

Strange Shackles in Frances Burney's *Cecilia*

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Frances Burney's *Cecilia* (1782) recounts the story of a young girl suddenly forced from her country home into the glittering and dizzying London metropolis. Cecilia has a large fortune, most of which she retains on the condition that her husband adopt her surname. She has three guardians instead of one, but they are all deeply flawed: the ruinously spendthrift Mr. Harrel commits suicide; the rich, but miserly Mr. Briggs lives in squalor; and the proud Mr. Delvile rejects Cecilia after she is forced from her home, contributing to her madness. Although Cecilia marries the man she loves, Mortimer Delvile, she must resign her fortune and name to satisfy his proud relations. At precisely the midpoint of the novel, when Cecilia goes to live with the Delviles, Mrs. Delvile declares to her, **[SLIDE 2]** "It has however been much believed in town...that you were strangely shackled by Mr. Harrel" (*Cecilia*, volume 3, book 6, chapter 4). What strikes me most about this phrase is its irony: Cecilia will soon be secretly "shackled" in (attempted) marriage to Mrs. Delvile's son, which is the first of many "strange" parallels between Harrel and Delvile that I will discuss today.

While the word "shackles" in my title was initially a clumsy attempt to address the conference theme of "Isolation, Gatherings, and Celebrations," the multiple appearances of "shackles" and "confinement" within the novel are telling. **[SLIDE 3]** Because of her vast wealth, Cecilia is seemingly "unshackled by dependance, unrestrained by authority, blest by nature with all that is attractive, by situation with all that is desirable" (vol. 2, bk. 3, ch. 2), as Delvile comments, though in an earlier speech to Cecilia, he makes light of her physical confinement by the devil at the masquerade: "there are many who would be happy to confine you in the same manner...you have, doubtless, been the aggressor, and played this game yourself without mercy, for I read in your face the captivity of thousands" (vol. 1, bk. 2, ch. 3). In fact,

almost from their first meeting, Delvile had assumed Cecilia was "confined" by Sir Robert: "I have even, at times, been tempted to acknowledge my suspicions to you, state your independence, and exhort you—as a *friend*, exhort you—to use it with spirit, and, if you were shackled unwillingly, incautiously, or unworthily, to break the chains by which you were confined." (vol. 2, bk. 3, ch. 9) Her commodification and sale by Mr. Harrel to Sir Robert Floyer and then Mr. Marriot is a type of confinement that Francesca Saggini and Margaret Anne Doody discuss.¹ But Delvile's own fettering of *Cecilia* is strikingly similar to Harrel's: he blackmails her into marriage by threatening her ruined reputation, even though he misleadingly declares, "I here acquit you of all promise!—to fetter, to compel you, were too inhuman to afford me any happiness" (vol. 4, bk. 8, ch. 1). The flighty, but wise Lady Honoria Delvile declares at the end of the novel that "a single woman is a thousand times more shackled than a wife; for, she is accountable to every body" (vol. 5, bk. 10, ch. 10), confirming that despite her wealth, Cecilia could never truly be independent because she is a woman. Cecilia's shackles have - more often than not - been forged alternately by Harrel and Delvile, and it is their common confinement of Cecilia that serves as the starting point for my paper and for other parallels between the two men. As I will show in the next fifteen minutes, the structural, thematic, and linguistic commonalities between both men constitute one of Burney's sharpest critiques within the novel.

As the editor of *Cecilia*, I was initially struck by the structural parallels between the section of the novel devoted to Cecilia's residence with Mr. Harrel and that devoted to Cecilia's romance with Mortimer Delvile. Doody and Saggini have previously observed that Harrel's story occupies "half" of the novel.² Indeed, the second volume of the two-volume Birmingham edition of *Cecilia* - many thanks to Ann Marie Holland for finding this - begins in the aftermath of Harrel's suicide with Cecilia's trip to Delvile Castle. **[SLIDE 4]** Several other critics read

Cecilia's interactions with Harrel and Delvile in parallel. Susan Greenfield argues that Cecilia believes her “reluctant consent to a secret marriage” with Delvile is “as immoral” as any of her transactions with the Harrels.³ Cynthia Klekar presents Cecilia’s “‘gift’ to the Harrels” alongside “the love exchange between Cecilia and Mortimer,” interpreting “her benevolent acts...as forced responses to paternal aggression.”⁴ I contend that while Cecilia appears to be Burney’s protracted opus on the marriage plot, it is significant that Harrel’s agonizing appropriation of Cecilia’s inheritance is given almost exactly as much space and significance as the excruciating resolution of her marriage to Delvile. Both men ultimately divest Cecilia of her wealth: Harrel through the 9,050/ he extorts from her, which is nearly the same amount Delvile expects her to contribute in a marriage sanctioned by both of his parents. Furthermore, Delvile wrenches the remaining 3,000/ per annum from Cecilia by refusing to take her last name upon their marriage. The potential deaths of both men haunt Cecilia throughout the text. Harrel repeatedly threatens and ultimately commits suicide. Delvile duels and dangerously injures Mr. Monckton and nearly fights Belfield as well, even though he knows that Cecilia despises duels even more than she values her reputation. **[SLIDE 5]** Both men are also prominently featured in illustrations within lifetime editions of *Cecilia*, such as the image of Harrel threatening suicide in the 1822 Caxton edition or that of Delvile rescuing Cecilia from a thunderstorm in the 1820 Dove edition.

