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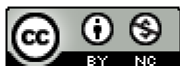

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Two Decades of the Burney Society and Burney Studies[1]

HILARY HAVENS

The Burney Society formed in response to the burgeoning interest in Frances Burney's life and works that developed in the late 1980s. Paula Stepankowsky, Lucy Magruder, and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh co-founded the society while they were attending the Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA) conference in Lake Louise in 1993. They decided to organize a dinner to begin a Burney Society, and more than twenty-five people came to that dinner in New Orleans in 1994, many of whom have attended most of the Burney meetings in North America since, including Elaine Bander, Conrad Harper, Juliet McMaster, Margaret Anne Doody, and the late Joan Drexler. At that dinner, representatives on both sides of the Atlantic decided that Frances Burney needed her own society to highlight the century of women writers that preceded Jane Austen.[2] The first official meeting was exactly twenty years ago at the JASNA 1995 conference in Madison, Wisconsin. Margaret Anne Doody gave the plenary talk on "Frances Burney: Diarist, Dramatist, and Novelist," which emphasized Burney's plays and signaled an important shift in the field of Burney studies.

It is necessary to go back almost 30 years to give some context regarding this shift. Until the mid-1980s, scholarship on Burney predominantly focused on her life-writings and her first novel, *Evelina*. Then came the three big monographs of the late 1980s: Kristina Straub's *Divided Fictions: Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategy* (1987), Margaret Anne Doody's *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (1988), and Julia Epstein's *The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* (1989). Doody's work remains, with Joyce Hemlow's *History of Fanny Burney* (1958), the most important monograph in Burney studies. Doody's work is known for its careful documentation of Burney's life alongside thoughtful interpretations of her texts. She argues that "The story of Frances Burney's works is deeply involved also with the story of her life. We cannot fully appreciate what she achieved until we have some

idea of what she experienced" (9). She goes far beyond Hemlow, who, according to Doody, "sees no deep connection between the life and the writings" (10) and emphasizes Burney's relationship with her father. Doody's work is unprecedented in its scope: she discusses all four of Burney's novels, along with all eight of her plays. She looks at original source material—Burney's novel manuscripts and unpublished journals and letters—and her work has set a standard that remains unrivalled. Kristina Straub's and Julia Epstein's works have also remained influential studies that, like Doody's, interpret Burney's works through a feminist lens. They focus on Burney's contradictory status as both a public author and a proper woman. Straub discusses "Burney's struggle to resolve [the] two sides of her identity": on the one hand she was "an informed and carefully self-conscious writer" and on the other "a woman with a commitment to ideologically orthodox [or traditional] femininity" (7). Epstein, instead, focuses on moments of tension and violence in Burney's writings that emerge amidst possibilities of women's financial independence and the limitations of "appropriately decorous and feminine" behavioral norms (9).

In recognition of the flourishing work in Burney studies, a special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* was published in 1991 that was devoted exclusively to Burney's *Evelina*. Despite this seeming recognition of Burney's important status within the eighteenth-century canon, Margaret Anne Doody wrote in her afterword:

> We who are Burney critics (and how good to think that that is now a large plural, even a community) need to reintegrate the novel with itself, as well as with its world. So we need to integrate Burney's works (a considerable number if we include the plays) with themselves and with each other.... We must engage in this work if we are not to make of Burney again the one-book little novelist. ("Beyond *Evelina*" 371)

This is a provocative claim that urges critics to engage with

Burney's later novels, in addition to the more accessible *Evelina*, and with her plays. Doody and Epstein, her co-editor of the issue, identify psychobiography as the predominant critical approach to Burney. This is an approach that merges personality psychology and historical evidence. Most previous critics align the notoriously reticent Burney with her fictional heroines, especially the ingénue Evelina. Doody argues instead that new contextual approaches are needed and that more of Burney's works deserve critical notice. This is an important call-to-arms that has since been answered more variously and robustly than Doody, perhaps, could have ever imagined.

