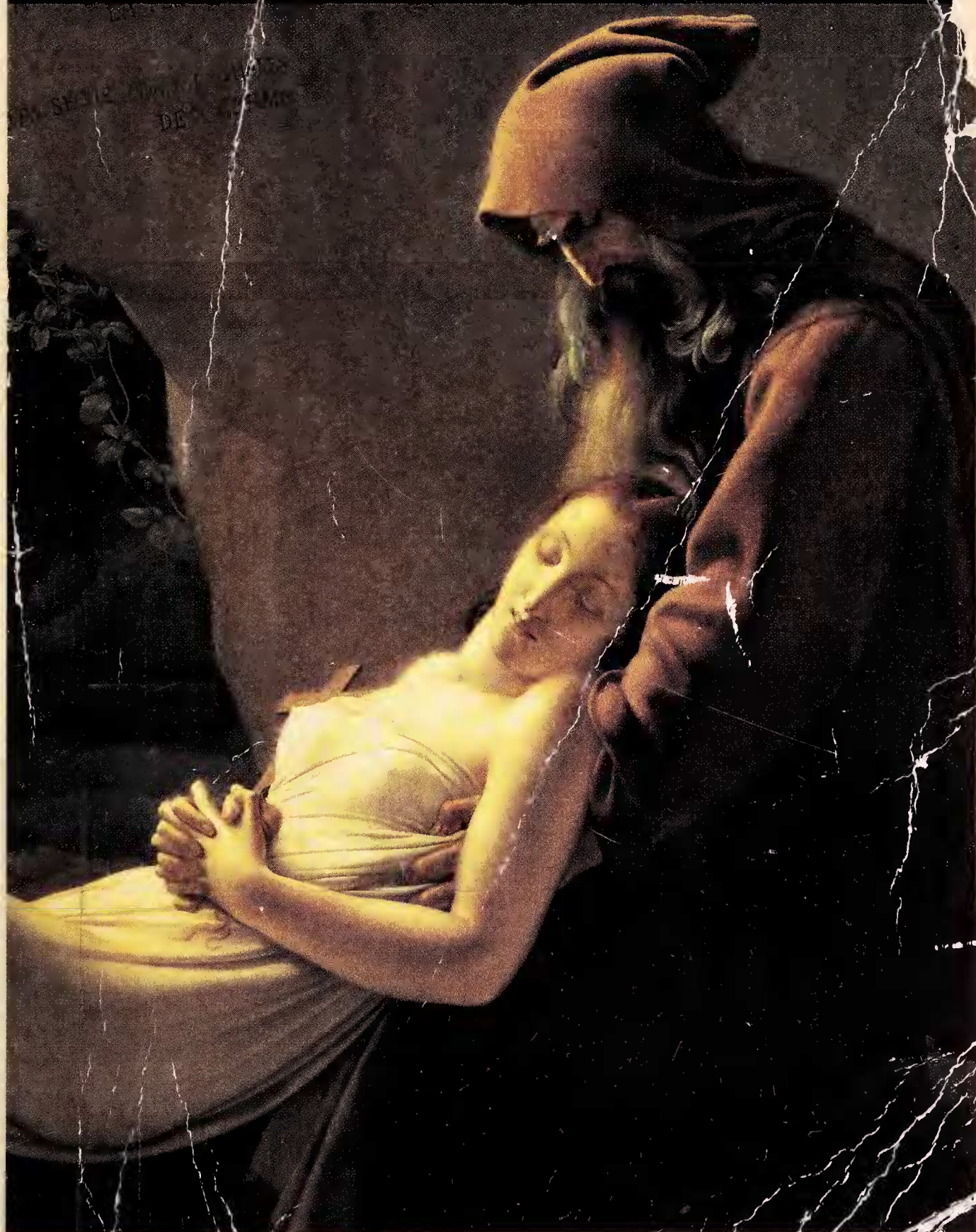


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THE ITALIAN



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THE ITALIAN

ANN RADCLIFFE was born in 1764, the daughter of a London tradesman. In 1787 she married William Radcliffe, later the manager of *The English Chronicle*. She set her first novel, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789), in Scotland, and it received little critical or public attention. Using more exotic locations in Europe, notably the 'sublime' landscapes of the Alps and Pyrenees, she wrote four more novels within ten years: *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797), as well as a volume of descriptions of her travels in Holland, Germany and the Lake District.

