The Bisexuality of Ellena in Ann Radcliffe’s
The Italian
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In 1797, when The Italian was published, sexuality was a term with a very different definition than we have today. If used at all, sexuality was a synonym for sex or the desire for sex. One of the major historical/political conflicts readers see in most gothic novels is the pressure for those of the upper class to marry within the same class to keep the family bloodlines pure and the fortunes intact. Noble parents’ first concern entailed their sons marrying the daughters who belong to families of equal rank. In the 1700s, marrying outside of the class structure was one of the biggest political and social disintegration of ideology at the time. There was not an option to have a relationship with someone of your own sex in the 1700s or for centuries after that without severe consequences. Women however, were allowed to have rather close relationships under the guise of “sisterly” or friendly affection. In The Italian however, the relationship between Ellena and Olivia is rather different than many of the female relationships portrayed in gothic novels. The principal difference in Ellena and Olivia’s relationship is how Ann Radcliffe sets up Vivaldi falling in love with Ellena to parallel Ellena’s interactions with Olivia and Ellena’s subsequent love with Olivia. The reader is first introduced to Ellena through the affections of Vivaldi; by looking at the similarities of his thoughts on Ellena versus how Ellena later thinks about and interacts with the nun, Olivia, one can understand the bisexuality displayed by Ellena.

The first interaction Vivaldi has with Ellena mirrors the first interaction Ellena had with Olivia. Vivaldi first becomes enthralled with Ellena after he hears her singing in church: “The sweetness and fine expression of her voice attracted his attention to her figure, which had a distinguished air of delicacy and grace” (5). From just one glance at Ellena, Vivaldi is entranced by her and feels he must find out more about her. The scene in which Ellena first encounters Olivia is very similar, “she looked to the gallery where the nuns were assembled, to discover a countenance, which might seem to accord with the sensibility expressed in the voice” (86). Ellena is caught up in the virtues of Olivia. The introduction of Ellena by Vivaldi uses similar language as when Ellena’s character draws attention to Olivia. Vivaldi is caught by “sweetness and fine expression” in Ellena’s singing while Ellena is drawn by the
"sensibility" of Olivia's singing. Ellena and Vivaldi are both drawn to what are considered the female virtues of the 1700s.

While Radcliffe intended Vivaldi to be the romantic interest for Ellena, many of the interactions Ellena has with Olivia are almost exactly the same as those readers saw earlier when Vivaldi was in pursuit in Ellena, including the "love at first sight" both characters experienced- Vivaldi to Ellena, and Ellena to Olivia. Much like how Ellena took up all of Vivaldi's thoughts and actions through most of the novel, Olivia holds a similar place in Ellena thoughts for much of her stay at the convent so that "she regarded the nun with a degree of interest which rendered her insensible to every other object in the chapel, she fancied she could perceive the calmness in her countenance to be that of despair...to energetic for common suffering...[i]t had, however,...seemed to speak a similarity of feeling (86-87). Before Ellena even has a chance to speak with Olivia, she has developed a connection in her own mind of the type of person Olivia is and how they have similar things in common. She is so enraptured with Olivia that she becomes "insensible to every other object;" Ellena's entire being is wrapped up in Olivia and she is unable to think about anything else while in her presence. Vivaldi is similarly enraptured with Ellena and is unable to do anything but stalk her. His thoughts are filled with Ellena and he is unable to leave the area by her house. The narrator tells the reader,

the beauty of her countenance haunting his imagination, and the touching accents of her voice still vibrating on his heart, he descended to the shore below her residence, pleasing himself with the consciousness of being near her, though he could no longer behold her; and sometimes hoping that he might again see her, however distantly, in a balcony of the house where the silk awning seemed to invite the breeze from the sea. He lingered hour after hour...recalling to his fancy the enchantment of her smile, and seeming still to listen to the sweetness of her accents (7).

