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The sound of the gaze in Ann Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance*

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The terrifying mystery in Ann Radcliffe’s second novel, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), is a sound.[[1]](#endnote-2) Julia Mazzini hears a distinct knock coming through the wall of a supposedly vacant part of Castle Mazzini, and spends the novel trying to understand how something like that could arise with no one to produce it. The knock, predecessor to terrifying sounds encountered in later texts by Thomas de Quincey and Charlotte Brontë, seems to be what psychoanalysts would call an “object voice,” a sound “fully unfastened from phonemization,” which marks a void in the castle architecture through its menacing excess to signification.[[2]](#endnote-3) Though indeterminate, it soon becomes what Mladen Dolar would call “a grain of desire, a small provocation which triggers off massive consequences.”[[3]](#endnote-4)

To the extent that the sound in this novel asks for anything, it asks to be seen. Julia and her comrades, in concerted acts of synesthesia, frequently look around for sounds and listen for sights. The characters constantly attempt to keep a lookout for the sound: “For the remainder of this night they resolved to watch.”[[4]](#endnote-5) The mystery of the knock (as buttressed by other associated sounds, like footsteps or a groan) first manifests as a visual sign, a light in the tower seen and then “seen no more,” with all of the narrator’s emphasis placed on “what she [in this case, Madame de Menon] had seen.”[[5]](#endnote-6) Radcliffe consistently presents sound as an excessive aspect of vision, and visuality as something lacking in sound, and thus repeatedly encourages the reader to contemplate the relationship between sound and vision, just as David Bowie recommends. Julia’s brother Ferdinand, the narrator assures us, “had himself witnessed the sounds.”[[6]](#endnote-7) Certainly, it is possible to witness something auditorily, but the term, in 1790 as now, especially pertains to visual phenomena.[[7]](#endnote-8)

Inspired by this strange synesthesia, this essay will resort to theories of the gaze in an attempt to think through the novel’s frightening maternal sound. First, I consider Michel Foucault’s comments in “The Eye of Power,” an interview in which he considers the ways that Radcliffe’s castle spaces seek illumination, to better herald the arrival of a gaze exercised pervasively. I suggest that sound in *A Sicilian Romance* complicates that model, given how, on the one hand, both the ruins of the castle (in the narrative frame) and the castle itself (in the main narrative) remain inundated by sounds and silences that interfere with the operation of power, and how, on the other hand, the sound through the wall tends to disperse and diffuse the patriarchal authority of Castle Mazzini with a maternal counterpoint. Second, I connect this mechanism to a little-discussed aspect of Jacques Lacan’s commentary of the gaze in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: as Lacan engages with and attempts to challenge Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of the gaze, he notes that the gaze has to do with sound rather than sight directly. This sonic facet of the gaze will help us understand the role sound plays in Julia’s protestations of love for Hippolitus. Third, I consider Sigmund Freud’s discussion of alarm clock dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he contemplates how the same stimulus, and the same dreamer, can produce a diversity of dream images. Freud’s consideration of F. W. Hildebrandt’s alarm clock dreams complicates any attempt to understand the “meaning” of the knocking sound in Radcliffe’s novel or confine it to its seemingly obvious Oedipal resonances. Sending sound beyond any patent relation to signification, the bells of Castle Mazzini, like the knocks that emanate from within, position Julia as their true agent, as if the plot were bent on undoing her subjectivity rather than, as it may at first appear, asserting her right to make her own sexual decisions.

In thinking about sound through epistemologies of vision, Radcliffe could respond to contemporary debates about gender, class, and privilege. It has often been noted that vision was increasingly presumed, over the eighteenth century, to be the basis of all knowledge and the instrument of subjectivity.[[8]](#endnote-9) Landed male poets would climb hills to “assume a position of superior knowledge drawn from personal experience,” while women writers would oftener adopt points of view within, rather than above, the field of vision.[[9]](#endnote-10) The priority of vision within Enlightenment epistemology has helped to sustain several important analyses of Radcliffe’s work.[[10]](#endnote-11) “What is new in Radcliffe’s fiction,” explains Alison Milbank, “is located in her way of seeing,” and *A Sicilian Romance* particularly brims with “pictorial effects.”[[11]](#endnote-12) Even today, as Kandice Chuh has argued, the visual regime continues to reify neoliberal hierarchies of race and gender inherited from the Enlightenment.[[12]](#endnote-13)

Critics remain in dispute over the function of sound in Radcliffe’s work, with Frits Noske arguing that “the sounds in her novels appear for their own sake,” and Angela M. Archambault arguing that Radcliffe uses sound, and especially the voice, to create terror and chaos in her novels, generally starting with quiet, peaceful sound effects which become more jarring as the novels progress.[[13]](#endnote-14) Thinkers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge would, during the early nineteenth century, frequently associate sound with the sublime, arguing both that sound is intrinsically indeterminate and that we are relatively defenseless against it.[[14]](#endnote-15) Noske maintains that “it was Ann Radcliffe who first used sonorous means as a structural factor in fiction.”[[15]](#endnote-16) In implicit opposition to Milbank’s conclusions, Matt Foley, from a Lacanian perspective, traces “the acoustics of the Gothic romance,” and finds, in *A Sicilian Romance*, that voice conveys tyrannical authority.[[16]](#endnote-17) Throughout these debates, critics do tend implicitly to accept Noske’s now-classic assessment that Radcliffe uses music as a “connecting factor” between characters and as an “indicator of moral values.”[[17]](#endnote-18) Yet this essay will suggest that sound, at least in *A Sicilian Romance*, connects characters only by cutting relations between them in ways that defy moral classification. Sound (including music, noise, and silence) had an important visual component in eighteenth-century English culture, especially for the construction of gender,[[18]](#endnote-19) and yet existing criticism on Radcliffe has seldom considered sight and sound at once. Milbank finds sight and sound to be dichotomous in Radcliffe’s early fiction, with tyrants exercising a visual dominance and “virtuous characters . . . particularly influenced by sound.”[[19]](#endnote-20) This essay challenges that dichotomy by showing vision to be an aspect of sound in *A Sicilian Romance*, and tracing the psychic consequences of that sensory entanglement. As *A Sicilian Romance* crosses and co-implicates vision and sound, pinning each as an impossible point within the other field, the relatively tidy taxonomies established by Milbank, Noske, and Archambault tend to break down. I am interested in exploring these points of intersection without intersection.