Predominant readings of Burney and her works have continued to be feminist. Epstein, Straub, and especially Doody remain important influences, particularly on the monographs by Katharine Rogers and Barbara Zonitch, which were published in the 1990s. Katharine Rogers's *Frances Burney: The World of Female Difficulties* (1990) emphasizes Burney's conventional leanings and proposes that each of her novels blends her acceptance of prevailing social norms with her transgressive protest against them. Like Straub and Epstein, Rogers highlights Burney's conflicting view of gender norms. Barbara Zonitch's *Familiar Violence: Gender and Social Upheaval in the Novels of Frances Burney* (1997) has striking similarities with Epstein's monograph in its focus on traumatic episodes. Zonitch argues "that Burney's preoccupation with violence originates in the fear that the death of aristocratic social domination subjects women to the escalating violence of the modern world" (14). Yet, unlike Straub's work, Zonitch's is grounded in historical contexts and relies heavily on accounts of eighteenth-century marriage and gender relations, such as those by Lawrence Stone and Susan Staves. This increasing emphasis on contemporary cultural contexts is linked to the rise of new historicism, a branch of literary theory in which critics argue that literary texts are inseparable from the various contexts (historical, political, social, etc.) that gave rise to them. For example, Claudia Johnson's *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s: Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen* (1995) contains a feminist approach

to Burney's *Camilla* and *The Wanderer* that is linked to the rise of male sentimentality in the 1790s. Johnson argues that male sentimentality overturns traditional gender markers in Burney's fiction and that Burney criticizes these feminine men of feeling and the harsh women "who take up the severity and fortitude sentimental men have relinquished" (16–17).

New historicist approaches to Burney also take up economic issues, often with respect to gender. Catherine Gallagher's *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (1994) explores and links the themes of debt, gender, "Nobody," and the literary marketplace within Burney's life and first two novels, using a framework indebted to Marxist interpretations of commodities and exchange. Gallagher focuses on the Burney family's efforts to make their own place in an emerging literary-professional class. Deidre Lynch's *Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (1998) posits that Burney's fictions reflect the merging of women's "self-definition" with "commodification" as they enter the marriage market. She emphasizes, for example, that in *Camilla*, the heroine's painful debts are entangled with her agonizing courtship with Edgar. The most popular scholarly approaches to *Cecilia* had previously been linked to the masquerade scene, but recent readings of the novel focus on financial matters like consumption, debt, and gifts. D. Grant Campbell's essay surveys financial consumerism in *Cecilia*, and Catherine Keohane's and Cynthia Klekar's essays focus on debt, gifts, and charity. This turn to finance was reflected in the topic of the 2012 Burney Society Annual General Meeting, "Love, Money, and the Marketplace in Burney." Work on finance in Burney's novels is linked to work on Burney as a professional writer, which pays close attention to her dealings with publishers, her remunerations, and her treatment by the reviewers. The best examples of these are Janice Farrar Thaddeus's *Frances Burney: A Literary Life* (2000) and Betty Schellenberg's chapter on Burney in her monograph, *The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2005).

Schellenberg's and Thaddeus's studies are linked to a

growing biographical trend in Burney studies. While Hemlow's *History of Fanny Burney* remains the most fully documented study of Burney's long life, three more recent biographies supplement Hemlow's in important ways. Kate Chisholm's (1998) is a richly illustrated biography that creates a sympathetic, evocative portrait of Burney and offers lively accounts of the composition and reception of her novels and plays. Hester Davenport's *Faithful Handmaid* (2000) focuses on Burney's time at court, from 1786 to 1791, as Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte with some attention to the remainder of her long life. Davenport's book is elegantly written, with much original research regarding Burney's five years at the court of George III. Claire Harman's biography (2000) gives an overview of Burney's life, paying as much attention to the journals and letters as to her published works and offering some useful critical insights.

There has also been more interest in other members of the Burney family. The extended Burney family was the focus of an international symposium at Cardiff University in 2015 as well as the "Burneys in Windsor" conference of the Burney Society (UK) in 2007. Notable work includes Lorna Clark's publications on the novels and life-writings of Frances's half-sister, Sarah Harriet Burney. Marilyn Francus has discussed Charles Burney's second wife, Elizabeth Allen Burney, and her difficult position as stepmother. In 2012, Philip Olleson published the first separate edition of Susanna Burney's journals and letters with Ashgate. And Peter Sabor is under contract with Oxford University Press to finish publishing the correspondence of Dr. Charles Burney; only the first volume, which spans the years 1751–84, is currently available.