Vivaldi's inability to get Ellena out of his mind mirrors the thought process Ellena has about Olivia. Ellena is "haunting his imagination" much like how Olivia makes Ellena "insensible." Ellena has an enchanting effect on Vivaldi in the same way that Olivia has an enchanting effect Ellena. Radcliffe's use of parallel story lines once again implies a bisexuality in Ellena's character.
Throughout the novel, Vivaldi frequently proposes to Ellena and she continuously turns him down. This rejection constantly upsets Vivaldi which mirrors Olivia’s rejection of Ellena and puts Ellena on the brink of a breakdown. Vilvaldi’s distress from Ellena’s rejections leaves her wavering on her love for him: “I have lost you already! Say, O! say but, that your hope it is not, and I, too, will hope again...The anguish with which he uttered this, awakened all her tenderness...you see my misery, and from pity, from gratitude, not affection, would assuage it...No, Ellena! It is too certain that you do not love me! (151-152). Vivaldi is unable to be rational about Ellena’s rejection of marriage until his family approves. He is so distressed by her rejection that Ellena almost changes her mind to make him feel better. Ellena has a comparable experience with Olivia, when she is ignored by the nun, making Ellena feel rejected. Ellena while in mass

forgetting the decorums of the place, left her seat to approach her [Olivia]...As she advanced, the nun dropped her veil, a reproof which she immediately understood, and she withdrew to her seat; but her attention remained fixed on the nun during the whole service. At the conclusion, when they left the chapel, and she saw Olivia pass without noticing her, Ellena could scarcely restrain her tears; she returned in deep dejection to her room (88).

Ellena, even though she did not have a verbal rejection, was very clearly rejected and then ignored by Olivia. Ellena once again only had the ability to give Olivia attention while in church; Olivia passing her by even after she paid such close attention to her, was more than Ellena could handle. The desire Ellena has to interact with Olivia is so strong it leaves her in “deep dejection” and almost in “tears.” Ellena’s feelings of rejection are once again mirrored by Vivaldi’s feelings of rejection. Radcliffe’s use of parallel story lines for Vivaldi and Ellena and Ellena and Olivia give readers a view of how bisexuality can be constructed in the 1700s.

The relationship between Ellena and Olivia comes to a climax when Olivia meets Vivaldi for the first time. Ellena grows so close to Olivia that when rescued by Vivaldi, he has to pry her off Olivia and asks, “do I then hold only the second place in your heart?” (135). Ellena while claiming love for Vivaldi, shows more love for Olivia to the extent Vivaldi feels the necessity to comment on her affections. Vivaldi’s short statement is the only time in the novel that the relationship between Ellena and Olivia is openly commented on. His concern about Ellena’s love for Olivia, while short lived, brings
Ellena’s sexuality into question and may speak to a hidden audience of women in the 1700s.

Ann Radcliffe sets up the parallel between Vivaldi and Ellena and Ellena and Olivia but then seemingly ties up the possibility of Ellena having an attraction to Olivia. Olivia is revealed to be Ellena’s mother, which in the 1700s and even today discourage readers from looking at Ellena and Olivia’s relationship through a queer studies lens. However, as incest is a taboo because of repeating genetic material and two women in the 1700s are unable to reproduce, the historical reasoning for the taboo on incest is negated. Also, as Ellena has not been raised by Olivia, she does not have a mother/daughter connection with her, making her just like any other person Ellena may meet. Radcliffe writes Ellena as a bisexual character but then covers her social taboo by giving Olivia a maternal role in Ellena’s life, attempting to pass off the attraction as that of maternal attraction. By taking Olivia out of the picture, Ellena is able to marry Vivaldi and follow the norms of her time.

The parallel story lines throughout The Italian are structured to connect the relationship between Vivaldi and Ellena, a classic romantic relationship to that of Ellena and Olivia, a taboo relationship. Radcliffe uses the structure for how a relationship is ordered in a gothic novel from the time for Vivaldi and Ellena’s relationship. Since Ellena and Olivia’s relationship follow the same patterns, the reader can infer that Ellena is in fact bisexual in nature but created in a time when bisexuality is not an option. Through the mirroring of relationships, Ellena is able to come out as much as a character from the 1700s can and express a nonconforming identity for half of the book. Ann Radcliffe seems to explore bisexuality through literary form in the character of Ellena yet still maintains the social constructions of her time.

Works Cited