispensed with the character Du Pont, Emily's second admirer, and had Valencourt arrive to rescue Emily from Udolpho.

The Critical Review is far less gentle in its reproof. "We must likewise observe, that the adventures do not sufficiently point to one centre: we do not, however, attempt to analyse the story; as it would have no other effect than destroying the pleasure of the reader." Yet the reviewer concludes by admonishing the writer that she would do better work "when no longer disposed to sacrifice excellence to quantity, and lengthen out a story for the sake of filling an additional volume."

Once again it seems that Radcliffe took the comments of a reviewer to heart, for her next and final romance, The Italian, is not only shorter (presented in three volumes instead of four), but is simpler, more concise. In fact, every incident contributes to the central plot in a way which would hardly be countenanced by modern readers who are not inclined to accept multiple coincidences. The hapless Ellena is abducted from her home and carried to a remote convent, where she is held prisoner. On the eve of the day she is to be virtually buried alive for refusing to take holy orders, she is rescued by the only kindly nun in the whole convent, who we later learn is Ellena's own mother, Olivia. The
coincidence that Ellena's abductors should have brought her to the one convent in all Italy where unbeknownst to abductors, heroine, or mother, Olivia is cloistered is likely to need extensive explanation for the modern reader to find palatable. Equally dependent upon coincidence is the fact that Ellena's persecutor, Shedoni, who has taken it upon himself to rid the world of Ellena to please the Marchesa, is in reality her uncle. Fortunately for Ellena, Shedoni comes to believe he is her father and thus does not kill her, but he never does learn that Olivia, who (having married her first husband's brother) is his wife, is still alive.

All these intricacies of relationship among the characters contribute to the simplicity of the plot, and they seem to have been accepted by Mrs. Radcliffe's readers without a blink. In fact, if anything, the singularity of purpose achieved by the use of remarkable coincidence was praised. The Monthly Review has this comment: "We discern much more unity and simplicity in this than in the former publications of the fair writer; the attention never flags in the perusal; nor do inferior interests engage the reader, to the prejudice of the chief characters." 24

Those first readers of Ann Radcliffe's works were not concerned by such artifice and manipulation of plot. They were much more interested in the inventiveness which brought to the printed page delightful adventures. Perhaps they were
more capable of suspending disbelief than we are now, for they seemed to feel that the chief requirement for romance was not that it be logical, but instead that it be imaginative.
NOTES


18 *Monthly Review*, 8 (May 1792), 82.


21 Ibid., p. 279.


23 Ibid., p. 372.

CHAPTER II

MYSTERY AND COMMON SENSE

Few things could be more delightful than the atmosphere of supernatural terror that Ann Radcliffe creates, and few things could be more disappointing than her dispelling these terrors with the cold splash of common sense. Much has been written about her tendency to explain away all her ghastly creations in the calm light of reason. Modern critics are inclined to take much the same view as David Masson, who says, "There is something like treachery . . . to the true theory of her style, in her habit of always solving the mystery at the end by purely natural explanations." It is certainly true that we feel deflated when we find we have been led to countenance ghosts which turn out to be waxworks or bats, but Ann Radcliffe's anticlimactic explanations of the terrors she conjures are the result of an effort to create an eerie atmosphere without offending good sense.

To appeal to her contemporary audience, her novels had to meet, to some extent, the demands of logic as well as meet the appeal of romance. It says much for her ability to gauge the tastes of her readers that she was able to bridge the gap between romantic invention and scientific logic by evolving a kind of gothicism which could, to some degree, appeal to
both. While critics sometimes deplore her tendency to explain all her mysteries in terms of the mundane, it is well to remember that her contemporaries were often pleased by it.

The novel which pleased her contemporaries the most, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, is the very novel which has most offended later critics in this respect. It is filled with gloomy castle chambers, mysterious singers, eerie portraits, and things-that-go-bump-in-the-night, all of which come to nothing extraordinary by the end of the work.

For example, when Emily is conducted to her chamber in Udolpho, she learns that there is an extra door which leads into her room: one which is locked from outside her room, but which cannot be secured from her side. Her request that she be allowed to use another chamber is denied. Understandably nervous, she keeps Annette, her aunt's servant, with her well into the night. Unfortunately, the garrulous Annette is but a mean comforter. She regales poor Emily with tales about the former owner of the castle who disappeared under very mysterious circumstances.

"They say, too, there is an old chapel adjoining the west side of the castle, where any time at midnight you may hear such groans!—it makes one shudder to think of them;—and strange sights have been seen there—"

"Hush!" said Emily, trembling. They listened, and continuing to sit quite still, Emily heard a slow knocking against the wall. It came repeatedly. Annette then screamed loudly, and the chamber slowly opened.---It was Caterina, come to tell Annette that her lady wanted her.
We as readers are inclined to feel as foolish as does the heroine when we learn we have been frightened by normal circumstances, but as Dunlop suggests, "In the hands of Mrs. Radcliffe, not merely the trampling of a steed, and the pauses of the wind, but, in some circumstances, even common footsteps and the shutting of a door become sublime and terrible."4

But it is a mark of Radcliffe's abilities that she at one moment reassures us that we are being terrified by trifles, and the next moment gives us something to be genuinely nervous about. The night after Emily has been frightened by the knocking of a servant, she retires to her chamber, this time alone.