This attention to the life-writings of Frances Burney's family members is connected to the significant progress that has been made in the last twenty years in publishing Burney's own journals and letters. Twenty years ago, only the first three volumes of Burney's *Early Journals and Letters* were published. Now, all five volumes are complete, and these are significant texts that describe the conditions surrounding the publication of *Evelina* and *Cecilia* as

well as Burney's introduction to the Streatham Circle. From 2011, *The Court Journals and Letters of Frances Burney* have appeared, and now five out of six volumes are published. These are historically significant texts that contain first-hand accounts of King George III's madness and of life at the royal court in general. Most recently, the first volume of Burney's *Additional Journals and Letters* (which spans 1784–86) was published in June 2015. At this point, only two volumes of Frances Burney's correspondence remain to be published—so the massive editorial project housed at McGill University's Burney Centre—is nearly complete.

As for the texts of Burney's novels, twenty years ago only two editions of *Evelina* were in print: Edward Bloom's Oxford edition and Margaret Anne Doody's Penguin edition, which is based on the third-edition text. Now Vivian Jones has revised and updated Bloom's Oxford edition, and two other important editions of *Evelina* have appeared in the past twenty years to challenge the Oxford and the Penguin versions: Stewart Cooke's and Kristina Straub's richly supplemented texts published respectively with Norton and Bedford. These texts, which contain a wide array of contemporary and critical contexts, reflect the New Historicist tendencies in concurrent literary criticism. As for Burney's other novels, *Cecilia* and *Camilla* remain in print with Oxford and have been recently reissued. Sadly, there has been regression with *The Wanderer*, which was published twenty-four years ago in 1991 but has now gone out of print. If you were not lucky enough to procure a copy, a new one will cost you close to $200 on Amazon. *The Wanderer* remains popular with scholars of eighteenth-century and Romantic literature, as well as women's studies, so perhaps there is hope for its reappearance.

The increasing number of editions has fostered diversity in Burney studies, which can also be seen in the two essay collections that were published in 2007 and in the recent Burney Society of North America Annual General Meeting topics. From 2006, Burney Society conferences started to have specialized themes, such as "Burney and the City" in Chicago 2008 and "Burney and the Gothic" in Portland 2010.[3] As for the essay collections,

Lorna Clark's *A Celebration of Frances Burney* is a collection of eighteen papers, originally presented at a Westminster Abbey conference celebrating the 250th anniversary of Burney's birth in 2002. There are three sections, each consisting of three essays focusing on the novels, dramas, and journals and letters, as well as other contributions on Burney's family, her life, and her times. In general, the collection contains a diverse set of topics that reflects burgeoning scholarship related to Burney and her family members and her literary friends. Some of them also read Burney within other contexts (such as the recurring themes of professional men and illness). Peter Sabor's *The Cambridge Companion to Frances Burney* follows a more traditional structure as it is part of the celebrated Cambridge Companion series. *The Cambridge Companion* is a collection of ten essays, with two on the novels, one each on the plays and journals, and the remainder on the Burney family, politics, gender, society, the literary marketplace, and the afterlife. These essays have been frequently cited in the eight years since the collection was published.

All of this diverse scholarship has shaped current trends in Burney criticism. Criticism on *Evelina* is both rich and various. Scholars have interpreted the novel across an imaginative array of contexts. Some of my favorites include Jeanine Casler's essay on age in *Evelina*. Using the old women's race as a starting point, Casler argues that Burney is keenly aware of the condition of life for the elderly in her depictions of Madame Duval and Mrs. Selwyn. Irene Tucker's essay on "*Evelina*, the Epistolary Novel, and the Paradox of Property" discusses the epistolary form of *Evelina* within the context of *Pope v. Curll*, a legal case that granted letter copyright to the writer rather than the recipient. There have been a few important essays on the monkey scene by Susan Greenfield, Patricia Hamilton, and Laura Brown, which generally connect that scene to eighteenth-century anxieties concerning the limits of human nature. Melissa Pino's "Burney's *Evelina* and Aesthetics in Action" is a lively discussion of aesthetics in *Evelina*, focusing on Burney's intentionally satirical attempts "to apply abstract formulas of beauty to bodies that are living, various, and very

much present" (269). Finally, Helen Thompson's "*Evelina*'s Two Publics" is an important interpretation that reads Burney's novel alongside theory about the emerging public sphere, which separates the public letter-writer from the embodied female self. All of these essays focus on a wider range of contexts and theories than earlier feminist and New Historicist work.

