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Edited by Dale Townshend and Angela Wright

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PART I

Cultural contexts

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CHAPTER ONE

Gothic and Romantic engagements
*The critical reception of Ann Radcliffe, 1789–1850**Dale Townshend and Angela Wright***1823: the death of a genius**

Though the grave relegated her person to perpetual silence, the death of Ann Radcliffe on 7 February 1823 certainly brought with it her canonisation as one of the British nation's most distinctive creative voices. Fraught though they are with all manner of biographical and literary-historical error, the numerous obituaries published in Britain in the months following the writer's death indicate the considerable esteem in which Ann Radcliffe was held in 1823, a fact that seems all the more remarkable in view of the twenty-six years of creative silence that had prevailed since the publication of her fifth novel, *The Italian: Or, The Confessional of the Black Penitents*, in late 1796.¹ Though intended more as an independent defence of the powers of original genius, and the role of the periodical press in regulating it, than a celebration of any particular author, an essay published in *The Edinburgh Review* in May 1823 seized the opportunity occasioned by Radcliffe's recent demise in order to pay touching tribute to the writer in an extended footnote: 'The fair authoress kept herself almost as much *incognito* as the Author of *Waverley*; nothing was known of her but her name in the title page. She never appeared in public, nor mingled in private society, but kept herself apart, like the sweet bird that sings its solitary notes, shrowded [*sic*] and unseen' (Anon. 1823b: 361). Here, the author's retirement and obscurity, a pose she notoriously adopted throughout her life, became synonymous with modesty and creative decorum, a decidedly feminised set of values compounded by the metaphorical associations that the article draws between Ann Radcliffe and the mythological figure of the nightingale, Philomela. Though familiarity with her person might have eluded most, her novels, the obituary published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* opined, were the subject of universal appreciation, for 'this lady was known and admired by the world, as the able and ingenious authoress of some of the best romances that have ever appeared in the English

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language' (Anon. 1823c: 87). Ann Radcliffe, this writer continued, ought to be henceforth remembered not only as the originator of a distinctive literary school but also as a key figure in the development of prose fiction and poetry alike (Anon. 1823c: 88). The entry published in *The Annual Biography and Obituary* (1824) echoed many of these sentiments, claiming that 'among the eminent Englishwomen who have contributed by their talents to the intellectual character of their country, the name of Mrs Ann Radcliffe will always stand highly distinguished' (Anon. 1824a: 89). Of her fictions, this obituary continues, 'it is not too much to say that they rank with the best that have appeared in the English language' (Anon. 1824a: 89).

One year later, and partly as a means of further memorialising the recently deceased author, Sir Walter Scott reprinted Radcliffe's five Gothic romances in the tenth volume of James Ballantyne's Novelist's Library series (1824), introducing the fictions with a lengthy 'Prefatory Memoir to Mrs Ann Radcliffe'. Though the terms of Scott's positive but by no means uncritical views of Radcliffe are well known, they are nonetheless worth pausing over in order to mark in them his assessment of the writer's central place within, and significant contribution to, British literary history in the third decade of the nineteenth century: 'Mrs Radcliffe has a title to be considered as the first poetess of romantic fiction, that is, if actual rhythm shall not be deemed essential to poetry' (Scott 1824: iv). Bypassing the fictional achievements of Fielding, Richardson and Smollett, and overlooking, for the moment, Horace Walpole's attempts in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to rejuvenate the fusty realism of the modern novel with the imaginative capacities of ancient romance, Scott accords to Radcliffe's romances the successful integration of poetic fancy and novelistic form, even to the point of muddying the distinctions between them. As if to prove his sense of the writer's merits, Scott undertakes in his 'Prefatory Memoir' a genealogy of Radcliffe's literary genius, constructing an evolutionary narrative that accounts for her earliest forays into prose in *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789) and *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), her growing literary abilities in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) and her eventual maturation into one of the nation's most celebrated authors in her later romances, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1796–7).

The discourse on original genius upon which Scott's posthumous assessment of Radcliffe draws had initially been sketched out by Edward Young in his influential *Conjectures on Original Composition* [...] (1759) and elaborated upon in such later treatises as William Duff's *An Essay on Original Genius* (1767). Effecting a discursive break with the mimetic ideals of early

