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Frances Burney's *Evelina*

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The Other Side of Late Eighteenth-Century Society: Social Violence and  
Masquerade in Frances Burney's *Evelina*

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## Accessing Frances Burney Through the French Revolution: The Politics of Audience

At first glance, Frances Burney appears to be an ideal figure to study in order to gain a better understanding of British opinions on the French Revolution. She was a prominent member of British intellectual society, having published a successful premiere novel, *Evelina*, at a relatively young age. She was welcome in intellectual circles of the time, rubbing elbows with contemporary scholars such as Samuel Johnson and political philosophers like Edmund Burke. Most importantly, she had a personal stake in what was happening across the channel in France. During the Revolutionary period, Burney met and married a French refugee named Alexandre d'Arblay. D'Arblay was living in England as a member of the "Juniper colony," a coterie of French Constitutionals who were residing in exile at Juniper Hall in Mickleham. As the wife of a man whose life had been completely uprooted by the Revolution, it is not surprising that Burney would have a lot to say about this time of historically significant upheaval and change. It is also to be expected that she would be interested in the political and philosophical reactions to the Revolution among the English. Discussions of the Revolution and its aftermath are in fact present throughout her writing from those decades. The reader of her personal journals and letters will find an anxious tone running through the background of her writing. Her final novel, *The Wanderer*, focuses entirely on the Revolution and its affects in England.

What is surprising, however, is *how* she expresses her opinions and to whom. While she only occasionally addresses it explicitly, any mention of the Revolution in her letters and journal entries is charged with emotion. Among the English aristocracy and gentry of the late 18th century, the reports of uprisings in France, the beheading of the King and Queen and the political chaos that followed could have been nothing short of terrifying. Coming into contact with French

refugees in England and hearing firsthand accounts of the trauma they experienced left its mark as well. Burney devotes considerable time to recording the interactions she has with these refugees, often translating their accounts into English to preserve them for posterity.

It is striking how much space she devotes to writing about other people in her letters and journals. While we might think of a diary as the opportunity for individual expression, Burney does a remarkable job of putting the opinions and personal stories of others into words. At times she is better at writing about others than articulating her own thoughts and opinions, especially concerning politics. In other words, she is writing like a novelist, taking people whom she meets and turning them into “characters” in her diary. While the characters in her novels spring primarily from her own imagination, the personages in her diaries and letters are real living people. It is up to her as a writer to observe them closely and effectively consolidate those observations and character judgments onto the page. Essentially, she has made it her task as a letter writer and diarist to collect, shape, and record lived experience. It is in this way that her letters and diaries came to be considered literature, through a combination of the pure passage of time as well as their overall quality and comprehensive nature.

One profound example of her ability to reveal the opinions of others as well as provide well-rounded descriptions of those whom she comes into contact with can be seen in her accounts of her interactions with Edmund Burke. Considering their intellectual relationship, it is particularly valuable to look at Burney’s personal reaction to the opinions he puts forth both in his book *Reflections on the Revolution in France* as well as in person during social gatherings. Examining these particular scenes from her letters reveals Burney’s complex opinion of the Revolution while at the same time showcasing her ability to say one thing when she may hold

the opposite opinion. In this case, Burke is one of her superiors whom she knows she must respect even if she does not personally agree with what he is saying.

And while she may not be completely enthralled by Burke the man, she is certainly impressed by his writing, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in particular. She writes to her friend Georgiana Waddington, raving about Burke's new book and providing a brief personal reflection on the issues it raises:

When I read, however, such a book as this, I am apt to imagine the whole of such a Being must be right... and that the time may come when the mists which obscure the motives or incentives to those actions and proceedings which seem incongruous, may be cleared away, and we may find the internal intention had never been faulty, however ill appearances had supported any claim to right.

(*Journals and Letters* 307-308)

Given the fact that this letter was written just one year after the storming of the Bastille in 1789, it is interesting to note the reflective tone Burney takes. Perhaps she was inspired to do so after reading Burke, who uses a similar tone in *Reflections*, one that simultaneously predicts what is to come with "its clairvoyant predictions of extensive bloodshed," while still mourning what has been lost (*Journals and Letters* 348). Burke was criticized for his grim predictions about the course the Revolution would take by early supporters of the Revolution like the powerful Whig politician Charles James Fox. During a politically charged dinner conversation, Burney notes that Fox accuses Burke of being right "*too soon*" about the bloody turn that the Revolution would take (*Journals and Letters* 348).

While Burke was, in fact, "right too soon" about this one particular fact, that was the full extent of his forward thinking. He was correct in anticipating the bloodshed that would follow the Revolution but his criticism of the philosophy supporting it was conservative in nature backward looking. Robert A. Smith points out in *Edmund Burke On Revolution* that

Burke was old rather than new: a summarizer of the philosophy of the *ancien regime* rather than a prophet of the modern state; the spokesman of the religious rather than of the secular view of life. He foresaw the new order but rejected it out of hand, believing the old to be better and more true. (Smith xi)

In short, Burke was a philosopher who considered current political situations with a conservative eye, all the while emphasizing the importance of the past. For example, he argues in *Reflections* that the beheading of Marie Antoinette would also mean the death of chivalry in western culture. This is a good example of how Burke makes an argument, which defends something like chivalry as an institution that is so deeply rooted in the past. Perhaps this appealed to Burney's more conservative views on certain issues, but only to an extent. Highly esteemed as he was, Burke to her was nevertheless a man for whom she felt she had to put on airs and adjust her behavior. One scene that reveals a great deal about the nature of their relationship is from her letter about a dinner party conversation she and her father have with Mr. Burke about *Reflections*.

At the party, Burke sees Burney and comes over to speak with her, exclaiming that she seems to have changed significantly since the last time he saw her. He remarks that she seems altered "quite for the better" since she left her position at court. He also rejoices in the fact that she "seemed so ill-suited to that station" (*Journals and Letters* 346). She responds rather waspishly by writing:

Ah! thought I, this is simply a mistake from reasoning according to your own feelings. I only seemed altered for the Worse at the Trial because I there looked coldly and distantly from distaste and disaffection to your proceedings; and I here look changed for the better only because I here meet you without the chill of disapprobation, and with the glow of my first admiration of you and your talents! (*Journals and Letters* 346-347)

This little exchange reads more like a drawing room party scene from one of her novels than anything else. Indeed, many of the scenes Burney describes in her letters and journals are so detailed and carefully constructed that they do not carry any of the sloppiness and randomness that we would expect from the scribbles that often result from keeping a record of the day's activities. After this particular exchange, her father joins the pair and the subject of the conversation turns to politics and to the Revolution itself:

The French Revolution, he said, which began by authorizing and legalizing Injustice, and which by rapid steps had proceeded to every species of Despotism except owning a Despot, was now menacing all the Universe, and all Mankind with the most violent concussion of principle and order. / My Father heartily joined in, and I tacitly assented to his doctrines, though I feared not with his fears. (*Journals and Letters* 347)

This interaction with Burke and her father reveals how careful Burney is in mixed company to put on airs of enthusiastically agreeing with whomever she was speaking to, even if, as she says herself in the case of Burke and her father, their fears were much stronger than her own.

She is also able to effectively paint a picture for her audience or in this case the reader of the letter, of whomever she is describing. It is as if she is treating her friends from the real world as characters in a novel. In the act of describing Mr. Burke, she concentrates more on his personality than his physical appearance:

this wonderful Man when he is easy, happy, and with people he cordially likes!-- But politics, even on his own side, must always be excluded: his irritability is so terrible on that Theme that it gives immediately to his Face the Expression of a Man who is going to defend himself from Murderers (*Journals and Letters* 347).

She pays particular attention to the multiple sides of his temperament, how he can be so cordial with his friends and overly intense about politics, an astute observation worthy of a novel writer. She is right to notice that Burke's politics are the one thing that betray him in polite society. In

this particular letter, she reveals two different aspects of Burke's character. On one side, he is a happy, cordial friend to her. On the other hand, he is also a fiery political philosopher, who is wholly engrossed in his scholarly pursuits and stubborn in his beliefs. He is also an elderly man, who believes that he is right in pointing out the fact that Burney's temperament has "so changed since they last met," not realizing that he is only seeing in her what he wants to see and that she is not in fact the devotee to his work that he thinks she is. In short, Burke fails to notice that her change in temperament has everything to do with *him* and his proceedings. He clearly overestimates her level of reverence towards him as a scholar.

Topics such as the French Revolution are examples of violent events that Burney could have only experienced second hand. Nevertheless, she does an excellent job of effectively capturing the frightened spirit of the age. These sentiments are revealed not only in her own personal preoccupations with the situation in France but in her ability to sympathize with the French people as well as the French refugees living in England, one of whom she will eventually marry. Burney's opinion on the French Revolution changes depending on whom she is writing to. She clearly has different concerns than her father and Burke, but she makes a deliberate effort to support their opinions in public. She also supports her father's views in her letters to him but her opinions and preoccupations about the Revolution change when she addresses her group of predominantly female friends. Her concerns appear to lie primarily with the violence occurring in France and the situation of the French refugees in England rather than the possibility of the spread of revolutionary ideas across the channel, which seems to concern her father and Burke.

