

Ann Radcliffe's Ruminations on the Ageing Body in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791)

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Abstract. In the third volume of *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), Ann Radcliffe introduces an ageing clergyman, Arnaud La Luc, who is the philosophical and spiritual foundation of his parish. La Luc's ill health concerns his parishioners, who convince him to undertake a journey to the south of France for recovery. This article engages with Radcliffe's reflections on ageing and the end of life through the Gothic. Writing in her twenties, Radcliffe imagines the physical and emotional strains that might "shatter[]" La Luc to "infirmity" as his body gives way to consumption and is further weakened by threats to his son's life (Radcliffe 2009, 348). Each new setting from the Maritime Alps to the French Coast fails to cure the consumption wrecking La Luc's body, and yet, in the novel's closing chapter, Radcliffe grants this ailing figure a miraculous recovery. This choice underscores the value of ageing figures, and the importance of intergenerational exchange. La Luc embodies tradition, experience, terrestrial limits and celestial expanses and symbolises the grace acquired in ageing (Dekker 2005, 108-11). His journey is paralleled with the movements of Adeline, a young heroine trying to escape despair. Through the presentations of the ageing clergyman and the teenage heroine, this article considers how mental strength is tempered by frailty in Radcliffe's Gothic novel.

Keywords: Ann Radcliffe, ageing, death, Female Gothic, eighteenth century, travel narratives

In their recent chapter "No Country for Old Women", Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik reflect on ageing in the Gothic. They suggest that the fate of older women in Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian* is troubling, as these figures are set in opposition to the vitality of her heroines. As they put it: "the figure of the older woman lurks in the background, in the shape of the mother who is frequently absent, dead or thought to be dead"

(Zlosnik and Horner 2016, 186). Such a reading demonstrates the multiplicity and gendered experience of growing old and points to the capacity of Radcliffe's work to be read as a study on ageing. Similarly, Angela Wright references the reaction of the hero, Vivaldi, in *The Italian* towards Signora Bianchi as an exemplar of Radcliffe's critical awareness of the ageing female in a patriarchal society.

Radcliffe takes care, I think, to reveal slowly his flawed, biased approach to women; his tendency to deify the young and beautiful heroine, and to dismiss all other female characters within the novel as mere adjuncts to the young heroine. (Wright 2016, 22)

However, Radcliffe's third novel, *The Romance of the Forest* (*Romance*), is conspicuously absent from these analyses. In this novel, Radcliffe offers perhaps her most extensive reflections on ageing men and women through a diverse cast of figures at different life stages. I deliberately use the term 'stages' rather than 'ages' here, as Radcliffe does not always measure chronometric time (Baars 2016, 70). Her heroine, Adeline, is "about eighteen", and her villain, de Montalt, is "about forty". The term "about" speaks to the uncertainties of time, a reality we all live with, that is amplified in the Gothic (Miles 2020). The ages of many of the characters in Radcliffe's novel are left to the reader's conjecture.

The Romance of the Forest explores the senescence of the body and maturation of the mind. Life experience becomes a significant theme in the final volume as Radcliffe incorporates elements of Rousseauvian education into her narrative (Wright 2013, 98-9; Radcliffe 2009, 249). Unlike Zlosnik and Horner, who focus on female ageing, this paper considers the ailing figure of Arnaud La Luc, a clergyman introduced in the third volume of the novel. Suffering from consumption while trying to raise his daughters and act as a spiritual guide to his parishioners, La Luc undertakes a journey in pursuit of health from Savoy to the south of France. Travel for health became increasingly popular in the Romantic imagination from the late eighteenth century; different locales and methods of travel promised different cures (Chard 2014). Through La Luc's expedition in *Romance*, the reader is invited to reflect on recuperation, melancholy and tenacity and to consider ageing a mental and physical process (Radcliffe 2009, 278). His experience is paralleled with the teenage Adeline, in search of "calmness" and "resignation" after a series of escapes and separation from the hero, Theodore (Radcliffe 2009, 288).

