

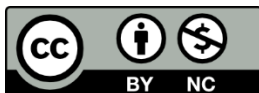
E-Burney, Green Burney, and Public(an) Burney: the “Quiet Spectator” on a London Wall

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E-Burney, Green Burney, and Public(an) Burney: The “Quiet Spectator” on a London Wall

FRANCESCA SAGGINI

ABSTRACT: The two famous portraits of Frances Burney, painted by her cousin Edward Francisco Burney in the 1780s, are recontextualized in light of the author’s discovery in 2021 of a mural inspired by the portraits, painted by the art duo id-iom in a pub in the Streatham area of southwest London. The article uses material heuristics to address the transmodalization of celebrity culture and sociability in a contemporary pop artwork. The article is accompanied by an interview with id-iom.

During 2020, I contacted Surrey History Centre to organize research activities related to the places in Surrey where Frances Burney lived in the 1790s, the truly remarkable decade in which Burney worked at her historical plays. Because of the lockdowns that affected all of Europe at the time, communication with Surrey History Centre took place mostly online and involved Julian Pooley, Public Services and Engagement Manager at the Centre. Out of my frequent conversations with Julian there came the idea of establishing a more lasting collaboration between local researchers, cultural stakeholders, and interested non-academic parties and my European Research Executive Agency (REA)-financed project at the University of Edinburgh, titled *Opening Romanticism: Reimagining Romantic Drama for New Audiences*.¹ One of the events I proposed to cement my partnership with Surrey History Centre was a series of public-facing talks based at Leatherhead Library, the first of which I called “The Press in the Garden: Rediscovering Frances Burney's Surrey.” My talk would coincide with the launch of a Burney-related photography competition, possibly using such everyday personal devices as smart phones. The aim was to encourage the local community – both adults and school-aged children – to connect with Frances Burney and the places she had lived in the area, and to raise the public’s awareness and generate personal engagement with them, along the lines of the integrated approach known as citizen science, one of the pillars of Horizon2020 (European Commission). When my suggestion for collaboration was heartily taken up (and I am still very

grateful for this), Julian asked me, “It would also be nice to include a portrait of Frances [Burney], so again, is there one that was taken at around the time she was associated with Surrey, and will it be OK to use it?”

Apart from a few artefacts of still doubtful attribution, including the miniature portrait by John Bogle, which claims the greatest credit for authenticity, the only known genuine likenesses of Frances Burney are the two oils painted by her cousin, the renowned artist Edward Francis or Edward Francisco Burney (1760-1848). They are held, respectively, in the private collection at Parham Park, West Sussex, and the National Portrait Gallery in London, the institutional place *par excellence* to celebrate artists and notables on canvas and in photo.

The first of Edward Francisco's two portraits was most likely painted in August 1782, only a month after *Cecilia's* publication. Ladies' fashion provides a name for this portrait, called the “Van Dyck portrait” because of the type of gown worn by Frances, commonly known as a vandyke dress (**Fig. 1**).

Burney's diaries concisely recount how the sitting came about, emphasizing on the one hand the familial commission and future limited circulation of the artwork, and on the other the unease felt by the apparently unwilling sitter, Frances Burney: “The instant dinner was over,” she writes, “to my utter surprise and consternation, I was called into the room appropriated for Edward and his pictures, and informed that I was to sit to him for Mr Crisp!”

Remonstrances were unavailing, and declarations of aversion to the design were only ridiculed; both daddies [Charles Burney and Samuel Crisp] interfered, and when I ran off, brought me back between them and compelled my obedience. (Burney, *Diary*, 2: 120)

Here, Burney's somewhat overemphasized reluctance finds linguistic expression in the sequence of verbs in the passive form, and in the (slightly unlikely) description of the machination of which she is the helpless victim. The abhorrence for the picture-sitting imposed upon her, and her visible disinclination, turn into an almost comic ambush. It is, therefore, an apparently ironic twist that just a handful of months after her death on January 6, 1840, the so-called “Van Dyck portrait” was

reproduced as both stipple engravings and mezzotints in at least three different versions in the space of only a few months.² These images were used, in a position of obvious textual prominence, as the frontispiece of Volume 1 of the 7-volume *Diary and Letters* edited by Burney's niece, Charlotte Barrett in their first 1842 edition and in subsequent ones, too.



Fig. 1 Edward Francisco Burney, *Fanny Burney*, oil on canvas.

By kind permission of Parham House, West Sussex. © Parham Park Limited

The portrait of Frances Burney that most people are familiar with (therefore, the most suitable for the purposes of a public-facing event such as the one we were planning in Surrey) is the oil on canvas painted by Edward Francisco Burney, *circa* 1785 (**Fig. 2**). Though painted well before Burney's Surrey days, possibly building on the momentum of the international celebrity status she found with *Cecilia*, this likeness is by far the visual representation of Burney most familiar to a general audience, if only because it appears on the covers of many biographies and critical studies of her work

(Chisholm; Harman; Thaddeus).



Fig. 2 Edward Francis Burney, *Fanny Burney*, oil on canvas, NPG 2634.

© National Portrait Gallery, London.

