

THE MYSTERIES OF UDOLPHO

by Ann Radcliffe

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The *Mysteries of Udolpho* was published in 1794 and was the great template of the Gothic novel. Satirised by Jane Austen, reinvented by Emily Bronte, it is a powerful, imaginative, undisciplined original, the first and arguably the ultimate woman-in-peril story. It shifted copies like the kind of airport bestseller that in many ways it resembles. Australia's *Tabula Rasa* magazine describes Ann Radcliffe as the eighteenth century's Stephen King, and the comparison is an accurate one. She has a similar talent and imaginative energy, and often the same relish for excess. One critic has written:

"(This is) the great gothic classic, one that kept Jane Austen's Catherine up all night in **Northanger Abbey**. The opening is pastoral and didactic, but soon the novel turns into an exploration of lyrical, sexualized terror. You think the novel can't maintain the level of dreamlike, romantic nightmare nor its sexually charged atmosphere; but as you move from a vast abbey in the woods, to a surreal Venice, to the castle where rape and torture seem but a page away, the tension builds."

In Emily St Aubert, Radcliffe created the prototypical Romantic heroine. In Montoni, the charismatic and menacing uncle into whose power she falls and in whose castle the main action of the novel takes place, we see the first of the seductive Byronic villains. Although nominally set in the late middle ages, Radcliffe's Shakespearean disregard for historical accuracy ties its imagery to a much later era.

For a two-centuries-old, six-hundred-page bestseller, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* has survived remarkably well. It remains in print and is still read for pleasure as well as for its academic interest. When the Gothic Society held a poll of the membership to rename its quarterly magazine, *Udolpho* took the popular vote.

THE STORY

Emily St Aubert is the only surviving child of elderly parents with whom she lives on an idyllic country estate. Her life there seems to be charged with natural mystery; distant music heard at sunset, a sense of presence in her favourite places. Her father has retired to this spot, disillusioned but not disheartened by the world in which he made his modest fortune. He's seen the worst of his fellow-man, but continues to believe in the best. Right now life seems perfect, but he's wise enough to know that, like it or not, everything changes.

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Which it does. Shortly after the death of Emily's mother, St Aubert's investments suffer a fall in value and they're forced to close up the estate and travel in order to economise without humiliation. Leaving their neighbours the Du Ponts to keep an eye on their property, they set out on a version of the Grand Tour. During their travels they fall in with a young huntsman, Valancourt, who escorts and aids them through some dangerous country and who begins to form an attachment to Emily.

This isn't something that they can pursue, however, because Emily's father succumbs to the strain of travelling and becomes seriously ill. When he knows he's dying, he tells her of some hidden papers back at the estate which he charges her to burn without reading. He also makes her vow never to break up or sell the property.

Emily is delivered into the care of her Aunt, Madame Cheron, who's abrasive toward Valancourt when he presents himself to her but allows herself to be won over to the idea of a wedding when she learns that he's not quite as low on the social scale as he at first seemed... a second son with no inheritance and a commission in the army, he nonetheless has some connections of prestige.

In the meantime, however, the visiting Count Montoni has become Madame Cheron's lover and looks very coolly on the impending match, considering it inferior in the light of their own proposed marriage. They commandeer the young couple's wedding arrangements, Madame Cheron becomes Madame Montoni, and Valancourt is barred from seeing Emily. He meets her in the garden during the wedding ball and begs her to enter into a clandestine marriage with him, saying he's heard that Montoni is a man of broken fortune and a sinister reputation, but Emily isn't prepared to submit to the shame of such an act, however well he means it. Entirely dependent on her aunt and new uncle, Emily is then given no choice when the household decamps to Montoni's mansion in Venice on the way to Udolpho, the castle in Italy that Valancourt has warned her was acquired under curious circumstances. Montoni's first wife disappeared twenty years before, and all her properties transferred to him.

In Venice, things begin to go sour. Montoni vanishes to play the tables in private casinos, and his new wife finds herself largely abandoned. Emily finds herself the object of unwelcome attentions from a Count Morano, apparently with the active encouragement of Montoni. Emily doesn't know it, but he's effectively offering her for sale to the highest bidder – when she tries to decline Morano's proposal, Montoni tells her that she'll be married to the Count whether she consents to it or not. Finally it all falls apart like a house of cards... everyone apart from Emily has been keeping up a social front and hoping that their connections would bring them financial advantage. Like Emily, Madame Montoni has title to family estates but no actual money; Morano has even less than that. Disappointed both by his wife's and Morano's failures to bring the revenues he'd hoped for, Montoni mobilises the household and makes an urgent night-time departure to evade his creditors.

