


Article

Queer Feelings: Love and Loss in the Letters of Horace Walpole

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Abstract: This essay looks at the letters of Horace Walpole through the lens of the contemporary performance theory of José Muñoz in order to suggest the ways in which Walpole's feelings in the past reach us with a hope for the future. By looking at touchstones in Horace Walpole's life, I look for a model of queer relationality that is centuries ahead of its time.

Keywords: Horace Walpole; José Muñoz; queer relationality

1. Introduction

In a proposal for a roundtable I proposed for an ASECS conference, I quoted from José Muñoz's wonderful book *Queering Utopia*, in which he asks us to "look for queer relational formations within the social". I am in awe of Muñoz's "queer utopian hermeneutic", and I would like to consider how it might disrupt the moral valence of feelings in the later 18th century (Muñoz 2009). Muñoz talks about moments in poems by Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler as a way of getting at the queer utopian experience he sees in the everyday world. I find similar moments in the work of Horace Walpole (1717–1797) and his contemporaries.

Before I talk about this amazing collection of letters, though, I would like to talk a bit about my own investment in Walpole. If a young queer scholar can feel a shock of recognition in encountering an 18th-century literary figure, that is what I felt as a junior scholar when I began working on Walpole in the context of sexuality studies in the 18th century. My project was never to "out" Walpole nor to force him into a 20th-century sexual identity, as some have done—Timothy Mowl can stand in as a shorthand reference for this approach—nor was it an attempt to find a life full of sexual subterfuge—as the lives of Beckford, Lewis, and even Gray can be described—instead, what it was for me with Walpole was a feeling, a set of queer feelings, one might say, that produced a queer utopia of my own.¹

I first encountered Horace Walpole as an undergraduate at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA. In my first English course—18th-Century Novel—we read *The Castle of Otranto*. My professor, a young man called Maurice Gérard, made the novel fun and introduced us to a Gothic vocabulary that surprised and intrigued me. I returned to Walpole and the Gothic, both in my undergraduate years and in graduate school, and I ended up writing my dissertation on Gothic fiction too. As a young scholar at the University of California, Riverside, I revised the dissertation as the book *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form*. Still not finished with Gothic or with Walpole, I returned to the material when I wrote my first article in gay studies: "Literature and Homosexuality in the Eighteenth Century: Walpole, Beckford, and Lewis". By this time in my studies, the notorious careers of William Beckford and Matthew Lewis were, if not common knowledge, not really hidden. Walpole remained the most intriguing of these men because he was also the most secretive. In 48 volumes of correspondence, there is no mention of a sexual encounter of any kind. "Where is the smoking gun?" a British colleague once asked me at a conference dinner. There may not be a smoking gun anywhere in Walpole's *Correspondence*, but there is such rich smoldering of emotions that something must be afoot (Walpole 1937–1981). That is at least what I felt when I first encountered Walpole, and indeed, it is exactly what I still feel.



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If feelings remain suspect in traditional scholarship, they can often find a central place in queer scholarship. Connections that queer scholars recognize in the past, that is, are often recognized emotionally as well as intellectually. Of course, I can only speak for myself in this regard, and I recognize my attachment to this subject is primarily an emotional attachment. Queer feelings—what Muñoz calls queer relational formations—open an area of investigation that is akin to forming a bond with a subject, just as Walpole forms bonds with artworks, and miniatures, and the house he constructed to put them in. I feel my understanding of Walpole, just as I feel my bonds with gay, lesbian, and queer friends, and I know them, Walpole included, through my feelings even more powerfully than I do through any other kind of understanding. Feelings can challenge normativity in friendships as well as in scholarly pursuits, and to the extent that they do, we might feel justified in labeling them queer.

Queer feelings are of course just feelings—the very feelings that Adam Smith and others called sentiments in the 18th century and saw as a mode of social cohesion and mutual caring. “Nature, which formed men for that mutual kindness so necessary for their happiness, renders every man the peculiar object of kindness to the persons to whom he has himself been kind”, Smith writes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith 2000). The object of kindness flourishes to the degree that he or she is bonded in mutual kindness. These peculiar objects find happiness in a kind of mutuality that is itself a version of happiness.

This is exactly what queer feelings also do, but they do it in a way that expands and enriches our notions of feelings themselves. When understood as sentiment, feeling becomes the basis of an intimacy I elsewhere call queer friendship. If friendship can be considered queer when its erotic potential is acknowledged, then feelings are also always already queer in their mode of bonding like with like. Walpole and his friends can bond in feelings about each other, about their houses and collections, and even about their persons.

Walpole’s friendship with Thomas Gray (1716–1771) has its beginning during Horace’s years at Eton College and Cambridge, just as he was coming into adulthood. At Eton, Walpole and Gray, along with Thomas Ashton (1715–1775) and Richard West (1716–1742), formed the Quadruple Alliance. These friends were temperamentally suited to Horace, intellectually if not socially, and together they transformed the Eton experience into something truly wonderful.² (Gray’s father was a scrivener and exchange broker in London effectively separated from his wife;³ West was the son of Richard West, the Lord Justice of Ireland, who had died some years before, leaving West in the care his mother; and Ashton was the son of a clergyman who was usher at a Lancaster school.) All were intellectually inclined, and they were reserved, if not painfully shy. Horace’s editor, W. S. Lewis, says that these boys shared “literary tastes, physical slowness [although Ashton, at least, was tall and ungainly], an aversion to games, and the sense . . . that they came from unhappy homes”, and he continues to claim that they had Horace as their leader: “He assumed the rôle inevitably, not because he was the Prime Minister’s son, . . . but because he was gay and gregarious and had a gift for friendship”.⁴ Is “gay and gregarious” a code? These expressions may not be code for Lewis, who spent his life as the editor of Walpole’s letters, but we are free to see them that way.

