“Ormond’s Subversion of Heteronormative Gothic Characteristics: Constantia Dudley, Sophia Courtland, and Martinette de Beauvais”

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Introduction

During his attempts to create American literature distinct from its European heritage, Charles Brockden Brown wrote Ormond; Or, The Secret Witness. Written and set in the 1790s in the United States, this novel establishes a recognizably Gothic plot, only to thwart the expected sexual violence by allowing the heroine to kill the man who threatens her. With this and other examples of female empowerment, including the revolutionary soldier Martinette de Beauvais, Brown argues that women are not the inherently weaker sex. In the unsettled years after the American Revolution, when the new democratic society was defining itself, Brown had the perfect opportunity to write about the possibility of a new position in society for women. Influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft and the revolutionary ideal of true equality, Brown sharply critiques the patriarchal, heteronormative society of his time by suggesting that an alternative was not only possible, but indeed necessary to allow women the full joys of human dignity.

Ormond as the Patriarchy

Despite the fact that Brown sets Ormond primarily in America, the work's titular character is a classic Gothic villain: although not Catholic, he is involved in an arcane secret order baffling to outsiders; although not a member of the nobility, he possesses land and wealth that give him power over the heroine. Most importantly, he poses a sexual threat to the heroine. Ormond is more explicitly dangerous than other villains, whose threats are either indirect (Montoni, who tries to control Emily St. Aubert's marriage in The Mysteries of Udolpho) or at least hidden from the ingénues they pursue (Ambrosio, The Monk). By contrast, once he realizes that Constantia plans to leave him forever, Ormond seeks her for the express purpose of delivering a rape threat: "one more disaster remains….Thy reputation will be spotless, for nothing will be done by thee, unsuitable to the tenor of thy past life" (Brown 198). While Constantia is confused about his language, readers clearly apprehend that the entirety of this five paragraph monologue is an extended description of how Constantia will suffer after the sexual assault, coupled with the disconcerting idea that, if she takes the right attitude toward it, Ormond could be doing a favor for her emotional stability.

The reader has good reason to believe Ormond's threats. At least two of the deaths in the narrative are directly his doing. He manipulates Thomas Craig into murdering Mr. Dudley, and

then murders Craig. Both of these are convoluted attempts to control Constantia. First, by removing her father, who disapproved of Ormond and Constantia's relationship, Ormond takes on the responsibility of providing for her, which earns him her esteem even while it gives him an astonishing amount of power over her life. Second, by killing Craig, he serves a paltry vigilante justice for the father's death. Ormond believes that this will endear him further to Constantia, despite the fact that the murder of Mr. Dudley was Ormond's orchestration in the first place. Ormond additionally has the audacity to admit all of this to Constantia and claim it as advance payment for the sexual gratification he desires (213-214). His actions demonstrate male entitlement in extremis: he believes he knows more than Constantia about what will make her happy.

One of the most frightening aspects of Ormond's character is how casual he is about his premeditated rape. He views it as a natural conclusion to their relationship, asking Constantia, "Art thou still dubious of my purpose? Art thou not a woman? And have I not intreated [sic] for thy love, and been rejected?" (215). Implicit are the values, both of the Gothic tradition and of Brown's society in general, that women exist to provide sexual pleasure for men, and that men are entitled to that pleasure. Furthermore, Ormond discusses the planned rape as if he cannot stop himself, playing into another ancient stereotype of men as sexually uncontrollable brutes: "Come, it will....An inexorable and immutable decree enjoins it" (198). Not even Constantia's death could stop Ormond's lust, as he informs her that "living or dead, the prize that I have in view shall be mine" (216). Such a perversion, while hopefully uncommon in the general male population, serves to demonstrate the inhumanity to which male entitlement can lead. This extremity in Ormond's assumptions about his rights as a man and Constantia's role as a woman are established as a direct critique of those ideas, which Brown deconstructs at the climax of the novel.

When confronted with the immediate threat of rape, Constantia doubts her physical prowess in a fight, so she resolves to kill herself rather than allow Ormond to assault her. She later describes rape as "an evil worse than death" (220). According to the sensibilities of the time, the word rape is actually never once used in the text. All references to the act are centered on honor: Constantia is concerned with her ability to "find safety for her honor" (215), Ormond mocks her for

"preferr[ing] thy imaginary honor to life" (216), and Sophia asks Constantia if "nothing has happened to load you with guilt or with shame?" (220). This was – and in some places still is – common in the discussion of female sexuality; an unwed woman's virginity gave her honor and was inextricably linked to her social standing.

