The Archetype of the Terrible Mother in Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1790)

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Abstract

Rooted in Jung's theories of the unconscious, and further developed by scholars like Erich Neumann or Northrop Frye, the archetype of the Terrible Mother appears to emerge with special intensity at times of trouble and social unrest to remind us of our deepest fears. This article explores this archetype within the pages of Ann Radcliffe's gothic novel *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), examining the marchioness Maria di Vellorno as an embodiment of the evil stepmother figure, a common manifestation of the Terrible Mother archetype. By analysing the marchioness's controlling demeanour and the destructive attributes associated with the darker aspect of the Feminine, the paper reveals how Radcliffe's novel reflects the anxieties of late 18th-century England in the face of French revolutionary radicalism. The analysis highlights the Terrible Mother's links to social unrest and the triumph of English social order through the heroine's victory and the demise of the evil stepmother. The article contributes to understanding the psychological and cultural meaning of the Terrible Mother in literature and its portrayal of historical anxieties.

Key words

Ann Radcliffe, „A Sicilian Romance", Terrible Mother, evil stepmother, gothic novel, archetypal criticism

Introduction

Carl Gustav Jung's exploration of mythology and its application in clinical practice in the early 20th century sparked extensive discourse on archetypes and their relevance across various disciplines. Archetypes have gained notable recognition in art and literary studies, serving as the source of the human spirit in all its forms (Neumann 2015, 17), a means to reveal the artist's unconscious (Storr 1983, 16). Therefore, an archetype is an unconscious 'spectroscopic band of peculiar formation of symbols' (Frye 1963, 11). These symbols are interconnected elements that merge to create patterns, which in turn define the archetype (1965, 4). The archetype would then take the form of a narrative, which would be the myth (Baudkin 1965, 8; Storr 1983, 16). This would mean that an archetype forms the foundational structure within myths, mythologies and narratives of all kinds: oral and written texts, pictorial, and an

endless number of them. Defined as 'the matrix of literature' by Frye, the archetype serves as the primeval wellspring to which literature continually returns (1963, 33).

As several scholars remind us, a ubiquitous archetype in all mythologies is the Great Goddess, or Great Mother (Jorge 2019, 57), which shows both creative and destructive tendencies (Rooks 2016, 122). Exploring mythological motifs dating back to the Palaeolithic era, Jung argues that the collective unconscious depicts the Great Mother as two distinct deities: one representing benevolent, nurturing and protective qualities – those we tend to commonly associate to "motherly love", a second one incarnating darker aspects, such as devouring, seduction and destruction (Rooks 2016, 122-3; Tausiet 2019, 58). Furthermore, building on Jung's premises, Erich Neumann (2015) also identifies two aspects of the Mother archetype: her positive and negative elementary characteristics. This paper will further explore the latter in relation to a Gothic masterpiece. Therefore, the Great Mother archetype is an inherent presence within humanity's unconscious since ancient times. It has appeared with varying degrees of recognition across diverse cultural expressions, often embodied as goddesses representing different forms of the feminine (Leeming and Page 1994, 3). Thus, the concept of the Great Mother archetype transcends physical manifestation, existing beyond the constraints of tangible form or specific temporal and spatial boundaries. Instead of that, the Great Mother is an inner image which is active in the human psyche (Neumann 2015, 33). This archetype's effect is discernible in the rituals, myths and symbols humanity still carries from ancient civilizations to this day (Neumann 2015, 3).