1. The Sound of the Gaze Beyond Panopticism

“Enchanting sounds!,” Hippolitus says, when he is told by Ferdinand that Julia secretly loves him: “I could listen till I forgot I had a wish beyond them.”[[20]](#endnote-21) Sounds, in this formulation, serve to obliterate one’s desire, even while one’s ability to listen is understood to be an effect of that desire. This arrangement may seem to facilitate an Oedipal plot, for which one would have to learn to forget one’s own wishes. Yet the visual structure of supervision in this scene expands that paradigm by constructing a whole series of triangulated relations around the “enchanting sounds” to give them multiple and competing points of reference. Hippolitus asks Ferdinand for some proof of Julia’s love, leading Ferdinand to report that he “saw her ineffectual struggles to conceal” her feelings.[[21]](#endnote-22) In this model, the “enchanting sounds” of Ferdinand’s report are guaranteed by Julia’s feelings, which, although they cannot themselves be seen, become apparent in the attempt to camouflage what is already invisible. Julia has gone into hiding, Ferdinand says, not wanting to be seen in such a lovelorn state. She is invisible but audible: “I have often heard her singing in some lonely spot,” Ferdinand says to Hippolitus, noting that “your return produced a visible and instantaneous alteration” in her voice.[[22]](#endnote-23) In sum, Ferdinand reports having watched Julia not being seen by hearing her singing, which has made a spectacle of her invisible feelings. Although she is hidden from view—even he does not seem to know where she is, as to him it is merely “some lonely spot” or another—he could plainly see the change in her song once Hippolitus returned.

This explanation raises a series of questions that are important throughout the novel: how is it possible to locate something “visible” in a voice emanating from a hidden place? And in what sense would the voyeur’s report of that discovery constitute a “sound,” per se, rather than mere information? It is as if the jouissance of Julia’s attachment to Hippolitus, something in excess of any possible sexual relationship between them, crosses narrative levels. It first conveys itself into a song about her love, which renders the love visible to auditors. It next becomes the excessive part of Ferdinand’s report of that song. The excess jouissance then gets transmitted back to Hippolitus, its original inspiration, in what he takes for simply “sounds.” Finally, it gets subsumed within the novel’s narrativizing structures, through which it gets ultimately and indirectly reported to the frame narrator and reader. It is as if anything attached to Julia’s desire overspills the capacity in language for communication, such that even reports of her desire necessarily carry with them this excessive quality, turning information into sound. Throughout the novel, Julia tends to convert incidental sounds (such as the rowing of oars in the water nearby the castle) into songs (or what she calls “hymns”), so as to produce “holy enthusiasm” and a stolen “sigh of exstacy.”[[23]](#endnote-24) This is perhaps part of her general tendency—also a tendency of Radcliffe’s—to “transform the utilitarian into the aesthetic.”[[24]](#endnote-25) The central question for the other characters then becomes: how can one look at this play of sound? Which is also to ask: how can we see someone hide from view, except insofar as they do so “ineffectually,” and thus *not* hide from view? Ferdinand’s method is to watch by listening.

Ferdinand’s report of sonic voyeurism folds back on itself because, all the while, Julia is eavesdropping from a closet near the gallery, that quintessential parlor of Romantic visuality. She crouches there, where she cannot be seen, because she is afraid of being overheard: “She hardly dared to breathe, much less to move, . . . lest the sound of her step should betray her.”[[25]](#endnote-26) Fearful of being seen, she “moved softly,” but “the sound of her step alarmed the count.”[[26]](#endnote-27) Hearing the gentle footsteps, Hippolitus bursts into the closet to discover her; mortified, she “hid her face in her robe.”[[27]](#endnote-28) Ostrich-like, Julia signals her refusal to gaze rather than be seen: she is content to be looked at but not, any longer, to inhabit a hidden point of auditory oversight. Hippolitus responds with “expressive silence,” an oxymoronic state that suffices until he can “recover[ ] … his voice.”[[28]](#endnote-29) Throughout this complicated and multi-layered tableau, sight cannot be disentangled from sound, and nor is either, as Milbank holds, particularly the domain of patriarchal tyrants.[[29]](#endnote-30)

Julia, like her brother, is hiding so as not to be heard and is ashamed when her footsteps are seen. To borrow from Slavoj Žižek, we might say that:

voice does not simply persist at a different level with regard to what we see, it rather points toward a gap in the field of the visible, toward the dimension of what eludes our gaze. In other words, their relationship is mediated by an impossibility: *ultimately, we hear things because we cannot see everything*.[[30]](#endnote-31)

Voice, with its capacity to present the disquieting excess found in lack, thus becomes a marker of the impossible. These effects, most importantly, continue to cross levels of narration: Julia is twice hidden from view here, first in “some lonely spot” and then in the gallery, where she overhears the tale of her own hiddenness; her body, hidden from tales of its own hiddenness, seems to emit sounds, constantly at both levels, which render her visible. Here, as in Yael Shapira’s analysis of *The Italian*, “the ideology of the polite body and the challenges it presents to women are woven into the very fabric of [Radcliffe’s] writing.”[[31]](#endnote-32) There is something in these sounds, occurring simultaneously across the two levels of narration, that speaks to Julia’s presence and yet seems far in excess of her status as a subject. The mysterious capacities of sound, always disclosing more than Julia intends, repeatedly interfere with her ability to remain hidden. Yet, it is Julia’s continuing visibility, as she buries herself in her cloak in response to being unhidden, that silences the man who has seen her.