For Ketton-Cremer, “The Quadruple Alliance was a much more romantic affair than the Triumvirate, an earlier group of friends. Gray and West were poets by temperament and by habit; and all four friends were literary and sentimental and intellectually precocious. They studied the English poets as well as Virgil and Propertius, and exchanged verses of their own making; they were deeply read in English plays and French romances, and found magnificent titles for one another in those flowery pages”.⁵

Robert Mack, in his biography of Gray, discusses this group in similar terms. Mack asserts:

The members of the Quadruple Alliance were bound together by similar characters and interests. All were, if not the best scholars, at least academically inclined. They were likewise, with the possible exception of Ashton, “delicate”. . . . or less physically robust and athletic than most of their schoolfellows. They shared a

penchant for the romantic and, rather than rough-housing with the other students, preferred to spend their leisure hours reading . . . and re-imagining their potentially mundane surroundings transformed into the landscapes of fantasy and enchantment. . . . The nicknames by which the members of this select society would even in later life address each other emphasized their commitment to the liberating alternatives of the world or romance and pastoral idyll.⁶

Mack also explains their Alliance names:

Ashton . . . was ‘Almazor,’ the name taken from John Dryden’s vaguely oriental *The Conquest of Granada*. West was naturally ‘Favonius’ or ‘Zephyrus,’ a reference to the gentle west wind. Walpole was distinguished among his friends as ‘Celadon,’ the name of a lovesick shepherd [in] Honoré d’Ufresnoy’s pastoral romance *Astrée*, and subsequently a virtuous swain in the ‘Summer’ portion of Thomson’s *The Seasons*. Gray . . . was ‘Orosmades’—and angelicized version of the wise and beneficent Persian divinity Ormuzd or Ahura mazda, but a name also used in several other popular romance narratives and dramas, most notably Nathaniel Lee’s 1677 blank verse tragedy *The Rival Queens*. (Mack 2000, p. 104)

Mack goes on to quote David Cecil’s celebration of these boys: “Walpole and West, Gray and Ashton saw themselves as Damon and Pythias, Orestes and Pylades, inheritors of the glorious tradition of antique comradeship, united to one another by a refined affinity of soul beyond the reach of commonplace pursuits” (Cecil 1948, pp. 92–93).

Mack and Cecil are pushing at something that they cannot quite say, and although we might feel that we know exactly what they are getting at, still it is difficult to attach labels of any kind to boys such as these: boys exhilarated with the freedom of learning and of finding themselves in literature, but also exhilarated with the thrill of finding each other. Their intimacy is almost palpable here. Cecil calls it “antique comradeship”, which is about as cumbersome a term as we might imagine. If he used the less cumbersome “Greek love”, however, the description might be equally confusing. For Mack, the boys are “each of them juvenile survivors of some sort form of emotional trauma; they had all passed through childhood experiences which had taken a deep if silent toll on their respective senses of personal worth and self-esteem. They found in each other companions who sought similarly to some degree, to escape the rhythms, the routines and—not at all surprisingly—the brutality of a harsh, masculine physical world, in favour of the transforming and infinitely transmutable environment of the feminine” (Mack 2000, p. 108). We might turn to the Greek sense of *philia*: love and tenderness that also expresses a sense of care. If this comes closer to an expression of the love between Horace and his friends, then it can demonstrate how queer feelings can transform the world of the 18th century.

Here is an example of an early letter from this group—this particular letter is from Gray to Walpole in 1734. The boys are still teenagers, and the mood of the Quadruple Alliance underlines the friendliness with a deeper understanding:

I believe by your not making me happy in a longer letter than that I have just received, you had a design to prevent my tiring you with a tedious one; but in revenge for your neglect I’m resolved to send you one five times as long. Sir, do you think, that I’ll be fobbed off with eleven lines and a half after waiting this week in continual expectation and proposing to myself all the pleasure that you, if you would, might give me? Gadsbud! I am provoked into a fermentation! When I see you next, I’ll firk you, I’ll rattle you with a *certiorari*. Let me tell you I am at present as full of wrath and choler as—as you are of wit and good-nature; though I begin to doubt your title to the last of them, since you have balked me in this manner. What an excuse do you make with your Passion Week and fiddle-faddle as if you could ever be at a loss what to say! . . . But I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself: in town, and not able to furnish out an epistle as long as a cow’s tail! (excuse the rusticity of my simile). In short, I have tried and condemned you in my mind; all that you can allege to save yourself won’t do,

for I find by your excuses you are brought to your *derniere chemise* and as you stand guilty, I adjudge you to be drawn to the place of execution, your chamber, where, taking pen in hand, you shall write a letter as long as this to him who is nothing when not Your sincere friend and most devoted humble servant, T Gray. (ca. 16 April 1734; 13-56-7)

This letter gives us a rich insight into the lives of these schoolboys. Gray is affectionately challenging here. He seems to be upset at not getting a newsy letter from Horace, but that does not stop him from being highly entertaining in his own way. Walpole's editors help us to understand some of the references here, and the letter is nothing if not almost campily referential: "Gadsbud! I am provoked into a fermentation! When I see you next, I'll firk you, I'll rattle you with a *certiorari*" is almost a direct quote from Congreve's *The Double Dealer*; and "you are brought to your *derniere chemise*" likewise refers to the supposed French translations of Colley Cibber's *Love's Last Shift*.⁷ Rather than diminishing the almost erotic intensity of this language, however, the Restoration comedy sources only heighten the possibility of risqué interpretations.

In Congreve's *The Double Dealer*, for instance, Lady Plyant has been led to believe that Mellefont, who has been courting their daughter Cynthia, is really in love with her. This is a ploy of Lady Touchwood, whose unrequited love for Mellefont causes her to design a trap for him, which her friend Maskwell helps her spring. When Sir Paul and Lady Plyant hear that Mellefont is courting the daughter in order to seduce the wife, they are outraged:

SIR PAUL: Gadsbud! I am provoked into a fermentation, as my Lady Froth says; was ever the like read of in story?