At the time of my email conversation with Julian Pooley, little did I know that it would be possible to use that well-known portrait, held at the National Portrait Gallery in London, for free for non-commercial purposes. So, I decided to launch an image search on Creative Commons, an immense online repository that holds over six million items to reuse.³ I hoped to discover an image of Frances Burney which the Surrey audiences – both young and old – would be able to easily relate to and, with any luck, which some may also recognize. Never did I think that I was about to discover a portrayal of Frances Burney that was completely unknown to me (**Fig. 3**).

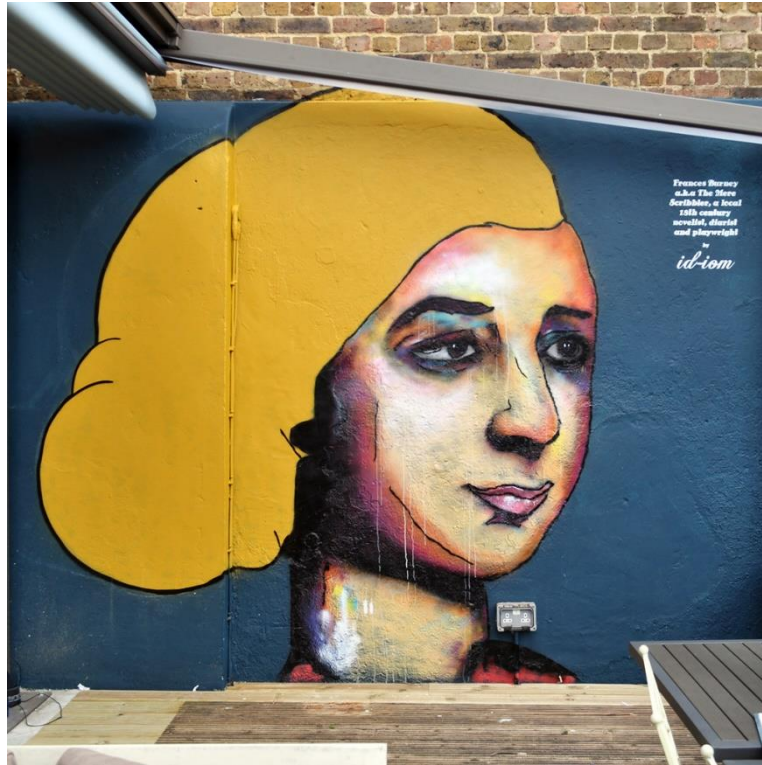


Fig. 3 *id-iom vs the mere scribbler* by id-iom, licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

There she was! My internet search brought, before my incredulous eyes, the spirit of Edward Francisco's two much-loved versions of Frances: her familiar intense look and half smile were unchanged, yet this time her still recognizable features had been given an appealing street vibe and were crowned, in the ultimate pop twist, with a striking mustard-yellow mane!

Once past the first surprise, I wanted to find out right away more about this eye-catching artwork and its authors, whom the credit line indicated as id-iom.⁴ Another mystery unfolded there as this name was not associated with any *habitués* of the Burney societies of which I am a member.

As my inquisitiveness grew, my research escalated across many online platforms. Luckily, my curiosity was to be quickly appeased. I discovered that the Burney mural had been painted in the beer garden of The Mere Scribbler, a pub facing directly on to Streatham Common in Streatham, a locality in SW London with strong ties to the Burneys.⁵ In the Summer of 1778, Frances had been introduced by her father, the musicologist and aspiring socialite Dr Charles Burney, into the circle of fine wits and famous artists regularly welcomed in the grand country home of the wealthy brewer Henry Thrale and his brilliant wife, Hester Lynch, at Streatham Park (otherwise known as Streatham Place).

There is no doubt that the multi-talented Hester was the powerhouse behind those trend-setting gatherings and the stimulating conversation they fostered. As mentioned by Margaret Anne Doody: “The success of Streatham as a center for informal gatherings and lively conversation was largely owing to the qualities of Hester Lynch Thrale ... Her home became a kind of salon, the party varying from day to day” (66-7; see also Clifford, II).

The cultural remediation of Hester Lynch Thrale's refined eighteenth-century salon into a busy pub in present-day London immediately struck me as unique, a deeply fascinating transformation, and the perfect instance of a transmedia remodeling on the collective scale. The warm and welcoming atmosphere of the Streatham public house is highlighted on the website by The Mere Scribbler's owners, pub group Livelyhood:

Our venues embrace the Livelyhood ethos of bringing unique, independent and inviting pubs to South London neighbourhoods, focusing on social spaces for eating and drinking at the front and entertainment areas with big screens for showing sport, hosting quiz nights and other events at the back, as well as outdoor space. (“Our Pubs”)

Without further ado and eager to find out more, I contacted the artists behind this extraordinary mural, whose symbolic value gradually grew on me as my research unfolded and our conversation flowed. What follows is an account, with commentary, of my epistolary exchanges and final interview on Teams with id-iom, a pseudonym behind which we find brothers Hugo and Sholto Brown, originally from the Isle of Man (and, indeed, the post-hyphen “-iom” in their name is an acronym harking back to their island origin).

