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The Heroine, the Abbey and Popular Romantic Textuality: *The Romance of the Forest* (1791)

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Chapter 6

The heroine, the abbey and popular Romantic textuality

The Romance of the Forest (1791)

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The great fairytale writer Andrew Lang once observed that The Romance of the Forest (1791) was not only his favourite novel written by Radcliffe but also ‘infinitely the most thrilling of modern English works of fiction’ (Lang 1900: 23). In order to understand why The Romance of the Forest assumed such popularity and prominence, and had such an extensive circulation via other media in the literary culture of Europe at this time, this chapter will summarise its major representations, adaptations and ideological concerns. In the desolate (and some would say haunted) Abbey of St Clair, deep in the forest of Fontanville, France, the heroine of Ann Radcliffe’s third novel discovers a rusty dagger, a crumbling manuscript and a skeleton in a chest, all the physical evidence she needs to prove that her evil uncle, the usurping Marquis de Montalt, murdered his own brother, seized his property and title, and thereby denied Adeline of her identity and birthright. The discovery of this evidence, and the fact that the crime was committed and hidden for many years in the heart of the abbey, suggests what critics have long recognised, namely that the haunted and ruined abbey stands as the locus classicus at the heart of the Gothic imaginary, the very repository of the historical and religious past that a modern, secularising culture was trying to bury. This chapter will examine Radcliffe’s novel by addressing three questions. Firstly, how does the text position its heroine as an exemplar of bourgeois and sentimental codes associated with femininity at this time? Secondly, how did the novel influence dozens of other Gothic, Romantic and melodramatic texts that directly emerged from a critical and imaginative engagement with it? And thirdly, how did Radcliffe’s attempt to rewrite the picturesque and travel genres intersect with a ‘ruins discourse’ to produce the highly charged construction of the Abbey of St Clair? Answering these three questions allows us to examine how and why The Romance of the Forest was so popular, both at the time of its publication and throughout the nineteenth century.
The sentimental/Gothic heroine

The heroine Adeline St Pierre-de Montalt is an early example of a sentimental ‘damsel in distress’, disinherited and dispossessed, while, at the same time, she is an early exemplar of a female Gothic detective, intent on solving the mystery of her identity and her father’s murder. At times, she appears to be nothing more than a victim; in fact, when she first enters the texts she is being literally passed from man to man as just so much excess and inconvenient baggage. When the novel opens she is being handed by a hired ruffian into the confused and baffled hands of a fleeing criminal, M. La Motte, who takes her with him and his wife to the crumbling and deserted Abbey of St Clair in a forest near Lyons. Later, La Motte hands her to X who hands her to Y who hands her to Z. The names and identities of the other men are less significant than the fact that Adeline exists in this text as a fetish of femininity, an exchange commodity between powerful men who use her as a pawn in their own vaguely homosocial schemes. That their schemes involve unpleasant activities such as fratricide, theft, blackmail and the usual unsavoury and unsubtle ploys that men use to gain wealth and status in this male-dominated society (southwestern France, c. 1660) should not surprise us. As both a sentimental and Gothic heroine, however, Adeline is victim and avenger, for by the conclusion of the novel she is able to bring her evil uncle to justice and regain her title and properties.

There is also a religious agenda depicted throughout this novel, with Adeline consistently coded for her British readers as a proto-Protestant who gains their sympathies by eschewing Catholic superstitions and instead praying to God directly, without a priestly intermediary, when she is in the presence of nature:

> The scene before her soothed her mind, and exalted her thoughts to the great Author of Nature; she uttered an involuntary prayer: ‘Father of good, who made this glorious scene! I resign myself to thy hands; thou wilt support me under my present sorrows, and protect me from future evil.’ Thus confiding in the benevolence of God, she wiped the tears from her eyes, while the sweet union of conscience and reflection rewarded her trust; and her mind, losing the feelings which had lately oppressed it, became tranquil and composed. (Radcliffe 1986: 22)

Adeline’s belief in God as the creator of a benign natural world suggests not only Radcliffe’s own brand of Latitudinarianism (Mayhew 2002) but also what has been called her own belief in a ‘Natural Theology’ (Chandler
2006) as distinct from traditional Anglicanism. Mirroring this external and benign world, the heroine is characterised as ‘tranquil’ and ‘composed’, demure, delicate and the very emblem of taste and decorum, the most important characteristics of the sentimental/Gothic heroine poised to do battle with assaults on her person as well as her soul.

