

The perils of aesthetic pleasure in Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

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Abstract

In her works, Ann Radcliffe continually expressed an unwavering appreciation of aesthetic pleasure. Accordingly, one significant level of character evaluation in her fictional worlds is the characters' sensitivity to aesthetic experience, which typically functions as an indicator of virtue. In line with the recent revisionist tendencies in Radcliffe criticism, problematising things that so far have been taken for granted, this article is concerned with a negative, or at least dialectical, evaluation of aesthetic pleasure, which is offered in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). In particular, by concentrating on a reconciliation of villainy and aestheticism that is indicated in the narratives, the article shows how the seemingly antithetical arrangement of characters becomes destabilised; whereas by problematising the female sensitivity to art, it argues that aesthetic experience may pose a threat to the stability of selfhood. The heroines' reactions are read as illustrative of an implied dialectic between vulnerability and empowerment, which arguably underpins Radcliffe's handling of aesthetic pleasure in general.

Key words: Ann Radcliffe, aesthetic pleasure, female characters and art, identity

Throughout her writing career, Ann Radcliffe expressed an unwavering appreciation of aesthetic pleasure. There is little that we know about her as an actual person, but if anything can be taken for granted in the scanty biographical information we have is that musical tunes and poetic verse as well as the beauties of landscape and pictorial art were her 'chief delights' (see Norton 1999: 29). Accordingly, one significant level of character evaluation in her fictional worlds is the characters' sensitivity to aesthetic experience, which typically functions as an indicator of virtue. For example, in *The Italian* (1796-7), while the heroine Ellena becomes strongly affected by 'majestic nature' revealing itself in the observed scenery, the villain Schedoni remains largely unmoved (I 255).¹

¹ Throughout the article, I will be using the following abbreviations for references to Radcliffe's works: RF—*The Romance of the Forest*; MU—*The*

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Radcliffe's heroes and heroines are never indifferent to musical, poetic and visual pleasure: they appreciate art and they are artists themselves. Aesthetic experience brings them together: in Radcliffe's first novel, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789), the lovers meet when they are drawn to each other by musical tunes; the same strategy is repeated in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian*. Aesthetic pleasure also helps overcome moments of distress: it is typical of Radcliffe's oppressed heroines to find consolation in poetry, drawing or the visual delights offered by natural scenery. A stock Radcliffean scene features an imprisoned damsel with a book of poetry in her hands, sitting by a window frame showing enchanting vistas.

In line with the recent revisionist tendencies in Radcliffe criticism, problematising things that so far have been taken for granted, I will be concerned in this article with an ambiguous, or dialectical, evaluation of aesthetic pleasure, which is offered in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. In particular, by concentrating on a reconciliation of villainy and aestheticism that is indicated in the narratives, I aim to show how the seemingly antithetical arrangement of characters becomes destabilised; whereas by problematising the female sensitivity to art, I will argue that aesthetic experience may pose a threat to the stability of selfhood. The heroines' reactions will be also illustrative of an implied dialectic between vulnerability and empowerment, which arguably underpins Radcliffe's handling of aesthetic pleasure. What will come into focus are two scenes in which villains are depicted as connoisseurs and their highly aestheticised settings become spaces of deception and magical, as it were, entrapment.

Radcliffe's heroines and the experience of art

The scenes that will come under discussion feature two Radcliffean heroines, Adeline and Emily, who throughout both novels are invariably characterised as highly sensitive readers/viewers/listeners of artwork, admirers of beautiful scenery and very much talented practitioners of the different arts. Adeline 'ha[s] genius' (RF 29) and cultivates 'her imagination in spite of her reason' (RF 33). Aesthetic delight becomes a

Mysteries of Udolpho; Journey—A Journey Made in the Summer of 1794; I—*The Italian*. See the reference list for bibliographical information.

form of consolation, when the heroine wishes metaphorically to free herself from everyday concerns: 'La Motte's books were her chief consolation. With one of these she would frequently ramble into the forest [...] there she would seat herself, and, resigned to the illusions of the page, pass many hours in oblivion of sorrow' (RF 34-35). The narrative is also interspersed with poems composed by her. In the first one, 'To the Visions of Fancy', inspired by the beauties of nature, Adeline thus invokes the eponymous visions of the creative mind: 'O! still—ye shadowy forms! attend my lonely hours/ Still chase my real cares with your illusive powers! (RF 35).

