

# Gender, the novel and the modern order of time: the case of Frances Burney's *The Wanderer* (1814)

Gênero, o romance e a ordem moderna do tempo: o caso de *The Wanderer* (1814) de Frances Burney

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the 1814 novel *The Wanderer, or female difficulties* by English writer Frances Burney and how its depiction of Britain at the time of the French Revolution can contribute to the understanding of the emergence of what François Hartog called the modern regime of historicity. Like many authors analyzed by Hartog in his books *Regimes of Historicity* and *Croire en Histoire*, Burney was personally affected by the French revolutionary process, a fact that is reflected in her last work. However, the time of its publication – when the Napoleonic Wars were at their end – made it outdated, something that was compounded by the debates regarding the Revolution and issues of gender that it was steeped in. By analyzing this novel, I will argue that issues of gender also played a role in the changes of how men and women related to time at this period as part of the transformations in the concept of History that occurred at the turn of the eighteenth century.

## KEYWORDS

Novel; Gender; History

## RESUMO

O presente trabalho tem como objetivo analisar o romance *The Wanderer, or female difficulties*, da escritora inglesa Frances Burney, publicado em 1814, e como seu retrato da Grã-Bretanha à época da Revolução Francesa pode contribuir para a compreensão da emergência do que François Hartog chamou de regime moderno de historicidade. Como muitos autores analisados por Hartog em seus livros *Regimes de Historicidade* e *Crer na História*, Burney foi pessoalmente afetada pelo processo revolucionário francês, um fato que se reflete nessa sua última obra. No entanto, a época de sua publicação – quando as Guerras Napoleônicas estavam chegando ao fim – fizeram com que o romance ficasse datado, algo agravado pelos debates sobre a Revolução e questões de gênero com o qual dialoga. Através de uma análise desse romance, argumentarei aqui que questões de gênero também tiveram um papel em como homens e mulheres se relacionavam com o tempo nesse período, como parte das transformações no conceito de História que ocorreram na virada do século XVIII.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Romance; Gênero; História

In March 1814, a novel called *The Wanderer, or Female Difficulties* appeared in booksellers and libraries in Britain, written by the same author of three other successful works published in the previous century. Frances Burney (1752-1840), the writer, had made her anonymous debut in the literary market thirty-six years before, with the epistolary novel *Evelina* (1778); she now presented to the world what came to be her last work, one that took fourteen years to be written amid radical changes both in her private life and in the European political landscape.

Frances Burney is a relatively unknown writer in Brazil; *Evelina* was recently translated into Portuguese and published with an advert on the cover stating that its author was “one of Jane Austen’s major influences” (2014). Notably, Austen’s most famous novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), had its title taken from a passage from *Cecilia* (1782), and Burney’s works are also mentioned in the posthumously published *Northanger Abbey* (1818). However, we should note that Burney belonged to an ampler group of female authors that left their mark in the British literary world by the end of the eighteenth century. This period is characterized by “bizarre and untidy” prose constructions (JOHNSON 1995, p. 1), part of a literary context located between the so-called “rise of the novel” in the 1740s – with Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson, among others – and the early nineteenth century, with the establishment of the genre in Britain represented in the traditional canon by Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen herself.

What defines these final decades of the eighteenth century and that interests me in particular is the fact that British fiction then was intensely marked by their to the French Revolution, as well as to the different political and epistemological disturbances stimulated by it. Writing and publishing well before the outbreak of the 1789 events, Burney achieved fame with three novels – *Evelina*, *Cecilia* and *Camilla*. They follow their title characters from the moment they are introduced to society until their marriage to adequate partners;

they are indeed very similar to the novels written by Austen and other authors of the same period. The work that interests me here, *The Wanderer*, repeats this formula: a young woman is introduced to a certain community and must learn to navigate through a series of mostly embarrassing situations until she finds a suitable partner to marry. The distinction between this novel and its predecessors is that *The Wanderer's* protagonist is a refugee of Robespierre's Terror.

Moreover, in contrast to Burney's other novels, *The Wanderer* sold poorly, amounting to a single printed edition, which the critics received with disdain. Such failure is usually attributed to several factors, including its already outdated plot – the Jacobins had been defeated two decades before –, and the on-going conflict between Britain and Revolutionary France since 1792, which was personified in a new villain: Napoleon Bonaparte.

*The Wanderer* was not the only novel in this period to use the French Revolution as a plot element. As previously stated, most of the prose fiction produced in Britain in the 1790s was written in reaction to the French revolutionary process; different novelists took up different stances, covering an ample political spectrum that went from support to what was happening in France – with authors such as Mary Hays, Charlotte Smith and, most famously, Mary Wollstonecraft – to more reactionary positions, like Jane West, Elizabeth Hamilton and Hannah Moore. However, given Burney's proposal and the differences of this novel in comparison to her previous ones, I see *The Wanderer* as an interesting work through which we can analyze the transformations in the order of time, which characterized the turn of the eighteenth century, especially in what relates to the transformation of the categories of present, past and future.

