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Rethinking the Sublime in the Novels of Ann Radcliffe

That John Keats could make a wry comment about "what fine mother Radcliff [*sic*] names" he had used in his poem "Eve of St. Mark" vividly conveys just how influential Radcliffe's version of the gothic was.[1] Writing in a tradition that was already fairly well established, she developed it so fully that her name became almost synonymous with the form. Eugenia DeLamotte notes that Radcliffe's contemporaries "recognized her as, if not the fountainhead, at least the opener of the floodgates for those tales with which, according to the *Critical Review* in 1796, the press had been inundated since 'Mrs. Radcliffe's justly admired and successful romances' " (1990: 11).[2] Robert Kiely has commented as well on the fact that Radcliffe's "gently euphemistic prose, her fainting heroines, and explainable ghosts were reproduced by other writers so quickly and on such a large scale that they were clichés before they had time to become conventions" (1972: 65). The task for the critic, then, is to determine just what she contributed to the form that made everyone so eager to imitate her.

Robert Miles has argued for Ann Radcliffe's "consolidation of the plot of the female Gothic" in *The Romance of the Forest* (1995: 101), and in this chapter I move to a similar conclusion by different analytical means. Radcliffe's centrality in shaping what Ellen Moers first called the "female gothic" is clear. Moers defined this sub-genre of the gothic as one in which "woman is examined with a woman's

eye, woman as girl, as sister, as mother, as self," and, more precisely, in which women "give *visual* form to the fear of self" (1985: 109, 107), i.e. in which they produce images that in some way represent themselves. Juliann Fleenor reads female gothic as a form focused on a "conflict with the all-powerful devouring mother," an argument that is consistent with Moers's insofar as that "mother" may be "a double, a twin perhaps, to the woman herself" (1983: 16), and argues that this relationship can be worked out in any number of ways. Radcliffe's novels clearly place mother–daughter relationships at their center, exploring the workings of this relationship in a patriarchal society. The strength of this exploration is in its devising an aesthetic that insists on rather than obscures difference, as a way of allowing the daughter, whose story is always at the center of the novel, to separate from her mother and take her place in that larger society.[3] Radcliffe accomplishes this by moderating her engagement with – and at key points revising – then current thinking about the sublime.

Radcliffe's engagement with the tradition of writing about the sublime is complex. Even as she famously invokes the supernatural in her works only to explain it away in the end, so she gestures toward the sublime of writers like Walpole and Lewis only to set it aside. She does not endorse either their vision of sublimity as an experience based on the violent effacement of differences, or their reliance on its disruptive power to negotiate the social problems represented in their novels. Instead, she redefines sublimity as an aesthetic that multiplies differences, and that therefore empowers rather than effaces women.[4] And, while she sees a value in sublime experience, she does not see it as a viable way of addressing the social problems with which her novels also deal. Those she insists on engaging through social mechanisms.

A Sicilian Romance and *The Italian*

A Sicilian Romance was written early in Radcliffe's career, while *The Italian* is acknowledged to be the masterful accomplishment of a mature writer.[5] The plots of both develop through a calculated resistance to the patriarchal plots of the Burkean sublime, as they explore the ways in which the lives available to women are really no better than living deaths. These deaths are not the sublime events we saw in Walpole, Lewis, and Maturin, but are instead the seemingly routine erasures of women from the public sphere that mark the experiences of so many women in Radcliffe's novels. Life as a wife and life as a nun are the options most often presented to those women whose desires conflict with the desires of people in power, and, consistently, those options are figured as equivalent to death.[6] Indeed, when the women in question will not accept either of these options, physical death almost always awaits them right around the corner.

The importance of resisting these options is Radcliffe's subject in these novels. In *A Sicilian Romance*, she explores them from multiple perspectives. In the background are the stories of Louisa de Bernini, who marries the Count Mazzini only after the man she really loves has been killed, and of her dear friend Madame de Menon, whose brother is the man killed and whose husband is the killer. When we first hear these stories, Louisa has been presumed dead for many years, and Madame de Menon has essentially taken her place, having served all that time as the tutor of the two daughters Louisa left behind: Emilia and Julia. The stories of these two young women become entwined with that of a third – Cornelia, whose brother Julia loves – and while they initially threaten simply to repeat what has gone before, they finally recover and find a way past the seemingly limited options available to them.

The stories of Emilia and Cornelia do not result from the sorts of persecution that will characterize Julia's experiences, and that fact alone suggests that the ordinary options for women serve only to limit their lives. Emilia has only a minor role in the narrative, spending all of her time in her father's castle, not because she has been forcibly confined there, but because – not yet being desired in marriage, or destined for a convent – she has no other place to go. Cornelia's story is more involved, for she is a noble but poor woman who loves the equally noble but equally poor Angelo, and their lack of resources initially prevents their marriage. Cornelia conceals her passion for Angelo, but will not marry another, agreeing to take the veil instead. She is to be spared this fate when her father discovers her love for Angelo and agrees to the marriage, but at that very moment stories of Angelo's death cut off the possibility of their marriage and result in her deciding once again on the convent. When Angelo – who has not died – discovers what has happened, he becomes a priest and passes his life in the same religious establishment to which Cornelia belongs. They see each other only once, then lead separate lives, and Cornelia dies soon after Julia meets her.

Cornelia's story combines a perhaps incredible level of coincidence with a more considered commentary on the ways in which women's choices in life lead consistently to loss – of their lovers, of themselves, of their lives. Julia's story makes much clearer the powers that operate to put women in this position. Her father destines her to be the wife of the ambitious and tyrannical Duke de Luovo, and while she replies that "to obey [him] would be worse than death" (p. 55), he is so insistent that she is forced to flee her home to escape this fate. She takes shelter for a time in her maid's home town, but gives that up for the seemingly greater safety of the abbey of St. Augustin. There she faces the choice of either marrying de Luovo or becoming a nun, both of which are represented as equally dreadful: "From a marriage with the duke . . . her heart recoiled in horror, and to be immured for life within the walls of a convent, was a fate little less dreadful" (p. 142). She nonetheless resolves on the latter until she discovers her beloved

Count de Vereza – whom she had presumed dead – to be still living. At that point she escapes the convent and after still more life-threatening adventures finds herself unexpectedly in the Castle of Mazzini with a woman whom she discovers to be her mother. Once again refusing the death offered to her – this time a very literal death – she is able, with the help of Vereza, to free both herself and her mother from their prison.