In addition to a demeanour that spoke to contemporary sentimental codes of appropriate femininity, Adeline is a Gothic/sentimental heroine because her parentage is a source of sorrow for her. She believes that her mother died when she was seven years old, leaving her to be raised in a convent. Her father, a heartless tyrant, demands that she become a nun at the age of eighteen. When she objects, her father ‘denounce[s] vengeance on [her] head if [she] persisted in disobedience’ (Radcliffe 1986: 36). Adeline wants nothing more than to be a dutiful daughter, but she is instead forced reluctantly and unwillingly into the role of quasi-revolutionary:

‘Since he can forget,’ said I, ‘the affection of a parent, and condemn his child without remorse to wretchedness and despair – the bond of filial and parental duty no longer subsists between us – he has himself dissolved it, and I will yet struggle for liberty and life.’ (Radcliffe 1986: 37)

Radcliffe had explored this idea before in A Sicilian Romance (1790), and this time she revised the scenario ever so slightly. In this version, the evil father is not the heroine’s biological father. Whereas the earlier novel had the heroine excavating and rediscovering her imprisoned mother, The Romance of the Forest drops the mother altogether and has the heroine recover the identity, fate and property of her biological father, murdered by his brother, who later has the audacity to court his own niece, Adeline, in marriage. Adeline, like Julia before her, plays the part of the female Gothic detective, decoding the saga of this dysfunctional family romance and once again proving that masculine hubris, greed and ambition are no match for feminine ‘genius’.

Using her dreams as clues to the murder mystery that she confronts in the ruined abbey, Adeline can be seen as an almost biblical figure as well as a proto-modern, scientific one. Dreams have long functioned – in literature as old as the Bible – as privileged sites of meaning, transactions wherein highly charged signifiers intersect with highly ambiguous signifieds. Adeline’s dreams are, in fact, a veritable treasure trove of adolescent anxiety. The first one in the sequence reads as follows:

I thought that I was in a lonely forest with my father; his looks were severe, and his gestures menacing: he upbraided me for leaving the convent, and
while he spoke, drew from his pocket a mirror, which he held before my face; I looked in it and saw, (my blood thrills as I repeat it), I saw myself wounded, and bleeding profusely. Then I thought myself in the house again; and suddenly heard these words, in accents so distinct, that for some time after I awoke, I could scarcely believe them ideal – “Depart this house, destruction hovers here.” (Radcliffe 1986: 41)

The images are classic set pieces: the false father holding up the mirror to his daughter; the daughter wounded, beaten and bloody. The anxiety and blatant fear of menstruation and sexual assault are imaged here in ways that the author herself seems not to recognise. The house that holds ‘destruction’ is the heroine’s own body, changing without her wilful consent, a transformation that is instigated in some malicious and threatening manner by the father himself. Very shortly thereafter we are told that the heroine finds herself in her chamber with the ‘door locked’ (Radcliffe 1986: 41). Adeline falls asleep, thinking that men are coming in through the locked door. At first we think she is dreaming, but then men actually do appear and kidnap her, only to deliver her once again into the hands of Monsieur La Motte.

If the first dream serves as a précis of the first section of the novel, Adeline’s second dream introduces her to the next section of the narrative’s action. In this second dream she sees herself in a large old chamber of the abbey, long deserted and mysterious. Suddenly she hears a low voice calling her. When she attempts to find the source of the voice she sees a dying man, stretched on a bed, his face possessing ‘an expression of mildness and dignity’ (Radcliffe 1986: 108). His features convulse, and he grabs her hand:

she struggled in terror to disengage herself, and again looking on his face, saw a man, who appeared to be about thirty, with the same features, but in full health, and of a most benign countenance. He smiled tenderly upon her and moved his lips, as if to speak, when the floor of the chamber suddenly opened and he sunk from her view. The effort she made to save herself from following awoke her. (Radcliffe 1986: 108)

Before Radcliffe gives us time to interpret this scenario, however, we are presented with the third dream. In this oneiric sequence, Adeline finds herself in winding passages of the abbey at dusk, unable to find a door. She hears a bell toll, and then the confusion of distant voices. Lost and trapped, she suddenly sees a light and tries to follow it. It leads her to a man who looks as if he is trying to take her to a funeral. She is afraid to follow him, but he suddenly turns on her and begins to chase her. Her terror awakens her (Radcliffe 1986: 109).
As if three dreams were not enough, Radcliffe quickly gives us the fourth. Adeline returns to sleep as if to solve the mystery. In this final dream she follows the same mysterious man into a room hung with black wall hangings, prepared as if for a funeral. At the centre of the room stands a coffin, and while she gazes at it she hears ‘a voice speak as if from within’:

The man she had before seen, soon after stood by the coffin, and, lifting the pall, she saw beneath it a dead person, whom she thought to be the dying Chevalier she had seen in her former dream: his features were sunk in death, but they were yet serene. While she looked at him, a stream of blood gushed from his side, and descending to the floor, the whole chamber was overfl owed; at the same time some words were uttered in the voice she heard before; but the horror of the scene so entirely overcame her, that she started and awoke. (Radcliffe 1986: 110)

These four dreams, strung together as a sort of crude nocturnal melodrama, reveal the history and fate of Adeline’s father, imprisoned in the abbey by his avaricious brother, the evil Marquis de Montalt, and then murdered by him and left to moulder in a trunk that has been stored in the haunted Abbey of St Clair. Sent by fate to uncover and punish this horrible deed, Adeline has been taken to the one spot in the world where she can solve the crime. And not only does she have the moral force of justice and the inexorable laws of fate on her side but she also has feminine intuition – the ability to read her dreams – to lead her to the murderer. She may sleep no more that night, but the reader is left in no suspense as to the heroine’s ability to decode her dreams and solve the mystery of her identity and her own father’s murder.

