

## Sapphic Subjectivity and Gothic Desires in Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy* (1795)

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Near the beginning of Eliza Fenwick's epistolary novel *Secresy* (1795), the heroine Caroline Ashburn declares to her new friend Sibella Valmont that 'You are a glorious girl, Sibella, you elevate, you excite me! You awaken my mind to more and more love of those fervid qualities that shine so eminent in you. . . . fear not my love. The day of your liberty will come'.<sup>1</sup> In referring to Sibella's virtual imprisonment by her tyrannical uncle, which initiates the adventures of the novel, Caroline is positioned as speaking in the conventional voice of the Gothic hero. Later in the same letter to Sibella, Caroline not only foregrounds her own intense delight in hearing from her friend, but also the effect of this elation on her mother's friends:

His Lordship was persuaded, it seems, that a letter exciting such visible pleasure as that did which the servant delivered to me must be from a favoured lover. My mother was certain the effect was produced by my *romantic friendship*, to use her own expression; and, as the Earl was incredulous, she was desirous of referring the decision to me. Lady Laura affectedly begged I would defend the *sweet powers* of friendship; and my mother sneeringly observed, that I had a fine scope for my talents in the present instance. (91)

After Caroline shows Sibella's letter to her mother's friends, the Earl states that the handwriting is 'not a female character' (91). Lady Mary Bowden then insists that she would 'dearly love to hear of queer creatures' (92). Caroline responds by describing her friend as her '*queer creature*' (92), as she italicizes this phrase along with the earlier ones in her letter, in a traditionally masculine anatomization of Sibella's physical beauty:

I spoke of the first sight I had of you; the impressive effect at that moment of your face, your form, your attitude, your simple attire. I appealed to my mother, to testify the [sic] singular beauty of your eyes, your forehead, your mouth, your hair. I told them that your hair had never been distorted by fashion; that, parted from the top of the head and always uncovered, it fell around your shoulders, displaying at once its profusion and its colour, and ornamenting, as well by its shade as its contrast, one of the finest necks [glossed by Isobel Grundy as implying 'bosom or cleavage' (n. 2)] that ever belonged to a human figure. (93)

How are we to read such explicit declarations of desire by a woman for a woman? Are we to dismiss Caroline's effusive statements of passion for Sibella as merely part of the heady emotions of youth? Are there enough Gothic elements in Fenwick's novel to allow readers to dismiss the apparent sexual and gender transgressions in the portrayal of Caroline's and Sibella's relationship? I shall argue that the Gothic aesthetic of the novel enables what I call a 'sapphic subjectivity' that can be read in the homoerotic dynamic between Caroline and Sibella. Furthermore, the epistolary form of *Secresy* dictates that the events in the novel only make sense to the extra-textual readers (ourselves) while the form deconstructs these readers' competencies through the portrayal of the characters' interpretations and mis-readings of one another's letters. For example, Caroline's italicising of her own and others' words highlights a possible queer reading of her feelings for Sibella. What I call sapphic subjectivity in *Secresy* is what the novel's Gothic aesthetic legitimates, and what its epistolary form proliferates. *Secresy* engages with the ideological sexual and gender discussions of the volatile 1790s period and is, I argue, an instance of the homoerotic aesthetic representation of female desire that exceeds the liberal rationalism and platonic sentimentalism of the explanatory accounts of their time and ours. I recognise Susan Lanser's cogent caveat that 'female intimacies were perceived [in the eighteenth century] as chaste or sapphic according to the conventions through which they could be read'.<sup>2</sup> My essay thus sketches how we may uncover the emergence of the sapphic subject and how it is both enabled and circumscribed by the contemporary interpretive and aesthetic regimes of Wollstonecraftian liberal feminism, the hetero-normative form of the novel, and the sexual conventions of the Gothic genre.

