

This work has been submitted to **NECTAR**, the **Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses and Research**.

Conference or Workshop Item

Title: A first look at "Who's the Murderer?" by Eleanor Sleath

Creators: Mackley, J. S.

Example citation: Mackley, J. S. (2013) A first look at "Who's the Murderer?" by Eleanor Sleath. Symposium presented to: *Fantastic Worlds: A Joint Symposium on Fantasy, Science Fiction and Gothic Literature, The University of Northampton, 22 November 2013.*

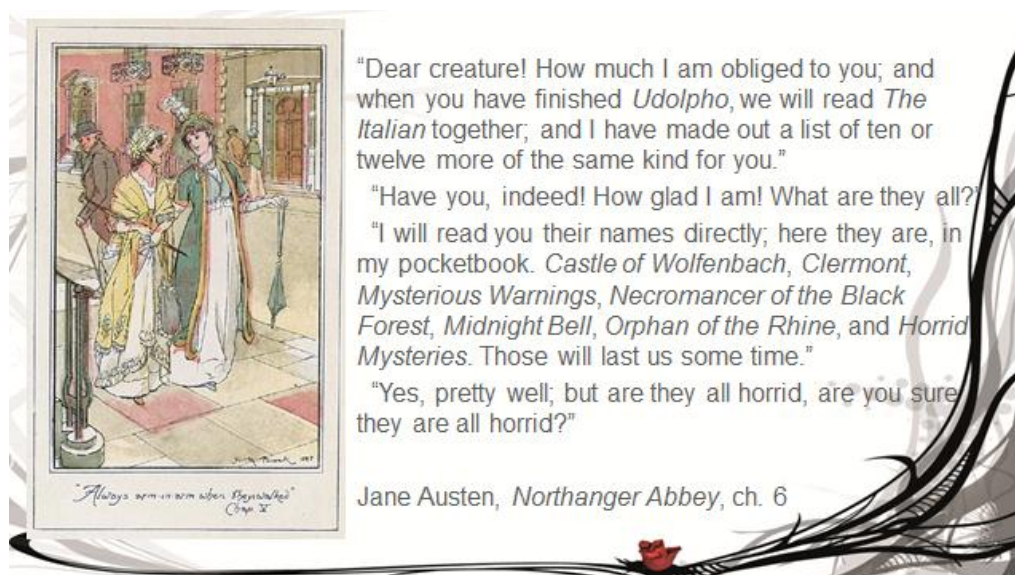
Version: Presented version

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/6330/>



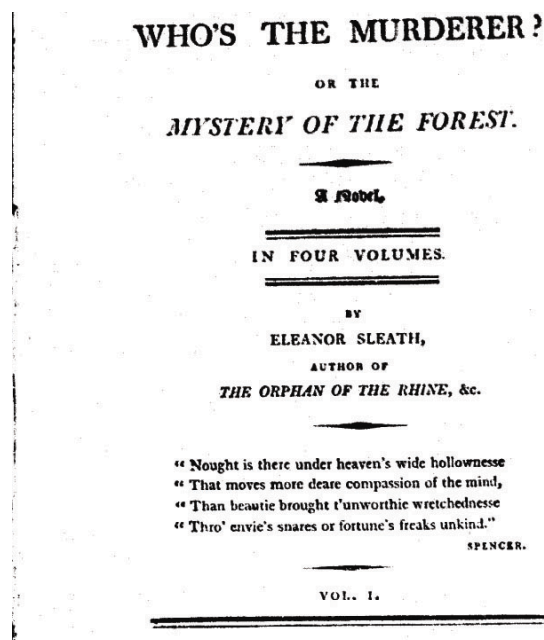
A First Look at *Who's the Murderer?* by Eleanor Sleath
J.S. Mackley, University of Northampton
Fantastic Worlds Symposium, University of Northampton
22 November 2013

In Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine and Isabella discuss what horrid novels to read next – they discuss the well-known *Mysteries of Udolpho*, but Austen also lists a series of other works. It was initially thought that Austen fabricated the titles, but the researches of her biographer Michael Sadleir found they were novels published by the Minerva Press.¹



It was while working on a paper for this symposium *last* year – about a book by Peter Teutold called *The Necromancer* – that I contacted Valancourt Books in Kansas City. Valancourt publish volumes that have been long out of print. I was asking about work called *Horrid Mysteries* by Peter Teutold who had also written *The Necromancer*. I was informed that this book was still in the editing process, but after a short discussion about my interests, I was asked if I should like to edit a book myself.

¹ Michael Sadleir, *The Northanger Novels: A footnote to Jane Austen* (English Association Pamphlets, 1927).



The book that I have completed a first draft edit is called *Who's the Murderer, or The Mystery of the Forest* written in 1802 by Eleanor Sleath. It's a novel published in four volumes – each volume is between 350-400 pages, amounting to some 185,000 words in total. Eleanor Sleath wrote six novels including *The Orphan of the Rhine* (published in 1798) – one of the novels listed in *Northanger Abbey*. Sleath undoubtedly owes her reputation to Jane Austen; Devendra Varma classes Sleath as 'one of a

number of minor "gothic" writers whose works were animated by the last flicker of enthusiasm for gothic fiction'.² *Who's the Murderer?* shares some plot strands with *The Orphan of the Rhine*, including a child who is fostered under mysterious circumstances, a vulnerable female character, a forced marriage, a lost bracelet which later reveals the identity of its owner and, of course, an ending where most of the strands are neatly tied together and the main characters live happily ever after.

Until fairly recently, very little was known about Eleanor Sleath: Michael Sadleir speculated that Sleath was a Catholic because of the 'wise and spiritual disposition' of her ecclesiastical figures in *The Orphan of the Rhine*;³ Devendra Varma agreed with Sadleir; but while he correctly ascertained that Sleath was born in Leicestershire, and came tantalisingly close to identifying Eleanor Sleath by recognising 'the death of a military doctor of the name of Sleath' who died in 1794, the surgeon's widow was dismissed because there was 'no supporting evidence'.⁴

A full biography of Sleath was pieced together and published in 2012 by Becky Czapinski and Eric C. Wheeler.⁵ Their study of the Leicestershire archives

² Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame* (Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1987), p. 173.

³ Sadleir, *The Northanger Novels*, p. 22.

⁴ Devendra P. Varma, 'Introduction' in *The Orphan of the Rhine by Eleanor Sleath* (London: The Folio Press, 1968), p. vii.

⁵ Rebecca Czapinski and Eric C. Wheeler "The Real Eleanor Sleath", *Studies in Gothic Fiction* Spring 2012.

revealed that Mrs Sleath was born Eleanor Carter, the youngest of five children of Thomas and Elizabeth Carter, and who was baptised in Loughborough Parish Church on 15 October 1770. Her father died when she was young, but the family had sufficient wealth to ensure the children received a good education. Eleanor married Dr John Barnabas Sleath of Calverton, Buckinghamshire on 14 September 1792: John established himself as a surgeon and apothecary in Nuneaton, Cheshire, some 50 miles from Calverton, and 30 miles from Loughborough. (This was the surgeon named by Varma). Shortly afterwards, Eleanor's son, Joseph Barnabas Sleath was born, but he died in September 1794, and her husband died the following month.