Scholars such as Hannah Arendt (2007), Reinhart Koselleck (2006) and François Hartog (2013) systematized the changes that occurred in the relationship men and women had with time in that period, which along with the epistemological

transformations caused by the development of political philosophy and the natural sciences made it possible for the *Ancien Régime* to be overturned. The consequences of these transformations contributed to the emergence of what is called the modern concept of History and to the subsequent development of the historical discipline as an autonomous field of knowledge. As a literary genre, novels were considered vulgar at the time, especially in comparison to history; however, the genre equally reflects those changes, as authors drew more and more from what we call historical events. Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyze *The Wanderer* as a work that provides us the opportunity not only to comprehend the impact of the French Revolution in the European world at the time but also to explore the epistemological transformations – especially in relation to gender issues – to which these events gave rise, especially when it concerns what we call the order of time.

This paper is divided in three parts. In the first section, I will present Frances Burney so I can locate her in this context of political upheaval that marked the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Following, I will explore the relationship between novel as a genre, more specifically historical novels, with the period in question. In the final section, I will approach some aspects of *The Wanderer's* plot so I can present how this work can contribute to the comprehension of the aforementioned issues.

## i.

Frances Burney was born in 1752, the third of six children by Charles and Esther Burney. Her father, an organist and composer, later also acquired fame as a musicologist and music historian, a fact that made it possible for Frances and her siblings to, from an early age, frequent the intellectual circles of London at the time. Her experiences in this context appear in her diaries and correspondence, which are notable sources for contemporary historians to understand how these social circles worked. Her siblings also acquired some notoriety,

especially her eldest brother, James, a Navy officer, who served under James Cook in two of his expeditions to the Pacific and published his travel writings. Her half-sister Sarah also became a novelist.

As mentioned before, Burney published *Evelina* anonymously in 1778, without her father's knowledge. This novel was, in fact, the continuation of another, which she had written at fifteen, titled *The History of Caroline Evelyn*; this and other manuscripts by her were burned at the time of her father's second marriage. She began writing *Evelina* almost immediately after this episode, in secret, for, according to Burney in the dedication page written for *The Wanderer*, her father did not approve of women writing fiction. Margaret Doody characterizes this narrative that Burney made of herself and her father as a self-dramatization, which had to do with the status of prose fiction at the time – Burney started to write, in the second half of the eighteenth century. As Doody points out, in her dedication Burney says that her family library had a single book in the way of novels – *Amelia* (1751) by Henry Fielding –, but her diaries and letters imply that the entire family was made of avid fiction readers, and that Burney herself, by the age of sixteen, had already gone through novels that would have been considered indelicate for young women like herself, such as *Tristram Shandy* (1759) and *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), both by Lawrence Sterne (DOODY 1988, p. 37).

*Evelina* was published with the help of her brother Charles, who, posing as its author, offered the work to two booksellers, the second of which, Thomas Lowndes, printed the work in January 1778. Burney took several precautions to make sure that the novel's authorship was not discovered, going as far as faking her own calligraphy, as she feared being recognized for her work as her father's amanuensis. The novel was well received, and by June her sisters revealed to Dr. Burney that Frances was its author. From this moment on, and especially after being assured that his daughter's reputation

took no damage, the musicologist introduced Frances to the intellectual circles he frequented, as a writer in her own right. Like many before her, amongst them Henry Fielding's sister, Sarah, Frances Burney became a public figure chaperoned by a male relative. Later, when writing *Cecilia*, her second work, her father – contrary to what might be expected – was anxious for its conclusion and eventual publishing (DOODY 1988, p. 99). The apex of her insertion in British high society was when, in 1786, Burney obtained a position in Court as one of Queen Charlotte's Keeper of the Robes, with a salary of two hundred pounds a year. However, this position cost her the time she had available to write, and she abandoned it five years later.

In 1792, through friends, Burney came in contact with a group of exiles from the revolution that had already been convulsing through France. William Locke, a liberal art critic, and his wife Frederica, with whom Burney maintained a friendship intense enough to be frowned upon, offered hospitality to several of these people, amongst them the notorious Mme. de Staël. Burney and the baroness quickly established a rapport, but Charles Burney did not approve of her daughter's keeping company with a woman he considered a revolutionary and who, worst of all, was a renowned adulteress. The music historian also did not find it convenient when Frances fell in love with Alexandre D'Arblay, an officer in the French army with ties to Lafayette, a *constitutionnaire*, who had little in the way of money. Through a correspondence in which they taught each other their respective languages, Burney and D'Arblay established, according to Margaret Doody, a fairly equal relationship, which served as comfort to D'Arblay as he kept up with the turn of events in his country of origin: "The shock of the execution of the king of France in January 1793 made both Frances and Alexandre more tender, more vulnerable; d'Arblay in particular needed someone to offer emotional support as his world was disappearing" (DOODY 1988, p. 200). The pension guaranteed by Queen Charlotte for Burney's services allowed the couple to get married and, later, the gains from the sale of *Camilla*

were used to build a cottage in Surrey into which they moved until D'Arblay was offered a position in Napoleon Bonaparte's government in 1801.