Gayle Rubin has persuasively argued that feminism is limited in its usefulness for understanding sexuality because it is based on the category of gender: 'Feminism is the theory of gender oppression. To assume automatically that this makes it the theory of sexual oppression is to fail to distinguish between gender, on the one hand, and erotic desire, on the other'.<sup>3</sup> The collapsing of the analytical categories of gender and sexuality is particularly problematic when reading British novels from the eighteenth century since this period also witnessed the rise of the novel itself. Judith Roof has noted the novel's inextricable connections to certain bourgeois hetero-ideologies. Roof argues that since our contemporary notions of sexuality and the genre of the novel emerged at the same time, in the novel's plot 'homosexualities can only occupy certain positions or play certain roles metonymically linked to negative values within a reproductive aegis'.<sup>4</sup> What happens to female eroticism in the Gothic novel then? Where is it and can we read it with our old lens of gender? For Terry Castle, sapphic sexuality appears as an 'apparitional lesbian' whose desire is simultaneously introduced and negated in her dematerialization.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Gothic novel with its numerous spectral figures would be the perfect place to find her. While the Gothic with its penchant for titillating scenes of sexuality may depict female-female desires in pornographic fashion for the pleasures of the ideal male reader, those seemingly inevitable moments when a third male character accidentally catches the intimacies between women

testifies to the presence and not absence of lesbian or sapphic sexuality. For the horror registered by this intrusive male character and, supposedly, the male reader, at witnessing the actual passions between women also produces his paranoid suspicions of all women. I am arguing that when sapphic sexuality occurs in the Gothic novel, doubts about masculine potency or feelings of patriarchal insufficiency are transferred onto a rigid surveillance of women which is both dangerously and ambiguously stimulating and, hence, productive of lesbian panic. In the Gothic novel, female same sex eroticism appears either as apparitional lesbianism or sapphic monstrosity. This equation of apparently excessive female sexuality with monstrosity can also be found in the transitional decade of the 1790s.

Published in 1795, *Secresy* is firmly embedded in the French Revolutionary discussion of rights articulated so forcefully by Mary Wollstonecraft in her two vindications: *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The 1790s not only witnessed the height of the Gothic novel, but also responded in fiction and non-fiction to the fervent political debates from both the right and the left that were triggered by the momentous events of the French Revolution. Like many political and fictional writings of the eighteenth century that not only challenge oppressive male dictums concerning the sex/gender system, but also expose the insidious ways these expectations dictate how we can even view female ambitions, female communities, female friendship, or sisterly affection, *Secresy* explores, among other topics, the social implications of the emotional intensity of women's relationships with each other. We need to remember the insights of queer theorists such as Eve Sedgwick, Romantic critics such as Andrew Elfenbein, historians of sexuality such as Michel Foucault, and late-eighteenth century scholars such as Katherine Binhammer, all of whom have already discussed how the volatile socio-political climate of the 1790s enabled the production of homosexuality as an ontological category through its abjection in the process of consolidating heterosexuality.<sup>6</sup> Inevitably, however, these various political debates employed images of femininity, such as in Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), and centred on the rights of the female body and its proper expression of sexuality in the service of the nation state. Indeed, in her article 'The Sex Panic of the 1790s', Katherine Binhammer concludes that 'the hysterical discourses around the French Revolution produced the consensus that female sexuality – since it influenced the political state of a nation – was a matter of national security.'<sup>7</sup> For example, by the end of the decade Wollstonecraft's articulation of gender equality both in her personal life and in her work was synonymous with unbridled female lust and the very name 'Wollstonecraft' denoted prostitution.<sup>8</sup> This paranoid public response to one woman demonstrates the extent to which the socio-political climate in Britain was more akin to the 'late-nineteenth century crackdown on prostitution and the [late twentieth-century hysteria] over AIDS'.<sup>9</sup> A writer such as Eliza Fenwick through her own association with radical Jacobins, being a close friend of William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Hays, and through her husband John Fenwick's political connections and active support of Irish nationalism, must have been acutely aware of the political implications of criticizing, even

implicitly in fiction, the traditional structures of gender and class. For any suggestion that women may desire alternatives to the emerging hetero-normative models of desire could be seen as akin to treason. Some Jacobin writers, therefore, displaced their social criticisms in fiction through their use of Gothic conventions, as did William Godwin in *Caleb Williams* (1794).

To return to my initial problem of how to read the undeniably homoerotic moments in Eliza Fenwick's Gothic novel, we can now understand, to use Marilyn Farwell's words, that we must be attuned to that 'narrative space where both lesbian characters and other female characters can be active desiring agents' even if this space is subsequently invaded by the voyeuristic gaze of a male character.<sup>10</sup> For in his moment of lesbian panic, lesbian desire or sapphic sexuality is unmistakably visible. As George Haggerty reminds us, in the Gothic and other novels of the mid- and late-eighteenth century, 'gender [itself] is under negotiation.'<sup>11</sup> We, therefore, cannot read these works through a contemporary hetero-normative model that only recognizes two genders, otherwise we will risk not seeing the blurry lines of the 'apparitional lesbian' and, in the case of Fenwick's novel, we will dismiss Caroline's passionate desires for Sibella as merely the emotions of a youthful and platonic romantic friendship.

