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“Are we not all creatures of one Creator?” Frances Burney and
Catholic Suffering
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Abstract: Informed both by England’s violent anti-Catholic history and her own Roman Catholic familial and marital ties, Frances Burney’s writing dating from the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars is deeply interested in, and critical of, the sectarian persecution of Roman Catholics. In her pamphlet *Brief Reflections Relative to the Emigrant French Clergy* (1793) and her novel, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (1814), which is set in the 1790s, Burney often draws parallels between the disenfranchisement and suffering of Roman Catholics and that of women. Such parallels function to encourage empathy regardless of difference, and to contribute to the burgeoning rhetoric of human rights that enables humanitarian activism and action.

Miss Morland—my stupid sister has mistaken all your clearest expressions. You talked of expected horrors in London—and instead of instantly conceiving, as any rational creature would have done, that such words could relate only to a circulating library, she immediately pictured to herself a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George’s Fields.

— Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818)

Henry Tilney’s flippant allusion to the 1780 Gordon Riots implies that women are incapable of understanding the connections between history, the novel, Englishness, and Catholic suffering.¹ The work of Frances Burney, one of the novelists lauded in *Northanger Abbey*’s defense of novel

reading, contradicts such a suggestion. England's violent anti-Catholic history and Burney's own Catholic familial ties haunt her work, especially as the violence of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars increasingly impacted her life after marriage to a French Catholic émigré and her experience of exile in France during the Napoleonic wars. In her 1793 pamphlet *Brief Reflections Relative to the Emigrant French Clergy*, an appeal to British women to support refugee priests who had fled revolutionary France, Burney contrasts a vision of brutally lawless revolutionary France to one of bountiful, magnanimous, and peaceful Protestant Britain. Ultimately, her strategic alignment of victimized French priests with charitable British women foments sympathy across gendered, national, and religious identity categories. Burney furthers this ecumenical project in her last novel, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (1814). Set in the 1790s and composed piecemeal from that period through Burney's ten-year exile in France, *The Wanderer* represents painfully vulnerable women, cast out from revolutionary France and unwelcome on English shores in part due to their ties to Catholic faith. At this time in history and Burney's own life, religious and gendered forms of oppression prove inextricably intertwined. Burney's sentimentalized but nevertheless detailed and frighteningly real depictions of anti-Catholic violence and gender-based violence not only function to encourage sympathy across difference but also contribute to the burgeoning rhetoric of human rights that enables humanitarian action.

I: Biographical Context

Burney family attitudes toward the nexus where religion and rebellion meet have not garnered much critical attention despite a rich archive of primary material relevant to the topic. This involves significant Burney relationships with Roman Catholics by blood and by marriage—Frances's fondly remembered maternal grandmother was Roman Catholic, as was her eventual husband, the French émigré Alexandre d'Arblay (1754-1813). It also includes the family's first-hand experience of anti-Catholic violence during the Gordon Riots, "the largest, deadliest and most protracted urban riots in British history" (Colley 332). Susan Burney's oft-cited eyewitness account of the Gordon Riots in a letter to her sister expresses sympathy for "the utter ruin of so many poor innocent People who, because they are Catholics, can have no hope of redress" (Olleson 174). Susan's letter also describes a remarkable moment when her father Dr. Charles Burney is forced to refute protestors' accusations that the family are themselves Papists. Frances was in Bath with the Thrales when the Gordon Riots broke out, and wrote anxiously to her family in London, fearful for their safety, before "all [wa]s altered" by anti-Catholic violence in Bath, and she had to flee with the Thrales to escape (*EJL* 4: 178). These biographical details can help to understand why Burney linked Catholicism, femininity, and vulnerability in significant ways throughout her writing.

In her *Memoirs of Doctor Burney*, published in 1832, Burney dates her Catholic sympathies to her childhood and matrilineal roots. Frances cherished the memory of her mother, who died when she was ten, and offers a beatific characterization of her maternal grandmother, Frances Wood Sleepe, who was brought up Catholic and outlived her own daughter long

enough to have a significant impact on her granddaughter's life, dying when Frances was twenty-one (Erickson 29-30). Although Burney herself characterized Frances Wood Sleepé as the daughter of a French Huguenot refugee, Amy Louise Erickson's work on the successful fan-making business and mercantile savvy of the Sleepé women—Frances Burney's grandmother, mother, and maternal aunts—establishes Frances Wood Sleepé's Catholicism as traceable to *both* parents. Erickson identifies Frances Sleepé's father as Francis Wood, fan-maker, "recorded in the London 'Return of Papists'" in 1706 (26). Though Frances Wood's husband, Richard Sleepé, was Anglican, her parents, Francis and Arabella Wood, were both certainly Catholic. Erickson characterizes Frances Burney's own account of her grandmother as the daughter of a Huguenot refugee father and a Roman Catholic mother as "mistaken" (27). In her account of her grandmother's religion as a result "probably of maternal education," Burney aligns Catholicism and maternal nurture while making clear that her own mother, Esther, was brought up Protestant (*Memoirs of Doctor Burney* 1: 80). According to Erickson, Frances Wood Sleepé was still recorded as Catholic in the 1767 Return of Papists records, which means she would have been required to practice her religion privately after her marriage. Erickson argues that it is unclear if Burney's own errors about her maternal familial heritage offered in *Memoirs of Doctor Burney* are intentional efforts to conceal her grandmother's successful mercantile background or efforts to redefine that background as "gentile" (30-31). The same could be said of Burney's mischaracterization of her grandmother's Catholicism as only "maternal." Certainly, practicing Catholicism in eighteenth-century London not only incurred political disenfranchisement (a condition, of course,

familiar to all women at the time) but also, as the Gordon Riots demonstrate, risked serious persecution.