In a similar manner, Emily St. Aubert, in the *Mysteries of Udolpho*, is represented as one endowed with an artistic soul. Already at the beginning of the novel, she is characterised as both naturally talented and well educated in the fine arts, this time in a comprehensive way that shows the educational implications of the sister arts tradition:

Adjoining the eastern side of the green-house [...] was a room, which Emily called hers, and which contained her books, her drawings, her musical instruments [...] Here she usually exercised herself in elegant arts, cultivated only because they were congenial to her taste, and in which native genius, assisted by the instructions of Monsieur and Madame St. Aubert, made her an early proficient. (MU 3)

Emily, too, makes use of her imaginative faculties when trying to console herself in her plight. For example, when she is going to be imprisoned in the villainous Montoni's villa, she is aesthetically affected by Venice and the splendour of the Venetian Carnival, which makes her momentarily forget her actual situation.

One way of interpreting the female characters' predilection for aesthetic pleasure would be to discern a conservatively patriarchal agenda behind it. After all, there is an implied binary established between the delights of illusion and the sorrows of reality. Aesthetic experience compensates for the real, thus distancing the female protagonists from mundane concerns and reinforcing their powerless position. Their escape to the realm of aesthetic pleasure might be interpreted as a distraction from attempting to exert any influence on the real world. They do not dream about changing their actual situation but enjoy escapist fantasies. This pattern of dissociation, as David Durant argued, is doubled by the experience of reading Radcliffe. In Durant's words, rather than equipping her readers with 'ways of dealing with the

mundane world', Radcliffe preferred to offer an 'escape from it' (Durant 1982: 527-29).

Conversely, stemming from revisionist readings of Radcliffe, especially the ideas put forward by feminist scholars, it is possible to interpret fantasies as a form of empowerment. A similar dialectic has been identified in the character of Arabella, the absent-minded heroine of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), who has difficulty telling illusion and reality apart. Although on face value the novel seems to be an object lesson on the perils of romance reading, Margaret Anne Doody, to give but one name, has interpreted the climactic disillusionment—when Arabella is taught about the difference between fiction and reality—as a metaphor of patriarchal disempowerment. In other words, Arabella can no longer fantasise about enjoying a dominant position; one entitling her to rule men (Doody 1987: 300). In the case of Radcliffe's fiction, the heroines' susceptibility to fantasy and aesthetic pleasure is then not only illustrative of their escapist tendencies, but it is also a quality that allows for a more comprehensive experience of life, all the more so in a reality where the boundary separating the real and the illusive is far from being clear cut, as Terry Castle (1987) and Robert Miles (1995) have shown. In analysing the dialectic behind the representation of aesthetic experience, I will be mindful of both the traditionalist and revisionist approaches.

Art as deception, villains as aesthetes

Roughly half way through *The Romance of the Forest*, the distressed heroine, by way of an oppressive arrangement between her unwilling protector Pierre de la Motte and the villainous Marquis de Montalt, is taken by force to the latter's estate. Her entrance repeats the pattern of many such arrivals in the Female Gothic tradition: 'The door opened upon a narrow passage, dimly lighted by a lamp, which hung at the farther end. He [Marquis' servant] led her on; they came to another door; [...]' (RF 156). The reader expects an appropriately Gothic interior to be unveiled by the second door, but the setting that is revealed surprises with its splendour. As we read on, we find mentions of frescoes representing scenes from Ovid and Tasso; comments on the decorative silks, flowers and busts of Horace, Ovid, Anacreon, Tibullus and Petronius; as well as enumerations of other sensual stimuli, including

colours, perfumes and luxurious foods. All this creates the following impression: ‘The whole seemed the works of enchantment, and rather resembled the palace of a fairy than any thing of human conformation’ (RF 156).