If the four interlocking dreams are the dramatic highpoint of the first volume of the novel, the discovery of the rust-stained dagger and the ‘obliterated’ manuscript form the crux of the mystery in the second volume. With the dreams, we are in the very rudimentary realm of the unconscious mind; we are, in short, within the psyche and subjectivity of the Gothic heroine. But, as she is a heroine, her internal world is an exact replica of her external situation, a manifestation of the ‘attendant circumstances’, that mirroring of subjective and objective worlds, that Radcliffe had praised in Shakespeare in her posthumously published essay, ‘On the Supernatural in Poetry’ (Radcliffe 1826b). Inner reality reflects outer reality in a reciprocity that we know is only characteristic of the universe of moral allegory. With the dagger and the tattered manuscript we move to the ontological level of proof, the material clues that allow Adeline to close in on her suspect, the Marquis. Notably, however, the dreams have already
provided her with the bare outlines of the murder: the who, what, where and how of the crime. All she needs is the motive, and that is provided when she reads the manuscript, the written record of her father, kept in his own hand as he faced murder by his own brother. This device, the partial, fragmented manuscript, became after Radcliffe a stock Gothic trope. In fact, the unearthed manuscript henceforth became such a conventional trope that it was both ridiculed and valorised in several later Gothic (or anti-Gothic) novels. We can recall, for instance, the crumbled laundry list in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1798–9; published in 1818) or the ripped manuscript confession that is finally assembled at the conclusion of the novel to reveal the identity of the usurping murderer in *Phantoms of the Cloister; Or, The Mysterious Manuscript. A novel*, written by ‘I. H.’ and published in 1795.

Adeline is not able to spend much time with the manuscript because, right outside her bedroom door, the Marquis and La Motte are heard plotting as to how she will be handed over to the Marquis, who confesses that he ‘adores’ Adeline and hints that her father is in the vicinity, ready to hand her over to him if La Motte fails to cooperate in his lustful schemes (Radcliffe 1986: 116–17). At the mention of her father’s name, Adeline ‘shudders’ and sinks into ‘a new terror’ (Radcliffe 1986: 117). Like *A Sicilian Romance*’s Julia before her, this Gothic heroine believes her father to be her mortal enemy. In fact, what hurts Adeline even more is the realisation that her beloved parent-substitutes, the La Mottes, are in league with her father and the Marquis to betray her: ‘To discover depravity in those whom we have loved, is one of the most exquisite tortures to a virtuous mind. […] “Is this human nature?” cried she. “Am I doomed to find every body deceitful?”’ (Radcliffe 1986: 118). She believes herself to be in a desperate situation – with her father, ‘whose cruelty had already been too plainly manifested’, on one side of her – and the Marquis on her other side, ‘pursuing her with insult and vicious passion’ (Radcliffe 1986: 123).

Adeline does not, however, spend all her time reading musty manuscripts by candlelight. She has attracted the attentions of the young and attractive Theodore, a good and virtuous man who has been rewarded for his interest in her by being wounded during her attempt to escape the clutches of the Marquis. Adeline realises that she loves Theodore as she is waiting for his wound to be dressed: ‘Upon the whole, Theodore’s present danger, together with the attendant circumstances, awakened all her tenderness, and discovered to her the true state of her affections’ (Radcliffe 1986: 178). But, before the way is cleared for Adeline and Theodore to marry and live happily ever after, Adeline must once again fall into the
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clutches of the evil Marquis, who has finally solved his own mystery and realised the true identity of Adeline. He sees a mailing seal used by Adeline to send a letter to Theodore, and the family crest on it reveals to him the basis of his attraction to her. He has, he realises, been pursuing his own niece, only daughter of the brother he murdered years ago in the deserted abbey in the forest. The Marquis now even more avidly pursues Adeline, not to marry her but to murder her, for he realises that her continued existence threatens his hold on the estates that he inherited at the death of his brother.