My grateful thanks go to id-iom for the generosity with which they shared the mock-ups, later discarded, of their Streatham mural. Thanks also for allowing me to reuse the extraordinary *id-iom vs the mere scribbler* mural for the posters of my talks at Leatherhead Library, Surrey (**Fig. 4**), thus enabling me to connect – more than at the purely conceptual level – the past of those Surrey places, and their extraordinarily rich Burney associations, with the present time of my research. Where not otherwise

indicated, the following images must be all credited to id-iom.

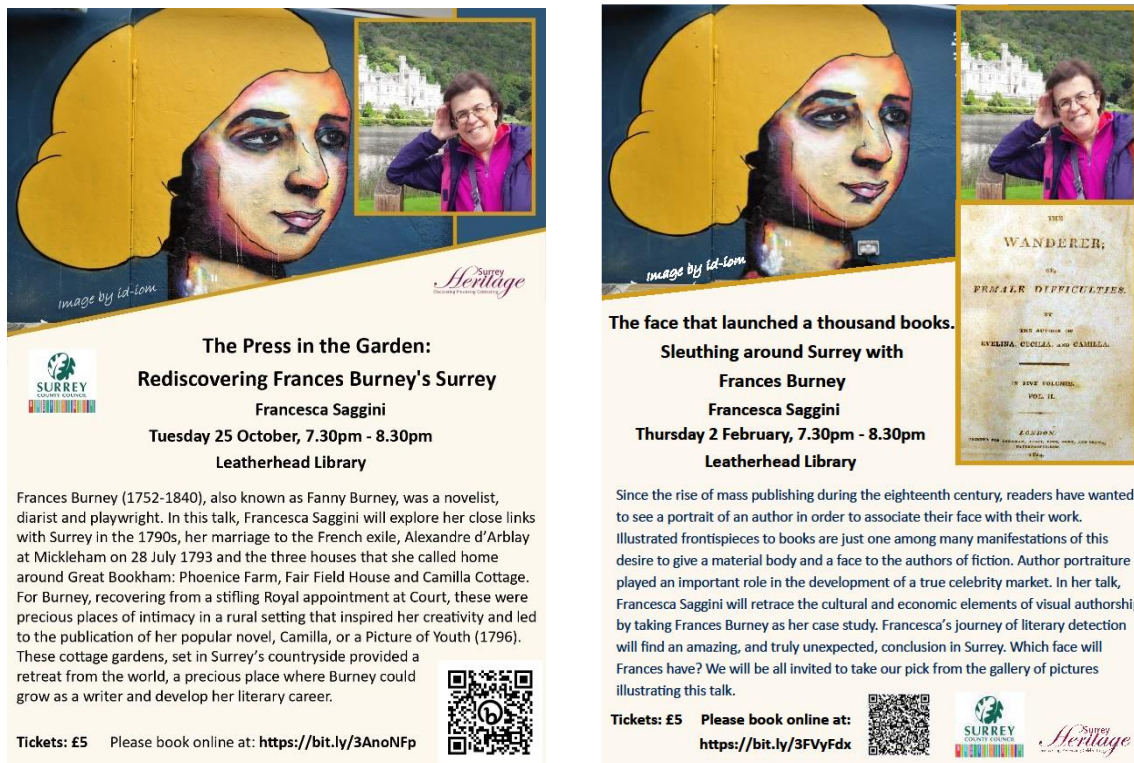


Fig. 4 Posters of my talks at Leatherhead Library, Surrey. © Leatherhead Library and Francesca Saggini

Interview with id-iom⁶

First, I introduced myself, my research on Frances Burney, and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions project on which I am Principal Investigator at the University of Edinburgh: *Opening Romanticism: Reimagining Romantic Drama for New Audiences*. We quickly moved on to the questions I had previously sent out to them. The strategy behind my interview was to understand how Frances Burney's autobiographical (Reynolds, 28; 30) *persona* can disseminate across non-expert audiences and how Frances Burney herself and her legacy are being appropriated by different artistic ecologies today. Hopefully, the interview would also help me figure out more about the concept of authorship as remediated across different art platforms and artistic languages. So, by way of a warmup, my first questions could only be as follows:

Q: Was I the first Burney scholar to ever get in touch with id-iom?

A: *Yes. Absolutely.*

Q: I take it you must have been surprised when I dropped you a line.

A: *Absolutely. We did that piece [id-iom vs the mere scribbler] a while ago. I cannot even remember when.*

Yes, you are the first one.

Q: Would you like to introduce yourselves?

A: *We're brothers Sholto and Hugo and we comprise the artist duo id-iom. We are originally from the Isle of Man but now living in London. Brixton to be precise – which is just down the road from The Mere Scribbler pub.*

Q: Describe your art for us. What do you guys do?

A: *That is a difficult one ... We pretty much do anything. Whatever the idea dictates we do. We are an artist duo using spray paint, stencils, paper and pretty much anything else we can lay our hands on to make contemporary art with a street and pop edge. We are multi-media artists, constantly entertained by the world around us. We take ideas from pop culture, music, books, and stuff that makes us laugh to create work that makes people smile. We love to experiment. We believe everyone has a tale to tell, and as you can probably guess from our name, we love playing with language. So, you'll find words and quotes mixing with portraits and people to create our distinctive visual style – all tied together with an imaginative little story for each piece.*

A: Would you like to suggest some sites where we can retrieve your works?