Montalt’s choices regarding the design of the interior yield an obvious interpretation: ‘Is this a charm to lure me to destruction?’, asks Adeline (RF 157). Indeed, the literary themes and figures invoked leave little doubt as to the Marquis’ intentions. The wall frescoes would have illustrated Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* (2 AD) or *Metamorphoses* (8 AD), both centring around the themes of desire and seduction, whereas Armida, represented in the ceiling, was a Saracen enchantress in Torquato Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581), as well as a number of opera performances titled after her or her lover Rinaldo, where she exerted seductive and enchanting powers on the Christian knights, leading them astray. The spatial organisation of these paintings reveals a villainous logic: the confining four walls imply the inevitability of seduction, while the enchantress in the ceiling fresco presides over the heroine, throws a spell, as it were, making her all the more susceptible. The choice of literary figures represented by the busts is not accidental either: they were all associated with a poetics of delight and hedonism. Visual pleasure and the narratives behind it are complemented by signifiers of luxury and sensual experience, involving the senses of smell and taste.

Adeline, though impressed, is able to see through all of this. She accepts that her role is that of victim, having realised that ‘all chance of escape was removed’ (RF 157), and is not willing to succumb to the abundance of sensual pleasure at hand. Things become more complicated when the visual is augmented by the audible: ‘[Adeline hears] the notes of soft music, breathing such dulcet and entrancing sounds, as suspended grief, and waked the soul to tenderness and pensive pleasure’ (RF 157). Radcliffe employs here the same contrast she uses when characterising the heroines: the experience of pleasing art as ‘suspension of grief’. The present scene, however, creates a sense of ambiguity as for the kind of pleasure to which the heroine’s soul is supposedly woken. After all, the music is exerting its enchanting influence in a setting that has been accurately interpreted by Adeline to be conducive to her ‘destruction’. The scene becomes a drama of consciousness, with explicit mentions of the heroine’s entrance into the realm of aesthetic pleasure and return to ‘a sense of her situation’ (RF 157); a pattern that is repeated several times.

When the initial tunes develop into a harmony of several instruments and a female voice, Adeline yields to the 'sweet magic' of music and reaches a state of 'ecstasy'. She then hears the words of an outwardly hedonist song, concluding with a tempting line 'Catch the pleasures ere they fade' (RF 158), but these words do not moderate in any way the impact of the tunes; Adeline is not alarmed even if the message is straightforward. When the Marquis enters the room, ready to reap the fruits of his stratagem, Adeline has already fainted under the influence of the 'pleasing languor' inspired by the music (RF 158). She welcomes the villain in a perfectly passive and susceptible state—the spell has played its role.

An analogical episode is repeated in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. At one point in the narrative, Emily St. Aubert is taken by force to the Venetian villa of the villain Montoni. Before she arrives at the villa, Emily enjoys an opportunity to marvel at the beauties of Venice. As she and her guardians reach the 'enchanted shores' of the city (MU 174), they observe the festivities of the Venetian Carnival. The vistas are accompanied by music, which, despite her plight, brings recollections of happy days with her father and her lover Valancourt (MU 175). Clearly affected by the magic of Venice, created by the delightful sounds, fairy-tale-like views and splendid architecture, the heroine finds herself in 'a large house' that, like Montalt's estate in *The Romance of the Forest*, reveals 'a style of magnificence that surprised Emily':

The walls and ceiling were adorned with historical and allegorical paintings, in *fresco*; silver tripods, depending from chains of the same metal, illumined the apartment, the floor of which was covered with Indian mats painted in a variety of colours and devices; the couches and drapery of the lattices were of pale green silk, embroidered and fringed with green and gold. (MU 176)