From the disturbed slumber into which she then sunk, she was soon awakened by a noise which seemed to arise within her chamber. . . . While Emily kept her eyes fixed on the spot, she saw the door move, and then slowly opened, and perceived something enter the room, but the extreme duskiness prevented her distinguishing what it was. Almost fainting with terror, she had yet sufficient command over herself to check the shriek that was escaping from her lips, and letting the curtain drop from her hand, continued to observe in silence the motions of the mysterious form she saw. It seemed to glide along the remote obscurity of the apartment, then paused, and, as it approached the hearth, she perceived, in a stronger light, what appeared to be a human figure . . . which remained for some time motionless; but then, advancing slowly towards the bed, stood silently at the feet. . . . 5

But this mysterious visitation does not come from any supernatural agency, as such introduction certainly suggests. But neither is Emily being here frightened with trifles. Her
visitor turns out to be the Count Morano, who proceeds simultaneously to attempt to profess his love for the heroine and to abduct her for the purpose of forcing her to become his wife. It is true that this disturbance is no ghost, but if we as readers resent this, we overlook one of the genuine merits of Ann Radcliffe's romances. She realizes that there are many terrors in this world which have nothing at all to do with the supernatural. It is a trademark of Radcliffe's style that she makes the genuine dangers look like imaginary ones as well as making the imaginary ones look genuine. It cannot be denied that the threat of rape to Emily in Udolpho is in reality as powerful a builder of suspense in this work as any ghost that sings outside Emily's window or any chamber that is mysteriously and unexpectedly locked. Although Count Morano's attempts at kidnapping are thwarted, the castle still teems with soldiers and rogues. Emily is obliged to repulse would-be attackers in castle corridors, and when she refuses to sign over her estates to the wicked Montoni, he makes it clear that he will not exert himself to protect her.

One must feel that in all the controversy about Mrs. Radcliffe's explaining her hobgoblins, too little attention has been paid to the power of the real dangers that her heroes and heroines face. The relief that the reader feels when Emily escapes from Udolpho springs not from the fact that she is escaping from the spectres of former occupants, but from
the fact she leaves behind her a den of thieves and cut-throats whom we have been led to believe might at any time have done her bodily harm.

Yet it still must be admitted that Mrs. Radcliffe does tease us with ghosts which are of less exciting composition than ectoplasm. And perhaps none of these imaginary terrors is more shocking than the one which hides behind the veil in that mysterious chamber (usually locked) in one wing of Udolpho. Emily slips into this chamber to take a peek at a mysterious object behind a black veil. She pulls back the veil, looks, and promptly faints. As soon as she regains her senses, she flees from the room and never again enters it. What is so frustrating is that the reader does not know until the very end of the story that what Emily has seen is merely a waxen statue. "The history of it is somewhat extraordinary," says Mrs. Radcliffe, "though not without example in the records of that fierce severity which monkish superstition has sometimes inflicted on mankind. A member of the house of Udolpho having committed some offense against the prerogative of the church, had been condemned to the penance of contemplating, during certain hours of the day, a waxen image, made to resemble a human body in the state to which it is reduced after death."  

Later critics of Mrs. Radcliffe's works seemed to take this being tricked by her far more seriously than did her contemporaries. Dunlop says, "After all the wonder and dismay,
and terror and expectation, excited by the mysterious chamber in the castle of Udolpho, how much we are disappointed and disgusted to find that all this pother has been raised by an image of wax!"  

One might well agree with Dunlop's observation, but it should also be kept in mind that his criticism came in 1814, eighteen years after Radcliffe's works were first published. Those critics who have a greater bulk of romantic literature with its extravagant flights of fancy with which to compare Mrs. Radcliffe's works are much more inclined to be disappointed that Emily did not see behind the veil a skeleton, a bodiless head, or some wavering form composed of ectoplasm, than were those who read her books when they first came off the press. As a matter of fact, her somewhat tame explanations were heartily applauded by her reviewers. The Monthly Review, for example, lavishes warm praise on this tendency of hers. "Without introducing into her narrative anything really supernatural, Mrs. Radcliffe has contrived to produce as powerful an effect as if the invisible world had been obedient to her magic spell; and the reader experiences in perfection the strange luxury of artificial terror, without being obliged for a moment to hoodwink his reason, or to yield to the weakness of superstitious credulity."

Thus, as far as The Monthly Review is concerned, the many seemingly supernatural situations in The Mysteries of Udolpho
are all the more interesting because they are explained as having been occasioned by natural causes. It is certainly as logical that this age, which was still concerned about scientific explanation, should applaud these empirical solutions as that our age, which is enamoured of parapsychological research, should not.

As exasperating an incident as the black veil, but one which is not as notorious, is the incident of the manuscript which M. St. Aubert enjoins his daughter to destroy. Since it is the poor man's last request, Emily complies, but as she is in the process of destroying them, she sees a line or two of what is written. The reader does not know what she has seen, but merely that it disturbs her. With the papers, Emily finds a miniature of a beautiful woman. She remembers having seen her father weeping and groaning over this picture, and while we know this is not a picture of Emily's mother, Madame St. Aubert, it is so often pointed out to us that Emily bears a striking resemblance to this woman that the reader is left to draw the rather obvious conclusions about the faithfulness of Emily's father.

This supposition on the part of the reader is of course erroneous. The beautiful woman depicted in the miniature is merely St. Aubert's sister, who had died an unfortunate death. The papers which Emily has been asked to destroy relate this unfortunate incident. St. Aubert, we are told, had asked his
daughter to destroy the papers and had kept from her the knowledge of this sister of his because he had not wanted to upset her.

This kind of explanation is as exasperating as any of Radcliffe's dispelling of ghosts. Emily is beseeched to destroy these papers very near the first of the story, and we are not given the story they reveal until the final chapters of the work. Moreover, to have been led to expect a scandal and thus to have been thwarted makes the explanation Radcliffe gives for the mystery seem all the more unlikely. One reviewer explains the reader's plight: "In this contest of curiosity on one side, and invention on the other, Mrs. Radcliffe has certainly the advantage. She delights in concealing her plan with the most artificial contrivance, and seems to amuse herself with saying, at every turn and doubling of the story, 'Now you think you have me, but I shall take care to disappoint you.' This method is, however, liable to the following inconvenience, that in the search of what is new, an author is apt to forget what is natural; and, in rejecting the more obvious conclusions, to take those which are less satisfactory."

