Writing Intergenerational Female Relationships: Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791)

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Abstract

This article uses *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) as a case study on the ways Radcliffe writes intergenerational female relationships and engages with the limitations of sensibility and "good" conduct. It will demonstrate how Radcliffe both criticises and endorses female sensibility, as an action which leads to poor judgement and as a tool to manage relationships, as seen in the case of Madame La Motte. It will also address Radcliffe's framing of the doctrines of conduct literature, which produce an admirable role model in the form of Madame La Luc, who is subsequently written out of the text. Finally, it makes a case for intergenerational exchange where the process of a mother-daughter education gives the young women in the novel patterns of behaviours to reshape. This article contributes to the growing volume of research on Radcliffe's politically engaged writing and the Female Gothic.

Keywords: Ann Radcliffe, Gothic fiction, Female Gothic, conduct literature, intergenerational relationships

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Introduction[1]

Ann Radcliffe is credited with establishing the Female Gothic tradition, a fitting topic for this special issue on women writers of the long eighteenth century. Like her contemporaries across literary genres—Fanny Burney, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Jane Austen, to name a few—Radcliffe uses her fiction to explore the female experience, socio-political and economic rights. This resonates with her own context in the 1790s rather than that of her early-modern "Gothic" settings (Hoeveler 65; Johnson 76; Miles 78; Stabler 5-6). Ruth Anolik suggests that the Gothic employs "literalization" to make "visible" the legal limitations (primogeniture and couverture) women were

1 This article is the outcome of several of papers presented at the BSECS Postgraduate Online Seminar Series, *Crones, Crime, and the Gothic* conference at Falmouth University, and *English and Irish Women Writers of the Eighteenth-Century* conference at the University of Pécs. As elements of my doctoral research informed this article, I would like to thank my supervisors Thomas Duggett and Paul Baines, and my examiners Angela Wright and Simon Marsden, as well as Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University for providing a scholarship for me to undertake a PhD.

confined by in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Anolik 40; see also Clery, *Women's Gothic* 83; Davison 87; and Stabler 15). This article will address what Radcliffe's mother-figures in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) make visible through their interactions with the heroine, Adeline.

Radcliffe's mother figures have been the subject of scholarly discourse for over two decades.[2] Much of this body of research has focused on maternal absence and haunting (Zlosnik and Horner 186; Anolik 25; Miles 106). For example, psychoanalytical and historical analysis has been applied to the position of Louisa Mazzini in *A Sicilian Romance* (1790): a spectral prisoner, who is kept in the passageways beneath her property as her husband commits bigamy and tries to force their daughter, Julia, into a loveless marriage to the Duke de Luovo. Alison Milbank reads the mother-daughter reunion at the end of the novel as "a testing out of what it might mean to acknowledge the mother, and to establish social networks built upon this Utopian project" (xxiv). In Radcliffe's fiction the mother-child dynamic is essential, as Carol Davison asserts:

> the mother embodies and emblematizes the past in the Female Gothic and, more specifically, the daughter's past. This association is logical, given her biological role as the site of the daughter's origins, but it also incorporates the idea of the mother's legacy to the daughter in terms of certain culturally defined roles and behaviours. (Davison 95)

However, to characterise Julia in *A Sicilian Romance* as motherless until the point of her reunion with Louisa, is untrue. She receives her education alongside her sister, Emilia, in the family home, under the guiding hand of Madame de Menon (Radcliffe, *Sicilian* 6-8; see also Stabler 6, 15), the "mother substitute" (Hoeveler 62). This article focuses on the role of the so-called mother substitute in *The Romance of the Forest*—a text which provides alternative case studies in Radcliffe's construction of womanhood compared to her earlier novel.