Notably, Julia's escapes from her tyrannical father hinge on the help of several people: she initially attempts to escape her father's castle with the help of her brother, Ferdinand, and her lover, Hippolitus, but they are betrayed by a servant; she succeeds on a second attempt, aided by her maid and her maid's lover; she then finds her way to the abbey with the help of her former tutor, Madame de Menon; finally, when the abbey ceases to be a safe haven, it is Madame de Menon and her brother Ferdinand who arrange her flight. That servants and tutors should help her is perhaps explained as an alliance among people who are relatively disempowered. That her lover should also try to help her one can put down to self-interest. That her brother should oppose his father by supporting first her and later her mother suggests a rewriting of the rules of patriarchy – though by no means an abandonment of its structure – to accommodate and render visible the women who make it possible.

Radcliffe's central emphasis in this – and in all of her novels – is on rewriting what Burke and his peers would have defined as sublime experience to show that it is at best a temporary escape from, and at worst actively perpetuates, the oppressive politics of a patriarchal society. Sublime experience isolates, overwhelms, and eventually effaces those individuals who succumb to it, and so is not something Radcliffe can endorse. Her characters end up in the public sphere, in communication with other people and able to act on their own behalf. And it is her capacity to endow her female characters, in particular, with agency in the public sphere that renders Radcliffe's novels so successfully feminist.

Radcliffe's genius is to accomplish this goal in part through what Alison Milbank (1993) has identified as an important feminist revision of the Burkean sublime. Milbank points out that theorists of the sublime from Longinus on had associated sublime experience with "the masculine public arena of privileged equals, in which the orator 'transports' his hearers to new appreciations of their shared discourse" (1993: xii), while Burke contributed to this aesthetic his identification of it as a psychological experience rooted in terror (1993: x). She then argues that Radcliffe picks up Burke's interest in the sublime as an aesthetic that overwhelms those who experience it, but follows poets like James Thomson in locating the source of the sublime in nature, thus "open[ing] up the concept of the sublime as a democratic experience, since all people can respond to the beauties of creation" (1993: xiii). Following Samuel Monk, an influential critic of the early twentieth century, Milbank argues that this form of the sublime and its asso-

ciation with "the chivalric, the Gothic and the Ossianic takes the place, for women deprived of Greek and Latin, of classical education" and allows them to "establish . . . a rival cultural genealogy" (1993: xiv).

The natural sublime in itself is thus seen as open to appropriation by women, and Milbank's reading anatomizes its specific workings, showing how the passivity that leaves women – or anyone – open to sublime experience will in fact lead to useful knowledge. Her example is that of Madame de Menon in *A Sicilian Romance*, who follows "a view so various and sublime, that she pause[s] in thrilling and delightful wonder" until it leads her to the figure of her supposedly lost pupil, Julia (p. 104, cited in Milbank 1993: xvii). Similarly, Milbank argues that, in Radcliffe's later novels, "protagonists' acknowledgment of the sublime power of forces in nature and history beyond their control is followed by literary or musical creation, as an Emily St Aubert 'transposes' her immediate sensations into 'composition' of a more objective and universal character," with the result that "[p]rivate feelings can become public, and female experience is enabled to reach out to claim representative human status" (1993: xix). Thus "the Burkean sublime has become both a means of dramatizing human, and particularly female, subjection, and a catalyst to its overcoming" (1993: xix).

Milbank's reading of Radcliffe's rendering of the Burkean sublime is compelling, and leads one to ask a question that Milbank herself does not quite ask, namely, whether in Radcliffe's novels sublime experience does not become self-subverting. Such would seem to be the case, for scenes of sublimity in her novels seem regularly to lead women away from their initially transcendent experience and into the world that in so many ways wants to exclude them, a world whose realities Radcliffe insists they understand and respond to constructively. A still fuller response would acknowledge that Radcliffe's response to the sublime subverts at least Burke's version of the sublime in a variety of ways. At times she deliberately exposes and/or resists the oppressive dynamic on which a sublime moment is built. At others she contents herself with insisting on the importance of moving into and then right back out of that Burkean moment. At still others she goes so far as to restructure those moments, to try to shape a sublime experience that does not erase but instead acknowledges and even generates difference.

If sublime experience in Radcliffe leads one inevitably and ironically back into the world, the most important form of that experience occurs not as a result of human interaction with nature, the supernatural, or even the divine. Instead, it occurs in mother–daughter relationships, which – as I noted earlier – have long been recognized as central to the genre of female gothic. Critics have had much to say about Radcliffe's engagement with this subject, and here again, Alison Milbank's discussion is particularly helpful. Her introduction to her edition of

the novel (Milbank 1993) reads Radcliffe's portrayal of mother–daughter relationships in light of what recent criticism has identified as a pre-Oedipal sublime.[7] This way of understanding mother–daughter relationships clearly relies on the analytical framework provided by psychoanalysis, in which the pre-Oedipal phase of development is that phase in which the child has not yet separated from its mother, and directs us to see the struggle of the gothic as the struggle of the daughter to separate from the mother. Claire Kahane first articulated this way of reading gothic, arguing that the mother was often literally represented by the gothic castle or house in which the heroine is trapped, and Milbank builds on Kahane's work, arguing that "[t]he sublime here is the location of the repressed and unrepresented mother, and it tempts the heroine to return to a complete identification with this buried experience" (1993: xxi). Where this complete identification would in turn result in repression of the heroine, however, Milbank argues that Radcliffe does not play out this dynamic, but instead insists on recovery of the mother as the necessary first step in the heroine's emergence as a distinct individual. Thus Milbank argues that, in *A Sicilian Romance*, for example, Julia's discovery of her mother in the dungeons under the family castle results not in Julia's being subsumed by her mother in a moment of sublime self-loss, but in her coming to understand herself "as the product of the union of male and female – of a truly sexual union – and . . . that the mother is also a lover" (1993: xxv). Julia's discovery of her mother results in her understanding of the complexity of her mother's identity, in other words, and in her understanding of herself as separate from her mother.