As Northrop Frye argues, each archetype – whether images or patterns – comprises two interconnected, if contrasting, aspects: the Apocalyptic or Ideal Aspect, associated with images of 'revelation' and the benevolent, or 'good', aspect of the archetype (Frye 2004, 31), and the Demonic Aspect, linked to images of downfall and the dreadful or 'terrible':

> I was speaking about the structure of imagery [...] and was saying that the imagery tends to split into two opposed categories. One I'm calling the apocalyptic or the ideal, the one that's associated with the Garden of Eden, with the Promised Land, with Jerusalem and the temple, with Jesus' spiritual kingdom. The other I'm calling the demonic: it's what is associated with the heathen kingdoms of tyranny. (Frye 2004, 41)

The presence of these two archetypal aspects is evident in every image and symbol across most mythologies around the globe, reflecting humanity's collective unconscious (Tausiet 2019, 58). This suggests that imagery typically comprises both an Apocalyptic and a Demonic context, with very few images lacking either aspect (Frye 2004, 41). Such aspects align with Neumann's interpretation of two contrasting

archetypes: the Good Mother, which embodies a nurturing and creative feminine aspect of the Goddess, and the Terrible Mother, representing a destructive and aggressive side containing the negative feminine and masculine elements of the Feminine (2015, 21). These dual aspects of the Goddess figure illustrate the complex nature of divine feminine symbolism in mythology and psychology. Both the Good Mother and the Terrible Mother Archetypes would correspond, respectively, to the positive and negative aspects of the Great Mother (2015, 20). This is a uroboric primeval goddess originating from a primordial archetype that contains both the Good and Terrible aspects within herself, thereby creating a unified entirety:

> A configured form of the Great Mother has emerged from the primordial archetype. Now an order is discernible in the elements. She has three forms: the good, the terrible, and the good-bad mother. The good feminine (and masculine) elements configure the Good Mother, who, like the Terrible Mother containing the negative elements, can also emerge independently from the unity of the Great Mother. The third form is that of the Great Mother who is good-bad and makes possible a union of positive and negative attributes. [...] Great Mother, Good Mother, and Terrible Mother form a cohesive archetypal group. (Neumann 2015, 21)

The human psyche would convey these fundamental archetypes through diverse symbolic representations, as the archetype's symbolism is expressed through specific psychic images that are individually perceived and vary for each archetype (Neumann 2015, 4). Thus, for instance, the Terrible Mother and the nurturing, kind Good Mother archetypes would manifest in different images, or as Frye would deem, in contrasting aspects of the same symbol. One not uncommon embodiment of the Terrible Mother is the ubiquitous fairy-tale evil stepmother, who is 'by far the most common of all the cruel relatives who persecute the hero or heroine' (Watson 1995, 258).

This paper will focus on analysing the stepmother of the Mazzini children – the sisters Emilia and Julia, and their brother Ferdinand – the marchioness Maria di Vellorno, in Ann Radcliffe's gothic novel *A Sicilian Romance* (1790). This analysis will provide insight into the character of the marchioness of Mazzini and her association with the Terrible Mother archetype through one of the archetype's most common embodiments, the figure of the evil stepmother. This paper will therefore focus on analysing two distinct traits found in all mythological figures associated with the Terrible Mother: the Terrible Mother's deadly and paralysing appearance, and the Demonic Aspect related to the *upper womb*, which carries all the destructive and negative female and male attributes of the Feminine, as mentioned above. This analysis will enhance our understanding of the Terrible Mother archetype in Ann Radcliffe's A Sicilian Romance and its wider significance when one bears in mind Radcliffe's readership at the turbulent end of the 18th century. In doing so, this paper

will unveil the angst faced by the English public as they faced a dark future threatening their stable life, stemming from radicalism across the Channel. As the embodiments of this archetype emerge 'among those people who felt themselves utterly powerless before the voracious maw of an appalling war machine' (Schechter 1973, 253), Radcliffe will show the triumph of English social order over French revolutionary radicalism through the final demise of the evil stepmother in favour of the victorious heroine and her Good Mother (England) at a time of trouble and uprisings across the world.