The castle of Udolpho proves to be an enormous edifice in some very wild country, an area that's overrun by banditti and seems very remote from the civilised world. Emily is given a room which has a door with the bolts on the outside. She barricades it while she sleeps... and when she wakes, sees that the barricade has been quietly rearranged. Exploring the building, she comes upon a set of locked apartments that

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she's able to enter and there finds a picture frame covered by a black veil; lifting the veil, she glimpses a famously hideous object that she believes to be the embalmed and decayed corpse of Montoni's first wife.

Udolpho is like Hamlet's Elsinore, its battlements under repair and horsemen gathering in the halls below the private apartments. Madame Montoni is starting to lose her grip. Her attitude towards Emily improves and she makes her a confidante, seriously regretting her marriage and this move. She reveals that Montoni is pressuring her to sign over her own estates to him.

Emily is left alone for much of the time, and in these moments seems to experience Udolpho on a different, almost supernatural plane. She hears footsteps outside the bolted door. She sees a figure on the ramparts where supposedly no-one walks. She hears spectral music in the night. Annette, one of the servants, conveys stories of the ghosts that supposedly haunt the castle and the stories behind them. Meanwhile, the gathering brigands are an implied sexual threat.

The biggest threat comes when she awakes to the sound of bolts being drawn and sees a shadowy figure entering her room; she's astonished to find Count Morano bending over her. He's followed them from Venice and bribed his way into the castle, and now tells her how Montoni reneged on the deal that would have delivered her to him; now he, Morano, has come to collect. Montoni is also fortifying the castle and recruiting brigands to pillage the surrounding countryside by force of arms. These are condottieri, state-sanctioned mercenaries who engage with the country's enemies and are allowed to keep whatever plunder they gather on the way. Montoni bursts in, and in the ensuing fight Morano is badly wounded and carried from the castle.

The gloves are off, now. Montoni stops pretending to be anything other than the ruthless exploiter that he is. Emily and Madame Montoni are obliged to be hostesses at a dinner for Montoni's new associates. It's like a nightmare. Montoni accuses his wife of trying to poison him and threatens to have her locked in the east turret if she resists his wishes any longer. There's no support for the women on any side. That night, Emily is unable to locate her aunt but finds a trail of blood leading to a locked door in the east turret.

As the company of brigands returns from its first foray, Emily learns that their loot includes prisoners for ransom. She confronts Montoni, accusing him of murdering her aunt and demanding to be allowed to return to France. Montoni concedes that he has no right to keep her there... but she'll stay nevertheless, simply because that is his will. He tells her that her aunt is alive, and that she can see her.

Allowed into the east turret, she finds Madame Montoni emaciated, wasted, and in a shocking state – Montoni is letting her die of neglect. As Emily nurses her, that night she sees the figure on the battlements again – and it beckons to her.

Montoni appears in the chamber for one last attempt to get his wife to sign away her property, and doesn't leave until she's unconscious. When he's gone, Madame Montoni rallies and warns Emily that as her closest blood relation, she'll inherit the property and Montoni will turn his attention onto her. That night, during a violent storm, Madame Montoni dies.

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In a famous set-piece scene, Madame Montoni is given a midnight burial in the castle's chapel vault. Montoni is not present, and Emily is her only mourner; the coffin is borne by ruffian condottieri. The service is conducted by a monk who moves to speak to Emily afterwards, but is bundled away.

In the immediate aftermath of the funeral, Montoni has Emily swept upstairs where he asks her to witness a deal that he's making with his friend Orsino from Venice. Distracted though she is, she realises just in time that this is a ruse to get her to sign away the estates that she's just inherited, and she refuses. He tries to flatter, persuade, cajole... and when all fail, he explodes. "You speak like a heroine," he says. "We shall see whether you can suffer like one."

The next afternoon, a coachload of women arrives from Venice. Party girls. As a consequence of being a base for brigands and a haven for fugitives like Orsino, Udolpho is becoming a debauched and lawless place. Emily tries to steer clear of it all, but is grabbed in the corridor by one of Montoni's lieutenants who tries to press his attentions on her... when she appeals to her uncle, she finds that he's withdrawn his protection as a means of increasing the pressure for her to sign.