Such synesthetic situations characterize the first half of the novel. Julia, for instance, spends a lot of time looking for sound, as when “their steps ran in whispering echoes through the gallery, and often did Julia cast a fearful glance around.”[[32]](#endnote-33) When Ferdinand sees stairs, he oddly listens to them: “whence rose a winding stair-case, which led up to the south tower of the castle. Ferdinand paused to listen.”[[33]](#endnote-34) Ferdinand, shortly after, finds that sound and vision work at cross-purposes but simultaneously: “A faint sound died away along the passage, the windings of which prevented his seeing the figure he pursued.”[[34]](#endnote-35) The prepositional phrase “of which” retains a certain ambiguity here, as its syntax could pertain equally to the passage or the sound; because of this ambiguity, the passage inadvertently suggests that the windings of a sound are preventing Ferdinand from seeing. Yet, although we are told that the sound “died away” as the sightline vanishes, these are not presented as parallel effects—it’s not, for instance, *the shape of the passage blocked both the sightline and sound*—but as independent experiences each ending in sensory failure. When sight and sound are presented in parallel, the link between them is defined (as in the previous passage) by lack, absence, and exceptionality: “*Nothing met the eye* but beauty and romantic splendor; *the ear received no sounds* but those of mirth and melody,” the narrator says of a Mazzini family festival, as if an overabundance of joyful sounds and sights would best be represented through figures of lack failing.[[35]](#endnote-36) Even when sight and sound are presented in parallel, and kept separate by, for instance, a semicolon, the subjects of these clauses—i.e., “nothing” and “the ear”—are unexpectedly not parallel. It is as if the ear is the equivalent instrument to the nothing that meets the eye. Is this not also what Hippolitus discovers in the gallery closet? These are the “strange contingenc[ies]” of lack in sound that characterize the gaze throughout Radcliffe’s second novel.[[36]](#endnote-37)

This “nothing” discovered at the juncture of sight and sound radically complicates any attempt to theorize the novel’s visual field. I am thinking especially of Michel Foucault’s commentary on Radcliffe, which remains influential within studies of the Gothic. Foucault characterizes the latter half of the eighteenth century as a campaign against dark spaces; “the new political and moral order could not be established until those places were eradicated.”[[37]](#endnote-38) To illustrate this thesis, Foucault suggests that “the landscapes of Ann Radcliffe’s novels are composed of . . . imaginary spaces [that] are like the negative of the transparency and visibility which it is aimed to establish.”[[38]](#endnote-39) Radcliffe’s world, Foucault asserts, is one ruled by “opinion,” in which, for things to operate justly and efficiently, secrets must be laid bare and people thoroughly seen. It is a world organized by “an inspecting gaze” in search of “exact legibility,” in which everything seeks to be controlled by a pervasive ideological machine.[[39]](#endnote-40) This thesis has influenced Foucauldian studies of Radcliffe’s fiction[[40]](#endnote-41) and also invited a measure of criticism by scholars of the Gothic.[[41]](#endnote-42) Dale Townshend considers *A Sicilian Romance* to be the quintessential illustration of Foucault’s claim, given what Townshend sees as the novel’s powerful investment in light and concerted attempts to make everything visible.[[42]](#endnote-43) For Townshend, *A Sicilian Romance* depicts a crisis in “alliance” as a system of paternal authority, a point echoed elsewhere by Foley.[[43]](#endnote-44)

The novel does explore the relationship between panopticism and authority, for instance when the evil Marquis tries to assure his retinue that the tower is “not haunted” by swearing that “you shall see the whole of these buildings,” or when it insists that Julia and Emilia “had never passed the boundaries of their father’s domains.”[[44]](#endnote-45) Radcliffe sometimes plays with multiple and divergent meanings of Foucauldian words like “observe,” as in the sentence: “She observed that the marchioness pursued her with steady and constant observation.”[[45]](#endnote-46) Yet, as David Collings rightly notes, “the Gothic makes possible a direct refutation of disciplinary strategy in a way it cannot anticipate.”[[46]](#endnote-47) In a crucial metafictional passage, Madame de Menon advises Julia and her sister Emilia that we believe in ghosts because we believe in God—which means that if ghosts do sometimes appear, it’s because God has authorized it: “be assured that there are no beings who act unseen by him.”[[47]](#endnote-48) This would seem to be a quintessential example of Radcliffe’s enthusiasm for panoptic regimes. Yet the narrator—another form of all-seeing entity—immediately offers that “no further sounds disturbed them for that time.”[[48]](#endnote-49) The implication is that God sees everything because we hear nothing. But Ferdinand reverses that logic in the next paragraph, when he suggests that the absence of sound must mean that we cannot be seen! “He very readily consented to watch with his sisters in Julia’s apartment; . . . there would be some difficulty in passing unobserved to her’s [*sic*]. It was agreed, however, that when all was hushed, he should make the attempt.”[[49]](#endnote-50) One can enjoy invisibly, it seems, when it is quiet. So the troupe commits to the task of watching for sounds: “The greater part of several succeeding nights were spent in watching, but no sounds disturbed their silence.”[[50]](#endnote-51)

In a similar vein, the novel opens with our frame narrator seeing voices, a device which quickly gets embedded into the general fiction through which the story of *A Sicilian Romance* is told. In the narrative frame, the ruins of the castle are specifically something “to be seen.”[[51]](#endnote-52) Yet the frame narrator insists that he or she hears it: they fantasize about bygone times

when the halls . . . resounded with the voices of those whom death had long since swept from the earth. ‘Thus,’ said I, ‘shall the present generation—he who now sinks in misery—and he who now swims in pleasure, alike pass away and be forgotten.’ My heart swelled with the reflection; and, as I turned from the scene with a sigh, I fixed my eyes upon a friar, whose venerable figure, gently bending towards the earth, formed no uninteresting object in the picture.[[52]](#endnote-53)

This is an intensely ironic passage, and not only because the narrator describes imagined “voices” as a “picture” capable of “reflection.” The frame narrator, hearing a visual spectacle, concludes that previous generations will be forgotten, despite seeming to hear “voices” that would testify to exactly the opposite. In another twist, the voices are not “real” but a mental extrapolation from the visual scene. The entire story to follow would lead someone to precisely the opposite conclusion: the previous generation may be repressed, but only incompletely; one’s ancestors remain very much present and audible, even if out of view for a long time. Immediately the frame narrator gets caught between written and oral histories, as the friar tries to convince the frame narrator that further information is to be acquired in a manuscript “of which I could, perhaps, procure you a sight.”[[53]](#endnote-54) Yet the friar introduces the frame narrator to his boss, the abate, who for unknown reasons recounts the history of the castle to our frame narrator orally. From there, it gets assembled into “abstracts” for the reader’s view, which give body to the “voices” that had been initially imagined.[[54]](#endnote-55) The unstable movement back and forth between print media, oral storytelling, history, and fantasy is something that Garrett Stewart has called the “phonemanography of response to the silent babel of text,” according to which “voice is no sooner subsumed to the formal genres of print poetics than it resurfaces there.”[[55]](#endnote-56) The narrative structure of *A Sicilian Romance*, then, demands that voice is implicit as an active agent within any visual or textual experience of history.