Significantly, the majority of the letters in Fenwick's epistolary novel are exchanged between the rational and wise Caroline Ashburn and the naive and passionate Sibella Valmont. In an apparently Gothic plot and through its exploration of the relationship between these two female characters, Fenwick's novel critiques Rousseau's gendered theories of education, especially his *Émile* (1762), and advocates a Wollstonecraftian liberal feminist ideal of gender equality whereby both men and women exercise their rational capacities for the good of the nation.<sup>12</sup> Caroline's letters are especially pointed in her Godwinian invectives against the blind obedience that is demanded of men by all authority figures and of women by a patriarchal society. Caroline and Sibella engage in numerous epistolary discussions on the social expectations of femininity, and the damaging consequences of aristocratic privilege. Class and gender issues become inextricably connected, especially in Caroline's letters. Fenwick's *Secresy*, then, also inherits something of the radical Enlightenment feminism of the eighteenth century's earlier Sarah Scott. Scott's *Millennium Hall* (1762) not only depicts a separatist utopian community of rational women, but also intimates that non-hetero-normative desires may be a more viable choice for women. At the same time, in idealizing intellectual friendships between and among women of the same class, *Millennium Hall* de-emphasizes the potential eroticism of these same sex relationships and in many ways establishes the literary precedent for reading the depictions of women's associations with other women, however intimate, as platonic and expected, particularly if the women are of the same gentry class.

Furthermore, with its exploration of the friendship between two devoted but seemingly opposite female characters, *Secresy* anticipates later, rather conservative, portrayals of female intimacy, such as that between Marianne and Elinor Dashwood in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Yet Fenwick's novel does not

conclude with the requisite marriage so typical of Austen's plot. Rather, the narrative ends with Caroline Ashburn's letter to the novel's rake, Lord Filmar, in which she documents the death of both the ostensible hero Arthur Murden and the heroine Sibella. This particular ending leaves the sole rational woman, Caroline, alone but strong in her convictions. Haggerty notes that several of the more popular novels by women writers of the later eighteenth-century follow such a pattern of depicting a potentially transgressive desire, in this case female homoeroticism, that is not allowed to flourish within the confines of the narrative structure.<sup>13</sup> Haggerty argues that 'women novelists struggled to resist the formal compulsion of novels to offer only one version of female experience and their oppression, as it were, of the female character in her movement through the marriage plot'.<sup>14</sup> What is so vividly dramatized in Fenwick's novel is the failure of Caroline's friendship with Sibella, not only to constitute the dominant emotional relationship in Sibella's life but also to protect her from the cruelty of men, which indicates the work's allegiance to the Gothic rather than with Austen. Nevertheless, because there has been more scholarship on Austen's corpus compared to the relatively recent critical attention paid to the writings of women of the 1790s period, Fenwick's portrayal of the emotionally intense relationship between Caroline and Sibella may still be too readily interpreted as platonic sisterly affection of the Austenian sort. My point is that Fenwick's *Secresy* is a far more radical novel.

Our ability to detect the subversive subtext of female-female passion depends on whether we can recognize the narrative structure of the text as preventing female desire from emerging out of the confines of the teleological marriage plot. If we read for the marriage plot, we can only view female homoeroticism as an adolescent sisterly attachment that must yield to the heterosexual commitment of adult life. Haggerty's reading of the subversion of narrative in Scott's *Millennium Hall* as indicative of a lesbian novel reads the failure of the work as empowering the female characters. For Haggerty argues that:

*Millennium Hall* [is] a lesbian narrative because it insists on intimate relations between women as an alternative to the male-centered experience of marriage. At every point in the narration when a patriarchal resolution would be possible, Scott offers an alternative in female terms that rewrites the narrative from the position of difference. This disruption of narrative is the most powerful means Scott has of overcoming the assumptions behind patriarchy. Because she articulates a female alternative and gives narrative shape to her own sexual preference, Scott liberates women from the phallic interpretation of female desire implicit in traditional narrative. Lesbian narrative form in other words, offers an escape from 'happily ever after'.<sup>15</sup>