Daniel Couégnas has made a strong case for the paraliterary characteristics of Radcliffe's writing as she incorporated or influenced other genres, including melodrama, sentimental novels, and the fantastic (Couégnas 2006, 322). The experimental third volume of *Romance* introduces elements of travel writing and resembles Tobias Smollett's *Travels through France and Italy* (Chard 2009, 392; Dekker 2005, 112). Smollett published a series of letters in the mid-eighteenth century on touring southern Europe, where he "hoped the mildness of the climate would prove favourable to the weak state of [...his] lungs" (Smollett 1778, 10). In Radcliffe's novel, La Luc travels to Nice for an almost identical purpose to benefit from the "soft and salubrious air" of the south (Radcliffe 2009, 280). However, La Luc asserts, before beginning his sojourn, "[l]et us trust in God, my friends; he has power to heal all disorders both of body and mind" (Radcliffe 2009, 278). For the clergyman, faith is the only cure-all. Arnaud La Luc's journey appears completely unnecessary to the wider plot. However, I hope to demonstrate that this section of the novel is a balancing act, which invites comparison between a young woman seeking the stability of self that comes with experience (Bronfen 2014, 164) and an ageing man attempting to cling to life despite his frail and failing body.

To better understand the complexity and presentations of age(ing) in *Romance*, I will begin by reflecting briefly on the plot and some of the core cast who do not feature in La Luc's journey from Savoy. The novel starts by following the escapes of Pierre de La Motte from the "persecutions of the law", and Adeline from a father she believes has betrayed her (Radcliffe 2009, 1-11). Over the first two volumes, Adeline lives with the La Motte household in the ruins of St Clair Abbey as their ward and then as a prisoner. At the abbey, she is vulnerable to the Marquis de Montalt, a nobleman who owns the forest and ruins that the household has made their home. When Adeline attempts to run from the Marquis, with the support of Captain Theodore Peyrou, she is captured and returned to La Motte's guardianship. Meanwhile, Theodore is court-martialled for resisting his Colonel's orders and desertion. After imprisoning Adeline, de Montalt realises that the heroine is not only resistant to his marriage plans but is also his niece with a rightful claim to his estate. Therefore, he shifts his scheme to murder (Radcliffe 2009, 226).

None of the figures introduced in the first two volumes of the novel could be described as elderly. Although Pierre and Madame La Motte have reached middle age, having raised their son, now an adult, they are both described as highly reactive and sensible figures, prone to dissipation. Pierre La Motte

“was a man, infirm in purpose and visionary in virtue: in a word, his conduct was suggested by feeling, rather than principle; and his virtue, such as it was, could not stand the pressure of occasion” (Radcliffe 2009, 2). Despite being a father figure in the novel, La Motte’s “infirmity” and spontaneity of “feeling, rather than principle” speaks to immaturity. Hence, he sharply contrasts with figures such as the unbending, coercive Marquis and the principled clergyman. As I mentioned in the introduction, Philippe de Montalt is relatively ageless. “He appeared to be about forty, but, perhaps, the spirit and fire of his countenance made the impression of time upon his features less perceptible” (Radcliffe 2009, 87). Radcliffe suggests that he possesses an energy that subverts the aesthetic impacts of time. Resistance to temporality is a characteristic shared by malicious figures in the novel. The discrepancy between his age and appearance renders the villain unquantifiable before his nature and crimes have been revealed.

Diane Long Hoeveler explores the potentially subversive heroine figure in the Female Gothic tradition. She suggests that Radcliffe’s heroines, from Julia (*A Sicilian Romance*) to Ellena (*The Italian*), are a progressively nuanced expression of the “personal and social anxieties” facing middle-class, late-eighteenth-century women (Hoeveler 1998, 55). One of the qualities of a Gothic heroine that Hoeveler repeatedly identifies is youthfulness:

But that is the very meaning and substance of life for the female gothic heroine: she lives suspended in the realm of experience deferred, poised between childhood and adulthood, forever in the act of becoming someone. The goal for a heroine can only be to remain a young woman, free from the ravages of time and the decay of the body. (Hoeveler 1998, 84)

As readers, we will never see Adeline age. However, in *Romance*, Radcliffe offers poignant moments when youth and age intersect and overlap, and experience might be conferred from an older to a younger generation. This is best encapsulated in La Luc’s journey to the south of France. The gendered dimension of these paralleled ageing journeys, while not the focus of this article, would bear further reflection in future research. It is not irrelevant that Adeline is a young woman. Her journey is one of emotional rather than academic or physical development as it plays into discourses around female education and sensibility.

