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"'Tis best to build no Castles in the Air": Romantic Fantasy meets Economic Reality in Frances Burney's *Court Journals*

LORNA J. CLARK

Frances Burney's novels are centered on a young girl emerging unprotected from a cocooned world into a field of wider action. In the journey from childhood to adulthood, the time of her coming out is most perilous as she runs the gauntlet through a social world that includes sharpers and rakes jostling with snobs and prudes. She must learn to tell the sterling gold from the cheap imitation and find her way to a hero who represents solid worth; her success is celebrated in the final wedding.

The "true value" of the hero can be calculated in monetary terms, taking financial assets as a straightforward signifier of his value as a human being and a measure of the heroine's triumph in capturing him (i.e., money represents an undoubted good, like Darcy's £10,000 a year). In this, Burney follows a long tradition that reaches back beyond *Pamela* even deeper into folklore motifs: the tale of a low-born maiden wooed by a high-born male. This is not an unusual pattern for women's novels of the period, but it seems deeply embedded in Burney and, I would argue, forms a structuring principle not only in her novels but also in her journals which are not (as earlier critics seemed to think) so much documents of social history but rather literary exercises ("a selection of episodes, recollected from memoranda in tranquillity and sometimes described with imaginative force and stylistic effect," as Joyce Hemlow was the first to point out).[1]

The earlier view was based on an incomplete text, the Victorian edition of *The Diary and Letters of Madame d'Arblay*, edited by Charlotte Barrett (1842–6), followed later by that of Austin Dobson (1904–5), which omitted roughly half of the material available, as Peter Sabor has estimated, for his own recent edition of the Court Journals.[2] Readers of the new edition will find that the uncensored text changes the shape of the narrative, revealing that Burney does not portray the externals of court life so much as her own private concerns. In turning

away from the novel (the genre so disapproved of by the Queen), she pours all her creative energies over this five-year period into her journals, which function as a sort of writer's notebook in which she experiments with fictional techniques and stands firmly at the center.[3]

In this essay, I shall be focusing mainly on one section, the Cheltenham episode of July and August 1788,[4] which Burney seems to have planned as a set-piece, pre-determined and shaped as a "courtship journal," her own version of the theme "he stoops to conquer." In it, she plays with literary techniques of epistolary fiction to write herself as heroine of her own tale[5] on the familiar pattern of a low-born maiden wooed by an aristocratic male. In Colonel Stephen Digby, dazzlingly arrayed in a scarlet and blue uniform, she has the perfect candidate for hero. Born into a family of barons and raised in a castle, Digby rubs shoulders with earls and ministers and has the honor of handing the Queen with his white gloves whenever she appears in public, or standing in a post of honor behind her chair. Burney, on the other hand, belongs to the "background" of household servants (*CJL* 4: 437) whose status was not sufficiently elevated to be seen in public with the royal family.[6] Although far above Burney on the social scale, Digby nevertheless appears interested in her and seems to be spending all his time at her tea table while Burney indulges in the golden dream of a possible escape from her trammels at court. But I shall go on to show how the financial realities underlying the sentimental scenes that she creates are too strong to be ignored and eventually rupture the text, shattering the illusions she constructs so skilfully in her account. As Burney once remarked sadly, "'tis best to build no Castles in the Air,—" (*CJL* 5: 471).

This paper explores the conflict between the two narratives, the intersection between sexual and economic relations. There is a tension between the deliberately shaped narrative that Burney constructs and the inescapable financial facts, which underpin the world of aristocratic privilege that Digby inhabits. An examination of these financial considerations suggests a quite different narrative that could be imagined in counterpoint to the first (the more useful given the absence of a competing narrative penned by Digby). In this essay, I shall point out the contrast between these two parallel universes, a

conflict that leads to the inevitable crash.

With writerly skill, Burney presents the Cheltenham episode as though it is a courtship that will eventually lead to a proposal, something which (later on in the year) she comes to believe is actually pending. The scenes that she writes seem to lead towards that end-point and raise that expectation in the reader. So powerful and persuasive is her account that it is possible to read it straightforwardly, as a potentially serious love affair that eventually ruptures badly (as several biographers of Burney have done).[7] However, I tend to read her work rather as a fictional construct and see Burney, as author of these journals, in effect, as an unreliable narrator, an interpretation that has been reinforced recently by John Wiltshire who also questions her account and suggests that perhaps "this gentleman with aristocratic connections could not imagine that Burney, a commoner, might ever conceive of him as a potential husband" (384).

Colonel Stephen Digby (1741–1800), at his first appearance, may not seem an obvious choice for hero. At 47 years old (eleven years older than Burney), he is married with four children. There are other candidates among the handsome equerries who take their tea with the Keeper of the Robes. Often nobly born (younger sons who went into the army), they ride for hours with the King in the morning and in the evening, and vie with each other in entertaining the ladies with their banter. Though bluff in manner, their sexual energy is compelling. The scenes in which the equerries take their tea may lack the brilliance of Burney's London assemblies, but (as with Austen) the journal sparks to life whenever the men enter the parlor: the attentive Major Price, the handsome Colonel Gwynn, the elegant Colonel Greville, or the boyish Colonel Manners.

Among these, Digby has a certain air of distinction. On their first meeting in July 1786, Burney describes him as "a Man of the most scrupulous good-breeding, diffident, gentle, & sentimental in his conversation, & assiduously attentive in his manners" (*CJL* 1: 88); he is the only one sensitive enough to observe and sympathize with her discomfort on her first excursion in her capacity as Keeper of the Robes and considerately takes care of her fatigue and hunger, producing "some apricots & Bread" from his pocket and insisting that she share

them (*CJL* 1: 127). But soon afterwards, he is called away from Windsor by his wife's illness and takes a "hasty leave" (*CJL* 1: 147). She hears that he is devotedly nursing his wife who is suffering "Death by inches" from breast cancer (*CJL* 2: 22); she dies in August 1787. In the wake of this loss, Burney notes the universal sympathy and respect that Digby commands: he "stands, upon the whole, the Highest in General esteem & regard of any Individual of the Household. I find every mouth open to praise & pity, Love & Honour him" (*CJL* 2: 237–38).