As for Burney's other novels, the best work on *Cecilia*, as mentioned earlier, has been focused on money and the masquerade. *Camilla* criticism has generally taken two approaches. There have been a number of works on material aspects of the novel, such as articles by George Justice and Emma Pink, which discuss its cultural production, and I have written a couple of articles, which examine its early manuscript drafts. Most other important recent critical interpretations (like Katherine Binhammer's) focus on the romance plot, especially the importance of economics and how financial concerns supersede those of romance. More than with any of Burney's other novels, scholars of *The Wanderer* focus on questions of women's rights and agency. Mascha Gemmeke wrote an entire monograph on *The Wanderer*, which reads the novel through various contexts, including those of female rights, education, labor, aesthetics, contemporary literature, and Burney's own life. There has been influential work by Elaine Bander and Jocelyn Harris on *The Wanderer*'s connection with other significant novels of 1814, such as Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Maria Edgeworth's *Patronage*. 1814 was also the topic of the 2006 Burney Society of North America annual general meeting. Two other significant interpretations are Sarah Salih's 1999 article on race and alterity in the novel and Justine Crump's examination of madness in the text and its contemporary contexts. Madness and race remain important critical approaches to *The Wanderer*.

There has also been growing work on Burney's plays, the subject of Margaret Anne Doody's talk at the first Burney Society meeting. Twenty-five years ago, only *Edwy and Elgiva* and *A Busy Day* had been published. Tara Ghoshal Wallace's edition of *A Busy Day* led to much subsequent interest in the play and eventually to the play's performance in 2000 on the London West End stage.

Since then, there has been a critical edition of *The Witlings* edited by Clayton Delery and another of *The Witlings* and *The Woman-Hater* edited by Peter Sabor and Geoff Sill. Sabor and Sill's text was taken from their larger edition of *The Complete Plays of Frances Burney*, which they edited with Stewart Cooke and published exactly twenty years ago with Pickering and Chatto. *The Complete Plays* really do contain all of Burney's plays: the four comedies and the four tragedies, including the unfinished *Elberta*, which Cooke pieced together using Burney's notes. Similarly, there has been more scholarship on the plays, including several essays that examine why Burney's plays remained largely unknown in her lifetime. However, the only monograph to date on Burney as playwright is Barbara Darby's *Frances Burney, Dramatist: Gender, Performance, and the Late-Eighteenth-Century Stage* (1997). In addition to providing close readings of each of her eight plays, Darby examines them alongside writings by other late eighteenth-century female dramatists and employs performance and feminist theory. Scenes from Burney's plays have also been performed during Burney Society annual general meetings.

So what does the future hold? It seems as if Doody's call to arms from her 1991 afterword has been answered. But I would say that new and exciting work on Burney is largely divided between the theoretical and the archival—an interesting blend of new and traditional methodologies.

Two recent monographs epitomize the rise of theoretical approaches to Burney. The best of these is Francesca Saggini's *Backstage in the Novel: Frances Burney and the Theater Arts* (2012), which contains chapters on *Evelina*, *The Witlings*, *Cecilia*, and *The Wanderer*, as well as a valuable and comprehensive appendix on the actors and the theatrical and musical performances mentioned in Burney's writings between 1768 and 1804. Saggini's volume is a thoughtful meditation on theatrical elements in Burney's fiction that emphasizes the performative, a growing subfield in Burney studies. Indeed, the performative was the subject of the Burney Society of North America's annual general meeting in Montreal in 2014. Saggini's work combines structuralist and historicist theoretical

approaches. The most recent monograph is Brian McCrea's *Frances Burney and Narrative Prior to Ideology* (2013), which instead of giving a chronological assessment of Burney's life and works, traces Burney's attitude towards certain ideologies within her life and fiction. These include feminism, free-market capitalism and Marxism, professionalism, and formal realism. McCrea contends that "as Burney stands 'prior' to them, their explanations of her are incomplete" (9). This is a fair point—that Burney's novels, which were written before the rise of various ideologies that critics have used to interpret them, cannot adequately fit into anachronistic categories.

The strand of Burney criticism that most excites me is the turn to the archives. This is exemplified best in Cathy Parisian's recent study, *Frances Burney's* Cecilia: *A Publishing History* (2012). Parisian's work carefully traces *Cecilia*'s progress through print to the present day in England and abroad, supplying reproductions of seventy-four illustrations and bibliographic descriptions of fifty-one editions. Arguing that "more may be known about [*Cecilia*] than any other [novel] of the eighteenth century" (1), Parisian's study combines methodologies of book history and bibliography, unveiling the "intersections between the intellectual content of this book and the physical forms in which it has existed" (xx). This is an impressively researched text that bears the fruit of Parisian's travels to at least ten discrete archives. Parisian is able to make a number of key observations about the novel and its readership based on her extensive archival investigations. In short, the work provides a comprehensive account of *Cecilia* in print, and its depictions of the novel's nineteenth-century reception open up new avenues in Burney scholarship. It should be essential reading for eighteenth-century book historians, and the collection of illustrations and the descriptive bibliography are particularly valuable to scholars of *Cecilia* and Burney.