If one follows Milbank in understanding the sublimity of this moment to inhere in the potential merging of mother and daughter, then it is clear that one must read this scene as one in which sublime experience is avoided – or at least quickly set aside – as social reality comes to the fore. There is one more theoretical paradigm that may be helpful, however, and that is one generated by critical efforts to define a "female sublime." In an essay that Milbank also cites, Patricia Yaeger identifies the "female sublime" as a rhetorical mode, "a vocabulary of ecstasy and empowerment, a new way of reading feminine experience" (1989: 192). Barbara Claire Freeman argues quite differently that

> the female sublime is neither a rhetorical mode nor an aesthetic category but a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into relation with an otherness – social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic – that is excessive and unrepresentable. The feminine sublime is not a discursive strategy, technique, or literary style the female writer invents, but rather a crisis in relation to language and representation that a certain subject undergoes. (1995: 2)

Most interesting for my reading of Radcliffe are not the ways in which these two theorists oppose each other, but the ways in which they are in dialog. Yaeger is

interested in women's writing as a way of reinventing existing notions of the sublime and so is Freeman, who says at one point that her "central question is not, what is the feminine sublime? but rather, how does it signify?" (1995: 10) For all of their differences, both Yaeger and Freeman finally point to a female sublime that posits not a relationship in which the self masters the overpowering other, but a relationship "that permits both a saving maintenance of ego-boundaries and an exploration of the pleasures of intersubjectivity" (Yaeger 1989: 205), that "involves taking up a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness" (Freeman 1995: 11). Both are interested in forms of the sublime that acknowledge forces of overwhelming excess in the world around us, forms of "otherness" with which one can forge a connection, but to which one need not submit and which one need not conquer.[8] And this is Radcliffe's interest too.

With this line of thought in mind, one can see that Julia's discovery of her mother at the end of *A Sicilian Romance* is a discovery of someone whom she rightly identifies as other than herself but also somehow essential to definition of that self. Julia's first sight of her mother simply shows her "the pale and emaciated figure of a woman, seated, with half-closed eyes, in a kind of elbow-chair," whose "mild dignity . . . excited in [her] an involuntary veneration" (p. 174). The two do not yet know each other, but the mother's "wild surprise" at her unexpected visitor gives way in a moment to recognition of her daughter, and she immediately "faint[s] away" (p. 174). Julia in turn feels "astonishment," followed by a "multitude of strange imperfect ideas" that leave her "lost in perplexity" (p. 174). She starts to get her bearings when she looks in her mother's face and sees not the original of her own features, but rather "the resemblance of Emilia!" (p. 174). A scene that begins with the hallmarks of the Burkean sublime – literal loss of sense on one side, veneration and astonishment on the other – opens out into sublimity of another sort. Julia does not see in her mother a mirror-image with which she can fully identify, but the image of her sister, who mediates and so complicates the moment of identification. Identification of her mother and so of herself proceeds not through the merging of one into the other, but rather through the opening out of their identities into those of others. This process of identification is completed when the marchioness awakens and asks about her husband, at which point "Julia [throws] herself at the feet of her mother, and embracing her knees in an energy of joy, answer[s] only in sobs" (p. 174). The moment is sublime in its understanding of the multiple ties that go into the definition of a single individual, and it is this form of sublimity that Radcliffe explores once more in *The Italian* (1797), another novel in which the heroine's discovery of a mother she had thought dead helps bring her trials to a successful close.

The Italian explores the placement of women in patriarchy in a way that recalls but elaborates *A Sicilian Romance*, again scrutinizing the social structures that conspire to render women invisible, and again recognizing the Burkean sublime as

the aesthetic that serves to mask these structures. Even as the Burkean sublime is undercut, however, Radcliffe works to redefine sublimity in a way that acknowledges and complicates our understanding of female subjectivity, rather than effacing it, and again it is the heroine's relationship to her mother that facilitates that exploration.

The heroine of *The Italian* is Ellena di Rosalba, who – like Julia in *A Sicilian Romance* – is from the start fairly secluded from society. Where Julia was locked away in a castle with her sister and tutor, so Ellena lives with an elderly aunt. And where Julia's attraction to the Count Vereza can be seen as the cause of subsequent efforts to confine her, so Ellena's involvement with her suitor, Vivaldi, precipitates all of her problems. At the request of Vivaldi's mother, Ellena is abducted from the home of her recently deceased aunt and taken to a remote convent, where she is given a choice between becoming a nun or agreeing to an arranged marriage. She refuses both options, saying that she is "prepared to meet whatever suffering [the abbess] shall inflict upon [her]" instead (p. 84). The only other "evil" that Ellena can imagine being inflicted on her is permanent confinement from the world, though an experienced reader of gothic will know that death is yet another alternative. Having articulated these scenarios, the novel plays them out one after the other.