It was in this period of residency in France that Burney wrote *The Wanderer*, at which point the couple also had a son, Alex. What had been at first only a change of country because of her husband's new job became an exile with the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars. According to Doody, the tone of *The Wanderer's* dedication shows how much she perceived this novel as interconnected with her personal life (DOODY 1988, p. 313). What is noteworthy is that not only the adaption to a new country and maternity affected the writing of this work, but later, a delicate health issue also did so: in September 1811, after being diagnosed with a tumor in her right breast, Burney subjected herself to a mastectomy in the kitchen of her house, without any sort of anesthetic or sedative. In a letter to her sister Esther, Burney described the operation in detail, despite having fainted twice during the procedure. At the beginning of 1814, when Napoleon's defeat was positively close, Burney returned to Britain and at last published her new novel.

*The Wanderer's* first edition sold out, but as previously said, the chances of a second run were quashed by reviews. The most notable of all was the one written by William Hazlitt and published in the *Edinburgh Review* in November 1814. After expatiating about the novel as a genre, touching especially on authors such as Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollet, Lawrence Sterne and Samuel Richardson – all of them men –, Hazlitt, asserted, regarding the writing of his own time: "It not to be wondered, if, amidst the tumult of events crowded into this period, our literature has partaken of the disorder of the time; if our prose has run mad, and our poetry grown childish". Only then did he mention women authors, beginning with Burney herself, whom he considered as having kept the "tenor of their way" (HAZZLIT 1815, p. 335). Concerning *The Wanderer*, the critic famously wrote that it was a work written in the old fashion, by "a common observer of manners" and definitely



a woman whose narrative was marked by what he called “a consciousness of her sex” (HAZZLIT 1815, p. 336). This fact, underlined by the differences that Hazlitt identified even in the physical attributes of men and women, made the novel superficial; according to him, the feminine mind – following the same principle as the female body – was more fragile and therefore more impressionable when it came to ordinary events.

As already pointed out by Beatriz Villacañas Palomo, in affirming that Burney wrote conscious of her sex, Hazlitt was ironically correct: placing the issue of gender at the forefront of Burney’s work corresponds to the core of the interpretation given to the novels written by Burney and her contemporaries by scholars and historians of literature at the end of the twentieth century (VILLACAÑAS PALOMO 1996, p. 445). In this perspective, *The Wanderer’s* novelty was that, beyond the common embarrassments and violence suffered by women, there were specific and unprecedented historical events. This is why *The Wanderer* is especially interesting to explore with regards to what extent the issue of genre is also important to understand what François Hartog calls the “breach in time” responsible for the erosion of the *topos* of *historia magistra vitae* between the mid-eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth.

## ii.

When it comes to denoting a relationship between the events of the turn of the eighteenth century and the establishment of the novel as a literary form that marked this epoch, the usual practice is to resort to the classic 1937 essay by Hungarian philosopher Georgy Lukács titled *The Historical Novel*. Lukács asserts that the rise of this new and specific subgenre was linked to the rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte and culminated in the appearance of Walter Scott’s *Waverley, sixty years since*, only four months after *The Wanderer*. *Waverley* narrates the adventures of its title character, an officer in the English Army,



during the Jacobite Rising of 1745, the last effort on the part of the Stuart dynasty and its allies to revert the results of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. As his name implies, Edward Waverley finds himself involved in a civil partisan conflict and his loyalties swing from one side to the other throughout the narrative. According to Lukács, the main characteristic of Scott's novels was this portrayal of the average, mediocre man, imbedded in civil war (LUKACS 1989, p. 33).

Beyond the building of a conciliatory national narrative – Scott inscribed Scotland into a modern, Hanoverian Great Britain through this novel and subsequent ones –, other topics that marked the nineteenth century novel appear in *Waverley*. For example, the protagonist who takes the place of the reader in a world different to his own; marriage as an allegory for the conciliation of a divided nation; and the maturing of the protagonist throughout the narrative, which in *Waverley* happens through his involvement with “History”. Scott left a considerable number of followers in Europe, like Alessandro Manzoni and Honoré de Balzac, and in the recently turned independent countries in the American Continent, such as James Fenimore Cooper, in the United States, and Brazilian novelist José de Alencar, who would start publishing several decades later.