Montoni's palace offers a variety of sensual pleasures resulting from an interplay of art forms, lights, colours and materials, but this time, unlike the description of Montalt's saloon, the passage fails to conceptualise explicitly the narrative to be read in the design. What is emphasised three times is Emily's surprise. However, it does not stem from her struggle to reconcile villainy with aesthetic beauty (though she does note a mismatch between Montoni's 'gloomy temper' and the splendour of the place), but from a discrepancy between the surplus of luxury and Montoni's alleged bankruptcy (MU 177). As such, the aesthetic designs

of Montoni's and Montalt's mansions perform the same role—that of dissimulation. Whereas Montalt's display of magnificence works to 'lure [Adeline] to destruction', Montoni's villa, at first sight, becomes a mask of greatness, earnestly worn by Madame Montoni, who 'seemed to assume the airs of a princess' (MU 177).

Like Adeline's, Emily's awareness of danger and imprisonment is destabilised by music, which is here combined with colourful masqueraders taking part in the Carnival of Venice. Emily listens to the pleasing tunes from a lattice of Montoni's villa—a typical opening to the wider world in Gothic prison spaces. Technically speaking the heroine remains confined; metaphorically, the music lures her out and casts a pleasing spell of forgetfulness and reunion with her beloved ones; after all the tunes and the pleasing voices express 'a light grace and gaiety of heart' capable of 'subdue[ing] the goddess of spleen in her worst humour' (MU 177). Emily's state is described as 'pensive enthusiasm', 'pensive tranquillity' (MU 177) and indulgence in fancies (MU 178), and it is then that she wishes 'to throw off the habit of mortality' and become a sea nymph. Ironically, she is 'recalled from her reverie' (MU 178) by an invitation to 'a mere mortal supper', after which she is taken to her room, her actual prison.

This motif is again a repetition of a similar one employed in *The Romance of the Forest*, but apparently, in *Udolpho* Radcliffe would have wished to make her message more explicit. Here, the room capitalises on the deceptive powers of art—if the design of Montoni's salon surprised Emily with its magnificence, the room she is to occupy dispels the charm: it is 'spacious, desolate, and lofty' (MU 179), while the 'long suites of noble rooms' leading towards it display walls covered by 'faded remains of tapestry' and frescoes deprived of 'colours and design' due to humidity (MU 179). In *The Romance of the Forest*, Adeline's chamber matches Montalt's salon in its splendour, but this time the heroine keeps her emotions in check, recognising a relationship between visual attractiveness and deception: 'The airy elegance with which it was fitted up, and the luxurious accommodations with which it abounded, seemed designed to fascinate the imagination, and to seduce her heart' (RF 163). Adeline remains uninspired, though, casting only a 'transient look' upon the various embellishments (RF 164), and proceeds to examine the possibilities of escape. There are no enthralling sounds to render her motionless and vulnerable.

Between vulnerability and empowerment

The discussed scenes provoke questions about Radcliffe's consistency in representing aesthetic experience, her apparently ambivalent representation of the role of the arts, and a peculiar understanding of music with its potential to stimulate uncontrollable sensations. In attempting to tackle these issues, I would like to return to the two interpretative handles addressed before, which conceptualise the heroines' immersion in the world of delightful illusion as weakness and empowerment, respectively.

On the one hand, then, Radcliffe points to the fact that is well recognised by the heroines themselves—art can be deceptive and female susceptibility to it can be used to their disadvantage by the predatory males. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the aesthetic delights offered by Montoni's Venetian mansion constitute a form of architectural masquerade,² corresponding well to the on-going Carnival of Venice, which conceals the true nature of the house, as well as the actual financial status of the villain.³ In *The Romance of the Forest*, art is meant to seduce the susceptible heroine, and this idea is powerfully illustrated when Montalt assumes the role of the master of revels and instructs his musicians to perform in such a manner as to enthrall Adeline: 'the Marquis [...] presently made a sign for another composition, which adding the force of poetry to the charms of music, might withdraw her mind from the present scene [i.e. her distress due to the presence of Montalt], and enchant it in a sweet delirium' (RF 161).