In *Memoirs of Doctor Burney*, Frances Burney also suggests that her father did not send her to school in France with her sisters for fear that she would be particularly susceptible to Catholic influences. She writes that Charles Burney had later acknowledged that his reticence to send Frances to Paris was in part due to her

tender veneration ... for her maternal grandmother; whose angelic piety, and captivating softness, had won her young heart with such reverential affection, that he apprehended there might be danger of her being led to follow, even enthusiastically, the religion of so pure a votary, if she should fall so early, within the influence of any zealot in the work of conversion. (1: 155)

Charles Burney himself admits that he took steps, including hiring a private tutor, to be sure that his other daughters would not be “prejudiced in favor of any religion except our own” while residing in Paris (158). Since it is also true that she was an exceptionally shy, developmentally delayed child who may not have thrived away from home, Frances Burney’s interpretation of her father’s choice to send Susannah to Paris rather than herself may reveal as much about her own interest in and sympathies toward Catholicism, early on or in later life or both, as it does her father’s motives.

Indeed, despite a record of extraordinary filial obedience prior to her marriage—she had published her first novel in secret for fear of offending her father, faithfully served as his amanuensis, capitulated to his wishes that she not pursue a career as a dramatist, and spent five soul-crushing years as a Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte at his behest—Frances

Burney ultimately married a French Catholic émigré, Alexandre d'Arblay, at the age of forty-one against her father's "coldly averse" wishes (*JL* 2: 175). Doctor Burney did not attend the ceremony that took place on the twenty-eighth of July 1793 in an Anglican parish church. The couple married again two days later in a Roman Catholic ceremony in London at the chapel of the Sardinian Ambassador to ensure legal claim to d'Arblay's property in France if it could be restored after the Revolution (Doody, *Frances Burney* 202). Thirteen years prior to the d'Arblays' marriage, the same Sardinian Embassy chapel had been wrecked during the Gordon Riots, and, before that, destroyed by a mob after the flight of James II in 1688. Thus, the destruction and rebuilding of the Sardinian Embassy chapel functions as a synecdoche for Catholicism in England during the long eighteenth century, alternately reviled and tolerated, persistently evocative of the potential for violent destruction. Sanctified in the Anglican church and a twice rebuilt Catholic chapel, Frances Burney's marriage to d'Arblay initiated a series of geographical and cultural border crossings that would dominate her life during the Napoleonic wars.

For Frances Burney, then, Catholicism was woven throughout her life and works in both deeply personal and unavoidably public ways. As Frances Dolan confirms, "Catholicism was not just a spirituality but an inevitably political position" ("English, Women" 239). On the one hand, Catholicism was Burney's grandmother's private faith, part of the nostalgic narrative she created around her lost and much-lamented maternal inheritance, and, at the Sardinian Chapel, it reinforced one of her most central affective ties in her egalitarian, companionate marriage to Alexandre d'Arblay. On the other hand, Catholicism was alternately unacknowledgeable

and reviled in the eyes of her father and country, due to a complex combination of ancient and current cultural tensions which were often xenophobic and political in character as well as religious (Colley 19). Because the author of *Evelina* and *Cecilia* was a public figure when she married d'Arblay, murmurs of Gallic sympathies and covert Papism bubbled up in response to her publication of *Brief Reflections Relative to the Emigrant French Clergy* just after her marriage, and in reviews of her subsequent novels *Camilla* in 1796 and *The Wanderer* in 1814.²

II: Critical Contexts

Literary scholarship addressing Catholicism in the British novel in the period between the Gordon Riots in 1780 and Catholic emancipation in 1829 has focused largely on religious and political divisions, particularly dominant anti-Catholic ideological representations in mostly Gothic fiction. Literary scholars have shown how anti-Catholic literary representations, particularly in Gothic literature and Romantic poetry, intersect with class concerns and nation-building, and have explored how scapegoating Catholicism functions to deflect the fractures and schisms within English Protestantism itself.³ Historians including Linda Colley and Colin Haydon have also focused on connections between anti-Catholicism and English or British identity, especially insofar as Catholicism aligns with foreignness in the British imagination at the time. All in all, it has long been a given in scholarship on the “Catholic question” that Catholic exclusion was central to Anglican hegemony and anti-Catholicism functioned throughout the eighteenth century to undergird and articulate English national identity. Burney’s voice, however, numbers among emergent counter-representations in novels and political writing of the period that

advocated for and sympathized with Roman Catholics from a Protestant perspective.

Connections between suffering, the sublime, and sensibility are well established during the eighteenth century, including the vital role played by sympathy in constituting human beings as social and moral creatures. In “The Texture of Sympathy: Narrating Sympathetic Failure in Frances Burney’s *Camilla* and *The Wanderer*,” Kandice Sharren argues that Burney’s take on sympathy was significantly revised between the composition of her early and later fiction. I agree, and I would argue that this shift is increasingly imbricated with questions of religious and national identity for Burney in the 1790s and beyond. I want to distinguish, however, between religious *tolerance* as a political concept that many scholars argue not only reinforced English national identity but also was often explicitly predicated on anti-Catholic sentiments, and *sympathy* for Roman Catholics as a more radical mechanism for moral thought and practice.⁴ While some of Burney’s representations of and rhetoric about Catholics and Catholicism certainly participated, in terms of Enlightenment ideals, in the ideological underpinnings of Catholic emancipation, I am particularly interested in her focus on bodily suffering as means to incite humanitarian action. In the opening chapter to *Inventing Human Rights*, “Torrents of Emotion,” Lynn Hunt argues that the emotional connections forged between readers and characters in eighteenth-century sentimental fiction paved the way for a modern understanding of human rights. In “Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative,” Thomas W. Laqueur also contends that narratives of bodily suffering, such as the explications found in autopsy proceedings, are key to the development of humanitarian sensibility. Frances

Burney was particularly invested in and adept at creating just this sort of narrative of bodily vulnerability around the locus of Catholic suffering. Furthermore, by tapping into a long history of feminizing Catholicism, Burney makes the Catholic other into the female self, thus resolving the problem Laqueur identifies surrounding the potential inability of narrative alone to engender moral action when we care more for what affects us than for what affects others (“Bodies, Details” 202-03).

