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The Wanderer or Female Difficulties is the tale of a penniless emigree from revolutionary France trying to earn her living in England while guarding her own secrets. Combining the best elements of the gothic and historical novels, this newly appreciated work is an extraordinary piece of Romantic fiction. Burney's tough comedy offers a satiric view of complacent middle-class insularity that echoes Godwin and Wollstonecraft's attacks on the English social structure. The problems of the new feminism and of the old anti-feminism are explored in the relationship between the heroine and her English patroness and rival, the Wollstonecraftian Elinor Joddrel, and the racism inherent within both the French and British empires is exposed when the emigree disguises herself as a black woman.

The Wanderer: or, Female Difficulties Details

Date : Published June 28th 2001 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published 1814)

ISBN : 9780192837585

Author : Fanny Burney

Format : Paperback 1008 pages

Genre : Classics, Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literature, English Literature, 19th Century, European Literature, British Literature, 18th Century

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From Reader Review The Wanderer: or, Female Difficulties for online ebook

Kelsey Bryant says

The Wanderer was Fanny Burney's last novel, and, in my opinion, her magnum opus. It was published in 1814, years after her third novel, *Camilla* (1796). She had started it soon after *Camilla*, but it was set aside when she turned to plays in order to earn more money to support her family.

There are so many superlatives I could apply to *The Wanderer*. It blew me away. Fanny Burney (or Madame d'Arblay, her married name) had an incredible mind. My edition was 873 pages long, 5 volumes and 92 chapters. Throughout that thick pile of pages, Mme d'Arblay sustained a mystery -- the identity and story of the Wanderer -- that kept me worried and intrigued to the last chapter.

It's hard to say much about the plot without giving anything away; perhaps the greatest pleasure of this novel is knowing nothing at all about it, being surprised and breathless at every turn. That's the way I read it -- and I loved it.

But I should share something to whet your appetite: *The Wanderer* cannot give her name to anyone; we immediately apprehend she is in danger when, in the first scene, she boards a boat fleeing to England from France during the French Revolution. The alternate title of the book is *Female Difficulties*, and that is likewise a very apt title. Because she is alone, she must support herself once in England. For a female, that was next to impossible -- very few careers were available, and those that were either did not earn much or were not in high demand. And any working woman was looked down upon.

Fanny Burney d'Arblay supported a cast of maybe forty realistic characters, from every spectrum of society -- and I do mean every. *The Wanderer* ended up in the city, in the country, in the seaside town; with the nobility, with the gentility, with the working class, with the peasantry. The scope of this novel was vast; the author had an outstanding grasp on that part of the world in 1793-94. Running throughout the story was a political commentary that was ahead of her time.

It was partly this political commentary that caused the 1814 reviewers to give *The Wanderer* poor reviews. Yes, that's right; not everyone thought it was Fanny d'Arblay's magnum opus like I do. Her comments on society -- for instance, the oppression of the poor and of women -- touched too many nerves for it to be popular. I would not say she was a feminist (at least not like Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*) or a radical, because she was not extreme; she excused no one, portraying equally the respective flaws of rich and poor.

Hmm ... there are so many things to say about this incredible work, but I must limit myself. It includes some great theological discussions. Its many adventures sure make it appealing, though back then some dismissed it as "improbable." Perhaps because it was not a Gothic novel people thought it should be as straightforward as Mme d'Arblay's other fiction and as Jane Austen's. After 1814, *The Wanderer* was not republished until 1988.

While I feel sorry for the generations that missed it, I'm so glad it's available today. It's joined my list of favorites. In one of my posts about *Evelina*, Fanny Burney's first book, I had stated that Jane Austen was the superior artist, but Fanny Burney had some talents that went beyond her. *The Wanderer* shows its artist fully matured, at the top of her game, and -- while I can't say she leaves Jane Austen behind, because when it comes down to it, comparing writers can be like comparing apples to oranges -- I see her now for what she was: a genius.

(from my blog, <http://kelseysnotebookblog.blogspot.c...>)

Oh, and one final note! If you read the World's Classics edition, do NOT read the introduction first. It gives away the whole plot. I am sooo glad I didn't read it first.

Scarletfish says

Underappreciated. Wonderful depiction of the limited opportunities available to women in late Georgian society. Also, very interesting politically, as Burney engages directly with the French Revolution and its effect on both French and British society. Not as funny as Burney's earlier efforts, but still every bit as interesting and readable.