It is in 1788, when Digby reappears at court as a widower, that he moves to center stage in Burney's narrative. His first appearance after his loss "*electrified*" her with deeply-felt sympathy; he has visibly aged: "worn with care & grief & watching," and she is "filled . . . with as much admiration as . . . compassion" (*CJL* 3: 41–42). As Digby had once "sincerely felt for & pitied" her, so Burney commiserates his grief, especially when he expounds resignedly upon melancholy subjects such as "*Life*, & *Death*, . . . & the little space between them" (*CJL* 3: 56, 54). She seems to imagine herself in the role of comforter and "*wished him at Norbury*!" her symbol of domestic felicity. His presence gives an extra zest to the tea meetings in the spring.

The situation heats up when the King visits the Cheltenham spa in the summer with just a few attendants, who are thus thrown together, among them Colonel Digby, who "threatened repeatedly how well we should all know one another" (*CJL* 3: 248). The Cheltenham journal "promises . . . all the charms of novelty," Burney writes, "which will make this month rather an Episode, than a continuation of my Epic prosaic performance" (*CJL* 3: 249) with a nod to Fielding.[8] Upon arrival, Digby invites himself to Burney's tea-table "for *this Night only*," promising that thereafter, "he should intrude himself . . . no more" (*CJL* 3: 255, 257), but he keeps doing so, apparently lured irresistibly by the evident pleasure he takes in Burney's company, which is amply reciprocated: "I know not when I have spent an Hour more socially to my taste" (*CJL* 3: 257–58), she writes after one of his visits. She gives the impression that Digby spends all his spare time with her, lugubriously reading sentimental poems—Henry Crawford-like, he likes the sound of his own voice—while she sits sewing, in scenes that evoke a domestic novel.[9]

The narrative 'Episode' is marked as a courtship—raising the expectation of the conventional ending—through the use of several techniques. First, the selection of material. No matter what else occurs, the journal focuses so much on Digby that it gives the impression of a plot that is advancing in which he plays a crucial role. For instance, the first full day that Burney spends at Cheltenham (when she is up for eighteen hours), she chooses only two parts to dramatize: breakfast-time when the gentlemen join their table, and "Colonel Digby undertook to settle our seats, . . . he fixed upon the place next me for himself: & desired we might *all keep to our Posts*"; and the evening, which begins when "who should enter my little Parlour, after all the speechifying of *only one night*, made yesterday, but Mr. Digby, . . ." (*CJL* 3: 259–60). Oftentimes, the way that Burney passes her daytime hours between these sociable mealtimes or visits goes unrecorded.

Second, there is the restriction of narrative viewpoint so that in scenes in which Digby plays a part, the narrator fixes upon his face and reads his expressions for their meaning. When Digby's son comes to tea, Burney never records anything he says but does remark on Digby's fondness for him and how his face and manner soften and animate when the boy is there ("it quite youthifies, & brightens his whole Countenance"), making him more attractive (*CJL* 3: 539–40, 555). In another scene, several people are present, including the King, but it is Digby's facial expressions that become the focus of the narrator's attention as a guide to the reader's response. He starts "with a look of very droll curiosity," which develops into "a very examining look"; he begins to "smile," and his eyes "sparkled with fresh curiosity," which helps him regain "a brightness of <ex>pression" that had been dampened by his grief (*CJL* 3: 175–76). The dramatization of the scene ends when he leaves the room with the King. Even though Digby remains largely silent throughout, it is his reaction to the dialogue that constitutes the action.

A third technique is the use of third parties (as a kind of Greek chorus) to underline the significance of Digby's attentions. For instance, the King discovers them in a tête-à-tête and exclaims "with a sort of arch surprise, 'What!—only *you two*?—'" .... (*CJL* 3: 257). More frequently it is her colleague Miss Planta who is amazed: "'Good Lord!

she cried, to come when the King & Queen are out!—I never knew such an odd thing in my life!'" (*CJL* 3: 294). Or the Queen will look "more surprised than pleased" (*CJL* 3: 311) when she learns of Digby's frequent visits— which highlights their importance.

A fourth strategy is the telescoping of the action. The summer sojourn in the country lasts five weeks in all, but several days are lost to illness (first on Digby's and then on Burney's part), and there is a brief interlude in Worcester when she rarely sees him. The number of days on which the two interact number twenty in all; nevertheless, Burney gives the impression of the full flowering of a relationship that seems predestined. The brevity of their interaction has not previously been noted, perhaps because Burney's clever use of tenses implies a much longer duration. For instance, when Digby asks if she would like him to read to her again, Burney gushes: "How unexpected an indulgence—a luxury, I may say, to me, are these Evening's now becoming!" (*CJL* 3: 269), suggesting an established pattern—whereas this is only the third day. The situation develops with incredible rapidity. They arrive late on a Saturday. On Monday, Burney exclaims: "This Mr. Digby is a man of ten thousand" (*CJL* 3: 263). By Tuesday, she enthuses, "This man seems all soul" (*CJL* 3: 269), and she characterizes him as the ideal combination of poet, courtier, and soldier. After a week's worth of daily visits comes the climax, when the pair wander out after dinner onto the steps where they linger in desultory conversation:

> And here, for near two Hours, on the steps of Fauconberg Hall, we remained; & they were two Hours of such pure serenity, without & within, as . . . I scarce ever remember to have spent. . . .
>
> The sweetness of the surrounding Scenery, & perhaps the harmony of our feelings in our recent reading, seemed to affect the mind of Mr. Digby with correspondent sensations . . . .
>
> I cannot give you our conversation; it was desultory & local: the Birds that chirped, the Meadows that bloomed, the Hills that rose before us, the purity of the air we breathed, the clearness of the fine blue Canopy that

covered us . . . . (*CJL* 3: 319–20)

"This is perhaps the most lyrical passage in the Court Journals and evokes convincingly the magic of falling in love," as I have noted (*CJL* 3: xxv). Burney's emotional state is conveyed by the heightened coloring in the description of their surroundings ("Meadows that bloomed . . . purity of the air," etc.) in a passage that surpasses in its intensity even the proposal scenes in Burney's fiction in which the romance is usually a long process that develops slowly and must be inferred indirectly by the reader.