Burney’s Catholic sympathies foreground connections between women’s vulnerability in patriarchal contexts and sectarian violence, whether enacted by deist French revolutionaries or English Protestants. Anna Battigelli and Laura M. Stevens argue that a long association between Roman Catholicism and femininity in the English imagination stems from not only the desire to parody Catholics through feminization but also anxieties surrounding the power given to women in Catholic belief and practice, particularly in private worship conducted in recusant English households after the Protestant Reformation (“Eighteenth-Century Women” 9). However, Burney’s feminization of Catholicism—in her early family life, her companionate marriage, her political pamphlet, and her fiction—does not function as a means of ridiculing or denigrating Catholicism. Rather, Burney’s Catholic sympathies prove integral to her proto-feminism, since she draws parallels between the categories of disenfranchised Roman Catholic and marginalized woman, evoking sympathy for the oppressed in both categories partly by detailing the results of systemic persecution against them. Anti-Catholic violence, then, not only haunts much of Burney’s work but also enables her humanitarian rhetorical intervention.

A significant scholarly corpus exists on Burney’s

fascination with and treatment of violence and violent spectacle in her writing. *Evelina* (1778) alone features a brutal highway robbery hoax, an inhumane old lady race, a threatened suicide by pistol, and a vicious monkey attack. From Cecilia's crazed journey through the streets of London (1782) to Burney's 1812 excruciatingly detailed description of her own mastectomy, critics including Audrey Bilger, Jason Farr, and Barbara Zonitch have explored the centrality of bodily suffering, disfigurement, and violent spectacle in Burney's work. More recently, scholars have connected the spectacle of anti-Catholic violence during the Gordon Riots to Burney's treatment of the titular character in *Cecilia*. Both Elizabeth Porter and Daniel Waterfield argue that there are parallels between the scene whereby Cecilia runs through the streets of London surrounded by a mob and the carnage of the Gordon Riots, which occurred while Burney was writing *Cecilia*. Building on this work, I contend that by the 1790s, Burney's writings continue to propagate depictions of state-sanctioned and systemic violence against Catholics, women, and a conflation between the two. It may be possible to argue that in *Evelina*, violence often functions primarily at the level of characterization—violence against others or the self signifies individual moral failure while horrified reactions to violence mark true moral sensibility. However, as her career progresses, violence increasingly features in Burney's work as a systemic and persistent form of state and patriarchal control that often explodes in detailed, visceral imagery crafted to make readers first feel and then act.

III: *Brief Reflections*

Brief Reflections Relative to the Emigrant French Clergy (1793), Burney's first publication after her marriage to d'Arblay, invokes an ecumenical conception of Christianity by strategically aligning Roman Catholic French priests with Protestant British women. Burney, newly situated in a cross-national and cross-religion marriage, revels in the conflation and collapse of these identity categories.⁵ Religion and gender are often conflated to hint at a similar or even singular position of alterity in relation to the Protestant, male, enfranchised British citizen.

The pamphlet was written at the behest of the Burney family friend Frances Anne Crewe (Lady Crewe, 1748-1818), who, along with Edmund Burke (who had published his "Case of the Suffering Clergy of France" in *The Times* on 18 September 1792), had taken up the cause to raise money for the refugee French clerics. Crewe enlisted Dr. Burney's help to call upon both Hannah More (1745-1833) and his daughter to write with voices that "carried enough moral weight to speak out in favour of a group [Roman Catholic priests] which continued to sit uneasily despite royal support" (Waterfield, *Anglican Womanhood* 191). Frances's response was enthusiastic: "How truly humane is the Plan for some further relief for the voluntary Exiles & pious Martyrs of France!" (JL 3: 5). Margaret Anne Doody, who devotes only a couple of pages to the pamphlet in her *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works*, nevertheless deems it a "successful" and "shrewd" piece of rhetoric that "anticipates the judgment of posterity and carves out a space however modest for Burney to erode purported lines between appropriate topics and duties for men and women" (204). In a recent contribution to a collection

addressing authorship and activism, Anna Paluchowska-Messing commends *Brief Reflections* as “a considerable feat of rhetorical acrobatics” designed to “redefine the acceptable boundaries of feminine interest in public matters” (124). I want to push further this interest in the way Burney’s tract complicates gender norms, to consider its similar complication of nationalist and sectarian boundaries, particularly as a form of humanitarian action.

Frances Crewe had been keen to solicit women to write in favor of the cause, and the title page of *Brief Reflections* announces itself as addressed expressly to a female audience. The work is “EARNESTLY SUBMITTED TO THE HUMANE CONSIDERATION OF THE LADIES OF GREAT BRITAIN. *BY THE AUTHOR OF EVELINA AND CECILIA.*” In the prefatory “Apology,” Burney specifically addresses “her countrywomen,” reassuring them that “in the cause of tenderness and humanity, they may come forth, without charge of presumption” (v, iv). In the main body of the tract, Burney goes on to argue that Christian piety, and British women’s particular moral responsibilities to care for the downtrodden, require philanthropic action (4). While this sounds no less than reasonable to a modern ear, Burney was walking a fine line politically both in terms of sympathizing with Catholics and in terms of expressing any views on the Revolution itself. Unsurprisingly, then, the specifically gendered call occasionally gives way to nationalist rhetoric, pitting the “FEMALE BENEFICENCE” that will go down in the “female annals of Great Britain” against the “lawless iniquity” of France to emphasize national divisions (6, 4). Yet ultimately Burney pivots to deemphasize divisions—whether based on gender, nationality, or religious denomination—in favor of celebrating

commonality. "By addressing myself to females, I am far from inferring that charity is exclusively their praise; no, it is a virtue as manly as it is gentle; it is Christian, in one word, and ought therefore to be universal," Burney writes, thus moving quickly from her gender- and nation-specific address to her overarching point: the need to combat what she characterizes as "implacable prejudice" by emphasizing shared humanity (7, 12). "Are we not all the creatures of one Creator? Does not the same sun give us warmth? And will not *the days of the years of our pilgrimage* be as short as theirs?" (12). Burney cites Genesis chapter 47 verse 9, invoking Jacob's difficult journey, to replace national, and by extension religious, differences with connections predicated on shared Christian moral foundations.⁶ "We are too apt to consider ourselves as a distinct race of beings, than as merely the emulous inhabitants of rival states," Burney argues, admonishing a mindset that could prevent a spirit of fraternity "with the good, wheresoever they may arise!" (12-13). Thus, Burney both deploys dominant gendered and nationalistic norms and pushes back against them.