She handles the mysterious past of Shedoni in The Italian much better. She sketches for us the bare outline of the past of this rather frightening character. Little by little she drops suggestions about a confession which is so terrible
that the confessor left the confessional in convulsions. When the time comes, however, for Radcliffe to explain, we are gratified to learn that Shedoni is every bit as disreputable as we have been led to believe. We are told that the mysterious confession was one in which he related that he had had his brother killed and had married his brother's wife. Then he had attempted to murder this poor woman as well (he believed that he had succeeded) when he found her talking to a male guest in the parlor. The physical reaction of the confessor is explained when we learn that he was the man to whom this poor woman was talking!

We find such explanations of mysterious pasts much more satisfactory than the kind we get for the mysterious part of St. Aubert. We like having our notions of what is consistent with human nature confirmed. If a man scrupulously hides his past, we naturally assume that he has a past of which he is ashamed.

But even in the case of Shedoni, Radcliffe will not quite relinquish her delight in thwarting her audience. She has led us to believe that he is Ellena's father, but we learn that instead he is her uncle. Thus Ellena is saved from the stigma of being the daughter of a murderer and Radcliffe is saved from having made her plot too transparent.

But while Mrs. Radcliffe is occasionally willing to present a genuine scandal when she has prepared us for one,
she still seems to have difficulty presenting us with a genuine ghost. The closest that she comes to doing this in her novels occurs when she presents us with the Provençal tale which Ludovico reads as he waits along in a castle chamber. He volunteers to spend the night in this part of the chateau to prove that no ghosts haunt it. One wonders at his choice of tales (a ghost story) in such circumstances, but one cannot deny its power in setting the stage for what afterward happens to Ludovico.

The tale in itself is rather interesting. It is as if Mrs. Radcliffe would find it a violation of her personal integrity to ask us to believe in ghosts, but asking us to believe in a ghost story is acceptable. Thus, twice removed from her subject, she does an intriguing job of sketching out a first-rate ghost.

A Baron of Bretagne, the hero of this tale is visited by the ghost of a recently murdered nobleman. The latter leads the Baron to a corpse, which he claims is his own, demands that the Baron exact vengeance for his murder, and requests a Christian burial for his body. The latter request the Baron accomplishes for him, but we never do learn whether he accomplishes the former, for Ludovico lays aside his book because he is drowsy. By the next morning Ludovico, we learn, has disappeared unaccountably from the apartment where he was to have stayed the night.
Hazlitt says of this tale, "The greatest treat . . . which Mrs. Radcliffe's pen has provided for the lovers of the marvelous and terrible, is the Provencal tale which Ludovico reads in the Castle of Udolpho." But Hazlitt is quick to give even her less spectacular spectres credit. "Her great power lies in describing the indefinable, and in embodying a phantom. She makes her readers twice children: and from the dim and shadowy veil which she draws over the objects of her fancy, forces us to believe all that is strange, and next to impossible of their mysterious agency."12

Stoddard describes the fin de siècle novels of Ann Radcliffe as novels of mental excitement. According to him, the castles, ghosts, and other external trappings of medievalism were there only to "arouse the mind."13 In the light of this observation, it is well to remember that the minds of Radcliffe's audience had not yet been taught by the Romantic movement to suspend their disbelief in ghosts and goblins and that they might have considered doing so "Hoodwinking their reason."
NOTES


2 Ibid., p. 182.


5 Mysteries of Udolpho, I, 125.

6 Ibid., II, 153.

7 Dunlop, II, 581.

8 Monthly Review 15 (Nov. 1794), 280.


10 There is, of course, a genuine ghost in Mrs. Radcliffe's metrical romance, Gascon de Blondeville.


12 Ibid., 178.

CHAPTER III

MORALITY AND TASTE

Like melodrama, romance is a rather prescribed literary form involving certain stock characters. Sir Walter Scott noted this similarity and commented upon it in his short article on Mrs. Radcliffe's life and works. "The persons introduced . . . bear the features, not of individuals, but of the class to which they belong. A dark and tyrannical count; an aged crone of a housekeeper, the depository of many a family legend; a garrulous waiting maid; a gay and light hearted valet; a villain or two of all work; and a heroine fulfilled with all perfections, and subject to all manner of hazards, form the stock-in-trade of a romancer." As a result, there are absolutely no surprises in store for the reader with regard to the conduct of the principal characters nor with regard to their ultimate situation. Part of the charm of either melodrama or romance lies in the security that we feel that in the end all will be right. The beautiful and chaste heroine will marry the dashing, handsome young hero, and an end will be made to the nefarious career of the villain. Poetic justice will reign by the end of the tale. What so intrigues one with regard to poetic justice in Mrs. Radcliffe's works is what, in her opinion and in the opinion of late
eighteenth century English popular audience, composed a "good" or a "bad" character.

Besides moral purity, it was expected of one of Mrs. Radcliffe's heroines that she be possessed of gentle, if not noble birth. Consequently, Mrs. Radcliffe's heroines are required not only to be honest and chaste, but are also required to exhibit impeccable taste and exemplary manners, for both propriety and taste were indicative of gentle breeding.

Her heroines all delight in music and poetry and the beauties of nature and are seldom found abroad without a lute or a sketch pad. By contrast, the villains are immune to these simple joys and usually require opulence and a display of wealth to bring them pleasure. When acceptable moral behavior is blended with poor taste or a lack of delicacy, the result is a character who is neither good or bad, but is a mixture of the two, a mixture which is not likely to enlist our sympathy.

The Quesnels, Emily's aunt and uncle in The Mysteries of Udolpho, are such characters. In his introduction to a nineteenth century edition of this novel, D. Murray Rose points out that Mrs. Radcliffe has the couple arrive "with all the tumultuous vulgarity of the worldling in a landau with a pair of smoking horses!" Madame Quesnel is described by Mrs. Radcliffe as a "vain and frivolous woman." And she commiserates Madame St. Aubert that she should be obliged to
spend her life "in this remote corner of the world," and proceeds to describe balls, banquets, and processions which she has seen in Paris, "from a wish probably of exciting envy."

