The Burney Journal

Volume 12 (2012) Article 2

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Laura Engel, Duquesne University

Recommended Citation
Engel, Laura. "Close Encounters: Frances Burney, Actresses, and Models for Female Celebrity." *The Burney Journal*, vol. 12, 2012, pp. 7-27.
https://www.mcgill.ca/burneycentre/burney-society/burney-journal/vol12/2.

Close Encounters: Frances Burney, Actresses, and Models for Female Celebrity

LAURA ENGEL

In June of 1792, Frances Burney documented a strange encounter with the actress Mary Wells in a letter written to her beloved sister Susanna Phillips. While visiting John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery in Pall Mall, Burney describes being followed around the rooms and then nearly accosted by Wells—a well-known comedic actress who had by the early 1790s gained quite a reputation for her "noted and infamous" behavior offstage. Burney's inclusion of the Wells anecdote in her letter, which is framed theatrically as if it were a scene in a short play, is perhaps the best evidence we have of how Wells behaved in public and the ways in which her "audiences" perceived her as menacing, crazy, and above all, presumptuous. The letter also provides insight into Burney's views on the ever-changing status of female celebrities in London society.

Burney's comments on actresses in her diaries and correspondence reveal a complex picture of the impact of different actresses on their spectators and in the world. Considering the different "effects" on Burney produced by the actresses Frances Abington (1737–1815), Sarah Siddons (1755–1831), and Mary Wells (1762–1829), suggests that there were a variety of responses to female performers on stage and off that went beyond either complete adulation or rejection. While scholars such as Nora Nachumi and Emily Anderson have brilliantly discussed Burney's depiction of heroines as actresses in her novels, as well as the connections between Burney's involvement in the theater and her fiction, less has been written on Burney's comments on actual actresses, her interactions with them, and her opinions of them.[1] Burney's nuanced assessment of female performances and the range of possibilities attached to them proposes alternative ways of considering recent work on women and celebrity culture.

Burney's particular take on actresses illuminates and complicates Joseph Roach's thesis on celebrity in his book *It*, where he details the history of the often intangible aura or quality that surrounds celebrities—either they have "it" or they don't. Roach explains, "There is a certain quality, easy to perceive but hard to define, possessed by abnormally interesting people. Call it 'it.'. . . Most of us think that It is rare, and it is quite, even

to the point of seeming magical, but It is also everywhere to be seen" (Roach 1). Roach's analysis provides a framework for understanding how this quality of the "it-factor" manifests itself through celebrity. Although he points out that the charismatic aspect of the celebrity "it" factor can be both positive and negative, in his analysis of particular players he is more interested in what sustains a celebrity's aura than in how and why that aura might fail. In contrast, Burney provides ample material in her encounters with actresses for considering the potential failures of celebrity and the humiliations, vulnerabilities, and absurdities of public female performances. In addition, Burney's anecdotes about actresses emphasize the reality that celebrities may not be who or what we imagine.

According to Burney, Sarah Siddons, the most adored actress of her day and one of Roach's main examples of someone who possessed "it," was not nearly as sublime as others believed her to be. Burney's descriptions of Siddons off-stage underscore that her "real" persona did not live up to her remarkable public reputation. And while Burney was completely put off by the outrageous antics of the actress Mary Wells, she was far more fascinated by Wells's unusual behavior than she was by Siddons's performance of composed nobility. Wells's manipulation of celebrity privilege—her assumption that she had "it," even though she did not—becomes a terrifying experience for Burney and her companions. In addition, Wells's stalking of the Burney group in the Shakespeare Gallery is an ironic reversal of an incident which occurred years earlier when a teen-age Burney and her sister encountered the celebrated actress Mrs. Abington and secretly followed her down the street watching her window shop. Burney's reaction to actresses certainly reflects her own ambivalent social position and relation to her own celebrity at different points in her literary career, but it also suggests ways of thinking about actresses in everyday life, how they inhabited public spaces in the urban landscape and what kind of models they enacted for other professional women.