Although, throughout the novel and its narrative structure, voice refuses to be subsumed into visual ways of knowing and, by extension, print media, a moment in the main narrative turns this structure on its head. In a reversal of what will befall the frame narrator, Julia and Madame de Menon find that they are seen as they look upon the same ruined castle, and find themselves explaining their history to the abate’s predecessor. They, too, find that voices—this time of Julia’s father’s spies—interfere with their visual experience of the space: “As Julia gave a last look to the scene, she perceived two men leaning upon a part of the ruin at some distance, in earnest conversation. As they spoke, their looks were so attentively bent on her.”[[56]](#endnote-57) She watches the people who are watching her look at the scene. Yet how does one “look” at a conversation, especially one in which she finds herself the object of the discussants’ own looks? This is what Nina Sun Eidsheim would call a “sonic reduction”: that is, the use of figural language to place a sound, in all of its unlimited multidimensionality, within a meaningful register.[[57]](#endnote-58) Sound, Eidsheim argues, bears haptic, tactile dimensions, and even visual and olfactory ones, so our tendency to treat it only auditorily amounts to a sustained, collective act of figuration. Radcliffe, though, is experimenting here with a different sort of sonic reduction, one that uses visual tropes to report on sound, and works through negation and interruption: rightly fearful, the two women “walked swiftly through the woods, … [and] were surprized to observe the distance to which they had strayed from the monastery, whose dark towers were now obscurely seen rising among the trees that closed the perspective.”[[58]](#endnote-59) Seeing towers that, we are assured, could not be seen from their vantage, they “observed” their *distance* from the towers rather than the towers directly. Yet they report having seen, however “obscurely,” something that was “closed” from their perspective. They see the men pursuing them but conclude, strangely, that it does not look like a pursuit: “On looking back, they perceived the same men slowly advancing, without any appearance of pursuit, but clearly as if observing the place of their retreat.”[[59]](#endnote-60) Once again, Julia is looked at from within a space that cannot be seen and is caught looking at other people’s voices. Lack becomes the extimate point that governs the visual scene as it gets, here and there, converted into sonic reduction.

2. The Sound of the Gaze Beyond Sartre’s Keyhole

Excerpts like these lead us to reexamine Foucault’s panopticon thesis. Certainly, as Foucault suggests, this is a novel filled with secret passageways and dark forests that could be improved through better lighting. But the anchor of the visual field—indeed, across the novel, a substantial number of different visual fields—seems to be a spot that cannot be synthesized into it, from which Julia, Ferdinand, or the frame narrator can gaze. They frequently see things that are specifically closed to her view—not by opening new avenues for sight, but precisely by remaining in the place where visibility fails. Voice and sound seem to be the mechanisms by which this impossible point can be sutured within the visual field—it is as if the entire visual field is constructed around the excessive lack in the object voice. Because of this, we will need to seek a theoretical model better equipped to think about the holes in the scene that cannot be seen. Although the novel arguably displays a desire for total and full illumination and disclosure, it positions its viewers somewhere that cannot be synthesized into that panoptic fantasy. They can only “radically disidentify” with their environs and foster “uncommon, illiberal sensibilities” expressed through silence.[[60]](#endnote-61) Sound (including silence) is the cut in this visual field that, to everyone’s shame and horror, authorizes subjectivity only as “a rupture at the core of self-presence.”[[61]](#endnote-62)

Thus, it is significant that the secret passageways of Castle Mazzini are investigated auditorily—which is far from saying that the experience is not visual. For instance:

Ferdinand carefully sounded the wall which communicated with the southern buildings. From one part of it a sound was returned, which convinced him there was something less solid than stone. He removed the tapestry, and behind it appeared, to his inexpressible satisfaction, a small door.[[62]](#endnote-63)

This passage suggests a satisfying reciprocity of sound: one discovers the secrets of Castle Mazzini by hearing one’s own sound “returned” by the castle itself: it is as if Ferdinand’s desire is the desire of the Other, and so only through the “returned” sound can Ferdinand recognize himself and feel “satisfaction.”[[63]](#endnote-64) Hence “sounding” is both the name of Ferdinand’s action and the object of that action. Lifting the tapestry, he confirms by sight the thing that he has heard. His satisfaction in the discovery, though, remains “inexpressible”: it is the part that cannot be articulated or mapped even at the point of the door’s discovery. What had seemed to be a satisfyingly reciprocal call from the other side soon becomes excessive and autonomous: as Ferdinand “stood gazing on the door, and inwardly lamenting, . . . a low hollow sound was heard from beneath. Emilia and Julia seized his arm; and almost sinking with apprehension, listened in profound silence. A footstep was distinctly heard.”[[64]](#endnote-65) Here again, Ferdinand finds himself looking at a sound, and “uncertain sounds of strange and fearful import” to boot.[[65]](#endnote-66) The sounds are a figure of lack (associated with something “hollow” situated “beneath,” and promoting silence); yet it is the lack of that lack that causes the most anxiety of all: “though the night passed without further disturbance, their fears were very little abated.”[[66]](#endnote-67) Ferdinand begins to fear the sound of his own footsteps, as if the haunting supernatural sound were actually a figure for the mysterious invisible excess in the investigating party. Coleridge would be amazed at the sublime indeterminacy in sound, but Radcliffe finds that even concrete sounds point to an excessive, inassimilable lack in the auditor. Julia and Emilia endure Ferdinand’s efforts to open the secret door “in fearful silence, but no sound disturbed the stillness of night”; they bravely “followed in silence” once the door is pried open, presenting this new silence as the interruption of the previous silence, which had been caused by a dread of more silence.[[67]](#endnote-68) Silence is a condition of the house and is not in any way separate from or opposite to groans, which are characterized repeatedly by their hollowness.