Furthermore, Burney employs subtle strategies to assuage fears about the wisdom or propriety of donating to the cause of the clergy. She notes that, though "paid into foreign hands," the funds raised will be "expended" in England, "wholly among ourselves...it is all and entirely our own by immediate circulation" (18). She also anticipates the refugees' eventual return to a safer and calmer France, and speculates that, once re-established, they would resume a charitable role in French society, thereby not only contesting suspicion of Catholic corruption but also aligning the French Catholic priests with the English Catholic women via the act of charity (19). In one of several images of a happy future time that validates

the present moment's charitable action, Burney asks, "Who is there that can look forward without emotion to the period of their [the emigrant clergy] recal [sic] and departure? With what blessings and what prayers will their hearts overflow!" as they cry "Farewell," to their "protectors" and "Blest be your kingdom!" (19). Considering *The Wanderer*, Linda Zionkowski has noted the political importance in anti-revolutionary rhetoric of the traditional English gift economy, whereby upper-class men serve as patrons to women and the lower classes (122). In *Brief Reflections*, I would argue that Burney seeks to establish a different mode of gifting—from women to men, across sectarian and national divides.

Burney's most effective rhetorical strategy towards this ecumenical charitable aim, which dominates the final third of the pamphlet, is an attempt to move her audience to humanitarian action with an evocation of horrific Catholic suffering. Aspiring to "still a little nearer... bring reflexion home," Burney invokes the spectacular violence of the Terror, feminizing the French priests by emphasizing their physical fragility (22). She had earlier characterized the emigrant clergy as "[d]riven from house and home, despoiled of dignities and honours, abandoned to the seas for mercy, to chance for support, many old, some infirm, all impoverished" (6). But she also highlights the priests' vulnerability when she makes the appeal to readers to imagine themselves "placed in *l'Eglise des Carmes*, in Paris, on the 2d of September, 1792, in full sight of the hapless assemblage of this pious fraternity, who there sought sanctuary—not for the crimes they had committed, but for the duty they had discharged to their consciences" (22). Burney then goes on to describe vividly the September Massacres while contrasting the pious clergymen to their bloodthirsty attackers.

She paints the picture of “venerable men” imprisoned in the very spaces meant for “holy offices, bewailing the flagitious actions of their country-men” at the same time they are “devout, composed, earnest in prayer and incorruptible in purity” (22). The “sacred abode” is breached by “ruffians” with weapons, who bear down on the defenseless priests with “staves and spikes” (22-23). Burney martyrs the suffering priests, who pray even as they are slaughtered remorselessly on the altar, “Mangled carcasses strew the consecrated ground ... cleft in twain” while their “savage destroyers” let out cries of “joy” (24).

As Claudia L. Johnson notes, there is resonance between this passage in *Brief Reflections* and Edmund Burke’s gendered attack on the French Revolution in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), wherein Burke presents Marie Antoinette as a symbol of elite women’s private inviolability, clearly distinguished from the “unsex’d” market women who marched on Versailles (“Introduction” viii). While Burke’s imagery is probably an influence, images of the Gordon Riots may also echo here. Susan Burney’s epistolary eyewitness account of mob violence against Roman Catholics, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, describes not only property damage, but also her fears for the lives of her family and their neighbors. She writes to Frances that Justice Hyde, who had read the Riot Act and sought to “quell the Rioters,” was happily not at home when the mob sought him out, “for had he fallen into their hands, I believe he w^d have been torn to pieces” (170). His property did not escape the rioters’ wrath; “they pull’d the Hyde’s House to pieces & threw every thing they found in it into the Flames” (170). In this account, Susan does not need to linger on her own feelings in contemplating the violence directed at fellow humans to know that she can inspire

sympathy in her reader: “I need not dwell on the Consternation wth w^{ch} I beheld these sights — it was indeed unspeakable — but your own reflexions & your humanity will acquaint You with every thing I felt for the present & all I apprehended for the future” (172). Susan is certain of her sister’s capacity for sympathy; Frances’s “humanity” requires no embellishment of the brutality she has witnessed.

Frances herself, who was in Bath at the time of the first riots, was indeed quite anxious to know that her friends and family in London had escaped harm. In a letter to her father written on June 9, 1780, Burney expresses incredulity at the motives of the mob: “who is going to turn *Papist*? Who, indeed, is thinking in an *alarming* way of *any* Religion? this pious mob, & Lord George Gordon excepted!—” (*EJL* 4: 176). Burney clearly cannot comprehend religious difference as an incitement to violence. On the same day, after having erroneously expressed certainty that the anti-Catholic violence would not extend to Bath, Frances later adds a postscript confirming that indeed the “Roman Catholic Chapel in this Town was set on Fire ... & the House of the Priest belonging to it is in Flames also!” (*EJL* 4: 178). She notes that “the poor persecuted man” has escaped with his life, but not without harassment, before acknowledging that the Thrales are seeking an escape plan themselves, having already rejected journeying to Bristol “as there are 7 Romish Chapels in it” (*EJL* 4: 179).

