

Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*

Summary (LM): *Ellen Moers sees in Radcliffe's heroines an expression of literary feminism which she calls heroinism. Heroinism takes many forms, such as the intellectual or thinking heroine, the passionate or woman-in-love heroine, and the traveling heroine. Radcliffe's heroines fall into the category of the traveling heroine, "who moves, who acts, who copes with vicissitude and adventure." Threatened and beset, the heroine is forced to flee her home or her refuge; her flight allows her to experience exciting adventures.*

Ann Radcliffe, the greatest practitioner of the Gothic novel, was the most popular writer of her day and, in her moral views, among the most conventional. She is surely the last of turn-of-the-century writers to whom we would look for the expression of feminist doctrine. Nevertheless, the Gothic fantasies of Mrs. Radcliffe are a locus of heroinism which, ever since, women have turned to feminist purposes. Feminism and heroinism can often be seen to touch in women's literature, but they are not the same.

Ann Radcliffe began to write fiction at almost the same moment as Mary Wollstonecraft, and she too had an idea of female selfhood. But it was not the thinking woman, not the loving woman, but the traveling woman: the woman who moves, who acts, who copes with vicissitude and adventure. For Mrs. Radcliffe, the Gothic novel was a device to send maidens on distant and exciting journeys without offending the proprieties. In the power of villains, her heroines are forced to do what they could never do alone, whatever their ambitions: scurry up the top of pasteboard Alps, spy out exotic vistas, penetrate bandit-infested forests. And indoors, inside Mrs. Radcliffe's castles, her heroines can scuttle miles along corridors, descend into dungeons, and explore secret chambers without a chaperone, because the Gothic castle, however much in ruins, is still an indoor and therefore freely female space. In Mrs. Radcliffe's hands, the Gothic novel became a feminine substitute for the picaresque, where heroines could enjoy all the adventures and alarms that masculine heroes had long experienced, far from home, in fiction....

The travel motif in women's literature seems, however, to require separating into its two distinct kinds: indoor travel and outdoor travel....

It was *only* indoors, in Mrs. Radcliffe's day, that the heroine of a novel could travel brave and free, and stay respectable. Today young women make headlines by hijacking planes and carrying machine guns to bank robberies, but quite impossible for the Emilys and Evelinas of early women's fiction were the moderately adventurous outdoor activities by which, say, a Tom Jones could establish himself as a hero: blacking an eye, climbing a tree, fighting a duel...

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.... where Ann Radcliffe writes about the horrors of a woman's life with a woman's sense of decorum, there she is very close to Fanny Burney, whose career as a novelist began over ten years before and ended over ten years after Mrs. Radcliffe's.

Fanny Burney's principal gift, as diarist and novelist, was for comic dialogue, and Mrs. Radcliffe, as far as we know, never cracked a smile, yet the real relationship between them has emerged more clearly with the passage of time. This is not merely because *The Mysteries of Udolpho* reads much less frightening today, more down to earth (and, all unconsciously, much funnier); while *Evelina* (and *Cecilia* and *Camilla* as well) reads much less funny than Burney intended, much more strained, extreme, fantastic, and even frightening in the impossible trials to which the heroine is subjected. The perils that threaten *A Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (the subtitle of *Evelina*) seem to issue from the same grim realities of eighteenth-century girlhood that inspired Mrs. Radcliffe's Gothic: the same unjust accusations and uncaused severities; the same feminine malice and masculine cruelty; the restraints on her freedom, all the way to actual imprisonment; the mysterious, unexplained social rituals; the terrible need always to appear, as well as always to be, virtuous; and, over all, the terrible danger of slippage from the respectable to the unrespectable class of womanhood.