But the absolute depths of vulgarity are reached when M. Quesnel brings up the subject of M. St. Aubert's family estate, which M. Quesnel had purchased five years before. Were it not serious enough a breach of delicacy to bring up the matter at all, he proceeds to outline the improvements he intends to make. He comments that he intends to spend "thirty or forty thousand livres" on adding dining rooms and servants' quarters. These remarks St. Aubert accepts with reasonable equanimity, but when M. Quesnel announces that he intends to cut down the trees as well, particularly one ancient chestnut of magnificent proportions, St. Aubert is aghast. When he learns further that M. Quesnel means to put in their places poplars such as those which adorn a certain villa in Italy, he is astounded. "'On the banks of the Brenta, indeed!' continued St. Aubert, 'where its spiry form is intermingled with pine and the cypress, and where it plays over light and elegant porticoes and colonades, it unquestionably adorns the scene; but among the giants of the forest, and near a heavy Gothic mansion--'"4 St. Aubert is too shocked even to complete his sentence.

M. Quesnel is but poorly punished for his perfidy; Mrs. Radcliffe allows him to get by with only being obliged to sell
this same estate back to the orphaned Emily by the end of the story. Madame Cheron, however, another such character with basically sound morals, but offensive manners and poor taste, receives a much more severe punishment for her foolishness.

Madame Cheron (later Madame Montoni) is Emily's aunt; she becomes Emily's guardian after the death of the latter's parents. She is a foolish, frivolous, thoughtless woman, whose atrocities in taste include a chateau with a formal garden (sympathetic characters have gardens in the English style), a decided lack of delicacy, and so pronounced a tendency for talking nonsense that one can hardly blame Montoni for his coldness toward her.

Her shocking lack of delicacy prompts her to accuse Emily (falsely, of course) of maintaining a clandestine correspondence with Valencourt. Emily, at first too overcome by honest pride to respond, is finally so upset by these aspersions that she expostulates:

"Dear Madame," said Emily, bursting into tears and overcome by the rude suspicions her aunt has expressed, "how have I deserved these reproofs?" She could say no more . . . so very fearful was she of acting with any degree of impropriety in the affair . . . . She knew that she did not deserve the coarse suspicions which her aunt had thrown out; but a thousand scruples rose to torment her, such as would never have disturbed the peace of Madame Cheron.6

In an essay "Ann Radcliffe, or, the Hand of Taste," William Ruff points out that "not once in all her novels is there a breach of correct manners unpunished."7 This holds
true for the lack of delicacy on the part of Madame Cheron. Her foolishness and exaggerated concern for her own consequence lead her to marry the monster of the tale, the villain Montoni. The result is that Montoni tries to force her to sign over her lands to him and she refuses. She dies soon after of a mysterious illness.

This unexpected death seems a stern punishment for a woman whose worst crimes are a lack of sensibility and a lack of delicacy. Yet, as Ruff points out, Mrs. Radcliffe is "a lady writing for ladies and gentlemen." Perhaps it is not too surprising, then, that in the world she creates, bad taste is almost as serious a crime as moral deviance.

But the real villains in Mrs. Radcliffe's works exhibit not only deplorable manners, but moral decay as well. Lust is a common passion among them. In *A Sicilian Romance*, Julia's father, Count Mazzini, locks his first wife away in an uninhabited part of the castle so that he can marry a woman more to his taste. In *The Romance of the Forest*, the Marquis is so taken with Adeline's beauty that he has her abducted and conveyed to his chateau. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Montoni maintains a mistress and flaunts her in front of his wife (an offence against taste as well as of morality). Shedoni, the villain in *The Italian*, has his brother killed so that he might possess his wife.

But lust alone does not seem monstrous enough for Mrs. Radcliffe's villains. Frequently they reveal or exhibit other
moral flaws. In The Romance of the Forest, the Marquis is motivated also by greed and fear of discovery. When he learns that Adeline is the daughter of a brother whom he has murdered, he tries to have her killed as well. In The Mysteries of Udolpho, the driving force behind Montoni is greed; for he endeavors to extort from his wife and niece the lands which are rightfully theirs. And what becomes, ultimately, the ruling passion for Shedoni in The Italian is ambition.

Nearly all her villains are guilty of murder or some other serious crime before the story in which each is portrayed ever begins, and each has managed to elude the authorities so far. Each, moreover, bears a physiognomy which is rather forbidding, like that of Shedoni, of whom Mrs. Radcliffe says, "There was something in his physiognomy extremely singular, and that cannot be easily defined. It bore the traces of many passions, which seemed to have fixed the features they no longer animated. An habitual gloom and severity prevailed over the deep lines of his countenance; and his eyes were so piercing, that they seemed to penetrate, at a single glance, into the hearts of men and to read their most secret thoughts; few persons could support their scrutiny, or even endure to meet them twice." Yet notwithstanding all this gloom and austerity, her villains are so clever that they are as capable of being conciliatory as they are of being despicable.
They are, except for Shedoni, all totally evil. Their plots all come to naught, and they all die before the end of the works in which they figure. One reviewer of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* said of it what could have been said of any of Mrs. Radcliffe's works. "The numerous mysteries of the plot are fully disclosed in the conclusion, and the reader is perfectly satisfied at finding villainy punished, and steady virtue and persevering affection rewarded."¹⁰

And of course virtue in Mrs. Radcliffe's novels is rewarded in grand style. The beautiful young heroine not only is possessed by the end of the tale with exorbitant wealth, but is allowed at last to marry a young man as true hearted and noble as she herself. But before she is allowed to marry him, she must overcome certain obstacles.

