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## Novel Horizons

Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* showcases rural, wilderness, and outdoor landscape spaces in stark contrast to the interior spaces of the castle and the convent that enables a discussion of the limited power of the women characters, in both interior and exterior spaces. The text focuses the discussion of the power and agency of Julia in the non-domestic realm as she expands her limited perspectives through: her access to the transcendent sublime using a study of nature, romance, and artistic expression; her escape from domestic imprisonment utilizing the exterior wilds; and the courage she shows in spite of the dangers of discarding the domestic sphere to venture out into the exterior wilderness.

On another level of comparison, the wilderness scenes of this novel also mirror the expansive possibilities of the genre of novel writing. Reading a novel, similar to having experiences in the outside world, may also expand perspectives by providing access to the sublime, enabling escape from domestic exile, and commenting on the possible dangers of an expanded intellectual perspective. Like the similarly unknown and unsafe (but simultaneously freeing and enlightening) wilderness scenes in this novel, the novel genre becomes a gateway to freedom, enlightenment, and danger for readers like Julia de Mazzini. Her connection to the rural landscape allows Julia to access the sublime, making transcendent connections to happiness,

love, bliss, and joy. She discusses how the, “wild and picturesque scenery ... formed a grand and sublime picture in the background of the scene” (6). She increases her knowledge of nature, art, and romance through her interaction with the natural landscape. These key exterior points of access to the sublime allow Julia to express her individuality, freedom, emotions, and artistic and romantic desires in a space that is distinctly different from her confining interior spaces. This free expression of her own talents, skills, wants, and desires shows her increased power and agency in her world, while her private interior spaces show how limited her power currently is. Julia, “secretly sighed for a view of that world, from which she had hitherto been secluded ... (6). She is intelligent and longs to augment her experiences in the world existing beyond her castle walls, which eventually leads to her rebellion against her father and the Duke, showing her increased power to affect her own life.

Beginning with Julia in her closet looking out the window, she wishes she could experience the outside world, but is basically imprisoned in her home. She idealizes nature through her limited view of it - the window in her reading closet, and her view of the woods from the pavilion. These views of the natural spark Julia’s creativity and imagination. Initially, she accesses knowledge of the world and the sublime through her limited window and pavilion views, but predominantly through her reading of novels:

Julia, who discovered an early taste for books, loved to retire in an evening to a small closet in which she had collected her favorite authors. This room formed the western angle of the castle: one of its windows looked upon the sea, beyond which was faintly seen, skirting the horizon, the dark rocky coast of Calabria; the other opened towards a part of the castle, and afforded a prospect of the neighboring woods. (5)

The words used in this passage like “opened towards,” “western,” “skirting the horizon,” and, “afforded a prospect,” all reveal that Julia is looking forward to her future, and that she desires to participate in the natural world she can currently only see at a distance. Right now she is unable to act on her desires, showing the limited control she has in her interior space. She indulges her desires and dreams in her protected closet space, with its view of the sea, the woods, and the mountains. This view of the larger world is associated with her novel reading. Julia looks out the window to illustrate her imprisonment in the domestic interior space. This imprisonment contrasts with her urgent desire to participate in the exterior spaces, so she may possibly increase her agency and interaction with the rest of humanity. Her novel reading in the closet becomes a vehicle to further expand her sphere of knowledge, and view of the world, while imprisoned.

Julia’s artistic expression in nature is the key to her increased freedom. This intellectual power gives Julia greater access to the sublime, and therefore knowledge. She is happy that, “Books, music, and painting, divided the hours of her leisure, and many beautiful summer – evenings were spent in the pavilion ...” (7). Her creation of romantic, naturally themed poetry empowers Julia as an artist, and works in tandem with the landscape sections. Nearly every outside section has a poem associated with it. She doesn’t just read the poetry, she performs it. She is also an accomplished musician who plays the “piano forte” (22). She actively engages in artistic work and expression. She expresses awe of nature through her poetry and singing. She shows more freedom of personal expression in the outside spaces that illustrates just how intellectually confining her life in the interior of the castle is.