She writes to her father responding to the "cruel slaughter of the King of France, Louis 16." While many French people today celebrate the beheading of Louis XVI as a kind of gory/nationalistic holiday, it is important to remember that news of such a profound act of



violence against a monarch must have been deeply upsetting to members of the European aristocracy, regardless of their personal politics. She exclaims in the letter, “The dreadful Tragedy acted in France has entirely absorbed me...what must be the feelings of all but the Culprits in France!” (*Journals and Letters* 354).

The beheading aside, Burney’s preoccupations are much more specific and less ideological in her letters to her friends. Rather than making profound ideological exclamations about the villains across the channel, she devotes more time to sharing news about her courtship with the Frenchman M. d’Arblay and sharing her concerns about how the current political situation in his native land will affect their prospects for marriage. She writes to her friend, Frederica Locke on the subject of current Franco-English relations, seeming much more concerned with a recent personal falling out with Madame de Staël than anything else: “Had I understood her disposition better, I should certainly have attempted no palliation, For I rather offended her pride than mollified her wrath” (*Journals and Letters* 360). Apart from (apparently) Madame de Staël, she sympathizes with the French refugees living in England at the time, criticizing the scorn that these constitutionalists experience at the Royal Court.

As for the case of M. d’Arblay in particular, she does not have much hope that his situation as “an Émigré, who is supposed to be here to Day, and gone to-morrow” will improve (*Journals and Letters* 363). She also confesses to her friends that her father is unwilling to help her fiancé gain permanent residency status. It is understandable, therefore, that she would not bother to go into anything too personal with her father but rather to treat their letters as an area to converse about more abstract subjects such as politics. This is yet another example of the self-censuring Burney does in the presence of a particular audience, especially her father.

The best glimpse of what Burney *really* thought about the Revolution comes through her diary. In one particularly memorable entire, she describes meeting a traveling party of poor French refugees in which one of the women in the party tells her, “‘They say,’ she cried, ‘in France they have now liberty! Who has liberty, *le peuple*, or the mob? Not *les honnêtes gens*; for those whose principles are known to be aristocratic must fly or endure every danger and indignity. *Ah! est-ce là la liberté?*’” (d’Arblay 8). The group continues to discuss what they believe to be the true meaning of liberty, which they believe is exemplified in Britain. They all agree that the current state of France is one of tyranny rather than democracy because French aristocrats who consider themselves to be “*très démocrate*” are still either thrown out of the country or sent to the guillotine. Burney reacts strongly to this encounter, and rhapsodizes about the nature of liberty in society:

Ah! is this liberty, where one side alone predominates thus fiercely? Liberty! the first, best, noblest gift for mankind, is mutual, reciprocal for all parties: in France it seems to me but a change of despotism. I rejoice with my whole heart to see those redressed who have been injured; but I feel horror, not joy, to see those oppressed who are guiltless. I have much, I own, to learn ere I can account for the predilection I see taken for a demolition of tyranny by tyranny. They say I have heard but one side: it appears to me they think there is but one side. (d’Arblay 11)

She is clearly leaning in favor of the aristocracy, but she does recognize the fact that there is another side to the story of what is happening in France even though everyone around her insists that it is a black and white issue. This ability of hers, that interest in the other side, even if she may not agree with it, is evident in her entire life’s work. It is certainly evident in her first novel, *Evelina*, written years before the Revolution.

The French Revolution would also serve as the central driving force behind the plot of her most politically conscientious (and final) novel, *The Wanderer*. In a critical study of the

politics of Fanny Burney's novels, *The Iron Pen*, Julia Epstein argues against the previously held notion that Burney avoided political commentary in *The Wanderer*. She writes that this is, in fact, a misreading and that "the absorption of the political into the personal, rather than evading, permits Burney to analyze explicitly the ideological impact of French revolutionary politics on the European social condition" (Epstein 177). I would argue that this absorption of "political into personal" is also noticeable in her personal letters and diaries, as shown in the examples above which were written just before and around the same time as *The Wanderer*. As a woman of that world, who was deeply affected by the tumultuous relationship between France and England, Burney's own life and the lives of her friends and family members are perfect informants to the state of the "European social condition." For her, the politics she witnessed through interactions with great philosophers such as Edmund Burke became the personal stories, which filled her personal journals and letters.

Reminiscent of her ability to recognize the existence of "another side," she also is able to create a character, Elinor, who is entirely pro-Revolution and extremely proto-feminist. Elinor "leaves her mark on the novel by serving as a countermand to all the narratives ostensibly received notions: she champions the French Revolution and challenges male hegemony" (Epstein 187). While Elinor as a character may represent a pro-revolutionary opinion that might be completely the opposite of Burney's own personal opinions, the fact that she is able to imagine and craft a strong character with opinions that, on the surface, are so different from her own shows skill and intellectual tenacity. It also proves an intense interest in people, especially those different from herself, and in crafting portraits of those characters, which come to life on the page. Though Burney was politically against it, perhaps the Revolution was ideologically appealing because to her it promoted the ideals of justice and equality. Burney is clearly allied

with women, taking a proto-feminist standpoint in her novels. Therefore, the idea of equality would be appealing to her. But these sentiments are much less clear in her diaries and journals and much of that can be attributed to the question of who her audience is for a particular piece.

These questions of audience such as for whom is she writing, when, and to what end are all raised under the subject of the French Revolution. But they also extend beyond how Burney wrote about and viewed the violence of that particular event in history. In fact, these elements of writing that she employs are noticeable throughout her *œuvre*, especially during scenes of social violence and/or masquerade in her novels as well as in certain events recounted in her diaries and letters. Burney's writings on the French Revolution, which is an event in history that is easily accessible to many people, provide an interesting introduction to examining the work of this lesser known author. It provides impetus for close examination of other scenes of violence in her work, scenes of violence that are much less historicized than the Revolution. My objective here is to examine how Frances Burney writes about violence *Evelina* as well as selected journals and letters. This will be accompanied and enriched by analysis of the special type of social ingenuity that is afforded to *Evelina* through, what I call, social masquerade. I will also explore the surprising connection between social ingenuity and social violence, which is revealed in certain scenes from Burney's own life as well as *Evelina*. Burney has traditionally been compared with Jane Austen and only to argue that Austen is "better." Because of this, I will avoid Austen and compare *Evelina* and selected letters to other 18<sup>th</sup>-century works that deal with similar themes of violence against women coupled with elements of this same type of social disguise. All of these modes of analysis will serve to complicate our contemporary literary understanding of Frances Burney as an 18<sup>th</sup>-century novelist. It will contribute, I hope, to vindicating her contributions as a

writer to the development of the novel, particularly in the area of character development as well as the possibility for more nuanced social commentary within a narrative.

### Behind the Mask: Gender Masquerade and Agency in *The Female Husband*

In order to fully understand how Burney's *Evelina* fits into the history of novels, it is useful to look at works, which came before and that deal with similar themes. It is also advantageous to consider novels specifically with characters that are able to pass through multiple layers of society like a type of social chameleon. Henry Fielding's novella *The Female Husband* is a peculiar tale of disguise for the purposes of fulfilling sexual desire. Similar to *Evelina*, it is the story of a woman who receives the attention of multiple lovers. Only, while *Evelina* concerns a woman being pursued by men, Fielding's heroine, "Mrs. Hamilton," is dressed as a man and is pursuing women. By cross-dressing, Mrs. Hamilton is able to take the offensive (male) position in pursuing her love interests. In this way, *The Female Husband* is the antithesis of *Evelina*. While *Evelina* constantly needs to ward off the aggressive attentions of male suitors, Mrs. Hamilton does the opposite. By choosing to dress like a man, she is essentially taking control of her life and her sexual desires. Therefore, she has agency but at an extreme cost. In the end, she is found out and punished by the "mob," which is surprisingly comprised mostly of other women, for having the audacity to step outside of the gender normative power dynamics of that particular society.

In addition to questions of gender and society, *The Female Husband* also engages in the question of what a proper education for a young lady consists of. This issue is also raised by Fordyce and Gisbourne and further complicated by Burney in *Evelina*. As Mrs. Hamilton moves steadily from marriage to marriage, always ending up discovered and therefore forced to flee from her lover's bedchamber at the last minute, her lovers become increasingly more "innocent"

and naive and therefore more likely to fall for her disguise. Her final lover, Molly, is so inexperienced and unaware of the ways of the world that she does not think it odd when her fiancé after entering into an altercation with another gentleman has her “wastecoast” torn open “so that her breast was discovered, which...were so different a kind from the bosom of a man” (Fielding 46-47). The narrator tells us that this revelation “might have spoiled the match with a less innocent and less enamored virgin” but was not considered to be strange at all by this young woman (Fielding 47). In fact, the narrator highlights the futility of a “proper education” on the protagonist herself and its lack of an effect on the morality of her actions later in life. It also made perfectly clear that the proper education received did nothing to dissuade her obvious homosexual orientation: “yet was the girl brought up in the strictest principles of virtue and religion; nor did she in her younger years discover the least proneness to any kind of vice, much less give cause of suspicion that she would one day disgrace her sex by the most abominable and unnatural pollutions” (Fielding 30). Even at the beginning of the novella, we become aware of the fact that this woman is doomed to disgrace her entire gender and that this will be a story about some sort of “fall” into ruin.