In 1798, Eleanor published her first novel, *The Orphan of the Rhine*. This was particularly influenced by the *Sturm-und-Drang* literature – usually translated as "Storm and Stress", which allowed authors to explore the extremes of emotion. Sadler describes this novel as 'a genuine product of the influence of Mrs Radcliffe. It contains sensibility with sensation, being more terrific than

Works by Eleanor Sleath

The Orphan of the Rhine (1798)
Who's the Murderer; or, The Mystery of the Forest (1802)
The Bristol Heiress; or, The Errors of Education (1809)
The Nocturnal Minstrel; or The Spirit of the Wood (1810)
Pyrenean Banditti (1811)
Glenowen; or, The Fairy Palace (1815)

[Regina Maria Roche's] *Clermont* but more melodious and picturesque than the horror-novel pure and simple'⁶ In addition, he recognises the 'affinity to the Radcliffian school of sensational landscape-fiction staged abroad'⁷. Both *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Who's the Murderer* start their stories in France with a vulnerable heroine who must stand up to the machinations of the evil Italian count; in particular, however, Sleath subscribes to the theme of sensibility that is so prevalent in Radcliffe and Austen's novels.

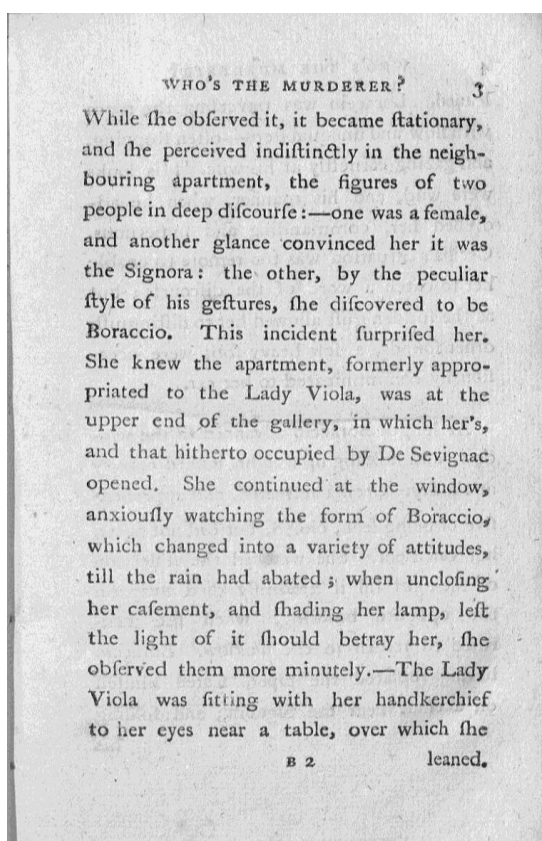
In 1801, Eleanor's brother, John, moved the whole family to Scraftoft Hall, a short distance from Leicester. She was living here in 1802 when she published *Who's the Murderer?* Amongst others in their social circle, Eleanor and her family associated with the Rev. John Dudley, vicar of Humberstone, although a sarcastic comment from Eleanor's sister-in-law gave rise to a speculation concerning an

⁶ Michael Sadleir, *Things Past* (London, Constable, 1944), p. 180.

⁷ Michael Sadleir, *The Northanger Novels*, p. 22

affair between Eleanor and John Dudley, aggravating his wife's jealousy. She resorted to spreading slanderous gossip about Eleanor, which led to John separating from his wife in 1808. Shortly after this time, Eleanor published three novels, *The Bristol Heiress*, *The Nocturnal Minstrel* and *Pyrenean Banditti*.

In 1813, when Eleanor's brother died, his estate was divided between his wife and sisters; Eleanor moved back to Loughborough, only a short distance from Sileby where John Dudley was vicar. Around this time, she published *Glenowen*, or *The Fairy Palace*. Less than two months after the death of Ann Dudley in 1823, John Dudley and Eleanor were married after which undertook the role of the vicar's wife until she died on 5th May 1847, aged 77.



Thinking about the practicalities of working on the edition of *Who's the Murderer?*: the administrators at Valancourt had already done a lot of the hard work, having scanned the text into a word document. Unfortunately because of the nineteenth century typefaces it is often difficult to discern between some letters, between S and F for example, so the text needs to be carefully proofread; and every comma and semicolon needs to be as the author intended. There may be some attempt to correct spelling, but often the archaisms add to the mood of the piece. Nor have I made any attempt to correct the mistakes where she has misspelled words, or

mistakes in her geography: for example, "Cannes" is spelled as "Vannes" and "Antibes" as "Anbibes".