Yet again Adeline stumbles into another surrogate family – the La Lucs – and finds another sibling figure in their daughter Clara and another father in Monsieur La Luc, also recovering from a wound in his arm. As luck would have it, M. La Luc just happens to be Theodore’s father and Adeline, the surrogate ‘daughter’, can now become officially accepted into the family through her marriage to Theodore. The novel concludes, like the French melodrames of the time, with a courtroom scene and a trial that exposes evil and dispenses justice, the existence of the dagger and manuscript providing the crucial material evidence against the present Marquis. At the trial of her uncle, Adeline learns the secret of her lost parentage and receives a miniature portrait of her mother from a distant relative. This moment is crucial, for the mother is now understood to be irrevocably dead, nothing more than a vague portrait whose features are recognisable but hazy. Identifying the father, exposing his cruel murder, punishing the murderers, enshrining his manuscript as a ‘relic’, finding his bones and interring them in the family vault – these are the tasks that consume the Gothic heroine who ‘was suffered to live as an instrument to punish the murderer of her parent. […] Justice, however long delayed, will overtake the guilty’ (Radcliffe 1986: 343). But justice has not been simply meted out, for Adeline recognises that in this chain of events there has been a ‘design’ wrought by God and not the mere ‘works of chance’ (Radcliffe 1986: 346). As the date for the verdict approaches, the evil Marquis poisons himself, as evil people in eighteenth-century Gothic romance are wont to do, such as Father Conrad in Joseph Fox’s Santa-Maria; or the Mysterious Pregnancy (1797) or the Duke of Placenza in T. J. Horsley Curties’s The Monk of Udolpho (1807). Thus, the way is now clear for Adeline and Theodore to marry and live happily ever after in M. La Luc’s parish, where he presides as an idealised father (Rousseau without the sexuality) over the entire community. With his wife’s remains buried close by, La Luc is the perfect patriarch presiding over a happy community: the ‘venerable La Luc, as he sat among the elder peasants, surveyed the scene – his children and people thus assembled
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round him in one grand compact of harmony and joy – the frequent tear bedewed his cheek, and he seemed to taste the fullness of an exalted delight’ (Radcliffe 1986: 362). Treading ‘the flowery scenes of life’ (Radcliffe 1986: 355), Adeline and Theodore live surrounded by their friends and family, affording to all observers ‘an example of trials well endured [...] virtues greatly rewarded’ (Radcliffe 1986: 363). Read allegorically, Adeline (meant to be read as a ‘British’ Protestant heroine displaced on French soil) is an ambivalent signifier who makes necessary forays back into her country’s murky Catholic and corrupt past (and uncovering scenes of murder, mayhem and injustice) but is finally able to eradicate the abbey of its Catholic past so that it can be respectfully buried, laid to rest and exorcised. The conclusion of the novel presents a heroine who is finally able to endorse a vision of the precariously grasped future, the ideal of a companionate marriage functioning in harmony with a Protestant and benignly reformed patriarchy. This British Gothic heroine, like Julia before her, also earned her popularity by maintaining the façade of femininity even as she functioned as female Gothic familial detective, a highly charged signifier of both earlier, sentimental codes of behaviour and a newer, conflicted modernity for her reading public.

The literary circulation of *The Romance of the Forest*

So powerful was the trope of the ruined Gothic abbey after the publication of Radcliffe’s novel that Jane Austen began her writing career attempting to satirise its status in her own first foray into novel writing, *Northanger Abbey*. Abbeys as literary settings were all the rage in England, as evidenced by George Moore’s magazine serial publication of *Grasville Abbey* (1793–7), Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’ (1798) and Peacock’s *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), to name only the most obvious examples. The prominence of the ruined abbey in British Gothic literary works has long been explained as part of the drive towards the numinous, or as a manifestation of the Burkean dimension of the sublime (Tarr 1946: 115). For instance, in his *General Character of the Gothic Literature and Art*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge observed that ‘Gothic art is sublime. On entering a cathedral, I am filled with devotion and with awe; I am lost to the actualities that surround me, and my whole being expands into the infinite; earth and air, nature and art, all swell up into eternity, and the only sensible impression left is “that I am nothing!”’ (Coleridge 2001: 2.79). But it would have been much more likely during this period to have entered a demolished Gothic cathedral that had been destroyed and ransacked by Thomas Cromwell’s
troops during the dissolution that occurred between 1536 and 1541. Within a generation of that event, there was rage, resentment and genuine antiquarian angst about the horrendous loss of historical and cultural treasures caused by the widespread violence and destruction (Macaulay 1953: 343). The ruined Gothic abbey – like Tintern or the ruined monasteries at Melrose, Bury St Edmunds, Glastonbury or Faversham – became by the end of the seventeenth century ‘admonitory receptacles of a vanished yet recoverable past’ (Aston 1973: 254), sources of ‘a nostalgia which can merge with concerns for history’ (Aston 1973: 254). And, by the end of the eighteenth century, Gothic novelists were full participants in this nostalgic antiquarianism, touring not only Britain but also France, Italy, Germany and Spain in search of lost monasteries as well as Roman and secular ruins such as Pompeii and Herculaneum. Indeed, historical novels began very specifically to locate their action within the turmoil created by the dissolution of monasteries, for instance *Sir Ethelbert: Or, The Dissolution of Monasteries, A romance* by Catherine Cuthbertson (1830).4