The figure of the “fallen” woman is engaged with in this novella, in the protagonist as well as her female lovers. The first woman that Mrs. Hamilton is able to seduce and marry is the 68-year-old Lady Rushford, who experiences a level of “undonness” equal to that of Madame Duvall, one of fallen women from *Evelina*. The narrator describes her state after she realizes that she has been duped and has not married a young man but a young *woman* in man’s clothes. Her great-grandson finds her, “in the midst of it in her shift, with a handful of shirt in one hand, and handful of hair in the other, stamping and crying, I am undone, cheated, abused, ruined robbed by a vile jade, impostor, whore” (Fielding 40). It is also interesting to consider the fact that in all

of the instances in which Mrs. Hamilton is found out she is called a “whore.” And this is all for acting in a sexually licentious manner, or to put it simply, acting like a man. This curious comparison between man and whore is not directly implied in the novella. But it is interesting to consider the double standard that presents itself when the behavior code of gender is disrupted by the act of cross-dressing and masquerading as the opposite gender. And it is only during queer moments like the case presented in this novella where we can get a glimpse of the truth about the social code, which states that men cannot by definition be whores (the closest word that exists today for us is the colloquial “man-whore”) whereas women who “act like men,” that is to say take multiple lovers, are living up to the exact definition of the word. In short, gender is the sole determinant of whether or not the same behavior is acceptable.

The gender of the audience is also an important influence over the narration of the novella. At the very end, Fielding insists that he has written a novel, which leaves its (female) reader’s mind completely untainted. In this way, the scandalous nature of the story is reduced or at least diminished in the eyes of potential censors. And yet the scandal remains. He has written about cross-dressing, a woman being whipped about her bare back for crimes committed while acting as a man, and even hinted at homosexuality or as he calls it, “criminal...transactions not fit to be mention’d” (Fielding 31). Thus, while Fielding effectively ensures that his unorthodox novella will not be considered too unseemly for young ladies eyes by promising to his reader that “not a single word occurs through the whole, which might shock the most delicate ear, or give offence to the purest chastity” we know that he is being completely disingenuous (Fielding 51). I am confident in saying that the author of *Tom Jones* knows more than most that a good scandal in literature is always appreciated. It is also interesting to consider the fact that if he had really

wished to warn anyone by providing a sort of 18<sup>th</sup>-century trigger warning, he would have put it at the beginning of the novella rather than in the very last sentence.

### Violence in *Evelina*

While it is very often placed under the category of works by “women writers” and considered a precursor to Jane Austen’s novels, *Evelina* is a surprisingly violent novel. I would therefore argue that it is better coupled with more “masculine” works such as *The Female Husband*. And the story itself is quite different from any of the drawing room dramas that Austen wrote. It is also a novel that depicts almost exclusively violence enacted against women. The only male characters in the story who experience any peril are Mr. McCartney who is thwarted in his attempt to commit suicide by the heroine herself and Mr. Lovel, whose public embarrassment is very much deserved. Suffice it to say that the women of *Evelina* live in a perilous world, a world in which the potential for dangerous situations becomes completely real the minute they are left alone without the protection of a man or a group of people. One of the most frightening scenes for *Evelina* occurs when she becomes separated from her party on a visit to Marybone gardens. Being startled by some fireworks, she runs away with other members of the group, but soon finds that during the scattering of her party, she has completely lost sight of anyone she knows. The minute that she loses the protection of a large group bad things start to happen to her:

I started, and then, to my great terror, perceived that I had outrun all my companions, and saw not one human being I knew!...I found myself in the midst of a crowd, yet without a party, friend, or acquaintance...every other moment, I was spoken to, by some bold and unfeeling man, to whom my distress, which, I think, must be very apparent, only furnished a pretense for impertinent witticism, or free gallantry. (*Evelina* 273-274)



She is completely alone without a companion or any protection from the perils that lurk in the shadows of the eighteenth-century pleasure garden. And Burney does not make any effort to hide any harsh realities at this point in the novel. Instead, she uses the situation of her protagonist as an occasion to display another side to London life. In this way, the curtain is pulled back to reveal a darker side of society, “At last, a young officer...with great violence, he seized my hand. I screamed aloud with fear, and forcibly snatching it away, I ran hastily up to two ladies” (*Evelina* 274). But the two ladies turn out to be quite the opposite of what they originally appear. It is soon made clear that they are prostitutes, and Evelina writing to her guardian Mr. Villars confesses that she cannot tell him everything of what they discussed: “I will not dwell upon a conversation, which soon, to my inexpressible horror, convinced me I had sought protection from insult, of those who were themselves most likely to offer it!” (*Evelina* 274). In the same way that Burney changes her writing and what she reveals about herself in her letters to her father, Evelina also censures herself when corresponding with her own “father figure.” Burney also seizes on the opportunity presented here to showcase the seedy underbelly of London to her audience both for the purposes of dramatic effect and to provide subtle social commentary, all the while thinking of her audience’s sensibilities. The fact that Evelina is consciously censoring herself in relating this story to Mr. Villars makes it perhaps slightly more palatable to the sensibilities of a wider audience. The fact that she is somewhat checking herself in her letter to him and choosing not to reveal *everything*, specifically the bawdy details of her conversation with the prostitutes, also adds a note of nuance and mystery to the scene itself.

As for the men that she meets, specifically the officers who accost her, they are clearly those same “gallant gentlemen” whom she could have met in a completely different social context. Thus the drastic change in behavior between how gentlemen treat her when she is alone

in a pleasure garden, presumably a prostitute or a lost girl and therefore, easy prey and how they treat her in more polite settings. But I also question whether or not Evelina is completely immune to these male aggressions even in polite settings. She is treated poorly by most of the men she encounters, even under the polite social pretenses of the ball. Her first ball in London, as Margaret Doody aptly points out, is far from a Cinderella success story despite the fact that she is successful at attracting a lot of attention for her beauty. During the course of the ball, the “fop” Mr. Lovel accosts her; she is “rescued” from him by Lord Orville (her eventual savior in the novel as a whole); and concludes the evening by being propositioned by the aggressive Sir Clement Willoughby. Evelina only finds out later on that Lord Orville, the man she is immediately drawn to, calls her both “a poor weak girl” and “a pretty modest-looking girl” after meeting her for the first time (*Evelina* 35). Clearly, even the wonderful Lord Orville, who is Evelina’s dream man in the end, does not see her in the most favorable light when they first meet. By calling her “a poor weak girl” in front of Sir Clement, Lord Orville is placing a permanent social label onto Evelina’s identity. Consequently, this is how Sir Clement views Evelina for the rest of the novel and this explains why he pressures her so aggressively, in spite of her clear protestation. It is also important to remember that as an attractive woman without a father, Evelina’s social destiny was to most likely to become the kept-mistress of a distinguished man of the upper class, a fact that Sir Clement was probably all too aware of (Doody 40).

#### On the Docks of Dunkirk: Frances Burney’s Own Experience with the Violence of French Authorities

One comparable scene of real life violence experienced by Burney during her years spent in France can be found in an incident she records in a journal entry. During the few months she and her family spent trying to escape Napoleon’s France by fleeing to England, they spent some

time in Dunkirk waiting for a ship that could take them across the channel. This particular incident occurs on the docks in Dunkirk, when after helping several Spanish refugees, she is forcefully detained and questioned by an aggressive police officer, “Never can I forget the terrour with which I was seized at this Command... the view of the tremendous Belt of my assailant, which was furnished, conspicuously, with Pistols and Daggers. Follow I did, though not less perforce than if I had been dragged by chains” (*Journals and Letters* 457). What follows is an aggressive interrogation by the officer, which he clearly enjoys, given what Burney calls his “sneering sardonic grin that seemed anticipating the enjoyment of compulsion” and submission on her part (*Journals and Letters* 458). Burney does not spare her reader any details especially with regard to her interior thoughts. She confesses that in spite of her revulsion and anger towards both the man and the awkward situation he has forced her into, she realizes that being brave enough to maintain total composure during the affair would serve her better than outwardly resisting. Thankfully her son, Alexander Jr. runs past the window, “wildly” searching for her and is able to find the honorable Mr. Gregory, their friend in Dunkirk to vouch for his mother.