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modern and neoclassical aesthetics, Young's treatise sought to validate unprecedented originality over all acts of aesthetic imitation. Originality was the unequivocal mark of Genius, the Genius that was said to manifest itself in all accurate mimetic reflections or copies of nature but was sorely compromised in one author's imitation of another (Young 1759: 9). By the 1770s, the notion of originality had become, in aesthetic circles in Britain, a veritable orthodoxy. It was particularly prominent during the 1790s, the decade that saw the genesis of 'high' poetic Romanticism in Britain and in which Radcliffe published her most influential fictions. Consequently, it formed the discursive background in the period against which Radcliffe and her imitators were assessed. For Scott, it was *Udolpho*, far more than *The Italian*, that marked the zenith of the writer's creative powers: larger and more sublime in scale than her previous romances, it was in this fiction that 'the potent charm of this mighty enchantress' (Scott 1824: vii) became most apparent; 'The author pursuing her own favourite bent of composition, and again waving her wand over the world of wonder and imagination', Mrs Radcliffe in *Udolpho* 'had judiciously used a spell of broader and more potent command' (Scott 1824: vii). Scott's recourse to the metaphors of magic, though by no means the earliest occasion on which Radcliffe had been spoken of in these terms, might be traced back at least as far as Young's celebration of the powers of original genius in the *Conjectures*: 'The pen of an *Original* Writer, like Armida's wand, out of a barren waste calls a blooming spring; out of that blooming spring an *Imitator* is a transplanter of Laurels, which sometimes die on removal, always languish in a foreign soil' (Young 1759: 10). Through reference to the magical powers of the witch Armida from Tasso's *La Gerusalemme liberata* (1581), Young figures the original author as a quasi-divine being who is endowed with the powers of creation *ex nihilo*. From this perspective, Scott's identity as the 'Wizard of the North', adopted and assigned in the wake of the presentation of the Wizard Michael Scott in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), is as much anchored in the Romantic discourse of original genius as it is a Scottish alternative to Scott's sense of Ann Radcliffe as a 'mighty enchantress'. For Scott, Radcliffe's tendency for the writer to return the reader to what Young referred to as 'flat Realities' following a magical process of transportation was somewhat crudely handled via the contrivances of the explained supernatural. But he nonetheless takes care to defend the unquestionable genius of Ann Radcliffe on at least three accounts: her presiding over 'a separate and distinct species of writing' (Scott 1824: xx); her ability to sustain her readers' interest and attention across three major novels, and this within a publishing context

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that had become rather ‘satiated with horrors, and indifferent to the strongest *stimuli* of that kind’ (Scott 1824: xxii); and her exploration of extreme human passions in appropriately southern European settings. Eventually, then, Scott enthusiastically celebrates Ann Radcliffe as the founder of a distinctive literary school, a writer of original genius who has ‘the most decided claim to take her place among the favoured few, who have been distinguished as the founders of a class, or school’ (Scott 1824: xvii–xviii). The fair authoress of melodious, bird-like song; a writer read and admired the world over; the female ornament of English literature; the ingenious founder of a distinct literary school; an eminent Englishwoman of great intellect; the first poetess of Romantic fiction: Ann Radcliffe in Romantic-era Britain of the early 1820s was eulogised in the most rapturous terms possible.

Critical responses, 1789–1797

Though canonised at the time of her death as one of the nation’s most influential writers, Ann Radcliffe’s debut on the literary scene with the publication of *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne: A Highland Story* by Thomas Hookham in London in 1789 was met with considerably less enthusiasm.² ‘To those who are delighted with the *marvellous*, whom wonders, and wonders only, can charm, the present publication will afford a considerable degree of amusement’, sniffed Andrew Becket in the *Monthly Review* (Becket 1789: 91). The *Critical Review* was scarcely more gracious. Whereas it conceded at first that ‘there is some fancy and much romantic imagery in the conduct of this story’, it went on to complain that ‘our pleasure would have been more unmixed had our author preserved better the manners and costume of the Highlands’ (qtd in Roper 1978: 133). The casual use of the plural possessive (‘our’ author) was then modified erroneously in the final sentence, with the observation that ‘he [the author] seems to be acquainted with both’. Though a similar claim is made in the review in *Town and Country Magazine*, the presumption of male authorship was not to be repeated in Radcliffe’s career, for the title page of Radcliffe’s second novel, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), while still retaining the veneer of anonymity, specified that the tale was ‘By the authoress of *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*’. Such attributions are fairly common throughout the reviewing practices of this literary period, but of all the novels produced in the years 1790 and 1791 (the two years in which Radcliffe and her publishers used this attributive construction), hers are the only ones that specify ‘by the authoress’ rather than ‘by the author’.