As Alan Richardson notes, the concerns of educational and gothic literature overlap. In Radcliffe's third and fourth novels, both benign patriarchs and malign villains subscribe to Rousseauvian schemas, proving that

the line between pedagogy and tyranny is an uncomfortably fine and unstable one, particularly given the agenda for perpetuating male domination built into most of the period's programs for female education. (Richardson 1994, 204)

Despite the frailty of his body, La Luc remains a patriarchal figure, empowered by educational authority.

In the novel's third volume, Adeline comes to the home of Arnaud La Luc, his daughter, Clara, and his sister, Madame La Luc. As a father figure to his family and the wider community, the clergyman is described in very different terms to his reactive counterparts, the La Mottes. La Luc lives "in tranquillity" in the Savoy Alps, managing his "tender melancholy" after the death of his wife over a decade earlier (Radcliffe 2009, 246-7). He is regarded as a "venerable" leader within his parish, Leloncourt (Radcliffe 2009, 258). Geoffrey Scarre suggests that 'venerability' "is a doubtfully desirable status in the human case considering that it is usually accorded only to persons who are feeble and ailing" (Scarre 2016, 96). Scarre's contention is around the use of 'venerable' to describe ageing people. Following his line of analysis, I would suggest that the respect afforded to La Luc gives the impression that he is much older than other characters in the novel, including would-be peers, the La Mottes. It also implies his frailty. The clergyman is a liminal figure existing on the boundary of life and death. Despite the implication throughout his journey to Nice and Languedoc that his consumption is terminal, he recovers in the final chapter in the climes of Montpellier before returning to Savoy. The novel closes with La Luc "sat among the elder peasants", shedding tears as he watches over a younger generation celebrating their reunion. Radcliffe suggests that senescence, while inevitable, is "idiosyncratic", an important contention highlighted by scholars in ageing studies (Scarre 2016, 94). To some extent, Arnaud La Luc's survival creates ambiguity around ageing and the trajectory from ill health to death.

La Luc's journey for health is set in opposition to Adeline's quest for mental, physical, and emotional equilibrium. Adeline first arrives at La Luc's chateau suffering from the effects of fleeing France and her worries over the welfare

of her imprisoned lover, Theodore. It is one of several bouts of illness which are physical manifestations of Adeline's anxieties (Bronfen 2014, 166). For example, in the very first chapter of the novel, the heroine becomes feverish and unresponsive after being rescued from criminals (Radcliffe 2009, 11). Likewise, she faints upon meeting de Montalt and collapses once again when he attempts to forcefully seduce her (Radcliffe 2009, 87 and 158). At the novel's end, Adeline finds the truths revealed at La Motte's trial difficult to face (Radcliffe 2009, 341). Elisabeth Bronfen suggests that this "gap in consciousness becomes a symptom even as it shields her from the lethal, archaic knowledge about to engulf her" (Bronfen 2014, 165). While a resident at La Luc's chateau, "Adeline, assisted by a fine constitution, and the kind attentions of her new friends, was in a little more than a week so much recovered as to leave her chamber" (Radcliffe 2009, 258). The heroine's ability to rapidly recover is a testament to her youth and concomitant "fine constitution". However, her new home, family and treatment, even the alpine terrain, do little to cure her "unceasing anxiety", which "corroded her heart, and embittered every moment of reflection" (Radcliffe 2009, 259). Adeline is increasingly discomposed: asleep, she cannot escape the "exaggerations of terror" for Theodore, and awake, "a dreadful despair would seize her [... and] threaten to bear down every barrier that fortitude and reason could oppose" (Radcliffe 2009, 260). Adeline's fear is a sickness so consuming that it may render her senseless or perhaps suicidal. "Fearing longer to trust her own thoughts, she would hurry home, and by a desperate effort would try to lose, in the conversation of La Luc, the remembrance of the past" (Radcliffe 2009, 260). While Adeline's body can heal, unlike La Luc's, her mind is rarely at ease, and she finds the elderly clergyman a tonic for her anxieties.