As pointed out above, Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* is a keystone in Gothic literature, and a landmark in what is commonly known the Female Gothic: a tradition in which the male transgressor becomes the quintessential gothic villain, who wields his power as a patriarchal authority, abbot or family confessor, or some kind of tyrannical ruler (Rogers 2007, 38). This villain's sinister influence aims to "entrap the heroine, usurps the great house, and threatens death or rape" (Milbank 2009, 121). *A Sicilian Romance*, published in 1790, revolves around the events surrounding the fall of the old, feudal regime in the Sicilian house of Mazzini, with its symbolic abandonment of the medieval family castle, and the start of a new order with the rise of the Mazzini children, and the youngest daughter, Julia, in particular. After his wife's supposed death, the marquis of Mazzini marries again to Maria de Vellorno, who becomes the marchioness of Mazzini – and the novel's stepmother figure –, and leaves the family castle in Sicily with his new wife and son, Ferdinand. His daughters, Emilia and Julia, remain in the family castle and seat of their House under the care of Madame de Menon, an old friend of the late marchioness and mother of the Mazzini children. Eventually, following reports of supernatural occurrences and the death of Vincent, the marquis's loyal servant, the marquis and his entire household return to Castle Mazzini. Julia, the more spirited of the two sisters, falls in love with the Count de Vereza, Ferdinand's best friend. However, the marchioness, who is infatuated with Vereza, uses all her art of manipulation to attract the attention of the Count fruitlessly. Driven by jealousy towards Julia, she mistreats the sisters and conspires with the marquis to arrange an advantageous marriage between Julia and the violent, tyrannical Duke de Luovo, member of one of the most influential families across the sea, in Naples. Ferdinand urges Julia to escape her fatal destiny by eloping with his friend Vereza, but their plan is frustrated by the marquis, who seemingly kills Vereza and imprisons his own son, Ferdinand. Julia manages to run away from the castle, leaving Emilia to suffer confinement and suspicion, as the marchioness persuades the marquis of her involvement in her sister's disappearance.

The marquis's and the Duke's attempts to find and pursue Julia become complex, involving the Duke's temporary capture by a band of banditti led by his own

son, who had rebelled against his father's authoritarian and tyrannical character. In the meantime, Julia is granted temporary shelter in a convent with Madame de Menon, where she faces pressure from both the marquis and the Padre Abate, who compete for control over her. Eventually, Ferdinand finds and rescues Julia, revealing that Vereza survived his wounds. More typically Gothic twists ensue, including Julia being rescued from banditti by Vereza while she believes her brother is dead. After entering a cavern, Julia discovers her supposedly dead mother is alive, having been imprisoned for years by the marquis so he could marry Maria de Vellorno, the current marchioness. Following the characteristic feature of the Supernatural Explained that Female Gothic, and Radcliffe in particular, tends to adhere to (Botting 2005, 41-42), Radcliffe reveals that it was the old marchioness who was responsible for the ghostly moans in the castle's southern buildings, a common feature depicting what Deborah Rogers defines as "matrophobic Gothic" and whose core drama revolves around "identification with and separation from maternal figures" (Rogers 2007, 39). The marquis's murderous intentions and the marchioness's – Maria de Vellorno's – plotting are uncovered, leading to their own end. Out of embarrassment for having two living wives and fear of being publicly exposed he plans to kill his first wife to avoid scandal and more serious accusations of polygamy. In turn, the marchioness poisons the marquis after he learns about her infidelities and then stabs herself. After escaping the marquis's criminal plot, the family's matriarch is found to be safe and alive, hiding with Julia and Vereza in a lighthouse. The family reunites around her, leaving Sicily and the castle behind to start a new life in Naples.

