The Nation, the Gift, and the Market in *The Wanderer*

*Linda Zionkowski*

*But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded, and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever. Never, never more shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom.***

—*Edmund Burke*, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)

Set in the year 1794 at the height of the Reign of Terror, Frances Burney’s *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* appears to replicate Burke’s dichotomy between the English and French nations: the novel’s plot centers on two divergent, even antagonistic types of exchange that oppose the gift—a manifestation of Burke’s “unbought grace of life” that beautifies social relations—to the market, which serves as the prime arena for economists and calculators. In the first transaction, Lady Juliet Granville, an orphaned English aristocrat raised and educated in France, unwillingly marries a French commissary so that her guardian, a bishop, may escape execution by the Revolutionary tribunal. Her self-sacrifice is presented as a gift expressing bonding value, defined by Jacques Godbout as “what an object, a service, a particular act, is worth in the world of ties and their reinforcement.” Juliet’s action in the “world of ties” fundamentally contrasts with her self-interest: by marrying the commissary, she not only places herself...
in bondage to a brutal husband but also forgoes the opportunity to claim recognition as her father’s heir—and with it the whole extent of her dowry, which amounts to 30,000 pounds. Instead, the exchange brings her nothing in return except the bishop’s anguished praise for the generosity of his “more than daughter.” The gift economy evoked by Juliet’s action entails a refusal “of the spirit of calculation and the exclusive pursuit of material (as opposed to symbolic) interest”; her behavior is understandable principally in terms of what Pierre Bourdieu calls symbolic capital—“a capital of recognition, honor, nobility”—which accrues only for those agents possessing a subjectivity “adjusted to the logic of ‘disinterestedness’” and thus capable of sacrificing themselves for others. Juliet’s actions testify to her status as an Englishwoman and an aristocrat, for she preserves the affective, chivalric sensibility supposedly abandoned by Frenchmen imbued with the “mechanic philosophy” of self-interested reason.

The second transaction in the novel bears the hallmarks of a different economy altogether. Mocking Juliet’s filial attachment to the bishop, the commissary “swore that he would marry her, and her six thousand pounds” (W 740), which is the inheritance that her grandfather, Earl Melbury—infuriated at his son’s mésalliance—allowed to her from her deceased father’s estate. Clearly more interested in the money than in the wife, the commissary bullies Juliet into marriage by showing her the executions taking place on the scaffold, with the bishop awaiting his turn. Juliet’s exchange from father to husband—traditionally viewed as a gift transaction establishing new bonds between families—is refashioned by the revolutionaries as a wholly mercenary act, void of any significance save the transfer of Earl Melbury’s promissory note to the commissary: the civil ceremony “mockingly” replaces the sacred exchange of vows, the couple never consummate the union, and Juliet’s own family members label as “chimerical” the validity of the marriage (W 856, 852). In the context of the revolutionaries’ new commercial order, Juliet herself visibly becomes a commodity whose value is determined by her grandfather’s signature on the note, and even assumes the properties of a commodity: the presence of her husband robs her of agency, activity, and consciousness as she falls silent and grows “nearly lifeless” (W 731) on the occasions when he claims her as his wife. Dispensing with affective attachment, the revolutionaries turn a gift relation into a blatantly commercial act, transforming women into objects of exchange while erasing their subjectivity. For the commissary, Juliet is equivalent to no more than the dowry that she brings; by contrast, while it leads to