Volume I devotes considerable time to Ellena's imprisonment in the convent of San Stefano. Notably, she is "not . . . shocked by a discovery of the designs formed against her, since, from the moment of her arrival at San Stefano, she had expected something terribly severe, and had prepared her mind to meet it with fortitude" (p. 84). This all too comprehensible misery is countered, however, by what any reader of Burke would describe as the sublime pleasure she takes in contemplating the setting in which she finds herself. Ellena's walk through an unguarded door at the convent of San Stefano into a room with a view of the surrounding landscape invokes but also critiques Burke's thought with a rhetoric as subtle as it is incisive. In this "turret . . . suspended, as in air, above the vast precipices of granite, that formed part of the mountain" on which the convent is situated, Ellena looks out "with a dreadful pleasure" that directs one to read her experience through Burkean lenses (p. 90). "The consciousness of her prison" is said to disappear as "her eyes ranged over the wide and freely-sublime scene without" (p. 90):

> Here, gazing upon the stupendous imagery around her, looking, as it were, beyond the awful veil which obscures the features of the Deity, and conceals Him from the eyes of his creatures, dwelling as with a present God in the midst of his sublime works; with a mind thus elevated, how insignificant would appear to her the transactions, and the sufferings of this world! How poor the boasted power of man, when the fall of a single cliff from these mountains would with ease destroy thousands of his race assembled on the plains below! How would it avail them,

> that they were accoutred for battle, armed with all the instruments of destruction that human invention ever fashioned? Thus man, the giant who now held her in captivity, would shrink to the diminutiveness of a fairy; and she would experience, that his utmost force was unable to enchain her soul, or compel her to fear him, while he was destitute of virtue. (pp. 90–1)

This much-discussed passage fascinates not simply because it envisions Ellena escaping the confines of the physical world to dwell with the Deity in sublime unity, but because it implicitly opposes this form of sublimity to that which would be created by the spectacle of a cliff falling on thousands of men. Ellena's vision of sublimity as union with the divine contrasts with her vision of the sublimity caused by confrontation and destruction. Further, even while one might feel that her repeated mentions of "men" and "man" are meant to invoke all humanity, it is hard not to read those words as detailing a more specifically gendered dynamic, in which her male and male-identified oppressors – "accoutred for battle" as they are – will themselves be oppressed.

In a couple of ways, then, this passage offers a vision of sublime experience that recalls but revises sublime scenes as they have emerged in Walpole and Lewis, yet Radcliffe herself cannot finally endorse even this revised form of sublime experience as a lastingly viable way for her heroines to cope with the world. She stresses that Ellena's sense of union with God is illusory, that Ellena dwells only "*as it were*, beyond the awful veil," and only "*as* with a present God" (italics mine). Ellena can retreat to this turret from time to time, but it offers no real escape from her problems. Indeed, it is available to her only so long as she is resident in the convent, and when her refusal to take the veil means that she will be immured and left to die in the labyrinth of secret spaces beneath the convent, she must flee. Notably, that crisis coincides with the very human intrusion of Vivaldi onto that sublime landscape: "perched on a point of the cliff below" her window, Vivaldi outlines a plan for her escape, and it is in this reclaiming of the sublime by the human that the solution to Ellena's problems emerges (p. 124).

Ellena's refusal to become a nun sits alongside her repeated refusals to marry against her will. She never even considers the partner chosen for her by Vivaldi's mother, and puts off Vivaldi – to whom she is in fact pledged – as long as she can. Ellena's wariness of marriage stems from her desire to preserve a sense of her own self-worth once married, and while it is clear how a marriage made under duress would erode that sense, what is less obvious is the way in which all romantic relationships seem to threaten the self as well. Relevant here is Terry Castle's discussion of Radcliffean gothic as a genre characterized by what she calls the "spectralization of the other." Talking specifically about *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Castle traces the way in which lovers reduce their beloveds to ghostly

images that "can be appropriated, held close, and cherished forever in the ecstatic confines of the imagination" (1995: 136), and her argument clearly pertains to Radcliffe's other novels as well. In the first chapter of *The Italian*, Vivaldi takes leave of Ellena physically, but with "[t]he beauty of her countenance haunting his imagination, and the touching accents of her voice still vibrating on his heart" (p. 7). Similarly, Ellena associates Vivaldi with her deceased aunt, and "her love for the one was so intimately connected with her affection for the other, that each seemed strengthened and exalted by the union" (p. 57). And the beloved who has been reduced to this ghostly status arguably does become "a source of sublime and life-sustaining emotion" (Castle 1995: 136).

Even as these actions take place, however, Radcliffe seems to recognize that the cost of this ghostly imaging is the loss of the other, at least in a physical sense. To take the other into one's mind is to deny her or him an independent existence, as Castle sees. It is in some sense also to kill off that other, at least figuratively. This sublime and life-sustaining experience would seem to involve as much figurative violence as any of the sublime experiences considered to this point, and this is surely yet another reason why Radcliffean gothic stands back from any full-fledged endorsement of either Burkean sublimity or the structure of human relationships that it supports. Ellena and Vivaldi will marry by the end of the novel, but not before their connection to each other has been significantly redefined.

Before I talk about just how that redefinition takes place, however, there is one last invocation and resistance of the Burkean sublime in this novel that merits discussion, and that is Ellena's confinement and near murder at the hands of the priest Schedoni. That Schedoni balks at the murder is important, for he mistakes a miniature around Ellena's neck for a picture of himself, and believes that he is about to kill his own daughter. The scenario here is nearly that of *The Castle of Otranto*, but this time the supposed father puts the dagger down. He does not kill Ellena, but instead conducts her away from his home, and sets about reuniting her with Vivaldi. The novel in this way again avoids the sublime erasure of difference that novels like *The Monk* allow.

In turning away from this form of the sublime, Radcliffe would seem to turn away not only from its threat to the self, but also from the promise of revelation that accompanies that threat. Where Walpole and Lewis link sublime experiences with the revelations that bring their stories to a close, Radcliffe seeks another way by which the truth can emerge. In part, she turns to storytelling as the vehicle for truth-telling, and, unlike Walpole and Lewis – who make sure that everyone involved knows the truth about everything that pertains to them – Radcliffe allows her characters access to the truth only when it will serve some practical purpose. She has Schedoni commit suicide at the end of the novel, and while his death perhaps recalls the Burkean sublime, combining the violence of

self-murder with the revelation of much that has to this point been mysterious in the novel, it is finally not sublime but ironic. In spite of all that he is able to tell his rapt auditors about the sins of his life, Schedoni dies without ever discovering that Ellena was his stepdaughter and not his daughter. Radcliffe denies him the holistic vision accorded to Manfred and Ambrosio, refusing to privilege the insight of this corrupt man.