But, before the appearance of the novelistic retellings of the work, there was a popular dramatic adaptation written by one of Radcliffe’s most assiduous followers. On the night of 25 March 1794, three years after the publication of *The Romance of the Forest*, the theatre historian and playwright James Boaden produced his *Fountainville Forest*. Opening to a large crowd and playing successfully for several weeks, Boaden bragged that he intended to out-Gothicise the high priestess of the Gothic herself. He ensured his theatrical success by emphasising in his play the supernatural elements of the novel and brandishing a real ghost in at least four scenes. Whereas Radcliffe took great pains to explain away all of her uses of what appeared to be supernatural trappings, always relying on rational and commonsensical explanations, Boaden instead emphasised the dream scenes, the discovery of the missing manuscript fragment and the eerie ghost sent as a messenger to the dispossessed heroine. The play was revived and ‘compressed into four acts’ on 8 January 1796 at Covent Garden. In addition, there was a dramatic adaptation written by William Dunlop titled *Fontainville Abbey: A Tragedy* and produced in 1807; while on 9 March 1824 a melodrama based on the novel, *Fontainville Abbey; or, The Phantom of the Forest*, was produced at the Surrey Theatre in London.5

George Moore’s magazine serial publication of *Grasville Abbey* (1793–7) would appear to constitute the earliest and arguably the most popular adaptation of Radcliffe’s novel.6 Richard Warner’s *Netley Abbey*7 appeared in 1795, followed closely by John Palmer’s *Haunted Cavern: A Caledonian Tale* (1796).8 A year later, *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey* was published
by Mrs Elizabeth Carver. In 1799 Ann Ker’s *Adeline St Julian* appeared. With little respite, T. J. Horsley Curties’s *Ancient Records: Or, The Abbey of St Osuythe* (1801) and *Adelaide; or, The Chateau de St Pierre* (1806) appeared, the latter supposedly written by Maria Edgeworth but most likely composed by one of the anonymous ‘hack’ writers in the employ of the notorious publisher J. F. Hughes. Towards the end of the High Romantic/Gothic period, novels such as Ann Mary Hamilton’s *Montalva; or Annals of Guilt* (1811), Catherine Ward’s *Mysteries of St Clair; or Mariette Mouline* (1824) and Mary Sherwood’s *Convent of St Clair* (1833) went back over the same terrain, revealing that the nostalgia for a lost architectural heritage was mingled with an ambivalent embrace of a very different, vaguely modernising and secularising ethos.

But the numerous British adaptations of this novel are only part of the story. As Summers shows, the novel was translated almost immediately into French in 1791, and then again in editions that were published in 1796, 1800, 1802, 1819, 1831 and 1869. In addition, it appeared in a German
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translation in 1793 and in Italian editions in 1869 and 1871 (Summers 1941: 138–9). Its popularity throughout Europe suggests that its thematic concerns and imagistic tropes spoke to a culture that was deeply ambivalent about the familial, religious and social changes that were occurring not simply in Britain but in France and Germany too. Figure 6.1, the frontispiece from the 1796 French edition, suggests that the novel was also being marketed there by emphasising its ‘damsel-in-distress’ theme rather than its architectural portraits of decayed and ruined monastic properties.  

The picturesque and the ruins discourse

Although it may appear that the Abbey of St Clair is a mere architectural prop in the tale of Adeline's quest-romance, the ruined setting can in some ways be read as almost another character in the novel. It is lovingly and minutely described by the author (Radcliffe 1986: 15–17), and it is returned to over and over again throughout the novel's action. It contains winding staircases, towers, turrets, multiple apartments, hanging tapestries and a mysterious dungeon that holds a skeleton. Readers certainly were attracted to the romantic tale of Adeline and Theodore, and were undoubtedly held in suspense as the former battled her wily and evil uncle Montalt. But finally they seem to have been enchanted, entranced and mesmerised by the Abbey of St Clair itself, at one time a monastery where monks chanted hymns and lived in harmony with the natural world. In more recent times, the abbey was something altogether more sinister. In addition to the nostalgic bows made to the ruined abbey, there was also a darker, more Gothic nod made to its existence as a sanctuary for superstition, idolatry and Catholic mummeries. For British Protestant culture the abbey was most consistently figured as a scene of blasted promise, a tainted abode of Catholicism and finally a testament to the omnipotence of mortality and death. The ruined abbey functioned as a two-sided emblem of, firstly, architectural nostalgia and, secondly, the very rapid historical and religious transitions and necessary modernisations that were being embraced by an emerging Whig and Protestant consciousness.