In *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), both Madame La Motte and Madame La Luc educate Adeline, and become responsible for her well-being over the course of the novel. Eva König has stated that Radcliffe's third novel centres on Adeline's journey "to find an acceptable father" and "an acceptable representative of the Law-of-the-Father" (189). In this process she also encounters two different matriarchal figures both of whom she must learn from and respond to. To borrow Anolik's term, these mother-figures "literalize" (40) conflicting standards for female behaviour in the eighteenth century. This article begins by establishing Radcliffe's Female Gothic and its educational function. The second section addresses the role of sensibility in Madame La Motte's behaviours and her relative success by the conclusion of the narrative. In contrast, the final section discusses the "ideal" yet limited counterpoint to sensibility configured through Madame La Luc.

2 At the *Year of Gothic Women Conference*, Angela Wright discussed Radcliffe's "family romances" with reference to biographical details of the author's upbringing, proving it to be an evolving strand of research in studies on Radcliffe (Wright, "Family Romance").

The Female Gothic and Educational Texts

To address the complexity of Radcliffe's engagement with motherhood, it is first necessary to define the framework of the Female Gothic. Robert Miles considers it a "narrative matrix" in which accessing Radcliffe's subversive message requires "the modern critic [. . .] to read against the grain of Radcliffe's apparent intentions" (18). In other words, her challenge to patriarchal institutions is often masked by the structure of the narrative. In *Gothic Feminism* Dianne Long Hoeveler argues that:

> The female gothic heroine is most decidedly a daughter whose task concerns a rewriting of the mythically heroic: she must redeem her good but missing mother, kill her evil and false father and stepmother, and reinstitute a new world with an appropriately and professionally bourgeois hero-husband. *A Sicilian Romance* is the first version of this tale. (62)

As Hoeveler indicates, *A Sicilian Romance* establishes a very particular frame which is cemented by Radcliffe's subsequent publications. In *The Romance of the Forest* for instance, Adeline journeys across France, resisting the perils of manipulative allies and a reprehensible Marquis, later revealed to be her uncle. She finally settles in Savoy with her husband Theodore. Rather than focusing on Adeline's narrative arc, which has been well-addressed in existing scholarship, this article discusses intergenerational female exchange: the strained nurturing and educational dynamic between Madame La Motte and Madame La Luc, and their daughters Adeline, and to a lesser extent Clara La Luc.[3]

Much has been written about the "abject," missing mother in the Gothic (Davison 94), but less attention has been directed towards the objectionable ones.[4] Such figures are by no means villains, but not completely vulnerable or always interested in the needs of the heroine(s), especially if it compromises their sense of order. This article reconsiders two maternal figures in *The Romance of the Forest* who offer ironic depictions of, and resistance to, traditional ideals of eighteenth-century femininity. Madame La Motte and Madame La Luc never meet, which seems to me a deliberate effort to frame differing educational strategies on Radcliffe's part. These women also

3 Clara and Madame La Luc only appear in the third volume and play no role in Adeline's relationship with Madame La Motte. However, much of the educational schemas Madame La Luc seems to advocate for are described through a brief history of the La Luc household, and her frustrations in raising Clara: "[Madame was] displeased that her niece neglected her domestic duties, and wished to reprove her" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 249).

4 The idea of abjection was proposed by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, in which she explores the contested position of women. The author argues that "What we designate as 'feminine,' far from being a primeval essence, will be seen as an 'other' without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity" (Kristeva 58). In establishing the Female Gothic, Radcliffe puts the feminine 'other' at the core of her narratives (Clery, "Politics of the Gothic Heroine" 70-71). Yet there remain peripheries, increasingly "abject" forms of womanhood itself. As Wright, and Zlosnik and Horner have pointed out, older women might be taken as the "other" to the young heroine (Wright, "Heroines in flight" 22; Zlosnik and Horner 186).

represent the familiar eighteenth-century debate around reason and sensibility. In fact, Nelson C. Smith argues that Radcliffe intends to caution against excessive sensibility in her novels (Smith 583). Citing an episode in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) in which St. Aubert's dying wish is that his daughter regulates her reactive personality (Radcliffe, *Udolpho* 79), Smith contends that:

> Mrs. Radcliffe's criticisms of this luxuriating in emotion do not possess the humor or the genius of Fielding or Miss Austen; but they nevertheless are clear, direct, and perhaps even more interesting. For she takes the typical heroine of sentimental novels and, using the techniques of the Gothic novel, reveals how such a state of mind brings about many of the terrors which the heroine faces. The cure for such an attitude, Mrs. Radcliffe makes clear, lies in a return to common sense. (580)

However, Smith's conclusions are limited by focusing on the heroines' experiences in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian* (1798). The idea that Radcliffe completely condemns sensibility and emotional reactivity is unconvincing when reading the ambivalent words of wisdom and humorous interludes associated with matriarchal figures in *The Romance of the Forest*. Madame La Motte is a case study in thinking through feeling and using emotional cues to get her own way. Meanwhile, Madame La Luc is so rational and dutiful, she becomes ridiculous. Thus, these women do not configure a "return to common sense" (Smith 580).

Madame La Motte's Reactive Sensibility

Madame La Motte appears in the first chapter of *The Romance of the Forest* mourning her departure from Paris because of her husband's criminality. The La Motte couple rescue Adeline on their journey from Paris, and Madame's interest in the young woman's story and protection is motivated by her physiognomic assessment of the heroine's face. Madame La Motte finds herself fascinated by Adeline's "melancholy grace" and the "penetrating sweetness in her blue eyes, which indicated an intelligent and amiable mind" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 9). Within a few short hours of their first meeting, Madame establishes an intimate connection which will lead her to sit at Adeline's bedside as the heroine suffers through a fever (Radcliffe, *Romance* 11-13). Her early interactions with Adeline are inherently maternal:

> She was a sensible and highly accomplished woman, and it became her chief delight to form the rising graces of Adeline, who had, as has been already shown, a sweetness of disposition, which made her quick to repay instruction with improvement, and indulgence with love. (Radcliffe, *Romance* 34)

Madame La Motte was raised as socialite in Paris, which explains why she would be well-placed to "form the rising graces" of the heroine, and Adeline finds herself under the wing of an "indulgen[t]" teacher. However, living in (a) ruin with her ward,

two servants and her criminal husband, Madame appears to be missing the realities of her socio-economic position, as she continues to act as if she retains her elite status. She teaches an aristocratic form of household management perhaps because her knowledge is limited by her own experience and upbringing. By that same token, she genuinely enjoys Adeline's company whose "affectionate attentions [. . .] console her for the want of other society" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 29).

The matriarch befits Alan Richardson's definition of "emotional responsiveness," as she is a reactive figure capable of "controlling nurturance," "frivolity," and "luxuriousness" (169). She is particularly sensitive to the fashions and social power of other figures in the novel. This makes her a poor judge of character, as "the noble deportment" and "splendour" of the villain's person (Radcliffe, *Romance* 88) convince Madame of his value, far more than his ethical standing. Radcliffe's ambivalent treatment of sensibility, however, is striking. Madame's initial generosity and charity towards Adeline, is the product of impulse, as is her good impression of the Marquis de Montalt, the latter proves to be erroneous. Although she can discern the depth of Adeline's goodness from her melancholic features, this is coincidental, as she is vulnerable to a façade of nobility.

While Madame is prone to misinterpretation, she is strategic in her management of friendships and in her willingness to end them when they no longer serve her purpose. In a fraught episode in which Madame believes Adeline to be having an affair with Monsieur La Motte, she asserts that: "[a] friend is only estimable when our conduct deserves one; the friendship that survives the merit of its object, is a disgrace, instead of an honour, to both parties" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 78). Madame finds the idea of her husband's and Adeline's infidelity unspeakable, "[h]er jealousy of Adeline, however, she could not communicate," and she becomes increasingly "tormented" by her own imagination (Radcliffe, *Romance* 71). Angela Wright notes that this interaction leads Madame to "neglect" her "surrogate daughter" (*The Import of Terror* 100), and through the heroine's dutiful response (calmly continuing to serve the household), Radcliffe reflects on the limitations of Rousseauvian philosophies on "self-love" (Wright, *The Import of Terror* 101). Hoeveler considers the tension between Madame La Motte and Adeline a competition where "[t]he husband and wife can view a child only as an interloper, an unwanted third party in the eternal dyad that we know as marriage in the patriarchy" (75). A stung Adeline is in fact not guilty of an affair, but she has nonetheless received an important warning on the limitations of friendship. In defense of her marriage, Madame's "controlled and controlling nurturance" (Richardson 169) comes to the fore and her friendship, maternal and educational impulses are conditional. Even after learning that she was mistaken, Madame will choose to ignore the mistreatments she inflicted and eventually sit in silence while her husband betrays Adeline in exchange for legal protection (Radcliffe, *Romance* 211).