Burney's writings, then, make significant contributions to the newly emerging field of celebrity studies. In a recent article detailing new work in eighteenth-century celebrity studies, Cheryl Wanko offers an excellent summary of what constitutes a "celebrity" during this period: "Most scholars agree that the celebrity object is someone known mainly via the media circulation of his/her textual and/or visual images, which are minimally controlled by their human referents, necessarily multivalent to embody multiple cultural desires and fears, and absorbed by a cultural machinery that uses, multiplies, reinforces, and modifies those images"

(Wanko 351). She goes on to explain that academic analyses of celebrity investigate "the mechanisms by which one achieves popularity, in what forms, with whom, and to create what cultural meanings" (Wanko 351).[2] Wanko ends her article with an assessment of questions scholars of celebrity need to address more fully: "After examining the achievement of celebrity, we need finally to ask the fundamental question of why celebrity most often *fails* to attach, both then and now, especially when it seems available to anyone" (Wanko 359).

Burney's detailed account of the "half-crazy" Mary Wells, then, offers rich material for theorizing why celebrity "fails" to attach and for considering the dangerous consequences of the growing accessibility of celebrity to all. Burney's encounters with Abington and Siddons, both highly acclaimed celebrities, are also significant because of her ability to translate the effect of being in close proximity to them. Burney chronicles the experience of encountering celebrities by recording the impact of their physical presence. Celebrity historian Leo Braudy explains that one of the differences between celebrity and fame is that celebrity involves a close contact with the celebrated figure, while fame operates on a more ephemeral level. Celebrity "has to have a perceivable physical presence, and the corollary might be that when physical presence is obliterated by death, celebrities are no more, unless they made the transition to fame" (Braudy 1073). Braudy proposes, "If fame includes such an element of turning away from us, celebrity stares us right in the face, flaunting its performance and trying desperately to keep our attention" (Braudy 1072). Thus, Burney's writings about actresses offer contemporary readers a momentary re-creation of what it was like to see actresses in the flesh and a historical record of the materialization of cultural mechanisms that allowed celebrities to operate in particular ways.

Burney's reactions to actresses also reflect contemporary theories about how we perceive celebrities to be mirror images of ourselves. Braudy suggests that our current fascination with the "dark side" of celebrities (or self-immolating public personas like Lindsay Lohan or Eliot Spitzer) can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, to the famous doppelganger creation of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. In addition, he argues that in contemporary culture "charismatic individuals can no longer, if they ever could, rely on their charisma to be sufficient; they must through study or intuition understand how best to construct themselves for the public eye" (Braudy 1074). Burney's commentary on actresses pushes Braudy's formulations back a hundred years, suggesting that there is ample material

for tracing the roots of celebrity (de)construction, negative and positive image making, and the elusive properties of charisma to a pre-Freudian era.

Nobodies and Somebodies

Burney's ties to the theater, professional artists, and celebrity culture can be traced back to her early childhood. Burney's father, a musician and composer, became close friends with David Garrick, the theatrical manager and leading actor at Drury Lane, in the 1740s. A frequent guest in the Burney house, Garrick entertained Frances and her siblings with his lively anecdotes and performances.[3] Burney began attending the theater herself at a young age and expressed her intense desire to see Garrick on stage in all his major roles. In addition to attending plays (often seated in Garrick's box), Burney delighted in reading plays, imitating the actors, and reciting speeches from memory. Yet despite her love for the theater and its obvious connections to the plights of her literary heroines, Burney's relationship to writing for the stage and to the spectacle of performance remained deeply vexed throughout her career.[4]

Catherine Gallagher famously reads Burney's literary heroines and her own self-representation as an author through the nobody/somebody dichotomies of the quest for celebrity. She writes, "In sum, Burney wrote for, about, and from the point of view of 'Nobody,' stressing the questionable ontological and/or social status of her characters, her readers, and even herself . . . It was not surprising that Frances Burney's writings are remarkably saturated with those terms, for discourse about nonentity had special resonance for people who lived off their representations" (Gallagher 214). Gallagher stresses that for Burney "the social significance of the family name, however, was not a given. The family was self-consciously engaged in the project of creating it. They had no rent roles, no pedigrees, no real or invented histories of military or public service; they had only talent and knowledge, copyrights and such 'symbolic capital' as Dr. Burney's degree from Oxford and (much later) Frances's place at court" (Gallagher 217).[5] Burney's attempt to be "somebody" but also to play by the modest rules of late eighteenth-century female authorship and female propriety, in other words by appearing to be "nobody," was in many ways very similar to the task of late eighteenth-century actresses. In order to be perceived as legitimate professionals and associate themselves with aristocrats and elevated society, actresses engaged in complex and specific

self-fashioning strategies which similarly attempted to balance their determined ambition with their desire to represent themselves as worthy, authentic individuals.[6]