There is a comfort derived from La Luc's company, which comes from his sense of perspective. This might be what Scarre considers the ability of older people to look past the "trivial" as they age (Scarre 2016, 96). The experience of becoming a widower and of tempering his grief affords La Luc an ability to escape "temporary disappointment" through a "romantic sadness", "which elevated his mind above this world, and opened to his view the sublimity of another" (Radcliffe 2009, 247). His conversation is a "refuge from misery" (Radcliffe 2009, 260) for Adeline because it speaks to limitlessness. The clergyman has accepted mortality while finding joy in his polymathic appreciation for art, music, literature, languages, and science (Astronomy) (Dekker 2005, 108). There is a mythic quality to La Luc's knowledge, and it seems particularly interesting that the clergyman

can cushion painful (sur)realities. "Calamity taught him to feel with peculiar sympathy the distresses of others" (Radcliffe 2009, 245). Although he has experienced a loss like the one Adeline imagines, he is no longer driven to the same kind of "dreadful despair" at the thoughts of his late wife that the heroine faces when she meditates on Theodore's position. Life experience and acquaintance with "the frailties of mortality" (Radcliffe 2009, 274) is both a character trait and a service. Radcliffe implies an inherent value in ageing, as "calamities" produce empathy, stability and comfort in one's own company. La Luc does not resolve Adeline's fears, but his presence and conversation absorb her nervous energy. Hence rather than presenting La Luc as someone always in need of support, Radcliffe shapes intergenerational relationships as an exchange.

George Dekker suggests that La Luc embodies "a larger and less selfish understanding of patriarchal obligation" (Dekker 2005, 108). I believe La Luc's age is a critical component of this identity. While Dekker uses "larger" in the spatial and familial sense, in other words, an obligation to his parishioners outside the walls of his family home, the largeness of La Luc's obligations can be read as temporal. Although other figures in the novel, including the hero Theodore, represent a "benevolent patriarchy" (Dekker 2005, 110), La Luc demonstrates this as a tradition transferred between generations. This resonates with Scarre's comments on ageing, as he suggests that "the old form a bridge between the young and those who have gone before" (Scarre 2016, 96). Dekker terms La Luc an "interstellar tourist", as

his study of astronomy permits him, without stirring from his hall, to 'launch' beyond the normal limitations of the human sphere into regions whose multiplicity, immense distances, and sublimity far exceed those even of the Alps or the ocean. (Dekker 2005, 108)

The "limitations of the human sphere" are not only reimaged by La Luc but tested by his survival. While Dekker reads the clergyman's recovery from consumption as "wish-fulfilment" on Radcliffe's part (Dekker 2005, 112), I think it can be taken as a statement on tradition, as La Luc embodies and models stability and grace for a new generation. His survival is, therefore, necessary.

Having explored the teenage heroine's despair before joining La Luc on his journey to the south of France, I will now turn to the clergyman's "declining health" and "languid countenance" (Radcliffe 2009, 277). The

clergyman gladly offers time, energy and, where possible, fiscal support to his parishioners in Leloncourt. His journey to the south of France becomes a promise of survival to them:

His parishioners felt the life of their pastor to be of the utmost consequence to them. It was a general cause, and they testified at once his worth, and their sense of it, by going in a body to solicit him to leave them. He was much affected by this instance of their attachment. Such a proof of regard, joined with the entreaties of his own family, and a consideration that for their sakes it was a duty to endeavour to prolong his life, was too powerful to be withstood, and he determined to set out for Italy. (Radcliffe 2009, 278)

This scene demonstrates not only La Luc's integral role within his community but also the republican character of the village. Here the residents are at liberty to go "in a body" to petition the local landowner, La Luc (Dekker 2005, 110). More importantly, the views of the collective are "too powerful to be withstood". The "flourishing, healthy, and happy" (Radcliffe 2009, 240) community maintained by the curate is likewise invested in his individual corporeal experience. He is duty-bound to attempt a difficult recovery far from home, despite his faith that in death, the righteous "shall meet in a state where sorrow never comes" (Radcliffe 2009, 327).