However, Scott's centrality in the development of the novel as a literary genre has been notably questioned since the end of the last century, in works like Ina Ferris's *The Achievement of Literary Authority* (1991), in which she defends that the *Waverley* novels (so called because they were published as being “by the author of *Waverley*”) were fundamental to the change of status of the genre in the nineteenth century, making it a respectable literary form. As Ian Watt's classic 1957 *The Rise of the Novel* already indicated, the audience that consumed novels in the eighteenth century was made up of mainly middle class women who, liberated of several domestic activities by the Industrial Revolution, suddenly had time to indulge in reading (WATT 2011, p. 43). However, although the

authors normally considered canonical – both at the period and today – were men (e.g., Laurence Sterne, Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson), a growing number of women also wrote novels, which would culminate in their preponderance in the market for prose fiction at the turn of the century – the context in which Frances Burney herself began writing<sup>1</sup>. For Ferris, Scott's works meant the "masculinizing" of the genre and its consequential elevation to a more respectable place. In a similar vein, Katie Trumpener (1997) problematizes Scott's "pioneering" when it comes to the historical novel, as she traces the origins of this genre in what is also called "national tale" to the generation of women novelists of the 1790s.

More recently, Fiona Price (2016) demonstrated that Scott amply appropriated himself of the fiction produced by women before or at the same time as him. The name "Waverley" itself is an example of that, having been employed before by both Charlotte Smith and Jane West with the same goal of denoting ambiguity. Thus, Price defends the idea that the historical novel as a subgenre precedes Scott and would be even more closely linked with the reaction in Britain to the French Revolution. What made Scott's prose so different when compared to these authors, Burney herself among them, was the fact that he calculated the political risk of referring directly to those events and chose to represent partisan conflicts in historically removed settings.

On the other hand, in the dedication to her novel, Frances Burney affirms that she opted to portray the period of the French Revolution precisely because trying to represent any dimension of life at that point without referencing it was an impossible task (BURNEY 1814, p. xii). In contrast to Scott, who wrote initially about Scotland during the Jacobite rebellions as an oblique way of dealing with the present, Burney saw no way around it – one possible explanation is that her personal life was intensely intertwined to the Revolution through her marriage to D'Arblay.

*1 For this process, see also: VASCONCELOS (2007).*

Carmel Murphy, who is part of the most recent wave of analyses of the historical novel in its beginnings, approached *The Wanderer* from its representation of the French revolutionary process and the possible interpretations of Burney's rendering of such context. In what concerns the contrasting receptions that *The Wanderer* and *Waverley* had when released, the author asserts that, although both novels dialogued each in their own way with the Revolution, these differences were decisive to the elevation of Scott to his position as an author and the rejection of Burney's work by the literary establishment. The novels by the *author of Waverley* had, as mentioned, an important ideological role in Great Britain in the later moments of the Napoleonic wars, presenting coherent and unifying national narratives in a period of uncertainty and political turbulence that, in a way, only came to an end with the Reform Law of 1832, which increased electoral representation in Parliament. On the other hand, *The Wanderer* brought forth debates on social, economic and gender issues that had taken place decades before, besides being a cosmopolitan novel of sorts – its protagonist is English, but grew up in France – and with a plot that denounced and criticized English society (2015, p. 488).

My concern here, however, is to approach *The Wanderer* as a moment of transition in when the novel as a genre was moving from what might be called the picaresque, or the novel of manners, to dealing with specific historical events – generating what we call the historical novel –, and to explore what relationship we can infer from there regarding the changes in the order of time that made emerge what, as discussed by François Hartog, we call the modern regime of historicity.

In both *Regimes of Historicity* (2013) and *Croire en l'Histoire* (2017), the French historian dwells on the experiences of literary men during the revolutionary process and how they can be perceived as what he calls a "rift in time" between the historical *topos* of *historia magistra vitae* and the emergence of History. In *Croire en l'Histoire*, specifically, Hartog dedicates

a chapter to the novel, where he underlines the connection between history and the rising of modern literature, but not only that: the tenuous relationship between this genre and the modern regime of historicity. This relationship is tenuous, according to the author, because, on the one hand, “everything starts with this irrefutable experience of European societies overtaken by a new time”, but on the other, “literature would concentrate itself preferably on the cracks of the modern regime, in capturing its failures, on apprehending the heterogeneity of the temporalities on course, to then extract a dramatic techniques and the occasion to question the world order” (HARTOG 2017, p. 128). However, perhaps due to his choice of authors, Hartog’s study does not touch on a central issue to understand the establishment of the novel and its relationship to 1789’s events: the issue of gender.