Fenwick's *Secresy* also subverts the 'happily ever after' plot, but it does so through its use of the Gothic. If we define Gothic broadly as a discourse that can appear in various genres and that is structured by anxieties over and transgressions of various socially sanctioned boundaries, we can see how such a discourse may provide narrative spaces for alternative stories within the genre of the novel. In other words, the Gothic when married to the novel may transform the latter's

aesthetic terrain. For the Gothic, which Anne Williams cogently traces as a history that resists classification and thus implicitly foregrounds its own historicity, can function as the destabilizing force in the novel which from its inception, according to numerous scholars, most recently Judith Roof, is itself thoroughly imbricated in hetero-normative ideologies.<sup>16</sup> In Fenwick's novel the failure of homoeroticism itself testifies to the power of the Gothic discourse to render visible this alternative non-hetero-normative possibility. Precisely through the novel's use of the Gothic and its engagement with contemporary political issues, Fenwick's narrative of Caroline's and Sibella's relationship not only departs from an Austenian critical lens and the Wollstonecraftian liberal feminist tradition of its time, but also suggestively alludes to the erotics of female-female connections.

Because the Gothic genre focuses on the psychosexual as opposed to a more ethereal side of desire and anxiety, the Gothic is seen as one of the pre-eminent vehicles for explorations of transgressive sexuality. Yet, aside from Haggerty's insightful book *Unnatural Affections*, little has been written on lesbian sexuality in the novels of the 1790s; even the so-called 'Female Gothic' novels of Ann Radcliffe are often interpreted by scholars according to the dictates of heterosexuality.<sup>17</sup> The female relationships in Radcliffe's novels, regardless of their emotional and physical intensities, tend to be explained away as 'romantic friendships', to use Lillian Faderman's term for asexual female bonds.<sup>18</sup> In the case of a novel such as Fenwick's *Secresy* which demands to be read for its implicit and often explicit depictions of same sex desire between women, the specifically erotic aspect of Caroline's desire for Sibella is elided by labelling their relationship a 'romantic friendship'.

Subtitled *The Ruin on the Rock*, Fenwick's only known work of fiction for adults weaves its tale of female friendship with staple Gothic elements: George Valmont is the misanthropic evil patriarch who raises his niece Sibella Valmont as his daughter and his unacknowledged illegitimate son Clement Montgomery as his adopted son in a gloomy haunted castle with extensive grounds and a Ruin. Valmont's tyrannical Rousseauesque upbringing of Sibella to be the perfect wife for Clement leads to the former's pregnancy and the latter's infidelities. In his secret plan to arrange Sibella's marriage to Clement so that he can both acknowledge Clement as his own son and bestow his vast fortune on him, Valmont demands an unquestioned compliance with his wishes from both his wards. It is this expectation of filial duty combined with their isolation from society and Valmont's explicit command to consider each other as 'no more than a sister' or brother that leads to numerous secrets in the novel, the most significant one being Sibella's pregnancy (59).

After a series of plots and counter-plots to abduct and then rescue Sibella from the literal and metaphorical prison of Valmont's world, the various secrets of the novel are exposed and supposedly resolved, but, unlike in the Gothic, the emphasis is not on reasserting the status quo nor on punishing sexual transgressions. The ineffectual Clement is not directly punished for his sexual infidelities or for secretly marrying Caroline's mother. The libertine Lord Filmar, whose abduction of Sibella is foiled, comes to recognize his own pecuniary motivations and confesses in a letter to his silent friend Sir Walter Boyer that he is 'a coward' and 'more of [Clement]