The novel's gothic mood, brimming with some of the genres' devices such as the patriarchal castle, mistaken identities or banditti (see Botting 2005), would follow some of the darkest times in the history of England and Europe, with the aftermath of the French Revolution still vividly resonating in Radcliffe's ears as the Age of Terror in France was a pervading ghostly presence, dominating the public sphere and life (Butler 1989, 1; Michaelson and Moore 2022, 25), as the growing number of the so-called "Jacobin" novels published at the time indicate (Chew and Altick 2002, 1114--1115; Verderame 2012, 130). At the end of the eighteenth century, and barely a year before the publication of *A Sicilian Romance*, all of Europe was vigilant at the events taking place in France following the fall of the Bastille on 14th July 1789. In England in particular, responses to the French Revolution evolved from being "greeted with great enthusiasm" (Miles 1995, 58), as the herald of change – as did Radcliffe's dissenting intellectual circle (Watt 2014, 66), to fear and rejection as violence increased (Butler 1989, 3). Even if Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) published in the same year as *A Sicilian Romance* – began a "process of demonising radical politics" (Miles 1995, 59) that remained a minority by the time of its publication, it "achieved instant popularity, or notoriety, together with large sales"

(Butler 1989, 38) and soon unrest was felt across the Channel, where Britons felt the spirit of the Revolution could spread. This opened the way to a national anxiety reflected in the numerous volumes and political pamphlets with the Revolution at their centre (Butler 1989; Macleod 2007). Gothic production in the 1790s was quickly linked to the Terror to such a point that, as Robert Miles reminds us, "the currency of the smearing pun "the terrorist system of novel writing" [was] employed by reviewers during the latter half of the 1790s" (2006, 43). However, the feeding on this rather infamous reputation was both ways, as the Gothic also used the anxiety caused by the Revolution to fill pages and volumes with horrid imagery and terrifying tyrannical villains that would engross its readership in Britain; in Miles' words, "the Gothic vogue fed on the revolutionary anxieties of its readership" (2006, 44). This follows Schechner's view on the appearance of the Terrible Mother when a given society is at a time of trouble or social unrest (1973). It would, therefore, also explain the relevance of the marchioness's actions, her selfish and violent behaviour, her crimes – adultery and the attempt to murder her husband – and the way she manipulates the marquis, and everyone around, in her own benefit. With the Terrible Mother's demise at the close of the novel and the triumph of the enlightened heroine, Radcliffe, in her "teasing and elusive" fashion (Watt 2014, 80), appears to mitigate the social and cultural anxieties attached to this archetype, gesturing toward the possibility of transformation at a moment when "the mood on the radical side was unusually cheerful" (Butler 1989, 3).

As mentioned before, this paper will now focus on the first characteristic of the Terrible Mother to be analysed, which concerns the destructive attributes associated with the Feminine, and which will mark her appearance at the time of trouble Radcliffe's contemporaries lived through. As moderate and cautious in her opinions as she could at first appear, Ann Radcliffe was fully conscious of the profound changes the Revolution could entail (Watt 2014, 81), echoing a nation's anxiety in the face of a deep transformation and formidable challenges. This will show the marchioness as the terrible embodiment of the nation's angst in front of an engulfing monster. As Neumann suggests, the uroboros is a symbol of the "psychic state of the beginning, of the original situation, in which a man's consciousness and ego were still small and undeveloped" (Neumann 2015, 18), therefore symbolising the original, undivided cosmic ancestor who later separated into the Great Father and the Great Mother: 'the most perfect example of the still undifferentiated primordial archetype' (2015, 18). Within this primordial archetype, both the Archetypal Feminine and Archetypal Masculine emerged as distinct individuals, yet each retained elements of the other. For instance, the Archetypal Feminine "contains positive and negative male determinants aside from the predominant female elements" (Neumann 2015, 21), in greater or lesser degree. Among these elements the Terrible