Fiona Price went back to this incipient historical fiction in the 1790s to show that History – manifesting itself through the French Revolution – became the main concern of British novelists of both genders to the detriment of only portraying manners and customs. Not that fiction in the preceding decades of that eighteenth century did not busy itself with historical events: for instance, *The History of Tom Jones, a foundling* (1749) by Henry Fielding, which is set in 1745, has its main character find a company of soldiers headed to Scotland in order to suppress the Jacobite rising, which makes the references to it along Scott’s *Waverley* even less gratuitous. Among the novels mentioned by Price is *Marcus Flaminius*, by Ellis Cordelia Knight, published in 1792, and which, in a procedure very similar to François-René de Chateaubriand’s *Essai sur les revolutions* (1797), analyzed by Hartog (2017, p. 134), retreats to Antiquity to try and confer some meaning to the revolutionary experience. On another front, also central to Price’s analysis, is *Charles Dacres; or the voluntary exile. A historical novel, founded on facts*, published anonymously in 1797, which deals directly with the events of the Revolution, already placing them in “history, although its writing always remits to the present” (PRICE 2014, p. 145). This idea of

contemporaneity perceived as historical constitutes one of those contradictions referred by Hartog when discussing the relationship between literature and the modern regime of historicity. Other novels from the same period where this practice also appears are *Desmond* (1792), by Charlotte Turner Smith, and *Lioncel: the adventures of an emigrant* (1803), published anonymously.

For Price, however, what Hartog calls a “rift in time” could be attributed to the perception of the French Revolution as moment of rupture within the historiographical perspective of the Scottish Enlightenment, the idea of *stadial history*, linked to authors such as William Robertson, Adam Ferguson and John Millar. In their estimate, history equaled the progress of humanity through different stages, the last being the era marked by the development of trade. Although some interpreters of the French revolutionary process, such as Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft, attempted to frame the French Revolution in this scheme, Price asserts that novels like *Charles Dacres*, for example, underlines its limits, for they saw the French Revolution as an event requiring its own historiography (PRICE 2014, p. 145-146).

Writing her dedication in the last moments of the Napoleonic Wars, Burney also inscribed this period in the past, asserting this view of rupture, which included the fact that in the past she wouldn't consider it something of her concern: “I held political topics to be without my sphere, or beyond my skill” (1814, p. xi-xii). Despite the imperative of representing the Revolution, shoving it to the past was a way to try and deal with the impression that her motives would cause controversy:

Anxious, however,—inexpressibly!—to steer clear, alike, of all animadversions that, to my adoptive country, may seem ungrateful, or, to the country of my birth unnatural; I have chosen, with respect to what, in these volumes, has any reference to the French Revolution, a period which, completely past, can excite no rival sentiments, nor awaken any party spirit; yet of which the stupendous iniquity and cruelty, though already historical,

have left traces, that, handed down, even but traditionally, will be sought with curiosity, though reverted to with horror, from generation to generation. (BURNEY 1814, xiii).

Thus, one of the questions lurking behind *The Wanderer* is the fact that it doesn't actually portray the events of the Revolution *per se*, but rather their effect on the protagonist and other characters' lives, something very reminiscent of Burney's own experience of the revolutionary process since she only dealt with it from afar. The scope through which she would touch on these issues was already present in her works, despite steering clear of the radical circles frequented by the likes of Mary Wollstonecraft. The subtitle "*female difficulties*" brings this central aspect of the denouncement that is contained in the novel to the fore, but which had already been at the core of Burney's literary concerns.

In *Equivocal Beings*, Claudia L. Johnson (1995) stresses how the issues of gender and sensibility were at the center of the ideological battles that followed the French Revolution in Britain, starting with *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, by Edmund Burke, who declared the revolutionary process as signifying the end of the age of chivalry (1872, p. 332). Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the first to react strongly to this sentence and to the treatment Burke conferred on Queen Marie Antoinette in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1791), a rebuttal to Burke that preceded by a few months of the one by Thomas Paine with the same title. According to Wollstonecraft, Burke was behaving like the women that she would, a year later, in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, characterize as being incapable of thinking and acting rationally; those that justified men's control of women. To the philosopher, in reducing himself to a sentimental behavior typically feminine, Burke was relegating women to the status of children (JOHNSON 1995, p. 8). According to Johnson's interpretation, this overtaking of the realm of sentiment by men in the late eighteenth century is shown, for instance, in this period's fiction, in its heroines rarely expressing their wishes. Burney herself had already

codified this stifling of feelings and desires in her earlier novels through the crises that overcome their protagonists in their *denouement*; Cecilia Beverly temporarily loses her mind and the ability to talk, and Camilla Tyrold is led to physical and mental exhaustion. In *The Wanderer*, however, besides the struggles that were particular to women, these issues will be compounded by “the reign of the terrible Robespierre”, as we will see next.