Images of the Gordon Riots and mob violence in Burney’s journals, letters, and earlier fiction are part of a thread running through to images of the violence of The September Massacres and The Terror in her later work, including *Brief Reflections*. Daniel Waterfield contends that Burney’s argument in *Brief Reflections* harks back in English history even further

than the Gordon Riots to evoke the anti-Catholic violence and Catholic suffering that permeated British history since the Reformation, establishing resonance between *ancien regime* France and *ancien regime* England. “Both countries,” Waterfield argues, “persecuted those who ‘refused to take an oath which their consciences disapproved.’ Catholics in France and Protestants in England are thus conflated Burney therefore explicitly rejects any argument that Catholicism necessarily leads to autocracy” (*Anglican Womanhood* 192). While Burney manifestly evokes the mob violence of The Terror in *Brief Reflections*, with her image of “ruffians that invade the sacred abode” and priests “reviled—chaced [sic]—assaulted,” it is possible that she also raises the specter of English anti-Catholic mob violence from the earlier Gordon Riots, complicating any tidy nationalist narrative that would easily distinguish French barbarity from English persecution (22-23). Burney’s deployment of violence in this context is thus ecumenical and humanitarian in its effect, asserting our shared humanity in our vulnerability. Just after describing the scene of the September Massacres, Burney metaphorically wounds the reader, imploring them to act and “rescue” (with their charity) before their hearts heal—or harden: “while your hearts bleed fresh with sympathy, will ye not call out, ‘O could they have been rescued!’” (24-25).

Brief Reflections eventually pulls readers from the scene of the September Massacres back to the benevolent shores of England with a literary allusion to a deeply flawed ruler turned aged, homeless man, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. “Would not those white hairs move pity?” Burney asks (24). Claudia L. Johnson argues that, again qua Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, “to represent authority as aged and receded was ... a basic strategy of sentimental authority” (*Equivocal*

Beings 174). For Burke, that means protecting the old and infirm father of the state as zealously as the sexually vulnerable queen. For Burney, Johnson suggests that sentimental rhetoric is meant to inspire “female gallantry” via the feminization of the aged, vulnerable priests, erasing their paternal power and evoking the absence of fathers common in sentimental rhetoric such as in *The Wanderer* (*Equivocal Beings* 174). However, I contend rather that Burney’s choice of a line from *King Lear* comes with the reminder of the potential frailty of an elderly man—and a nation—rendered vulnerable by the mistreatment of women who have abandoned their duty of care. Thus, though she interweaves nationalistic appeals and gendered flattery with a foundation of shared Christian morality throughout the pamphlet, Burney also demonstrates the fragility of any idealized national, religious, or gendered identity.

Instead, Burney reserves her idealization for the vision of community that concludes the pamphlet. Her most powerful argument for sympathy in *Brief Reflections* exhorts her audience to extend their compassion from the clerics killed in France to those who are still alive and seek shelter:

And ye, O ye who hear it, revere the immortal faith that, proof against this consummate barbarity, preferred its most baneful rage, to uttering one deviating word! And then, while your hearts bleed fresh with sympathy, will ye not call out, “O could they have been rescued! had pitying Heaven but spared the final blow, and, snatching them from their dread assassins, cast them, despoiled, forlorn, friendless, on this our happy isle, with what transport would we have welcomed and cherished them!” (24-25)

As Paluchowska-Messing also notes, Burney provides here a utopian image of a welcoming Britain for those who seek

shelter (133). Burney's final image not only offers an alternative narrative for the murdered priests, but also an alternative ending for a version of *King Lear* in a Britain where "immortal faith" binds sympathetic beings to each other.

Burney's *Brief Reflections* was her most explicit foray into politics. In "British Government Aid to French Émigrés and Early Humanitarian Relief during the French Revolution," Kristy Carpenter argues that eighteenth-century British relief efforts for French émigrés served as a precursor for subsequent political action and humanitarian funding for victims of war and persecution, paving the way for our modern conception of human rights. Carpenter shows how unprecedented British support for French Revolutionary refugees, which began as charity instigated by private citizens and extended to government relief, required "overcoming entrenched religious barriers and secularizing the aid process" (52). Burney's vivid rhetoric, and her careful deconstruction of difference in the name of universal kinship, contributed significantly to this humanitarian project.

IV: *The Wanderer*

Composed during the Napoleonic Wars, for a decade of which the d'Arblays were living in France, *The Wanderer* is arguably Frances Burney's most political fiction. In fact, if Burney's account is to be believed then the manuscript of the novel itself enjoyed its fair share of political adventure before anyone had read a word of it. In 1812, during a brief period of peace, Burney attempted to travel to England (via a ship ostensibly bound for America) to see her family and elected to take the nearly complete manuscript with her. She claims in the preface to *The Wanderer* that, "the voluminous manuscript

was suffered to pass, without demur, comment, or the smallest examination” due to the “honour and liberality of both nations ... at the Custom-house on either—alas!—hostile shore” (4). Her journals tell a different story. There, Burney explains how the French border police detained her while they investigated the manuscript, accusing her of “traitorous designs” and sanctioning her passage only after an English merchant vouched for her identity (*JL* 6: 716). Burney, her son, and the novel manuscript—“the Fourth Child of my Brain”—finally left France only to learn that Britain was now at war with America when their vessel was intercepted by the British (*JL* 6: 717, 725-27). Thus, *The Wanderer*’s conditions of production mirror the vulnerability of refugees caught up in violence between nations, just as the manuscript mimicked its author’s and its heroine’s journeys from France back to England and the interrogations they encountered at the border.

