Dale Townshend and Angela Wright, eds., *Ann Radcliffe, Romanticism, and the Gothic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. 274. £60. ISBN 9781107032835.

I have always felt that there was something odd about Ann Radcliffe's career. Her first novel, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789) is a rather uneven work; but in her second, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), she made a decisive shift, abandoning the masculine heroic narrative in order to focus, instead, on female subjectivity under pressure. Over the next seven years, in four novels of increasingly impressive sophistication, she explored the predicaments of young women cast adrift in threatening Gothic worlds which menaced them with exploitation and destruction, becoming the most popular and commercially successful author in Britain along the way. But then, at the age of 33, at the height of her powers, when her fame was just starting to grow on the continent and her popularity in Britain was so great that she was able to command unprecedented advances from her publishers, she seems to have simply given up the business of novel-writing. Her silence continued until her death, twenty-six years later.

What happened? This book proposes various possibilities, but the fact is that we can't be sure, because we know so little about Radcliffe: for an author of such fame, she kept an extremely low profile. Compared to the wealth of information we have about the lives of Scott, or Dickens, or the Brontës, Radcliffe is a shadow; and despite the heroic efforts of her biographers to wring as much meaning as possible from the scanty surviving sources, what she really thought about her art and her popularity is anyone's guess. The result is an ambiguity that repeatedly surfaces in the essays which compose this collection, whose fourteen authors have collectively attempted to situate Radcliffe firmly within the cultural and historical context of the 1790s. On Radcliffe's texts, her reception history, her sales figures, and her influence on contemporary literature, they write with fluency and authority; but when they attempt to discern her own beliefs and intentions, everything becomes a great deal more speculative.

Many of the authors of this collection will be familiar names to anyone working in the area of Gothic literature. Sue Chaplin, Diane Long Hoeveler, Jerrold Hogle, Edward Jacobs, Alison Milbank, Robert Miles, Dale Townshend, James Watt, and Angela Wright are all well-known within the field, and their collective expertise is clearly apparent in their essays here. (Diego Saglia, whose name will be familiar to Romanticists but not necessarily to Gothicists, also contributes an informative essay on the stage adaptations of Radcliffe's novels.) The short essay is a punishing form, but here it is for the most part used well, although the arguments of some of the chapters clearly strain under the tight word limits placed upon them. Highlights of the collection include Watt's carefully measured assessment of what we can deduce of Radcliffe's politics from her works (to which the answer turns out to be 'very little'); Hoeveler's exploration of the factors contributing to the popularity of Radcliffe's break-out novel, *The Romance of the Forest*; Chaplin's comparison of Radcliffe's novels with those of some of her contemporary imitators; and Jacobs' persuasive analysis of the impact which Radcliffe's stylistic and textual innovations had upon Romantic-era print culture as a whole.

Anyone who teaches an undergraduate or MA-level course which features Radcliffe will want to add this book to their reading lists, because it functions as a very convenient one-stop shop for students looking for information about Radcliffe's life, works, reception, and influence. Townshend and Wright's useful summary of the critical responses to Radcliffe will be especially helpful to students encountering her works for the first time, and I expect to see it cited in many, many graduate essays in the years to come. To the academic reader, it offers a helpful cross-section of the current state of Radcliffe scholarship, showing how the field has

progressed since the first wave of scholarly interest in Radcliffe in the 1980s. The last twenty-five years have added a great deal to our knowledge of the literary culture of the 1790s, and researchers in the field now have a much better understanding of how Gothic fiction was read, distributed, and published during these years; this, in turn, has made it possible to push past the long-standing caricature of the genre as mass-produced trash, churned out as fodder for ignorant patrons of circulating libraries. Many of the best essays in this collection make use of this new knowledge, offering new insights into Radcliffe's unique status within the literary landscape of her day, and the cultural impact of her immense popularity; others offer sensitive readings of her poetry and prose. Radcliffe herself, however, remains as elusive as one of her own spectres; and while her novels always took pains to provide rational explanations for such ghostly goings-on, her own literary vanishing act remains as unsettling as ever.

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