### iii.

The first element that draws attention in *The Wanderer* when compared to Burney’s other novels is that the title does not consist in the protagonist’s name. Beyond replicating what was already common practice in the genre at the time, the issue of names was almost always at the core of Burney’s plots. As already mentioned, the title character of *Evelina* is an illegitimate young woman and the search for her true parentage – and consequently her true name – is what drives most of the narrative; in *Cecilia*, a conflict is established because the will that makes Cecilia Beverly an heiress requires her husband to take her surname, what in turn would deprive him of *his* identity. A name, though, does not limit itself to determine an individual’s identity, but also implies their social standing and what place they occupy in the world. Like Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones, Evelina’s status as someone illegitimate leaves her adrift in the society she must navigate until finding where she belongs, be it as someone’s daughter or someone’s wife. In similar fashion, *The Wanderer*’s main character not having a name also lacks the correct place in the community she encounters after crossing the Channel.

The narrative begins when a group of people attempting to clandestinely leave France receives in their boat a young lady who asks for their assistance. At first, seeing her praying in gratitude, the other characters assume she is a nun. Quickly, however, a gust of wind reveals that the skin under her robes is dark and that she wears bandages, as if wounded.



The mystery of who exactly is this young woman drives most of the novel's plot, until her motives for running away and concealing her identity are slowly revealed. In the second chapter, already in Britain, we learn that contrary to everyone's assumption, she is English, which attenuates her companions' suspicion. In the fifth, being referred by the narrator as "Incognita", the protagonist gets rid of her ragged clothes, of the cosmetics that darkens her skin and the bandages that supposedly covered her wounds. Gradually, the young woman's social standing becomes clearer. Ellis, as she becomes known after receiving a letter addressed to "L. S.", appears to be an English lady belonging to a family of means, not much different from the people under whose protection she places herself after disembarking in British soil.

From the moment she starts living in England, however, she suffers much of the same embarrassments that Burney's previous heroines did: threats of sexual abuse or physical violence, and the danger of losing her social status. Distinctly from them, however, her struggle is also for financial autonomy: Ellis, who, by her manners and education, seems to belong to the gentry, finds herself obligated to offer musical performances in exchange for money – something that was considered improper for a young woman of her status. Debra Silverman notes this aspect of the novel, also in comparison with Burney's other works. Since Ellis has no name and therefore does not clearly belong to a specific social class, she cannot refuse to perform publicly, what would not be demanded of her if the people who protect her knew who she actually was (SILVERMAN 1996, p. 69). The protagonist's frustration underlines Burney's criticism toward society at her time – they encompass the *female difficulties* announced in the novel's title.

Ellis's real name, it turns out, is actually Juliet Granville, and, like Evelina before her, she is the illegitimate daughter of an English earl, raised in France and at the time of the Terror, forced to marry a Jacobin interested in her fortune as a potential heiress. Again, along with the physical threats of the

Revolution, there is once more the issue of women's lack of financial autonomy, since the character is seen as a mere means of acquiring money or property. Ellis/Juliet, however, is not the only one in the novel affected by the French revolutionary process; in the narrative she has an antagonist named Elinor Joddrel, one of the characters in the boat at the beginning of the novel. Elinor is one of the many radical characters that appear in this period's fiction, comparable to Harriet Freke, of Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1800), and to Amelia Opie's title-character in *Adeline Mowbray* (1801).

Elinor is conceived not only to contrast with Ellis/Juliet in behavior, but also to dispute the attentions of Albert Harleigh. Both Harleigh and Joddrel represent, as suggested by Carmel Murphy, rivaling perspectives of the French Revolution, based, respectively, on the interpretations of Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft of that process (2015, p. 493). Like the author of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Elinor went to revolutionary France to experience it herself and returns to England when her physical integrity becomes threatened because she is an English subject.

Elinor also shares other aspects of Wollstonecraft's personal life, whose details were made public by her own widower in a biography published closely after her death, and which contributed to the decline of her reputation (GODWIN, 1798). One of such details is that facing evidence that Harleigh was falling in love with Ellis, Elinor threatens to kill herself. Wollstonecraft, in her turn, twice attempted suicide, both times in connection with her relationships with men. Although suicide had already appeared in a novel by Burney – when the husband of Cecilia Beverly's best friend kills himself because of his debts in very public fashion –, here it is connected with something problematic in this regime of sentimentality alluded to by Claudia Johnson: the possibility (or impossibility) of women manifesting their wishes and desires. To divest herself of any shame in admitting her feelings is part of Elinor's stance as an adept of the revolutionary ideals of her age.

'How paltry is shame where there can be no disgrace!—I disdain it!—disclaim it!—and am ready to avow to the whole world, that I dare speak and act, as well as think and feel for myself!'