An example of such an obstacle is the one that Emily faces when Valencourt urges her to elope with him. To be fair to Valencourt, this urging on his part of so serious a breach of social code can perhaps be excused by the fact that Emily's guardian, Madame Cheron, had at first granted consent to the nuptials of the young couple, then withdrawn it. Furthermore, Madame Cheron has married an Italian, and Valencourt is faced with the prospect that Emily might be whisked away to Italy and that he might never see her again. To complete Valencourt's misery, he has heard rumors which indicate that Emily's new uncle, Montoni, might well be a
There is little wonder that he is moved to urge Emily to elope. Emily, however, overcomes the temptation to flee with her lover, saying, "I never can consent to this hasty, imprudent proposal!"\textsuperscript{11}

In \textit{The Italian}, Ellena is tempted in much the same way. Vivaldi proposes marriage to her, and her guardian, Bianchi, agrees. However, Vivaldi's proud parents are set against the wedding. Ellena resolutely refuses to marry him until his parents agree to the match. Her one lapse from propriety, when she agrees to marry Vivaldi so that he will be legally able to protect her from the dangers which surround her, is soundly punished, for the villain's agents rush into the church before the vows can be spoken and take both her and her bridegroom prisoner.

Not only does some insidious obstacle keep trying to stop these young women from marrying the men of their choice, but someone is always trying to make one of them marry someone else. Julia, the heroine in \textit{A Sicilian Romance}, refuses to marry the Duke de Luovo. Her father is enraged and has her locked away until preparations for the nuptials can be completed. The day of the wedding the servants open the door to her apartment and find that she has escaped.

In \textit{The Mysteries of Udolpho}, Emily is told by Montoni that she must marry the Count Morano. Since she cannot escape, she resolves to refuse to repeat the words of the
ceremony. Fortunately, the very morning upon which she is to have spoken the vows, she is mysteriously whisked away by Montoni, the very individual who has been so insistent upon the match!

Ellena, the heroine in *The Italian*, is offered a most disagreeable choice. Vivaldi's mother, the ambitious Marchesa, has learned of her son's attachment to Ellena de Rosebla and has had the young girl captured and conveyed to an isolated convent, where she is informed that she can either take holy orders or marry a suitable young man that the Marchesa has graciously chosen for her. She rejects the revolting marriage instantly, but she is forced to stall on the equally unwelcome alternative of holy orders. She is dragged all the way to the altar where she resolutely refuses to repeat the vows.

But perhaps the greatest testimony to a heroine's ability to resist temptation occurs when Emily returns to France and hears rumors that suggest that Valencourt has, perhaps, become unworthy of her. The Count, in whose household she is a guest, counsels her in a fatherly fashion about the young man, saying that he has heard that Valencourt has fallen into disrepute because of gambling debts. There is also some indication that he has been in prison and that his bail was paid by a certain notorious woman in the upper echelons of Paris society. Unfortunately, the hero himself has already contributed to the heroine's doubts by telling her that he is not worthy of her.
The end result is that far too many pages go by before we learn that Valencourt has been grossly misrepresented, that his actions were merely youthful foolishness rather than the result of depravity.

In the meantime, however, Emily has resolutely refused his proposal. What is confusing here is that we are given to understand that in this refusal she is motivated not only by respect for propriety, but by good sense as well. This rejection certainly indicates a strange twist in her logic since while on the one hand she claims that she cannot be happy with a man who has so fallen into disgrace, she is obviously miserable without him. One is inclined to agree with the homely logic of the housekeeper, who remarks, "Dear! dear! to see how gentlefolks can afford to throw away their happiness! Now if you were poor people there would be none of this!" And of course, old Theresa is right. One of the primary reasons that Emily has to give such scrupulous consideration to propriety is that she has to consider what is due her station in life as a lady if she wishes to enjoy "the luxury of conscious worth" which she so prizes. But the fact that she is a lady causes extra complications in the situation since for a long time she has been forced to believe the rumors about her beloved because the subject of his disgrace was too delicate a matter for her to broach with him. Had it not been that the Count heard the truth of the matter...
and put all to rights, we must assume that Emily and Valencourt would never have married.

Their attention to taste and propriety, their delicacy and gentle breeding causes all of these young ladies to be distinguished by their simplicity in dress and their pleasing manners. These qualities, one suspects, aroused the sympathy of Mrs. Radcliffe's readers as much as did the moral purity of the young women.

However much Mrs. Radcliffe's attention to propriety entered into it, the critics of her time appreciated what they called the "moral" of her work. Even the rather childish work The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne was praised by the Monthly Review for its "moral." Thomas James Mathias claimed that in general her works were not so frivolous as works written by other feminine writers of the day, and a reviewer in the United States Review and Literary Gazette said of her as a writer what one might have said of any of her heroines, "There is a beauty in her mind, a gentleness, a delicacy, a retiredness in her disposition, which is wholly feminine." But perhaps the summation of the effects of Mrs. Radcliffe's works is given by Dunlop in his History of Fiction:

The general tendency, too, of all these terrific works is virtuous. The wicked marquis, or villainous monk, meet at length the punishment they deserve, while the happy heroine, undisturbed by hobgoblins, or the illusions created by the
creaking of doors, sobbing of the wind, or partial gleams of light, discovers at length that the terrific castle, or mouldering abbey, in which she had been alarmed or tormented, is a part of her own domain, and enjoys in connubial happiness the extensive property of which she had unjustly been deprived. All this may be very absurd, but life perhaps has few things better than sitting at the chimney-corner in a winter evening, after a well-spent day, and reading such absurdities.
NOTES


3Ann Radcliffe, Mysteries of Udolpho (London: George Routledge and Sons, 18-?), I, 10.

4Ibid.


6Mysteries of Udolpho, I, 63.

7Ruff, p. 186.

8Ibid., p. 186.

9The Italian, I, 55.


11Mysteries of Udolpho, I, 79.

12Ibid., II, 137.

13Monthly Review, 81 (May, 1798), 563.


16Dunlop, p. 587.
CHAPTER IV

ROMANTIC ATTITUDE TOWARD NATURE

Nothing could better exemplify the romantic attitude toward nature which was developing in the last decade of the eighteenth century than Mrs. Radcliffe's description of mountains, forests, lakes, and oceans. Scarcely is any heroine of her creation allowed to make a journey without pausing to exclaim over the beauties of the scenery and enjoy a moment of melancholy reflection. But while Mrs. Radcliffe's descriptions reflect the fact that she saw in nature the opportunity for the individual to escape from the corrupting influences of society and to achieve a kind of unity with the infinite and the sublime, her reviewers and early critics seemed pleased with them simply because they were beautiful, as subsequent quotations in this chapter will show.