She manages to get away and, that night, barricaded in her room for safety, hears again the spectral music that takes her mind back to the estate where she grew up. But who could know it? She starts to become convinced in her own mind that Valancourt must be among the captives being held for ransom, and gets her servant Annette to make enquiries.

Meanwhile Verezzi, the lieutenant who tried to press himself upon her, is clearly eyeing her and looking for another opportunity, all with Montoni's amused approval. You can stop living in fear, he's basically saying, if you'll just sign. Otherwise...

Annette's lover, a member of the castle guard, has brought something from the prisoner... a miniature of Emily herself. Surely the prisoner can be no-one other than Valancourt. We now learn that the prisoner has been bribing his jailers to let him walk on the ramparts at night, a place from which he had no way of escaping but from where he could catch a glimpse of Emily... this is the figure that she took for an apparition.

Emily offers all she owns – her jewellery, her personal property – to bribe those same guards to allow a meeting between her and the prisoner. It's arranged accordingly. She's led through enclosed passageways and back routes to a corridor where we see the figure from the ramparts, robed as before, and she runs into the arms of...

A complete stranger.

Well, not exactly. This is Du Pont, of the neighbouring family to her home estate, a man who's admired her from afar since childhood and who now proves to have been responsible for the sense of presence she often felt. He took the miniature from her home, and followed the French army into the region in the hope of finding her, only to be captured in a condottieri raid. Further explanation is cut short when Verezzi

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appears and jealously goes for Du Pont with a stiletto; but Du Pont is both hefty and handy, and after overpowering Verezzi takes the stiletto and turns on the guards.

Suddenly, they've a chance at freedom. They make their way through to the castle's inner courtyard and, when the gates are raised, sneak out amongst the horses that are being driven through. Stealing a couple, they make their escape from Udolpho; Montoni orders a chase after the discovery of Verezzi's body, but Emily and Du Pont get away. As the condottieri chase riderless horses, the fugitives head into the hills on foot.

Du Pont now has to handle disappointment when Emily tells him that she loves another. And while it seems like a poor reward for rescuing her, we can kind of see her point... Du Pont is blood-flecked and savage right now. He tells her that he recognises the name of Valancourt; an officer in the regiment that Du Pont set out to follow, the word is that he underwent a spectacular moral decline in the fleshpots of Paris after a failed love affair. But don't take my word on it, he says... you may think so little of me that I would lie to secure your affection.

Emily is all but destroyed by the news... the one thing that's been keeping her going has been the thought that she might eventually be reunited with Valancourt. She retreats into shock. Du Pont delivers her to a convent in the hills, where he makes camp outside the gates and stays there as a lonely sentinel while the nuns care for her.

No-one can get through to her other than the ageing Sister Agnes, who's not entirely compos mentis but whose story hooks Emily's attention; thought by everyone else to be a madwoman's fantasy, Emily recognises elements in her tale which suggest that she was actually Montoni's first wife and the Mistress of Udolpho, brought here by her father to save her from Montoni. Sister Agnes is dying, and in nursing her and being the first person ever to take her tale seriously, she both brings Agnes comfort and gets control of her own despair. But if this is, indeed, the Lady Laurentini of Udolpho, what did Emily see behind the black veil?

Meanwhile, Udolpho is under assault. The castle is well-nigh impregnable but a small band of French soldiers enter under the guise of returning condottieri and, once inside, draw their weapons and take the gatehouse. Among them is Valancourt, who pursues Montoni through the building for a swords-drawn showdown. Montoni is captured but not killed.

Up at the convent, Sister Agnes dies and her will is read. A newly-added codicil names Emily as the new Mistress of Udolpho.

Emily travels to the liberated castle and sees Montoni being taken away. But she's here to confront her fears in the locked apartments. Entering alone, she opens the shutters to daylight and then approaches the black veil. She tears it down to reveal, not a rotting corpse, but a wax memento mori effigy. Horrible, but not real.

She hears a voice, and turns. It's Valancourt. He's been told that she doesn't want to see him; he'll respect her wish and leave her alone, but first he wants to know why. So she tells him, and he's able to put her right. Under the influence of his brother-

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officers, he ran up some gambling debts and was briefly imprisoned. But it was a moment of economic weakness, not a lapse into depravity. The debts were paid and his name cleared. Hesitant at first, but then with all reservations forgotten, they embrace by the effigy.