This is one of two incidents in the Cheltenham episode involving stairs—here, in private, they are both on the same level. In public, though, their inequality is evident as is suggested in another scene when Burney approaches Fauconberg Hall but finds a trio of aristocratic ladies lingering at the top of the steps. She is stranded at the bottom as, due to her inferior status, she dare not proceed: "I could not possibly pass them," she remarks, when the chivalrous Mr. Digby, who had already "given his Hand to the Queen & Princesses," and then to the court ladies "saw me, &, probably, saw my uneasy situation; for he quitted them all, to descend the steps & speak to me. I felt both obliged & relieved . . . ." Thus encouraged, Burney then "walked up them immediately, under his protection. . . . Mr. Digby, with even peculiar distinction of manner, continued by my side, speaking to me . . . as if to force me into the party, & to shew them all his kind opinion" (*CJL* 4: 352–53). After this Orville-like rescue, Digby followed her "almost instantly" into the parlor for tea; the next line has disappeared completely from the journal, cut away from the page.[10] The incident is carefully staged and could be taken symbolically to represent physically the class difference between the two while suggesting Burney's sublimated desire that Digby might indeed, one day, venture to raise her to his own level.

All of these scenes (not to mention their furtive reading together of the aptly named *Original Love Letters*) give the impression of a plot moving towards its inevitable conclusion, building on the reader's assumption that the details selected must be significant. But as the end approaches (which should have brought Digby Orville-like to his knees), the reader senses that Burney's material, drawn as it is from

life, is resistant to the shape being imposed upon it. The reader gets not closure but a scene of parting that Burney nevertheless makes the most of:

> He held out his Hand for mine, with a look of such mild, yet sincere regard, that I gave it him with all my Heart.
>
> He held it, I believe a minute, without speaking; but in a manner denoting such chaste kindness, as reminded me of the words that had so recently passed his lips,—*That there is an affection so pure, so free from alloy*. (*CJL* 4: 409)

In this powerful passage, the phrase "with all my Heart" is an interesting choice: it could mean simply a hearty extension of the hand of friendship but might also imply that she is giving her heart with her hand (both hand and heart together). This kind of loaded language with a double signification (implying much more than meets the eye) is often used by Burney in these scenes with Digby.[11]

"And thus ends the Cheltenham Episode" (*CJL* 4: 423), Burney writes soon afterwards. She returns to Windsor; the promised correspondence with Digby does not materialize, and when he finally arrives two months later, he seems in no hurry to seek her out. The reader is puzzled what to make of this interlude, anxious to learn how the story comes out and why the destined "courtship journal" runs aground.[12] We long for the other side of the correspondence, that of Lovelace to her Clarissa, or perhaps for several viewpoints which could be combined to create a multifaceted narrative that would give a fuller understanding of what transpired. But that is to imply that Digby must have a side to Burney's story (as though she frames the terms of reference) whereas what we need to explore are the texts that make up his world, independent of her expectations or even of their interaction.

Colonel Stephen Digby did not leave behind hundreds of pages of journals to counteract the dominance of Burney's narrative point of view. The few letters of his that are known to have survived from this time period are eloquent in their silence in that they do not mention Burney at all. One letter he writes is particularly significant for the light it sheds on a scene in which he has asked Burney to share with him a prayer she has written, a request to which Burney attributes a lot of

importance. Digby's urgency to obtain and then retain a copy (a tussle that would repeat itself in the weeks to come) manages to convince her that "*His Heart was surely Mine*—" (*CJL* 5: 396, 422). Although on this night she parries his request, its urgency persuades her that a proposal is imminent, and she spends a sleepless night wondering what to answer.[13] She might have thought differently if she had seen a letter Digby had written a month earlier, full of gratitude to another woman who had sent him a prayer she had composed, which shows such a "true spirit of devotion" that he comes to see her "in the light of an angel."[14] The survival of Digby's letter is crucial in that it sheds new light on an issue that is accorded enormous emotional significance in Burney's account, casting doubt on her interpretation of it. But these moments of intersection are unfortunately rare; if we seek a contrasting narrative to juxtapose beside that of Burney's court journals, we need to look elsewhere in the archives for documents that do survive. Evidence of an alternative viewpoint can be found in the financial transactions, marriage settlements, wills, and property deeds that form the basis of the life of privilege in the class to which Digby belonged. As a commentary on the Cheltenham episode, these could be seen as forming a contrasting text that undermines Burney's world of fictional constructs.[15]

I have said that Digby fits the bill of aristocratic hero; it is worth exploring who he was and what we know of his background. The Digbys were an old and well-established family; mentioned in the Domesday book with estates in the Midlands, they can be found on manor rolls dating from the thirteenth century. In the Wars of the Roses, they backed the Lancastrian cause; three brothers were knighted by Henry VII for their service at the Battle of Bosworth Field, one of whom, Sir Simon Digby, was granted lands at Coleshill in Warwickshire (which still remain in the family more than five hundred years later). Two branches were ennobled: Sir Robert Digby (d. 1642) was elevated to the peerage of Ireland as Baron Digby of Geashill in 1620; his uncle, Sir John Digby (d. 1652/3), an ambassador for James I, was rewarded with a Barony and Sir Walter Raleigh's estate, Sherborne Castle, which he purchased in 1617 for £10,000; he was later created 1st Earl of Bristol (1622). At Sherborne, he enlarged the

Tudor mansion built by Raleigh, but his support of the royalist cause in the Civil War led to the Old Castle being besieged and demolished in 1645. He fled to the continent where he died in 1652. His son, George Digby (d. 1676/7), the 2nd Earl, returned at the Restoration and recovered his estates, but his conversion to Catholicism prevented him from holding office. His more pacifist son, the 3rd Earl, wisely backed William of Orange but died without heirs in 1698, at which time his titles became extinct. Politics was not the only field to which the Digbys contributed, however. Sir Kenelm Digby (1603–65), a celebrated royalist (whose father was executed for his role in the Gunpowder Plot) was a founding member of the Royal Society and noted for his philosophical and scientific discoveries.[16]