So, La Luc departs Leloncourt with Clara, Adeline, and Peter (a servant) in a melancholy procession which evokes a funeral. It is a sequence Radcliffe would reuse in her fourth novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (Dekker 2005, 112-3).

As he moved slowly on he cast a lingering look at his little home, where he had spent so many peaceful years, and which he now gazed on, perhaps for the last time; and tears rose in his eyes; but he checked them. (Radcliffe 2009, 279)

Radcliffe's sentence structure here is protracted, breaking the line in several places with commas and semi-colons. The reader is forced to give pause, to "linger" like the clergyman as he rides away from his parish. The party moves from Savoy through the Maritime Alps, awe-inspired by the "solitary grandeur" of scenes like "those produced by the lonely visions of the Poets" (Radcliffe

2009, 279-80). Radcliffe brings her reader closer to understanding "life to be very precarious" (Radcliffe 2009, 278) through the inherent transience of journeying and an acute awareness of the severity of La Luc's condition. She also emphasizes "solitude", which speaks to a wider eighteenth-century concern with isolation (Goodson 2002). Contemporary works such as Johan Zimmerman's *Of Solitude* suggested that old age and youth are interestingly united in benefiting from "occasional retirement": "to congratulate ourselves upon the tempests we have survived" or "to obtain that train of thought which is to guide us through life" (Zimmerman 1797, 6). The journey in *Romance* offers periods of reflection critical to Adeline and La Luc's recovery and their stages in the ageing process. In the south of France, the heroine grapples with being directionless and unsure of her future while the clergyman faces the challenge of survival. In many ways, Radcliffe's writing entangles different perspectives and moments in the ageing process rather than implying a vast distance between age and youth.

La Luc's journey to the south of France is an "experiment" governed by the ebb and flow of his illness. After three weeks in Nice, his consumption worsens, and he is prescribed a "sea voyage", and if that too fails in improving his condition, "the air of Montpellier" (Radcliffe 2009, 291). La Luc's decline in the ancient town is a sharp contrast to the increasing independence and composure of the heroine, as "the variety and novelty of the surrounding scenes amused her mind" (Radcliffe 2009, 287). The passage of time is a recurring theme in the novel, regularly introduced by Adeline as she 'repeats', 'recites' or 'recalls' poetry, with seven different poems included in this journey alone. For example, "Sunrise: A Sonnet" closes with the lines: "So life's young hour to man enchanting smiles, / With sparkling health, and joy, and fancy's fairy wiles!" (Radcliffe 2009, 282). Youth is presented as a fanciful albeit temporary period of "sparkling health". The hope of sunrise is naturally dampened by the course of the day. The sense of solitude and deeply poetic appreciation for nature is an example of the sentimentalism that Radcliffe incorporated into her Gothic romances (Miles 1995, 123). The maturing heroine has been forced to abandon the joys and lightheartedness of her youth through the realities of being pursued by de Montalt and having lost Theodore. Daybreak on the clifftops of Nice offers her moments of sublimity and enchantment, which perhaps draw her back to the freedom and fancies associated with the young. Once she sets sail to a new province with La Luc, an awful sense of uncertainty once again consumes her thoughts: "my future view is like the waste of waters that surround me" (Radcliffe 2009, 292).

Just as Adeline is overwhelmed by the “waste of waters”, the coast is intimately connected with the vacillations of La Luc’s condition. While “his spirits revived” on the boat to Languedoc (Radcliffe 2009, 296), the clergyman faces a rapid decline shortly after docking when he learns that his son has been sentenced to death (Radcliffe 2009, 306). La Luc transforms from an ageing man recovering his vitality, as he animatedly discusses the activities of the coast, to one who is “feeble and overcome with grief” (Radcliffe 2009, 309). His children, Clara and Theodore, mark this decline. For example, Clara confides in Adeline: “I shall lose my dear father too [...] I see it; I shall lose my father and my brother together” (Radcliffe 2009, 310). Similarly, Theodore is struck by the “ravages which illness and calamity had made on the features of his parent” before the clergyman collapses “shuddering, and complaining he was very cold” into a chair in Theodore’s cell (Radcliffe 2009, 312). The imperilled position of his son drives La Luc to the precipice of death. E.J. Clery suggests that in Radcliffe’s novels, “[t]he wrecks of castles and human bodies alike testify to their function as theatres of the passions” (Clery 2004, 60). La Luc’s body becomes a theatre upon which our fears around frailty are performed and through which the value of older persons is embodied. Here Radcliffe demonstrates once again that life and lives are entangled; that the young and old are contingent.