Ed Pluth and Cindy Zeiher have called attention to Lacan’s early theorization of silences that are “not empty.” They point us toward Lacan’s little-known commentary on the 1929 murders committed by Christine and Lea Papin, commentary which came three years prior to his first iteration of the mirror stage. Pluth and Zeiher adopt this early Lacan text as a way to think about imaginary relations through sound and silence, rather than, as we might normally expect from Lacan, through sight and mirroring.[[68]](#endnote-69) The Papin sisters’ silence following their crime was, Pluth and Zeiher suggest, neither “meaningful” nor, as Lacan stresses, “empty”; rather, their violent act—killing their employers by gauging out their eyes before bludgeoning and stabbing them to death, and then retiring to bed together—was a way of interrupting a structural, enforced silence that had pervaded their workplace, the victims’ home. As Pluth and Zeiher indicate, this spectacular violence was an act of self-punishment at the level of the imaginary, as the sisters, being their victims’ domestic maids, had come to feel like doubles of their employers within the house. By gauging out their employers’ eyes and then remaining silent in court and to the press, the Papin sisters attacked the very mechanism through which the identification had happened, offering their own silence as a cut in what had been a visual circuit.[[69]](#endnote-70) Radcliffe’s silences, I will suggest, are similarly “not empty,” and constitute attempts to sever manifold structural crises fundamental to the patriarchy.

As with the case of the Papin sisters, narrative meaning in *A Sicilian Romance* is cut by interruptions (both of silence and of sound) that, though mysterious, are not empty, and that indicate the oppressive patriarchal structure governing Castle Mazzini. Madame de Menon, for instance, in first telling Julia about her mother, fuses surveillance and sound in telling Julia that Louisa “would steal to her harpsichord” “when she thought herself unobserved.”[[70]](#endnote-71) Yet her tale of maternal musicianship is “interrupted” by “the horn … [that] sounded the signal for dinner”—a semi-musical sound that interrupts, as with a Lacanian short session, a tale of amateur musicianship.[[71]](#endnote-72) We have, then, a tale of sound interrupting the silence that was interrupted by another sound. What interests me is that there is no formal reason for the novel to include this horn; it doesn’t delay the exposition by any more than four sentences. Madame and Julia simply have dinner and then go right back to the story within in the same paragraph, like nothing had happened. The reader is left with a bizarre narrative interruption, bizarre because it doesn’t actually interrupt anything. The interruption, rather, is registered at the level of narrative but felt at the level of the story, as the sound makes conspicuous its own construction *après coup*. The narrator’s emphasis in telling us the story of Julia being told a story is on Julia’s hearingof it, not the content, as if the story of the mother were itself an aural interruption into Julia’s own routine of playing the lute.[[72]](#endnote-73) That is, one’s mother’s harpsichord “interrupts” her own routine of musicianship: Julia is not like Louisa in the sense that both play musical instruments in defiance of patriarchal supervision, but rather they are linked by the way that this bond actually severs that relation. We have found, here, a way to traverse “the strange loop, the tie between inner and outer, the short circuit between the external contingency and the intimate, the curious match of the click [or in this case, musical sound, which has become a hollow knock] and the inner sexual arousal.”[[73]](#endnote-74) The situation thus finds a new iteration immediately to follow, when “madame, who was then speaking, was interrupted by a low hollow sound, which arose from beneath the apartment, and seemed like the closing of a door.”[[74]](#endnote-75) The story is now interrupted, not by the horns of official castle timekeeping, but by the subject of the story itself, as if the story’s content had managed to interrupt its own narration, to ask for help in being discovered. The novel’s main plot is thus made possible by the interruption of its backstory. Only through this interruption can Julia be reunited with her mother, whose voice, Dolar reminds us, is often “the first problematic connection to the other, the immaterial tie that comes to replace the umbilical cord.”[[75]](#endnote-76) That voice is actually quite like a narrative umbilical cord, in the sense that Julia only gains a mother once the story of that motherhood is cut.

These sounds are disruptive in their absence as much as in their presence. Radcliffe, writes Anna Shajirat, chronicles the “irrevocable disruption” stemming from the “mundane realities” of eighteenth-century women’s lives, and thereby theorizes “the trauma of the ordinary for women.”[[76]](#endnote-77) This is why her novels are organized around the “double horror” of “an unimaginable void at the center of a void,” according to which the patriarchal legal frameworks and unchecked domestic violence prove, in the end, more horrifying than any ghost.[[77]](#endnote-78) If read in this way, Castle Mazzini, for all of its musical performances and unaccountable footsteps, seems largely defined by the absence of sound: “a melancholy stillness reigned through the halls, and the silence of the courts . . . was for many hours together undisturbed.”[[78]](#endnote-79) Silence reigns at Castle Mazzini because the silence is structural rather than incidental; the silence is then interrupted by tales of silence, which are interrupted by further routinized silences. This is perhaps why, as Madame de Manon implies, the ghosts are an effect of silence and an aspect of the master’s gaze, and why the Real becomes, as Lacan warns, in Julia “to a very great degree the accomplice of the drive.”[[79]](#endnote-80)

In *A Sicilian Romance*, the “void at the center of a void” is the gaze itself. Here, I am prone to consider the gaze in a Lacanian way, and thus contribute to a recent revival of Lacanian interest in Radcliffe.[[80]](#endnote-81) In this, I hope also to build on Volker Langbehn’s work, which was an “attempt to trace the philosophical precursors of Lacan’s theory of the gaze” in the Romantic period, all while heeding the warning that “Lacan’s theory of the gaze suffers under a certain degree of compartmentalization and manipulation” when adapted for literary analysis.[[81]](#endnote-82) Very much unlike Foucault, Lacan rigorously distinguishes between the look and the gaze: one looks at things, but is beheld by the gaze, and the relation between these levels is vastly asymmetrical. The gaze happens, for instance, when Ferdinand and Julia, hiding in a cave worthy of Plato, detect shadows disappearing behind a rock: they feel themselves being seen from a point that they cannot see.[[82]](#endnote-83) The gaze, in Lacan’s analysis, is not, then, merely the depersonalized exercise of supervisory power; it is a traumatic point in a visual field that cannot be incorporated or claimed but that cuts open the subject. Lacan developed his theory of the gaze as a rejoinder to Jean-Paul Sartre, who had discussed the gaze in *Being and Nothingness*. Explains Lacan:

If you turn to Sartre’s own text, you will see that, far from speaking of the emergence of this gaze as of something that concerns the organ of sight, he refers to the sound of rustling leaves, suddenly heard while out hunting, to a footstep heard in a corridor. And when are these sounds heard? At the moment when he has presented himself in the action of looking through a keyhole. A gaze surprises him in the function of voyeur, disturbs him, overwhelms him and reduces him to a feeling of shame. The gaze in question is certainly the presence of others as such. But does this mean that originally it is in the relation of subject to subject, in the function of the existence of others as looking at me, that we apprehend what the gaze really is?[[83]](#endnote-84)

The rhetorical question that Lacan finally poses, with its implied answer of an ambiguous “no,” has clear implications for *A Sicilian Romance*. We have seen how, for Ferdinand, silence guarantees a certain invisibility, and how, further, a sound is “satisfying” to the extent that one’s “soundings” are returned proportionately by the Other. We have also seen that, for Louisa in the narrative of Madame de Menon, sound provides a cut in the structural conditions of Castle Mazzini. In each case, the gaze sustains desire; it is not a map of the symbolic space that the Marquis gets to monitor. Part of the operation of that gaze is how Julia’s desire gains its form through a sonic interruption, rather than being contained by her father’s supervisory apparatuses. The relation at work is not, as Lacan hints, “subject to subject,” but rather in the asymmetrical experience of finding oneself in the invisible hiding place of the Other, seeing oneself being seen from that impossible vantage.

As Lacan suggests, Sartre’s “own text” is indeed very interesting in this regard, for the insistent way that it crosses the registers of sound with sight. Sartre’s first test case for the gaze focuses on the voice, when: “this voice which I hear is that of a man and not a song on a phonograph.”[[84]](#endnote-85) He then stresses the asymmetrical nature of being subjected to another’s look, noting how “I,” with my enduring subjectivity, cannot so easily become a pure object like, say, the grass, because, as he explains, “‘Being seen-by-the-Other’ is the truth of ‘seeing-the-Other’” [[85]](#endnote-86). Yet passersby, he argues, are thoroughly objects for “me.”[[86]](#endnote-87) Faced with this incongruity, he proposes the thought experiment that would catch Lacan’s interest: “Let us imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole.”[[87]](#endnote-88) It is important for our purposes to note that Sartre, here, presents voyeurism as something anatomically impossible: how can someone look through a keyhole with their ear to the door? Behind that door, argues Sartre—and I picture a small door hidden behind a tapestry, as in *A Sicilian Romance*—“a spectacle is presented as ‘to be seen,’ a conversation as ‘to be heard’”; it is “a sight” and “a spectacle” given meaning by my jealousy.[[88]](#endnote-89) Sartre is very clear that eavesdropping is an aspect of the gaze. He imagines the scene, then, interrupted: “But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean?”[[89]](#endnote-90) In Sartre’s vignette, then, one hears oneself being looked at when one is looking and listening illicitly, and in the act of being thus interrupted one comes into being within a triangulated structure of relations mediated by the semi-permeable door. He begins to reckon with the shame of being seen at the keyhole.

Lacan emphasizes, with regard to the passage in Sartre, that the gaze is exercised through sound rather than sight. The gaze is never one’s own activity, and it is not as simple as one’s being-looked-at; rather, it is specifically the sound of one’s being looked at. This is, I would say, a capable interpretation of the passage from Sartre—an element of Sartre’s text that is present but not adequately factored into his thinking. When sound becomes an element of one’s perverse enjoyment, attesting to “the presence of others as such,” one experiences the gaze—which is always, it seems, a humiliating ordeal. The gaze is the experience of hearing oneself being watched while we are watching and listening. Lacan’s point is that the desiring subject is created, even sustained, through such triangulation.[[90]](#endnote-91)

The knock resonating through Castle Mazzini is just such an event. It is a pure part object, causing anxiety given its proximity to the partial drive. It is effectively a voice (testifying to a human presence) but with no content—it actively *says nothing* rather than merely being unclear. Yet the knock is noteworthy, among the millions of small sounds that surely bombard Julia and Ferdinand every day, for seeming to carry a meaning: it seems to say something or at least request the opportunity to do so. Yet it also, like any voice, seems “strangely recalcitrant to” meaning; it is a “material element” of communication that “*does not contribute to making sense*” (Dolar 15, emphasis in the original). The knock is an exemplary case of “a voice and nothing more,” as Dolar would say. It is

the grain of an inexplicable noise, a mysterious sound, which can appear even with the tiniest click. At the origin of fantasy there is a traumatic kernel materialized by the voice, the noise—we should allow full latitude here to a sonority not pertaining to language.[[91]](#endnote-92)

The knock, in its function as a part object that calls into being the point of the gaze, arrives from a place in the castle yet outside the castle, or even beyond the castle. It is in this sense that Julia, like Sartre’s voyeur, is being gazed at by a sound. It is repeated at intervals in the story, and the intervals come and go in intervals of their own: “The sounds were repeated, at intervals, for near an hour, when silence returned . . . [for] the rest of the night.”[[92]](#endnote-93) The so-called “explained Gothic” of Radcliffe’s formula is never really explained, because it depends upon “a spectral presence in the real,” which remains ever an “unknowable and uncontainable excess.”[[93]](#endnote-94)