Valancourt and Emily marry and settle on the old family estate. Udolpho is closed up. Our last sight of it is from the hills above the castle, as the solitary, brooding Du Pont rides away. He's a loner, heading off into who-knows-where... and as he looks back on Udolpho, there's a strange sense of affinity between the grim structure and the disappointed man. Another Montoni in the making, perhaps? He turns away, and rides on.

ADAPTATION

With the exception of a few dramatised scenes included within a BBC TV version of *NORTHANGER ABBEY*, *THE MYSTERIES OF UDOLPHO* has never been adapted for film, television or radio.

Why? Probably for a number of reasons. I referred to it as an undisciplined classic, and that's something of an understatement. The storyline above, while 95% pure Radcliffe, involves major editorial selection, omission and restructuring. The novel itself ranges around, digresses, stops, and often fails to match its invention with an equal sense of organisation. There is an entire and unlikely second plotline about Emily's ancestry. The first hundred pages consist of near-aimless travelogue, while the last hundred seem to be the work of an author resolutely dodging a conclusion rather than working toward one. She sets up some of the most memorable and understated supernatural effects in literary history, only to deflate them later with some of the lamest non-supernatural explanations on record.

UDOLPHO is more a work of great popular fiction than of great literature. It's also a major showcase for eighteenth-century attitudes on sensibility and the sublime. Radcliffe's achievement is in her energy, her imagery, and her ability to capture the imagination. Her descriptive writing – her famous 'word-painting' – can be exceptional, but her sense of structure and long-distance narrative control can best be described as relaxed. Yet the structure is there, albeit implied; after lifting out the central story, all one needs to do to bring it to a tight and satisfying conclusion is to gather up the loose ends that Radcliffe lets hang.

To reflect the spirit of the original, an adaptation should not be too well-mannered. This was a blockbuster whose four volumes "flew from hand to hand" in the evening by the fireside. It's the source of every *REBECCA*-like tale, of every 'old, dark house' story. It's *DIE HARD* in a castle. Given the frequent inclusion of entire poems and songs and the operatic extravagance of some of the emotions, there's almost a touch of Bollywood about it; and while I'd draw the line at a musical, I can see it as a sweeping historical thriller that moves along in the manner of Kapur's *ELIZABETH* or Kevin Reynolds' similarly anachronistic *ROBIN HOOD*, *PRINCE OF THIEVES*. It's theatrical, it's spectacular. Sir Walter Scott was an admirer, Coleridge wrote an appreciation, and Keats cited Radcliffe's work as an influence. Even *DRACULA* is a later, distant, yet distinct echo.

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To do Radcliffe justice, one should focus on getting the most out of the elements that work best. To make too much of those elements that have worn less well – or, even worse, to give in to the temptation of spoofing them – would be an act of poor faith.

The novel was composed and published in four volumes of roughly equal length. My first thought was to see if this would give us four one-hour episodes, but I reached a different opinion in the course of reading. I now believe that a feature-length adaptation is the optimum form, a single, forward-moving, momentum-gathering arc. A two-parter as second choice.

STYLE

Although the novel is supposedly set in 1584, Radcliffe depicts a world that is almost entirely contemporary. Just as Shakespeare presented an Elizabethan take on Ancient Rome, what she gives us is recognisably her own eighteenth century. While she describes landscapes in detail, she never describes clothes, furniture, or carriages, and all her other cues to the imagination are drawn from her own times and circumstances. Anachronism is an essential part of her style, much as one finds in Tim Burton's *LEGEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW*.

Where she excels is in her suggestion of the supernatural, the powerful feeling that one's surroundings are charged with hidden force and meaning. Her effects are simple and subtle, and chill without being improbable. The apparition on the ramparts immediately called to my mind the presentation of the ghost in Kosintsev's Russian film of *HAMLET*, the most genuinely spectral I've ever seen and achieved with nothing more extravagant than shadow, a low angle and an overcranked camera. Similarly, *Udolpho* itself recalls the Beast's castle in Cocteau's *LA BELLE ET LA BÊTE*.

The main criticisms that might be aimed at the story for a modern audience are that Emily can come over as a passive heroine, too much given to weeping and fainting, and that the plot moves forward as a series of incidents and coincidences without much sense of motivation. Can one address these without betraying the character of the original?

I believe so. To put it crudely, I'd allow her one fainting episode and maybe two well-separated bouts of justified weeping. As for Emily's passivity and the plot moving forward by unmotivated coincidences... put her in charge of her own fate and make those incidents her choices, and all falls into place.