La Luc is determined to use his remaining energy to protect his son and petitions the King in Paris, undertaking another risky and extensive journey across France:

‘If I sacrifice the small remains of my life in the service of my child,’ said he, ‘I shall lose little: if I save him, I shall gain everything. There is no time to be lost – I will set off immediately.’ (Radcliffe 2009, 314)

As La Luc’s statement indicates, he believes little “remains” of his life, and all of it is worth risking for Theodore’s cause. Much like Adeline’s fainting spells, La Luc’s despair on failing to secure a pardon, and fatigue at travelling between the Languedoc and the capital, physically manifest in his “shattered [...] frame” (Radcliffe 2009, 325). Radcliffe reminds us that “grief might be fatal” (Radcliffe 2009, 325), and it seems that of the sicknesses facing La Luc’s ageing body, it is the threatened loss of a child (his heir and legacy) that breaks his resiliency.

After promising the hero's death within hours, and his father shortly thereafter, Radcliffe provides a last-minute salvation: Adeline must stand witness at La Motte's trial in Paris, thereby revealing the machinations of de Montalt and absolving Theodore. While delaying and eventually preventing his son's execution, the trials are a period of purgatory for La Luc in the south of France, unable to travel to Montpellier to recover or to Paris to gain an audience with the King. During these legal proceedings, the "extreme weakness and lassitude to which [...La Luc] was reduced made travelling [to the capital city] impracticable" (Radcliffe 2009, 336). La Luc appears close to death as his body has been pushed to its limit by consumption, stress, grief, and, ironically, extensive journeying. Even after his son is proven a victim of the Marquis' manipulation of the justice system, the clergyman's condition remains terminal: "the languid smile he assumed seemed to express that her solicitude was vain, and that he thought his health past recovery" (Radcliffe 2009, 337). In this scene, Arnaud La Luc embodies all the characteristics associated with ageing and death. Theodore asserts in what he thinks is his final hours that "[t]he sharpness of death consists in parting with those who are dear to us; when that is passed, death is disarmed" (Radcliffe 2009, 327). With his son's safety guaranteed by Adeline's intervention, it seems that for La Luc, "death is disarmed". Christopher Cowley reflects on the ways we might "come to terms with death" through "reconciliation", "life review", and an acceptance that life will come to an end, a tranquillity or *ataraxia* (Cowley 2016, 204). La Luc's languid smile speaks to such peacefulness, unlike the worries of Clara, Theodore, and Adeline.

As noted at the beginning of this article, Radcliffe's works have many paraliterary features, and the author became known for her arguably predictable resolutions (Miles 1995, 55). La Luc journeys on with Clara to Montpellier, where the "climate" finally seems to have the desired effect. So, Radcliffe concludes La Luc's journey in the company of his children, visiting first Adeline's estate (included in the extract below) and then his own parish.

When La Luc, thus restored to those most dear to him, looked back on the miseries he had escaped, and forward to the blessings that awaited him, his heart dilated with emotions of exquisite joy and gratitude; and his venerable countenance, softened by an expression of complacent delight, exhibited a perfect picture of happy age. (Radcliffe 2009, 357)

Writing in her mid-twenties, Radcliffe imagines “happy age” as an essentially peaceful state of reflection and perhaps premonition, contingent on the happiness of those you hold dear. *Romance* does not make an emphatic statement on ageing. As Clery notes, it “is, among other things, a fascinating novel of ideas” (Clery 2004, 70). By entangling Adeline’s emotional explorations with the health of La Luc, the novel encourages us to “read the beginning in the end and the end in the beginning” (Baars 2016, 82), to reflect on what ageing might look and feel like, both for those becoming adults and for older people considering their past and future. Radcliffe demonstrates, above all, an appreciation for the delicacy of life and the destabilising factors in survival.

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