Much as Shajirat stresses with regard to *Udolpho*, *A Sicilian Romance* challenges our most familiar paradigms for understanding Gothic topoi. The plot would seem to epitomize both the “unspeakable” and “live burial” topoi, which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues are foundational to the genre. Much as Sedgwick affirms, these topoi take on multiple resonances throughout the text, repeatedly connecting Julia to her mother through a set of structural redundancies.[[94]](#endnote-95) Yet, in a stark departure from Sedgwick’s model, *A Sicilian Romance* refuses to let “everything mean[] something else” in a display of its signifying processes.[[95]](#endnote-96) Rather, the knock presents obstacles to signification. Sound, across this novel, comically creates cases of mistaken identity: the fourth terrifying knock on the door is actually just Ferdinand; Julia loves the song “Sonnet” but doesn’t know who sang it; Ferdinand, having heard the sound through the hidden door, is afraid of his own footsteps.[[96]](#endnote-97) If the knock solicits a connection between Julia and her mother, it is only through their shared refusal to find meaning in these object voices. Julia, after all, plays the lute in a manner “which seem[s] to breathe a soul through the sound, and which take[s] captive the heart of the hearer.”[[97]](#endnote-98) Julia, in this metaphor, becomes both her mother and her father, insofar as the lute, in her hands, is both the agent of imprisonment and the barely-audible breath attesting to a life imprisoned. It is as if the novel’s metaphorical proxies for its own metaphors of imprisonment turn on themselves and become complicit in that imprisonment. In effect, Radcliffe here achieves at the figural level the same sort of twisted Moebius pattern that she had achieved at the narratological level, just a few pages earlier, in the narrative frame. Yet it is a figure not of connection but of a cut. Although Julia, Louisa, and probably Hippolitus each play the lute, what they have in common is not some sort of shared musicianship but the way that each relates, through the musical note, to the surplus enjoyment causing them anxiety. What they have in common is how this signifier, now barred from any signification, “compresses the enigma of the Other while being simultaneously the telltale sign of the excess in the subject.”[[98]](#endnote-99) Instead of establishing a circuit of displaced meaning, as Sedgwick would have it, it moves only through the shared experience of interruption. Lack, treated as a positive property, is what the characters have in common.

Dolar, analyzing one of Freud’s cases, notes that a small sound can be “a structural moment when something which upsets and interrupts the course of desire toward its fulfillment actually defines and drives the desire itself.”[[99]](#endnote-100) The two generations discover themselves in the other through their mutual experience of interruption rather than alliance. Indeed, as Ruth Beinstock Anolik argues in a semi-Lacanian key, “the absence of the mother [is] a requirement for the narratable deviance necessary for narrative to occur.”[[100]](#endnote-101) As we have seen, Louisa’s absence must be accounted for through frequent acts of inset narration as well, and these stories, too, must be interrupted if Julia is to find her way through the secret passages that sustain her as a desiring subject. She is, as Lacan would say, “pouring [herself], as it were, along the veins through which the domain of vision has been integrated into the field of desire,” that is, acoustically.[[101]](#endnote-102)

3. The Sound of the Gaze Beyond Signification

Early in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud considers a problem encountered by his predecessor in dream-theorization, F. W. Hildebrandt. Hildebrandt had, in the late nineteenth century, analyzed three very different dreams of his own, each punctuated by a sharp sound which, it turns out, was really him registering the sound of his alarm clock and attempting to incorporate the interruption into the dream. Hildebrandt dreamed, in one case, of a church bell; in another, of the jingle of a horse’s sleigh-bell; and in a third, of a kitchen-maid loudly dropping a tall stack of dishes, in dread of the very same alarm clock. In each case, the dreaming Hildebrandt responded to the jarring alarm clock with an attempt to continue sleeping by incorporating the interruption into the narrative of his dream.[[102]](#endnote-103) Freud asks: why would the mind make “the arbitrary decision” to assign the sound to something else, when it knows an alarm clock lies in wait? Would not the dreamer’s attempt to continue sleeping be more effective if he were to dream of an alarm clock directly? Freud compares the situation to seeing a cow in a distant field and convincing oneself, through the inadequacy of one’s vantage, that it is a horse.[[103]](#endnote-104) Breaking with Hildebrandt, Freud urges us to go beyond objective stimuli to understand this phenomenon.[[104]](#endnote-105) Despite the external stimulus causing the dream, he says, we should be “engaged in looking for sources of dreams inside the organism instead of outside it.”[[105]](#endnote-106) I take from this that even symbols, such as alarm clocks, with relatively stable and confined meanings stop having stable meanings once they have been introjected. The cut is interior to the subject now, even while, as a fragment of the real, it remains something forever excluded. “Where am I in relation to my desire?” is a more relevant question in these cases than “what is that sound?”

*A Sicilian Romance* is, by the standards of an eighteenth-century novel, unexpectedly replete with alarm clocks. Early in the novel, for instance, as Julia lies awake late at night reading, she “was roused from her forgetfulness, by the sound of the castle clock, which struck one.”[[106]](#endnote-107) The sound startles her because it comes so late: why, she wonders, would the clock chime at 1:00 at night? She is jarred by its failure to interpellate her, which she takes as a possible temporal misalignment between herself and her environs: not being asleep, she cannot recognize herself as the proper subject of its rousing chime, which is ironically why it rouses her into an important discovery. The sound leads her to the window, where she sees for the first time, in the form of an inexplicable light, the central mystery of the South tower. As she continues to watch, she finds herself “survey[ing] the scene” as it “echoed the sounds of gaiety and gladness” at the marchioness’s return.[[107]](#endnote-108) Seeing the sound rather than either hearing it or seeing a visual phenomenon is, in this passage, reassuring for Julia. But repetition will render its effects uncanny.

The scenario recurs later in the novel, in a twist that will force the meaning of the bell inward, into Julia, rather than into any external signifying system. This time, inappropriately-timed sounds seem to beget further sounds, rather than sights, which Julia finds disquieting:

Julia was awakened by the bell of the monastery. She knew it was not the hour customary for prayer, and she listened to the sounds, which rolled through the deep silence of the fabric, with strong surprise and terror. Presently she heard the doors of several cells creak on their hinges, and the sound of quick footsteps in the passages.[[108]](#endnote-109)

Archambault, interpreting the castle “bells as instruments of behavior control,” suggests that their ringing at the wrong time signals the breakdown of social order.[[109]](#endnote-110) Yet the bells frighten Julia even when they ring as scheduled:

The castle clock struck twelve. The sound seemed to shake the pile. Julia felt it thrill upon her heart. “I hear you,” sighed she, “for the last time.” The stillness of death succeeded. She continued to listen; but no sound met her ear.[[110]](#endnote-111)