LADY PLYANT: Sir Paul, have patience, let me alone to rattle him up.

SIR PAUL: Pray, your ladyship, give me leave to be angry. I'll rattle him up, I warrant you. I'll firk him with a *certiorari*.

LADY PLYANT: You firk him, I'll firk him myself; pray, Sir Paul, hold you contented. (Act II, Scene 4)

This scene is memorable, to be sure, and all the talk of firking is clearly meant to be as suggestive as it sounds in Gray's letter. "Firk", according to the OED, means, among other things, "to urge, press hard, to drive, drive away"—also, "to beat, whip, lash, trounce, drub". Sir Paul and Lady Plyant certainly mean to punish Mellefont. But does not Lady Plyant seem to suggest something almost erotic here? Later, she says to Mellefont, "Have I, I say, preserved myself like a fair sheet of paper for you to make a blot upon" (William Congreve, *The Double Dealer* (1694): II.iv.). Lady Plyant's insisting on firking Mellefont herself leaves her open to the rigors of double entendre.

Can Thomas Gray be said to be entering into the world of double entendre himself? He can only be quoting from this Congreve play because he knows that Horace will understand him. Moreover, if Horace does remember the scene from which these quotations come, the sexual urgency of the passage cannot long be hidden as of pumped-up anger. This letter carries us inside the Quadruple Alliance and brings home to us its tenor and its rich emotionality.

Time in Walpole's letters resists the linearity of straight time. The letters stack up dates and seasons that come to us in an utterly expansive version of time: either slipping from the capacious index into a particular moment of immediate recognition, or slipping over weeks, or months, or years to see a friendship flourish or a home redecoration come into its own. This is the queerness that Walpole recognizes in his compatriots abroad and that could almost be said to nurture in himself:

In England, tempers vary so excessively, that almost every one's faults are peculiar to himself. I take this diversity to proceed partly from our climate, partly from our government: the first is changeable, and makes us queer; the latter permits our queernesses to operate as they please. If one could avoid contracting this queerness, it must certainly be the most entertaining to live in England, where such a variety of incidents continually amuse. (24 January 1740 NS; 13.199–200)

Of course, this queerness is nothing less than the utopian and idyllic world that Walpole creates for himself and his friends. José Muñoz discusses James Schuyler's poem "A Photograph", whose easy familiarity, a "recollection of domestic bliss", Muñoz sees as "utopian desire inspired by queer relationality".⁸ The poem, he says, "steps out from the past and remarks on the unity of an expansive version of temporality; hence future generations are invoked. . . . Queerness's time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time. . . . Queerness's ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world" (Muñoz 2009, pp. 24–25). Walpole's letters abound in such moments of hopeful queer relationality. Whether he is chatting with friends about a social scandal, choosing a new brocade for Strawberry Hill, or enthusing about the perfect miniature, he steps out of his time and reaches into ours, and we recognize those gestures and what they can mean in a queerness that has not yet been fully realized. If I see such relationality in Horace Walpole's world, I do not think I am making him into my image: rather, he is making me into his.

For Muñoz, "Schuyler's poetry is not so much about optimism but instead about a hope that is distinctly utopian and distinctly queer. [Schuyler] imagines another collective belonging, an enclave in the future where readers will not be beset with feelings of nervousness and fear" (Muñoz 2009, p. 5). Walpole's own collective belonging begins, of course, with the Gothic castle he with his friends created at Strawberry Hill. His first mention of such a place is in a letter to his dear friend Sir Horace Mann (1706–1786), a distant cousin who was also serving as Envoy to Florence. Walpole has been complaining about having to visit his father's country estate at Houghton. The dread is tempered, however, when he imagines having a country house of his own:

If I had a house of my own in the country, and could live there now and then alone, or frequently changing my company, I am persuaded I should like it; at least, I fancy I should, for when one begins to reflect why one don't like the country, I believe one grows near liking to reflect in it. I feel very often that I grow to correct twenty things in myself, as thinking them ridiculous at my age; and then with my spirit of whim and folly I make myself believe that this is all prudence, and that I wish I were young enough to be as thoughtless and extravagant as I used to be. (16 August 1744; 18.498–99)

Walpole begins to contemplate, in a "spirit of whim and folly", this notion of a country house that conforms to his own idea of what a circle of friends will mean to him in his maturity. "I wish I were young enough to be as thoughtless and extravagant as I used to be", he says. What is this, if not a utopian fantasy, a folly that he will realize in creating a house that still dazzles us with its fancy (Ketton-Cremer 1964, pp. 122–26; Fothergill 1983, pp. 56–58).

At other times, Walpole is a caring friend to Mann when he suffers physically or when he is overcome by the demands of his office. Here is Mann writing to Horace about his treatment for hemorrhoids:

My dearest child, I could not write to you last Sunday for a violent fever which after hanging upon me for several days obliged me then to be blooded. . . . I may venture to tell you the reason why I pass over all this so slightly at a time that I could say so much, as before this can reach you I shall be very well again and quite recovered of a severe operation that was performed the day before yesterday in being cut again as before. I can give you no account of it, whether it was the remainder unobserved at that time by the surgeon, or whether it was new, but having the surgeon about me on account [of] my fever and bleeding, and having some very small uneasiness in that part, I would be examined more strictly than I had done for some days before, when to the great surprise of Cocchi, the surgeon and myself it was necessary to cut. Oh the horror I was under at that word! But I did not hesitate, but bid him do that instant what was necessary. (17.340–41; 5 March 1742)

This is a long way from his Eton College friendships. Horace Walpole and Horace Mann are the kind of adult friends who discuss physical complaints and the details of bodily misery. Walpole and Mann crave this kind of epistolary intimacy because of the friendship they share. For Mann to be able to open himself this way, as it were, to his friend in London, he must feel a trust and a mutual understanding that emerges into a realm beyond simple friendship. The feelings that sustain him here suggest to me a kind of queer relationality. The intimate confessionality of these lines and their plea for physical response, almost too intense for the tenor of their epistolarity, suggests a deeper understanding than even their protests of long-standing friendship do.