Just as Madame La Motte betrays Adeline, she also rebuilds their friendship in the interests of protecting her household. In the third volume of the novel, Monsieur La Motte is prosecuted and requires Adeline to stand as a witness in his trial. Madame, in collaboration with her son, persuades the heroine to do so. After Adeline has been driven out of their home and confidence, it seems incredible that she would

once again support the La Mottes. While in part motivated by the chance to protect Theodore and incriminate the Marquis during the trial, Adeline is also moved by Madame's effort to repair their bond:

> She [Adeline] was immediately visited at the hotel by Madame La Motte: the meeting was affecting on both sides. A sense of her past conduct excited in the latter an embarrassment which the delicacy and goodness of Adeline would willingly have spared her; but the pardon solicited was given with so much sincerity, that Madame gradually became composed and re-assured. (Radcliffe, *Romance* 338)

After Adeline arrives in Paris to give testimony, Madame La Motte "immediately" jumps into action. Radcliffe's employment of the verb "excited" implies Madame's reactive nature. There is a sense of reciprocity and resemblance between the two women. However, Madame's reactions can be read as performative, as her apologetic demeanour and visible "embarrassment" quickly shift to "composure" once she has resumed control of the wilfully credulous heroine. "[E]motional responsiveness" (Richardson 169), in other words sensibility, is used to reassert a mother-daughter dynamic, as shortly hereafter, Madame offers Adeline a place in her lodgings (Radcliffe, *Romance* 339). Once returned to Paris, Madame La Motte proves politically astute, recognises her role as her husband's ambassador, and manages her friendships accordingly.

Despite Adeline's presence in the trial, La Motte is sentenced to death and Madame is seen "at the Chatelet with her husband, suffering all the distress which the sentence pronounced against him might be supposed to inflict" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 345). Madame La Motte ensures that her companions are attentive to her "sorrowful heart" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 346). However, her excessive emotions are momentarily soothed by a very different revelation from the proceedings: Adeline is an heiress. On learning this, she displays a "momentary gleam of satisfaction" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 346), perhaps signalling a shrewd awareness that her friendship with "Adeline de Montalt" could promote her interests despite her husband's criminal conviction. While this scene may encourage a discussion of the political power associated with a hereditary title, more significantly in this discussion, it exposes the ways Madame's sensibility tracks with changing political dynamics—from "embarrassment" to composure, despair to satisfaction. Madame La Motte's sensibility is a point of humour, and a redeeming quality which allows her to make, break, and rebuild friendships. It is also a political strategy to succeed in a patriarchal society. By the close of the novel, Madame's emotional manipulations have realised a great deal of success. Sensibility may render her mistaken in some moments, but influential in others. Her future will be in England, funded by Adeline (a "noble" "benefactress") and accompanied by her husband, whose "sentence was softened from death to banishment" at the heroine's request (Radcliffe, *Romance* 353-54). Madame La Motte refuses to be the victim of a patriarchal system and uses sensibility to sure up her socio-economic position. This is dramatized through her interactions with Adeline.