Q: *We have our website www.id-iom.com or you can take a look at our social media*

channels <https://www.instagram.com/thisisidiom/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@thisisidiom> and www.flickr.com/id-iom.

Q: Can you explain the concept behind your art?

A: *It really depends on the piece we're painting but we usually produce a little narrative write up to accompany most of the stuff we do, which gives a little insight into where the idea has originated (Fig. 5). A little story behind the art is useful. Other times you do a picture and then add the write up. It is quite an organic process. With "the mere scribbler piece", it was because the pub had been named in honor of Frances Burney who had, I believe, been described as a 'mere scribbler'.*

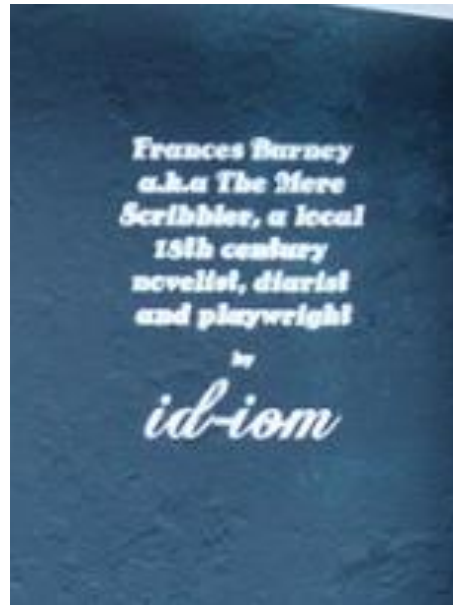


Fig. 5 Detail of *id-iom vs. the mere scribbler*, top-right corner. The text reads, “Frances Burney a.k.a. The Mere Scribbler, a local 18th century[sic] novelist, diarist and playwright by id-iom.”

Despite their self-confessed lack of background knowledge, id-iom touched upon an interesting point here. Who is a “mere scribbler”? And does the definite article “the” refer to Frances Burney, the subject of the mural with pride of place in the pub garden? What does this choice entail from a critical standpoint?

The almost ludicrous disparagement of women writers as “mere scribblers” was widespread and biting at the time. One instance of this mocking is Matthew Gregory Lewis’s not-so-soft-spoken comparison between female needle workers and “female scribblers” (Lewis’s nod here was in the direction of the Scottish novelist Susan Ferrier): “the needle, not the pen, is the instrument they should handle, and the only one they ever use dexterously,” he maintained (qtd. in Saggini, “Obscure”, 13). Unsurprisingly, a further myopic comparison of allegedly undemanding, as well as unstudied, female writing with scribbling, along the lines of Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of English Language* definition,⁷ is reported in a well-known letter of the Burney family friend, Samuel Crisp, dated 25 January 1782, only a few months before the publication of Burney’s *Cecilia; or, A Picture of Youth*:

If she [Frances] can coin gold at such a Rate, as to sit by a warm Fire, and in 3 or 4 months

... gain £250 by scribbling the Inventions of her own Brain ... she need not want money.

(Hutton, 74)

It seems to me that by choosing the harshly gendered and heavily judgmental epithet “mere scribbler” as the name of a pub – which is, ultimately, a commercial enterprise thriving on sales and astute commercialization – those instances of long-ago de-professionalizing vilification are impertinently turned on their head. In fact, they are converted into an antiphrastic present-day badge of courage, professional commitment and shrewd self-management pinned on to Frances Burney’s lapel.

Q: I went on an early morning virtual pub crawl across The Mere Scribbler Facebook photos, and I understand that you spray painted the mural in April 2017?

A: *Yes. That would be correct, we guess.*

Q: As I mention in the contact email I sent you, I discovered the mural you did for The Mere Scribbler by chance, through a random Creative Commons image search. A truly serendipitous find for me! The mural immediately struck me as exceptional, both beautiful and evocative from an artistic point of view. What was its genesis? What did you know about Frances Burney before you started the mural?

A: *We were commissioned this artwork for the outside area [of the pub, **Fig. 8**] by the lady whom I think is the CEO of the pub. We usually like giving our pieces quite fantastical names but it would seem we just called this one “id-iom vs the mere scribbler”; although I’m sure we could come up with something a little more special, maybe simply just ‘the mere scribbler’. The owners had already decided on the name of the pub being ‘The Mere Scribbler’ and told us a little about her [Frances Burney] but we had to go on a deep dive of the internet to find out more information. They’d renamed the pub as it was previously called ‘TheBank’ and they wanted to make it less blokey, something a little bit more contemporary. We could have done anything, they were not specific, so we concentrated our research on Frances Burney, though we might have done something completely different. Given the name, though, it seemed quite obvious.*

I pondered a moment on id-iom’s answer and wondered how much tongue in cheek there had

actually been behind the choice of the appellation “The Mere Scribbler”. Sholto’s mention of a “less blokey” pub was another trigger. Before continuing with the interview, I briefly ruminated on the owners’ onomastic shift from echoes of financial institutions and economic apparatuses (“The Bank”) to gendered ideology.