While the beauty of her descriptions cannot be denied, it is true that they occur entirely too often. At times they are presented so frequently that the enthusiasms that each of the heroines feels for each example of natural beauty begins to wear down the patience of the reader. Dunlop says of these young women, "They are all fond of watching the setting sun and catching the purple tints of evening, and
the vivid glow or fading splendour of the western horizon. Unfortunately they are all likewise early risers. I say unfortunately, for in every exigency Mrs. Radcliffe's heroines are provided with a pencil and paper, and the sun is never allowed to rise or set in peace . . . and in the most distressing circumstances [they] find time to compose sonnets to sun-rise, the bat, a sea-nymph, a lily, or a butterfly."

Although it must be acknowledged that Dunlop is right, that Mrs. Radcliffe's heroines seem always retiring into woods or gardens and attempting to be poetic immediately after being insulted or threatened, it should also be pointed out that this juxtaposing of opposing scenes does serve a useful purpose. It is necessary for these young ladies to be able to retreat into the woods or meditate upon a sunset when faced with "distressing circumstances." For their being able to do so provides a contrast not only between those very harrowing circumstances and the peace and quiet to be found in an idyllic setting, but also the contrast between the villiany, corruption, or rudeness the heroine has just witnessed and the security, the reaffirmation that the world is still controlled by God.

In the Mysteries of Udolpho, Emily finds in the woods a refreshing change from the psuedo-sophistication of her aunt and uncle, the Quesnels. While the visit of the couple lasts, Emily and her parents sit indoors politely enduring their
guests' rudeness and snobbery with admirable patience. But as soon as the sound of the Quesnels' landeau wheels fades from their hearing, Emily and her father rush to the woods which surrounds their home. By so doing, they reaffirm their belief that the peace to be found in nature is far superior to the glittering sophistication of Paris. Not only heroines, but indeed all sympathetic characters in Mrs. Radcliffe's works are favorably affected by the glories of creation; Emily's father, St. Aubert, is no exception. The carriage trip that he and Emily take through the southern part of France is constantly being brought to a halt so that the pair can emerge from the vehicle to study botanical wonders.

These walks seem to inspire virtue, for on one such occasion St. Aubert gives money to a poor shepherd, and indeed, as Emily and her father walk in the environs of La Vallee to recover from the visit of the Quesnels, he stops to visit the pensioners whom from his very moderate income he contrives to support. It is interesting to note how the woods affect a man with a generous disposition. "'The evening gloom of woods was always delightful to me,' said St. Aubert, whose mind now experienced the sweet calm which disposes it to receive pleasure from every surrounding object."² It is significant to note here that after a fashion St. Aubert also becomes poetic, for he goes on to explain
how the woods affect him. "I remember that in my youth this
gloom used to call forth to my fancy a thousand fairy visions,
and romantic images; and, I own, I am not yet wholly insen-
sible of that high enthusiasm, which wakes the poet's dream."³
It seems clear that Mrs. Radcliffe considered this poetic
spirit a natural outgrowth of contemplation of the sublime
and beautiful, nature at its best.

Mrs. Radcliffe's characters seem often to find in nature
a reaffirmation of all that is sane and just and right. Just
as Emily and her father, after their nerve-wracking visit
with the vulgar, noisy Quesnels, escape into the woods to
enjoy the peace to be found there, so also does Adeline in
The Romance of the Forest escape to the serenity of nature
after a distressing confrontation with Madame La Motte. The
latter, suspecting that Adeline and M. La Motte are having
an affair, has told Adeline "A friend is only estimable when
our conduct deserves one; the friendship that survives the
merit of its object, is a disgrace instead of a honour, to
both parties."⁴ This rather obscure reproof, while Adeline
has no notion of what prompted it, sends the poor girl scurry-
ing to her room in tears. She spends much of the day seeking
solace from poetry, but at evening she seeks comfort in the
forest.

At the decline of day, she quitted her chamber
to enjoy the sweet evening hour; but strayed no
farther than an avenue near the abbey, which con-
fronted the west. She read a little, but, finding
it impossible any longer to abstract her attention from the scene around, she closed the book, and yielded to the sweet complacent melancholy which the hour inspired. The air was still; the sun, sinking below the distant hills, spread a purple glow over the landscape, and touched the forest glades with softer light. A dewy freshness was diffused upon the air. As the sun descended, the dusk came silently on, and the scene assumed a solemn grandeur.  

It is hardly surprising that upon observing this magnificent scene Adeline begins immediately to recall and recite several stanzas of poetry.

Mrs. Radcliffe saw, as did most romantics, that in creation was reflected the creator. Many of her sympathetic characters move, like Madame Menon in *A Sicilian Romance*, from contemplation of the nature to contemplation of God. As she enjoys an evening walk in unfamiliar surroundings, she comes upon this rather remarkable scene:

A group of wild and grotesque rocks rose in a semicircular form, and their fantastic shapes exhibited Nature in her most sublime and striking attitudes. Here her vast magnificence elevated the mind of the beholder to enthusiasm. Fancy caught the thrilling sensation, and at her touch the towering steeps became shaded with unreal glooms; the caves more darkly frowned—the projecting cliffs assumed a more terrific aspect, and the wild overhanging shrubs waved to the gale in deeper murmurs. The scene inspired madame with reverential awe, and her thoughts involuntarily rose, "from Nature up to Nature's God."  

In fact, so healing an effect does nature have upon an honest heart that in *The Italian* Ellena derives comfort from it in spite of adverse conditions. Even when she has been kidnapped and has no idea what her fate is to be, she pauses
to admire the scenery passing outside the carriage. So impressed with it is she that she is moved to exclaim, "If I am condemned to misery, surely I could endure it with more fortitude in scenes like these!" In contrast to the response of Ellena, the ruffians who have abducted her, "whose hearts were dead to feeling," never even notice the grandeur which surrounds them.