Montgomery's sort than . . . [he] believed . . . [he] was' (341). Like *Millennium Hall's* Lamont, who is both the rake and the sceptical observer of the female utopian society, Filmar is partially converted through his interactions with Sibella and his epistolary exchanges with Caroline. The only worthy candidate for a Gothic hero in Fenwick's novel, Arthur Murden, is significantly a reformed rake. His surveillance of Sibella by the Ruin and private rhapsodies on romantic love blind him to Caroline's desires for him and prevent him from successfully rescuing Sibella from Valmont's castle. For in his attempted rescue of Sibella, Arthur is taken aback when he sees her pregnant body. He informs Caroline that, 'It is a relief, madam, to write – tho' any thing upon earth would be preferable to hearing – I mean, *seeing her*' (320) for 'I recoiled *from her*, from the remembrance of her Clement' (322). Arthur Murden is a far cry from a typical Radcliffian Gothic hero such as *Udolpho's* Valancourt. That the self-interested rake Lord Filmar emerges as a more noble character for his ability to recognize his own desires points to the novel's connections with a Godwinian critique of aristocratic hypocrisy rather than with a conventional Gothic romance. In the novel's subversion of the Gothic plot, that is, in its portrayal of ineffectual male characters who cannot satisfy Wollstonecraftian female characters, Fenwick's *Secresy* may be read as presenting an alternative non-hetero-normative narrative of female desire.

Not only does *Secresy* subvert its Gothic plot, the novel also reverses traditional gender roles. Caroline, for example, is a disappointment to her mother because of her distaste for the usual female pleasures of fashion, makeup, romantic conquests, and gossip. As Sarah Emsley notes, 'it is the weeping Davenport who looks to the strong and rational Caroline for advice, and she is even able to offer him financial assistance'.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, while both Arthur Murden and Sibella suffer from illusions of love, he in his romantic fantasies of Sibella and her in her insistence that she and Clement are married because of their early emotional and physical intimacy, only Murden in a conventional feminine mode goes mad, faints several times, weeps profusely by Sibella's bedside, and dies from love in a consumptive fever. As Caroline explains in one of her final letters to George Valmont, Murden's 'life pays the forfeiture of his curiosity and secrecy. A romantic love of Miss Valmont [Sibella] sapped its foundation, and his nights of watching [her] amidst the chilling damps of the Ruin [within your castle grounds] hastened the progress of its destruction' (338). Caroline goes on to explain that it is Sibella's 'escape from him at a time when his high toned feelings were wrought upon, in a way that I cannot express, by the *alteration* in her person [namely Sibella's pregnancy] [that] drove him to madness' (338). On the other hand, Sibella displays courage when faced with the dissolution of her romantic hopes. For despite Clement's 'cowardly' and 'cruel' (345) public rejection of her love, his feeble declaration of his own marriage to Caroline's mother, and her stillborn child, Sibella neither faints nor weeps. We gather from both Lord Filmar's letter to Sir Walter Boyer and Caroline's letter to Lord Filmar that Sibella maintained a stoical reserve until her death in Caroline's arms. Clearly, then, as far as the male characters are concerned, Fenwick's novel uses the Gothic more to reveal the villainy, selfishness, deficiency, and patriarchal complicity of supposedly benevolent men.

If the male characters are portrayed as weak and ineffectual, the main female characters of Sibella and Caroline in their interactions with these men are depicted less as Gothic heroines and more as Wollstonecraftian feminists. However, when we consider Caroline's and Sibella's epistolary accounts of their relationship *with each other*, Fenwick's narrative also seems to exceed its Wollstonecraftian ideological foundation. For the novel is filled with ardent declarations of love between Caroline and Sibella that cannot so readily be subsumed under the rubric of Wollstonecraftian liberal feminism or explained away as Faderman's 'romantic friendships'. Caroline exclaims in the first letter of the novel which is addressed to Sibella's guardian George Valmont that 'I have no pleasure in view equal to that I expected to enjoy in the society of Miss Valmont' (39). The same letter ends with Caroline's declaration that a friendship with Sibella is the only goal 'to which my heart aspires with zeal and affection' (40). In this calm and logical letter, Caroline persuades Valmont to allow a correspondence between the two women. While Caroline's statements may simply mark the youthful and emotional exuberance of the initial stages of a 'romantic friendship', her narrative role is unusual. For she is the only female character who is respected by the men in the novel, particularly by the rake Lord Filmar and the misogynist George Valmont. As well, Valmont's and Caroline's epistolary exchanges always centre on their respective desires for Sibella. Thus, we might interpret Caroline's narrative position in a variety of ways. First, because of her reasoning abilities, we might argue that Caroline is more aligned with the masculine position and functions as Valmont's potential rival for Sibella's affections. Second, because of her disgust with her own mother's infantile preoccupations, we might regard Caroline, though not much older than Sibella, as a maternal figure in her affectionate concern for her friend. Third, because of her advisory role for many of the characters in the novel, we might consider Caroline to be acting merely in a tutelary manner in her relationship with Sibella. Viewed in the context of these possible relationships (rival, mother, tutor), Caroline's character appears to embody the Wollstonecraftian feminist ideal of rational women who control their emotions in order to be educated mothers and active contributors in a civil society. Wollstonecraft's liberal feminism, that is, the belief that women should aspire to be more like rational men, denies or diminishes the intensity of women passions, whether for their own or the opposite sex. If we then focus on Caroline's and Sibella's relationship with each other as each woman narrativizes the dynamics of their written and actual interactions in epistolary form, Fenwick's tale departs from this Wollstonecraftian interpretation.