Many scholars have previously pointed out the ways in which *The Wanderer* challenges English and British nationalism.⁷ Indeed, in the novel’s preface, Burney refashions her tangles with national security officials to celebrate the generous conduct that ultimately allowed her manuscript to pass over both borders and to argue that its successful passage proves it “cannot but be read with satisfaction by every friend of humanity, of either rival nation” (4). Eschewing any political content, she insists that her narrative does not take sides, especially given her own deeply personal connections to both France and England. Instead, Burney takes pains to reiterate that the novel will appeal to “every friend of humanity, of what soil or what persuasion soever he may be” (6). “Persuasion” can be read here to expand the conversation beyond nationalism, particularly to denote religious belief or denomination. It is

this expansion that interests me. A tight focus on the interplay between marginalized religious and gendered identities guides my reading of Burney's last novel and marks it out from the existing scholarship previously cited. I argue that while Burney feminized Catholic priests in *Brief Reflections*, in *The Wanderer* she collapses Catholic sympathy into the feminine body via the fictional construction of the vulnerable "Incognita" protagonist, Juliet, and her suffering friend, the émigrée Gabriella (*The Wanderer* 12). Long understood as a vehicle for expressing "Female Difficulties," per its subtitle, *The Wanderer's* treatment of women's suffering is informed by the history of Burney's feminization of Catholic suffering. Burney thus furthers the humanitarian cause of ameliorating the suffering of the least among us, regardless of nation, rank, gender, and religion.

The opening line of *The Wanderer* could easily describe the emigrant French clergy, or indeed any refugee fleeing war-torn France:

During the dire reign of the terrific Robespierre, and in the dead of night, braving the cold, the darkness and the damps of December, some English passengers, in a small vessel, were preparing to glide silently from the coast of France, when a voice of keen distress resounded from the shore, imploring, in the French language, pity and admission. (11)

Offering a marked contrast to the idealized, aspirational portrait of Britain with which Burney concludes *Brief Reflections*, the heroine of *The Wanderer* Juliet (or "Ellis," as she is known through most of the text) leaves the chaos and bloodshed of revolutionary France for the purportedly peaceful shores of Britain only to find disdain and rejection based on her status as Other. Juliet, born British but raised in a French convent, keeps her identity a secret because she is fleeing from a forced

marriage to a tyrannical husband who is a tool of the coercive state under Robespierre. Reduced to dependence on the charity of others and degrading work—for example, as a lady's companion and later a seamstress—Juliet's wandering aligns her with French émigrés fleeing the Terror.

Juliet appears at the onset of the novel seeking refuge in the boat heading for England. Her skin is blackened, and she is meanly dressed. Since she initially speaks only French, she appears to be French—and subsequently Catholic—perhaps even a nun. During the passage across the channel, the hero Albert Harleigh tells his friend Elinor Joddrel that Juliet “seems to be at prayers,” and Elinor responds, “At prayers? She's a nun, then, depend upon it” (13).⁸ Juliet is referred to as “outlandish” twice, a word glossed as foreign by Margaret Anne Doody (*The Wanderer* 14, 912). But, according to Linda Colley, “outlandish” is also “the slang adjective most commonly applied to Catholics” (23). Most of her fellow passengers fear her French presence in a primarily English boat, which seems to hint at the porousness and vulnerability of Britain's border.

Elinor, a self-styled Jacobin sympathizer, perceives Juliet's supposed Roman Catholic identity as a potential source of sensationalized “stories of ... monks and abbesses,” invoking a popular Gothic representation of the Roman Catholic Other (13).⁹ But the vulnerable woman inspires sympathy from other passengers, as well as from readers. The Admiral pleads for her inclusion in the boat on the grounds that she is “a woman, and in distress.” He exhorts the pilot to “save her ... in God's name!” (12). Leanne Maunu argues that one way in which Burney encourages sympathy for French émigrés in *The Wanderer* is via secondary characters such as the Admiral who emphasize shared Christianity over national prejudice (*Women Writing*

the Nation 218). While the emigrant French priests Burney characterizes in *Brief Reflections* are men who breach borders and command sympathy from women, Juliet is a woman who breaches a border and commands sympathy from men. Though no one would rightly deem Frances Burney an uncomplicatedly Jacobin novelist, moments such as this explore the consequences of turning established gendered, national, and religious binaries on their heads and consequently deconstructing them in the interest of a broad definition of *human* rights that transcends these boundaries.

The Wanderer ultimately repatriates Juliet rather quickly—she deems herself English by the second chapter—and subsumes her into the British patriarchal order via her eventual marriage to Harleigh. Nevertheless, Juliet goes through constant shifts in *social* position throughout the novel. Cora Kaplan argues, “The line between the primitive and the degraded feminine is a thin one, habitually elided in dominant discourse and practically used to limit the civil and political rights of all three subordinated categories: Blacks, women and the working class” (168). Juliet’s tumble through the social ranks from music teacher to performer to seamstress to paid companion and finally, in the New Forest, to the actual appearance of a rural, laboring-class woman as she trades in her white chip bonnet and fine linen for a straw hat and striped apron, can be seen as an occasion for alignment of the “degraded feminine” with people from all “subordinated categories,” which in eighteenth-century England certainly included Roman Catholics. Moreover, Juliet is ultimately revealed to have specific close ties to Catholics that are at the heart of her complicated and traumatic past. Near the end of the novel, she reveals her reason for hiding her true identity: determination to elude the French commissary who

forced her into marriage to access her inheritance. To achieve his ends, the commissary threatens the life of the benevolent Catholic Bishop who raised Juliet: “Her priest, then, he said, should away to the guillotine” (740). When the Bishop is being bound and taken away, he exudes “his natural state of calmness” (741); he “lifted up his eyes towards heaven, and, in a loud and sonorous voice, ejaculated, in Latin, a fervent prayer; with an air so absorbed in mental and pious abstraction, that he seemed unconscious what became of his person” (741). The image is strikingly similar to the priests Burney describes in *Brief Reflections* as praying while being slaughtered at the l’Eglise des Carmes, and it draws on popular imagery of the September Massacres in the same manner.