Horace's response is almost more touching for its deepfelt concern and expressions of care. He writes:

—My dearest child, I have this moment received a most unexpected and most melancholy letter from you, with an account of your fever and new operation—Jesus! I did not in the least dream of your having any more trouble from that disorder! Are you never to be delivered from it? Your letter has shocked me extremely. . . . You tell me, and my good Mr. Chute tells me, that you are out of all danger, and much better—but to what can I trust when you have these continual relapses? The vast time that passes between your writing and my receiving your letters, makes me flatter myself, that by now you are out of all pain—but I am miserable, with finding that you may be still subject to new torture! Not all your courage, which is amazing, can give me any about you—but how can you write to me? (10 March 1742; 17.365)

John Chute (1701–1776) was in Florence and could inform Horace about Mann's state, and he later became a dear friend in England, as I discuss below. Here he is writing to them both, in part to announce his father's assuming the title Lord Orford, but he waxes concerned and worried about his friend as a way of demonstrating how deeply he shares in their mutual affection.

Walpole expresses this affection for Mann in various ways throughout their correspondence. They talk about politics—indeed Walpole thought their correspondence a record of the politics of the age—about art, about friends and friendship, about their families, and about the little things that make life something to talk about. They can fuss about the latest political outrage or worry that some letters have gone astray, but what stays current in these letters is the mutual love and respect these men share. These feelings are exactly what I would call queer feelings. Muñoz reminds us that the utopian collectivity he envisions can form an “actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present” (Muñoz 2009, p. 49). If we change that last word to “past”, then we can begin to take the measure of the power with which these friendships resonate. In a collection of poems partly inspired by the work of James Schuyler and Frank O'Hara, Alex Dimitrov writes about utopian experience in a dystopian way. In one poem called “Love”, Dimitrov says, “I love the nostalgia of the future” (Dimitrov 2021, p. 24). The nostalgia of the future is a kind of yearning, a kind of hope. I find this hope in Walpole's letters, and it is the hope that Muñoz articulates in *Cruising Utopia*.

Horace Walpole was an inveterate collector: he collected books, artifacts, architectural bits, chinoiserie, porcelain, enamels, and other things that suggest a sharply honed (if not to say precious) taste. Walpole and many of his friends shared a perspective on personal experience that made them perfect confederates: fussing over the details of a find, rolling their eyes in mock frustration at the demands of a dealer, or celebrating a prize possession. Here is Walpole enthusing to Mann over a group of paintings Mann had just sent from Florence:

Last week I did not write at all, because I was every day waiting for the Dominichin *etc.*, which I at last got last night—but oh! That *etc.*!⁹ —[“Besides the alleged Dominichino, Mann had sent Giambologna's bronze, paintings by Andrea del Sarto, and Sassoferrato, Gino Reni's ‘Magdalen,’ Donato Creti's copy of Guido Reni's ‘Pallione,’ a copy of the Hermaphrodite, Valle's copy of the

statue of Livia, a scagliola table, drawing of the Uffizi, essences, and views of Rome ... ".] It makes me write to you, but I must leave it *etc.*, for I can't undertake to develop it. ... The charming Madame Sévigné ... had infinite wit, condescended to pun on sending her daughter an excessively fine pearl necklace: 'Voilà, ma fille, un present passant tous les presents passes et présentes!' Do you know that these words reduced to serious meaning are not sufficient for what you have sent me? (14 August 1743 OS; 18.291–92)

Horace's pleasure in things—the “etc.” of this letter—is at the heart of his impulse to collect. His father, of course, had been a collector before him, and although there was a lot he did not like about Houghton, his father's Norfolk estate, he did love the art that was on display there. Horace diverts that impulse away from grand masters and showstopping portraits, and instead he concentrates on the miniature, the exotic, the Gothic, and the risqué. Strawberry Hill itself became part of this display, and Horace never tired of exhibiting his various collections.

This enthusiasm over gifts from Mann is repeated again and again in the letters. Often not gifts as much as commissions, Horace used Mann to help him amass an impressive collection. I have elsewhere noted Horace's enthusiasm over what Mann calls “a most beautiful antique eagle that has lately been found at Rome in the highest preservation, and as far superior to that of Benv[en]uto Cellini which Ganimede keeps, as that is to the worst that could be made at Hide Park Corner” (13 July 1745 NS; 19.65); and over a bust of Caligula—“I do not know whether it is not more exquisite of its kind than my eagle. ... I shall make a solemn dedication of it in my Pantheon Chapel, and inscribe the donor's name. I assure you it is not bronze, whatever you may have thought, but flesh; the muscles play as I turn it round. It is my reigning favourite, and though I have some very fine things in my collection. I am fonder of none; not of the eagle, or my Cowley in enamel” (30 May 1767; 22.522–3).

Horace's appreciation of this piece, as deeply felt as it is, could almost be secondary to the carefully dramatization of thanks. The tender description of discovery, the exhilarating celebration of the gift, and the almost physical response to its beauty: this is all a gift to Mann. It is a celebration of their friendship: “I shall make a solemn dedication of it in my Pantheon Chapel, and inscribe the donor's name”. The thrilling eroticism of the image is almost less important than the care that Horace takes to thank his friend and make it clear that “It is my reigning favourite, and though I have some very fine things in my collection, I am fonder of none; not of the eagle, or my Cowley in enamel”. Horace may well feel this intensity of appreciation, but he clearly wants Mann to feel it as well. This feels like an “actually existing queer reality”, as Muñoz says, because the potential for escaping a “stultifying heterosexual present” is more than palpable.