In representing the villainous handling of the arts in the context of female susceptibility, Radcliffe situated herself in the eighteenth-century tradition of representing the perils of aesthetic experience. Jacqueline Pearson's insightful study (1999) offers a far-reaching account of the dangers of reading, as represented in fiction from 1750 to 1835, from Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) to Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and beyond. Joanna Maciulewicz, in turn, analyses the representation of reading and readerly pleasure in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and contextualises Radcliffe's treatment of the subject with

² I am borrowing the term from Ryba (2009: 36).

³ As Marek Błaszak points out, the masquerading character of the mansion is symbolic and representative of the 'discrepancy between Montoni's elegant attire and handsome physical appearance on the one hand, and his gloomy and corrupted nature on the other' (2016: 74).

Delarivier Manley's *New Atlantis* (1709), in which we find a story of a Duke who uses books in an attempt to facilitate the seduction of his ward: 'the most dangerous books of love—Ovid, Petrarch, Tibullus—those moving tragedies that so powerfully expose the force of love and corrupt the mind' (Manley 1992: 37, in Maciulewicz 2015: 168-69). The very same authors are mentioned in Radcliffe: there are frescoes of Ovid, as well as a bust of him and Tibullus in *The Romance of the Forest*, whereas the Venetian episode in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* mentions songs of Petrarch performed by the masqueraders and Emily's dream of an Ovidian metamorphosis into a sea-nymph.

The episode in *The Romance of the Forest* (and we can extend the parallel and include the one in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, too), has been treated as an allusion to the celebrated scene of enchantment and seduction in John Milton's masque *Comus* (1634), with which Radcliffe was familiar (Radcliffe uses the play as a source for her chapter epigraphs, and there is also a quote from it in RF 286 and MU 70).⁴ In her reworking of the model, Radcliffe incorporates the prominent elements of the original—an abundance of foods and a seductive rhetoric—but develops the aspects that Milton mentions only cursorily: in the secondary texts he describes the place as 'a stately Palace, set out with all manner of deliciousness' and adds that the scene is accompanied by 'soft Musick', a phrasing repeated by Radcliffe (Milton 1921: 27). By highlighting the role of these features, Radcliffe aptly contextualises the crux of her rewriting of Milton—the heroine's reaction. The Lady in *Comus* is indomitable:

I would not taste thy treasonous offer: none
 But such as are good men can give good things;
 And that which is not good is not delicious
 To a well-governed and wise appetite. (Milton 702-705; 1921: 28)

As we have seen, Adeline's and Emily's reactions to the perilous enchantment are far more equivocal: the moments when they are enjoying an alternative consciousness, as it were, echo the Lockean concept of being 'beside oneself' (Locke 1975: 343), the momentary adoption of a second person. The question that remains open is whether the idea behind this stepping beside oneself, as exemplified in the two

⁴ To read more on Radcliffe and Milton's *Comus*, see Graham 2014.

scenes, is limited to the patriarchal agenda of representing female susceptibility.

In changing perspective into what I have labelled a revisionist-feminist approach, I would like to begin with another use of *Comus* in Radcliffe's work. The reference is made in her travel account *A Journey Made in the Summer of 1794* (1795). At one point, she reports contemplating a sublime scenery, 'the view of which excites emotions of sweet, though tranquil admiration, softening the mind to tenderness [...]. The wildness, seclusion, and magical beauty of this vale, seem, indeed, to render it the very abode for Milton's *Comus*, "deep skilled in all his mother's witcheries"' (Journey 326). Radcliffe repeats here some of the emotions that would have been experienced by her heroines, such as 'tranquil admiration' or 'tenderness', which in the Gothic context may imply feminine defencelessness in the face of deceptive villainy. The context for the above report is, however, radically different: the travellers are not in danger and the state of enchantment is far from rendering them vulnerable; on the contrary, it is a state that allows them to enjoy a fuller experience of the surrounding beauty, one inaccessible to those insensitive to aesthetic pleasure.