Ruth says

A gripping, long tale on the order of Clarissa, a book I grieved to finish, and so was happy to find another.

Susan O says

Reviewing fiction is always a little intimidating to me. After years of reading and writing non-fiction, I have a clear understanding of what I'm looking for and what will benefit others. But I have always read fiction purely for pleasure, and sometimes escape. I don't read it critically, so if I get caught up in the story or characters, I can't always analyze why I enjoy it. And truth be told, I don't really want to, until it comes time to review it. However, at 1000 pages, *The Wanderer* was long enough to get a pretty clear picture of what I liked and didn't like and at the same time a quick enough read that I didn't forget along the way.

This was my first novel by Fanny Burney and I found it compulsively readable, but somewhat in the same way that a train wreck compels you to look. I don't mean that the book was a wreck, just that I couldn't quite figure out what made me return to it so readily. There are a variety of different characters, but several were infuriating, including the main character. Clearly the intention is to show the difficulties that a gentlewoman, alone with no resources, faces in the world. Our main character, the "Wanderer" doesn't even have the ability to fall back on a good name, because she has to keep her identity hidden. But the choices she makes often don't make sense to me. For example, she takes a position as a companion to an older woman, yet in spite of her beautiful singing voice and ability on the pianoforte and harp, she refuses to play when the woman has guests. Yes, the old woman is a tyrant, harpy is the word that comes to mind, but the wanderer's reduced circumstances require her to make some sacrifices to her pride. She also consistently, for over 800 pages, trusts the wrong people and doesn't trust those who clearly have her best interests at heart. Fortunately, those people don't give up on her.

There is one character that I think the book could have completely done without, Miss Arbe. She seems to serve only as a tormentor in the guise of a friend. In the third of five volumes, where Miss Arbe appears, the story seems to advance very little and I thought we would never find out anything about the big secret. Eventually, though, the background of our protagonist begins to come to light and the story moves on. She still infuriates by running away from anyone who could help her, but we begin to understand more of her fear.

I would like to have seen more growth in our main character. She seemed always to be the victim of her circumstances and society's expectations. The one character who had feminist sentiments and could have been an example of taking charge of your own life, is portrayed as ridiculous and mentally unbalanced. Although disappointing to me, perhaps this is precisely the opinion that Burney wanted to convey.

I thought the ending was great, although too pat and predictable for some people I'm sure. The action takes you right up to the end, so while the middle of the book seems unnecessarily drawn out, the conclusion is wrapped up pretty quickly. There are some great characters along the way and we find out what happens to them all. (I especially loved Sir Jasper.)

I will read more of Burney's work, although she's not for everyone. Definitely late 18th, early 19th century literature and sentiments.

Heather says

This is the last novel Frances Burney wrote and, for some reason, the only one not currently in print which I think is a shame because for me this is the strongest of her novels (although not necessarily the easiest to read).

Published in 1814 (the same year as Jane Austen's Mansfield Park) but written more in an 18th century style and set mostly in England in 1793 against the background of the French Revolution, [The Wanderer] sets out how difficult it was for young women to survive at that time without the protection of a man or money (which generally also came from a man).

From a modern day viewpoint the book suffers from some repetitiveness in that Burney makes her heroine repeatedly try different solutions to her difficulties only to fail at each attempt but from an 18th/19th century perspective the point needed to be repeated. And whilst women now (thankfully) have more financial independence, the repeated themes of women being threatened by men, mistreated by men and doubted by men sadly felt all too relevant as I was reading this over the summer. So, not exactly a cheerful book despite the convenient 'happy' ending but I think an important one and one that deserves more attention (and an edition in print).

Mary says

Burney's contemporaries criticized this book for its unwomanly interest in international and domestic affairs: she not only draws an unflattering portrait of cultured middle-class hypocrisy in England, but also meditates on the particularly vulnerable position of women under a tyrannical government (in this case, during the height of the Terror in France). The book is long (~900 pages) and contains much blushing, exclaiming, fainting, and tears. Perhaps a little too much to be wholly palatable by readers today...

Virginia Mae says

A mysterious woman travels from France to England during the French revolution. She relies on random acquaintances to support her once she gets there, but refuses to tell anyone her name, who she is or anything about her. The point: who in "good society" would be willing to help a nameless woman in distress? The

answer: almost nobody, and even those who do assist her often have their own selfish reasons. A scathing indictment of British society, a French revolution mystery and a romance. An interesting supporting character is Elinor, who believes it is her right as a woman to kill herself if the man she loves does not return her affections!