Mother archetype embodies the negative aspects of death and destruction, along with an extreme – even violent – sexuality, stirring feelings of impotence – both psychological and physical – and forlornness in her presence (Neumann 2015, 149). This makes Terrible Mother embodiments take on imagery related to what Northrop Frye calls the Demonic Aspect, linked to instances of ruin, decay and the terrible (Frye 2004, 41). Thus, her symbolism predominantly draws from the inner experience, reflecting emotions of anguish, horror and fear of danger (Neumann 2015, 147), which would permeate the conscious world of those whose worlds seem to be about to collapse. As a result, the imagery linked to the Demonic Aspect of the Great Mother often features fantastic elements that do not exist in the real world. Consequently, the Terrible Mother often appears as monsters in myths and legends across different cultures, such as Kali in Indian mythology, the Gorgon Medusa and the sea monster Scylla in Greek mythology, the serpent-goddess Tlillan in Mexico (Tausiet 2019, 58), the Irish Mórrígan – the 'great, phantom queen' – in Celtic mythology (Aldhouse-Green 2015, 125; Ellis 1987, 173), or Hella[1], the dreadful daughter of the archdeceiver Loki, in Germanic mythology (Orchard 1997, 79). As Neumann points out, the dark aspect of the cosmic egg, symbolizing the Archetypal Feminine, "engenders terrible figures that manifest the black, abysmal side of life and the human psyche" (Neumann 2015, 148).

As mentioned earlier, one characteristic associated with this archetype is the petrifying gaze of these figures, which contrasts with the life-giving essence found in all living beings, serving as a dark counterpart to the nurturing womb (Leeming and Page 1994, 88). Drawing from this concept, the first mythological figure that springs to mind when considering the dark aspect of the Mother archetype is Medusa, one of the Gorgons from Hellenic mythology[2], who has the power to turn anyone who met her gaze into stone (Rooks 2016, 127). Greek mythology describes how Medusa's gaze turns her victims into stone and, as a consequence, leaves them frozen and devoid of life. This transformation, marked by rigidity, is closely connected to the concept of death[3] since Medusa's petrifying gaze 'belongs to the province of the Terrible Great Goddess, for to be rigid is to be dead' (Neumann 2015, 166). In both a metaphorical and literal sense, the Greek myth of the snake-haired Medusa[4] illustrates the connection between petrification and death (Jorge 2019, 60). Her victims are portrayed as

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[1] Hella is the queen of Helheim, the underworld, in Germanic myth, and her name gave origin to the term "Hell" in the different Germanic languages, i.e. English "Hell", German "Hölle", Norwegian "Helvete", among others.

[2] Eduardo Cirlot, in his canonical *Diccionario de símbolos*, deems the Gorgons, and Medusa in particular, as a prototypical Terrible Mother figure (Cirlot 2006, 225).

[3] The Terrible Mother found in myths like those of Hecate or Medusa in Greece, Kali in India, or Tlillian in Aztec Mexico, is a deity associated with death and destruction (Jorge 2019; Tausiet 2019).

[4] The snake's negative aspect serves as a recurring symbol for figures representing the Terrible Mother (Rooks 2016, 127).

inanimate and inert, while her dwelling is rendered as the cold domain of death. David Leeming and Jake Page, in their exploration of the figures of the Goddess, offer an insight into the myth of Perseus, the son of the patriarchal god Zeus, and his confrontation with the fearful Gorgon. Tasked with the challenge to obtain the head of the snake-haired Gorgon, Perseus receives crucial aid from Hermes and Athena, which leads him to the island where Medusa lives and where "armed with Athena's bronze shield and Hermes's sword, Perseus eventually passed through rank after rank of inert, lifeless warriors standing like statues in the icy wind" (Leeming and Page 1994, 118), after which he beheads her. Yet, the deadly power of Medusa's gaze persists even after her demise. When the sun-hero Perseus returns home, he uses her decaying head to turn the king and his entourage into stone, effectively killing them (Leeming and Page 1994, 19).