A glimpse of the sublime found through romance can have rewards and dangers. Julia experiences this when de Vereza leaves, and she wonders about her new feelings as she describes how her “imagination soared into the regions of romantic bliss” (23). The downside to this transportive bliss is that without his presence she feels bereft. The contrasts between private versus public spaces are illustrated again by the initial use of Julia’s reading closet with its limited view of the outside, and then her subsequent escape to the seashore to pine for Vereza. This outside artistic expression allows her to participate more fully in her exterior environment, and shows that she is beginning to be comfortable in the outside spaces. Julia brings her private thoughts into the public sphere with her use of Art to express her feelings. She goes outside in the landscape to connect with the natural sublime and performs her art in a public space. She goes out into nature where:

she loved to indulge the melancholy of her heart in the solitude of the woods. One evening she took her lute to a favorite spot on the seashore ... The beauty of the scene, the soothing murmur of the high trees, waved by the light air which overshadowed her, and the soft shelling of the waves that flowed gently in upon the shores insensibly sunk her mind into a state of repose. (42)

She uses words like “beauty,” “soothing,” “soft, and “flowed gently,” to describe her natural surroundings and to mirror her emotions, and the music she creates. She thinks she is alone while accessing the sublime of nature and art, but Vereza sees and hears her. He is privy to her private emotions and professes his love for her, which leads to further transcendent joy at the feeling of being loved and loving someone in return.

The link between the dangers of the sublime romantic to novel readers is shown when Julia is up late reading, “a favorite book ...,” when the, “beauty of the night attracted her to the

window ...” (9). She is again reading novels, and starts looking outside her interior space. Julia’s new improved perspective of her larger world (thanks in part to her novel reading), allows her to consider the possibility of her escape from her interior domestic patriarchal prison. She will venture into the wild and dangerous world of the rural landscape, and from there possibly to physical freedom and freedom of expression as a woman. Julia places herself in danger with these new perspectives. She has given over her former ignorant happiness in nature and art to her idealized romantic notions that may lead her to danger and disillusionment. Her happiness seems dependent on the Count de Vereza’s love and not for herself anymore. Her sense of self-worth had been put in jeopardy. There is a major danger of romantic idealization here that highlights the dangers of unrealistic expectations of romance that are tied to both the natural landscape and to the novel genre. But Julia stymies her progress on the path to enlightenment when she says, “All her former pleasures now appeared insipid ...” (23). She stops taking joy in the simple things she used to love like reading and music, because she has been exposed to new thoughts and feelings. This emotional danger Julia places herself in by falling in love with Vereza compares to the dangers of how novel reading could expose a young reader like Julia to new horizons, romantic pleasures, and imagined joys that they may or may not replicate in reality.

Julia’s escape from imprisonment of the domestic sphere is enacted through several key scenes in the novel. The release of the “imprisoned air” of Julia’s mother’s secret, subterranean domestic prison shows the dramatic contrast between her and Julia. Julia’s mother, the true Marchioness de Mazzini never actively seeks to escape her domestic prison (165). She simply gives up hope, and becomes the submissive domestic. She has no view of the outside world, and

no window to gaze out, except for her one brief look at her children, thanks to Vincent. She has no books to open her horizons. She attempts to dissuade Julia from rebelling against her father and seeking refuge in the wilds outside the castle. She knows the dangers of the outside and refuses to put herself in what she perceives to be more danger by attempting to escape her tortured but somewhat “safer” domestic experience. “‘Whither can I fly?’ Said the marchioness, deeply sighing,” Julia’s mother replies when Julia exclaims, “Oh! Let us hasten to fly this horrid abode – let us seek escape ...” (181). The true marchioness believes her place is in the home, and that she is safer there than in the outside, even though she is likely mistaken.