Who's the Murderer? is a particularly rare book. Undoubtedly there are some copies in private collections, but of the dozen or so listings on WorldCat (a list of holdings for all the libraries), most of these are stored on microfiche. A microfiche is a postcard-sized sheet of acetate with tiny photographs on it. These photographs can then be viewed by a special magnifying reader. Unfortunately

there are problems with the fiche copy – blemishes on the photographs make some of the text unreadable and on sometimes pages have been omitted completely and it has been necessary to obtain a scan from the nearest library in which it's stored which is Harvard University library.

It is difficult to summarise this novel in a few lines. Cecilia is the heroine. Her parentage is concealed from the beginning of the story: as a baby she is placed in the care of a young widow. This widow then gives Cecilia to kindly aristocrats shortly before she becomes superfluous to the story and dies. The aristocrats are Madame de Villeneuve and her brother Monsieur de Sevignac. Cecilia's focus during this time is her growing friendship with the dashing young noble, Lorenzo di Varano. Varano makes honourable motions towards Cecilia and is, indeed, excellent company. However, De Sevignac warns Cecilia that, as Varano is of a noble family, he is not free to marry where he chooses but must instead form an attachment with another noble house.

Cecilia is 19 when Mme de Villeneuve dies, and when De Sevignac's health begins to fail, he is advised to travel and to seek the restorative air of Italy, so following a lengthy journey from the south coast of France from Provence to Nice (and a descriptions lifted from James Edward Smith's *A Sketch of a Tour on the Continent in the years 1786 and 1787* with lofty sublime descriptions that would greatly appeal to readers of Ann Radcliffe's novels); however, the trip to Italy does not improve De Sevignac's health, and, shortly before he dies, he promises Cecilia a package containing documents which explain her heritage. After his death, Cecilia is left in the dubious care of the aristocratic society of Genoa, some of whom do not have Cecilia's best interests at heart. Indeed there are long discussions about Cecilia's place in polite society. Without the protection of her step-father she is described as 'base' and 'low-born' and 'educated beyond her status'.

Of course, the path of true love never runs smooth. Cecilia is manipulated towards a marriage with the Italian Count Morsino, a marriage actually engineered to defraud her of her inheritance. She chooses not to read the package left by De Sevignac which contains details of her birth parents because of her 'melancholy disposition'. And she chooses to go to a nunnery, rather than marry against her will. On the way to the nunnery, however, she is kidnapped

and taken to a deserted chateau in the middle of the forest – a means by her would-be husband, Count Morsino, to continue his bullying in order to persuade her to marry him. In the meantime, she discovers something about her parentage. As Cecilia is helped to escape – eventually to Venice – she discovers she has a brother who is now known by an alias. Her brother makes her promise not to reveal their kinship because of a crime – a **MURDER!** – he committed some years before. But Varàno assumes the secrecy between Cecilia and her brother is actually an admission of affection and storms off without waiting for an explanation. (Indeed, Varàno sees Cecilia fleeing with her brother when their location is discovered by Morsino and immediately assumes the worst). Ultimately, as Cecilia's noble heritage is uncovered, Varàno becomes free to marry her and Cecilia's brother is vindicated of past crimes. All the virtuous characters live happily ever after, including some who were previously thought to be dead. Obviously, this is merely scratching the surface of a convoluted plot.