Q: Ok, I see your point, guys. I had already figured that you had fixed on Frances Burney due to her connections with the area. She was a regular guest at the Thrales’ at Streatham Park. Which actually struck me as a cheeky choice as Burney’s hostess, Hester Lynch Thrale, was just as famous as Burney was. At least she had a more established cultural profile as a woman about town than Frances’s when they met for the first time. Hester was actually the hostess with the mostest, so to speak and I wonder if now she will be turning in her grave out of jealousy! Fannikin had a mural, and she never did!

A: *Ab, we never thought of that! Ahababa!*

Q: Did you know anything about Frances Burney before painting the mural?

A: *I think that possibly I [Sholto] would have heard the name and that would have been it, but I would not have had any knowledge or read anything of hers.*

Q: So, how did you put together the background information you needed for the mural?

A: *The internet. We tried to find images. The people we worked for did not have really anything for us. They told us, the pub is called The Mere Scribbler, it is about Frances Burney, so it was really internet, yeah, that is where we found all the information. All the credit is to the people behind Wikipedia.*

One of the deliverables contemplated by my MSCA project involves updating and completing as many Wikipedia entries on Frances Burney and her circle as possible through the University of Edinburgh-based action wikiwomeninred, aimed at enlarging and reshaping women-related content uploaded to Wikipedia (“Women in Red”). id-*iom*’s reply reminded me of how crucial a role Wikipedia and similar bottom-up wiki projects may have in constructing and perpetuating – as much as dismantling – canonical and historical biases, be they gendered, cultural or otherwise. “Opening the Canon,” in my case the Romantic canon as per the title of my MSCA project, must contemplate

direct intervention on the digital/social level, too.

Ostensibly, artist duo id-iom were not aware that only very few portraits of Frances Burney exist. As they confessed, they did their best with a not better-defined “portrait” of Burney they found while browsing the internet. Likely, this portrait must have been the Van Dyke gown one. However, id-iom admitted that during their virtual trawls they had come across the so-called balloon hat portrait as well, as shown by some of their discarded designs (**Fig. 6**).



Fig. 6 Discarded mock-ups for *id-iom vs the mere scribbler*

I then wanted to move to the key issue of authorial portraiture and its relevance in terms of both self-construction and self-promotion for a writer, particularly in the fast-growing eighteenth-century literary market Burney competed in. Intriguingly, Peter Sabor, one of the foremost Burney scholars, mentions a correspondence between Dr Burney and a Frenchman, the philosopher and politician Jacques Pierre Brissot, who made enquiries about reproducing a portrait of Frances in a new periodical soon to come out in French. (As mentioned before, *Cecilia* had been published in 1782, the year before this epistolary exchange took place, and it had become a Europe-wide success.) Sabor says that the Doctor, who dictated his reply to Frances, responded that “although his daughter is flattered by [Brissot’s] request, she cannot grant it.” I find this response very interesting, as is Sabor’s following comment: “Thomas Cadell, the publisher of *Cecilia*, had also wished to reproduce her portrait as the frontispiece to the fourth edition, ‘mais y ayant une répugnance invincible, elle lui a donné un refus absolu’.” This answer is very much in line with Frances’s well-known 1778 letter – composed shortly

after the publication of her first blockbuster novel, *Evelina; or The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* – in which she writes:

I have an exceedingly odd sensation when I consider that ... a work [*Evelina*] that was so lately lodged, in all privacy in my bureau, may now be seen by every butcher, cobbler and tinker, throughout the three Kingdoms, for the small tribute of three pence. (*EJL* 3: 5)

Another point may be worth making here. At the time, Cadell obviously thought that a new edition of *Cecilia* with the author's engraved portrait would have significantly increased sales. At last, it would have been possible to associate to an image – hence, to commodify and monetize – the otherwise blank features of “the author of *Evelina*”. Vulgarity, after all, could line pockets – at least *some*, if not the author's own! – a fact which brings us back to the popularity and market appeal of authorial images in the fast-developing eighteenth-century literary market. Interestingly, Cadell's request was rejected in the end.

I wanted to have a quick chat with id-*iom* about these issues, therefore my following question was:

Q: From what did you draw inspiration for your mural? Were you aware of the very few existing portraits of Frances Burney, apparently picture-shy and even reluctant to appear on the frontispieces of her novels?

A: I [*Sholto*] didn't know that she was picture-shy but that explains quite a lot as we did have a hard time finding any pictures of her to use as a reference. We did our best with a portrait we found...

The discarded design in **Fig. 7** is another skillful – and perhaps more easily recognizable – appropriative instance of Edward Francisco Burney's work, that was the source of the final mural. *id-*iom**'s acknowledged reliance on the internet is also confirmed by the maxim they chose to include in the mock-up: “you must learn not only to judge but to act for yourself”. It comes from *Evelina*, the novel that gave Burney success in 1778, and is one of the top Burney quotes that a random word search on Google retrieves.