It was Digby's grandfather who united the estates in Warwickshire (Coleshill), Dorset (Sherborne), and Ireland. A Tory M.P. (1689–98), the Honourable William Digby (1661–1752) succeeded to the Irish barony (as 5th Baron Digby of Geashill) in 1686 and inherited the Sherborne estate (though not the title) in 1698 when his cousin, the 3rd Earl, died. He used his wealth to support various philanthropic causes (such as relieving debtors and founding a school) and lived to the age of 90, outlasting Digby's father, Edward Digby (*c.*1693–1746), who had followed the family tradition by going into Parliament (1726–46). The title then passed to Digby's eldest brother, Edward Digby (1730–57), Groom of the Bedchamber to the Prince of Wales (1751–53), who employed Capability Brown to improve the grounds of Sherborne Castle and followed his grandfather's philanthropic practice of releasing debtors from prison[17] before his sudden death at the age of 27. His younger brother Henry (1731–93) succeeded him as 7th Baron (1757). Described as a man of "sterling character,"[18] he had a successful career in diplomacy and was rewarded with an English title, 1st Baron Digby of Sherborne (1765) and, later, 1st Earl Digby in the county of Lincoln and Viscount Coleshill in the County of Warwick (1790). A letter written from Coleshill, 3 June 1766, praised him as "Head of a Noble and worthy Family . . . which, during two Centuries, lived the Love and Admiration of this County."[19] It would seem that the family had earned a place in the first rank of society; as Burney wrote, "I hear nothing but good of the

Digbys" (*CJL* 4: 368).

That was the Digby side of the family. On his mother's side, his ancestry was equally illustrious, perhaps more so. Charlotte Fox was sister to Stephen Fox (later Fox-Strangways) (1704–76), who made a great fortune as paymaster of the forces under Charles II and was created 1st Earl of Ilchester in 1741. Another brother was Henry Fox (1705–74), 1st Baron Holland (1763), who married the great-granddaughter of Charles II and focused his political ambition on obtaining "jobs and honours, for himself, his family and friends." When placed in charge of the pay office, he amassed a great fortune of £400,000 by speculating with public money and laid out half of it on landed property.[20] His son (Stephen Digby's cousin) was the brilliant orator Charles James Fox (1749–1806), the influential leader of the Whigs who inspired a fiercely loyal band of friends and supporters; Holland House became for many years the center and focus of Whig influence. Stephen Digby moved closer to this powerful family when he married his cousin, Lady Lucy Fox-Strangways in 1771, who brought into the marriage a dowry of £16,000.[21] So at a gathering of the clan, Digby might hobnob with earls, barons, influential politicians, and wealthy industrialists (his aunt had married into a family of coal magnates).[22] Such gatherings did take place at his mother's property at Thames Ditton, a gracious villa with lawns sloping down to the river, just opposite Hampton Court.[23]

Nor were Digby's siblings undistinguished. The two elder brothers, of course, inherited in succession (since the first died young) the title and a handsome estate. An indication of how the family was able to consolidate its position is suggested by the increase in wealth over the course of a century. In 1752, the 5th Baron left £23,000 to his heir[24] whereas a century later (in 1856), the 8th Baron and 2nd Earl Digby left personalty said to be worth nearly £900,000 (the equivalent of more than a hundred million U.S. dollars in 2017).[25] By then, the Sherborne estate alone (about 26,000 acres) yielded £45,000 a year, and the Coleshill estate (9,000 acres) was valued at £15,000, not to mention income from lands in Ireland—which would put the Earls of Digby among the great landowners of England.

But the wealth was not all concentrated in the hands of the

eldest sons. In 1752, Digby's grandfather had also left £12,000 for the purchase of land to be settled on his younger grandsons. The four younger brothers rose in their professions, helped no doubt by family connections. One of Stephen Digby's elder brothers, Robert Digby (1732–1815) became an Admiral, who was most notable for amassing a large fortune as he rose through the ranks.[26] The other, the Very Reverend William Digby (1733–88), Dean of Durham (1777–88), held several church preferments which were bringing in £4,000 a year at the time of his death in 1788, after which some of the livings fell to the youngest brother, Charles (1743–1810), another clergyman.[27]

Although he moved with ease in rarefied social circles, Stephen Digby was the least well off of his siblings. His vulnerable position was recognized by his mother who justified her decision to leave him the largest share of her estate upon her death in 1778, explaining (in a letter to her eldest son) that she had tailored her bequests according to need (personal items only to Lord Digby, £1,000 to the Admiral, £3,000 to the Dean, and £5,000 to the youngest).[28] Given that "Ste has not only a smaller income but much worse prospects than his Brors," she wrote, "I have left him rather more money,"[29] i.e., all of her properly at Thames Ditton, including the house and land nearby, which she calculated to be worth "near £20,000."[30] It was a touching gesture but when Stephen Digby came to sell Ditton House five years later (to the wealthy socialite Charlotte Boyle Walsingham), he purportedly received just £5,000 for it;[31] the sale of other lands nearby raised about £6,700 (these two sums would yield about £585 if invested in the five per cents).[32] Digby's salary as Vice-Chamberlain was £500 plus benefits (which included room and board) to which was added a sinecure conferred by the Queen in 1788 worth between £400 and £500 a year.[33] He also enjoyed (during his lifetime) the "Dividents interest and other profit" on the sum of £16,000 brought into the marriage by his first wife[34] (which at 5% return would yield about £800). All told, his income must have been at least £2,000 a year, even without adding in such unknown factors as the payment received from selling his commission in 1778,[35] and his share of the property left by his grandfather.

Digby's income, then, would easily have been ten times that

of Burney (who received £200 as Keeper of the Robes and had made a small profit on the sale of *Evelina* and *Cecilia*),[36] yet in the rank of society to which he belonged, it would probably have been insufficient. Moreover, he had four children to provide for and educate. His eldest son had started at Eton in 1787, not an inexpensive proposition, [37] and the second son attended a school in Wimborne, Dorset with his cousin, the future Lord Digby.[38] An income of £2,000 in 1788 would certainly allow Digby to lead the life of a gentleman but would put him more on the level of a country squire, well below the great landlords or even the ranks of the wealthy gentry with whom he was accustomed to mingle.[39] It is evident that Digby felt constrained by the limitations of his income: he complains of travel as an "Expence that . . . ill suited his fortune" (*CJL* 4: 383), and he professes the modesty of his desires with respect to his sinecure (the best one in the Queen's gift): "it is but little, but I *want* but little. It will do very well for *me*" (*CJL* 4: 435). In his widowhood, although he deplores having his children scattered in four counties, he makes no attempt to set up a permanent home for them but remains at court (where his own living expenses are paid) and gathers them together on long holidays, which he manages by staying with family or friends. For a man like Digby who moved in aristocratic circles and was anxious to establish his children, the most reasonable course of action would be to seek a second marriage that would improve and consolidate his financial position—which is exactly what he did.