When Henry VIII seized Catholic monasteries and abbeys for the aggrandisement of his own treasury, as well as for the benefit of his political supporters, the act was viewed by Catholics as a ‘sacrilege’ and a desecration of holy property. It was also a sort of primitive plundering in the manner of the old Viking raiders, an act that recalled the Gothic invasions on the Roman Empire during the fifth century AD. Horace Walpole, the first Gothic novelist, was most intent on reviving interest in the Gothic
ruin, and his estate, Strawberry Hill, along with his literary portrait of the Castle of Otranto in his eponymous novel (1764), stood as testaments to this antiquarian nostalgia. But Walpole was certainly not alone in his obsession with ivy-covered abbeys, decaying cathedrals and faux ruins. A discourse on the importance of architectural ruins and their recovery began in the late seventeenth century, a discourse represented by tomes such as *Monasticon Anglicanum: Or, The History of the Ancient Abbies, and Other Monasteries, Hospitals, Cathedral and Collegiate Churches in England and Wales [...]* by William Dugdale and Roger Dodsworth, originally published in Latin in 1655 and translated into English in 1693. Countless other such antiquarian texts, including William Stukeley’s *Itinerarium Curiosum* (1724) and Francis Grose’s *The Antiquities of England and Wales* (1773–84), were published during the eighteenth century, and they produced for gentlemen with the leisure to engage in such pursuits an ambivalent sense of living in a Britain that was at war with itself and its own historical heritage.

On one hand, the antiquarian sensibility mourned the loss of a Tintern or a Melrose Abbey, similar to what Pierre Nora has called ‘les lieux de mémoire’ (Nora 1989: 7), topographical protrusions of history that serve as ‘sites of memory’, while on the other hand the secularising and Protestant agenda demanded that these seductively beautiful structures be abolished in favour of the simpler Anglican chapel and the much safer, nationalistic Anglican ecclesiastical hierarchy. Radcliffe enunciates this dilemma succinctly when she observes in her *A Journey Made in the Summer of 1794 [...]*: ‘though reason rejoices [that monastic institutions] no longer exist [in England], the eye may be allowed to regret’ their absence (Radcliffe 1795: 250). Penning something like her own version of the Grand Tour as seen through the eyes of a British matron, Radcliffe participates in her Protestant culture’s anxiety about the residue of Catholic practices in countries that were otherwise quite charming and attractive. As Clare Haynes has demonstrated, despite claims that the cultural elite had moved much beyond the lower-class prejudices against Catholics, anti-Catholicism, in fact, pervades the literature of the Grand Tour well into the nineteenth century. And, although generally considered the province only of the lower classes, anti-Catholic attitudes pervade this elite literature because maintaining these attitudes ‘was essential both to Protestant identity and [paradoxically] to toleration’ (Haynes 2010: 195).

In a similar vein, it is worth mentioning a work such as William Shenstone’s ‘The Ruin’d Abbey; or, The Effects of Superstitions’ (c. 1750), a poem that has been recognised as participating in the agenda of ‘Whig
triumphalism’, an ideology that required the erasure of Catholicism from the landscape through the eradication of its monasteries as a necessary precondition (Tumbleson 1998: 201). No longer monuments to the ‘pride of ancient days’, the monasteries now are merely visual stimuli, picturesque ruins
to glad the sons
Of George’s reign, reserv’d for fairer times!
(Shenstone 1967: 555–6)

In such works, Catholicism is presented as alien and monstrous, ‘a transgressive other that must be erased’ so that the ‘ideologically constructed eternal present of mercantilist progress and sentimental virtue’ can be assured (Tumbleson 1998: 198, 201). Radcliffe discloses similar sensibilities when she hears about the Poor Clares of Cologne on her travels through Germany: ‘Accounts of such horrible perversions of human reason make the blood thrill and the teeth chatter’ (Radcliffe 1986: 188). Certainly, it is interesting that a number of bourgeois British women writers with ties to Unitarianism and Dissenting circles, such as Ann Radcliffe and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, led the crusade against the residual evils of Catholicism still visible in the landscape, and that ambivalently depicting the ruined Gothic abbey stood at the heart of their ideological agenda.

Francis Grose’s *Antiquities of England and Wales* charts his travels around the British countryside, on the hunt for the ruins of his country’s Gothic past. When he approaches the subject of Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries, Grose resorts to citing the historian Thomas Burnet on what his emissaries found: ‘in many places, monstrous disorders, the sin of Sodom was found in many houses; great factions and barbarous cruelties were in others’ (Grose 1773–6: 1757). And when he arrived at Wenlock Monastery in Shropshire, he observed that:

The common people have an absurd tradition of a subterraneous communication between this House and Bildewas Abbey; which has not the least foundation in truth, the nature of the ground rendering such an attempt impracticable; but, indeed, there is scarce an old Monastery in England but has some such story told of it, especially if it was a Convent of Men, and had a Nunnery in its neighbourhood. These reports were probably invented and propagated in order to exaggerate the dissolute lives of the Monks and Nuns; and thereby to reconcile the Multitude to the suppression of Religious Houses. (Grose 1773–6: III. n.p.)