Fig. 7 Discarded mock-up for The Mere Scribbler's mural

Q: In view of all the above difficulties, it was really nice of you to choose Frances Burney as the subject of a mural. Though I must say that I also want to think of the “balloon hat” portrait her cousin Edward Francisco Burney painted of her (**Fig. 2**) as a kind of business card, so to speak. Are you familiar with the portrait held at the National Portrait Gallery in London where Frances dons that flamboyant hat, the so-called balloon hat? A declaration of authorship, a strategy of self-commodification as much as fashion statement, to my mind!⁸

A: *Yes, yes!*

Q: I think that Burney must have used the hat as a kind of publicity stunt. At the time, balloons were famous, and she might have wanted to be synecdochically associated with a novelty, an extraordinarily fashionable reminder of the current balloon craze as a stand-in for her own amazing popularity as a best-selling novelist.

Frances Burney must have certainly been very much aware of the so-called “balloonmania”, which exploded in Britain in the aftermath of the pioneering aerostatic voyage of Vincenzo Lunardi in 1784,

which he described in *An Account of the First Aërial Voyage in England* (1784). Thereafter, Lunardi's balloon was exhibited in the Pantheon, Oxford Street, London, before a second voyage was attempted in Edinburgh a few months later in 1785. Burney mentions having visited the Lunardi London exhibition in a letter dated 28 November 1784: "My Father afterwards carried me to see Lunard's Baloon [*sic*] at the Pantheon ..." (*AJL* 1: 141).

The chronological overlap between the balloon craze and Edward Francisco Burney's portrait of Frances donning her extravagant hat appears to me remarkable and all but accidental, probably on both the counts of the artist (Edward Francisco) and the sitter (Frances). I want to imagine that Frances Burney must have used the visually unmissable association of successful female novelist with an extraordinary ladies' hat as a kind of quietly assertive, beyond-print publicity stunt. She might have also wanted to be associated with a novelty item of millinery, an area of women's fashion she was extremely sensitive to throughout her life, from her first comedy *The Witlings* (1779) to her last novel *The Wanderer* (1814). The ultra-fashionable reminder of the current balloon craze Frances Burney wore on her head must be considered as a double for her own amazing popularity as best-selling novelist, emphasizing the implicit trans-artistic (self-)transformation of a successful writer into a "curiosity".⁹

Q: I am sure Burney would be quietly chuffed at being the centerpiece in a beer garden, on a wall from which she can keep a discreet eye on all the action (**Fig. 8**). Much as she did throughout a good part of her life, by enjoying the role of the silent spectator, as she writes in a letter dated 28 October 1779, at the age of 27: "Such a speech as this would have determined me *to* Dance, but that it is so long since I have Exhibited, that I am a Poltroon; – besides, I see plainly *I* should be Watched & *commented* upon in a most scrutinizing manner, – for *that*, I have some reason to believe I am *without* Dance-ing, – & therefore I think I am most safe – & know I am most easy – in resting a quiet spectator" (*EJL* 3: 405).