Figures often tell the story; Digby's aristocratic relatives and their princely incomes have been dwelt on at length to underline the point. When viewed in this context in which financial and class considerations are laid out starkly, Frances Burney seems completely out of her league[40] and is foolhardy in ignoring repeated warnings that Digby is likely to marry a beautiful Maid of Honour, the Honourable Charlotte Margaret Gunning (1759–94). The daughter of a diplomat, Sir Robert Gunning (1731–1816), who was knighted and then granted a baronetcy by George III,[41] she lived in a grand Palladian-style manor-house once owned by the family of Queen Catherine Parr. Digby stayed several times at Horton Hall, set amidst luxurious grounds which would have provided a favorable setting for a courtship (they

featured a menagerie, a triumphal archway, and a Greek temple). Renowned for her learning as well as her beauty, Charlotte Gunning had been a friend to the family when his first wife was alive and had cared for his daughter immediately after her death. (She was the lady mentioned above who had sent Digby a copy of her prayers, apparently with none of the coyness or prudery of Burney.) Most importantly, Miss Gunning's marriage portion was rumored to be £10,000, to which would be added the usual £1,000 gift from the Queen.

Burney, on the other hand, was descended from actors, painters, and musicians, had no dowry, and was the daughter of a music-teacher who was grateful for the post of organist at £50 a year that eased his retirement, especially when he bargained for an apartment to be let to him for just £12 a year. Though Burney claims to be "fully aware" that Digby's "superiority in family & situation would keep the World" from placing any "*possible* misconstruction" on their friendship (*CJL* 4: 354), she evidently protests too much and may well be making the same misconstruction herself.

True, Burney had written two best-selling novels, and Digby had literary tastes. Still, a man in his position would have to be very much in love to hamper his children's futures (and his own) by marrying a woman with neither fortune nor connections. Surprisingly, when Burney hears of his intimacy at the home of a Mrs. Stuart (daughter-in-law to the powerful Earl of Bute), she seems never to have imagined that he might be interested in the eldest daughter Mary who was a fabulously wealthy catch (with a fortune of £40,000 a year), an idea which certainly occurred to Mary's mother and aunt, who included the "the Old Colonel" in the number of her admirers and hoped that she would do better.[42] Connections would have enhanced the attraction of Miss Gunning: her aunt had married into one of the most powerful and wealthy families in England, that of the Dukes of Hamilton; she was, in succession, the Duchess of Hamilton, the Duchess of Argyll and finally Baroness Hamilton (in her own right). When Digby did marry Charlotte Gunning on 6 January 1790, he received with her a portion of £9,000 while he himself brought £7,000 to the marriage. Both amounts were to be held by trustees while the spouses received the interest during their lifetimes (calculated at 4

½ %, about £720 a year), and after their deaths, the principal was to be divided equally among any children.[43] The complication of the marriage arrangements (requiring more than a dozen pages divided into two legal documents) provides a contrast to Burney's own later marriage to a penniless émigré in 1793, which proceeded without any settlement and just £100 a year to live on.

The Honourable Colonel Stephen Digby, younger son of an aristocratic family, seems oddly out of place in Burney's journals. He was the first man of his class whom Burney had come to know well, and, despite disclaimers, she clearly had little understanding of the documents making up his world, or of how she might fit into *his* narrative. She was sufficiently conscious of his elevated status to boast proudly of his acquaintance in letters to her father Charles Burney (that inveterate social climber)[44] assuring him that "Colonel Digby has been among my first favourites of the Household for these two years—he is perfectly amiable, highly well bred, & extremely fond of all literary attainments & pursuits" (*CJL* 3: 288). It seems as though she is seeking her father's approval for the grand friends she is making or perhaps trying to impress him with her aristocratic tastes. Yet, despite the frequency of Digby's appearances in her journals, he is surely unaware of the castles building in the air around him, and the expectations to which his friendly interest seems to have given rise; nor would he suspect the detailed accounts of their interaction being sent off in thick packets whose size he remarks upon (ironically enough), little imagining what a figure he was making in them.[45] As John Wiltshire astutely remarks, as a gloss on the events of 1788: "Perhaps she did not understand that his aristocratic manners, his graciousness towards and concern for a commoner, were simply that—gracious manners," and that he might have felt justified in believing "that to cultivate her friendship was harmless, free of any erotic or romantic overtones."[46]

In assessing Digby's character independently of Burney's narrative, the reader has to read against the grain. In the scenes she dramatizes, he comes across as manly and appealing with suave manners and a beguiling smile. He seems at home in a man's world, having grown up with five brothers and having spent twenty years in the army.[47] Though close to fifty, he still enjoys fast gallops over the

countryside. There is a physical vitality to him suggested by Burney's hyper-awareness of his presence when at meeting or parting he occasionally takes her hand.[48]

He also seems to have enjoyed the company of women. His favorite cousin was the spirited Lady Harriet Acland (1750–1815), who had followed her husband's regiment to America and nursed him behind enemy lines. Digby is sympathetic to Burney's situation; perhaps he senses how much at sea she is in the rarefied atmosphere of the royal household,[49] and he is chivalrous enough to pay her "doubly marked attention . . . in presence of Rank & Title" (she notes). He must have had democratic sensibilities, which led him to reach out in friendship and to treat as an equal one whose social position was so far beneath his own (perhaps his years of rubbing shoulders with the Whig grandees had left their mark). That women found him appealing was undoubted, as a fellow equerry remarks, "I think there is something in Digby, in his manners, & ways, as much formed to gain a woman's good graces as in any man's I know" (*CJL* 4: 417–18).[50]