We can see these men as a couple of stalwart 18th-century gentlemen, well dressed, well educated, and interested in topics of the day. Shift our perspective slightly, and we might see a couple of giddy queens, and that is a term I use out of utmost respect. Not so respectful, perhaps, was Hester Thrale Piozzi (1740–1821), who described Horace Mann and his friends like this: “I call these Fellows ‘Finger-twirlers,’ meaning a decent word for Sodomites; old Sir Horace Mann and Mr. James the Painter had such an odd way of twirling their fingers in Discourse—I see Seutonius tells us the same thing of one of the Roman emperors”.¹⁰

Piozzi relies on hearsay, perhaps, and on her worldly understanding of masculine mannerisms. She makes an obvious connection between what David Halperin calls “morphology” and what Piozzi herself calls sexual “propensity”, when, for instance, she is discussing William Beckford's pederasty.¹¹ Walpole is intimately connected to the world that Piozzi describes. These are not his friends by accident, after all. George Hardinge (1743–1816) wrote an account of Walpole's “effeminacy”, which included a reference to John Chute and George Montagu, two other friends I discuss below: “There was a degree of quaintness in Walpole's wit, but it was not unbecoming in *him* because it seemed part of his *nature*. Some of his friends were as effeminate in appearance and in manner as himself

and were as witty. Of these I remember two, Mr. Chute and Mr. George Montagu. But others had effeminacy alone to recommend them. In his taste for architecture and *virtu* there was both whim and foppery, but still with fancy and with genius”.¹²

Whim and foppery, fancy and genius, if this does not make you want to embrace Horace Walpole as a friend and a brother, then I do not know what would. José Muñoz talks impressively about the antirelationality of some recent titles in queer studies, such as Leo Bersani’s *Homos* and Lee Edelman’s *No Future*.¹³ Muñoz wants to replace the antirelational sexual shattering of these works with an anti-antirelationality that he sees in works that emerged around the time of gay liberation: “In the spirit of the counterpolemical swerve [I have] been taking, I want to suggest that this passage [of Eileen Myles caring for an elderly James Schuyler] as representing an anti-anti-relationality that is both weirdly reparative and a prime example of the queer utopianism of which I am arguing” (Muñoz 2009).

I would like to echo Muñoz’s observation to claim (still tentatively) that this kind of queer utopianism is exactly what we find in these 18th-century letters. These men care for each other in ways that are analogous to the ways in which Myles cares for James Schuyler. In doing so, they introduce an anti-antirelationality that beckons with warmth and welcome.

Walpole writes to Mann when Mann’s brother has fallen ill in London. Early in January 1757, Mann received news from Horace to say that Mann’s brother had indeed succumbed to his illness. His response to Horace includes one of the most moving paragraphs he ever sent to him:

You who loved my dearest brother and surely was adored by him, know likewise the uninterrupted affection that has ever been between us from our childhood, will therefore too easily figure to yourself my present situation and what I have suffered ever since I read your last letter, which ought indeed to have prepared me better for what you now announce to me, if such a stroke could admit of any alleviation by being foreseen! Pardon me, my dear child. I know it is indiscreet to increase your grief by indulging mine, but my tears flow too fast and my heart is too full to spare even you, my dearest and best friend on this occasion! (8 January 1757; 21.40)

Mann’s wonderfully rambling sentences of grief are the truest expression of the depths of his feeling. The sentences can hardly end because Mann cannot contain his feelings, and the only person to whom he can express himself in this way is Horace: “my tears flow too fast and my heart is too full to spare even you”. Of course, Horace had no wish to be spared, as he says in a letter in response to this one. “I live in dread of receiving your unhappy letters! I am sensible how many, many reasons you have to lament your dear brother” (6 January 1757; 21.38). Mann is equally tender: “How can I express my gratitude to you, my dear child, for all your goodness! I am sensible what force you must have put upon your tender nature in taking the commission to give me the last account of a person so dear to us both” (15 January 1757; 21.42).

If Muñoz proposes the caring scene between a young lesbian and an aging gay poet as a relational ideal, I would suggest that Walpole’s letters offer their own counterpolemical swerve in 18th-century culture, and they do so in similarly intimate personal terms. Filled with the emotional intensity of love and care and illness and loss, they also help to fill out what the contours of the queer feeling expressed in these letters might actually be.

Horace puts it this way, in a letter after they have been passing ribald jokes back and forth:

I believe I tell you strange rhapsodies—but you must consider that our follies are not only very extraordinary, but are our business and employment: they enter into our politics, nay, I think they are our politics—and I don’t know which are simplest. They are Tully’s description of poetry, *haec studia juventutem alunt, senectutem oblectant; pernoctant nobiscum, peregrinantur, rusticantur* [trans: These studies nourish youth, beguile old age . . . go through the night with us, travel with us, go to the country with us (Cicero, *Pro Archia poeta* vii 16)]—so, if you

will, that I write to you, you must be content with a detail of absurdities. (25 June 1749 OS; 20.74)

Horace's "detail of absurdities" tries to get at what is special about this friendship and this correspondence. "Our follies"—all the details of public life that these two men share—are couched in the mutuality of queer feelings.