Beyond the social ramifications, Brown acknowledges the more significant effects of rape on the mental health of the victim. Ormond's threat includes the assertion that the event "will be thought upon with agony: It will close up all the sources of pleasurable recollection: It will exterminate hope… and push thee into an untimely grave" (199). All this from an event that Ormond reiterates will not be known to the wider world if Constantia does not speak of it. If she never tells anyone, society will believe her honor to be intact. The horror of the crime is not in the loss of honor, but rather in the powerlessness of the victim, which crystalizes, in a physical act, the oppression women face in a patriarchal society.

Constantia is willing to die rather than suffer sexual assault, and Ormond's feelings of sexual entitlement make her resolution appear to be the inevitable conclusion to the episode (216). However, the scene of the aftermath upon which Sophia enters is radically different. Ormond lies lifeless on the ground, and Constantia lives, all through her own doing (219). For a Gothic novel, this is an astonishing occurrence. Not only does the heroine escape – which does sometimes happen – but she also saves herself from the male threat without male aid – which liberates her femininity from masculine control.

Sophia Courtland: Female Relationships

At the end of the novel, Constantia does not have an honorable young man to sweep her away into marriage. However, she does have an intimately close female friend who also functions as the narrator of the story. When Sophia and Constantia are alone together, their interaction is "of too intimate and delicate a nature, for any but a female audience" (197). Ormond was written too early for the modern construction of lesbianism to exist, but Constantia and Sophia certainly share a relationship outside 1790s heteronormativity.

Sophia's position as narrator, romantic interest, and actor in the main narrative reifies the Gothic subversion. In the role normally occupied by a virtuous male suitor, Sophia is the one who cares for Constantia in the aftermath of Ormond's death. She rescues Constantia from the locked mansion, justifies

Constantia's actions to the judicial system and reader alike, and arranges for the pair to travel to Europe (220). Even before this, the "effects of [their] romantic passion for each other" assist Constantia in deciding to turn away from Ormond and seek happiness elsewhere (197). While Sophia is married to a Mr. Courtland, he is laughably unimportant to her in comparison to Constantia and functions more like a mistress than a husband. After spending scarcely a page on Courtland detailing how they met in Europe and decided to marry, Sophia returns to her primary focus: "It was my inflexible purpose to live and die with [Constantia]" (178). To this end, she is willing to forgo living in Europe if Constantia refuses to move across the Atlantic; she arranges plans such that Courtland will come stateside to live with her and Constantia.

This female affection is not unrequited. Constantia shows a similar devotion to Sophia. When she is forced by desperate poverty to part with a portrait of her friend, her regret is immense, for the portrait's "power of her sensation was similar to that possessed by a beautiful Madonna over the heart of a juvenile enthusiast" (58). Comparing friendship to the idolatry reserved for the Virgin Mary is unusual; comparing romantic passion to such a sensation is much more common. The exemplary Gothic novel The Monk uses this convention to enhance the sexual passion between Ambrosius and Mathilda, who modeled for Ambrosius' personal Madonna icon. Additionally, Constantia is bitterly aggrieved at having to part with a mere picture: "It seemed as if she had not thoroughly conceived the extent of her calamity till now… she could have endured the loss of eyes with less reluctance than the loss of this inestimable relique" (58). The portrait is so dear to her because it is her only connection to Sophia after the Dudleys have to leave New York and change their names to hide their infamy. When Constantia's fortunes finally turn, she searches for the portrait in vain hope of recovering at least that connection. Her search instead yields Sophia's person, and Constantia "[sinks] upon the floor motionless and without sense, but not till she ha[s] faintly articulated; My God! My God! This is a joy unmerited and too great" (171). This excess of emotion is not inspired by simple friendship.

In the book Female Masculinity, author Jack Halberstam (Judith at the time of publishing) traces the history of deviant gender expression among women. This intersects with historical accounts of same-sex desire because, in the late 1800s, early sexologists

attributed homosexual behavior to "gender inversion," explicitly linking gender and sexuality (Halberstam 82). Before that time, including when Brown wrote Ormond, there was little public discussion of the cause of same-sex erotic activity. Women were viewed as asexual beings, and so all female-female relationships were classified as romantic friendships and therefore not a threat to the institution of heterosexual marriage (65). However, any reader attempting to place Constantia and Sophia's relationship in this category is thwarted by the fact that Ormond, the allegorical patriarchy, is extremely threatened by them. When speaking of Sophia and Constantia together, Ormond's "countenance bespoke a deepening inquietude and growing passion. He stopped at the mention of the letter, because his voice was overpowered by emotion" (Brown 197). If romantic friendship is non-threatening, what Constantia and Sophia share is not a romantic friendship.