More importantly, however, Radcliffe repeats the move that she made at the close of *A Sicilian Romance*, reuniting Ellena with the mother she has long presumed dead, and in the process reinventing the sublime. The seeds of this reunion are planted early in the novel, when Ellena – imprisoned in the convent of San Stefano – hears "[a]mong the voices of the choir . . . one whose expression immediately fixed her attention," one that "seemed to speak a loftier sentiment of devotion than the others, and to be modulated by the melancholy of an heart, that had long since taken leave of this world" (p. 86). Listening to this voice, Ellena "felt that she understood all the feelings of the breast from which it flowed" (p. 86), and she worries later that she has offended this woman whose "regard . . . was not only delightful, but seemed necessary to her heart" (p. 88). This woman is a nun named Olivia, and one is hardly surprised to discover, near the end of the novel, that Olivia is Ellena's mother. Susan C. Greenfield identifies this moment as one that takes Ellena back to the pre-Oedipal moment of unity with the mother (2002: 67–9), and that has in turn – as I have discussed – been identified as a form of the sublime. As in *A Sicilian Romance*, the assertion of this bond between mother and child results not in the absorption of one by the other, but in a connection that paves the way for separation. Once Olivia reveals that not the vicious Schedoni but instead the virtuous Count di Bruno was Ellena's father, and that she herself is Ellena's mother, Ellena's marriage to Vivaldi can go forward.

Radcliffe understands that sublimity must be redefined as a generative rather than a destructive principle. She understands as well the ironic truth that what it must generate are structures of difference, though she wants to change – rather than simply replicate – those that already exist. Thus, in the final chapter of *The Italian*, Radcliffe generates a vision of a world marked by differences that seem to multiply as one reads, and that by the end do not quite make sense. The scene opens with a fairy-tale vision in which nobles and peasants celebrate together, but Ellena is still "the queen" (p. 413). Similarly, "[t]he style of the gardens" is said to be "that of England, and of the present day, rather than of Italy; except 'Where a long alley peeping on the main,' exhibit[s] such a gigantic loftiness of shade, and grandeur of perspective, as characterize the Italian taste" (p. 412). So far we see only a careful articulation of sameness and difference, but things change when the servant Paulo rejoices that people "[m]ay fly in the sea, or swim in the sky, or tumble over head and heels into the moon," only to be corrected

by "[a] grave personage" who comments, "You mean swim in the sea, and fly in the sky, I suppose . . . but as for tumbling over head and heels into the moon! I don't know what you mean by that!" (pp. 414–15). This final exchange moves us into a world shaped by an excess of joy, a world that opens out into a complex and highly articulated – or differentiated – structure. It is a world that we do not quite recognize, and in that is her great success. In confronting that differentiated structure, and in acknowledging our own difference from it, we understand that these differences are what allow us to live our lives intact and empowered.

The Romance of the Forest and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* and *The Italian* turn away from the Burkean sublime, with its insistence on the effacement of the individual, suggesting instead that sublimity should be redefined as an essentially generative experience. This is seen primarily in the mother–daughter relationships that emerge in these novels, and that propel both mothers and daughters into recognition of their own complicated subjectivities. The novels Radcliffe wrote between these two – *The Romance of the Forest* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* – complicate this vision by focusing particularly on the heroines' progress in the world once their mothers are really and truly dead.[9] In *The Romance of the Forest*, Adeline's mother dies while she is yet an infant, and although evidence of Adeline's maternal heritage is important to establishing her identity at the end of the novel, the way in which the connection is established differs significantly from what we have seen in *A Sicilian Romance* or *The Italian*. In an even more notable shift in focus, Emily's mother passes away by the end of the first chapter of *Udolpho*, and any complications associated with her memory are fairly easily resolved. What changes when mothers drop out of the picture like this? Does Radcliffe turn away even from her own revisions of sublimity as the key to self-realization? If she does, what is gained and what is lost by this move?

The Romance of the Forest flirts with the Burkean sublime on many occasions, exploiting the thrills it can create while making unusually clear the patriarchal politics on which it is founded. Towards the end of the novel, Adeline ventures into the Alps with the La Luc family, and the "sublimity of the scenery" signals its capacity to take viewers beyond this world (p. 265). La Luc comments in utterly predictable language that such scenes "lift the soul to their Great Author," allowing one to "contemplate with a feeling almost too vast for humanity the sublimity of his nature in the grandeur of his works" (p. 265), yet when Adeline looks at the same landscape, she offers the far more idiosyncratic observation that "[i]t seems . . . as if we were walking over the ruins of the world, and were the only persons who had survived the wreck" (p. 265). She understands what La

Luc does not, that sublimity as it is usually understood grows out of the oppression of people and places, and indeed, her prior experiences with what Burke would have called the sublime make this dynamic all too clear.[10]

The novel opens with a "scene" that even one of its principal players recognizes as something "like a vision, or one of those improbable fictions that sometimes are exhibited in a romance" (p. 8). What has happened is this. Pierre La Motte, the player in question and "a gentleman, descended from an ancient house of France" (p. 2), has been forced to leave Paris for exile in the south of France as a way of escaping his gambling debts. When he loses his way just outside Paris, he seeks help from the inhabitants of a "small and ancient house, which stood alone on the heath" (p. 3), where he finds himself taken prisoner and fully expects to be robbed or even killed. What happens instead is that he is confronted with a beautiful young girl who will turn out to be our heroine, the above-mentioned Adeline, and told by a man whom Adeline believes to be her father: "if you wish to save your life, swear that you will convey this girl where I may never see her more" (p. 5). When the pair exit the house, they also exit the fairy-tale narrative it seems to represent. From that point on, the novel moves slowly to strip away such enchantment and expose the often brutal patriarchal politics behind it, concluding its action in a public courtroom where Adeline gains both recognition and power. That a courtroom should prove the antidote to the gothic terrors of the house on the heath is ironic, for both are clearly run on patriarchal principles. Radcliffe's interest all along seems to be less in dismantling patriarchy than exposing its workings and exploring the roles open to women within it. To this end the novel imagines not one, not two, but three different patriarchal societies in seventeenth-century Europe: the Forest of Fontangville, Leloncourt, and finally the city of Paris.