These structural similarities between Delvile and Harrel also appear in their language and characterizations, more precisely in their mistreatment of Cecilia. **[SLIDE 6]** Many of their interactions with Cecilia are attempted avoidance, a word Burney frequently associates with both of them. To evade paying his debt to Cecilia, Harrel “constantly...avoid[s] any private conversation” with her (vol. 2, bk. 3, ch. 4) and again “avoid[s] all separate conversation with her so skilfully, that she could not find a moment to make him hear her” (vol. 2, bk. 3, ch. 8).

And after Cecilia finally convinces Delvile that she is not engaged to Sir Robert Floyer, he also begins to shun her: “he had evidently avoided her while it was in his power, and when, at last, he was obliged to meet her, he was formal, distant, and reserved.” (vol. 3, bk. 5, ch. 1). This behavior continues and intensifies once Cecilia’s residence is fixed with the Delvilles, “Delvile, far from manifesting any design of conquest, shunned all occasions of gallantry, and sedulously avoided even common conversation with her” (vol. 3, bk. 6, ch. 3).

Both men also manipulate Cecilia, with the goal of obtaining her wealth and – in Delvile’s case – her person. [SLIDE 7] Harrel convinces Cecilia that he is “in the very act of suicide,” threatening – depending on whether she assists him or not – to “shut...up” his razor or “steep it in [his] blood!” (vol. 2, bk. 4, ch. 5). He gaslights her regarding the nature of her relationship with Sir Robert Floyer, to the point that every other character in the novel believes his lies instead of Cecilia’s denials. Mrs. Harrel, for instance, tells Cecilia that “Mr. Harrel has told me a thousand times, that however you played the prude, you would be his [Sir Robert’s] at last.” (vol. 3, bk. 5, ch. 7). And Delvile nearly blackmails Cecilia into a clandestine marriage by emphasizing that her reputation will be stained if she does not marry him:

...weigh your objections against the consequences which must follow. It is discovered I attended you in town; it will be presumed I had your permission for such attendance: to separate, therefore, now, will be to no purpose with respect to that delicacy which makes you wish it....it will cast over your own conduct a veil of mystery and obscurity wholly subversive of that unclouded openness, that fair, transparent ingenuousness, by which it has hitherto been distinguished. (vol. 4, bk. 8, ch. 1)

Even though Cecilia does love Delvile, all she can focus on is the “eternal blot to her character” that her clandestine marriage will cause, and she dramatically resolves that “happiness” would be

“unattainable for the remainder of her life.” (vol. 4, bk. 8, ch. 1). While my goal is not to draw an absolute equivalence between Harrel and Delvile – Cecilia undoubtedly loves the latter and dislikes the former – it is apparent that Delvile uses the same problematic strategies as Harrel in his own interactions with Cecilia.

I have shared some of the structural and thematic parallels between Harrel and Delvile, and my next question is whether these parallels extend into their language. *Cecilia*’s language has frequently been termed “Johnsonian” because of its elevated diction and complex syntax, though – as Jane Spencer argues – Burney’s ability to create individualized character speech or “idiolect” is “highly dramatic.”⁵ Tina Davidson argues that Burney frequently uses character speech distinctions “as a signifier of her speakers’ morality,”⁶ while Catherine Keohane argues that Mr. Harrel manipulates language to keep his creditors at bay, as a type of “camouflage[.]”⁷ Like Davidson, Keohane, and Spencer, I am interested in the significance of language in the novel, especially the things we can learn by using computers and technology or methodologies from the Digital Humanities [SLIDE 8]. This slide shows some of the things that we can find readily with computers, such as word concordances, or the language that appears on each side of a chosen word, and words statistically related to that chosen word. In the final part of my presentation, I will share some of my findings after analyzing word frequencies, parts of speech, and performing sentiment analysis on *Cecilia*. First, I had to process the text, which I did by searching for all appearances of “Harrel” and “Delvile” in the novel and then by isolating their spoken and written language. I removed special formatting and then wrote some code in Python, which is one of the most popular programming languages. Python contains a library called the Natural Language Toolkit (or NLTK), a powerful and popular tool that allows users to process and analyze language with a computer. My code appears in a web-based, interactive Jupyter

notebooks file, which is available through the link I shared, and it contains further examples and explanations.