Madame La Luc and Female Conduct

As indicated in the discussion above, there is a tension in Gothic texts between their surreal storylines and their educational impetus (Richardson 203-04). In fact, the conduct and education of young women was widely discussed in the late eighteenth century. As Harriet Guest points out, Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft's approaches to education unexpectedly overlap as both writers questioned "unqualified sensibility" (Guest 285). They pointed to the problematics of raising women who "are enthralled by novels, fascinated by manners, superficial appearances, surface ornamentation, distracted by isolated incidents and random, occasional events" (Guest 285). Such a description might befit some of Madame La Motte's behaviours but is strongly resisted by her counterpart in the third volume of the novel, Madame La Luc. Dorice Williams Elliot suggests that conduct literature established philanthropy as a domestic duty (183). A similar concern is embedded in *The Romance of the Forest* through Madame La Luc's role in her community and the ways she corrects her niece Clara, whom she fears is governed by emotional impulses instead of charitable duties and her obligations as a daughter.

Madame La Luc considers Clara's physiognomic impulse inherently "romantic" and a futile measure of moral worth: "Shall I never persuade you to give up that romantic notion of judging people by their faces" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 256). In contrast to Clara's visceral reaction to Adeline's unconscious face, which "prejudices" her in the heroine's "favour," Madame La Luc will collect information on the young woman's "history" prior to moving or treating her (Radcliffe, *Romance* 256-57). Rebecca Addicks-Salerno has argued that Madame La Luc becomes a model of female empiricism and science in the novel (74-75). However, this misses some of the humour in Radcliffe's writing and overlooks the fact that Madame's exacting rationalism is at times overbearing and increasingly ridiculous. Davison suggests that mother figures in the Gothic often work alongside patriarchal schemas, to "police" (94-95) the heroine. The idea of control is something which comes through most overtly Madame La Luc's strictures. Unlike Madame La Motte, whose actions are often guided by whim, Madame La Luc is rigid and prescriptive. Like her brother, a pastor in Savoy, Madame La Luc offers a reference to Rousseau's *Émile*. However, she seems to reinforce the educational doctrines recommended in "Sophie," which states that a young woman ought never to experience being "free from restraint" (Rousseau 270; see also Irving 16-17).

While Madame La Luc proves to be a dutiful role-model, she is not described as attractive, in contrast to the women of sensibility in the novel. Madame La Luc is an "elderly lady" who nursed Adeline through a fever "with an air of tender interest" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 243-44). This is quite unlike the "lovely" heroine (Radcliffe, *Romance* 103), "gentle" and "sweet" Clara (Radcliffe, *Romance* 246), or "beautiful and elegant" Madame La Motte (Radcliffe, *Romance* 2).[5] As the local healer Madame

5 Employing a Freudian lens, Elisabeth Bronfen reads for Adeline's "hysterical symptoms" (172-74) and responses to changing family dynamics, or frameworks of the family romance. The heroine is emotionally engaged and reactive, and therefore a configuration of sensibility.

La Luc's position is conflicted, integral yet outside (Addicks-Salerno 74-76): "From this room the whole village was liberally supplied with physical comfort; for it was the pride of Madame to believe herself skilful in relieving the disorders of her neighbours" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 248). While trusted by her neighbours, the efficacy of Madame's treatments appears the result of self-recommendation. Supporting the parishioners of Leloncourt is a point of "pride" for Madame La Luc, who will be called upon to treat Adeline, Clara, Monsieur Verneuil, and Arnaud La Luc over the course of the third volume of the novel. Problematically, she is delighted to be presented with an ailment: it was "difficult to determine whether she felt most concern for the sufferings of her guest or pleasure at the opportunity thus offered of displaying her physical skill" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 268). Thus, the matriarch's vanity is fuelled by her reputation (Johnson 89).

When it comes to parenting Adeline and Clara (both younger, unmarried women), her behavioural and medical treatment plans are inflexible. For example, she asserts that Adeline must "submit, therefore, to every thing that may conduce [. . . her recovery], and consent to be kept as quiet as possible" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 244). While Madame La Luc is decisive and generous—striving for her patient's comfort without reward while cautioning resistance. She imposes the role of female patient onto the heroine, who must "submit" and "be kept as quiet as possible." Any protest would likely go unvoiced and unheard. Addick-Salerno's contends that this is a request for "consent," that places "these two women in a patient/caregiver relationship" (73). Adeline's so-called consent is a "silent" nod of the head, less an agreement, than a willingness not to test the boundaries of the friendship. This interaction stands in stark contrast to Madame La Luc's treatment of Monsieur Verneuil's arm which is injured when he chivalrously saves Clara.