Adeline, Pierre La Motte, and his wife end their flight from their various oppressors in the Forest of Fontangville. Far from providing a pastoral alternative to the difficult lives they have all left behind, it does just the opposite, and they find themselves living in a nightmarish world that not only replicates but intensifies the world they knew. They make their home in the gothic ruins of the abbey of St. Clair, in an environment that might have been conjured by Burke. The remains of the chapel inspire in La Motte "a sensation of sublimity rising into terror – a suspension of mingled astonishment and awe!" (p. 15). "Terrors, which she neither endeavoured to examine, or combat," overcome Madame La Motte at the very prospect of staying in this place overnight (p. 17). The fears inspired by the abbey start to seem more justified when the family learns that it was the property of "a nobleman, who now resided with his family on a remote estate," and that it "was reported, that some person was, soon after it came to the present possessor, brought secretly to the abbey and confined" (p. 30). Not long after this, La Motte lifts the lid of a well-hidden chest only to discover "the

remains of a human skeleton" (p. 54). Adeline then has dreams about a man dying in a hidden room of the abbey, and finally she discovers – through a door hidden behind the arras in her room – both a bloodstained dagger and a mysterious manuscript. Her secret readings of the manuscript fill her with horror, yet its fragmented narrative does not reveal what happened to its author. To discover that she will need to leave the cocooned world of the forest, and one major obstacle prevents her from doing so: the Marquis de Montalt.

The Marquis de Montalt has considerable power over La Motte, both because he owns the building in which the latter is living, and because he has recently been robbed by La Motte, whom he can therefore have imprisoned at any moment. When the marquis inevitably blackmails La Motte, Adeline is his price for silence, and he gets what he wants, at least for a time. With La Motte's help, as well as that of his servants, he manages to kidnap her and bring her to a home that is the decadent counterpart to the decaying abbey of St. Clair. Adeline is "astonished" by the silk hangings, and frescoes "representing scenes from Ovid," but recognizes the danger she is in, and prevaricates well enough to keep the marquis at a distance (p. 156). She escapes both him and his dubious offers of marriage by jumping out of a window (following in the footsteps of Richardson's *Pamela*, who at one point escapes persecution in just the same way), and while she is eventually returned to La Motte, who once again agrees to turn her over to the marquis, she escapes a second time and is then able to leave the forest once and for all.

From a forest that is the preserve of the decaying and decadent nobility (the very nobility who would be guillotined by the thousands in the years just after this novel was published), Adeline escapes to the village of Leloncourt. This is the birthplace of La Motte's servant Peter, and, once there, she is taken in by the family of Arnand La Luc, the village pastor. La Luc's own home is said to be "delightful," while "the philanthropy which, flowing from the heart of the pastor, was diffused through the whole village, and united the inhabitants in the sweet and firm bonds of social compact, was divine" (p. 277). The words "social compact" indicate that we are to read this as a society modeled on the principles articulated by Locke and especially Rousseau,[11] and it is a community in which hierarchies of both class and gender seem less pronounced than they are elsewhere in the novel. That said, however, there are limits to this egalitarian vision. La Luc may be a benevolent man, but he looks startlingly like La Motte insofar as he is "descended from an ancient family of France, whose decayed fortunes occasioned them to seek a retreat in Switzerland" (p. 245), and it is not the collective efforts of the villagers, but his own "philanthropy" – described as "divine," no less – that creates the social harmony we are meant to admire. He is a sentimentalized version of Filmer's noble patriarch, but a patriarch still, and his is a world in which women's roles continue to be carefully circumscribed. La Luc's

sister is mildly satirized for her devotion to herbal medicines, while his daughter, Clara, is chastised for playing the lute rather than attending to her social duties (Johnson 1995: 88–9). Claudia Johnson has taught us to see this treatment of women as part of a more widespread tendency in the 1790s to render women "equivocal beings," out of place in the worlds of reason and of sentiment, both of which at this point are male domains, and her insight sits well alongside Carol Pateman's understanding (Pateman 1988) that a world defined by a social contract rather than literal patriarchal lines of rule is nonetheless a "world without women" (the phrase is David Noble's).

Alternative to both these settings is the city of Paris, where the novel's mysteries are finally resolved. The royal court, the prison, and the court of law are the locations of the activity that takes place there, and ironically these institutions – none of which leaves much space for women – are precisely where Adeline comes into her own. Caught up in the machinations of Montalt – who has managed to have La Luc's son condemned to death at the same time as he is bringing La Motte to trial for robbing him – she travels to Paris to testify on behalf of the latter. As the trial goes forward and the truth of the dealings between La Motte and Montalt are revealed, she also learns that Montalt is her uncle, that he killed her father to gain possession of the abbey of St. Clair, and that he wished to hold on to it by killing her as well. It should come as no surprise that the property originally belonged not to Adeline's father, but to her mother – who died shortly after her birth – and that the marquis is yet another patriarchal authority whose power is built on the oppression of women. More surprising is Adeline's accession to all that he has lost.