Martinette de Beauvais and Revolutionary Gender

At the conclusion of the novel, the reader discovers that Ormond is right to feel threatened by Constantia's same-sex proclivities; however, Sophia is not the true reason. Constantia, earlier in the story, becomes enamored with the extremely masculine Martinette de Beauvais. Before formally meeting her, Constantia is struck by Martinette's "heroic and contemplative" appearance, in which "the female was absorbed…in the rational creature, and the emotions apt to be excited in the gazer, partook less of love than of reverence" (60). The traditional association of the male with the rational and the female with the emotional plays out here to characterize Martinette as a masculine woman. Additionally, Martinette has spent time actively living as a man: during the American Revolution, she "delighted to assume the male dress, to acquire skill at the sword, and dexterity in every boisterous exercise" (154). Interestingly, this transgression of gender boundaries is connected to Martinette's deep love for her husband, who dies of complications from a wound received on the battlefield (155). In this way, Martinette's transgression is simultaneously excused – it was spurred by her wifely loyalty – and punished – it causes her to lose her husband. Of course, many women who conformed to feminine expectations lost their husbands in the war as well, so her punishment is not unique to her "crime."

Martinette's military career is key to the threat that Constantia poses to Ormond. When Martinette mentions

that she would have been willing to commit suicide for the sake of the French Revolution (in which she also fought), Constantia "shudder[s].... Hitherto she had read in [Martinette] nothing that bespoke the desperate courage of martyr, and the deep designing of an assassin" (159). While this violence initially repulses Constantia, when Ormond threatens her with rape, her "unalterable resolution is, to die uninjured.... To save a greater good by the sacrifice of life" (216). Martinette's example allows Constantia to overcome her reservations, and she finds herself able to contemplate suicide as a way to prevent Ormond's triumph. Not to be defeated, however, Ormond reveals that Constantia's death will not prevent his sexual gratification. She is then forced to counter Ormond's inexorable masculine desire with masculine behavior of her own: murder.

Understanding the concept of maleness as a performance becomes valuable here. Rape and other forms of physical violence were actions associated with men and masculinity in the 1790s. Furthermore, the distinction between masculinity and the unaltered male body was, and continues to be, nearly non-existent, while culturally accepted standards of femininity involved a great degree of artifice: elaborately coiffed hair, body-altering corsets, and hidden bodily functions, for example (Halberstam 258). Therefore, femininity could be performed by either men or women due to its stylized, theatrical nature. Performing masculine actions not only indicated masculinity, but also indicated a male body. What then of women who performed masculine actions? They were much more threatening than women who merely had masculine temperaments or intelligences. This is part of why Constantia (like many other Gothic heroines) retains her desirability as a single woman despite her conventionally masculine education.

Stabbing Ormond is the only active physical expression of Constantia's masculinity: every other masculine trait is internal. From her years as the breadwinner of her family, Constantia shares with Sophia "obligations and cares little suited to [their] sex and age...[that] enlarged [their] knowledge" (Brown 195). She rejects suitors based on rational conclusions, not emotion, and her father trains her in masculine languages and philosophy, while Ormond teaches her about politics and other traditionally male topics. However, these masculine mental exercises do not serve to defeminize Constantia. Sophia's femininity is even less in question, as she too is

characterized as extremely feminine by her miniature portrait, which so attracts a male stranger that he claims to be her lover.

Neither Constantia nor Sophia regularly perform physically recognizable masculinity – their masculinity comes from their mental abilities. Given the influence Mary Wollstonecraft's theories had on Brown, these so-called masculine qualities should not actually be considered masculine. Pragmatism, logical reasoning, and diligence are among Wollstonecraft's "manly virtues" which, "properly speaking, [are] those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character" (7). Wollstonecraft argues that qualities considered manly should simply be considered universally human. The "masculinity" of Constantia and Sophia, therefore, should not be read as such. Brown is characterizing them as fully competent people, properly educated and inured to the realities of the world.

So why does Brown agree with Wollstonecraft and question the proper roles of women? Halberstam writes that "minority masculinities…destabilize binary gender systems" (29). Conversely, destabilized binary gender systems allow for the exploration of minority masculinities – female masculinity among them. In the unstable time following the American Revolution, American culture was renegotiating itself. In creating a society that lacked hereditary nobility or a monarchy out of the Western European tradition, the United States had already challenged and changed fundamental concepts of how a society should be structured. Gender roles were equally entrenched in the societal structure, so they were as apt to be re-examined as everything else that had been previously held sacrosanct.

With Martinette, a veteran of two revolutions, as the most gender deviant character, Brown makes the connection between gender and revolution explicit. Specifically, Martinette is a woman assuming traditionally male power, and she is not alone. She speaks of "whole regiments of women" who had joined the French army in male disguise (Brown 159). With revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean spurring women into new roles, the old system of gender division becomes outdated and in need of its own revolution. Brown proposes Wollstonecraft's idea of educating women to have the same vigorous mental faculties that are expected in men as a suitable outcome of this gender revolution.