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There is evidence to suggest that Radcliffe studiously read the reviews of her fictions as they were published in the literary journals, magazines and periodicals of the day, and, having digested their import, strove to address and answer their criticisms in her subsequent publications: hence, perhaps, the specification of ‘authoress’ upon the title page of *A Sicilian Romance*, published by T. Hookham in 1790. With the modification of ‘authoress’ to the title page of her second novel, reviewers for the *Critical* and the *Monthly* were more alert, with William Enfield observing of *A Sicilian Romance* in the *Monthly Review* that: ‘The writer possesses a happy vein of invention, and a correctness of taste, which enable *her* to rise above the level of mediocrity’ (Enfield 1790: 91, our emphasis) and the reviewer in the *Critical Review* tempering a surprisingly warm response to ‘this very interesting novel’ with the caution that ‘we would advise her not to introduce so many caverns with such peculiar concealments, or so many spring-locks which open only on one side’ (Anon. 1791: 350). *The Romance of the Forest, Interspersed with Some Pieces of Poetry*, Radcliffe’s next venture, published by T. Hookham and Carpenter in three volumes in 1791, certainly appeared to temper the Gothic trappings with what the *Critical* called its ‘reflections’. It interspersed these more philosophical ‘reflections’ so sparingly with ‘spring-locks’ and ‘concealments’ that the *Critical* even resorted to adverbial superlatives (‘strongly’ and ‘powerfully’) to measure the high levels of interest that Radcliffe’s artistry maintained. The *Monthly Review* also followed suit, referring to the ‘perpetual agitation’ of the reader’s feelings that the narrative managed to effect. The reviews of the novel published in the *Critical Review*, *Monthly Review*, *Scots Magazine* and *English Review* in 1792–3 were uniformly positive, commending the writer on, among other things, her having exceeded the standards set by her earlier productions, her ability to capture her readers’ attention, her bold rendering of character and plot, and her deft handling of the supernatural. As the *Scots Magazine* put it: ‘We have seldom met with a fiction which has more forcibly fixed the attention, or more agreeably interested the feelings, throughout the whole narrative’ (Anon. 1792: 292). With the publication of *The Romance of the Forest*, in other words, the writer’s literary reputation had been secured, and it was in a second edition of the text in 1792 that the hitherto unnamed authoress declared herself to be ‘Ann Radcliffe, Author of “A Sicilian Romance,” &c’.

By the time of the publication of *The Mysteries of Udolpho: A Romance; Interspersed with Some Pieces of Poetry* by G. G. and J. Robinson in 1794, Ann Radcliffe had gained sufficient confidence in her craft not only to place her name upon the title page of what *The London Chronicle’s*

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advertisement portentously described as ‘Four very large Volumes’ but also to foreground alongside it her most recent literary success: ‘Author of the Romance of the Forest, etc’. As Scott recorded, *Udolpho* earned Radcliffe the ‘unprecedented sum’ of £500 in payment for the novel’s copyright (Scott 1824: vi). How widespread knowledge of this sum was at the time is difficult to determine, and the amount was subject to speculation, rumour and gross exaggeration (Anon. 1824a: 96). Indeed, a chill is certainly discernible in the review of *Udolpho* published in the *Critical Review*, the author of which, though not without dispute, has been identified as Samuel Taylor Coleridge: ‘The same powers of description are displayed, the same predilection is discovered for the wonderful and the gloomy – the same mysterious terrors are continually exciting in the mind the idea of a supernatural appearance, keeping us, as it were, upon the very edge and confines of the world of spirits’ (Coleridge 1794a: 361).³ The repetitious terms of these remarks in Coleridge’s review paved the way for further complaint concerning the ‘sameness’ of the descriptions and the ‘protracted expectation’ of the reader, as well as misgivings concerning the writer’s inaccurate if not entirely anachronistic sense of history. In Coleridge’s estimation, *Udolpho* had failed to recreate, equal or better the success of *The Romance of the Forest*, and, in a somewhat caustic barb at the end of the review, he noted that Radcliffe might put her powers to better use if she were no longer inclined to ‘sacrifice excellence to quantity’, spinning out her story purely for the sake of filling an additional volume (Coleridge 1794a: 372). Despite these reservations, however, Coleridge remained of the opinion that Radcliffe was an heir to the same tradition of horror to which Shakespeare belonged, and, citing an extract from Thomas Gray’s ‘The Progress of Poesy’, he claims that: ‘Such were the presents of the Muse to the infant Shakespeare, and though perhaps to no other mortal has she been so lavish of her gifts, the keys referring to the third line [Of horror, that and thrilling fears] Mrs Radcliffe must be allowed to be completely in possession of’ (Coleridge 1794a: 361).

Whereas the staples of unrenovated castles, scenic description and the explained supernatural in *Udolpho* were disappointing to Coleridge, the self-same motifs garnered praise from William Enfield in the *Monthly Review*. ‘We admire the enchanting power with which the author at pleasure seizes and detains’ our passions, observed Enfield, portraying the reader as a captive who is bound ‘in the chains of suspense; and by a vigour of conception and a delicacy of feeling which are capable of producing the most sympathetic emotions, whether of pity or of terror’ (Enfield 1794:

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279). Composed some three months after Coleridge's lukewarm review in the *Critical Review*, Enfield's response to *Udolpho* anticipated that of many later Romantic poets who, as we detail below, similarly looked to Radcliffe as an 'enchantress' who captivated their imaginations. Faced with a barrage of responses from readers of the *Critical Review* who objected to his comments, Coleridge, in a subsequent epistolary addendum to the earlier review, both defended his reservations with the 'exuberance of description' in *Udolpho* and pointed out that 'it never could be our intention to depreciate the genius of Mrs Radcliffe' and that, as his opening use of Gray's Ode showed, his review included 'such a compliment paid to the powers of her imagination as we seldom condescend to pay to any writer whatever' (Coleridge 1794b: 359).⁴ Eventually, then, Coleridge had no hesitation in declaring *Udolpho* to be 'The most interesting novel in the English language' (Coleridge 1794b: 359).