Admiring Abington

Burney's ambivalent relationship to the simultaneous vulnerability and fascination that public performance can create is reflected in her varied reactions to different actresses at different points in her career. On March 23, 1775, well before the publication of her celebrated novel, *Evelina* (1778), the event that initiated her status as a literary celebrity, Burney wrote the following entry in her journal about the actress, Frances Abington:

> Yesterday morning, as Susette & I were returning from Mr. Burney, we met the celebrated Actress, Mrs. Abington, walking & alone, in Tavistock Street. Susy proposed our turning back, & following her; the weather was beautiful, & [we] accordingly Traced her Foot steps, which were made very leisurely, as she looked at all the Caps as she passed. When we came to the End of the street, at the Corner of Charles Street who should we see but Mr. Garrick? He touched his Hat, & made a motion towards meeting. Mrs. Abington, who was just before us, returned a Courtesie, & crossed over to him, While we Walked gravely on, taking no sort of notice of his Bow, which we did not know who was meant for. They went down Charles Street together, & when we were out of their sight we again turned. (*The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney* 2: 94)

Burney's recounting of secretly following Frances Abington down the street with her sister creates a modern scene of teen fantasy. Sighting their favorite actress, the glamorous Mrs. Abington, actually in person, is riveting enough, but it is also intensely exciting to watch her performing everyday activities. In observing Abington shopping, Burney and her sister are privy to her "private" moments and potentially to how she goes about constructing her fashionable persona. If they "see" what she buys or desires, then they will have knowledge about what one needs to have in order to have "it"—to return to Roach's terminology. Burney's depiction of Abington supports Felicity Nussbaum's recent argument about Abington's role as a star actress and fashionable mannequin: "As a living mannequin dressed in high fashion, Abington advertised through her

self-commodified person, and through democratizing exchanges with the audience, that being à la mode was newly accessible to them" (Nussbaum 230).

Burney is acutely aware of the delight and the subversive possibilities of following someone famous. She stages a scene of recognition and misrecognition. Garrick the celebrity who knows both Burney and her sister (the ordinary people/nobodies) and Abington (the extraordinary person/somebody) may have seen all of them but bows in obvious recognition to Mrs. Abington. Burney and Susy are thus invisible for the moment, but in the potential embarrassment of being unseen and not recognized, they are safe from being exposed as celebrity stalkers. Burney's close encounter with Abington, then, is about the allure of having proximity to, yet distance from, famous people. Abington does not talk here; she is not a fully formed character, but rather she is a moving image, a projection. The setting of the street offers Burney and Susy freedom to see and be seen but also to get away. (This will not be the case later in the Shakespeare Gallery with Mary Wells.) Yet Burney's flight from the scene is not a giddy one. She reports, "we Walked gravely on, taking no sort of notice of his Bow, which we did not know who was meant for" (*EJLFB* 2: 94). Trying to appear calm, serious, and unaffected by her celebrity sighting and the potential embarrassment of thinking that Garrick's nod was meant for her, Burney recounts a moment of awkward vulnerability and loss. She is not the one who will be recognized at this moment, and those whom she wished to impress the most might never acknowledge her at all. In her encounter with Abington, Burney reminds us that there is a potential price to be paid for acknowledging the presence of a special/celebrated person. In that moment there is always the felt sense of the self-as-ordinary-other. Identification with celebrities can elicit a sense of agency for individuals, but it can also produce the opposite effect of enhancing and concretizing one's invisibility.

Seeing Sarah Siddons

It's interesting to consider the idea of invisibility when looking at Burney's reactions to Sarah Siddons, arguably the most visible female star of her day. Burney's interactions with Siddons highlight the juxtapositions between audiences' perceptions of a celebrity's persona and the "reality" of their bodies in person. Scholars have written extensively about the successful crafting of Siddons's public persona.[7] Burney's reactions to

Siddons at various points in her career add another dimension to these analyses. Burney held divided opinions about Siddons; she ultimately admired her as an actress but found her to be very dull and uninspiring as a person.[8] Burney's expectation that Siddons be as scintillating offstage as she was onstage suggests some of the mechanisms at work in constructing models of female celebrity and also emphasizes that these strategies did not always work.

