

) U D Q F H V % X U Q H \ . V t h e W a n d e r e r s C r i t i q u e o f  
Reproductive Futurity

Nowell Marshall, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Recommended Citation

Marshall, Nowell ) U D Q F H V % X U Q H \ T h e W a n d e r e r s C r i t i q u e o f  
Reproductive Futurity The Burney Journal, vol. 17, 2020, pp8-20.

<https://www.mcgill.ca/burneycentre/burneysociety/burneyjournal/vol17/2>



This work is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Frances Burney's Queer Gothic Wanderer: Critique of Reproductive Futurity  
NOWELL MARSHALL

Abstract Drawing on George Haggard's Queer Gothic, Lee Edelman's No Future, and Jose Muñoz's Cruising Utopia, this paper positions *The Wanderer* as both a female gothic and a queer gothic text through its representations of sapphism and its critique of the marriage narrative and reproductive futurity. *The Wanderer* locates Juliet's (who also goes by the Incognita, L.S. and Ellis) source of gothic horror in the marriage plot and the obligation of women to embrace reproductive futurity. However, Juliet's escape from her coerced marriage represents only a part of the novel's larger refusal of linear life paths and sexual developmental narrative. For both Mr. Ireton and Sir Jaspar Harrington, reproductive futurity unravels itself. , W JHQHUDWHV WKH JRWKLF VSHFWHU RI PDOH marriage and its avoidance—that prevents both men from achieving it, and this resistance to reproductive futurity compounds the novel's queer gothic narrative bent. The article ends by tracing Elinor's trajectory from Wollstonecraftian radical to someone obsessed with gender normativity and marriage. When marriage becomes foreclosed, Elinor becomes a wanderer who enacts her own unique, queer path.

In the introduction to Frances Burney's 1814 *The Wanderer*, Margaret Doody notes the extent to which the gothic animates Burney's work, calling *Camilla* (1782) as her most gothic and *Camilla* (1796) as her least gothic novel. Written in WKH V DQG V %XUQH\·V HDUO\ QRYV V HÍ

*The Wanderer* is a gothic text. Laure Blanchemain's more recent essay attempts to identify gothic aspects *The Wanderer*, but her insistence on what Eugenia DeLamotte has called “the shopping-list approach” to gothic (5)—where a text must include a long list of gothic elements to be considered a gothic text—leads Blanchemain to focus on the sublime and assert that the novel's lack of “foreign places and medieval settings” means *The Wanderer* “cannot be described as a gothic novel” (163). Tyler Tichelaar reads *The Wanderer* as a gothic rewriting of *Evelina* and argues for Juliet as a gothic wanderer (102-04). This essay offers a full reading of *The Wanderer* as a female gothic novel, but argues that it is also a queer gothic novel through its depiction of same-sex desire and its insistent critique of what Lee Edelman has termed reproductive futurity, a system that “remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to A. L. S. P. U. C. T. U. R. E. , authentic social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child” (2-3). In *The Wanderer*, Burney locates Juliet's (who also goes by the Incognita, L.S. and Ellis) source of gothic terror in the marriage plot and the obligation of women to

HPEUDFH UHSURGXFWLYH IXWXULW\ +RZHYHU patriarchal power represents only a part of the novel's larger refusal of linear life paths and sexual developmental narratives.

In *Art of Darkness*, Anne Williams argues that female gothic features a "KHURLQH ÁHHLQJ RSSUHVVLRQ 'JHQHUDWHV V by the chosen point of view" (102)," uses terror (or the explained supernatural), and often features a happy ending, usually coinciding with marriage. Q ÁUVW encountering the Incognita while crossing the English Channel, Elinor tells Albert Harleigh, "She's a nun, then, depend upon it. Make her tell us the history of her convent" (13). In this scene, Elinor condenses two stock gothic characters into WKH ,QFRJQLWD WKH QXQ DQG WKH JRWKLK KH QRW UHYHDOHG XQWLO PFK ODWHU LQ WKH QP who has forced her into an illegitimate marriage to gain access to her inheritance. Elinor continues to position the Incognita as a gothic heroine when she jokingly accuses Harleigh of wanting "to have all the stories of those monks and abbesses to yourself!" (13). Elinor's assumptions about the Incognita are eventually revealed to be true when, later in the novel, Juliet is revealed to have been raised in a FRQYHQW DQG WR KDYH ÁHG DVHULHV RI RSSU Lord Denmeath, Mr. Ireton (who repeatedly traps her), and libertine suitors like Sir Lyell Sycamore who doubles as a gothic villain attempting to abduct her (457-58). Likewise, the novel is set twenty years before its publication, "during the dire reign RI WKH WHUULÀF 5REHVSLHUH μ DQG WKH SOR that Robert Miles has suggested is key to the gothic (46-50).