Such feelings are invoked in a different way when Horace writes to Mann about the loss of John Chute's friend Francis Whithed. John Chute (1701–1776) and Francis Whithed (1719–1751) had been Walpole's friends from the early 1740s, when Walpole was in Florence with Mann. They shared a love of architecture and collecting, and for Walpole, Chute and Whithed were a model of friendship and care. Here he is telling Mann of Whithed's death:

How shall I begin a letter that will, that must give you as much pain as I feel myself? I must interrupt the Prince's death to tell you of two more, much more important, God knows! to you and me! One I had prepared you for—but how will you be shocked to hear that our poor Mr. Whithed is dead! . . . [He] had a bad cough for two months; he was going out of town to the Winchester assizes; I persuaded and sent him home from hence one morning to be blooded. However, he went, in extreme bad weather. His younger brother, the clergyman . . . dragged him out every morning to hunt, as eagerly as if it had been to hunt heretics. One day they were overturned in a water, and then the parson made him ride forty miles: in short, he arrived at the Vine [Chute's home] half dead, and soon grew delirious. Poor Mr. Chute was sent for to him last Wednesday, and sent back for two more physicians, but in vain; he expired on Friday night! Mr. Chute is come back, half distracted, and scarce to be known again. You may easily believe that my own distress does not prevent my doing all in my power to alleviate his. (1 April 1751 OS; 20.238)

This would be touching in any circumstances, but if we see these two men, the Chuteheds, as he called them, a proto-gay couple, the power of the scene is even more palpable. This is not from the annals of heroic soldiers or mythical figures, but it is from two simple men, minor gentry, who were in love. For that alone, this lament needs to be acknowledged and celebrated. Horace makes these terms even more persuasive as he proceeds:

He has left Mr. Chute one thousand pounds, which, if forty times the sum, would not comfort him, and little as it is, does not in the least affect or alter his concern. Indeed, he not only loses an intimate friend, but in a manner an only child; he had formed him to be one of the prettiest gentlemen in England, and had brought about a match for him that was soon to be concluded with a Miss Nichol, an immense fortune, and I am persuaded had fixed his heart on make him his own heir, if he outlived his brother. With such a fortune, and with such expectations, how hard to die!—or perhaps how lucky, before he had tasted misfortune and mortification! (1 April 1751 OS; 20.238)

Walpole's last sentiment about misfortune and mortification does not undo the profound statement of love between two men. Here again Horace calls Whithed "one of the prettiest gentlemen", which is a compliment to Chute, but also all but a code for effeminacy and sexual transgression. Furthermore, he expresses the love between these two men—an intimate friend, an only child—as if they are closer than he knows how to express. If Chute has arranged a marriage—and an immense fortune—that does not diminish the intimacy he feels for the man whom he hopes to make his heir. Whithed was a contemporary of Horace's. Chute was nearly 20 years older. However, that does not diminish the intimacy between these two men or insist that the father-son relationship was un- or antierotic. I think Horace here gives us every detail he can to express his admiration for this male-male couple, his friends from some dozen years earlier when he was on the Grand Tour.

When Horace describes an event, like the masquerade he attended in 1763, which was a celebration of the Peace of Paris ending the Seven Years' War, he does so brilliantly. It is not so much that the description is vivid, which it is, or the dramatic presentation is

riveting, which it is, but more than all this, Horace recreates the event to make it a social occasion in which he hopes we can share. If he does that for Horace Mann, to whom he is writing, he also does that for anyone who has the imagination to participate in this event with him:

Last night we had a magnificent entertainment at Richmond House, a masquerade and fireworks. . . . The whole garden was illuminated and the apartments. An encampment of barges decked with streamers in the middle of the Thames, kept the people from danger and formed a stage for the fireworks, which were placed along the rails of the garden. The ground rooms lighted, with suppers spread, the houses covered and filed with people, the bridge, the garden full of masks, Whitehall crowded with spectators to see the dresses pass, and the multitude of heads on the river, who came to light by the splendour of the fire-wheels, composed the gayest and richest scene imaginable; not to mention the diamonds and sumptuousness of the habits. (5 June 1763; 22.148–9)

This is Walpole conveying the grandeur of the scene as a way of entertaining his friend, making it part of his own experience. The letter exudes queer feelings by celebrating masquerade and frivolity, and by describing the scenes of the lights and the suppers and the fire-wheels: all these details make this scene tangible for Horace's reader, for Mann, that is, and beyond. If this is the "gayest and richest scene imaginable", it is so because Horace can create the scene in such "sumptuousness".

This friendship flourished until Mann's death in 1786, and although the correspondence stayed current, the two men never met again after the early 1740s. This is surely one of the great friendships of the literary tradition, and it also demonstrates how rich and varied an epistolary friendship can be. Their attachment's deep emotionality and its vast capaciousness sets a standard for queer relationality that is rarely matched.

Horace was as frolicsome and giddy in his letters to George Montagu (1713–1780), another Eton College friend with whom he corresponded and socialized well into middle age; to William Cole (1714–1782), an antiquarian with whom he shared collections and gout; and, of course, to his cousin Henry Seymour Conway (1721–1795), who was a close companion from childhood.

Walpole felt an abiding love for his cousin Henry Seymour Conway. They are Harry and Horry in their letters, and the affection is clearly mutual. Their letters share the fun and silliness of family frolics, and they cope with the rigors of Conway's position as a Field Marshall in the War of the Spanish Succession and beyond. In middle age, their intimacy is challenged in a very public way. When Conway was dismissed from Lord Grenville's Whig ministry as a result of a dispute in which he and Horace were both involved, Horace defended him energetically in his *Counter-Address*.¹⁴ William Guthrie wrote *A Reply to the Counter-Address*, in which he attacks Walpole's own masculinity:

How pathetically he swells on the ingenuous modesty of the general, on his extraordinary humility, on the twenty-seven years that he served, the six regular battles he was engaged in, . . . the heroes under whom he was formed, and the decorum which has graced every period in his fortune, if I did not recollect the unhappy situation of my Author, *C'est une affaire du coeur*: 'Tis his first love who has been so barbarously used.¹⁵

This discussion of the amorous features of Walpole's writing about Conway is arch and unpleasant, to be sure, but it also hints at the idyllic world that shimmers beneath the surface here. Guthrie resorts to a French expression as a way of heightening the erotic potential here.