Digby's softer side is suggested by his closeness to his mother and his devotion to his wife whom he must have known as a child, which attests to his protective qualities. He was a "Tender husband" to her (*CJL* 1, 88) and affectionate towards his children. In the portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds that hangs at Sherborne Castle, he looks "serious, sensitive, and strikingly pale" (although "the pallor probably owes more to fading paint than to natural complexion") (Davenport 95.) His assiduity in seeking out Burney's parlor might simply be accounted for by his recent bereavement; as a widower, he might well relish a quiet evening in female company as preferable to solitude. Burney remarks that if left alone for a few minutes, he lapses into "deep & melancholy rumination" and that he dreads going back to his "comfortless" solitary lodgings (*CJL* 3: 332, 303). That there is "no happiness . . . without participation,—no participation without Affection.—" (*CJL* 4: 408) is one of his favorite themes of conversation. In his words (as recorded by Burney, at least) there is little sign of romantic attachment let alone serious intentions.[51]

So what do we make of the juxtaposition of these parallel texts that tell two contrasting tales? We could add in to our layering a third

viewpoint, that of Lady Llanover, editor of *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs. Delany*, who admittedly had an axe to grind against Burney (with whom her mother had had a falling-out).[52] But Lady Llanover's undoubted snobbery is probably indicative of the class attitude underlying Burney's court experiences and which eventually ground her down.

> Miss Burney (she writes) was elated to such a degree by the appointment that she gradually lost all consciousness of her actual or relative position. She lived in an ideal world of which she was, in her own imagination, the centre. She believed herself possessed of a spell which fascinated all those who approached. She became convinced that all the equerries were in love with her, although she was continually the object of their ridicule, as they discovered her weaknesses and played upon her credulity for their own amusement.[53]

Burney learns her lessons the hard way. She continues, throughout the King's illness in the winter of 1788, to write up Digby's visits even though their interaction becomes ever less satisfying. She also takes comfort in writing tragedies in which heroines are broken by their love for all-powerful males. It is notable that in her later fiction, the heroines do not have the easy security of her youthful creations and that financial or social unease drains away their confidence and threatens their existence. The intensity of purpose that she pours into the Digby story in her journals demonstrates its importance to her, but the denouement (his engagement to an heiress) is a shocker, and the ending of the story dissolves into fragments. After the humiliation of her disappointment, Burney bows to the necessity of economic realities and in her later fiction, writes openly about the lack of money and social status that places her heroines increasingly at risk.

In his essay on "Cinderella or Bluebeard: The Double Plot of *Evelina*," Kenneth W. Graham finds fairytale-like elements in Burney's writing which repeat a form of wish-fulfilment fantasy, of Cinderella triumphing over her circumstances (85–98). Unlike Cinderella or Evelina, there was no Prince or Lord Orville to rescue Frances Burney. At the court of George III and in her unrequited love for Stephen

Digby, she fails to transcend the limits of her class; she does not achieve her Evelina-like moment. If, like the heroine of her novels, Burney can be seen as making the transition to adulthood through the course of her narrative, then it must be said that she does not find her happy ending.

In the passage I have quoted above about the dangers of building castles in the air, her conclusion is rather bitter: "They have so terrible an aptitude, light as they are, to shatter their poor Constructors in their fall" (*CJL* 5: 471). Yet Burney's court journals and the Cheltenham episode remain, in the face of these harsh economic realities, as a tribute to her belief in the written word and to her faith in the potency of her text.

NOTES

[1] Joyce Hemlow, *The History of Fanny Burney* (202).

[2] Sabor makes the claim in the Introduction to vol. 1 of his edition of *The Court Journals and Letters of Frances Burney* (vii). This edition, which covers the years 1786–91, will be referred to as *CJL*, and the volume and page numbers will be given parenthetically within the text. The amount of material that has been restored in modern editions of Burney's journals varies. In the *Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, 5 vols., ed. Lars E. Troide, which cover the years 1768–86, roughly 20% has been restored. The later years, 1791–1840, included in *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame d'Arblay)*, ed. Joyce Hemlow, et al., were by far the most curtailed. All told, the journals and letters will take up twenty-five volumes when completed, as compared with seven volumes that were edited by her niece Charlotte Barrett as *Diary and Letters of Madame d'Arblay.*

[3] This article expands on views presented briefly in my "Introduction" to volumes 3 and 4 of *CJL*, in vol. 3: xxiii–xxv, xxxiii–xxxiv, xxxviii. Also relevant is my article, "Frances Burney's Methods of Narrating the Court Experience."

[4] The Cheltenham episode, which takes up close to 15,000 words is spread between the two volumes I edited of Burney's *Court Journals and Letters*. See vol. 3: 249–342 and vol. 4: 347–423. Burney's

interaction with Digby actually begins in vol. 2 of *CJL*, edited by Stewart Cooke (2011), continues through vols. 3 and 4 to vol. 5, edited by Geoffrey Sill (2016), and ends in vol. 6, edited by Nancy Johnson (forthcoming).

[5] For an expansion of this argument, see my "Epistolarity in Frances Burney."

[6] For instance, it was "contrary to all rule" for her to follow in the suite of the royal family when they made their promenade or even for her to address any of their attendants (*CJL* 3: 284).

[7] Claire Harman writes of a "jilting" (222); Kate Chisholm believes that the relationship ultimately failed because Burney was "in the end, not really attracted" to Digby (154); Hester Davenport suggests that Burney's reticence about her feelings might have convinced Digby that she did not care for him (136–37). Underlying all these accounts is an implicit acceptance of the notion of a developing and potentially serious relationship whose failure must be explained, given the rather glaring discrepancy between Burney's claims and Digby's actions. Yet another explanation is surely possible for the contradiction between Burney's expectations and actual events. This essay attempts to shift the ground and to imagine Digby's own story, quite apart from Burney, to suggest a new perspective—which should in turn shed light on the "courtship narrative" she constructs and the literary purpose it may have served for her.

[8] Burney's phrasing is possibly an echo of Henry Fielding's Preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742), which he termed "a comic epic Poem in prose." Fielding was a favorite author of Charles Burney; Frances Burney later claimed, in her Preface to *The Wanderer* (1814), that her father's library contained just one novel, written by Fielding, but this claim appears to have been exaggerated.