Julia Epstein has noted the gothic resonances of Elinor's suicide scenes (188), which set a gothic tone using the explained supernatural. Having summoned

dramatic performances.

Since the 2006 publication of George Haggerty's *Queer Gothic*, gothic scholarship has undergone a general shift from discussions of female and male gothic to queer and, most recently, transgothic, which we can see as we move from Burney's gothic depictions of Elinor to those of Ellis. One such interpretation is Haggerty's idea that a "wide range of writers, dispersed historically and culturally, use 'gothic' to evoke a queer worldview that attempts to transgress the binaries of sexual decorum." The *Wanderer* evokes a queer worldview through Ellis's relationships with two women: Lady Aurora Granville and Gabriella. While still known as Ellis, Juliet is coerced into performing the role of Lady Townly in Elinor's private production of *The Provoked Husband* and meets Lady Aurora Granville after the performance. Lady Aurora almost immediately forms a connection with Ellis: "so warm an interest was kindled in the generous bosom of Lady Aurora, that the desire to serve and give comfort to her new favourite, became, in a short time, indispensable to her own peace" (118). Given Ellis's unknown past, this connection quickly becomes suspect, and after her lack of identity is revealed, the women are ordered to cease communicating. Yet the manner of this revelation suggests that this prohibited connection is about more than class mixing. In the scene at Mrs. Howel's house, "No one spoke; no one seemed to know how to begin a general or common conversation; no one could

sexuality studies as code for same-sex<sup>3</sup> desire, many scenes involving Ellis and Lady Aurora incorporate this double meaning of class and sexual scandal. For example, upon hearing carriages arrive to take Lady Aurora away,

Is she so nearly gone? Ellis cried; Ah! when may I see her again?—To the hall, to wait in the hall, she longed to go herself, to catch a last view, and to snatch, if possible, a kind parting word; but the tremendous Mrs. Howel!—she shrunk from the idea of ever seeing her again.

Soon afterwards, she heard the carriages drive up to the house. She now went to the window, to behold, at least, the loved form of Lady Aurora as she mounted the chaise. Perhaps, too, she might turn around, and look up. Fixt here, she was inattentive to the opening of her own room-door, concluding

WKDW WKH KR XVH PDLG FDPH WR DUU

gently articulated: "Miss Ellis!" She hastily looked round: it was Lady Aurora; who had entered, who had shut herself in; and who, while one hand covered her eyes, held out the other, in an attitude of the most inviting affection.

(OOLV ÁHZ WR VHLJH LW ZLWK M





---

As the Incognita, Juliet enters the novel as sexually suspect because of her apparent race. When the Incognita boards the ship for England, the other passengers hear her “imploring, in the French language,” for “pity and admission” (11) and assume that she is French. Although she dispels the idea, stating, “I am no foreigner,—I am English!” (26), that initial assumption has planted seeds of doubt in the minds of the other passengers. Mrs. Maple accuses her of being a thief and a French spy (25), and the Admiral assumes she is a fallen woman (37). These suspicions are exacerbated by English prejudices against the French: Having grown up in France, she is probably Catholic, and, as Haggerty has shown, during the 1790s the English viewed Catholic countries as queer spaces: “attitudes about sexuality” were “shaped by attitudes toward Catholics and Catholic countries. Throughout the eighteenth century, it was a commonplace that sodomy was imported from Italy and France, if not from more exotic locales, and often monasteries and convents were associated with sodomy” (16). This association of same-sex desire with France and Catholic spaces like convents adds another layer of sapphic meaning to Elinor’s earlier speculation that the Incognita is a nun on the run.

Likewise, the ambiguity of the Incognita’s race and ethnicity fuels such speculation. She appears as a woman with “hands and arms of so dark a colour, that they might rather be styled black than brown” (19). Riley immediately questions her race, ethnicity, and nationality by inquiring, “what part of the world might you come from? The settlements in the West Indies? or somewhere off the coast of Africa?” (19). These comments indicate more than Riley’s desire to denigrate the racial other; they also suggest sexual stigmas associated with racial, ethnic, and national identity. In *Racial Leather*

ing critical consensus that even as gothic texts make possible a range of transgressive forms of gender and sexuality," they too often exclude "the very transgression that they catalogue" (Marshall, "Beyond Queer Gothic" 41). It is tempting to read Juliet's restoration of identity and her marriage to Harleigh as reward, and yet, for the queer reader, these undercut her queerness, partially foreclosing the larger so resistance she has embodied.