Issicratea says

Fanny Burney's last novel, *The Wanderer, or Female Difficulties* was published in 1814, the same year as Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, and Walter Scott's *Waverley*. I think it's fair to say that it has not stood the test of time quite as well as its year-mates. It's a consummate example of a "loose baggy monster" novel, in Henry James's brilliant phrase. I have quite a taste for long novels, but even I found myself losing the will to live at points as I doggedly trailed through its nine hundred or so loose baggy pages.

Curiously, though, having narrowly survived this experience, I feel quite pleased to have made the acquaintance of this monster. It's certainly distinctive; and I can see why it has attracted much interest recently among feminist critics. The Wanderer of the title is a young woman whom we first encounter, in the novel's dramatic opening scene, begging a place on a boat filled with English travelers fleeing France at the height of the 1792 Terror. She arrives penniless, friendless, and nameless, condemned to conceal her identity and story for reasons that remain a mystery for most of the novel: a "female Robinson Crusoe, as unaided and unprotected, though in the midst of the world."

As the novel's subtitle suggests, Burney uses this device to mount a fairly pitiless investigation of the predicament of women in Regency England. The Incognita, as she is known for much of the novel, is beautiful, gentle, mannerly, unassuming, and eminently willing to work for her living; yet without money or a fixed identity or a family to own her publicly, she is subjected to various kinds of abuse by practically everyone who meets her. Her attempts to find work, as a lady's maid, a companion, a music teacher, a milliner's apprentice, a piecework needlewoman, all end variously in disaster. She falls prey to a series of tyrannical or exploitative women, while trying to dodge endless more or less ill-intentioned male admirers (best name prize in the novel goes to one of these, the dastardly rake Sir Lyall Sycamore.)

Gentle readers, lest your tender hearts be afflicted too grievously by this report of the sufferings of the fair Incognita, let me hasten to reassure you that she does not languish without succour. Along with her countless predators and foes, she wins various supporters through her beauty and virtue, and even a highly eligible love interest, the chivalrous, respectful, and besotted Mr Harleigh. Another admirer, the ancient, gouty gallant Sir Jaspas Herrington, manages eventually to discover her identity, and triggers a sequence of events leading to the inevitable happily-ever-after conclusion.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this novel is its engagement with the French Revolution. Burney wrote the novel in France, where she spent the entire period of the Napoleonic wars living with her French soldier husband, Alexandre d'Arblay. The Revolution does not only form the backdrop of the novel, and have a leading role in the Incognita's gradually revealed life history; it also inflects the moral and intellectual themes of the novel in various ways.

The principal vehicle in the novel for the revolutionary theme is the strikingly eccentric character of Elinor Jodrel: an outspoken enthusiast for the Revolution, a feminist and an atheist. Initially the Incognita's reluctant protector, Elinor turns into her love rival when she reveals her unconquerable passion for "noble Harleigh." Rejected by him in favour of the more conventionally feminine Incognita, Elinor conceives a grand plan of killing herself for love in his presence and expiring in his arms; and her various ingenious suicide plans punctuate the novel for quite a long tract, until even she becomes bored of the project. We see

her last having an interminable set-piece debate with Harleigh about the immortality of the soul against the surprising background of Stonehenge.

Critics have seen Elinor as a caricature of Mary Wollstonecraft, and there may be something in that, though she seems at the same time a caricature of the excesses of Romanticism—a comic, female Young Werther, if that can be imagined, or a broader-brush Marianne Dashwood. The novel's attitude to Elinor is complex. She is certainly positioned as wrong-headed in her ideas, with right belonging to Harleigh's and the Incognita's "sense," rather than her "sensibility," in Austen's terms. Her treatment is not unsympathetic, however; she is recognized as a person of unusual intelligence, and her revolutionary ideas are given a fair degree of space in the novel. I find myself agreeing with critics who feel that the novel's political conservatism is not untroubled or unnuanced.

Well! I certainly seem to have found a lot to say about this novel, even though I'm not sure I'd recommend it to anyone not writing a PhD on English literature or detained in a prison cell with this as the only reading matter available. I suspect it may end up being one of those novels you don't exactly enjoy, but which lurk around in your mind more than some that you did.