Emilia is much like her mother. Emilia is never outside, and also never ventures outside her expected domestic role. “Emilia, the elder, inherited much of her mother’s disposition.” Is described as having, “a mild and sweet temper” (4). Emilia does not expand her horizons with novels like Julia. She contrasts dramatically with Julia. She seems happy and complacent and is described as much like her mother. Knowing how her mother has accepted her fate of imprisonment in the subterranean passages of the castle, this passage really illustrates how Emilia might simply also accept her domestic role, like her mother because she lacks the desire to push the boundaries of knowledge about the outside world.

While Julia is still semi-confined within the “obscure recesses of St Augustin,” she illustrates further the limited power of women in interior spaces (116). The convent gardens allow Julia access to the freedom of an outside space, but she is still imprisoned. She will not be safe from her father or the Duke here either. She must go outside into nature in order to be at peace and work out what to do next. In order to escape her interior prison she must once again

brave the wilds. The closed mindset of the religious order about new ideas and going against patriarchal authority show how Julia is still limited in her ability to escape intellectual and physical restraint. This shows when she ponders the purpose of the convent, “Here prejudice, not reason suspended the influence of the passions; and scholastic learning ...” (116). The escape themes in this novel further illustrate the ability of the novel genre to provide freedom and escape for readers, as well as access to knowledge.

The novel is a wild genre that is open and allows for new, free thoughts and ideas, in contrast to the fixed ideas of religion, as they are practiced in this convent. Julia’s exposure to new ideas reveals the limiting conditions she has been living under due to her father’s tyranny and closed thinking. She needs to escape her current interior space which she describes a “vast monument of barbarous superstition,” in order to be free to express herself (117). The wild country landscape illuminates the dangers of escaping to the exterior world for Julia as well as the dangers she may encounter with her expanded perspectives about romance, art, and roles for women she may have learned from secular novels.

Julia is fully immersed in the wild, exterior spaces as the duke chases her through the forest, valleys, caverns, and subterranean passages. Physical danger truly comes into play here. The Duke’s quest to acquire Julia by any means necessary illustrates the possible violence that can happen when Julia steps outside her expected domestic role. She is at risk for death, forced marriage, abduction, or potential fates like Julia’s mother if she is unable to brave the dangers of the outside in order to escape the equally unsafe interior spaces. The duke is not afraid of the wilderness, but “Not so his attendants, many of whom, as the darkness increased, testified

emotions not very honorable of their courage: starting at every bush, and believing it concealed a murderer” (84). Julia is brave enough to avoid a domestic imprisonment with the duke.

The introduction of the dangerous banditti occurs outside as, “The duke listened with astonishment! Such social merriment amid a scene of such savage wildness, appeared more like enchantment than reality” (85). The Banditti scenes further enhance the awareness of the dangers caused by attempting to escape the interior. The “party of banditti seated within the deepest recess of the cave round a rude kind of table formed in the rock,” have an outdoor living space that is described as an interior home (85). They are at home in the wilderness. The banditti make their home in the caves, but they seek to imprison Julia in an interior space in the ruins. It is a case of mistaken identity, but reveals that the prisoner must be taken inside. Julia recounts, “They were taken from their horses, and conveyed to an interior part of the building ...” (111). The banditti take them inside to silence, hide, and re-imprison them. Perilous danger of death might be a reality, and strikes fear in the heart of Julia, but she again manages to escape. The dangers of the wilderness mirror the novel’s ability to expose minds to new ideas that may dangerously change a view of the world. This can be a dangerous, but ultimately rewarding experience.

Acquisition of new knowledge in the exterior world is the key to Julia’s formation as a young woman with increased agency in her own affairs. She dreams of a larger experience because she reads books and opens her horizons. This opening of horizons allows her to escape her interior, domestic imprisonment. But, she also opens herself up to the dangers of romantic idealism, the realities of escaping to the wilderness, and the dangers of new ideas that may



influence her development. The increased agency and empowerment of Julia through her reading of the novels, her foray into the exterior spaces, and her bravery in the face of danger assures that she will no longer be imprisoned in the familiar, and will instead escape through knowledge of nature, art and novels to take control of her life and future prospects.

## Works Cited

Radcliffe, Ann. *A Sicilian Romance*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2008, Print.