Following in her mythological and witch-like folktale predecessors' footsteps, Radcliffe's marchioness does not only intrude into social and political spheres stealing "the embodiment of male authority" (Williams 2016, 92-93) traditionally reserved for and still dominated by men in the 18th century, but she also attempts at dominating and manipulating those around her, at the same time that she seeks male attention. As she enters the castle at the beginning of the novel, one can perceive how she controls the entire situation, from her husband, whose gloom "broke away in smiles of welcome", to the numerous retinue that follow her and "whom pleasure attracted to her train" (Radcliffe 1998, 15). Her imposing, and voluptuous, appearance annuls men's wills to suit her plans, which is most noticeable in her influence on her husband the marquis, who she dominates through his passion towards her "so as to render him relentless in the pursuit of ambitious purposes" (Radcliffe 1998, 70). The marquis's leading role in his own dominions, or rather his submission to the marchioness's, is such that, after Julia's flight from her father's – and the marchioness's – plans to marry her to the Duke de Luovo, it is the marchioness who inflames the already tense situation and "orders all the habitable parts of the castle were explored, and she herself assisted in the search" (Radcliffe 1998, 72). The marchioness takes the leading role, even the hunting one, from her husband, who passively expresses his inflamed rage at Julia's breach of his plans. The marchioness becomes the head of the house of Mazzini, the leader of Julia's hunt and the one who takes over her husband's role as he moans for his loss in authority.

However, the Terrible Mother's traits go beyond her domination and active agency, as she shows an unyielding, emotionless demeanour reminiscent of the petrifying gaze Perseus encountered when he faced the terrible Gorgon. Throughout the narrative, the marchioness maintains an impassive, glacial disposition, revealing no guilt for her transgressions. This unwavering coldness echoes the lifeless, petrified state of the Terrible Mother's victims, as the marchioness remains unmoved by the

consequences of her actions. After all the persecution, both physical and psychological, she lead against Julia, spurring the marquis to treat his own daughter as a criminal and marrying her against her will (Radcliffe 1998, 60), the only regret felt by the marchioness is for the death of her adulterous love interest, Verezza, as he was supposedly killed by the marquis in a duel when he tries to elope with Julia:

> When the marchioness learned the fate of Hippolitus, the resentment of jealous passion yielded to emotions of pity. Revenge was satisfied, and she could now lament the sufferings of a youth whose personal charms had touched her heart as much as his virtues had disappointed her hopes. (Radcliffe 1998, 70)

Yet, her nature makes her only feel for the incompletion of her sexual desires, as she had not satisfied her wishes with the Count de Verezza, who "conducted himself toward her with frigid indifference" (Radcliffe 1998, 11) and had never shown to her any disposition to do so. Her lack of remorse makes her blind to reason and to own up to what she had done; instead, she "poured upon the defenceless Julia her anger for that calamity of which she herself was the unwilling cause" (Radcliffe 1998, 70). Moreover, the marchioness's haughtiness in the face of evidence for her trespasses is such that, when the marquis discovers her infidelities, she is blind to proof and "boldly asserted her innocence, and instantly invented a story, the plausibility of which might have deceived a man who had evidence less certain than his senses to contradict it" (Radcliffe 1998, 188). Wielding her influence over her husband with cunning manipulation rather than overt force, the marchioness embodies the Terrible Mother archetype. Unlike the Gorgon's petrifying gaze, her jealous eyes subtly erode the marquis's willpower, revealing his moral and spiritual weakness. The marquis, rendered passive and effectively "castrated" by his wife's machinations[5], relinquishes control of the castle and family affairs, as the marchioness "had the direction of the whole [of Julia's wedding]" (Radcliffe 1998, 65). In contrast, the marchioness assumes a dominant role, actively governing the household and orchestrates Julia's marriage, demonstrating the power dynamics at play in their relationship.