Burney's commentaries about Siddons are significant because she seems to "see" aspects of Siddons that others did not. In December 1782, Burney writes:

> I must confess my admiration of Mrs. Siddons does not keep pace with that of the Town; yet I think her a pleasing and elegant Actress. Her Countenance is intelligent, and full of sensibility, her voice is penetrating and affecting, her attitudes, upon striking occasions, are very noble, though, in general, her arms are awkward. I think her neither *great* nor *astonishing*; her manner seems to me monotonous, her Walk mean, her air wants spirit, and her dignity is studied. Upon the whole, I think she has much merit and but a few defects yet, alltogether, something through-out, is wanting to produce upon me much effect. (*Frances Burney Journals and Letters* 192–93)

Burney's observations about Siddons are based on a comparison of her own original views on the actress with the general opinion of the "Town." According to Burney, Siddons is "pleasing and elegant," but her arms are "awkward" and her manner "monotonous." Overall, the "effect" on her is neither "*great* nor *astonishing*." A few years later in 1785, Burney records a conversation with the King, who expresses his great enthusiasm for Siddons, declaring, "I think there was never any player, in my time, so excellent, not Garrick himself;—I own it!," and then demands to know her opinion (*FBJL* 228). Burney writes, "I still said nothing; I could not concur, where I thought so differently" (*FBJL* 228). Even in an interaction with the King, Burney cannot bring herself to extol Siddons's virtues. Instead, she remains silent.

When the Queen invites Siddons to read at the palace in 1787, Burney describes her disappointment with the actress in detail:

> I was much disappointed in my expectations . . . I found her the

> Heroine of a Tragedy,—sublime, elevated, and solemn. In Face and person, truly noble and commanding; in manners, quiet and stiff; in voice, deep and dragging; and in conversation, formal, sententious, calm, and dry.—
>
> I expected her to have been all that is interesting; the delicacy and sweetness with which she seizes every opportunity to strike and to captivate upon the Stage, had persuaded me that her mind was formed with that peculiar susceptibility that, in different modes, must give equal powers to attract and to delight in common life. But I was very much mistaken . . .Whether Fame and success have spoiled her,—in making her imagine That to *speak* alone is enough, from Her, to *charm*, or whether she only possesses the skill of representing and embellishing materials with which she is furnished by others, I know not. But still I remain disappointed. (*FBJL* 251)

In Burney's description of her close encounter with Siddons, Burney re-emphasizes and expands on her earlier commentaries. For Burney, Siddons offstage in person is awkward and out of place. Her theatricality is stiff, mannered, and uninteresting. Fame and success have somehow "spoiled" her into believing that she can just be a celebrity without having to demonstrate her claim to genius. And, even more damning, Burney hints that Siddons's genius may only come from representing and embellishing the words of "others," not from her own talents and skills as an actress/performer. Here, Burney describes the potentially unsettling effects of seeing a famous actress in the flesh offstage. In effect, Burney manages to deconstruct the core of Siddons's aura or her claim to the "it-factor," which relied on the idea of her authenticity. If Siddons was offstage who she was onstage, then she could be legitimately seen as an aristocratic, domestic, noblewoman, but the other side of this perception is Burney's view of the "real" Siddons as a clumsy, unoriginal echo of her onstage self.

Watching Wells

While Burney's encounter on the street with Abington highlights the difference between celebrities and ordinary people, and her reaction to Siddons at the Palace reveals that celebrity is often based on assumptions that the celebrity is on stage exactly who she is off stage, Burney's experience in the Shakespeare Gallery with Mary Wells emphasizes the

potential for female celebrity to manifest itself in excessive and terrifying ways. Burney's encounter with Wells provides a momentary glimpse of the possibilities and anxieties of a new kind of celebrity culture: a world in which spaces are transformed, boundaries are elided, and theatricality becomes simultaneously threatening and absurd.[9] Given Burney's own complex relationship to fame at this point in her literary career, a moment between the publication of her first two novels, *Evelina* and *Cecilia*, and her last works, *Camilla* and *The Wanderer*, and right after her departure from her position as keeper of the robes for Queen Charlotte, Burney's dramatic retelling of her experience with "the wild-half crazy" Mrs. Wells provokes complex questions about the impact of new manifestations of celebrity culture on the boundaries and expression of female identities.