In recalling their first meeting, Caroline tells Sibella that the latter evoked the memory of the 'Wood Nymph, Dryad, and Hymadriads' (54), all conventional terms to describe the bewitching beauty of the heroine in a Gothic or Romantic text. Caroline, then, confesses that, 'Again, Sibella, I stood still, [in first seeing you], unknowing whether to fall at your feet or to clasp you in my arms. Such was our first romantic interview. There was something wild in your air; . . . and I thought you altogether a phenomenon' (54). While Fenwick's epistolary narrative successfully deconstructs the authoritative voice in presenting different perspectives of the same

incident shared among several characters, the genre of the letter also foregrounds the fact that the belated expression of emotions are 'recollected in tranquillity'.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Caroline's narration of her first meeting with Sibella, in adhering to masculine Romantic literary conventions for describing the feminine love object, draws our attention to the fact that Caroline is depicted as doing so willingly. In other words, none of Fenwick's characters can be read as spontaneously expressing their emotions. The difference among the letters is only in degree, or in the genre chosen by a character to describe a certain event. That Caroline's letters to Sibella insert the rational woman into a romantic narrative position generally reserved for male characters hints at the subtext of secret non-hetero-normative female desires.

A comparison with Sibella's first letter to Caroline is instructive in this regard since Sibella's seemingly emotional letters also incorporate literary conventions to intimate the intensity of her passions for her new friend. Sibella states that 'I will love you as —' (41) and then breaks off her sentence only to follow with a long paragraph worrying about Caroline's feelings:

Do you love me as I love you? You never told me so. Seven days and seven nights you lived in our castle; and you walked with me by day, you wandered with me by night. I talked to you almost without ceasing. — You spoke infinitely less than I did. — You pressed my hand as it held yours: but you never said, *I love you!* — *I love you, Sibella, with all my soul.* — Nor did you ever quit your rest, amidst the darkness of the night, to hover near my chamber, as I have done near yours. — Miss Ashburn, when at night you had retired from me, I beheld only solitude and imprisonment; and I have waited hours in that forlorn gallery, that I might catch the whisper of your breathings . . . you do love me; for you asked the imperious, the denying Mr. Valmont, to let you take me from the castle. Oh, you did urge — you did intreat. — You do love me. — I am writing a letter to you; and perhaps, one day, I shall have all my happiness. (41–2)

It is Caroline's response to this letter that suggests both that Sibella's love is returned but also that their relationship surpasses mere friendship in its desires. Caroline tells Sibella that the 'breaks, the allusions in your letter, led me for a time into the tormenting and silly practice of forming conjectures' (46). In her close reading of Sibella's effusive letter, Caroline's response foregrounds what we may not consider, namely that the gaps might represent Sibella's excitement but, more importantly, the inscription of Caroline's desire. Caroline concludes this first letter to Sibella by stating that:

I thought I might embrace you as the first choice of my affections; but I doubted whether you might not, if now exposed to the glitter of the world, lose that vigour of feeling which in solitude made you appear so singular, so attractive. I longed to make the experiment, for my hopes of you were stronger than my fears; and, as I had so far prevailed on Mr. Valmont, I flattered myself I should also prevail on him to suffer me to conduct you from the castle. And these were the motives, this the expectation, dearest Sibella, that withheld me from confessing in Valmont woods — *that I loved you with all my soul.* (55–6)

This passage not only captures Caroline's physical longings for Sibella, but also her anxieties of an unrequited love. Moreover, Caroline wonders if the reclusive

Sibella's declarations of passion for Caroline in an earlier letter stem from her isolation from the world and not from erotic love for Caroline. Hence, Caroline tellingly describes her desires as an 'experiment'.