This version of the “alarm clock” disturbs Julia because it seems to mark the subjective time of her lifespan rather than any objective, chrononormative time in the world, which is to say that she seems to have traversed another Moebius strip of sorts: whereas once she had feared that the clocks had slipped out of time, she now fears that *she herself* is slipping out of their regulatory mechanisms. Its ring now produces a “thrill” for Julia, who is anxious about eloping with Hippolitus while “the silence of the place remained undisturbed.”[[111]](#endnote-112) If, for Coleridge, sound is powerful because of its intrinsic ambiguity, for Radcliffe sound is powerful because it can interrupt a state of uncertainty, and anchor meaning through its very capacity for polysemy and repetition. Julia, who is on the verge of a perilous attempt to escape from her prison-like existence with her illicit lover, the attempt at which will, sadly, immediately cost him his life, comes to associate, even in advance, the object-voice with life and its cessation with death. It is as if she has internalized the sound of the clock and made it part of her own unconscious aspiration toward stillness. In this sense, she embodies Freud’s analysis of Hildebrandt’s alarm clock dreams: the important thing is no longer the external stimulus of the alarm clock—when will it ring, and how will Julia react?—but in her own introjection of its chime. As Žižek explains in another context: “Far more horrifying than to see with our ears—to hear the vibrating life substance beyond visual representations, this blind spot in the field of the visible—is to hear with our eyes, that is, to see the absolute silence that marks the suspension of life.”[[112]](#endnote-113) What Julia hears, having traversed her fantasy of failed interpellation, is the sound of her own jouissance returning to her as an object voice.

Having traversed that loop across the first half of the novel, we can compare its structure to a passage in Chapter 2, in which Julia is roused by a lovely song being played outside her window. This is the night of the Mazzini family ball, after which, we are told, she “retired to her apartment, but not to sleep”; as she fantasizes about Hippolitus in a “state of entranced delight, she was awakened by the sound of music immediately under her window.”[[113]](#endnote-114) This is an interesting passage because Julia is awakened from a state of already being awake, much as the bell in the previous chapter had done. She supposes, because it is sung by “a voice of more than magic expression” accompanied by “a lute touched by a masterly hand,” that Hippolitus must be courting her. This musical evidence, despite her not knowing if Hippolitus can even sing or play the lute, “confirms” what had previously been her mere belief that “she was loved by Hippolitus.”[[114]](#endnote-115) The eight-line song rhyming *abab cdcd*, she somehow knows, is titled “Sonnet,” despite her being Italian and its not being a sonnet. She takes it as a sign of love, despite the elegiac energies implied by the stanza form. One wonders: where and why did it get this title? Did Hippolitus announce the title before playing it, or did Julia, with apparently limited knowledge of verse forms, conclude that the title was appropriate? Or is it the work of the frame narrator working from oral “abstracts”? Would a late-sixteenth-century Italian like Julia recognize this rhyme scheme as the beginning of an English sonnet, even without the final six lines? The song itself, in a cruel irony, proposes that “not a lonely sound / Steals through the silence of this dreary hour.”[[115]](#endnote-116) Neither Julia nor the narrator seems to note that she has been “awakened” from “not . . . sleep” by a non-sonnet called “Sonnet” that recounts how the absence of sound can pass through the silence. The scene in many ways presages the scene immediately following—and already discussed above—in which Madame de Menon’s story about musical sounds is interrupted by a musical sound. It is as if the novel must explore the topic first with regard to interrupted silence before presenting an analogous case involving interrupted tales of sound. While many people, myself included, would be irritated to be awakened by someone singing about silence, Julia savors the return of her lost jouissance in this impossible utterance: “she then perceived that love may produce other sensations than those of delight.”[[116]](#endnote-117)

The voice in this case functions as an autonomous part object, a gap in the visual field that constructs and sustains Julia’s desire. It “belongs” to Hippolitus only in her fantasy, and links the lovers through the cut it enacts.[[117]](#endnote-118) That cut, we might say, is their only real sexual relation. Repeatedly, we find that “the object voice emerges in counterpoint with the visible and the visual, it cannot be disentangled from the gaze which offers its framework, so that both the gaze and the voice appear as objects in the gaps as a result of which they never quite match.”[[118]](#endnote-119) Yet they, like Julia and Hippolitus, are made inseparable by this mismatch. The “strange and alarming sounds” of *A Sicilian Romance* impinge upon and contain traces of the visual register precisely because they are the points excluded from that register, and around which that register has been constructed.[[119]](#endnote-120) We cannot easily speak of either its visual or sonic field as having a meaning apart from the “nothing” that Julia, Hippolitus, or Ferdinand have, with a measure of shame, introjected.

4. Conclusion

Radcliffe hears lack as a positive presence in its own right, consistently crossing the visual and sonic registers to highlight a multisensory ambiguity. The text attempts recourse to sonic reduction, but can figure this ambiguity only as a lack in the listener. This lack, appearing as a disquieting excess of sound-in-vision and vision-in-sound, interferes even with the figural, formal, and narratological processes of the text. Radcliffe subjects her characters to a sonic voyeurism that exceeds Foucauldian and Sartrean models of the gaze. By staging silences that are not empty within gazes that are not silent, and by allowing even the absence of sound to interrupt both the characters and the narration, Radcliffe challenges emergent visual epistemologies of the eighteenth century and reorganizes prevailing patterns of Enlightenment subjectivity. Lack, in her account, is not something missing but something present and resonant.

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Notes

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26. Radcliffe, 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Radcliffe, 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Radcliffe, 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
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49. Radcliffe, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. Radcliffe, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. Radcliffe, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
52. Radcliffe, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
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64. Radcliffe, *Sicilian*, 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
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88. Sartre, 259. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
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109. Archambault, “The Function of Sound,” para. 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
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111. Radcliffe, 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
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113. Radcliffe, *Sicilian*, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
114. Radcliffe, 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
115. Radcliffe, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
116. Radcliffe, 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
117. Little wonder that Hippolitus is a “near and much-valued relation” to the Marquis de Lomelli, whose name is so reminiscent of Lacan’s mythological lamella, that organ of the drive. Radcliffe, 48; Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 205–6. [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
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