Perhaps I am most interested in archival work on Burney because that reflects the direction of my current project, which focuses on revision in the eighteenth-century novel. I have written an article on the manuscript draft of *Cecilia*, which provides a

striking illustration of revision. It contains hundreds of deleted words and phrases, but the longest and most strikingly obliterated passage is located within the novel's famous masquerade scene. I have been able to recover this hitherto unreadable passage using techniques I have pioneered in digital paleography. The newly restored text comprises a long episode describing the bizarre satanic rites of Cecilia's devious admirer, Mr. Monckton, who speaks in this episode in the Coptic language. By interpreting Burney's suppression and revision of this scene alongside her contemporaneous letters, we can understand for the first time that she succumbed to familial pressures while writing the novel to remove innovative elements, such as the satanic scenes (as well as some overly satiric episodes).

If you are not yet convinced that archival studies are the wave of the future, you should consider that fact that archival methodologies have been used in two recent prize-winning Burney essays. Simon Macdonald, a former postdoctoral fellow at the Burney Centre, was awarded the *Review of English Studies* essay prize for 2012 for his essay "Identifying Mrs Meeke: Another Burney Family Novelist." This is a very prestigious award, and his essay focuses on the writer "Mrs Meeke," the most prolific English-language novelist of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Macdonald demonstrates, for the first time, that she can be identified as Elizabeth Meeke, a step-sister of Frances Burney. It really is a terrific find, and Macdonald's work has already proven influential in the field: there have already been a few conference presentations on Meeke, including one at Cardiff, and, undoubtedly, more publications on her and her novels will soon appear. (I have read her novel *The Old Wife and the Young Husband*, and it is decent, though very didactic.)

My final example is the most recent Hemlow Prize winning essay, "'This crowded Sheet': Speaking Through Space in Frances Burney and Georgiana Waddington's Correspondence," by Emma Walshe of Oxford University. Her topic—the physical appearance of Burney's manuscripts—is fascinating and important, and her work demonstrates skillful archival research and paleography

training. She argues that "This particular epistolary atmosphere—of conflict and delicate harmony, apology and forgiveness—affected the structural manner in which Burney composed letters." Specifically, she contends that the physical appearance of Burney's letters to Marianne Port (the placement and appearance of text) reflects their vexed relationship and draws convincing parallels between their emotional and epistolary relations.

There is still much to explore in the archives, and more theoretical approaches will emerge in the near future in Burney studies. For my part, I would like to see *The Wanderer* back in print, as well as a new edition of *Camilla* that takes into account the radically revised second edition of 1802 and the large number of manuscript drafts that are scattered between the Berg Collection, the British Library, and the Houghton Library. I hope that the Burney Society continues to foster this golden age of scholarship through its two ongoing publications: a semi-annual newsletter (which has been published since the society's inception in 1995) and an annual refereed journal, which is up to fourteen issues now. Besides its influence on scholarship, the society has been actively involved in memorializing Frances Burney. It has installed a window to Burney in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey and restored the Burney/d'Arblay monument at St. Swithin's Church in Walcot, Bath. There have been twenty successful years of meetings, events, and initiatives on both sides of the Atlantic. I look forward to the next twenty.

NOTES

[1] I owe many thanks to Elaine Bander and Paula Stepankowsky for their help documenting the history of the Burney Society. Thanks are due to Conrad Harper and Juliet McMaster, as well as the other attendees of the 2015 Burney Society (NA) annual general meeting in Louisville, for their comments on the paper, which was originally delivered then. Also, many of the texts discussed are inspired by the annotated

bibliography on "Frances Burney" that I wrote with Peter Sabor.

[2] Jean Bowden undertook to be secretary-treasurer for the UK, thereby becoming the founding member of what would eventually become the UK society.

[3] The 2003 Burney Society (NA) meeting, which was held in Montreal while the JASNA conference was held in England, is the exception. That meeting had three invited speakers and four themed paper sessions.

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