> It was now swelled and somewhat inflamed, and this might in some degree be attributed to the effect of Madame La Luc's balsam, whose restorative qualities had for once failed. The whole family sympathised with his sufferings, and Madame, at the request of M. Verneuil, abandoned her balsam, and substituted an emollient fomentation. (Radcliffe, *Romance* 271)

Monsieur Verneuil has the facility to complain about and change his treatment, admittedly after the balsam seems to have caused adverse effects. Radcliffe's novel therefore offers an ambivalent frame for Madame La Luc's scientific prowess and relative empowerment. Like Madame La Motte, she asserts herself over younger women. This is achieved by chastising and challenging unwanted behaviours, while establishing her authority through (literal) prescription. On the other hand, she finds that she must accommodate the requests of male figures such as Monsieur Verneuil.

While Madame La Luc makes every effort to maintain her family's reputation, she falls into the background of the novel by its close. Like Madame de Menon discussed at the opening of this article, she is brought to Arnaud La Luc's chateau as a substitute mother figure. However, she can never quite replace her late sister-in-law (Radcliffe, *Romance* 274) and her position is further diminished by Adeline's connection to the La Luc household, as she will eventually marry the heir, Theodore Peyrou/La Luc. After their marriage, Adeline will become "Madame La Luc" effectively assuming her

aunt-in-law's title. At the close of the novel, overlooking Lake Geneva and "contemning [sic] the splendour of false happiness, [. . .] here, in the very bosom of felicity, lived Theodore and Adeline La Luc" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 363). Madame La Luc remains as she arrived: "a maiden sister, a sensible, worthy woman" (Radcliffe, *Romance* 246). However, she has little presence in the concluding chapter of the novel, merely waiting to greet her brother and the newly married Theodore and Adeline, at the gate of the chateau. Arguably, Madame La Luc's lack of sensibility dooms her to be virtually written out of the text.

Conclusion

Joan B. Landes suggests, during the French Revolution "women seem to straddle a desire to restore the old system of moral justice and an impulse to assert women's rights within the new system of legal representation" (107). Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* articulates this conflict between moral traditions and changing legal rights. Superficially, Radcliffe appears to reinforce patriarchal frameworks especially given the rigid educational schema for young women advocated by Madame La Luc. However, she treats this dynamic as admirable and laughable by turns, so that interactions with the matriarch are less an endorsement of well-reasoned decision making than a light-hearted challenge to prescription. This is only reinforced by the novel's conclusion, as adherence to the limitations of eighteenth-century domesticity leads to Madame La Luc's erasure. In contrast, Madame La Motte is both astute and self-interested across each volume of the text. Her status as a model of reactive sensibility, and what it might realize in terms of socio-economic power, proves that women who regulate their behaviours and reactions might be more respectable, but they are not necessarily more successful. Madame La Motte becomes what Emma Clery might term a "clandestine participant" in the male space ("Politics of the Gothic Heroine" 75). As a socialite Madame La Motte is "[f]orcibly absented from the scene of production" and as a wife, she is a "casualty" (Clery, "Politics of the Gothic Heroine" 75) of her husband's mistakes, but she becomes instrumental in their resolution through female alliance as a "mother substitute" (Hoeveler 62). In other words, Madame La Motte's friendship, or rather mother-daughter bond with Adeline, creates an opportunity for her to become influential in socio-economic terms. Through intergenerational female exchange in the novel, Radcliffe critiques and nuances the position of women and the management of their behaviours. The role of the mother is more complex in *The Romance of the Forest* than *A Sicilian Romance*, especially as the subplot exposes the value of sensibility in forwarding women's position within the patriarchal structures of the text.

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