By the conclusion of the trial, Adeline has been transformed from a penniless, helpless young woman beholden to La Motte, La Luc, their sons, and even the servant Peter into a wealthy young woman able to help every one of those people in return. She might be said to have taken on the role of patriarch herself,[12] as she moves into the place occupied first by her biological father and then by the marquis. That she does this by reclaiming the legacy of her mother, however, suggests alternatively that matrilineal descent is what is truly empowering here, though it surfaces only for this brief moment before Adeline marries and literally leaves behind (though she does not absolutely give up) that maternal legacy.

The Mysteries of Udolpho explores from another perspective the placement of – and possibilities for – women in patriarchal society. The novel exploits with great skill the power of the Burkean sublime to engross its readers, but at the same time insists – as does Radcliffe's other work – that this form of sublimity intensifies and obscures rather than resolves the problems that interest her most. The novel turns on Emily St. Aubert's efforts to ensure her own survival following the deaths of first her mother and then her father. Forced to live with her aunt, Madame Cheron, and the man her aunt has recently married, Montoni, she

must not let herself be overwhelmed – literally or metaphorically – by the variously awe-inspiring and terrifying scenes she encounters.

The pleasures of the Burkean sublime are, as usual, generated largely by the spectacular landscapes in which Emily finds herself at various points in the novel, and especially the mountainous terrain in which Udolpho stands. The terrors are just as expectedly generated by Montoni, whose name marks him as a human counterpart to the mountains, and again suggests that this form of sublimity is gendered male.[13] As terrifying as Montoni himself is everything associated with him – his henchmen, Udolpho itself, and the original owner of the castle, Signora Laurentini. Laurentini is particularly worth our attention, for it is in part through her character – especially as it exists in relation to Emily – that Radcliffe explores the possibilities and limits of female independence.

Laurentini is associated with terror for much of the novel, but the reason for this association shifts significantly over time. Emily articulates the nature of this shift towards the end of the novel, when she realizes that "Signora Laurentini . . . instead of having been murdered by Montoni, was, as it now seemed, herself guilty of some dreadful crime" (p. 650). Instead of having been victimized by a patriarchal society, Laurentini finds a way to make that society her victim, and in the swing from one extreme to the other there is a transition that echoes the story of Lewis's Rosario, the submissive noviciate who evolved into the devilish Matilda. Where Lewis portrays a resourceful woman as the devil incarnate, however, Radcliffe sees her in a far more complex way – as utterly human, and damaging not only to the society around her, but also to herself.

Laurentini is introduced into the novel indirectly, when the servant Annette tells Emily about the woman who originally owned the castle of Udolpho, and one day mysteriously disappeared. Since Laurentini's disappearance resulted in Montoni's inheriting the castle that dominates so much of the novel, one is quickly led to wonder whether he murdered her for the sake of her property, a conjecture that seems all the more warranted as we watch him imprison both Madame Cheron and Emily for the very same reason. Annette finishes her account of Laurentini's disappearance by saying that Laurentini "has been seen . . . walking the woods and about the castle in the night" (p. 238), and while Emily scoffs at this story, she nonetheless finds herself frightened by the thought of this "strange history" and its relation to "her own strange situation" (p. 240). In this frame of mind, Emily remembers seeing a picture "concealed by a veil of black silk" that according to Annette had "something very dreadful belonging to it" (p. 233) and she "resolve[s] to examine it," becoming increasingly "agitated" as she ponders "its connection with the late lady of the castle" (p. 248). By the time Emily actually lifts the veil – only to discover that it is "no picture" – she "drop[s] senseless to the floor" (p. 248). We do not learn at this point what exactly Emily has seen behind the veil, but as the novel progresses, she associates that terrify-

ing sight with that of a dead body that she stumbles across. The movement from the story of Laurentini to the mystery behind the black veil to the actual body "deformed by death" (p. 348) suggests a reprise of that form of the sublime that we saw in Lewis or Maturin – a sublimity predicated on the erasure of the recognizably human and its transformation into something terrifying – yet the novel famously pulls back from this scenario in its closing pages. There the figure is revealed to be not Laurentini or anyone else, but a wax figure of a decaying corpse – a *memento mori* that is meant to inspire penitence. By then this anticlimax is almost expected, because Laurentini has appeared – alive, if not quite well – in a very different context.[14]

While we might be glad to turn away from this vision of Laurentini and the sublime thrills inspired by the sight of victimized women, it is disturbing to recognize that Laurentini does participate in the process that produces such horrors, and even more disturbing to see that she perpetuates as well as suffers from it. She figures largely in the novel's final few chapters, when she is revealed to have seduced the Marquis de Villeroi and conspired to murder his wife, who is also – and not coincidentally – Emily's aunt. Notably, her crimes led to no reward, but instead "left her to the horrors of unavailing pity and remorse, which would probably have empoisoned all the years she had promised herself with the Marquis de Villeroi" had he not had been still more remorseful and so abandoned her (p. 659). She is a threat to patriarchy, and deals an effective blow to the marquis' family, but she is not in the end a threat on the order of Lewis's Matilda. Undermined by her own transgression, she spends the rest of her life in a convent, shrouded in the identity of the mad Sister Agnes, and so self-tortured that she becomes almost literally a shadow of her former self. She becomes a ghostly presence, haunting the environs of her convent with music of "uncommon sweetness" whose source no one can identify (p. 525), and by the end of the novel really is a kind of *memento mori*. She is a victimizer who became a victim of her own crime, and a warning – more touching than terrifying – of the price of passion.

Emily is like Laurentini in her possession of substantial property, even in her love of a man who appears less than virtuous,[15] but entirely unlike her in her ability to command her feelings. Emily is schooled in this command by her father, who from the beginning of the novel warns her to avoid "ill-governed sensibility", which can leave us "victims of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them" (p. 80). It is this capacity for self-control that renders her successful in the world, a worthy inheritor of her father's property.