Let this be a transition to an alternative understanding of the two episodes that I would like to offer. As I have shown before, both scenes capitalise on the interrelationship of art and the masquerade. Even if the heroines eventually manage to identify the truth beneath the mask of visual splendour, they both accept, as it were, the invitation for identity play offered by the masquerading show orchestrated by the villains. In *The Romance of the Forest*, once Adeline regains control over her emotional state, she decides not to reject openly Montalt's advances but play a game that she hopes will be more beneficial in her situation. As is reported in the narrative, she 'yield[s] somewhat to the policy of dissimulation' (RF 159). When the scene is about to close, Radcliffe's principled narrator excuses the heroine in the following manner:

Thus did Adeline, to whom the arts and the practice of dissimulation were hitherto equally unknown, condescend to make use of them in disguising her indignation and contempt. But though these arts were adopted only for the purpose of self-preservation, she used them with reluctance, and almost with abhorrence; for her mind was habitually impregnated with the love of virtue, in thought, word, and action, and, while her end in using them was certainly good, she scarcely thought that the end could justify the means. (RF 160)

Adeline thus accepts the challenge and deals with the villain in the manner of a cunning opponent. The scene then features a heroine who manages to escape the confines of a conventionally disempowered female victim and plays a game which, eventually, concludes in her escape. However, though aesthetic experience precipitates a character change, the episode in *The Romance of the Forest* does not establish a clear link between sensitivity to art and empowerment; rather, the change in Adeline is provoked by her readiness to take part in Montalt's masquerade, irrespective of the form of this masquerade. Indeed, Adeline's change produces actual effects, but in demonstrating the ambiguities of Radcliffe's treatment of aesthetic pleasure, I would like to emphasise the symbolic empowerment that is experienced by Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

As I have written before, Emily takes part in the masquerade only metaphorically: once she is lured out onto the balcony of Montoni's villa by the sounds of sweet music, she puts on her veil—a quasi-mask—and fantasises about 'throw[ing] off the habit of mortality' and metamorphosing into a sea-nymph (MU 178). As Barbara Schaff aptly argues, the sea functions as a 'feminine space' and offers 'everything which the oppressive and limiting confines of the city are not' (Schaff 1999: 92). This supports Terry Castle's idea of the masquerade as a utopian 'gynesium'—a fairy-land of sisterhood, where the heroine can enjoy 'sensuous liberty' (Castle 1986: 254). Enthralled by the aesthetic experience of the Venetian Carnival and the related spectacle of proteanism, the heroine entertains complete freedom and agency otherwise denied in the real world (see Lipski 2015: 332-35). Emily does not turn illusion into reality, but the categories themselves are not clearly separate in Radcliffe's realm, and apparently, as Castle (1987) persuasively demonstrated, this realm is characterised by the paradigm of spectralisation with the illusive seeming real and *vice versa*. Castle's idea was pursued by Robert Miles whose interpretations of *The Romance of the Forest* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* showed how the categories of the unreal, the illusive and the figural create an alternative reality in Radcliffe's fiction, a parallel world that is truly illustrative of who Radcliffe's characters really are (Miles 1995: 100-48). Seen in this light, Emily's reverie of metamorphosis becomes an indicator of her destabilised self, one that is characterised by discontinuity and a sense of

being in between agency and passiveness, freedom and oppression, feminine utopia and romantic desire.