'What amazing, unaccountable fools,' she cried, 'have we all been for these quantities of centuries! Worlds seem to have a longer infancy taken out of the progress of their duration, even than the long imbecility of the childhood of poor mortals. But for the late glorious revolutionary shake given to the universe, I should, at this very moment, from mere cowardly conformity, be the wife of Dennis!—In spite of my repentance of the engagement, in spite of the aversion I have taken to him, and in spite of the contempt I have conceived—with one single exception—for the whole race of mankind, I must have been that poor man's despicable wife!—O despicable indeed! For with what sentiments could I have married him? Where would have been my soul while I had given him my hand? Had I not seen—known—adored—his brother!'

She stopt, and the deepest vermillion overspread her face; her effort was made; she had boasted of her new doctrine, lest she should seem impressed with confusion from the old one which she violated; but the struggle being over, the bravado and exultation subsided; female consciousness and native shame took their place; and abashed, and unable to meet the eyes of Ellis, she ran out of the room. (BURNEY 1814, p. 141).

In this moment, despite her ideological convictions, her own body betrays her, causing her to interrupt herself, flush in embarrassment and run from the room where she had made the speech to Ellis. What comes to attention here is that Elinor, in manifesting her feelings openly, repeats the notion of history associated with the Scottish Enlightenment, according to which humanity progressed by stages, akin to the life of a person, and the French Revolution signified an important step forward in this process. This idea of history can be found in the political writings of Wollstonecraft, especially in her unfinished *A Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, published in 1794. Although it seems sometimes contradictory of "feminist" women like Wollstonecraft and Joddrel to expose their feelings for the men they love and even forfeit their lives

for them, they see the possibility of admitting these feelings in public as revolutionary, even if it meant the loss of their reputation.

When she finally declares herself to Harleigh, Elinor again alludes to her revolutionary ideals, but the strength of custom and habit stops her, in an almost physiological reaction.

She arose, and, clasping her hands, with strong, yet tender, emotion, exclaimed. 'That I should love you—' She stopt. Shame crimsoned her skin. She covered her face with both her hands, and sunk again upon her chair.

Harleigh was strongly and painfully affected. 'O Elinor!' he cried, and was going to take her hand; but the fear of misinterpretation made him draw back; and Elinor, almost instantly recovering, raised her head, and said, 'How tenacious a tyrant is custom! How it clings to our practice! How it embarrasses our conduct! How it awes our very nature itself, and bewilders and confounds even our free will! We are slaves to its laws and its follies, till we forget its usurpation. Who should have told me, only five minutes ago, that, at an instant such as this; an instant of liberation from all shackles, of defiance to all forms; its antique prescriptions should still retain their power to confuse and torment me? Who should have told me, that, at an instant such as this, I should blush to pronounce the attachment in which I ought to glory? And hardly know how to articulate.... That I should love you, Harleigh, can surprise no one but yourself!'

Her cheeks were now in flames; and those of Harleigh were tinted with nearly as high a colour. Ellis fixed her eyes stedfastly upon the floor. (BURNEY 1814, p. 160-161)

Ellis, by contrast, is condemned to silence not only because of her specific circumstances, but also because, unlike Elinor, she does not adhere to a rupture as radical with the *status quo*. She configures one of the many characters in the novels of this period that pull back at how far a female character could go, which are more easily found in Jane Austen's novels. When Austen started publishing, she did it more or less in the same vein as Scott, abdicating from explicitly writing

about contemporary events; the moving of army militias or a character gaining wealth through a naval career are the few references that are made to the Napoleonic Wars in her novels, although there are elements in them that escape us readers in the twenty-first century and have to do with the country's political elite<sup>2</sup>.

Like her contemporaries, Austen not only denounced the conditions to which women were submitted and doted her characters with what could be called "revolutionary attitudes", but also in a sense pulled back from how "revolutionary" they could be at the conclusion of her novels; most of her protagonists end up in economically advantageous marriages, although they also made "love matches". The case of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is notorious, in which her father even questions her if she is not only marrying Darcy for his social and economic standing. Burney, before Austen, also used this sort of narrative device; in *Cecilia*, the title-character gives up her fortune so her husband-to-be can keep his name.

Claudia L. Johnson states that it is the dynamic between different female characters that guarantees the protagonists' leeway to act outside what was or is considered conventional. Johnson identifies this pattern in *Pride and Prejudice* itself, whose protagonist has physical and intellectual attributes that could be considered improper, but that are not much of a problem when compared to her younger sister's conduct.

Lydia's offending presence in the novel makes this possible. Even though, as a husband hunter patterned after her doting mother, she has nothing in common with the feminist ideologues of turn-of-the-century fiction, she serves in much the same way they do in the novels of moderate social critics. Instead of standing as living proof that young ladies should be disciplined into shamefacedness' as Fordyce would term it, Lydia is a decoy who attracts the disapproval to which Elizabeth herself could otherwise be subject, and by lamenting Lydia's glaring excesses, Elizabeth is cleared for her less egregious, but still improper rambles, conceit and impertinence without arousing our discomfort or incurring our censure. (JOHNSON 1988, p. 76-77).