So strong is the link between virtue and the appreciation of nature that we are clearly given to understand in The Mysteries of Udolpho that had Valencourt but remained in the country where he belonged instead of going to Paris he would never have fallen into disgrace and caused himself the anxiety which for some time ruined his peace of mind. When he first appears in the story, he is an engaging enthusiastic young man as appreciative of the beauties of nature as either Emily or her father. In fact, St. Aubert is taken with the young man and often repeats to himself with evident relish, "This young man has never been at Paris." Later, after having fallen into disgrace in the city, Valencourt appears a saddened, depressed, unhappy young man, and Emily finds herself wondering how any young man who so appreciates the magnificence of nature can have so fallen into disgrace.

But while it is true that Mrs. Radcliffe's descriptions seem often to tell more about those that witness them than about the scenes themselves, and that not one of her sympathetic
characters can look upon the "fine effect of moonlight upon dark woods" unmoved, it was not this response that seemed to attract her reviewers to her natural descriptions. It was, instead, the beauty of the passages.

Mrs. Radcliffe wrote of places that she had never visited, but she gave such colorful descriptions of them that reviewers and critics were often confused. In a review of The Romance of the Forest, the Critical Review says, "The descriptions are in this place often beautiful, and seem to be drawn from personal examination." The writer is speaking of the descriptions of scenery in Savoy, which Mrs. Radcliffe had never visited. Scott notes that the Edinburgh Review was instrumental in continuing a rumor "that Mr. and Mrs. Radcliffe had visited Italy; that Mr. Radcliffe had been attached to one of the British Embassies in that country; and that it was there his gifted consort imbibed a taste for picturesque scenery. . . ." Scott goes on to inform us that Mrs. Radcliffe never had been in Italy. Unfortunately, he adds that Mrs. Radcliffe probably revised the descriptive passages in Udolpho after the summer visit that she and her husband made to Holland and Germany. Apparently this assumption has as little validity as the belief that Mrs. Radcliffe had visited Italy. McIntyre refutes Scott's statement:

Unfortunately for Scott's theory, the very title of the book to which he refers contradicts it. It is A Journey Made in the Summer of 1794.
and the first announcement of its publication is found in the London Chronical for May 1, 1795. The first notice of the Mysteries of Udolpho appeared on May 10, 1794. 12

A writer for The European Magazine seems also to think that Mrs. Radcliffe was writing of places that she had seen, but he points out something else commonly remarked upon with regard to her nature scenes—the remarkable amount of space devoted to them. "Though Mrs. Radcliffe be correct and faithful to the truth of geography and natural history, yet is she often, nay, for the most part, minute even to tedious prolixity in her local descriptions; a weight which would have hung with a deadening power about the neck of a composition not animated by the utmost vigour of imagination."13

Most reviewers, however, are more complimentary about these descriptions. For example, the Monthly Review says of The Mysteries of Udolpho: "The descriptions are rich, glowing, and varied; they discover a vigorous imagination, and an uncommon command of language; and many of them would furnish admirable subjects for the pencil of the painter. . . . They recur, however, too frequently; and, consequently, a similarity of expression is often perceptible."14 The same periodical carries in 1794 a review of Mrs. Radcliffe's last novel, The Italian. There seems to be a note of relief in the reviewer's comments. "Suffice it to say that the present volumes, though very far from deficient are less abundant than former publications, in that luxuriant painting of
natural scenery in which Mrs. Radcliffe delights; and which, though truly beautiful in itself, palls by repetition upon the pampered imagination. 15

But even Dunlop, who complained in so comical a fashion about the frequency of sunrises and sunsets the work, admits "It must be owned, however, that the landscapes of Mrs. Radcliffe are eminently beautiful, and their only fault is their too frequent recurrence." 16

Yet there is a certain vagueness about her descriptions which did not appeal to all critics. It did appeal to Scott, however, for he says of it:

Some artists are distinguished by precision and correctness of outline, others by the force and vividness of their colouring; and it is to the latter class that this author belongs. . . . As her story is usually enveloped in mystery, so there is, as it were, a haze over her landscapes, softening indeed the whole, and adding interest and dignity to particular parts, and thereby producing every effect which the author desired, but without communicating any absolutely precise or individual image to the reader. 17

Hazlitt, however, views this vagueness as a limitation of her work, for he calls her descriptions "vague and wordy to the last degree." Yet so powerful is the effect of Mrs. Radcliffe's description that even Hazlitt must admit that repeated perusal of The Romance of the Forest and The Mysteries of Udolpho have effected the very way he sees gothic ruins or moonlight. 18
NOTES


2 Ibid., p. 582.


5 Ibid., p. 183.


8 Ibid., p. 65.


10 *Critical Review*, 4 (April 1792), 459.


13 *The European Magazine*, 25 (June 1794), 440.


16 Dunlop, II, 582.

17 Scott, p. 573.

CONCLUSION

It was not merely the ghostly aspects of Mrs. Radcliffe's romances that made them popular, for her novels were not only terrifying, but tasteful, inventive, romantic, and sensible. After all, gothic novels were written by Walpole and Reeve long before Ann Radcliffe ever published a sentence, and scores of writers tried, by imitating her after she had ceased to publish, to capture a part of the audience she had held. Yet none of these writers ever approached the popularity of Mrs. Radcliffe.¹

Radcliffe's settings are romantic in every respect. Magnificent sunrises or sunsets provide backgrounds for gothic ruins, and moonlight shining on the forest glades provides the proper atmosphere for mystery by night. Ruined abbeys and crumbling castles tower above these forest areas, while inside these venerable edifices hollow footsteps resound in echoing corridors. Secret panels, locked chambers, and trap doors abound. Ancient staircases crumble beneath the feet of the unwary explorer, leaving him suspended on a dangerous perch high above the stone floor of some dark, deserted hall, or they lead him to chambers where dead bodies lie.