[9] The comparison with the sentimental novel is made in my "Introduction" to *CJL* 3: xxiv, a point that is picked up by Nancy Johnson in "Burney at Work: The Court Years" (24).

[10] A series of changes in the manuscript show an interesting evolution of this scene. In the phrase as originally written, "I walked up them immediately," the pronoun 'them' refers to the stairs. Later, the word 'to' was inserted before 'them' ("walked up to them") so that the

referent becomes 'ladies' rather than the stairs. Later still, the syllable 'wards' was written in pencil after 'to' so the phrase would read, "I walked up towards them immediately," an action that is not quite so bold. See *CJL* 4: 352 n. 8.

[11] Burney's techniques in her accounts of Digby are reminiscent of those she used to describe an earlier relationship with George Cambridge (see next note). As Margaret Anne Doody has written,"She hopes for symptomatic gestures toward more intimacy, the promise of a future. Frances Burney lingers constantly over the social-sexual hermeneutics, puzzling herself—and us—. . . [as she] tries frantically to read a hopeful message" (155–56).

[12] The Cheltenham episode is the second time a would-be courtship runs aground in Burney's journals. In 1782–85, Burney exhaustively records her interaction with a young clergyman, George Cambridge; despite rumors of their engagement (and Burney's hope for a proposal to prevent her having to accept a position in the Queen's household), he fails to step forward. For a discussion of the affair, see Stewart J. Cooke, "Sweet Cecilia and Brown George." For an analysis of Burney's literary techniques in her rendition of it, see Lorna J. Clark, "The Diarist as Novelist: Narrative Strategies in the Journals and Letters of Frances Burney."

[13] On 18 December 1788, Burney passes a sleepless night after Digby pressingly asks her for a copy of her prayers, which convinces her "that Mr. Digby has conceived an attachment of a far more serious sort than I had believed compatible with the state of his mind;—" and she agonizes over what she should answer. While expressing some ambivalence and a certain reluctance to change her condition, she notes, "Should the regard of Mr. Digby tend to so generous a conclusion,—to refuse him would be surely ingratitude & folly" (*CJL* 3: 675–76).

[14] Stephen Digby to George William Gunning, 21 [November 1788]. Although the month and year are not given, they can be ascertained by other information contained in the letter. More of the text is given in *CJL* 4: 574 n. 541, 668 n. 707.

[15] Some of Burney's biographers have expressed a similar frustration that no manuscript can be found in which Digby tells

his own side of the story. Chisholm laments that "Digby's version of what passed between them does not exist" (154), and Davenport remarks that "Stephen Digby never wrote his own version of events, so explanation of his conduct can only be speculation" (135) and that "it is difficult to know what went wrong from Fanny's words alone" (12).

[16] Information on various members of the Digby family has been gleaned from the *ODNB*, the *History of Parliament* online, the peerages, and the guide book to Sherborne Castle.

[17] Lettice Digby 80–81.

[18] *History of Parliament* online, citing the *Royal Register* (1781).

[19] Cited in Lettice Digby 83.

[20] *History of Parliament* online. See further Lucy S. Sutherland and J. Binney, "Henry Fox as Paymaster General of the Forces."

[21] Will of Stephen Digby.

[22] Stephen Digby's aunt Julia Digby (d. 1785) had married Herbert Mackworth (1687–1765), M.P., 1739–65, a wealthy industrialist who owned coal mines and copper works at Neath.

[23] In 1758, Charlotte Digby had rented the house at Thames Ditton which was then a two-storey brick house of 5,000 square feet, valued at £862. In 1763, she purchased the freehold of the house, together with various pieces of land nearby for £7,000. She enlarged and improved the house and grounds where she hosted gatherings of the Digby and Fox families until her death in November 1778. For a full history of the property, see Rowland G. M. Baker, "Boyle Farm—Thames Ditton."

[24] *History of Parliament* online; the will of William Digby.

[25] The claim is made in George Edward Cokayne, *The Complete Peerage*. The Digbys appear in volume 4: 352–57. The will of Edward, 8th Baron Digby is dated 16 August 1837. The monetary equivalency was obtained using the Inflation Calculator on the Bank of England website and then converting to U.S. dollars.

[26] Lettice Digby 84–85.

[27] Lettice Digby 87.

[28] The will of Charlotte Digby.

[29] Charlotte Digby explained her reasoning in a letter to her eldest son, Henry, Lord Digby, dated 8 June 1769, that it was "not

from partiality (tho' no body can be more deserving)" but because she thought it "reasonable" to favour Stephen (who was then in the army) since he was most in need of money (Sherborne Castle Archives). The will did not cause a family rift, for when her estate was found inadequate to the bequests, Lord Digby gave up his share of the inheritance, which allowed the Thames Ditton estate to remain intact (attested copy release, Surrey Record Office).

[30] Charlotte Digby made an estimate of what her assets were worth in a memorandum entitled "Sketch of my affairs Sep^{tr} 1774" (Sherborne Castle Archives). It seems that she overestimated somewhat as Lord Digby had to help to ensure that all the legacies could be paid (see previous note).

[31] As reported by Mary Hamilton Dickenson 141.

[32] An accounting of the sale of various parcels of land belonging to Charlotte Digby's estate exists in the Sherborne Castle Archives. It states that £3601.10.0 was raised by auctioning off some lots, £1600 from a private sale, and £1501 from selling other lots, "the purchase of which is complicated." The whole would add up to £6702, which would not include Ditton House and grounds. Other land that Stephen Digby owned nearby he transferred to his brother William in 1785.

[33] The names of appointees to the Household of Queen Charlotte 1761–1818, together with their salaries, are conveniently listed online. Stephen Digby's appointment as "master, keeper, and governor of the hospital or free chapel of St. Katherine near the Tower, *vice* Waller, dec." was announced under the promotions for August 1788 in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (758). Digby informed Burney that the value of the place was, on average, "between 4 & 500 a Year" (*CJL* 4: 434).

[34] Will of Stephen Digby.