Walpole writes to Conway in response, but he does not even try to contradict the attack:

I send you the reply to the Counter-Address; it is the lowest of all Grub Street, and I hear is treated so. They have nothing better to say, than that I am in love with you, have been so these twenty years, and am no giant. I am a very constant

old swain: they might have made the years above thirty; it is so long I have had the same unalterable friendship for you, independent of being near relations and bred up together. (1 September 1764; 38.437)

Walpole turns the attack on its head by accepting it. “Unalterable friendship” is a fitting euphemism for the intensity of this beautiful relationship. This is the utopian moment, akin to Munoz’s “modality of ecstatic time, in which the temporal stranglehold [of] straight time is interrupted or stepped out of” (Muñoz 2009, p. 22).

William Cole was a cleric and fellow antiquarian who shared many interests with Walpole, not least among them was the gout they both endured. Cole also helped Horace to gather materials for Strawberry Hill. Here Walpole enthuses about a tomb that he will be able to use as a gateway: “Bishop Luda must not be offended at my converting his tomb into a gateway. Many a saint and confessor, I doubt, will be glad soon to be *passed through*, as it will at least secure his being *passed over*” (15 July 1769; 1.178).¹⁶

Walpole shares his plans with Cole as a way of engaging the friend in his plans. The degree of detail that Walpole provides here and the care with which he makes drawings to accompany the text all mark the seriousness of his Gothic enterprise. More than sending out a request for antiquarian aid, Walpole reaches out to Cole out of a sense of shared intimacy.

That intimacy was at work some years earlier when Walpole wrote to Cole about a now almost infamous dream:

I waked one morning in the beginning of last June from a dream, of which all I could recover was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story) and that on the uppermost banister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening I sat down and began to write without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate. (9 March 1765; 1.88)

These lines introduce Cole to Walpole’s Gothic masterpiece, *The Castle of Otranto*. I have spoken about this letter many times, and I will not belabor it here. However, I will note that this letter describing the intimacy of his dreams may indeed provide the origins of the novel, but these details also remind us the depths that queer relationality can plumb.

George Montagu and Horace Walpole enjoy their social milieu, and they love to share gossip and expose silliness. Walpole also tries to tempt Montagu out of his country retreat by dangling the delights of Strawberry Hill before him. As he describes his home to Montagu, he almost seems to be using it for the purposes of seduction:

I am just come out of the garden in the most oriental of all evenings, and from breathing odours beyond those of Araby. The acacias, which the Arabians have the sense to worship, are covered with blossoms, the honeysuckles dangle from every tree in festoons, the syringas are thickets of sweets, and the newcut hay of the field in the garden tempers the balmy gales with simple freshness, while a thousand sky-rockets launched into the air at Ranelagh or Marybone illuminate the scene and give it an air of Haroun Alrachim’s paradise—I was not quite so content by daylight: some foreigners dined here, and though they admired our verdure, it mortified me by its brownness; we have not had a drop of rain this month to cool the tips of our daisies. (1 June 1765; 10.156)

He describes the fragrances of the evening in terms that Montagu can appreciate: the use of references to the *Arabian Nights* gives this description an exotic theme, and it underlines the sensory pleasures of Strawberry Hill on a summer evening.

Strawberry Hill had been Horace’s central project for some time. The house on the Thames that Horace transformed into a Gothic fantasy engaged an intimate circle of friends, not only Mann, who regularly provided materials from Italy, but also his dear friends John Chute, inheritor of a country house called the Vyne and deeply devoted to Walpole’s love of antiquities, and Richard Bentley (1708–1782), the artist and illustrator whom Walpole sponsored and encouraged. These men formed the Strawberry Committee, and together

they plotted to make the figures in Horace's imagination an architectural reality. What they share, of course, is good taste.

Joseph Litvak "has suggested that the gustatory underpinnings of sophistication grant an erotic quality to the pursuit of good taste by claiming that the mouth and the pleasures of orality are fundamentally erotic experiences. 'the distance between the aesthetic and culinary taste in sophistication is never as great as their distance in distinction,' Litvak claims, 'what enables their proximity . . . is the psychosexual dimension of taste'" (Litvak 1997, p. 8).

The psychosexual dimension of taste is another way of describing the queer feelings that form the bond between Horace Walpole and his friends. Mann and the other "finger-twirlers" maintain a standard of taste as a way of asserting their special version of emotionality that queer feelings can be said to approximate. Walpole and his closest friends understood taste as a definitive arbiter, something that they shared and that defined them. Like the later concept of identity, taste, for Walpole and his friends, is an artistically mutual sense of sophistication that sets these men apart and enables them to express their deepest feelings in the Gothic contours of Strawberry Hill.

Walpole's friendship with John Chute has a special resonance throughout the *Correspondence*. After Whithed's death in 1751, Walpole and Chute became even closer. When Horace took on Strawberry Hill, Chute was at this side either planning and designing or traveling with him around the English countryside looking for the Gothic treasures—an architectural detail, or a tomb, or a gateway—that they could plunder for the sake of their own Gothic palace.

Chute was the friend who anticipated Horace's every desire. In the following letter, Walpole is praising Chute for a design he has offered for the exterior of the cloister at Strawberry Hill. The editors of the *Correspondence* indicate that Chute here offers the second of three designs, all of which are housed at the Lewis-Walpole Library (in Farmington, CT):¹⁷

Well, how delightful! how the deuce did you contrive to get such proportion? you will certainly have all the women with short legs come to you to design high-heeled shoes for them. The cloister, instead of a wine-cellar, has the air of a college. It has already passed the Seals. Mr. Müntz has commended it in a piece of every language, and Mr. Bentley is at this moment turning it outside inwards.—I assure you, Mr. Chute, you shall always have my custom. You shall design every scrap of the ornaments; and if ever I build a palace or found a city, I will employ nobody but you. In short, you have found a proportion and given a simplicity and lightness to it, that I never expected. (4 November 1759; 35.110)

Walpole's tone is warm and friendly, and it reminds us how deep their friendship is. The letter also brings the planning of Strawberry Hill into their friendship and amplifies with the Gothic effects of the house. Chute is delighted to be working on the house with Walpole. Even more important than the designs that result is the emotional context, the queer feelings, out of which these designs emerge.