But, if the ruined abbey was the site of superstitious falsehoods perpetrated in order to justify the confiscation of the properties and their wealth, the
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The abbey was also a shrine to this lost religion, as Grose’s visit to Tintern Abbey suggests:

On the whole, tho’ this Monastery is undoubtedly light and elegant, it wants that gloomy solemnity so essential to religious ruins; those yawning vaults and dreary recesses which strike the Beholder with a religious awe, and make him almost shudder at entering them, calling into his mind all the Tales of the Nursery […] the whole is comprehended, nothing being left for the Spectator to guess or explore. (Grose 1773–6: II. n.p.)

In the same year, Joseph Strutt published his elaborately illustrated Regal and Ecclesiastical Antiquities of England (1773), and he too takes his readers on a ramble around the ruined abbeys of England. But, as I have noted, this culture’s preoccupation with ruined abbeys was both anti-Catholic and deeply ambivalent towards the modernisation efforts that had been made at the expense of the Catholic cathedrals and monasteries that were destroyed during Henry VIII’s dissolution campaign. Moreover, and as the historian Geoffrey Elton has estimated, the property owned by the Catholic Church in the 1530s was one-fifth to one-third of all land in England (Elton 1974: 142), effectively meaning that Henry’s confiscation of the property and lands represented a substantial addition to Crown revenue and power. There would thus appear to be two competing and contradictory discourses about ruins in the Gothic: the first is that of anti-quarianism and the picturesque (with its fetishisation of the lost beauty of the ruined abbeys) and the second is a type of chastisement, a condemnation of the seductiveness of these structures that represent a medieval past that the modern Protestant consciousness deeply condemned. Certainly it is easy to focus on Otranto and Walpole’s nostalgic architectural work at Strawberry Hill and see the Gothic ruin as embodying this first sentimental/nostalgic strain. But, unless we also focus on the literary depictions of walled-up niches in which murdered nuns were (supposedly) found in Netley Abbey or the Abbey of Coldingham (as in Walter Scott’s Marmion (1808)), we are not examining the full portrait of the Gothic ruin and the ideological role it played in so many Gothic and Romantic texts in the period.

We might well ask what it was about the ruined abbey or chapel that so intrigued, enchanted and seduced the British Protestant imaginary. As much as Catherine Morland was chastised when she attempted to read Northanger Abbey as a ruined abbey, the contemporary reader of Gothic texts has been told to ignore that skeleton in the chapel, or better yet, to view it as a conventional trope or prop in a duplicitous
supernatural game. Instead, I think it more appropriate to recognise the Gothic’s investment in the property once owned by the Catholic Church and seized from it by the monarchy as being part of a larger discursive system about modernisation and secularisation, about the attempts of a growing bourgeois population to stamp out the vestiges of superstition in their midst and codified in concrete terms in the abbeys and blasted cathedrals that dotted the landscape of Britain. There is no question that visiting Gothic ruins and ruined abbeys was a popular tourist activity during the eighteenth century, and certainly the shrine at St Winifred at Holywell came to be frequented almost exclusively by Catholics, while ‘Protestant authorities made few moves, in the eighteenth century, against meetings at these places’ (Haydon 1993: 71). But, if Catholics were attempting to re-sacralise certain locations, Protestants were attempting to reclaim others as sites of secular consecration, and perhaps none is more famous than Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’ (1798), and, later, the sonnets he collected as the ‘Dissolution of the Monasteries’ in his *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* (1822).

Haunted priories, ruined abbeys and desolate cathedrals, their ceilings gaping at the sky and overgrown with mould, were key tropes in the Gothic arsenal and have been much commented on by literary critics over the years. Indeed, the cathedral of Madrid and the catacombs of St Claire in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) were read by Peter Brooks as a locus that put the Enlightenment reader in touch with ‘the realm of dreams, spooks, interdicted desires […] the unconscious’ (Brooks 1973: 262–3). But I would claim that these locations also very specifically put Enlightenment readers in touch with their own political and religious past – that is, the historical legacy of Henry VIII and the dissolution of monastic properties between 1536 and 1541 that allowed the king to seize the capital of the Catholic Church as he shored up his own political and economic status and the loyalty of his aristocratic supporters. Of the sepulchre that lies beneath the Convent of St Clare, Brooks goes on to note that it ‘represents the interdicted regions of the soul, the area of the mind where our deepest and least avowable impulses lie, and at the novel’s climax the characters are driven unconsciously, but all the more powerfully, to go to confront their destinies in the sepulchre’ (Brooks 1973: 258). But the sepulchre is not simply some Freudian id writ in stone and mortar into which the Gothic protagonist descends; it is also the very real historical residue that defines the actions and attitudes of late eighteenth-century British citizens who confront and do battle with the heritage of Catholicism that lingers (like dead bodies in mouldering trunks) in their culture.
The heroine, the abbey and popular Romantic textuality

Notes

1 Although all quotations from *The Romance of the Forest* in this chapter are taken from Chloe Chard’s Oxford World’s Classics edition (1986), an earlier edition of the novel, with an Introduction by Devendra P. Varma, includes a discussion of the novel’s influence on the canonical Romantic poets (Varma 1974).