If, near the novel's end, Juliet refers to her coerced marriage to the commissary in negative terms such as "shackles" (862) and "slavery" (863), she also expresses revulsion at the idea of marriage—even to Harleigh—when she learns the commissary's execution in France:

What a change! her feet tottered; she sustained her shaking frame against the Admiral; she believed herself in some new existence! yet it was not unmixed joy that she experienced; there was something in the nature of her deliverance repulsive to joy; and the perturbed and tumultuous sensations which rushed into her breast, seemed overpowering her strength, and almost shattering even her comprehension... (856)

Juliet feels the elation of being freed from her tyrannical faux-marriage, but at this point, she also worries about the Bishop's safety and realizes that her relationship with Gabriella might be precluded by Gabriella's return to France and Juliet's expected marriage to Harleigh. Burney attempts to mitigate Juliet's fear of separation from Gabriella when, after marrying Harleigh, Juliet returns to France to visit the Marchioness and while there, "not vainly, she strove to console her beloved Gabriella" (871). This suggests that Juliet and Gabriella may continue their relationship after Juliet's marriage, albeit sporadically, because they live in different countries. leaving their future meetings off the page, Burney allows for such a possibility.

- X O L H W · V H T X L Y R F D W L R Q D E R X W P D U U L D J

Harleigh expresses his idea of love: "Loveliest Miss Ellis! most beloved Miss Gran







rejected her for being “prone to devote herself to whatever is new, wild, or uncommon” (165), Elinor continues to idealize him. She subsequently threatens to stab herself, then interrupts Juliet’s musical performance and does stab herself before staging the gothic performance in the graveyard cited above (182, 359). In this last scene, Harleigh prevents Elinor from shooting herself in the head (580). Through all these scenes—and despite Harleigh’s continual rejections—Elinor holds on to the cultural ideal of heteronormative marriage that society values, perceives that ideal as foreclosed by Harleigh’s refusals, and, unwilling to marry anyone else, exhibits performative melancholia (a condition where normative gender is experienced as loss) and becomes violently masochistic. As such, Burney uses Elinor’s experience to show the dangers of overinvestment in gender normativity—here, through a violent, enduring attachment to the idea of marriage and the privilege that it confers that ultimately leads to Elinor’s multiple suicide attempts.

On the novel’s last page, Elinor receives a letter from Harleigh recounting his marriage to Juliet, and Elinor is devastated:

She received it with a consternation that cruelly opened her eyes to the false hopes which, however disclaimed and disowned, had still duped her wishes, and played upon her fancy, with visions that had brought Harleigh, ultimately, to her feet. Despair, with its grimest horror, grasped her heart at this self-detection; but pride supported her spirit; and Time, the healer of woe, though the destroyer of life, moderated her passions, in annihilating her expectations; and, when her better qualities found opportunity for exertion, her excentricities, though always what were most conspicuous in her character, ceased to absorb her whole being. (872-73)

Burney leaves Elinor alone, punished on the one hand for her obsession with “whatever is new, wild, or uncommon” (165), e.g., her revolutionary politics, and on the other, for not knowing when to let go of Harleigh and the prestige that marrying him represents.

Yet, viewed from a different perspective, Elinor ends the novel on a happy—that is to say, queer—note: She says, “must even Elinor!—like the element  
 WR ZKLFK ZLWK WKH FRPPRQ KHUG VKH RZHV  
 KHUG <sup>3</sup>KHU RZQ OHYHO”<sup>3</sup> ÀQG WKDW VKH KDV VW  
 GLVFRYHU WKDW DOO RWKHUV DUH SDWKOHVV”



the essential nature of the game in which male power and female powerlessness are acknowledged in every move" (188). For an opposing view that borders on an academic beatdown, see Johnson, who critiques almost everything that Elinor does or says.

- Lanser, Susan. *The Secretory of Cassey: A History of the Trans Subject in Gothic Literature and Culture*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2014.
- Marshall, Nowell. "Beyond Queer Gothic: Charting the Gothic History of the Trans Subject in Beckford, Lewis, Byron." *TransGothic in Literature and Culture*. Ed. Jolene Zigarovich. New York: Routledge, 2017. 25-52.
- . *Romanticism, Gender, and Violence: Blake to George Sand*. PA: Bucknell