Juliet agrees to marry the commissary only after she witnesses the violent aftermath of the guillotine. The commissary pushes Juliet onto a balcony to view a scene that includes, “[a] scaffolding,—a guillotine,—an executioner” and in the hand of that hardened executioner, was held up to the view of the senseless multitude, the ghastly, bleeding head of a victim that moment offered up at the shrine of unmeaning though ferocious cruelty! Four other destined victims, kneeling and devoutly at prayers, their hands tied behind them, and their heads bald, were prepared for sacrifice. (743)

The Bishop waits among the intended victims. Juliet stays his execution by agreeing to marry the commissary, but only after being subject to the trauma of the gory scene before her, a “moment of horror exceeding all description!” (743). At the end of the novel, aided by the unscrupulous English boatsman from the opening scene, the brutish commissary breaches the

boundaries of England to re-terrorize Juliet: “The man, who was large made, tall, and strong, seized, then, both her arms, with a motion that indicated his intention to drag her along” (727). The English hero, Harleigh, attempts to intervene, and when asked by what right he would separate a man and his lawful wife, Harleigh cries, “By the rights of humanity ... and you shall answer me by the rights of justice!” before slinking away when he learns Juliet is indeed married (727). However, Juliet eventually is saved from her abusive husband not by the humane but passive Harleigh, but by the very violence of the French regime of whom the commissary is the ultimate representative: “Her brutal persecutor, convicted of heading a treasonable conspiracy in his own country, has paid the forfeit of his crimes!” (855).

The protagonist of *The Wanderer*, then, suggests via her ambiguous identity and turbulent past a marked analogy, in her experience of “Female Difficulties,” to the Catholic Other. In addition, Juliet’s childhood friend Gabriella, another émigré character introduced about midway through the narrative, offers a perfect intersection of womanhood with actual Catholicism. Kristy Carpenter’s research confirms that female émigrés were often especially desperate for succor, and

by early 1796, distress was high, particularly because women had little personal wealth and were vulnerable to sexual exploitation.... The French women émigrés made up a significant percentage of the lay émigré population. Yet they were a surprisingly invisible group in the émigré community either as recipients or distributors of relief. (61)

Gabriella’s functions within the narrative of *The Wanderer* have not been fully addressed in previous scholarship, which focuses largely on the close relationship between Juliet and Gabriella.

Carmen Fernández Rodríguez, for example, briefly considers Juliet's friendships with Gabriella and Lady Aurora (118-20), while Chloe Wigston Smith examines the significance of Gabriella's trade as haberdasher and the power of working in community with her friend, Juliet (281-88). Nowell Marshall sees Juliet's close relationship with Gabriella in sapphic terms and the novel as a queer female gothic that is skeptical of the heteronormative marriage plot. Patricia Cove argues that Juliet's compassion for Gabriella mirrors Frances Burney's case for sympathy for the condition of the French priests described in *Brief Reflections*. I concur with Cove, but whereas Cove believes that Burney fails to develop a coherent political worldview despite her powerful use of geographic displacement to engender compassion throughout the novel, I consider Gabriella as an important intersection of the identity categories of Catholicism, Frenchness, and femininity and thus a marker of Burney's moral imperative to address Catholic, and, more broadly, human suffering.

Living in exile in a foreign country, trapped by war, a suffering mother of a single son, often separated from and then without a husband after he dies, Gabriella shares many circumstances with Frances Burney d'Arblay herself. Though Gabriella has endured the loss of a child, a pain that Burney did not yet know, Burney did know what it was to be mothering alone, trapped with her child in a war-torn country not her own, a practitioner of a different religion, behind potential enemy lines. When readers and Juliet first encounter Gabriella, she is in a state of severe "distress" and "perturbation," mourning the loss of her child and her country, "Oh ma chère patrie!—malheureuse, coupable,—mais toujours chère patrie!—ne te reverrai-je jamais!" ["Oh my beloved homeland!—unfortunate,

guilty,—but still dear homeland!—shall I never see you again!”] (385). Juliet’s sentimental reunion with Gabriella, the moment when “Ellis” becomes “Ma Julie! ma chère, ma tendre amie,” is marked by Gabriella’s sorrow and loss, “unutterable conflicts between transport and pain” as she weeps over her son’s grave (387).¹⁰ Before her identity is known, Gabriella is first described to Juliet by her landlady, Miss Matson, as someone she would happily dislodge in favor of Juliet, an Englishwoman with connections to upper-class visitors, as “this person here, Ma’am, besides being poor, which, poor thing, may be she can’t help; and being a foreigner, which, you know, Ma’am, is no great recommendation;—besides all this, Miss Ellis, she has some very suspicious ways with her, which I can’t make out at all” (384). Juliet, on the other hand, is sympathetic to the as-yet-unknown émigrée, “filled with pity for a person who seemed still more helpless and destitute than herself” (384). Raised in sororal sympathy in better times, Juliet and Gabriella vow to live together and share their want, an echo of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer’s marriage vows as well as an echo of Burney’s own cross-national marriage. Gabriella, then, becomes Burney’s most literal manifestation of feminized Catholic suffering at the hands of the unfeeling English, provided succor only by the one Englishwoman whose own national and by extension religious liminality enables empathy.

The *British Critic*’s review of *The Wanderer* praises Burney for drawing hard lines between British Anglicanism and French Catholicism. The reviewer seeks to distance Burney from Catholicism, insisting that Burney herself acknowledges in the novel’s preface “the lamentable want of all religious feeling in the first societies of Paris” in contrast to the centrality of “religious topics in the first circles” in Britain (75-376) (Burney’s

own language is considerably more careful when addressing the distinction).¹¹ If the *British Critic* projected tidy national and by extension religious lines, John Wilson Croker infamously redrew them, and not in the novel's favor. In his review of *The Wanderer* in the April 1814 *Quarterly Review*, Croker venomously accuses Burney of French sympathies, arguing,

[I]f Madame D'Arblay were restrained by her feelings, whatever they might be, from expressing her detestation of the gigantic despotism, the ferocious cruelty, the restless and desolating tyranny of Buonaparte, that, at least, she should not have sought for opportunities of insinuating her gratitude for the blessings, the tender mercies which France enjoyed under the dominion of that tyger." (130)

Clearly Croker expected Burney to signal nationalistic loyalty to England via a jingoistic caricature of her decade-long residence in France, not a measured representation of French civility.

