

Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823)
by Ruth Facer

Ann Radcliffe will always be remembered as the great exponent of Gothic fiction. Though Jane Austen would parody her novels in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Radcliffe's wild, often bleak, landscapes, dark threatening men, and gothic mysteries lived on in the works of Keats, Mary Shelley, the Brontes, Dickens, and Bram Stoker and many others.

Contemporary readers and modern day critics have variously dubbed Radcliffe the 'Mistress of Udolpho', 'The Great Enchantress', and the 'Mother of the Gothic', but these are misleadingly exotic titles to bestow upon such a private person with such a prosaic life history. According to *The Edinburgh Review* (May 1823), 'She never appeared in public, nor mingled in private society, but kept herself apart, like the sweet bird that sings its solitary notes, shrouded and unseen'. In fact, so little was known about Radcliffe's life in the nineteenth century that Christina Rossetti abandoned a projected biography due to a lack of material.

We do know, however, that Ann Ward Radcliffe was born in Holborn, London, on 9 July 1764. She was the only child of William Ward, a haberdasher, and his wife Ann Oates. Her mother was relatively well connected. Oates's cousin was Sir Richard Jebb, physician to George III, while her brother-in-law, Thomas Bentley, was the partner of Josiah Wedgwood. In 1772, William Ward moved with his wife and young daughter to Bath, where he would manage a china shop partly owned by Wedgwood. The young Ann was reasonably well educated, read widely and had opportunities to meet literary figures of the day, including Hester Thrale and Elizabeth Montagu. Physically, she was said to be 'exquisitely proportioned' - quite short, complexion beautiful 'as was her whole countenance, especially her eyes, eyebrows and mouth'. [1] In 1787 Ann married William Radcliffe, a hardworking Oxford law graduate who became part-editor and owner of *The English Chronicle*. He often came home late and in order to occupy her time, Radcliffe began to write, reading aloud the lines she had written during the day on his return. She completed six novels in all. Her last, *Gaston de Blondville* (1826), was published posthumously.

The Radcliffes' marriage, though childless, appears to have been happy. In her Preface to *A Journey made in the Summer of 1794 through Holland and the Western Frontiers of Germany* (1795) Radcliffe touchingly referred to her husband as her 'nearest relative and friend' and acknowledged that the account of the journey had 'been written so much from their mutual observation, that there would be a deception in permitting the book to appear, without some acknowledgement, which may distinguish it from works entirely her own'. The couple loved travelling together and used some of the money made from the publication of Radcliffe's novels to finance their trips. They went to the Rhine and Lake District in 1794 and later made tours in Southern England, during which her beloved dog Chance chased wheatears on the beach.

According to Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd's *Memoir of the Author*, prefixed to *Gaston de Blondville*, Radcliffe kept daily accounts and spent her days reading poetry and novels.

She sang with exquisite taste: her voice, though 'remarkably sweet, was limited in compass'. She was a frequent visitor to the Opera and enjoyed sacred music, especially Handel oratorios. She admired Mrs Siddons and occasionally accompanied her husband to the theatre where she sat in the pit because it was warmer and she was less likely to be recognised. According to the *Memoir*, 'the very thought of appearing in person as the author of her romances shocked the delicacy of her mind'.

Like her novels, Radcliffe's last years are shrouded in mystery. She was said to be depressed in 1797. By the end of her life, rumours abounded that she had become insane as a result of her Gothic fantasies and had been incarcerated in a Derbyshire asylum. The truth may never be known. Radcliffe had suffered from asthma for the past twelve years and her death on 7 February 1823 may well have been the result of a fatal attack. Talfourd's *Memoir of the Author*, undoubtedly written under the instruction of Radcliffe's husband, categorically denies that she was insane: 'while some spoke of her as dead, and others represented her as afflicted with mental alienation, she was thankfully enjoying the choicest of blessings of life'. Her doctor issued a statement after her death, maintaining that she was in perfect mental health. Ann Radcliffe was buried in a vault in the Chapel of Ease belonging to St. George's, Hanover Square, in Bayswater, London.