Christina says

Miss Ellis (Juliet) journeys to England from France and finds herself at the mercy of strangers due to a loss of her purse as she travelled over. She comes from Family, but refuses to name them as she is being pursued by an evil "Citoyen" from France who has married her for her money.

She travels along and lives with several different families meeting Elinor who is desperately jealous of her because Harleigh is in love with her. Her aunt, Mrs. Maple who is always terrible to her because she is a "Wanderer". Mrs. Ireton who treats her as a servant and belittles her constantly as she thinks she is a "nobody" and so on and so on.

By the end, she is revealed to her family - her brother and sister Lady Aurora and Lord Melbury who have been her friends all along. She marries Harleigh and saves the Bishop who has been her long protector who was kidnapped by the evil French "husband". He is killed by the revolution in France for disobeying even their laws.

Kathleen says

It is the time of the French Revolution, and a lovely young woman is in a pickle. She flees France for England, but is constantly "*in the affright of pursuit, and the dismay of being exposed to improper pecuniary obligations.*"

This was overly-long and sometimes tedious, but still an interesting romp through "female difficulties" of the late 18th century--constraints generated primarily from oppressive social customs.

Elinor, the antagonist (the character supposedly based on Mary Wollstonecraft), was given the best lines such as, "*I did not fall into the refining hands of philosophy, early enough to eradicate wholly from my mind, all dregs of the clinging first impressions of habit and education.*" Also, "*What amazing, unaccountable fools,' she cried, 'have we all been for these quantities of centuries!'*" Hard to argue with that one!

Catherine says

A book filled with good intentions and characters who made me want to climb into the book for the sole purpose of slapping them.

Jennifer says

I had to stop listening to this one on audio because the adventures of the heroine were so painfully drawn out--I wanted to see the resolution, but I read it so I could get there more quickly. Although I think that Burney is a fantastic writer in some ways (and in some genres), I am pretty sure that this will be the last of the Burney novels I read.

Simon says

OK. This is loooooong. Has some interesting aspect: a bit of race stuff; husband's rights over an eloped wife; a 10-page or so philosophical discussion between two characters that is remarkably good, touches on many central points and shows Burney to be a worthy philosopher as well as novelist; connected with that, some frank discussion of atheism; some women's rights issues. But, did I say, it's loooooong. And there are just a few too many chance encounters.

Diane says

It took me days of near constant reading, but I finished it at last.

Be prepared for:

A heroine that calls many a Mary-Sue to mind.

Characters that are vastly exaggerated in their respective good- or badness.

A plot reminiscent of a telenovela in its proportions, its many twists and turns and ultimate predictability.

Language that is the closest to Jane Austen's perfection I have seen so far.

Loving it despite its flaws.

RA Sci-Fi says

This is quite possibly my favorite novel. Ever. I re-read it all the time. That said, it's my favorite novel for weird reasons. People who are not all that intrigued by eighteenth-century literature by and about women probably won't like this. People who are more interested in the blood and riot of war than in how discourses of domesticity and women's struggles align with political terrors of revolution would also not be interested in this book. It is a 900+ paged novel, so commit your time wisely.

For me, though, it was worth every page. The moments that seem slow or drawn out to many people are really some of the deepest moments of gender and political philosophizing that make this novel an absolute

gem in its contribution to studies in Romantic and Revolutionary writing--all the more potent because Burney lived in France with her French husband during some of the more horrific acts engendered by Robespierre and company. This novel is entirely about the terrors of war as they are experienced at home and abroad; it moves from the political and public spheres and in the domestic spheres--away from the gore and belligerence of the battlefield to the callousness and violence of "polite" society in the drawing room. What makes this novel great is its consideration of how domesticity and tyranny both perform a sort of violence upon women--no matter which "shore" is deemed safer at the time, no matter which "home" a woman is under.

And, like most novels of war penned by men and women alike, this also has a love story. It's a rather daring one, at that--and the love triangle is between two women and one man, which is really quite extraordinary for novels of the period.

If you're a fan of other novels by Burney, this one has even more dramatic flair than Cecilia; more maturity and perhaps less humor than Evelina; and the hero, at least, is far more engaging than the one in Camilla. In short, it's thought-provoking and delightful. A lovely mix of rigorous intellectualism and satisfying romance. What's more, the stellar quality of Burney's writing shines through here. Read it and write a great review of it--or it will scream "leave me not to be massacred!"