The novel plays quite consciously with Radcliffe's established pattern of empowering women through the recognition of maternal ties. Contrary to what Radcliffe's earlier novels might lead one to expect, Emily's mother never reappears as an important figure in the novel after her death in its first chapter. The

novel plays with readers' expectations on this subject, to be sure, through its recurrent focus on the miniature of a woman – not Emily's mother – which she sees her father kiss; through its insistence on Emily's resemblance to the late Marchioness de Villeroi, murdered mistress of the Chateau-le-Blanc, where Emily finds shelter after escaping Montoni and the castle of Udolpho; through Laurentini's mistaken identification of Emily with the marchioness. All of these details lead one to think that the marchioness must have been Emily's mother, yet this is not the case. Emily is not propelled into happiness by the recovery of a lost maternal connection. Rather, even her link to the woman figured in all these scenes – and there is one – insists yet again on the importance of paternity.[16] For the marchioness was Emily's aunt, and the sister of Emily's father.

Emily's tie to her father is asserted in various ways, the most important of which he articulates on his deathbed, when he asks of her three things: that she destroy without looking at them a packet of mysterious papers that presumably tell the story of the murdered marchioness; that "whatever may be [her] future circumstances," she never sell La Vallée; and that "whenever she might marry" she "make it an article in the contract, that the chateau should always be hers" (p. 78); and finally – as mentioned above – that she protect herself from "the dangers of sensibility," not shutting off her feelings, but not succumbing to them either. These pieces of advice constitute St. Aubert's efforts to protect his daughter, and together point to his clear understanding of what it takes for a woman to protect herself in late eighteenth-century society. He seeks to guarantee her material and her moral well-being in a world in which both are vulnerable to attack, and seems mindful of the fact that these two things are linked. Mary Poovey has argued that the phenomenon of sensibility encouraged sympathetic responses for others primarily because they "advanced one's own welfare and gratified the desire for approval" (1979: 307). Sensibility aided and abetted capitalist greed, in other words, and if Emily can protect herself from one, she can protect herself from the other. His desired legacy to her is thus an independence – a personal integrity or wholeness – that ensures she will not lose herself or her property to another. That legacy is almost instantly challenged, however, when Emily is forced to leave La Vallée for the home of her aunt, Madame Cheron, whom her father has made her guardian, and from that point on, her life turns into a series of threats that she must fend off.

Emily's paternal legacy shows an unexpected fragility almost at once. Immediately after she has left La Vallée, she learns that the debt-ridden estate has been leased to tenants without her knowledge. It appears she might lose her father's property before she has even had a chance to inhabit it, and her situation gets worse when Madame Cheron marries Montoni, who moves them still farther from home, first to Venice, and then to the castle of Udolpho, where she and her

aunt are virtually imprisoned. Montoni's interest in both women turns entirely on the fact that they either have or can help him attain property that will rescue him from a desperate financial situation, and to their credit, he does not get what he wants from either one. Emily is initially valuable to Montoni because of her potential to marry well, and she sees at once that he "[seeks] to aggrandise himself in his disposal of her" (p. 145), steadfastly refusing to do as he wishes. Indeed, it is her refusal to wed the Count Morano that is the immediate cause of the group's move from Venice to the isolated castle of Udolpho, where Montoni can better terrify her into acting as he wishes. Similarly, when Montoni insists that property she has inherited from her aunt is his by legal right, she has the temerity to disagree, saying: "the law, in the present instance, gives me the estates in question, and my own hand shall never betray my right" (p. 381). Emily's resistance is all the more significant given its context: Madame Cheron's death was the indirect result of her refusal to sign over the property in the first place, after she learned too late that this is what Montoni had really wanted in marrying her. Emily finally does agree to give up her inherited property in exchange for a promise of freedom that, unsurprisingly, turns out to be false. Thus when she escapes from Udolpho and finds her way to her next shelter – the Chateau-le-Blanc, with the Villefort family – she appears farther than ever from her father and the life he had wished for her.

Emily begins to recover her losses – material and otherwise – from the time of her arrival at Chateau-le-Blanc. During the stay in this region, she learns that Montoni has died mysteriously in prison, and her aunt's properties are restored to her. At the same time that she hears this news, she also learns that the tenants at La Vallée are coming to the end of their lease, so that she can return to her father's home. Finally, she inherits part of Laurentini's property as well, and with it a new understanding of her family's history, and of her father in particular (whose infidelity to her mother had been falsely suggested by the mysterious papers he had Emily destroy, and the miniature over which he wept).[17]

Having survived more threats than her father could have imagined possible, Emily has one more hurdle to navigate. She has long been courted by Valancourt, and while her father seemingly approved him as a mate, while her aunt even endorsed their engagement (though only because she wanted the social connection with his family), their marriage is delayed until the end of the novel. Their connection is initially severed by Montoni, but later denied by Emily as well, when she learns that Valancourt spent time in the gaming houses of Paris – and even found himself in debtor's prison – while she was at Udolpho. Such behavior grows from a sensibility more motivated by passion and greed than it ought to be, and only when he convinces Emily that he has repented as well as reformed – that he is more like her father than like Montoni – does she agree to marry him.

The novel concludes with a series of negotiations that make clear Emily's allegiances. She sells the estate she inherited from her aunt, gives away the legacy that she inherited from Laurentini, and buys back her father's boyhood home of Epourville, which financial exigencies had forced him to sell. She rids herself of property that has come to her through women, in other words, even as she consolidates that which is associated with her father, and when it comes to choosing a place to live, she of course returns to La Vallée.

Even more strongly than *The Romance of the Forest*, then, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* suggests that the way for a woman to escape the gothic nightmare of patriarchal society is – ironically – through identification with the patriarch. Laurentini errs when she tries to act in defiance of a society that does not serve her interests, playing neither a properly female nor a properly male role. Emily defies convention insofar as she insists that women can effectively oppose those men who would victimize them, but uses her independence to preserve rather than disrupt the patriarchal line on which that society is founded.