Radcliffe's novels commonly feature oppressed young females, passionate, but flawed, young lovers, overwhelming patriarchal villains, faithful, talkative servants, ivy-clad Gothic buildings with sinister vaults, wild romantic scenery and mysteries to be unravelled. Her plots assert traditional moral values such as honour and integrity while making strong political statements on the oppression of women in patriarchal society. She was not, however, the first practitioner of the Gothic. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), written in the year Ann Radcliffe was born, and Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777) were popular early examples of the form. Nevertheless, it was Radcliffe who was acknowledged by Sir Walter Scott as the true 'founder of a class or school'. Her writing was influenced by the ideas of Edmund Burke, who, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), proposed that terror was a source of the sublime capable of producing 'the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling'. In her essay *On the Supernatural in Poetry*, Radcliffe was careful to distinguish terror from horror:

Terror and Horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend, that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one.[2]

Where horror paralyses the individual, the experience of terror sublimely awakens the soul to its power. Radcliffe's heroines often experience the sublime in wild, rugged landscapes which brings them closer to the awe-inspiring presence of God.

Radcliffe's first novel, the anonymously published *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789), is in some ways an experimental work which relates the story of two warring

Scottish clans. It is here that she first articulated the theories on the sublime and picturesque - viewing a landscape as if it were a painting - she would develop in her later work and introduces the subject of the imprisoned woman deprived of her property rights. Her second novel, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), features a spirited young lady of sensibility, Julia, who confronts the destiny of a marriage imposed by her tyrannical father, the Marquis of Mazzini. Some of Radcliffe's recurring themes are developed in this novel: the heroine's search for a lost mother and incarceration, and woman's subjection to the impossible choice of a forced marriage or the veil.

Neither of these works were to capture the public's imagination in the way that Radcliffe's subsequent novels would. In her popular *Romance of the Forest* (1791), the author's descriptive abilities reached their full maturity. A Gothic castle almost takes on the role of a central character: 'The lofty battlements, thickly enwreathed with ivy, were half demolished, and become the residence of birds of prey. Huge fragments of the eastern tower, which was almost demolished, lay scattered amid the high grass, that waved slowly to the breeze'. Descriptions of landscape were likewise enriched by a poetic intensity lacking in her early works. Radcliffe had never seen the mountains or lush Italian countryside she described, but was inspired by the landscape paintings of Claude Lorraine and Salvator Rosa. In describing a house she had visited, she wrote,

In a shaded corner, near the chimney, a most exquisite Claude, an evening view, perhaps over the Campagna of Rome. The sight of this picture imparted much of the luxurious repose and satisfaction, which we derive from contemplating the finest scenes of nature. Here was the poet, as well as the painter, touching the imagination, and making you see more than the picture contained. You saw the real light of the sun, you breathed the air of the country, you felt all the circumstances of a luxurious climate on the most serene and beautiful landscape; and the mind thus softened, you almost fancied you hear Italian music in the air.[3]

Just as the Lorraine painting stimulates Radcliffe's imagination, so the landscapes described in her novels serve to awaken the sensibility (and terror) of her heroines. Landscape is always more than a backdrop to her novels. It is a device through which we come to know her characters and through which Radcliffe outlines her theories of the sublime and picturesque.