One of the principal differences between this novel and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for example, is *Who's the Murderer?* never attempts to suggest the supernatural. Everything has a rational explanation. The evil men do is worse than any nightmare the supernatural could generate. That said, despite being a strong character, Cecilia slips into madness and delirium following the cruel treatment at the hands of the Count; there is a horrific scene where she tries to see the body of her step-father at midnight in a thunderstorm; and a dream sequence the imagery of which is comparable with even the most graphic of terror novels:

At length the wind dropped, the sounds were hushed into repose, and the jarring of a distant door, which moved slowly on its grating hinges, alone disturbed the almost deathlike stillness that prevailed. ... Cecilia stepped back—her blood was chilled, and she turned to regain the door; but before she could seize it, it shut to with a thundering clap, and she was left alone among the dead. As she advanced again from the door, she thought the figures on the coffins began to move, their marble features became fleshy—the lights they held waxed pale—a strong sulphureous vapour rose from the

tombs—and a loud crash of thunder, like the noise of a thousand pieces of artillery, reverberated, and shook the inmost bowels of the earth. Horror again overwhelmed her, and again she made an effort to depart; but her feet, when she would have moved, sunk imperceptibly into the ground—a hot boiling fluid seemed to be gathering around them—and in a moment she was involved in a sea of blood!

I should like to spend a few moments thinking about the title: one think that “Who’s the Murderer?” refers to a body Varàno finds in the first volume when the travellers shelter from a storm on their way to Genoa. (The dwelling is inhabited by banditti, a favourite motif of Sleath). In fact, this is a dramatic interlude to which one of the characters reacts, suggesting his guilt, but is not satisfactorily resolved. And later, as Cecilia is confined in a castle, she finds blood-stained clothes presumably from decades before. Based on the title, I spent much of the novel wondering “who’s been murdered?” It is only when we reach the fourth volume that we discover *which* character has been murdered – and fate ties the murderer to his victim. It is the subsequent trial and twists that bring the strands of the story together. Only in the final chapters do we find certain events have been misrepresented, leading to an ironic ending.

Likewise, the subtitle, *The Mysteries of the Forest*, is somewhat misleading. There are times when the party are travelling to the cities that the pass through the forest and, as previously suggested, this is when Varàno discovers the body the banditti are trying to conceal. However, the majority of the story takes place in the various châteaux in which the characters reside, or amongst polite society in Genoa and Venice where people of rank attempt to both advance and deride Cecilia. However, she is confined in a castle in the forest, and it is here she learns about the fate of her parents which led to her adoption. So while the title is dramatic, and the subtitle is vague, they don't really give an adequate explanation of what's going on.

Having said the above, it is easy to see how the works of Eleanor Sleath would have appealed to Catherine and Isabella when they listed *The Orphan of the Rhine* amongst their ‘horrid novels’. As with Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the two novels named by Eliza Parsons, and

Regina Maria Roche's *Clermont*, Eleanor Sleath's novels have the lengthy descriptions of European landscapes, and a strong female character who is ready to stand up to the bullying of an aristocrat: on one occasion Cecilia is locked in a room with a suitor and she demands "release me this instant; or unprotected as you think I am ... be assured you shall repent your temerity", a line that would have even the most evil Italian Count quaking in his boots. That said, Cecilia does faint on occasion, but not as much as Emily in *Udolpho*. The story is a product of its time – A Romantic tale, with many gothic conventions and exotic locations, but most particularly, a female protagonist with whom the thrill-seeking young women readers could identify.

Bibliography

Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008

Sleath, Eleanor. *Who's the Murderer?* Forthcoming, Kansas City: Valancourt Press, 2014

Czlapinski, Rebecca and Wheeler Eric C. "The Real Eleanor Sleath", *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, Spring 2012

Sadleir, Michael. *Things Past*. London, Constable, 1944.

Sadleir, Michael. *The Northanger Novels: A Footnote to Jane Austen*. English Association Pamphlets, 1922.

Varma, Devendra P. *The Gothic Flame*. Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1987.

Varma, Devendra P. 'Introduction' in *The Orphan of the Rhine by Eleanor Sleath*. London: The Folio Press, 1968.