The Terrible Mother archetype's connection to death transcends the petrifying gaze explored in the previous paragraphs, extending into a symbolic representation of the upper womb through the metaphor of the lips. As every symbol has two embodiments in humankind's imagery (Frye 2004, 31), a Paradisal Aspect and a Demonic Aspect, Neumann (2015, 165) articulates two profound representations of the womb. The Paradisal Aspect of the womb emerges as a lush, tender mouth, where

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[5] As Sarah Lippert suggests, mythical Terrible Mother figures' ability to petrify or decapitate their victims could also be 'interpreted in terms of castration' (Lippert 2014, 249; Williams 2016, 91).

lips are metaphorically intertwined with female genitalia, symbolising the mouth as an upper womb – a sacred origin of life and wisdom. Conversely, its Demonic Aspect manifests as a destructive and deadly womb, archetypally portrayed through the haunting image of a mouth filled with teeth, known in symbolic language as the *vagina dentata*. This intricate symbolic duality reveals the complex nature of the Great Mother archetype, with its Good and Terrible Mother archetypal representations. Here, there same archetypal element can simultaneously embody creation and destruction, tenderness and terror, life and death. Thus, the lips become a powerful liminal space that represents the threshold between existence and non-existence, nurturing and consuming, in which the Terrible Mother takes the Demonic Aspect of the inert, barren womb. Embodying primal fears – like those arouse by revolutionary ideals across from revolutionary France – and the complex, often contradictory, nature of maternal energy, this symbolism emerges vividly across diverse mythologies. Greek mythology offers particularly rich representations of this archetype. Scylla emerges as a haunting figure for those who try to cross the sea – a beautiful woman with three sharply fanged hellhounds as her lower half, symbolising a devouring whirlpool of destructive feminine power. Medusa and her Gorgon sisters, as seen before, further crystallise this archetypal image, with their snaky hair, boar's tusks, beards and protruding tongues representing the Mother Goddess in her most terrifying manifestation (Cirlot 2006, 225; Leeming and Page 1994, 117; Neumann 2015, 169).

However, beyond the petrifying figure of Medusa, Indian mythology stands out as one of the most notable sources of the Terrible Mother archetype, splendidly personified by Kali, as she is 'dark, all-devouring time, the bone-wreathed Lady of the place of skulls' (Zimmer 1968, 81). Kali's connection to the Demonic representation of the *upper womb* is particularly evident as '[h]er teeth are blood-stained fangs. Rivers of blood flow from her; her stomach is a constant devourer of the equally constant plenitude of her womb' (Leeming and Page 1994, 24). Similarly, Kali appeared to the Indian mystic Ramakrishna, rising from the Ganges in a scene that intertwines life-giving and death:

> One quiet afternoon Ramakrishna beheld a beautiful woman ascend from the Ganges and approach the grove in which he was meditating. He perceived that she was about to give birth to a child. In a moment the babe was born, and she gently nursed it. Presently, however, she assumed a horrible aspect, took the infant in her now ugly jaws and crushed it, chewed it. Swallowing it, she returned again to the Ganges, where she disappeared. (From 'The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna', quoted in Campbell (1973, 115) and Schechter (1973, 253))

This portrayal of Kali vividly captures the dual nature of life, where her *upper womb* simultaneously creates and destroys life, symbolised by her giving birth to a child and then consuming it with her mouth filled with sharp fangs, evoking the concept of the *vagina dentata* (Schechter 1973, 254). As Harold Schechter reminds us through Kali imagery, the Terrible Mother's image of the vagina dentata functions as a metaphor for collective cultural anxiety amid social, political and humanitarian crisis.

