

## ABSTRACT

**RESEARCH PAPER:** “Trembling on the Brink”: The Fantasy of Female Subjectivity in the Precipice Stage

**STUDENT:** Taylor Lutz

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In the context of the eighteenth century, the role of women was both complex and contradictory. Amid the backdrop of emerging liberalisms, women’s subjectivities in the eighteenth century appeared to be largely constructed by prominent texts that attempted to contest and curtail women’s ability to function as liberal subjects. One way in which this was accomplished was through discourse about the female body, which worked to inscribe women’s supposed vulnerability. The gothic novel is an apt site for interrogating such constructed vulnerability, as the conventions of gothic horror often position their female heroines in perilous and precarious circumstances. This is reflected in gothics like Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1798), where the female protagonist Clara Wieland is terrorized by a host of threats: a precipice, an abyss, and other perils.

My analysis of Brown’s *Wieland* focuses on how this American gothic explores questions about the female subject. I position my discussion of female subjectivity in the context of Judith Butler’s work on the nature of subject formation as well as Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage. Accordingly, I propose that women’s subjectivities in the eighteenth century can be read as a kind of *precipice stage*, in which prominent ideas about women’s vulnerability—those that

disproportionately exposed them to violence and precarity—were mistaken for articulations of the female subject's actual self. This vulnerability, I argue, was instilled as means to reinforce the self-sufficient liberal (male) subject.

In this paper, I argue that Brown's exploration of the female subject articulates the horrific results of this precipice stage for the female subject. The bizarre occurrences that distinguish Brown's *Wieland*—including spontaneous combustion and a ventriloquist hiding in a closet—not only create conditions of gothic horror, but these conditions allow for interrogating the consequences of the discursive and deadly forces that ultimately walk women to the edge of the precipice, where, like in Lacan's mirror stage, they are shown “themselves.”