Title
Wandering, Form, and the Sentimental Novel

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I came upon my dissertation topic almost by chance. In reading for my comprehensive exams, I was so struck by a single word in a poem ("wanderers") that it determined the course of my future research. The poem, Charlotte Smith’s *The Emigrants* (1793), works to evoke sympathy for French émigrés who have fled the Terror in France. These wanderers, “outcasts of the world,” are unable to return to a homeland torn apart by revolution. I was startled by the way in which Smith collapses the condition of exile into a sentimental trope of wandering, a rhetorical move that I found both perplexing and intriguing because today we are more likely to associate wandering with aimlessness than with exile, with leisure than with penury.

As I read more broadly, I noticed that Smith’s use of “wanderer” was hardly unique in later eighteenth-century sentimental literature. In sentimental novels of the 1780s and 1790s, for instance, wanderers seem to crop up everywhere; their poverty, homelessness, abandonment, and exile perpetually bemoaned. As I looked into the scholarly work on these novels,
I was surprised at how little research had been done on wandering, especially given its ubiquity within sentimental literature. Who were these wanderers, and what did their stories tell us? Might not the unwieldy form of these novels—with their endlessly digressive plots, their postponement of narrative closure, and their refusal of probability—be tied to their preoccupation with wanderers?

I soon found that these wandering figures—though commonplace in all the sentimental genres—might help to account for the formal idiosyncrasies of late-century novels. Wandering, it seemed to me, might go a long way toward explaining the errant form of women’s sentimental novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Novels in this period are, in Claudia L. Johnson’s apt phrase, “famously bizarre and untidy.” My dissertation came to argue that the trope of wandering teaches us how to read these little-understood works. Later eighteenth-century fiction, I found, experiments with formal wandering to resist linear historical trajectories and to de-plot, through knowingly repetitious, overextended, and highly clichéd narratives, a literary tradition that sentimentalizes its violent treatment of women who have strayed. Where sentimental fiction by Laurence Sterne and others condemn such women to madness or death, novels by Sophia Lee, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and Frances Burney allow wanderers to slip away from their usual fate.

My dissertation research increasingly convinced me that wandering could serve as a powerful conceptual key in unlocking the experimental nature of a genre not usually credited with formal complexity—sentimental novels by women. In late-century fiction, wandering allows novelists to de-plot sentimental traditions, to push cultural scripts to (and sometimes past) their breaking points, and to defer closure by spinning out narrative long past the requirements of plot. Given the way in which wandering in late-century novels
by Lee, Smith, Robinson, and Burney allows narrative to run amok, it became clear that sentimental fiction, all too often seen as empty of aesthetic value, instead represents a tradition containing rich veins of formal innovation in the history of the novel. Nor were the only implications of my project for the history of the novel. My project, I realized, is a feminist one precisely because it attempts to re-claim women’s sentimental fiction not for its political content or cultural work—a move that would implicitly reinscribe the long-standing vilification of sentimental form as non-conceptual, non-rational, and feminized—but for its formal complexity. In rehabilitating the formal richness of sentimental fiction in the wake of critical dismissal and neglect, my dissertation uncovers a wide range of novelistic practices that have since become obscure, and in doing so, suggests how we might reappraise women’s experiments with novel form as political acts in their own right.

Melissa Sodeman is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Coe College in Iowa. Sodeman completed her dissertation, “Wandering, Form, and the Sentimental Novel,” under the direction of Felicity A. Nussbaum in the Department of English at UCLA. She received the CSW George Eliot Dissertation Award in June of 2007. This award, which is made possible through the generosity of Dr. Penny Kanner, recognizes an outstanding doctoral dissertation pertaining to women or gender that utilizes historical perspective in literature or the arts. Sodeman astutely shows in her dissertation how these professional women created the figure of the wandering woman to bring further fervor to others engaged in the work of vindicating the rights of women. Sodeman’s work continues that process: it is not only a historical project but a feminist one, asking us to remember and rethink our own aesthetic principles as we encounter these women who, in her words, “were forgotten not because of their obscurity, but because they were all too conspicuous.”