I initially performed a word frequency analysis of Delvile and Harrel's language to see if the thematic and structural similarities I observed extended to their diction. To improve the results, I removed stopwords from their language files. Stopwords are a set of commonly used words in any language, such as "the," "is," and "and". By removing stopwords, we can often discern distinctive aspects of a speaker's language. **[SLIDE 9]** For example, Delvile's top five words are "would," "may," "upon," and "Miss Beverley." **[SLIDE 10]** Harrel's include "come," "shall," and "Miss Beverley." **[SLIDE 11]** We can also combine Delvile's and Harrel's spoken language to get shared results, though these are skewed towards Delvile since he has more than five times the amount of language as Harrel (23,796 to 4,446 words). We can produce a visual representation of these frequencies by creating a "word cloud" in which a word's size is proportional to the frequency of its use. **[SLIDES 12-14 - toggle]** Many of the popular words – besides Cecilia's name – are verbs. Delvile's frequent use of "may" contrasts with Harrel's use of "come"; Delvile entreats while Harrel commands, yet the combined word cloud reveals that the verb "must," which conveys obligation or necessity, is significant for both. There are some expected discrepancies: "Cecilia" appears for Delvile and not Harrel. "Money" is used frequently by the extravagant Harrel. Interestingly, "mother" appears more often than "happiness" and "heart" for Delvile. This gives some credence to Doody's claims about an earlier version of *Cecilia*: "[Delvile] is crippled by Oedipal feelings: he admits that his mother is more important to him than his beloved."⁸ Also, "never" and "honour" are more prominent than "happiness" and "heart" in the combined word cloud, which confirms the shared priorities of both men and reflects their fraught relationships with Cecilia.

Computational literary analysis can go beyond mere word frequencies to identify and isolate groups of words based on their parts of speech. This is called parts-of-speech (or POS) tagging. I thought nouns and especially adjectives used by both characters might be representative of their relationships with Cecilia. **[SLIDE 15]** While this is not perfect, this selection of adjectives and nouns identified through POS tagging is largely correct and, after word frequency analysis of the data, the results are meaningful. **[SLIDE 16]** At this point, it shouldn't be surprising that "mother" is Delvile's most commonly used noun, while "honour" comes next, again boding poorly for Cecilia's marital happiness. **[SLIDE 17]** For Harrel, "house" and "money" are two of his top three, and "credit" and "bill" are among his most popular, which indicate his financial concerns. These nouns show differences between Delvile and Harrel's personal affairs, so I suspected that their adjectives might reveal similarities in language and tone. **[SLIDE 18]** For both, "such" and "own" are the two most popular, though they are short words used for emphasis or ownership. **[SLIDE 19]** Delvile's language mixes positive and negative adjectives: there's "happy," "good," "young," and "generous" on the one hand, and "dreadful," "impossible," and "dangerous" on the other. **[SLIDE 20]** There are also some strikingly negative adjectives for Harrel: "immediate," "impossible," and "unfortunate."

While Delvile and Harrel's nouns reflect plot developments and their personal situations, not much – initially – can be gleaned from their adjectives, so I decided to use sentiment analysis to discern their general tone. Sentiment analysis is a methodology used in natural language processing to determine whether data is positive, negative or neutral. It is also called "opinion mining," and while a customized model – trained on eighteenth century texts using machine learning – would be ideal, I used⁹ the NLTK's standard VADER sentiment analysis model, which has set parameters for how to define a word as positive, neutral, or negative.¹⁰ I wrote some

code that assigns the sentiment of a given word using VADER – setting positive words at 1 and negative or neutral words at 0. It then divides the total number of positive words by the total number of words to get a “positivity score,” which will always be between 0 and 1, and generally much smaller than 1 because of the large proportion of neutral words including articles, adverbs, and pronouns. **[SLIDE 21]** I ran the sentiment analysis with three different datasets. First, I ran it separately on all of Delvile’s and Harrel’s language. In that case, Delvile has a slightly higher positivity measure - 0.056 – versus 0.049 for Harrel. Secondly, I focused specifically on Harrel and Delvile’s language concerning “Cecilia” and “Miss Beverley,” using concordances to find surrounding words both men use in relation to Cecilia. Unsurprisingly, Delvile’s interactions with Cecilia are more positive than his ordinary language (0.061), while Harrel’s are more negative (0.047). Finally, I extracted the adjectives from those concordances to isolate tone. And interestingly, the positivity measure is reversed: 0.12 for Delvile versus 0.28 for Harrel. Perhaps this reflects Delvile’s despair that his love for Cecilia will not be sanctioned by his parents or, inversely, Harrel’s excitement as he siphons her money. The positivity measure is the largest measurement of the three because the proportion of positive adjectives (versus neutral ones) is higher, though these measures still seem quite low. In perhaps a future iteration of this project, I may perform sentiment analysis on Mrs. Delvile’s and Mr. Monckton’s language to establish a baseline.

The linguistic parallels between Delvile and Harrel are perhaps a bit murkier than the thematic and structural parallels, but they are nonetheless revealing. While it is not surprising that Harrel prioritizes money and has negative interactions with Cecilia, Delvile’s adjectives concerning Cecilia are similarly negative,¹¹ affirming that his mother and honour hold more significance to him than love and marriage. This unexpected closeness between the two men is

perhaps the novel's "strangest shackling," exposing Delvile's limitations and problems through his connections to Harrel.