Similarly, I'd plan a handful of key points in the script where a piece of all-the-stops-out landscape photography can take the audience's breath away, and otherwise let the element of travelogue fall into the background. And I wouldn't follow Radcliffe in giving a full (and often unconvincing) back-explanation of every supernatural effect – only those whose revelation moves the story forward, as with the disclosure that the 'ghost on the ramparts' was actually the heartsick prisoner from the dungeons.

The last half-dozen paragraphs of the above story outline are created from elements in Radcliffe, but are essentially new narrative.

PRODUCTION

It was rumoured that Ann Radcliffe's 'model' for Udolpho was actually Haddon Hall in Derbyshire, but while an English country house may have been a source of inspiration, a screen Udolpho would need to be a bigger, darker, stranger beast. One could go the GORMENGHAST route and make Udolpho a completely artificial (and extremely expensive) creation, but my feeling is that the unspoilt landscapes, 'fairytale' castles, and production economies of Eastern Europe are the way to realise a Radcliffean vision on a realistic budget.

In the adaptation, the novel's vast pan-European setting becomes focused into three main locales. The first is the lowland, pastoral, riverside setting of the St Aubert estates with the modest family home and the nearby, slightly grander house of Madame Cheron. In this area I'd also find the 'Grand Tour' locations, with the scenes to be given an extra visual lift by shots from the landscape unit (see below).

Then there's Venice. Ann Radcliffe's view of Venice derives entirely from contemporary travel writings and the paintings of Canaletto. To my mind it would be wrong to devote major resources to recreating Grand Canal vistas when Venice is, in effect, no more than a stopping-off place in the story; I'd aim to evoke it entirely through rococo interiors and a lantern-lit gondola ride in pitch darkness. Given that it's the place where Montoni gambles and acts as pimp to his oblivious niece, it's fair to equate Venice with modern Las Vegas and to seek to give it some of the feel of that artificially-lit, artificially-elegant, fundamentally venal playground. Montoni's Venice is a place whose denizens rarely step out of doors, and never in daylight.

Then finally Udolpho itself, the PSYCHO house on wooded mountaintop. The aim here would be to find a well-preserved and unspoilt castle that could provide both exteriors and interiors, where little construction would be called for, and where the visual tone would be set by rich costume and furnishing fabrics against bare stone and plaster. This same geographical area would ideally provide the convent and other 'bandit country' exteriors.

In addition to the above I'd have a second 'landscape' unit consisting of a minimal camera-only crew and a van, charged with the job of heading out into the wilderness for a week or so to get establishing shots, bridging shots and background plates of landscapes with the kind of dawn mist or sunset effects that will provide the Romantic sense of the 'sublime' that a first unit can't schedule or hang around for.

For wardrobe I'd start with a visit to The Black Rose neo-gothic clothing shop in Camden, and establish an Udolpho 'look' for the main section, varying and lightening this for the others. The opening section calls for earth and nature tones, Venice for more artificial colours and gilding; Udolpho I see as basic blacks with reds and beetle-wing highlights.

The key roles in casting are Emily and Montoni. The aim should be to find these players first, then cast Valancourt and Madame Cheron/Montoni to complement them, and then Du Pont to contrast with Valancourt. The part of Emily calls for an actress in her mid-20s with a visible intelligence. Montoni calls for an Alan Rickman-like complexity, otherwise he risks being just a Bond villain. Valancourt can be pretty

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straightforward – and straightforwardly pretty – but Du Pont should be more intriguing, as he's the character who has to learn to live without a happy ending.

I don't see this as a big special-effects show. Certainly not in the supernatural elements – these are edge-of-the-eye, WOMAN IN BLACK-style shadow effects, not GHOSTBUSTERS apparitions. The role I'd foresee for CGI would be in creating the condottieri hordes out of a handful of horses and extras, and in combining some main unit foreground action with second unit landscape plates.

If successfully done, the production would suggest the scale of Radcliffe's novel while keeping tight focus on less than a dozen main characters. Above all, it needs to move. The present-day reader might find the novel's mass of detail slow going, but for Radcliffe's readers it was the original 'unputdownable' tale.

TEXT AVAILABILITY

There are in-print editions from the Oxford University Press (in the Oxford World's Classics series) and from Viking Penguin. The text is reproduced online in the OUP setting at www.udolpho.com/udolpho. The complete text has also been scanned and made available for downloading from Project Gutenberg at <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=3268>.

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