These early epistolary exchanges between Sibella and Caroline portray not only their own narrative self-constructions, but also betray in their respective close readings their hopes and desires for each other. And because each is so anxious about the effect of her words on the other, we are only left to surmise that perhaps the open secret of Fenwick's novel is the homoerotic longings of these women, especially Caroline's. It is Caroline who reminds Sibella that, 'Men, my dear Sibella, have not that enthusiasm and vigour in their friendships that we possess' (24). We might, thus, read Caroline's 'unfeminine' and rational disposition in the context not so much of liberal feminism as the 'Romantic genius' which Andrew Elfenbein connects to the emerging category of the homosexual.<sup>21</sup> As the historian Randolph Trumbach explains, 'in almost all discussions of the relationship of biological sex to gender, and of the female gender to the male, the presumption is made that there are two biological sexes, man and woman, and two genders, female and male. But this is not so in all cultures, and it has not always been so in western culture.'<sup>22</sup> In fact, in the 1790s there emerged another category, the sapphist 'whose mind had been corrupted from the normal desires of . . . [her] female bod[y]'.<sup>23</sup> In this new world, 'there were [four genders] men and women, and sodomites and sapphists'.<sup>24</sup> By this definition, it is conceivable that any woman who exhibited ambitions for something more than domesticity and motherhood, say for example a writer or feminist, could be suspected of also being a sapphist. And, as Elfenbein notes, these emerging genders shared characteristics with the notion of the genius: 'Like homosexuals, geniuses became a privileged repository for all the behaviours exiled from respectable society'.<sup>25</sup> This connection between the social status accorded to the geniuses and to the sodomites and sapphists of late eighteenth-century Britain meant that homosexual writers, like William Beckford, could subsume their sexuality in the identity of the misunderstood genius, and working class and female writers, such as Wollstonecraft, could attain the tribute paid to a genius by appearing to have unconventional sexual desires. Of course, these writers walked a tightrope since neither wanted unequivocally to equate homosexuality with the genius, but merely to demonstrate that their creativity was superior to the average writer. Caroline, then, may be described as a 'sapphist'. Significantly, even though Caroline loses her friend Sibella and her potential suitor Arthur Murden, Fenwick's narrative implies that Caroline's isolation at the end is a far better position for a woman than that of the victimized Sibella whose gendered education leads to pregnancy, loss, and death. That Sibella dies in Caroline's arms also points to the way in which homoerotic female desires can only be imagined negatively. Nevertheless, I suggest that Caroline's sapphist subjectivity emerges as a superior alternative to the heteronormative female sexuality epitomized by Sibella's relationships with men.

Whether considering the queer dimension of the novel or not, Janet Todd in her introduction to the out-of-print Pandora press edition of *Secresy* notes that 'the two women in the novel find their happiest moments in writing to each other

and in openly expressing an affection that seems impossible in any other relationship.<sup>26</sup> And it is this narrative impossibility that I argue Fenwick's *Secresy* hints at. The framework of the Gothic genre's sensationalist depiction of transgressive desires allows Fenwick's narrative to reverse conventional gender roles and this is in keeping with the Wollstonecraftian critique of gender and class. As a work that both describes the effects of Rousseau's gendered theories of education on Sibella and details their failures in Clement, Fenwick's novel exceeds its Gothic narrative trappings. In other words, because neither the Gothic nor the romance plot is resolved in the traditional ways of reasserting the status quo and marriage, Fenwick's narrative leaves open a space for alternative models of desire for its surviving female character Caroline Ashburn. Ultimately, enabled by an incorporation of Wollstonecraft's critique of traditional social structures and a Gothic framework, I suggest that Fenwick's *Secresy* accomplishes two goals: her narrative simultaneously validates a feminist, decidedly Wollstonecraftian, politics of education, and articulates a lesbian, perhaps more accurately sapphist, erotics of subjectivity.

## Notes

- 1 Eliza Fenwick, *Secresy; or, The Ruin on the Rock*, ed. Isobel Grundy (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1994), p. 89. All further quotations from *Secresy* are taken from this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
- 2 Susan S. Lanser, 'Befriending the Body: Female Intimacies as Class Acts', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32/2 (Winter 1998–9), 184.
- 3 Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, eds, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 32.
- 4 Judith Roof, *Come As You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. xxvii.
- 5 Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
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