Mother and son are released from the officer’s hold and walk back to their hotel, utterly speechless. Burney concludes this story by writing that “this adventure, in the terrours to which it gave rise, was one of the most severe to my apprehensions, during several minutes, that I had ever experienced in my life” (*Journals and Letters* 459). What stands out in this phrase is the hyperbolic nature of her statement. It may be that this experience is one of the most terrifying she has ever experienced in her life, but that terror and emotion do not overpower her description of the actual scene itself is what contributes to the superior quality that characterizes her diary entries and letters. Instead, she is able to remain removed enough to present a certain objectivity

that permits her to remember (or embellish if need be) as many details as possible. Her account has clear elements of narrative. There is the exposition in which she explains how she would often go to the docks and talk to a group of Spanish refugees that congregated there. This is followed by an inciting incident when she decides to take pity on the poor souls by giving them some money and a climax when an aggressive French policeman takes her into custody. These elements along with her attention to details are what make this letter novelistic to some extent.

This practice of carefully crafting and presenting real-life stories to her friends and family vis-à-vis her letters no doubt influenced her ability to invent and properly write out scenes in her novels. The ability to disengage slightly from what one is writing in order to achieve a certain level of objectivity about an event is especially useful when the goal is to effectively convey scenes of violence. It makes them both more believable to the reader and more interesting because we are not left wondering whether or not we can completely trust the narrator.

Years before, Burney writes with similar attention to detail in describing one of the most violent scenes in *Evelina*. It is the story of Madame Duval's attack by Captain Mirvan and company. Madame Duval is a difficult character for anyone to like. Evelina dislikes her maternal grandmother for several reasons including her brashness and foreign French customs. Her gaudy clothes and caked on make-up make her a stage character, like Lady Wishfort in *The Way of the World* or something worse. Her character is reminiscent of the female figure described in Swift's poem, "The Lady's Dressing Room" particularly when he writes that she uses for her face, "A paste of Composition rare" (Swift line 23) made up of such unsavory things as "Sweat, Dandruff, Powder, Lead and Hair" (line 24) and even "Puppy water" (line 31) all in the name of beauty, and presumably a beauty that is in itself merely a mask for ugliness and not a very effective one at that. Following her outward appearance, the personal tragedy that she experiences is equally

dramatic. As part of a practical joke with underlying misogynistic sentiments and influenced on the surface by their simple hatred of the old Frenchwoman, Captain Mirvan and Sir Clement stage a fake robbery of Evelina and Madame Duval's coach.

Apart from causing emotional trauma to Evelina, the robbery also exposes Madame Duval to physical abuse. After Evelina discovers her grandmother tied up in a ditch, Madame Duval recounts the entire unpleasant incident to her: "But I believe nobody was so abused before, for he dragged me down the road pulling and hawling me all the way...if he'd beat me to a mummy, those cowardly fellows would n't have said nothing to it...I shall never forget it, if I live to be an hundred" (*Evelina* 192). She continues by describing how after shaking her and throwing her around violently, her attacker takes her over to a tree and pulls out a large rope, "It's a wonder I didn't swoon away, for as sure as you're alive, he was going to hang me to that tree. I screamed like anything mad" (192).

While many of the violent acts that Burney focuses on in her letters and diaries come from a more removed perspective (she only heard about the French Revolution and events from the Napoleonic wars such as Waterloo secondhand), she is best known for her account of something horrific that actually happened to her. One of her most celebrated letters is the letter in which she describes in extreme detail her own mastectomy without any anesthetic and executed with the crude surgical instruments and techniques of 18th century medicine. The thought of this procedure today and the type of pain it entails is close to unimaginable. And the pain itself, the actual pain that she experiences before, during, and after the procedure is one of the main focuses of Burney's letter. True to her style, she does not hold anything back while describing the surgery. And just as before with her own father and with Evelina and Mr. Villars, Burney knows that this kind of writing is not for everyone. She explicitly instructs her friend not to share the

letter with her father and others who she know cannot handle it, arguing that “My dearest Father and my dearest Mrs. Locke live so little in the world, that I flatter myself they will never hear of this adventure. I earnestly desire it may never reach them...I leave all others, and all else, to your own decision” (*Journals and Letters* 444). Clearly, the letter itself was passed around and shared in exclusive circles. But given the sensitive nature of its contents, the recipient of the letter should use discretion when she decides whom to show it to. Perhaps the inherently secret and private nature of these “shared letters,” the fact that they were passed along only in small selective circles, allowed Burney to be more candid in her descriptions of the difficult scene.

The events leading up to the surgery, along with her feelings of impending doom are painstakingly documented. The reader experiences every doctor’s visit and every “professional opinion” given, including the decision that she must not be made aware of the exact date of the procedure so as not to cause her too much unnecessary stress and alarm. Of course, we also then hear all about how this decision has the complete opposite effect on Burney’s mental state. On the actual day, however, she is strangely calm. She is able to maintain some sense of composure (just as she did during the incident on the docks of Dunkirk) or at least in comparison to everyone else around her. It is striking to read her descriptions of the maids crying, the doctor’s voice trembling, and her husband’s utter despair. There is also that awkward moment just before they place a veil over her face when there is some confusion over who will actually take hold of her breast. The veil is then placed over her face so that she cannot see (only feel) what is actually happening during the surgery.

And what she does in fact feel during the surgery, what she describes as “a terror that surpasses all description, and the most torturing pain” all contributes to making this letter completely unforgettable (*Journals and Letters* 442). She describes the first cut, the incision of

the blade passing through the different layers of her anatomy and the initial reaction that immediately follows, “I began a scream that lasted intermittently during the whole time of the incision--and I almost marvel that it rings not in my Ears still!” (442). Sensory feelings are the dominant mode of description in the difficult passage: “when...the instrument was withdrawn, the pain seemed undiminished, for the air that suddenly rushed into those delicate parts felt like a mass of minute but sharp and forked poniards, that were tearing the edges of the wound” (442).

In writing, feelings of extreme pain are not easy to describe. The mind naturally forgets memories of physical pain, but the simile that Burney uses here is powerful in evoking the physical nature, the rush of the air and the “sharp and forked poniards” are what make this description so realistic and so terrifying for the reader. The final blow, so to speak, that she puts down is when she describes how after the doctor has finally removed the tumor from her breast he then proceeds to scrape her breast bone with a knife, “I then felt the Knife rackling against the breast bone--scraping it!” (442). Just the motion implied by the word “scraping” in this context is enough to raise goose bumps. It is enough to make this passage extremely difficult to forget.

Also notable in this unforgettable letter are the questions it raises about how the body relates to the mind in instances of extreme duress. Since the body in pain is so difficult to describe, Burney makes do by writing physical approximations that the reader can relate to, to a point. But apart from the act of literally being able to put to words the pain experienced, there is also her account of what her mind remembers experiencing during the surgery. The questions raised here are what does the body in pain notice and how does being in pain influence one’s view of the world? What does she see and not see? While her face is physically covered, she remembers hearing and feeling a number of things. She remembers mainly the sound of her own scream, the voices and prolonged silences of the doctors in the room, and feeling the doctor’s

hand hovering over (but never touching) her open wound. Overall, the tale of her surgery is an instance of a bodily sickness, which she is able to elevate in a way by writing so profoundly about it by including such a detailed and multi-sensory description of the event itself. Doing this puts Burney in conversation with the feminist notion of embodied knowledge, rejecting the more male-dominated idea that a separation between mind and body is necessary in literature.<sup>2</sup> In this instance, Burney gives an account of a true story of sickness and pain that is both felt by the body and remembered by the mind.

While she experienced her mastectomy years after writing *Evelina*, and therefore could not have drawn from that particular real life experience in order to write violent scenes for that particular novel, there remains an interesting link between the two works. At the very least we can argue that Burney's memorable letter is that way because she had demonstrated skill in writing about violent and macabre subjects in her previous works. More generally, these scenes reveal to us in the twenty first century a different side of the late eighteenth century, a less respectable and less rational side, a side that is much more difficult to *préciser* than our current information age sensibilities would care for. And it is significant that the author bringing us these insights is someone who on the surface would have seemed to have little to no knowledge of this other world. In fact that opposite is true. Frances Burney, in spite of being a respectable middle class woman, knew all about this unrespectable side of society. Or at least, she knew enough to write about it effectively and to create novels that dealt with difference and the existence of more than one side of London, of society, and of life in general. The seedier, unrespectable world, is

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<sup>2</sup> This may be a bit of an exaggeration, but I had been searching for an opportunity to connect Burney to Virginia Woolf and saw the fact that they both address the notion of sickness in their writing as a possible connection. I am attracted to the idea of this Feminist notion of "embodied knowledge," which is quite different from the (male) notion of disembodied knowledge. In *On Being Ill*, Woolf argues that so rarely in literature is the body itself addressed and I think that Burney's famous Mastectomy Letter is a notable exception to that statement.



the world that existed beyond the doors of her home, outside of the social constraints of politeness and to write about it, only made the very existence of the “polite world” seem all the more impermanent and illusionary.