While contemporary critics of *The Wanderer* provided opposing views on its renowned author's Catholic and French sympathies, neither the tidy distinctions offered by the *British Critic* nor the scathing condemnation in the *Quarterly Review* capture the novel's humanitarian efforts to break down such hard lines. In *The Wanderer*, Others are not so easily consigned to neat boxes as either reviewer might like to believe. Certainly, Burney's own mixed-religion heritage, cosmopolitan marriage, and experience of "Female Difficulties," testifies to the difficulties and dangers of defining people by their creed, nationality, or gender. In the end, the novel brings the Bishop, Juliet's beloved paternal figure, to England. There, the Admiral extends an invitation to "Mr. Bishop ... to favour me with your company to eat a bit of roast beef with us at our lodging-house;

after our plain old English fashion” (859). Though the Admiral proceeds to sing the praises of British food over French food, the practice of sitting down together to break bread remains a powerful symbol of the triumph of universal humanity over national difference.

V. Conclusion

Contrary to Henry Tilney’s protestations cited at the outset of this essay, “any rational creature” living through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Britain could easily see the real and present threat of mob violence and anti-Catholic sentiment at home, as well as the vulnerability of war refugees arriving on British shores after escaping mob violence abroad. Frances Burney—who had witnessed anti-Catholic violence in the wake of the Gordon Riots and experienced the dread and uncertainty of expatriate life, including the suffering of separation from her extended family, fear for her military husband’s wellbeing, her own distress as a patient who underwent a mastectomy without her family to support her, and a harrowing illegal border crossing—numbered among the most sensitive and insightful witnesses to and victims of this anxiety and suffering. In her writing published during and set in the 1790s, Burney, whose personal history included deep ties to adherents to Roman Catholicism, put the privilege of her considerable literary celebrity to work for a cause that not only contributed to the short-term humanitarian relief of the emigrant French clergy but also the ideological underpinnings of a modern definition of humanitarianism.

Burney’s deconstruction of the English-Anglican/French-Catholic binary via vivid depictions of Catholic suffering, feminized or embodied in female form, serves the project of a

broad redefinition of human rights begun by Enlightenment articulations of natural rights, enacted in revolutions from America to France and Haiti. If Burney herself cannot be reasonably ranked among the political radicals of her day, she nevertheless contributed to the construction of a modern notion of human rights that is the legacy of such revolutionary ideology via her narrative constructions that yoke religious intolerance and women's oppression together to insist upon sympathy with the purported Other. In doing so, Burney's work not only speaks eloquently in its own place and time but also resonates loudly for us here and now.

NOTES

¹ Sparked by opposition to the 1778 Catholic Relief Act, the Gordon Riots began on 2 June 1780 when a massive crowd of “some 60,000 people” gathered in St. George’s Fields. Led by Lord George Gordon, MP and president of the Protestant Association, the mob marched through London to the House of Commons, gaining numbers along the way. Days of violence, arson, and general destruction targeted Roman Catholic chapels, businesses, and homes, but quickly spread indiscriminately and included successful attacks on the Fleet and Newgate prisons and an unsuccessful attempt to breach the Bank of England (Haydon 213-15).

² While *Brief Reflections* was reviewed favorably by the periodical press, the most extensive response, offered by the *Critical Review* (1794), hints that Burney might be pushing political boundaries. Despite “disclaiming *all interference in public matters*” the reviewer notes that “it is hardly possible to touch on the subject she has chosen, without discovering adherence to some political party, and Madame d’Arblay shews that she has decidedly chosen hers” (319). The review proceeds to chide Burney for her political naivete in her characterization of the emigrant French clergy as “actuated entirely by religious principle,” arguing instead for their deep political ties in France (319). This review perhaps informs Margaret Anne Doody’s supposition that *Brief Reflections* would have stoked public opinion “that Frances Burney herself was getting too soft on Catholicism” (205). By 1814, Croker’s review of *The Wanderer* in *The Quarterly Review* would definitively link Burney to sympathy for the French, if not Catholicism outright.

³ See, for example, Canuel, Conway, Dolan, Hoeveler,

Purves, Ryan, Tomko, Tumbleson, and Wheeler.

⁴ See Alvarez, Alvarez and Conway, Carnes, and Tumbleson. Conway connects the affective and the political elements of religious toleration in *Sacred Engagements*.

⁵ Like Jeremy Carnes, I treat religion here as a facet of identity rather than a system of beliefs, per se (*Papist Represented* 10).

⁶ Maria Jerinic points out that on page 15 of *Brief Reflections* Burney “collapses religious distinctions between Roman Catholics and Protestants by calling the Roman Catholic clergy ‘Priests of the Christian religion’” (74). Similarly, Paluchowska-Messing notes how Burney avoids using the word “Catholic” anywhere in the pamphlet (133).

⁷ See, for example, Benis, Cove, Doody, Jerinic, and Rennhak.

⁸ See Tonya Moutray on the trope of the nun in nineteenth-century fiction as well as similarities between Juliet and refugee nuns (128).

⁹ Of course, Juliet also initially appears as a Black woman. See Czechowski for an analysis of associations between Blackness and criminality aligned with anti-Jacobin rhetoric and Shelby Johnson for “trace histories” of the Haitian Revolution in *The Wanderer*. Johnson suggests that as long as Juliet is in blackface, her nationality would be presumed West Indian (59).

¹⁰ Later, Gabriella is the means by which Juliet’s full parentage becomes known to Sir Jaspar, who offers to intervene with her family on her behalf, thus functioning as the only character in the book who knows and enables Juliet’s true self. Rennhak suggests Gabriella’s only real function in the narrative is to reveal Juliet’s backstory (590n21).

¹¹ While Burney does acknowledge a “striking contrast” regarding discussion of “sacred themes,” she is clear that among her friends in Paris “piety, generally, in practice as well as in theory, held its just pre-eminence” whereas she often heard or occasionally mixed in other circles that “commonly considered belief and bigotry as synonymous terms” (*The Wanderer* 10).

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