Reception and Authorial Intent

Critics of Ormond have rejected the homoeroticism in the plot as a character flaw in Constantia, used it to bolster historical surveys of proto-lesbian desire, or treated it as a metaphor for social anxieties. After rightfully acknowledging that none of these approaches focuses on the dialogue about women's rights that Brown deliberately explores, Kristin M. Comment argues that Brown treats homoerotic behavior in women as a source of anxiety (57). She claims Brown meant to use Martinette to attack the idea of sexual female relationships as too radical: he gives Martinette foreign origins and a name that sounds like Marie Antoinette, the public figure most closely associated with debauchery and destructive femininity (68). She argues that Martinette takes the perversions associated with homosexual desire to "make Constantia and Sophia innocent by contrast" (69). However, the only contrast Comment cites is Constantia shrinking from Martinette's military violence – which Constantia later emulates. Furthermore, narrator Sophia uses Constantia's complimentary first impression of Martinette to describe Constantia herself. In fact, the narration suggests that Constantia is drawn to Martinette because of this very similarity: "this resemblance….maybe supposed to influence her in discovering such attractive properties in a form thus vaguely seen" (Brown 61).

Comment accuses Brown of the same xenophobia and racism (Martinette has a dark complexion along with her foreign birthplace) that Halberstam finds in Lillian Faderman's Scotch Verdict, which defends the "pure" nature of a romantic friendship by accusing an Indian girl of lying about the sexual actions she witnessed between two women. Faderman's goal, however, is to defend "her belief in a pure lesbianism," and Brown has no such motive (Halberstam 65). Queer historians like Faderman try to interpret truths about the past, while novelists, particularly early American ones like Brown, published commentaries on the current state of affairs with an eye toward changing the future. Connecting Martinette with the French Revolution might have made her undesirable for some readers, but Martinette's first experience in directly assuming a male role came in the American Revolution, about which all of Brown's intended readership would have had a positive view. Thus, for all that she is sometimes frightening, Martinette is an example of positive change in the world.

Both Faderman and Comment labor under the assumption that people before the 1900s viewed homosexuality

with the same negative connotations created by the gender inversion theory. Suggested first by Richard von Krafft-Ebing and expanded by Havelock Ellis, the theory states that a gender inverted woman would take on masculine characteristics that caused her to pursue women, while a gender inverted man would take on female characteristics and pursue men (Halberstam 76). This theory came to pathologize lesbianism and homosexual behavior, which had previously been more of a curiosity than a disease. However, with Wollstonecraft's ideas making Constantia and Sophia's competence not a symbol of masculinity, their relationship does not follow gender inversion. Furthermore, Martinette, the woman who performs the quintessentially masculine role of soldier, does so because of her heterosexual relationship. These women counter the gender inversion theory of homosexuality before it has even been proposed, and so studying Brown's intentions in that light is anachronistic and incorrect.

Comment further insists that Ormond makes "efforts to contain female intimacy and autonomy," but then turns around and cites the manifold examples of women handling their own affairs without the assistance of men and admits that men are usually the ones mismanaging the affairs in the first place (Comment 70). As to intimacy, Sophia speaks of "three days…spent in a state of dizziness and intoxication….amidst the impetuosities of a master-passion" when she and Constantia finally reunite (Brown 191-192). With Mr. Dudley already dead, the two women are free to do what they will with each other. With Sophia as the narrator, high romantic diction elevates the experience. The limits to female intimacy are wholly removed: Sophia says that "henceforth, the stream of our existence was to mix" (193). She even plans to whisk Constantia away from Ormond, the last possible male authority figure in her life. Rather than preventing female autonomy and intimacy as Comment claims, Brown allows his protagonist to indulge in the full glory of those possibilities.

Conclusion

With Constantia as a heroine capable of defending herself, Sophia fulfilling the typically masculine role of romantic protector, and Martinette as a radical example of the power women are able to command, Ormond becomes a subversion of the Gothic mode and patriarchal society. As a book Brown wrote to establish a uniquely American literary identity, it makes an impressively revolutionary statement. Not only do

American women not need men to save them, but they do not seem to need men at all. Heterosexual marriages serve important reproductive purposes for the continuation of the republic, but women's happiness and ability to survive do not hinge on them. Patriarchal society, present even in the so-called "New World," restricts women's independence by forcing them to rely on men. Implicit in that statement is the idea that women should in fact have independence. Brown also makes clear the damaging reality of male behavior. Ormond is an extreme case, but his candor reveals the beliefs ingrained in men that society refused to discuss in the 1790s. The issues brought up in Ormond are progressive for their time, and they are unfortunately topical in the present day. Perhaps if this novel and its message had been received more popularly, they would not be.

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