Music and destabilised self

As I have noted before, even if the heroines remain capable of seeing through visual and rhetorical deception, what successfully throws them off balance is music. In both scenes it is used as the ultimate means of affecting feminine sensitivity, in both cases to a powerful effect. In the two novels, music also becomes a source of ambiguity elsewhere. In *The Romance of the Forest*, one might argue for Sapphic undertones in the representation of the relationship between Adeline and Clara la Luc, her would be sister-in-law, and one endowed with exceptional musical talents, admired by Adeline. Jeremy Chow (2018), in an admittedly exaggerated manner, has recently argued for autoerotic symbolism in the treatment of the lute. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, in turn, opens with sounds of mysterious music that Emily struggles to interpret: Should she feel endangered? Should she follow the notes? Do the sounds come from a romantic lover or a deceptive seducer? The early scenes of music add to the eponymous 'Mysteries', which are not resolved till late in the narrative.

Part of the ambiguity of music in Radcliffe lies in its potential, as Pierre Dubois argues, to complicate the Burkean dichotomy of the beautiful and the sublime, and to evoke two different states of sublimity—one related to terror (as defined by Burke) and the other related to the ineffable, an experience beyond rational understanding (perhaps echoing Kant) (Dubois 2015: 162). For the most part, Dubois argues, Radcliffe conceptualises the feminine musical sublime as 'aligned with deep emotions of melancholy, meditation and a kind of inner catharsis' (Dubois 2015: 163). This role of the musical sublime in Radcliffe corresponds to the essential shift in musical theory that happened in the mid-eighteenth century, one that abandoned the classicist mathematical approach to music as an art of harmony and advocated a new understanding informed by the empiricist perspective on the senses and the emerging cult of feeling. The new understanding of music was best exemplified by Charles Avison, the author of *An Essay on Musical Expression* from 1752, whom Radcliffe knew and cited (see Norton 1999: 78-79). In particular, Avison centred his discourse around

the category of ‘expression’, writing that ‘the Force of *Musical Expression*’ makes it possible to ‘excit[e] all the most agreeable Passions of the Soul’ (Avison 1752: 3), and thus turned the attention towards the recipient and the subjective effect of music. Needless to say, the category of expression is far less verifiable than the classical notions of harmony and balance, and as such complicates and relativises both the evaluation and experience of music.

Considering the above, I would argue that Radcliffe’s ambiguous treatment of music in the discussed scenes stems from a complication of the two concepts of the sublime. The scenes destabilise the feminine musical sublime by again drawing it closer to Burkean terror. In other words, Radcliffe problematises her own distinction of the feminine musical sublime, as a state of uncontrollable but delightful enthrallment, by setting it against the background of conventional male oppression. Music in the scenes is thus illustrative of the paradoxical union of fear and pleasure, central to the Gothic, and the ambiguous response of the subject who, on the one hand, appears to be aware of her plight, but, on the other, succumbs to the aesthetic delights—the case of ‘stop it, I like it’, so typical of the Gothic in general.

The discussed scenes make for a micro-scale illustration of Radcliffe’s poetics in general. It is a poetics that does not yield to one-sided interpretations but leads its readers astray; it ‘keep[s] antithetical possibilities in solution’, as Miles aptly puts it (Miles 2015: 301). Radcliffe displays a peculiar skilfulness in conveying ambiguous meanings by complicating the extremes she herself seems to be establishing. The discussed dialectic in Radcliffe’s treatment of aesthetic experience, which undermines the seemingly clear-cut arrangement into sensitive victims and cold-hearted villains, finds a disturbing contextualisation in the two novels in general. *The Romance of the Forest* opens with an upsetting allusion to Marquis de Sade’s *Justin* (1791) (see Clery 1994), while *The Mysteries of Udolpho* features a seemingly positive character who was probably named after the notorious French poisoneress and Satanist La Voisin (executed in 1680) (see Miles 2015). Indeed, the ‘Great Enchantress’ excels in casting an enthralling charm of compromised binaries and failed certainties.

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