The motif of the *vagina dentata*, or barren womb in the marchioness of Mazzini might be compared to the vivid representations found in Medusa, Scylla or the Indian Kali. However, its underlying presence remains discernible. The upper womb symbolism, previously discussed as the origin of breath and life, contrasts sharply with the destructive aspect of the Feminine, embodied in the concept of the deadly, inert womb, a duality that reflects the complex nature of feminine archetypes in literature and mythology, who invert the nurturing aspect of motherhood into a destructive force. This transformation echoes the dual nature of creation and destruction associated with Terrible Mother figures and embodiments, like the evil stepmother or the folktale witch, or myth and literary figures like Medea or Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth (Bornham-Puyal & Martín Martín 2025, 53). In *A Sicilian Romance*, the underlying themes of terrifying feminine power resonate with the character's portrayal, albeit in a more nuanced manner. As we examine the marchioness's motherly role in the novel, we can notice how she represents the quintessential fairy-tale stepmother, even if at first encountering her stepdaughters, Julia and Emilia, she is given the opportunity to become the mother they did not have. As Julia sees the marchioness enter the castle accompanied by her retinue, among whom the girls' brother Ferdinand is, "her breast throbbed; her heart beat quickly with joy, and she lost her apprehensions from the marchioness in a sort of wild delight hitherto unknown to her. The arrival of the marchioness seemed indeed the signal of universal and unlimited pleasure" (Radcliffe 1998, 15). However, the marchioness shows her selfish, self-centred side, exercising her "ill-humoured caprice" (Radcliffe 1998, 115) upon the sisters, who she feels as a threat to her position within the family, and her love interest, Count Verezza. This is intensified as the "mother role" in the family has already been taken by the girls' nurse, who is discovered to be their supposedly dead mother's best friend. Julia and Emilia grow in their family castle in Sicily accompanied by Madame de Menon in a sort of Edenic setting away from their father and brother Ferdinand, and their stepmother the marchioness. Radcliffe unfolds de Menon's physical and intellectual nurturing qualities, as the narrator tells the reader that Madame de Menon "loved her young charge with maternal fondness" (Radcliffe 1998, 4). Therefore, the marchioness is introduced in the narrative as a potential mother figure who could bring life, albeit an imperfect mother, however, she soon comes across as the quintessential fairy-tale

stepmother, a fairytale embodiment of the Terrible Mother herself. The stepmother of the Mazzini children, the marchioness, is a woman whose womb not only fails to bring life but, instead, becomes a source of death and destruction.

In conclusion, the examination of the archetype of the Terrible Mother in Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* gives a deep insight into the influence of mythological and legendary elements on literary works, and their relevance in understanding society's fears and anxieties. From the matrix of the Great Mother archetype, this analysis reveals the complex interweaving of archetypal figures such as the Terrible Mother in constructing narrative frameworks, demonstrating how ancient storytelling traditions continue to shape modern literature – from mythical monsters, through evil stepmothers to evil gothic *femme fatales*. By employing such archetypes, authors tap into universal human experiences, creating stories that resonate across cultural boundaries and explore timeless themes. One such theme is the angst felt in the face of an unpredictable future triggered by dramatic changes, such as social, political or economic revolutions. This analysis has explored the portrayal of the marchioness in *A Sicilian Romance* through the lens of the Terrible Mother. By employing archetypal concepts from Neumann, Frye or Tausiet, the destructive aspects associated with this figure have been highlighted, alongside the parallelisms between the marchioness of Mazzini and mythical embodiments of the archetype. Furthermore, the analysis has contextualised the narrative within the turbulent the socio-political landscape of late 18th and early 19th century Europe, which had a strong resonance in England, giving a voice to that angst the English felt as they saw how a nation across the English Channel succumbed to trouble and terror. These implications – specifically, the emergence of Terrible Mother figures in times of trouble (Schechter 1973, 253) – have been further examined through the parallels drawn between the marchioness of Mazzini and mythological figures such as Medusa or Kali, fairy-tale wicked stepmothers, or literary embodiments of the archetype like Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. These address specific motifs linked to the Terrible Mother, in particular, her petrifying stare and presence, which may lead to a totalitarian control of her victims, and the symbolism of the *upper womb*, both associated with decay, death and destruction. This paper has essentially integrated literary analysis, archetypal theory and historical context to reveal how, by associating the marchioness of Mazzini with these powerful and often feared feminine entities, Radcliffe's narrative taps into deep-rooted cultural anxieties and universal fears, which she seems to appease with the embodiment of the Terrible Mother and the triumph of the enlightened heroine at the close of the novel. This correlation highlights how the Terrible Mother archetype still serves as a potent symbol of chaos, transformation and the darker aspects of the feminine psyche, as powerful nowadays as in ancient times, or as in the unstable England of the 1790s.

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