*2 For Austen's referencing people and places that her readers would instantly recognize see: BAR-CHAS (2013).*

One of the fictional feminine ideologues that Johnson mentions is Elinor Joddrel, who appeared in a novel after Lydia Bennet and therefore arrived to the public as an already anachronistic anti-heroine. It is worth mentioning that Walter Scott himself deployed this sort of dynamic in *Waverley*, making his protagonist, Waverley, at first turn his attentions to Flora McIvor, a Jacobite, who, although not presenting herself indecorously, also expressed herself, either politically, sentimentally or religiously, as a character that showed much more agency than her counterpart, Rose Bradwardine.

Following, therefore, the logic evidenced by Johnson, Elinor exists so that whatever problematic elements about Ellis/Juliet's conduct are softened to readers of the period, which include her having travelled alone from France to England and her refusal to reveal her true identity in a society in which this was a necessity to safeguard her reputation and financial autonomy. Carmel Murphy also indicates that, although Ellis/Juliet and Harleigh adhere to a Burkean interpretation of the French Revolution, Elinor's view of these events goes uncontested throughout the novel and both characters continuously show admiration for her (MURPHY 2016, p. 496).

What makes this novel so interesting here, beyond these specific dynamics, is how they denote the relationship of this work with time. The way in which we usually conceive the idea of literature is connected to a history of the arts in general, as part of the development of what is called civilization, which congregates the idea of progress or decadence. This notion appears in the Hazlitt's review of *The Wanderer*, where he contrasts Britain's past literary achievements with the "current state" of the nation's poetry and prose. Usually, as we pointed out at the start of this paper, the period to which Burney is usually circumscribed – if we think in terms of a development of British literature – is normally considered an interlude between the appearance of the first modern novels in the 1740s and the establishment of the genre in the early nineteenth century.

On the one hand, *The Wanderer* does signal a new stage in the development of the form toward what is called the historical and realist novel of that century: it is not limited to the misadventures of a character among English society – as was characteristic of the novel of manners –, but these misadventures are the consequence of a specific historical event, which was not common in the literature written before the French Revolution. However, beyond this – as is also present in Wollstonecraft's works and in the passages from the novel regarding Elinor Joddrel we quoted here –, the issue of women in this context, the denouncement of their situation, points to a future of equality between the sexes that would signify the reaching of another stage of human development. However, this future does not arrive and even these vindications become something of the past, that is, by its inadequacy in timing, *The Wanderer* is a novel pointing toward a future that is already past. In this sense, I believe, Burney's novel could be perceived as one of the "rifts in time" to which François Hartog alludes to when approaching the discontinuities present in the relationship between the modern regime of historicity and the novel as a literary form that manifests it.

#### IV. Final Considerations

My intent here was to briefly demonstrate how the novel *The Wanderer*, by Frances Burney, published in early 1814, can be useful to understand the emergence of what Reinhart Koselleck called the modern concept of history or more amply what François Hartog dubbed the modern regime of historicity. Both authors signal, in distinct ways, the importance that the development of the modern novel had in this process. However, the choices of material of both historians left aside works, in political theory, historiography or literature, by women, or that dealt with the issues of women and gender. These issues, as evidenced by the writings of female authors at this period, of which Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges are only the most famous examples, made up a significant part of the debates



regarding the French revolutionary process; those concerning the concept of reason, the rights of men and women, and the concept of history itself. In Great Britain, these debates took place mostly in literature, which resulted in the publication of several works that, on one side, denounced and sought to offer solutions to the issue of the subordination of women, and on the other, attempted to justify it.

Frances Burney took part in these debates through her novels and reacted to the French Revolution and how it affected people's lives, more specifically women's, through *The Wanderer*, a long novel about a woman's trajectory, in which she must omit her identity throughout the plot. The French Revolution, for Juliet Granville, did not mean only the threat of physical harm common in a period of violence, but also the loss of her place in society and of who she actually was. While deploying Juliet with a more conservative view of the process, Burney also presented us with a Wollstonecraftian anti-heroine with whom readers could sympathize, if this also didn't make it an anachronistic literary work at the time it was published, as it presented at the same time a denouncement of the present and a view of the future that, in the eyes of the British literary establishment, was ultimately defeated along with Jacobinism and later Napoleon.

What I aimed at here, therefore, is to take a step further in integrating works that deal with the issue of gender and their relationship with the concept of history to the debates surrounding the transformations in the concept of history as it appeared in the nineteenth century.

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## FUNDING

No funding was declared.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

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Historiografia:  
International Journal  
of Theory and History  
of Historiography.*  
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RECEIVED IN: 10/JUNE/2020 | APPROVED IN: 22/JULY/2020