Radcliffe's next novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), earned its author £500. It remains the best-known of her novels today, not least because it was *Udolpho* that caused Catherine Moreland's imagination to run riot as she approaches Northanger Abbey in Jane Austen's novel:

With all the chances against her of house, hall, place, park, court, and cottage, Northanger turned up an abbey, and she was to be its inhabitant. Its long, damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel, were to be within her daily reach, and she could not entirely subdue the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun.[4]

Despite the 'long damp passages' and 'awful memorials', reason prevails in the end of Radcliffe's novel. Emily St. Aubert, the heroine, is sorely tried as she is incarcerated in the villainous Montoni's dark castle, in which she manages to rise to each new challenge with strength and rationality after temporarily giving in to superstition and an excess of feeling. A girl of spirit, she retorts to Montoni: 'You may find, perhaps, Signor, that the strength of my mind is equal to the justice of my cause; and that I can endure with fortitude, when it is in resistance of oppression'. In Ann Radcliffe's particular form of Gothic, of which *Udolpho* is perhaps the best example, mysteries may confound for pages, spectral figures, distant groans and ghostly music may haunt the heroine, but eventually all is explained and reason prevails.

The Italian (1797) was the last of Ann Radcliffe's novels to be published in her lifetime. She was paid £800 for it and it is considered by many to be her best work. The novel is dominated by the dark, glowering figure of the monk Schedoni. Radcliffe's earlier works had already demonstrated that she possessed a strong ability to portray character, often of servants and minor players in the plot, but in this work she surpassed her previous efforts. Schedoni, who embodies the spirit of the Inquisition and the Terror in France, is vividly described thus:

His figure was striking, but not so from grace; it was tall, and, though extremely thin, his limbs were large and uncouth, and as he stalked along, wrapt in the black garments of his order, there was something terrible in its air; something almost super-human. His cowl, too, as it threw a shade over the livid paleness of his face, increased its severe character, and gave an effect to his large melancholy eye, which approached to horror.[5]

It is probable that Radcliffe wrote *The Italian* in an attempt to rescue the Gothic from the ravages of hell into which it was plunged by Matthew Lewis's scandalous horror work *The Monk* (1796). It has been suggested that Radcliffe's disgust with other Gothic writers was the principle reason for her decision to stop writing after *The Italian*.

Ann Radcliffe's final novel was written in 1802 but never published in her lifetime. *Gaston de Blondville* (1826) is a thirteenth-century tale set within a modern story. The book is drawn out and sometimes rambling, the plot lacking in impetus. It is partly redeemed by colourful descriptions of banquets and court ceremonial with remarkable detail. The second course at a feast included 'joly amber potage; jiggots of venison, stopped with cloves; lamprey, with galentine, marchpane; fritter-dolphin; leche-florentine'.

Although Radcliffe will always be remembered as one of the most gifted, exciting and popular novelists of the late eighteenth century, she was also a poet. A few of her minor poems are interspersed in her novels, but she also wrote a longer piece, *St. Albans Abbey* (1826), which was published posthumously. It does her no justice; it is long, rambling and tedious. The rhyme scheme is extremely variable and verses such as

A sigh - the first she long had known -
Burst from her breast, and fell a tear;
But 'twas not grief she felt, nor fear:
'Twas desolation, hopeless, drear!

bear little relation to her rich prose style.

Ann Radcliffe's novels were republished in two major early nineteenth-century collections, *The British Novelists* (1810) edited by Anna Laetitia Barbauld and *The Ballantyne Novelist Library* (1821) edited by Sir Walter Scott. Today there is a revival of interest in her work. Her five major novels are in paperback - *Gaston de Blondville* is not surprisingly omitted - and three major biographies, *Ann Radcliffe: A bio-bibliography* by Deborah Rogers, Rictor Norton's *Mistress of Udolpho* and Robert Miles's *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress* have all been published in recent years. Her enchantment goes on as her novels continue to give pleasure to many readers.

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- 1 *A Memoir of the Author*, prefixed to Gaston de Blondville (1826)
- 2 'On the Supernatural in Poetry', excerpt in *New Monthly Magazine*, 1826, p. 151.
- 3 *A Memoir of the Author*, p. 65
- 4 *The Novels of Jane Austen* ed. R. W.Chapman (Oxford University Press, 1923) p. 141
- 5 *The Italian* (Oxford University Press, World Classics, 1981) p.34-5.