Additionally, she knew that she was unusual in wanting to do this, or in wanting to be a writer at all. Her early journals and letters highlight just how much pleasure she got from writing as well as the anxiety she felt over her compulsive need to write. Her fear lay in the self-satisfaction she got out of writing and the fact that she viewed the action as a necessity rather than a hobby and the fact that publishing her work exposed her to the possibility of failure. This could be one of the reasons she wrote *Evelina* in secret (after burning its prequel and all of her other writings up to that point in a kind of ceremonial bonfire) and initially published it anonymously. In “Dynamics of Fear: Fanny Burney,” Patricia Meyer Spacks argues that

Her resultant sense of danger and fear [of being discovered] dominates her journal and published letters for years after the book’s publication. ‘All that I can say for myself is,’ she summarizes, ‘that I have always feared discovery, always sought concealment, and always known that no success should counter-balance the publishing my name.’ (Spacks 165)

In short, she was a writer who needed to write in spite of the limitations imposed by her gender and station in society. As shown in previous sections of this paper, she noticed aspects of life that escaped the attention of others. She particularly noticed the lives of other women around her and the seriously real potential of ending up in an unhappy marriage. These observations of the unfavorable fates of other women as well as her desire to continue her scholarly activities writing for her father and for herself no doubt influenced her opinion on marriage and how she went about writing her marriage-plot novels.

*Evelina* is undoubtedly a female-centric novel, focusing its attention on the trials of a young lady living in a particular period in time as she comes of age in a society that does not favor her sex. Yet it is also a commentary on the dynamics between the sexes, as they were at the end of the eighteenth century. The notion of liberty is raised implicitly in the novel and explicitly in Burney's letters, no doubt influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment in general and the French and American Revolutions in particular. Burney links gender and liberty in a letter written during the *Evelina* era: "Liberty is not without its value--with women as well as with men, though it has not *equal* recommendations for both, --& I hope never without a prospect brighter to myself to lose mine: & I have no such prospect in view" (*Evelina* 478). All of this is written in during the same time as Burney's own unwanted marriage proposal. In a conversation recorded in her journal, she tells her unwanted suitor, Thomas Barlow that "there are many odd Characters in the World--& I am one of them" deliberately naming herself as different, perhaps, from other women (485).

She also knew that her unusual temperament and her writer's mind encouraged her to take a strong stance on the institution of marriage. She writes in a letter from around this time explicitly stating her stance on marriage for herself, "Don't imagine by what I say that I have made a *Vow* for a single Life--no. But on the other Hand I have no *Objection* to it, & have all my life determined never to marry without having the highest value & esteem for the man who should be my lord" (*Evelina* 476). She was essentially asserting her right to be choosy about her marriage partner, a right that she could not completely justify as a woman living at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is also important to consider that she had the boldness to make a claim that other women might have been afraid to claim as their own right to say no to suitors and wait instead for the right partner to come along.

Her opinions on marriage and love no doubt influenced the creation of *Evelina*, which is a novel about finding a husband, among other things. While it is a relatively conventional novel, complete with a happy ending, Burney nevertheless presents a complicated view of a “young lady’s entrance into the world,” and what that entails. It is initially complicated by Evelina herself, being born a bastard and without any inheritance. Her social standing is far from that of a character like Elizabeth Bennet and while she has friends in high places such as the Mirvans who can serve as her guides into polite society, her future in terms of finding a suitable marriage partner is on shaky grounds for most of the novel.

But a more nuanced complication of the notion of “the entrance into the world” exists in how Burney presents an argument for what a suitable education for such an entrance entails for a young lady. Like Fielding before her, Burney brings up the question of the effectiveness of a proper education on a young woman as well as going so far as to question what that education should actually entail. What she believes is necessary knowledge for a young woman’s survival in the world differs from the views of more mainstream male philosophers and social commentators of the time period. Kristina Straub comments on this distinction in the introduction to the supplementary texts in the Bedford Cultural Edition of *Evelina*. She writes,

*Evelina* is both a contribution to the genre of texts designed for the education of young, middle-class women and not-uncritical commentary on how that education was often conceived in Burney’s culture. *Evelina* both models the process by which the young lady should enter into the world and is critical of how the young lady is generally educated in order to negotiate this risky period in her life (*Evelina* 442).

Male commentators included Thomas Gisbourne and James Fordyce who argued in favor of naiveté in young ladies, but not too much so that they can be easily led astray. Gisbourne

highlights the paradoxical nature of a “proper education” in his work, *On the Mode of Introducing Young Women into General Society*. He points out that too little education on the ways of the world can lead naive women down bad paths in life. But on the other hand, he also argues that too much education for a woman can corrupt her moral character. He writes,

...to accustom the mind by degrees to the trials which it must learn to withstand yet to shelter it from insidious temptations, while it is unable to discern and to shun the snare, is the first rule which wisdom suggests with regard to all trials and temptations whatever. To this rule too much attention cannot be paid in the mode of introducing a young woman into the common habits of social intercourse.  
(*Evelina* 459)

But Burney argues in *Evelina* that the innocence or rather ignorance in a young lady apart from the fact that it can more easily lead her into danger, has negative effects on her social well-being. Throughout the novel, Evelina is crippled socially both by her inexperience and lack of confidence. She does not know how to dance or flirt or how to graciously decline the advances of an unwanted man. She is caught up in several hasty lies that escalate to dramatic proportions, causing her to feel completely “mortified.” Her only asset is her internal strength and fortitude. While outwardly shy, demure, and very often awkward, Evelina proves herself to be a strong heroic character at times when it matters most. In a dramatic struggle she successfully thwarts the attempted suicide of Mr. McCartney, the same man who is later revealed to be her half-brother, “In a moment, strength and courage seemed lent me as by inspiration: I started, and rushing precipitately into the room, just caught his arm” (*Evelina* 222). In an unusual display of bravery she is able to wrestle the pistol away from the deranged gunman.

In fact, Evelina’s actions during her strongest moments are not the result of her proper social education but rather pure survival tactics born out of living in a world that she knows is

unsafe for someone like her, a fatherless daughter. How she appears to the outside world, particularly in the eyes of Lord Orville, changes during the course of the novel. At the beginning, Lord Orville says to Sir Clement that he sees Evelina as a “poor, weak girl.” But towards the end of the novel, in a conversation between the same two men overheard by Evelina’s ally Mrs. Selwyn, he confesses that his initial impression of Evelina was wrong and that she has proved herself to be quite a strong and intelligent young woman:

It is very true...that I did not, at our first acquaintance, do justice to the merit of Miss Anville; but I knew not, then, how new she was to the world; at present, however, I am convinced, that whatever might appear strange in her behaviour, was simply the effect of inexperience, timidity, and a retired education, for I find her informed, sensible, and intelligent. (*Evelina* 379)

She proves herself to be much more complex than she appears on the surface. In the end, Lord Orville and the reader are able to see past Evelina’s mishaps as merely the product of inexperience and naiveté. In the end, it is her in-born qualities, her strong morality, her restraint in the face of temptation by other men, and her intelligence that win her the heart of her dream man. In short, Evelina grows up as she enters into the world for the first time. But she grows up in spite of her circumstances and her “proper” education rather than because of them. Her true education comes from experience, learning from her mistakes, and all the while staying true to her internal sense of morality.

It is clear that with *Evelina*, Burney has created a strong heroine with a sense of morality that will not lead her down the path of wrong-doing, if she can help it. Her well being lies not in her own choices but in the fate that society decides for her. Straub points out this distinction, which sets Burney’s *Evelina* apart from other social commentary: “Unlike *Gisbourne*, who worries about young ladies’ failures of judgment, Burney is concerned that others will force her

into a course of life that she knows is antithetical to her well-being. Danger lies in society's rules, not the young lady's intellectual and moral capacity" (*Evelina* 440). I would argue that apart from the instances in *Evelina* when the heroine is in outright danger, she seems to be in some sort of social danger every time she steps out of the house. Her strongest emotional reactions do not occur when physical danger is near. Her reactions to the physical dangers of Sir Clement and others are less bodily than her social mortifications, though both types of violence have the same genesis and misogynistic undertones. The moments when she "dies of embarrassment" from the cruel words of the foppish Mr. Lovel provoke a much greater bodily reaction than her responses to Sir Clement's more physically aggressive advances,

I could almost have cried, that such impertinence should be leveled at me...from the resentment which Mr. Lovel harbors of my conduct, that he would think it a provocation sufficiently important for a duel, if his courage equaled his wrath. I am terrified at the very idea. Good Heaven! that a man so weak and frivolous should be so revengeful! (*Evelina* 128-129)

Luckily for *Evelina*, the man she fears most is the biggest coward of them all. It may be Mr. Lovel's cowardice and weak character, which make him the most vengeful towards *Evelina* who is so pure and well liked in comparison to him.