With G. G. and J. Robinson's publication in 1795 of *A Journey Made in the Summer of 1794, Through Holland and the Western Frontier of Germany, with a Return Down the Rhine* [...] in a luxury, one-volume first edition, Ann Radcliffe momentarily abandoned the romance form of her earlier works in favour of the travelogue, another popular literary genre of her day. Replete with verbal descriptions of the sublime and picturesque scenes of Holland and western Germany, and supplemented by an account of more domestic landscapes in the English Lake District and its surrounds, *Journey*, as a reviewer in the *Critical Review* described it, revealed Radcliffe to be a writer not only well versed in the techniques of fancy but also in natural and historical fact (Anon. 1795a: 241). The *Analytical Review*, too, acknowledged the marked generic shift encompassed by *Journey* (Anon. 1795b) and, as *The English Review* put it, 'in her romances she paints fancy-pieces; here she draws from nature' (Anon. 1795c: 1). Thus, with the publication of *Journey*, Radcliffe confirmed her reputation as a writer of considerable versatility, as adept at the crafting of travel journalism as she was at poetry and romance. While commending Radcliffe's powers of verbal description, the *Critical Review* pointed out Radcliffe's telling decision to exclude from her travelogue the illustrations, sketches and pictures that often accompanied published versions of picturesque tours in the 1790s: 'she is one of the few tourists who have diminished the regret that [her descriptions of natural scenery] were not accompanied by a painter. We say *diminished*, for what might not have been expected from the mutual aid of the pen and pencil!' (Anon. 1795a: 242). The three-part review in *The English Review* raised the same concern, claiming that 'to substitute the pen for the pencil, is as absurd as if a philosopher or historian were to

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exchange the use of the alphabet, for Egyptian or Chinese hieroglyphics' (Anon. 1795c: 4), and insisting that, since language alone is fundamentally incapable of accurately rendering the natural world, the text might have been usefully accompanied by illustrations, maps or pictures (Anon. 1795c: 177). However, what appears to be Radcliffe's deliberate decision to exclude illustrations from her foray into a genre that was usually accompanied by visual supplements affords insight, perhaps, into how the writer perceived herself and her writerly abilities: a verbal renderer of vivid pictures as dexterous as any landscape painter.

The mixed responses to the rendering of landscape in both *Udolpho* and *Journey* may well have affected Radcliffe's next fictional excursion, for *The Italian: Or, the Confessional of the Black Penitents* (1796–7) returned to the three-volume format, figuring scenic description in altogether more sparse terms. Almost in direct response to the writer in the *British Critic* who thought the poems in *Udolpho* to be both 'impertinent' and 'misplaced' (Anon. 1794a: 120), *The Italian* contained no original verse. In the *Critical Review*, however, Coleridge stoked the embers of his earlier condemnation of *Udolpho* by observing that 'The Mysteries of Udolpho fell short of the Romance of the Forest, by the tedious protraction of events, and by a redundancy of description: the Italian falls short of the Mysteries of Udolpho, by reminding us of the same characters and scenes' (Coleridge 1798: 166). While his review conceded that 'the descriptive part [of *The Italian*] is less prolix', it still insisted that 'the author has recourse to it in various instances, in which it has no natural connection with the story' (Coleridge 1798: 166). The novel did, however, receive some praise for the 'scenes that powerfully seize the imagination, and interest the passions' (Coleridge 1798: 166). Writing for *The Monthly Review*, Arthur Aikin chose *The Italian* to extemporise upon the distinctions between the 'most difficult species of novel-writing [which] consists in the accurate and interesting representation of such manners and characters as society presents' and the 'modern Romance; in which high descriptions, extravagant characters, and extraordinary and scarcely possible occurrences combine to rivet the attention, and to excite emotions more thrilling than even the best selected and best described natural scene' (Aikin 1797: 282–3). While placing Radcliffe firmly in the second, inferior category, Aikin nonetheless allowed that Radcliffe there held 'a very distinguished rank'. These reviews, then, were at best tepid, prophesying the degeneration of the modern romance's constitution through 'repetition' and 'curiosity'. An editorial footnote that accompanied the oft-quoted 'Terrorist Novel Writing' (1798), a satirical recipe for the artless construction of a Gothic