[35] Stephen Digby resigned his commission soon after his mother died on 22 November 1778, naming him as her heir. He explained in letters written to his brother Henry, Lord Digby, that he was concerned about his wife and family; he also explained that being in the military had not improved his fortune but that he had been "unlucky" enough to lose £1,900 by it (Stephen Digby to Henry, Lord

Digby).

[36] Stewart J. Cooke in "How Much Was Frances Burney Paid for *Cecilia*?" calculates that Burney received 30 guineas for *Evelina* in 1778 and £250 for *Cecilia* in 1782–83.

[37] Stephen Digby's eldest son Charles (1775–1841) attended Eton from 1787 to 1791 (R. A. Austen-Leigh (159)).

[38] Game Book, Sherborne Castle Archives.

[39] According to Edward Copeland, the rank of gentleman in the eighteenth century would require £300 to £1,000 a year to support; a country squire needed from £1,000 and £3,000; the wealthier gentry would have incomes between £3,000 to £5,000; and the great landlords received £5,000 to £50,000, with an average income of £10,000 a year (32). Copeland is basing his figures on the tables of G. E. Mingay in *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century* (26).

[40] Davenport would agree; after laying out Digby's pedigree in detail, she writes that, "The title 'Mr' Digby, so frequently found in the journals, scarcely does justice to the web of aristocratic connections" (94).

[41] Sir Robert Gunning was nominated a Knight of the Bath by George III on 2 June 1773 and was invested with the insignia of the order by the Empress of Russia on 9 July; he was later installed, on 19 May 1779. Meanwhile, he was granted a baronetcy on 3 September 1778 (Rigg, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*).

[42] From a letter from Mary's aunt, Lady Louisa Stuart, to her sister, Caroline, Countess of Portarlington, on 10 April 1789, published in Clark, *Gleanings* 2: 145–46, cited in *CJL* 5: 90–91 n. 149.

[43] Sir Robert Gunning would raise £9,000 secured by a mortgage, which would form Charlotte Gunning's marriage portion (she in turn transferred to him a third share in a property, a half-share in £1,500, and the Queen's gift of £1,000). Stephen Digby would bring £7,000 to the marriage and both would be held in a trust fund from which they would receive interest; various provisions were made for how the fund would be distributed after their deaths to any children who might be born to them. Stephen Digby had invested £7,000 in the purchase of £1,092.6s. bank stock and £5,037.15s.7p. in 4% consolidated bank annuities. The £9,000 to be paid by Sir Robert

Gunning was to remain at the interest rate of 4 ½% a year. The terms of the marriage settlement and the mortgage are laid out in deeds in the Northamptonshire Record Office G (H) 802 and G (H) 803.

[44] Doody presents this characteristic as a key ingredient of Charles Burney's nature (12–14, 18–19).

[45] See my "Epistolarity" (204).

[46] Wiltshire 386–87, 383.

[47] *The record of old Westminsters* (1: 269).

[48] Chisholm points out a suggestive passage in which Burney seems hyper-aware of Digby's physical motions, "beginning to finger the wax about the top of one of the Candles, & to put it into the flames, & draw it out, backwards, & forwards, with most fluttered motions" (152). Davenport singles out the same passage to show Burney's consciousness of Digby's "physical presence," especially his hands, and notes others, for instance, when he "drew on his white Chamberlain's gloves, took her hand . . . or grasped the one or two fingers which it was customary to offer as he took his leave" (115).

[49] On 12–15 August 1786, Burney accompanies the royal family to Nuneham and Oxford in her new capacity as Keeper of the Robes. She is sorely offended by the ladies of Nuneham for being too busy with the royal family to pay proper attention to her. Her sense of injury is so evident that she in turn offends others. Stephen Digby tries to assuage her feelings of injury and prevent further misunderstandings:

> He declared he had felt much concerned for me, not only last night, but from the time of my appointment, well imagining in how many respects its novelty must be distressing to me.
>
> I was quite obliged to him; . . .
>
> He very earnestly desired me not to abscond again, on our return to Newnham, & I assured him I had no such intention. (*CJL* 1: 118)

[50] Colonel Gwynn, in his "good natured way" (*CJL* 3: 288), seems to have been trying to warn Burney that Digby's affections were engaged elsewhere. Not only does she discount and ignore his repeated warnings, but completely disdains his intelligence (as indicated by the nickname assigned to him in letters from her sister, "Stupido") (*CJL* 3:

231 n. 647).

[51] Burney herself admits as much when she writes, "were not his visits, now, of a peculiar cast?—he said in them, in truth, nothing, relative to myself, that the whole world might not hear,—" (*CJL* 4: 631). And yet she continues to hope that there is a subtext, hidden meanings, or an undercurrent of powerful feelings that only she could understand. As Doody suggests, with reference to George Cambridge, Burney "always hopes that . . . [they] are talking in code and that by writing down all his remarks . . . she may recover satisfactory hidden meanings . . ." (155–56).

[52] Augusta, *née* Waddington, Lady Llanover, was the daughter of Mary Ann Port, great-niece to Mary Delany with whom she lived during the years that Frances Burney was employed by the Queen. Burney often dropped by daily as an intimate friend of the household. After Delany's death, Burney (then 36), promised her "eternal regard" for the 17-year-old Port, and they corresponded for years. However, Port took offence at Burney's failure to respond promptly or adequately to her letters, to her refusal to chaperone one of her daughters in London, and to Burney's slowness to respond to a request to return her letters. The final straw came with the publication of *The Memoirs of Doctor Burney* (1832) in which there were some passages about Mary Delany she found offensive and inaccurate. Some resentment must have been relayed to her daughter for Llanover's edition of the *Autobiography and Correspondence* of Mary Delany contains "the most hostile criticism of Fanny anywhere to be found" (Davenport 89).

[53] Llanover 361. Burney was first accused of egoism by John Wilson Croker in his review of the first volumes of the *Diary and Letters of Madame d'Arblay*. Noting his criticisms, I once wrote of the "self-consciousness that is an intrinsic part of journal-writing" and of Burney's tendency to place herself "at the centre of every scene" in "The Diarist as Novelist" (289). Gillian Skinner has taken issue with some aspects of this article in her "'A Tattling Town like Windsor.'"

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