Chute's own death in 1776 brings one of Horace's most touching laments. He writes to Horace Mann:

This fatal year puts to the proof the nerves of my friendship! I was disappointed of seeing you when I had set my heart on it—and now I have lost Mr. Chute! It is a heavy blow; but such strokes reconcile one's self to parting with this pretty vision, life! What is it, when one has no longer those to whom one speaks as confidentially as to one's own soul? . . . Mr Chute and I agreed invariably in our principles; he was my counsel in my affairs, was my oracle in taste, the standard to whom I submitted my trifles, and the genius that presided over poor Strawberry! His sense decided me in everything, his wit and quickness illuminated everything—I saw him oftener than any man; to him in every difficulty I had recourse, and him I loved to have here, as our friendship was so entire, and we knew one another so entirely, that he alone never was the least constraint to me. We passed many hours together without saying a syllable to each other, for we

were both above ceremony. I left him without excusing myself, read or wrote before him, as if he were not present—Alas! alas!—and how *self* presides even in our grief! I am lamenting myself, not him!—no, I am lamenting my other self. Half is gone; the other remains solitary. Age and sense will make me bear my affliction with submission and composure—but forever—that little *forever* that remains, I shall miss him. My first thought will always be, *I will go talk to Mr. Chute on this*—the second, *alas! I cannot*—and therefore judge how my life is poisoned! I shall only seem to be staying behind one that is set out a little before me. (27 May 1776; 24.209–210)

This passage “steps out from the past” to offer what Muñoz calls “an expansive version of temporality”. If queerness is “a stepping out of the linearity of straight time”, Horace Walpole takes that step here and asks us to step out with him (Muñoz 2009, p. 25). This vivid expression of queer feelings is a rich testament to a loving friendship. José Muñoz observes that “queerness is not quite here; it is, in the language of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, a potentiality” (Muñoz 2009, p. 21). Everywhere this potentiality is realized if we understand its relation to ourselves. If we recognize Horace Walpole as a queer progenitor whose life and friendships reach out to us, then we can celebrate these letters as a testament to the potentiality of a queer present in the past. I touch on only a fragment of the emotional richness and deep personal care that these letters express, but I hope I have begun to demonstrate how the queer feelings on display here can enrich our understanding of male relationality in the past.

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Notes

- ¹ I would like to thank the two generous readers for the journal, who offered valuable suggestions for the improvement of this essay. See (Mowl 1996). Other, more useful discussions of Walpole and sexuality include: (Campbell 1998; Haggerty 1999; Reeve 2020).
- ² As R. W. Ketton-Cremer notes, “Walpole was younger by about a year than the other members of the Quadruple Alliance. He was decidedly their social superior”. See (Ketton-Cremer 1964, p. 35).
- ³ See Toynbee (1915), 1.xx; see also Mack (2000, pp. 70–73).
- ⁴ See Walpole (Walpole 1937–1981). *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, 13.xxii. All parenthetical references are to this edition.
- ⁵ Ketton-Cremer (1964, p. 36). See also Toynbee (1915, 1.xvii–xx).
- ⁶ Mack (2000, pp. 103–4). Inner quotation is from Jacob Bryant, “Letter from Jacob Bryant”.
- ⁷ *Correspondence* 13.56–7nn 5, 6, 8.
- ⁸ Muñoz (2009, pp. 24–25). Muñoz’s (1999) earlier book could offer an equally rich perspective on this material, which I hope to develop in the chapter that will follow this essay.
- ⁹ “Besides the alleged Dominichino, Mann had sent Giambologna’s bronze, paintings by Andrea del Sarto, and Sassoferato, Gino Reni’s ‘Magdalen,’ Donato Creti’s copy of Guido Reni’s ‘Pallione,’ a copy of the Hermaphrodite, Valle’s copy of the statue of Livia, a scagliola table, drawing of the Uffizi, essences, and views of Rome . . .”. (*Correspondence* 18.291n 2).
- ¹⁰ See Fothergill (1983, p. 50); see also (Mowl 1996, p. 58).
- ¹¹ On the implications of “sexual morphology”, see (Halperin 2000).
- ¹² See Walpole (Walpole 1937–1981). *Correspondence* 35.648 [n. Extract in an unknown hand, labeled “Letter (to Nichols) from George Hardinge, Esq.”; here printed from a photostat in the possession of F. C. Holland, West Horsley, Surrey. Printed in Nichols, *Lit. Anec.* Viii, 525–26, where it is followed (pp. 525–70) by five paragraphs, which are here printed from Nichols’s printed text.]
- ¹³ See Bersani (1995) and Edelman (2004).

- ¹⁴ For a full account of these activities, see [Ketton-Cremer \(1964, pp. 198–203\)](#); see also [Mack \(2000, pp. xx–xxi\)](#) “Introduction”.
- ¹⁵ [Guthrie \(1764, p. 25\)](#); see [Mack \(2000, p. xxii\)](#) “Introduction”.
- ¹⁶ W. S. Lewis and A. Darryl Wallace remind us that Bishop Luda was William de Luda (d. 1298), Bishop of Ely, 1290–1298. His tomb in Ely Cathedral is the basis of Walpole’s designs. (1: 178nn. 6 & 7).
- ¹⁷ *Correspondence* 35.110n 1.

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