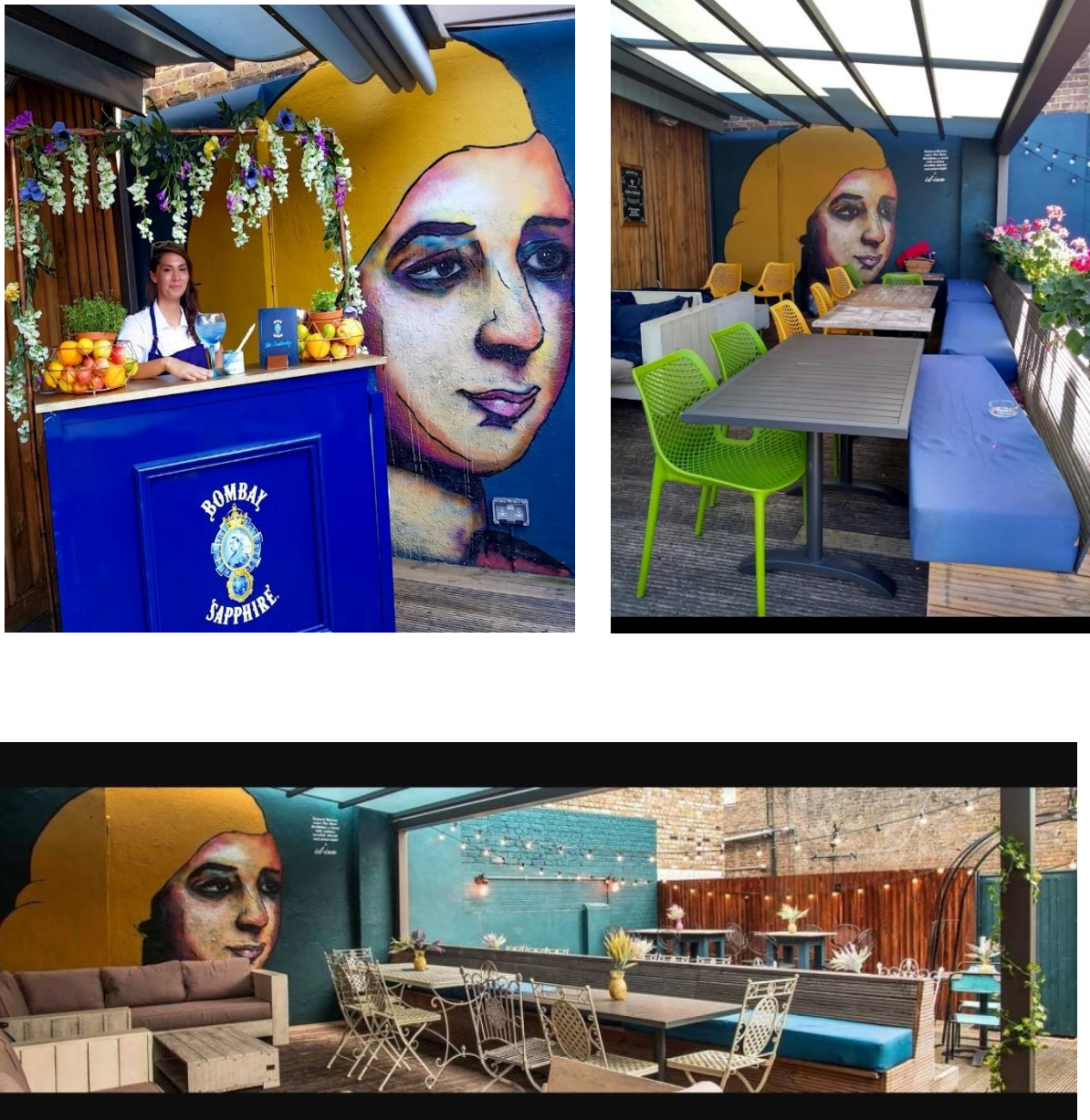


Fig. 8 Publicity shots taken from The Mere Scribbler Facebook Page (top and bottom) and picture gallery (top right picture, credit to Jozz Little)

The symbolic layers I perceive in **Figure 8** are truly signifying to me. There, on the wall, is a gigantic Frances, keeping an eye on – or “spectating”,¹⁰ as we could say by referring to her above-mentioned diary entry – the social hubbub unfolding in front of her, in today’s miniature version of the eighteenth-century London “world”. From her static side position, she looks curious, sympathetically interested, her gaze sweeping directly across the outside sitting area of the pub. Indeed, this arrangement represents a beautiful cultural and transartistic translation of the concepts of authorship

and authorial construction in Burney's works.

Q: Have you ever received any feedback on the mural or seen for yourself if a relationship is established between the pub patrons and your artwork?

A: *As previously mentioned to you, it was discussed with The Mere Scribbler that she [Frances Burney] was to have foliage for hair [Figs. 6 and 9] which is why we just put a placeholder color in and didn't give it too much extra thought. Not that I'm unhappy with the piece we produced it's just that it would have been nice if they'd given her foliage hair. Other than the fact they employed us again to work at another pub they have (which I figure is positive feedback) we haven't had too much feedback on this piece. We have however had feedback and seen people interact with previous work...*

The internet crawl I had embarked on resulted in mixed finds. The “quirkiness” of the pub's artwork is positively commented on in several reviews and websites (“The Mere Scribbler, London”), though disappointingly little direct mention of the subject of the mural is made. However, the following publicity blurb often crops up: “The pub takes its new name from the nickname of local 18th century [sic] satirical novelist, diarist and playwright Frances Burney” (“The Mere Scribbler, Streatham”). More detail on the garden space is provided by the *Balham Newsie's* Editor, who advertises the opening of the new venture by making an explicit reference to the mural:

Taking its title from the nickname of 18th century [sic] satirical novelist, diarist and playwright Frances Burney, who progressed her literary career in the area between 1779 and 1783, further tribute to the namesake has been paid through a statement piece of a modern graffiti portraiture by local artists id-iom, proudly displayed on a wall in the extensive beer garden. (“The Mere Scribbler”)

A very similar statement is made in another local online newsletter, *The Caterer* (“New openings”). Finally, on a more light-hearted note, “The Best Beer Gardens in South West London” makes a slant reference to the subject of the mural being a writer and hints at the possible liquid benefits of engaging with the *genius loci* and its presiding *daemon*, the literary spirit of the place: “The Mere

Scribbler, another one from the Livelyhood group, aims to inspire the writer in you. It's amazing what a few tipples of a Tuesday afternoon can do for writer's block..." (Boost).

Q: You were kind enough to share with me a mock-up of what the mural was meant to look like [Fig. 9]. I found it so beautiful and evocative, especially the idea of ivy for hair. Can you explain this choice to me? Why ivy hair?



Fig. 9 Discarded mock-up of *id-10m* vs. *the mere scribbler*

A: I'm not sure who came up with the idea to have ivy as hair, it could have been us or the pub owners. One of the reasons for it was because the piece is in the beer garden of a pub, they wanted a striking center piece that would grab customers' attention. And foliage for hair is definitely attention grabbing. Just a shame they didn't actually make it so.