The success of *The Romance of the Forest* established Radcliffe as the leading exponent of the historical Gothic Romance. Her later novels met with even greater attention, and produced many imitators (and, famously, Jane Austen's burlesque of *The Romance of the Forest* in *Northanger Abbey*), and influenced the work of Sir Walter Scott and Mary Wollstonecraft.

The Italian was the last book she published in her lifetime; a novel, *Gaston de Blondville*, and *St Alban's Abbey: A Metrical Tale* were published posthumously. Despite the sensational nature of her romances and their enormous success, Radcliffe and her husband lived quietly – she made only one foreign journey and barely glimpsed the Alps that she wrote about so vividly. She died in 1823 from respiratory problems probably caused by pneumonia.

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ANN RADCLIFFE

THE ITALIAN

or the Confessional of the Black Penitents

A ROMANCE

Introduction and notes by ROBERT MILES

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INTRODUCTION

LITERARY BACKGROUND: GOTHIC ROMANCE AND RADCLIFFE'S CAREER

When Ann Radcliffe published *The Italian* in late 1796, she stood as the unrivalled head of her own school of fiction. For those familiar with the history of the Gothic genre, this may come as a surprising statement, as the first Gothic novel was unquestionably Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, written in 1764. In *Otranto* one encounters what were to become the staple ingredients of the genre: it is a pastiche, an imitation 'Gothic' or Medieval story; it has a menacing castle; a villain; incest (near); rape (threatened); a ghost; labyrinths; plenty of 'gloomth'; a tyrannical father; an ineffectual mother; a scheming Catholic; and a happy couple. After *Otranto* there was a handful of imitations of Walpole's 'imitation', principally Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777), Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1783–5) and, to a lesser degree, Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline, or the Orphan of the Castle* (1788). Beginning with *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789), Radcliffe revived the genre and, in a sense, made it her own. Her first book was barely noticed; her second, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), was better received; her third, *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), immediately went into several editions, and made her reputation. Although published in 1818, Jane Austen's burlesque of the genre, *Northanger Abbey*, was largely written in the late 1790s, and as such contains a vivid picture of the literary scene at the time of *The Italian*'s appearance. By now the shelves of the circulating libraries were groaning under the weight of Radcliffe's imitators, such as Eliza Parsons, Maria Regina Roche, Francis Lathom, and Eleanor Sleath (all mentioned by Austen), and featuring such irresistible titles as *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793); *The Mysterious Warning* (1796); *The Necromancer; or the Tale of the Black Forest* (1794); *The Midnight Bell* (1798); and *The Orphan of the Rhine* (1798). But separate from these,

and outshining all the rest, Austen placed Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).

Not all of the *Northanger Abbey* novels are strictly speaking in the school of Radcliffe, for there was also a new strain emerging out of Germany, strongly represented in Austen's list. The German Gothic novel, or *Schauerroman*, was more lurid and sensational (in the public imagination at least) than anything associated with Radcliffe. A particularly good example was also cited by Austen, *Horrid Mysteries* by Karl Grosse (translated by Peter Will in 1796), a tale featuring 'magic', a secret group of violent revolutionaries known as the Illuminati, and a band of female Jacobins dedicated to performing sexual favours in the cause of liberty. In England, this sensational style of Gothic was principally associated with Matthew Lewis, the author of the notorious *The Monk* (1796).

Although we tend to lump together Walpole, Radcliffe and Lewis as Gothic novelists, that is not how their contemporaries saw things. For a start, the term 'gothic story', although current, was not common. The phrase they tended to use for Radcliffe's genre was 'romance', meaning miraculous tales related in poetic prose. It was the poetic element that set Radcliffe apart, and for which she was famous. Sir Walter Scott called her 'the first poetess of romantic fiction'; Nathan Drake, the 'Shakespeare of Romance writers'.¹ Her readers valued her for her accomplished terrors, but what set her above her contemporaries was her unrivalled ability to create – to realize visually – an enchanted, storied, landscaped past. Walpole's pastiche was, in comparison, 'dry, meagre, and without effect',² while the 'libidinous minuteness' of *The Monk* arguably belonged to another school of fiction altogether.³ Radcliffe did, of course, have competition from novelists, such as Jane Austen and Fanny Burney; but, within the domain of romance, she was peerless. The first reviews of *The Italian* confirmed her exalted status, as did the £800 she received for the copyright, an almost unparalleled sum. She was 33, at the height of her powers, and extremely prolific, having produced five romances and a travel book in the eight years since her début.

Although Radcliffe was to live for another twenty-six years, *The Italian* was the last work she was to publish in her lifetime, for reasons