2 The contours of the Freudian ‘family romance’ have long been recognised in Radcliffe’s novels by a variety of literary critics, most notably Elisabeth Bronfen (1994). I have also discussed this compulsive pattern of behaviour at greater length, and in the context of all of Radcliffe’s works, as an example of what I have called ‘gothic feminism’ (Hoeveler 1998).

3 Rictor (Norton 1999: 75) claims that Radcliffe made an early visit to Netley Abbey, near Southampton, and would have known of the legend of the Abbey. As Townshend (forthcoming) has demonstrated, prescient dreams featuring Catholic clergy were associated with the Netley Abbey narrative of desecration. When a carpenter named Taylor bought Netley Abbey from a Sir B., he was warned by a ghostly monk in a dream not to deface the property or he would suffer death. The next day, in the act of bringing down the roof, he was crushed and killed.

4 Sir Ethelbert uses the context of Henry VIII and the Pilgrimage of Grace to present a romance. Anti-Catholic in tone, it contains numerous condemnations of ‘Catholic superstitions’.

5 For a discussion of Boaden’s life and works, as well as reprints of all his dramas, see *The Plays of James Boaden* (Cohan 1980).

6 Maurice Lévy has declared that *Grasville Abbey* was the most popular Gothic novel at the end of the eighteenth century (Mayo 1974: v), and it is unique for being the first serial novel published in a magazine, in this case the *Lady’s Magazine*, appearing in instalments over a period of four years (1793–7).

7 *Netley Abbey* concerns the evil deeds of the villain, Sir Hildebrand, in league with the corrupt monks of Netley Abbey, who have transformed sections of the Abbey into a prison for the torture of Agnes Warren, the target of Hildebrand’s desires.

8 Eldred, the hero of this novel that is set in the Highlands during the reign of Henry VI (1422–71), discovers a skeleton and the rusty dagger of his missing, presumed-dead father in an underground Aberdeenshire cavern.

9 *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey* concerns the heroine Laura, pursued by the lecherous Lord Oakendale and trapped by him in a nightmarish abbey with walking spirits, open coffins and horrifying crypts that hold bodies stolen from the grave for use in medical dissections.

10 Set in the Languedoc region of France during the reign of Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu (1585–1642), the novel explores Adeline’s attempts to unearth the mysteries of her mother’s death and her own imprisonment in Castle St Julian and its adjacent monastery, both presided over by her evil and persecuting father, the Count Victor St Julian, and his accomplice, the lecherous inquisitor Father Dampiere.
Curtis’s novel is set in France during the reign of Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou. It focuses on the heroine, Rosaline, who opens a coffin to discover a mass of tangled skeletons and partially decomposing bodies.

A review of the novel can be found in ‘Novelists’ in Flowers of Literature for 1806: ‘We were much surprised to find that the puerile and inconsistent novel of Adelaide was written by [Edgeworth]. Abounding with caverns, groans, shrieks, murders, hobgoblins, and all the wretched mummeries of the Radcliffean school, it is, in every respect, far below the former works of Miss Edgeworth’ (Anon. 1806: lxxv).

Deborah Kennedy has noted that the ruined abbey runs as a leitmotif throughout the Gothic tradition: ‘Whether responding with religious awe, curiosity, or anti-Catholicism, people found in ruined abbeys an image of a religious past to be addressed in the present’ (Kennedy 2001: 504). Michael Charlesworth has gone further, arguing that the ruined abbey represents not simply religious anxiety but also ‘Whig doubt and guilt about their desecration of the sacred relationship between king and nation’ (Charlesworth 1994: 75–6). Myrone has summarized this position: ‘it was the associated guilty fears about superstition and Catholicism which underpinned the revival of the Gothic in its various manifestations in the later eighteenth century’ (Myrone 2006: 108).

The fact that the novel was so immediately popular in France may be explained partially by the fact that, as Mayo has demonstrated, Radcliffe’s novel was most likely based on the plot of Francois-Guillaume Ducray-Duminil’s Alexis, ou la Maisonette dans les bois (1789), which Mayo believes Radcliffe read in the original French (Mayo 1941).

See Janowitz (1990) and Townshend (2011) for helpful discussions of the prominence of the ruin in eighteenth-century literary culture.

Also see Woolf (2003: 290) for a discussion of ruined abbeys as lieux de mémoire.

For a fuller discussion of the political context of the poem, see Stewart (1996).