Throughout the novel, *Evelina*'s innocence is at once her greatest asset and at the same time at the greatest risk of being taken away from her. Mr. Villars' letters to *Evelina* reinforce the importance of innocence and its precarious nature in *Evelina*'s life. Throughout the novel, Mr. Villars' letters act as an outside voice of reason and reassurance to the heroine. After he has heard about every thing that has happened with Lord Orville, Sir Clement, and *Evelina*'s various other suitors, he writes a letter reminding her of the delicate nature of a young woman's virtue and reputation during that time:

Alas, my child! —that innocence, the first, best gift of Heaven, should, of all others, be the blindest to its own danger, --the most exposed to treachery, --and the least able to defend itself, in a world where it is little known, less valued, and perpetually deceived! (*Evelina* 342)

Evelina is fortunate for the advice and wisdom Mr. Villars is able to provide her throughout the novel. However, the question of whether or not she would be better with a “proper” education remains unanswered by the end of the novel. Although Burney does not outwardly raise the issue of education, it is certainly hinted at and complicated throughout the course of the novel. By naming it *Evelina: A Young Lady’s Entrance into the World*, Burney is focusing specifically on the societal practice of coming out and all of the experiences that come along with it.

### *Fantomina*: Gender and Social Mobility through Physical Masquerade

Another “coming out” story by a predecessor to Burney is *Fantomina*. A novella by Eliza Haywood, *Fantomina*, is an excellent example of the daring work of a female author that came before the publication of *Evelina*. Works like this were essentially able to pave the way in the publishing world for women writers, like Burney, who came after. Nevertheless, the path itself to publication was still very perilous in Burney's time. This is especially true when we consider the fact that an "authoress" was often equated with an "actress," which consequently was also synonymous with even more dishonorable professions such as “prostitute.”

Overall, *Fantomina or Love in a Maze* is a short, strange story. Published in 1725, it is really more of a proto-novel, more akin to *Oroonoko* than *Tom Jones* both in style and length. It is certainly much less "modern" than *Evelina*. The story itself, of a bored and under supervised noblewoman who disguises herself multiple times in order to gain intimate access to the

nobleman she is attracted to, is utterly fantastical. And it is fully aware of its lack of believability. The narrator herself responds directly to the assumed concerns raised by the reader about how it is impossible that her lover would fail to recognize Fantomina under her various disguises, especially given the fact that they sleep together multiple times. She writes, "In answer to these Scruples, I can only say, that besides the Alteration which the Change of Dress made in her, she was so admirably skill'd in the Art of feigning that she had the Power of putting on almost what Face she pleas'd" (Haywood 8). So what we have is a story that exists not to be realistic or even rational but rather something much more interesting than both of those things.

Like Haywood, Burney is also aware of the fact that the story she is telling is not necessarily "drawn from life." Instead, in the preface to *Evelina*, Burney insists that the story is drawn from "nature" rather than any actual source from real-life:

To draw characters from nature, though not from life, and to mark the manners of the times, is the attempted plan of the following letters... Let me, therefore, prepare for disappointment those who, in the perusal of these sheets, entertain the gentle expectation of being transported to the fantastic regions of Romance, where fiction is coloured by all the gay tints of luxurious Imagination. (*Evelina* 55-56)

And by "drawn from nature," Burney most likely means something very similar to what Samuel Johnson calls "general nature" in his preface to the works of William Shakespeare. Johnson argues that,

Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature... the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpracticed by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. (Johnson 61-62)



So for Burney, the world created by the Romantic imagination is gay and fantastical at its essence. But she is openly rejecting that model in her preface. The world that she has created in *Evelina* is on the whole a more realistic novel than works such as *The Female Husband*. It is “drawn from nature, but not from life.” It is merely inspired by the real world rather than a direct copy of it. Its characters, like the characters in Shakespeare are not based on individuals (as in her diaries) but rather the “progeny of common humanity,” in the words of Johnson. *Evelina* is realistic in the sense that it does not shy away from certain harsh realities of the time period rather than being a novel that falls under the movement of “Literary realism,” which came much later.

Contrary to what scholars have previously critiqued Burney for (mainly accusing her of being a sort of “18<sup>th</sup> century camera obscura or tape recorder,” as Doody points out) she is not in fact simply transcribing life. If a reader wanted to see her real transcriptions of life, he would only have to look as far as her letters. And even there lie embellishments and reworkings and reimaginings of conversations and events. She edited her letters not only while she was writing them in the act of self-censorship that we all practice to some extent but also towards the end of her life when she was well aware that they would be preserved for posterity. The last ten years of her life were spent editing her journals and letters, taking out areas of the text that reflected badly on herself and other family members as well as smoothing out the grammatical and stylistic errors of her youthful writing. Burney left her letters specifically to her niece, Charlotte Barrett. Along with the first editor Henry Colburn, Charlotte made even further edits to the journals and letters. Current editions attempt to undo the work of posthumous changes and to return the letters to as close to their original state as possible. Returning to the actual act of writing, it is also important to remember that memory itself is also grossly inaccurate and Burney's ability to add

to it and to mold her own experiences as well as imagined scenarios proves her abilities as a strong writer.

Like *Evelina*, *Fantomina* is a marriage plot. Although both works contain many strange events, they all culminate in an eventual marriage. *Fantomina* even has some letters, although they are strictly love letters and are made to resemble extremely private notes that would pass between lovers and not be seen by anyone else, adding a touch of scandal to the novella. But what these two stories share primarily is their strangeness and the way they reveal the macabre rather than try to cover it up. What is also notable is that they both do this act of revealing through a gendered lens.

Gender dynamics are key to both stories. *Fantomina* is a tale motivated by heterosexual female desire. The female protagonist is driven to extreme lengths in order to pursue the man she wants to be with, the dashing rake aptly called *Beauplaisir*. *Evelina* also experiences strong desires. While she occasionally reveals her interior wants through blushing in the presence of her own beau, Lord Orville, she does a better job than *Fantomina* of internalizing her feelings. She does not act upon her desires as boldly, except for when it matters most. One powerful example occurs when she finally summons the courage to stand up to Sir Clement's advances, telling him once and for all that she is not and never will be interested in becoming his mistress, "'Suffer me, Sir,' said I, very gravely, 'to make use of this occasion to put a final conclusion to such expressions. I entreat you never again to address me in a language so flighty, and so unwelcome'" (*Evelina* 377). It is admirable that *Evelina* is able to say no so definitively to Sir Clement's advances even when Lord Orville's intentions towards her remain unclear at that point in the novel. In this way, Burney gives her heroine the same courage to wait for an ideal life partner, an idea that she valued in her own life.

In sum, both stories focus on female desire and female fearlessness and the problems it can cause for a woman in that particular society. While Evelina is essentially born into a social predicament and being fatherless has a profound affect on her story, Fantomina makes her own predicament. The narrator tells us,

She had Discernment to foresee, and avoid all those Ills which might attend the Loss of her *Reputation*, but was wholly blind to those of the Ruin of her *Virtue*...the more she reflected on the Merits of *Beauplaisir*, the more she excused herself for what she had done. (Haywood 5)

In the mind of this heroine, the pleasure that she gets from being able to gain such unprecedented access to her love interest far outweighs the moral consequences of her actions, which she thinks she can successfully shield herself from with her many disguises.

Fantomina's ability to disguise herself as anyone, allowing her to permeate different levels of society is a skill that Evelina possesses only implicitly and not literally. While Evelina is not able to make physical changes to her appearance, her lack of a surname gives her considerable access to certain areas of life and even certain sectors of London that would not be experienced by someone with a more solidified place in the social hierarchy. In a letter to her friend Maria, we get a clear sense of how Evelina's situation allows her to pass through many different layers of society. We can also see how this is something that she is not entirely appreciative of,

O Maria, London now seems no longer the same place where I lately enjoyed so much happiness: everything is new and strange to me; even the town itself has not the same aspect: -- my situation so altered! my home so different! -- my companions so changed! -- But you well know my averseness to this journey (*Evelina* 213).

Being raised a bastard and knowing that her place in society was precarious at best, Evelina appreciates the kindness and manners of the company who receives her. She also explicitly links

this kindness with manners and these manners with class, looking down upon the unsophisticated behavior and lack of decorum shown in public by her relatives, the Branghtons. Evelina is never appreciative of the gift that Burney gives her, perhaps because all she really wants is to belong to a true household and to have a proper last name.

In contrast, Fantomina already has a last name and a title and presumably only lacks proper supervision. She seizes upon her ability to disguise herself perfectly in order to seduce *Beauplaisir*, posing as several different women. In this way, Haywood bestows upon her protagonist a gift that borders on the edge of being an almost supernatural power. Fantomina is able to play many different women from different walks of life. Her ability to shape shift, to act as a kind of social chameleon, and pass like a ghost through the walls that divide social classes is similar to the haunting power of the Burney's protagonist in *The Wanderer* who washes up on the shores of England coming from France and is completely unidentifiable. As Doody points out, the heroine from *The Wanderer* is representative of "a nameless Everywoman." In all of these cases, the anonymity of these characters (be it by choice or birth) gives them this remarkable power. It also provides them with the agency to move through the world in ways that would otherwise not have been very possible for their sex during that time period.