Q: Frances Burney was a city/London girl for most of her youth, but when she moved to Surrey, she kind of adopted a more Romantic, 'green' perspective. Her Surrey years in the 1790s were under the sign of gardening, walking, enjoying the local natural sites in company of her would-be-horticulturalist husband, Alexandre d'Arblay, as much as they were about

deeply committed professional writing (Saggini, “Houstory”). I am just sorry that the ivy hair just never happened, it would have paid homage to an extraordinary phase in Burney’s life.



Fig. 10 Detail of *id-iom versus the mere scribbler*. Bottom right.

Also, I like the fact that you painted the mural around a socket, did you spot that? (**Fig. 10**). Probably, it is a wall socket being used to plug in a Hoover or a similar machine to clean the beer garden, and obviously it was included in the picture out of necessity, rather than artistic choice. And this is actually lovely to me, because when Frances Burney was in Surrey, she really got powered up, charged up, so to speak, motivated by the responsibility of financially supporting her growing family. Amid such a georgic scenery, so distant from the business atmosphere of London, she started writing for profit. Dramas, a novel, lots of creative stuff. She even built a house, Camilla Cottage, with the money she made from the subscriptions for her Surrey novel, *Camilla; or, A Picture of Youth* (1796). So yeah, the ivy and the electricity – to me, those two elements icastically represent my idea of Burney in Surrey!

A: Yeah, the electricity. As I was saying, it would have been nice if we could have had some lights lighting her up. We could have added a little glint in her eye, if we could have added some electric power to it.

The “little glint in the eye” evoked by id-iom is a very nice touch for two artists who claim to have very little background knowledge of Frances Burney. Her short-sightedness, only at times

improved with spectacles, was notorious and is recalled in various diary entries. Indeed, her eyesight might have been weak, but we should not forget the very acute, indefatigable and “rather prominent gnat-like eyes”, in Virginia Woolf’s definition, of Burney the novelist (“Evening Party”). Burney’s ability to scrutinize the real, to capture the macroscopic nature of the city as well as the microscopic details of its inhabitants, make her the quintessential all-seeing city/society eye. So yes, the “glint in the eye” conjured up by id-iom must have definitely been there!

These final thoughts brought us to the end of the interview and suggested some concluding considerations on the cultural and artistic contexts around an author, in particular a female author. Burney’s past and present portraits, now gracing Parham House in Sussex, the National Portrait Gallery in London as well as a lively music pub in Streatham, powerfully remind us that any portrait implies – in fact it solicits – not a mere one-way gaze, but a complex two-way gaze. While the viewer looks at the portrait, the sitter implicitly looks back at, as much as looks out for, the viewer, too.

By studying her various images, as viewers we create stories around “Frances Burney, the writer”; simultaneously Frances Burney, as writer-sitter, spins her own yarn for the benefit of both past and present-day viewers, from within the frame. These two stories – hers and ours – coexist with, and complement, each other. After all, a portrait is both a narrative of the self, and by the self, especially so – and perhaps more eloquently so – when the portrayed is a writer.

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NOTES

¹ Details of the project (Grant ID 892230) can be found at <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/892230>.

² The images can be accessed in the website of the National Portrait Gallery (London), and copies can be purchased as greeting cards, www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp00120/frances-darblay-fanny-burney (accessed 3 September 2022).

³ <https://creativecommons.org/>

⁴ In keeping with id-iom's preferences, hereafter capitalization will follow the conventions they adopted.

⁵ The Surrey I refer to also in the titles of my Leatherhead Library talks must be taken in its historical sense, since the ward of Streatham was in Surrey before becoming part of the County of London in 1889.

⁶ The interview was conducted by via Microsoft Teams on 30 August 2022.

⁷ In his seminal lexicographical work (1751), Samuel Johnson defines scribbling as artless, worthless writing: "[a] petty author; a writer without worth". "scribbler, n.s." *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson. 1755. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/scribbler_ns (accessed 3 September 2022). See also "scribbler, n.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2022, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/173497> (accessed 3 September 2022).

⁸ For this reason, I have called my University of Edinburgh's project blog "The Lady With the Balloon Hat" <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/fsaggini/?author=0> .

⁹ Anna Laetitia Barbauld writes to her brother John: "Next to the balloon, Miss B. is the object of public curiosity" (*Works*, 2:22). Arguably, the balloon hat, with its several associations – bringing together the contiguous domains of fashion, *Wunderwerken*, female literary achievements, and public *éclat* – may be considered one of Burney's slant declarations of authorship, a strategy of self-

commodification and before-the-letter celebrity building. For the appropriation of balloons into contemporary ladies' fashion, see also Robert Burns's poem "To a Louse. On Seeing one on a Lady's Bonnet at Church": "I wad na been surpriz'd to spy | You on an auld wife's flainen toy; | Or aiblins some bit duddie boy, | On 's wylecoat; | But Miss's fine Lunardi, fye! | How daur ye do 't?" (*Complete Poems*, p. 139, ll. 31-36).

¹⁰ "spectate, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/186068. The connection with Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's daily periodical *The Spectator* (1711-14) and the rise of coffee-house culture cannot be missed here. However, the visual and material presence on a wall of the spectating author/Burney somewhat complicates and rewrites the vulnerable disembodiment of the periodical idolons described by Manushag N. Powell.

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