Radcliffe's characters, though they are really only cardboard figures, admirably serve the purpose for which
they were intended. They exemplify types rather than individuals and therefore one hero is scarcely discernible from another; one heroine is like all the rest. But each is recognizable as a member of a social class; as a result, we know what to expect from each character, whether a villainous count or an innocent young girl, and Mrs. Radcliffe never disappoints these expectations.

Radcliffe's plots are delightful, though improbable, creations. Her beautiful, long suffering young heroines are called upon to face one alarming situation after another. If they are not being locked in their rooms until they submit to marrying some unacceptable suitor, they are fleeing across hill and brook to elude the pursuit of a villain. They are usually being cheated of their rightful inheritance by a close relative, one whom Mrs. Radcliffe kills off by the end of the tale so that there can be no problems with the heroine's inheritance.

What adds spice to these lively plots is the supernaturalism which is diffused over them. Mrs. Radcliffe resolves this mystery at the end of each of her tales by informing the reader about the real nature of each seeming supernatural agency and thus proving that there are no ghosts. It is true that all of this explaining is anticlimatic, but it seems that Mrs. Radcliffe would have felt that presenting honest-to-goodness spectres in her light romances would have
been a violation of her integrity. However, prior to the anti-climactic denouements, her spell is remarkably powerful, remarkably terrifying.

These ghostly dangers faced by Mrs. Radcliffe's characters alternate with genuine dangers. Her heroines face the threat of rape or murder at the hands of merciless pursuers. Her heroes face imprisonment and torture. But while threats exist in plentitude, and an occasional dead body or skeleton lends substance to these threats, there is no direct violence, no murders that we see, no torture that we actually witness, and no threat of rape is ever carried out. Such things are spoken of in old manuscripts, to be sure, but to have filled her pages with actual violence, blood, and gore would not have been in Mrs. Radcliffe's style.

Her attitude toward poetic justice is reflective of the thinking of her age. Moral rectitude is not the only index of a good or bad character. Taste and attention to propriety are at least equally important in determining a character's worth. Those characters who give due regard to society's conventions, whose manners and correct attitude toward life show that they are worthy individuals, are rewarded in proper fashion. Those with outrageous taste and offensive manners are punished in an appropriate manner.

Of course, Mrs. Radcliffe is also careful to reward traditional virtue and punish ordinary vice. Genuine murders,
extortionists, and would-be ravishers are killed off in due time. Also in due time the hero and heroine marry and "live happily ever after."

A good character's taste always causes him to be enchanted or uplifted by the magnificence of nature. Those who can fully appreciate the beauties of the landscapes that Radcliffe paints are incapable (at least for the purposes of the story) of ever falling irretrievably into sin. Nature at her grandest in Mrs. Radcliffe's work has the power to solace the heroine when she is unhappy, to comfort her when she is in danger. It has power to remind any random sympathetic character (and, we suppose, any random reader) that in the creation is mirrored the creator.

We might conclude, as a result of the evidence presented in the preceding chapters, that Mrs. Radcliffe's works were so calculated to appeal to her contemporary audience that they hold no charm for a modern reader. Such a conjecture would be in error. The delicacy, the propriety, the social acceptability of Mrs. Radcliffe's romances represent only part of the reason they were popular. They were also popular because they were entertaining.

If we but let our imaginations loose upon them, the novels of Mrs. Radcliffe exert a potent charm. While it is true that the world she creates is too perfect a world, is one where good is always rewarded and bad is always punished, it
is also true that it is a world full of exciting incident. While Mrs. Radcliffe does eventually explain away her mysteries, in the mean time those lonely, dark, silent castle corridors loom in front of the reader. Castle clocks strike ominously. Mysterious manuscripts float out of his reach. Every noise becomes cause for alarm. Every chamber seems riddled with secret passages.

Mrs. Radcliffe's ghosts, though not really ghosts at all, are sufficiently terrifying. Even when we know that her style is to trick us at every turn, we still manage to be alarmed by singers in the woods at midnight and bedclothes which rise of their own accord on a bed where the lady of the house has died. What could be more unnerving than the groans which Ferdinand hears in his prison chamber in A Sicilian Romance? The reader knows as well as does poor Ferdinand that the wing of the castle in which he is now quartered is, except for himself, uninhabited. Who with an ounce of imagination could remain calm as Emily lies in bed in a chamber at the castle of Udolpho and watches the secret door into her room open quietly? At that point in the same work when Ludovico so mysteriously disappears from the chamber of Chateau Blanc, where his lonely midnight vigil is to have proven that no ghost haunted the area, what reader can yawn and close the volume?
It is true that the ideals which shine through Mrs. Radcliffe's romances are those of another era. Modern readers are bound to have difficulty accepting the logic of a heroine who refuses to flee with her beloved from the home of a rude, selfish aunt and a reputed murderer like Montoni simply because to do so would be a breach of etiquette. It might also be a bit difficult to believe that so many villains could so often abduct so many innocent young women without once succeeding in despoiling them. But if we approach Mrs. Radcliffe's romances as we would approach any fairy tale, we find it possible to believe in ghosts which do not exist and portraits of women long dead which by some strange coincidence bear a striking resemblance to the heroines.

Mrs. Radcliffe's works are interesting to us today not only because they preserve something of the flavor of the social atmosphere of the generation for which they were written, but because they also preserve something of the aura of fairyland. In that imaginary realm it is possible to believe that counts, dukes, and other titled monsters are always vanquished and that heroes and heroines must, by the end of the tale, be made happy.

Mrs. Radcliffe's romances never were meant to be "improving" works. They were written to be enjoyed as escape literature. Sir Walter Scott recognized this fact:
Perhaps the perusal of such works may, without injustice, be compared with the use of opiates, baneful when habitually and constantly resorted to, but of most blessed power in those moments of pain and languor, when the whole head is sore, and the whole heart sick. If those who rail indiscriminately at this species of composition, were to consider the actual quantity of pleasure which it produces, and the much greater proportion of sorrow and distress which it alleviates, their philanthropy ought to moderate their critical pride, or religious intolerance.
NOTES

1Frederick Farber, Introduction to The Italian (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), p. i.

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