It is significant that Haywood chooses to give her heroine a great deal of agency in this novella. Fantomina is able to completely transform herself at her whim and use her sexuality liberally to fulfill her own desires. By creating a story with a plot that is driven significantly by female desire, Haywood is following in the footsteps of previous female authors like Aphra Behn who chose to focus on a side of human sexuality that was acknowledged but often feared by society. In her play *The Rover*, Behn writes female desire into all three of the principal female characters. All of these characters defy the rules of their patriarchal household in some way to

pursue sex freely. One of the women, Helena even admits that she commends her sister for her plan to disobey her father's wishes that she marry the man whom he chooses. She exclaims, "Now hang me, if I don't love thee for that dear disobedience. I love mischief strangely, as do most of our sex who are come to love nothing else" (Behn 1.1. 26-28).

One can easily argue that Fantomina harbors a strange love of mischief and disobedience as well. Even Evelina, while she is a model of restraint in her outward actions, does nevertheless lie and manipulate situations to serve her own interests. Often these situations backfire and she ends up more embarrassed than ever. Nevertheless, it is clear that Haywood and Burney give both characters agency to some extent to pursue the men that they are interested in. That being said, when we consider something like agency, especially when it is given to a woman, it is important to remember that in any society agency or freedom occur only because of special circumstances caused by disruptions to the status quo. In this case, the disguises, both internal and external, cause the disruptions. In her article "Critically Queer," Judith Butler argues that "What we might call 'agency' or 'freedom' or 'possibility' is always a specific political prerogative that is produced by the gaps opened up in regulatory norms" (22). In the case of these two works, the "gaps that are opened up" to produce these changes in normalcy are the circumstances of the two heroines that Haywood and Burney create. Therefore, by giving Fantomina this superhuman gift of masquerade and by providing Evelina with the circumstances of an unusual birth, both authors are able to produce novels that reveal an unexpected side of society, one that defies social norms especially surrounding gender. While she is eventually punished for her digressions by becoming pregnant, Fantomina's curiosity and the "vast deal of Pleasure" she experiences from choosing to fly in the face of social conventions by

impersonating a prostitute (as well as several other types of women) are significant progressions in feminist thought in this early 18th-century story.

With the unprecedented access given to its two heroines, both *Evelina* and *Fantomina* could be called proto-feminist novels, meaning that they have feminist sympathies that predate the actual theory that could be used to support them. Immense social changes occurred during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that had wide-ranging consequences for the place of women in society. It is therefore to be expected that these great shifts would influence the production of proto-feminist literature, even though it was a long slow process. In that same proto-feminist vein, these novels also generally present unfavorable view of men.

*Fantomina*'s one antagonist is actually *Beauplaisir*, who also happens to be male and the central object of desire. In the novella he writes two letters, one to each of *Fantomina*'s different personas and proves himself to be just as deceitful as the heroine herself. But the story puts an interesting spin on the classic tale of the deceitful man. When *Beauplaisir* blatantly lies in his letter about why he cannot meet *Fantomina* the next day, she calls him a "Traytor!" (Haywood 10). When he writes to the character her saying "I fear I cannot see you till To-morrow; some Business has unluckily fallen out that will engross my Hours till then" she knows that he is lying precisely because he has agreed to meet with her other persona, Mrs. Bloomer, that day and is blatantly choosing one woman over the other (Haywood 10).

The fact that *Beauplaisir* has chosen one lover and forsaken the other puts *Fantomina* in an interesting position. She has been both rejected and propositioned by the same man and therefore feels simultaneously betrayed and gratified by his affections. But the emotion that trumps these two is the feeling of success and accomplishment at having outsmarted "the Unaccountableness of Men's Fancies, who still prefer the last Conquest, only because it was the

last” (Haywood 10). Indeed, the narrator makes it perfectly clear that *Beauplaisir* only chooses Mrs. Bloomer over Fantomina because she was the last woman he seduced. The heroine wonders how other women can possibly survive with the inconsistency of male desire, which she describes as a type of hellish “Horror of Despair,” and pats herself on the back for having figured out how to effectively play the game to get what she wants: “But I have outwitted even the most Subtle of the deceiving Kind, and while he thinks to fool me, is himself the only beguiled Person” (10).

*Beauplaisir* is the only developed male character in the novella but the narrator does allude subtly to the members of the male sex that populate the background of Fantomina’s world. Despite his faults, he is still painted as being quite a bit better than most, “This, indeed, must be said of *Beauplaisir*, that he had a greater Share of good Nature than most of his Sex, who, for the most part, when they are weary of an Intrigue, break it entirely off, without any Regard to the Despair of the abandon’d Nymph” (Haywood 10). In this way, *Beauplaisir* is not too different from Evelina’s Lord Orville, a male character who is “better than most” especially when he is compared to the other male characters of his respective novel, but still flawed. Both *Beauplaisir* and Lord Orville wound their lovers in some way. Therefore, both works take a less than favorable view of men: both in their descriptions of the sex in general and because the two “heroes” or saviors of the story are found lacking.

The men in *Fantomina* apart from *Beauplaisir* are not favorably described at all. At the beginning of the novel the narrator admits that this “Stranger to the World” is surprised to discover “that Men, some of whom she knew were accounted to have Wit, should have tastes so very Depraved” (Haywood 2). In sum, the men of Fantomina’s world are depraved and the women are unfulfilled. Burney does not write favorably of the male sex either. Burney’s male

characters in *Evelina* are all antagonistic in some way or another. The heart of their antagonistic qualities, for the most part, is directed towards the female characters in the novel, especially Evelina and Madame Duval. No surprisingly, men inflict almost all of the outward physical and emotional violence that the female characters experience.

Perhaps the most disturbingly brutal scene of violence enacted towards women is the foot-race that Lord Merton organizes between two poor elderly women in order to settle a bet with Mr. Coverley. Doody sees this particular scene as an allegory for the “fall” of women: “This scene is Frances Burney’s version of the fall of woman, of woman’s well-known tendency to make a slip. The author here retorts upon men who so often remind woman of her weakness and grin maliciously over her falling” (Doody 56). The scene depicts the old women physically falling down but also has socioeconomic and gender implications. The women being both old and poor are completely at the mercy of a wealthy man like Captain Mirvan and therefore cannot refuse participating in the race. What is perhaps most disturbing, however, is the fact that no one except Evelina seems to see any problem with the spectacle. Lord Orville disapproves of it, but only because of the fact that gambling is involved. Overall, it is one of the stranger scenes from *Evelina*, one that is left completely unexplored by the author. Instead, it is one of those incredibly disturbing scenes that are merely slipped in subtly between main acts in the novel, unaddressed but probably unforgettable in the eyes of the reader. It is also a scene, which highlights the connection between social standing and violence, meaning that the women by virtue of their low socioeconomic status are more vulnerable experience violence by way of physical pain and emotional humiliation at the hands of Captain Mirvan.

While the old women are not avenged for the cruelty they experience at the hands of Captain Mirvan and company, the novel’s greatest antagonist Mr. Lovel is rightly punished for



his treatment of Evelina at the end of the story. He is, in fact, the only male character in the plot that experiences the same level of social mortification as Evelina. Doody comments on the significance of the scene where Mr. Lovel is violently humiliated socially, “This is the only such violent scene in *Evelina* where the object is male, and the only one of such scenes in which the victim must be felt to deserve his fate” (Doody 65). The moment when Captain Mirvan punishes Lovel echoes certain aspects of his earlier attack on Madame Duval. Mr. Lovel’s outward appearance deteriorates into the same disheveledness witnessed earlier with Madame Duval. Essentially, both characters’ careful and elaborate costuming becomes unraveled and undone: “Mr. Lovel was now a dreadful object; his face was besmeared with tears, the blood from his ear ran trickling down his clothes, and he sunk upon the floor, crying out, ‘Oh I shall die, I shall die! --Oh I’m bit to death!’” (*Evelina* 432). In both of these scenes of violence, two characters that serve primarily as comic figures in the novel are reduced to the level of tragic objects. Their usual over-the-top finery is notably disheveled and they both succumb to their strong emotions, dying a mini-social death. This physical dishevelment is the result of a social disruption. The clothes and make-up that Mr. Lovel and Madame Duval don are representative of a social status quo, a bourgeois normalcy kept up by outward appearances. Consequently the violent act of tearing those physical adornments apart and revealing the characters for who they really are represents an extreme disruption in social convention. They also prove that social violence and physical violence are really one in the same, meaning that they both come from the same cruel sentiment and have the same effect on the body.

**Conclusion: At the intersection of Violence and Social Masquerade**

As we can see from the differences in *The Female Husband*, *Fantomina* and *Evelina*, the novel developed as a literary form over the course of the long 18th century. It progressively became a more complex genre as new authors wrote works that built on the techniques and styles of previous works. There are many different aspects of narrative where this progression is apparent. A perfect example of building character development, specifically the shift from exterior to interior character change and growth, is the Fielding, Haywood, to Burney trajectory described in this paper. We begin with *Fantomina* followed closely by *The Female Husband*, which represent two novellas in which the characters only change outwardly through physical disguise. The physical disguises they put on allow them to move freely through the world, adding social depth to the story but maintaining a less sophisticated arc of character development. The disguises are only surface alterations, reminiscent of the theater, and no narrative space is given to developing the interior character.

*Evelina* is also able to move up and down the social ladder during the narrative, but does not employ physical disguise and masquerade in doing it. Rather, she passes through different layers of society vis-à-vis her indeterminate social standing. This mirrors to some extent Burney's own semi-indeterminate social standing, which derived from being a female author celebrated from a relatively young age, and ending up as the wife of a French émigré. And while interior character development is hinted at in the novel (the epistolary form and the first person narrative it employs are the primary reasons for this), novelist who came after Burney would further develop the notion of interiority. One of the best examples of a later novel in which interior progression outweighs social and physical progression is Jane Austen's *Emma*. In which attention rests more on interior progression than on physical appearance. Unlike *Evelina*, *Emma* Woodhouse does have a fixed social standing and experiences a relatively narrower slice of

society in England. But the true drama of the novel lies in her interior character development and in realizing that she is in love with Mr. Knightly. Emma's interior development is more complex and psychological, and therefore further developed than Evelina's exterior character development.

But while Emma's character building is much more complex than Evelina's, it is important to acknowledge the geographic and social complexity that Burney highlights in *Evelina*. In particular, I wish to note the presence of violence, particularly violence against women and an interest in an all-together more macabre side of life during that time period. It is also interesting to consider the element of mobility through social or physical masquerade in the context of physical and social violence. In these works, violence occurs often when the "mask" that a character wears to maintain her social standing is disrupted by her own social mobility. In the case of Evelina's run in with the prostitutes, the "mask" that she is wearing in order to travel in the same social circles as people like the Mirvans, Lord Orville, and Sir Clement is disrupted when she loses her party and is left to the mercy of the crowd in the pleasure garden. In this case, the mobility afforded Evelina is both a blessing and a curse. It allows her access to a wider swath of the social spectrum but at the same time leaves her more vulnerable to the risk of the types of violent situations that can and do occur when one ventures out into the crowd. Because of this, I would argue that violence and the disguise go hand in hand to some extent in all of these works.

Violent scenes are coupled with the act of revealing someone for who they truly are. Madame Duvall "mask" of make-up and wig are smeared and torn off when she is attacked. During the altercation at Dunkirk, Burney herself comes dangerously close to being found out as an Englishwoman who is attempting to flee Napoleonic France. Perhaps most dramatically, Burke describes how Marie Antoinette flees, stripped of almost all of her clothes, from

Versailles. He describes how “A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with [her guard’s blood], rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced with a hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards, the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked” (Burke 99). She and her family were then forced to abandon the sanctuary of the most splendid palace in the world, which they left “swimming in blood, polluted by massacre, and strewed with scattered limbs and mutilated carcasses” (Burke 99). Thus, even the violence enacted against Marie Antoinette involved a sort of “unmasking.” Only in this particular case, the unmasking was more akin to disrobing, which is perhaps more physical and a more extreme act in itself than anything Burney or Evelina ever experienced. It also recalls the violence of the French Revolution, which Burney addressed in her personal letters. In the case of Marie Antoinette, the violence enacted against her in Burke’s scene is regrettable to him because he sees it as an act of making royalty ordinary. But when Marie Antoinette is stripped of her clothing she is also momentarily freed from the trappings of her royalty and privilege and is revealed to be no longer a queen, but simply a woman. But Burney, like Burke, sees the tragedy in losing one’s clothes and the social status (and protection) that they come with. Like Burke she does not recognize the potentially freeing nature that losing one’s clothing can also provide. This may be an overstatement but the connection between social masquerade and social violence is hidden in these physical and metaphorical acts of “disrobing” and is therefore worth examining further.

I would argue that works such as *The Female Husband*, *Evelina* and *Fantomina* tell daring stories that simultaneously reveal and examine largely hidden aspects of life and human nature. While Fielding’s narrator condemns “our carnal appetites,” by writing a story about a transvestite, he still draws attention to the actions that people are capable of when they let their inner desires take over. But apart from the fact that it makes for an entertaining story, is there

another agenda behind choosing to write about this stranger side of things, a side that is sometimes far less realistic than anything that could ever actually happen? In asking why Frances Burney specifically does this, why she brings *that side* of life into her writing when other authors, especially female authors, do not, it is important to think beyond differences in personal style. Frances Burney was a prolific writer throughout her long life and was someone who obviously enjoyed the act of writing immensely. In fact, she enjoyed it so much that she even felt guilty about it, as I have stated previously. But, she was also a woman who moved about considerably over the course of her life, both geographically and socially. Many critics view her as a woman who led a generally uneventful life that was punctuated by several moments of excitement, such as her famous mastectomy. But I would argue that she lived a very full, eventful and *unusual* life for the time period and even for any time period. She achieved fame for her first novel relatively early in life and was cast into instant celebrity. She refused marriage and took a position at the royal court. And she eventually married a French émigré and moved with him to his native land, which at the time was a country that had just gone through its own “Reign of Terror” and was in the process of transitioning politically to Napoleonic rule.

Perhaps it was the nature of the times, perhaps it was her experience, or perhaps it was a combination of the two that made her writing so revealing. It may also be the “freedom of expression” that was encouraged during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in contrast to the stricter morality that characterized the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Victorian era in particular. Burney actually witnessed the beginning of Victoria’s reign during her final years. She even criticizes the young Queen’s decision to exile one of her ladies in waiting, Lady Flora Hastings, for a presumed pregnancy that was never confirmed by the physician who examined her. It was later revealed that Lady Flora was suffering from a liver complication. Burney pities the young queen for being duped by

“a mere unweighted impulse of *Virtue*” and its influence over her “hasty order of exile” (*Journals and Letters* 564-565). All of this was written in her final surviving letter. A true testament to the “changing of the times” and the fact that era in which she had served at court truly had passed. In this case, the era that was ending was the long 18<sup>th</sup> century to which Burney belonged as a literary figure.

The licentiousness and relative openness of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is so baffling to many people today because of the fact that we so often think of those who lived during that time period as having the same “stuffy” morals as the Victorians. We make the mistake of assuming that societal norms before the 20<sup>th</sup> century were a lot more oppressive in their rules and regulations than they are now. And while things were a lot more properly done “back then” and more people have more personal freedoms now, characters like Frances Burney allow us to look beyond our preconceptions of times past. Her depictions of violence and more generally of this *other side* of life that is not often remembered allows the modern reader to gain some insight into how much things have changed but also how they may not have changed as much as we would like to believe. Meaning, that this world, our world is really not *that* different in essence from Burney’s and on the flip side that in her world (the elusive and sometimes mysterious period of the late-18<sup>th</sup> century) violence is just as violent and violence against women existed, as it still exists. Wars were fought and people lived in scary times of uncertainty, just as they do now. In sum, the world was just as wild as it ever was and ever would be, both then and now.

### Personal Coda: Frozen Fingers on the TA Bridge

I set out to write this paper about France Burney’s *Evelina* with no idea of where it would take me. Reading the novel, I was surprised at how candidly she wrote about violence, specifically against women. I was also struck by *Evelina*’s power to move about London with

such surprising ease simply by virtue of the fact that she was essentially fatherless and without any familial protection other than that of the aging and distant Mr. Villars. Additionally, only by reading *Fantomina* and *The Female Husband* was I able to fully understand the strange and unexpected connection that exists between social violence and social masquerade.

The implications of this connection and what it meant about the nature of violence, mainly the fact that all violence enacted by human beings against other human beings is in some way social violence, haunted me during the entire revision process. I wondered if I had somehow reached too far (even for an English paper) with my argument and if I would ever be able to effectively articulate what I was trying to say. There was also the fact that I didn't fully *know* what I wanted my culminating argument to be. Then, one night in mid-April I was struck by an idea of how to connect them. I stopped directly on the TA Bridge and although I was two minutes away from my front door and my fingers were freezing, I quickly typed what I had been thinking into the notes section of my phone. It wasn't much, but it provided me with an argument that would connect my two main observations. My fingers ended up getting so numb that it was difficult to finish typing but I ended up figuring out (in my mind) how masquerade and violence are actually connected and how *Evelina* reveals it.

I wrote that we all to some extent live in the world of "the gaze." And those of us who live most successfully in that world are also the best social chameleons. *Evelina* is an excellent example of someone who is good social chameleon, someone whose unclear social standing affords her a great deal of social ingenuity. However, this talent of social masquerade also comes with a price because those people who are the best at disguise or adaptation also run the risk of being "discovered" or "disrobed." When this social disruption does happen, it can be devastating because the entire system that they have mastered has been essentially ripped away. They are

also the ones who have the greatest potential to feel that violence of the disruption by virtue of their unclear place in society. And it is the people in society who have the strongest internal "armor" that feel this disruption the most acutely. And those people are usually, for a number of reasons, women. A perfect example of this is the fact that it takes actual physical violence to take down Madame Duval, whereas Mr. Lovel completely disintegrates from the violence of words alone.

This may be an overstatement but I like to treat novels (and literature in general) as a kind of window into another world, a world that is "drawn from nature rather from life" and which can reveal unexpected truths about another side of life.



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