Wells's behavior represented for Burney an example of unique and unruly celebrity, which reinforced the realities of a new marketplace for artistic culture and expression that did not rely on a stable platform of taste and authenticity but, instead, on the sheer force of the visibility and tenacity of the performer. Wells's apparent lack of boundaries in a public space, her perverse manipulation of her audience, and her entitlement in doing so provide evidence of the extent to which celebrity culture had infiltrated everyday experience. Burney's encounter with Wells is also an ironic reminder of the powerful agency produced by an emerging culture of celebrity that allowed those who otherwise would have gone unrecognized to be seen, a chance for "nobodies" to become "somebodies" in potentially significant economic and social ways.

The setting of the Mary Wells incident, John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, is a space that represented a nexus of competing commercial and social ideologies about the role of professional artists, actors, and spectators in the late eighteenth century. John Brewer explains, "the Shakespeare Gallery, [was] planned in 1786 by John Boydell, a wealthy printseller and politician, as a shrine to William Shakespeare. Its avowed aim was to encourage a native school of history painting by commissioning British artists to paint historical works representing crucial moments in the plays of the Bard. Boydell appealed to painters to join a scheme 'where the national honour, the advancement of the Arts, and their own advantage [were] equally concerned'" (Brewer 247). The gallery flourished in its early years, becoming a fashionable spot to see and be seen, but faltered in the 1790s when the support of French and continental clients waned in the aftermath of the French revolution (Brewer 248). The gallery then closed, the building was sold, and the works of art and engravings were

dispensed of by lottery in 1805 (Brewer 248).

The Shakespeare Gallery was an experiment in the blending of high and low aesthetic genres (history painting and portraiture), public and private artistic venues (the public museum and the family gallery), in order to attract a variety of patrons (wealthy and middle class). Emblematic of the heyday of celebrity culture in the late eighteenth century, the Shakespeare gallery sought to reconcile many of the contradictions inherent in promoting the connections between the theater, painting, and mass-market engravings. Christopher Rovee describes the Boydell system: "Londoners would circulate through the gallery *en masse*, ogling the original compositions of Britain's finest painters, and building on this publicity, the engravings would circulate as international commodities on the Boydell-dominated print market that was the financial bloodline for the project" (Rovee 513–14). One of the attractions of the project was to join a subscriber list that included King George III. Thus, Rovee continues, "Boydell promised a kind of immortality to ordinary citizens, elevating them with their king as comrade patrons of the arts" (Rovee 514). Boydell's "promise of immortality to ordinary citizens" reflects a larger obsession with expanding the boundaries of celebrity culture to include spaces and venues outside of the theater. However, the possibility of "everyone" moving in the same spaces as actors and actresses, and of physically coming into contact with celebrities, could be both a pleasant and unpleasant experience, as Burney so aptly narrates.

A Wild Half-Crazy Woman

Unlike her commentaries about Abington and Siddons, which are much shorter, Burney's narrative about Wells reads very much like a scene in a play, with specific staging, dramatic surprises, and conflict between the actors in the scene. Upon entering the gallery, Burney, her father, and her friend Mrs. Crewe noticed "a lady in the first Room, dressed rather singularly, quite alone, & extremely handsome, who was parading about, with a Nosegay in her hand, which she frequently snifted at, in a manner that was evidently calculated to attract notice" (*The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney* 1: 207).[10] After they move to the "Inner room, to avoid her," Wells follows them, brushing closely by Mrs. Crewe, and dropping her nosegay dramatically in front of Dr. Burney. When these tactics for attention and recognition do not appear to work, Wells begins "singing various quick passages, with-out words or connection" further

alarming the group. Burney writes: "By the looks we inter-changed, we soon mutually said, This is a Mad woman!" (*JLFB* 1: 208). Burney and her companions attempt a slow retreat, but Wells was "in an instant at our Elbows" (*JLFB* 1: 208). She continues, "We were going to run for our lives–when Mrs. Townshend whispered Mrs. Crewe it was only Mrs. Wells, the actress! & said she was certainly only performing vagaries to *try effect*, which she was quite famous for doing" (*JLFB* 1: 208–09).[11] Burney goes on to describe Mrs. Crewe's reaction in detail:

> It would have been food for a Painter to have seen Mrs. Crewe during this explanation. All her terror instantly gave way to indignation—& scarcely any pencil could equal the high, vivid glow of her Cheeks. To find herself made the object of Game to the burlesque humour of a bold player, was an indignity she could not brook, & her mind was immediately at work how to assert herself against such unprovoked & unauthorised effrontery. (*JLFB* 1: 209)

Here Burney highlights her own ability to paint narrative "portraits" of specific individuals. In recreating Mrs. Crewe's extreme reaction to Wells's provocative and desperate behavior, Burney articulates Leo Braudy's argument about the particular dynamics of celebrity, which "stares us right in the face, flaunting its performance and trying desperately to keep our attention" (Braudy 1072). After clearly alarming Burney and her companions, Wells continues to accost the group using the gallery as her own eccentric performance space. Burney observes, "Mrs. Wells, singing, & throwing herself into extravagant attitudes, again rushed down the steps, & fixed her Eyes on Mrs. Crewe. . . . She then presently affected a violent Coughing, such a one as almost shook the Room, though such a forced & unnatural Noise as rather resembled howling than a Cold" (*JLFB* 1: 209).

Attempting to gain control over the situation, Mrs. Crewe tries to complain about Wells's behavior, mentioning the names of the people in her party to one of the proprietors of the gallery, which makes Burney very nervous because the anecdote may "all get into the News-papers" (*JLFB* 1: 210). Wells overhears this interchange and apparently exclaims: "It's very hard, very cruel indeed, to take such notice of people in public. The Public's open to us all, & we have all a right to behave how we please. And it's very hard, & very cruel in people to be so soon affronted. And one person is as good as another in a public place" (*JLFB* 1: 211). Burney responds by attempting to dissuade Mrs. Crewe from "competition with

this lady," describing Wells as "a wild, half-crazy woman, accustomed to indulge herself in all her whims, as I had witnessed at Weymouth, where, absurdly as she behaved, she was opposed by nobody, & seemed always to regard herself as a priveleged person" (*JLFB* 1: 211). Mrs. Crewe answers: "O pardon me! I have notion of that! . . . we do not molest her; she has no title to molest us. I don't under-stand such priveleges. If she assumes them as hers, what in the meantime, is to become of our's?" (*JLFB* 1: 211).[12]

Mrs. Crewe's remark is telling. If Wells assumes the privilege to act in any way she pleases because of her celebrity and her potential power to influence the public sphere (i.e., her ability to get things into the newspapers), what will happen to those who are supposed to have privileges as a result of their "actual" status in British society? This is a clear expression of the anxiety that Wells's behavior instilled in spectators outside of the comfortable boundaries of the theater. While Wells's antics were certainly annoying, the most galling aspect of the incident, according to Mrs. Crewe, was the boldness of her behavior as an actress in relation to a group of people who were clearly above her in social status.

Wells's counter-assertion that "the public's open to us all" can be read as a powerful and poignant statement about the possibilities for female celebrity, and it also has particular relevance for the doomed project of the Shakespeare Gallery. At the same moment that the establishment of female celebrity in the late eighteenth century generated a new kind of status and agency for women in the public sphere, the audience's assessment of those performances is ultimately the most powerful indicator of a celebrity's success or failure. The initial description of Wells as a "mad woman" and the subsequent revelation that she is only an actress "performing vagaries for effect" are particularly significant.

Burney's description of her encounter with Wells reveals inherent cultural assumptions about celebrity status for women in the late eighteenth century. Actresses were tolerated in the public sphere only if they remained "under control." Wells's habit of indulging herself in all of her "whims," a typical accusation leveled against many modern celebrities, is dangerous because it threatens established social codes and hierarchies. Celebrity status suggests that an individual's performance can win them a certain agency or privilege that they otherwise would never have obtained. Wells's performance of celebrity privilege can thus also be read as an ironic commentary on the process of fashioning celebrity. The public may be "open to us all," but there are still limitations on, and expectations of, feminine behavior that intangibly structure and script the

ways in which women are allowed to act and the ways in which audiences are led to respond to their performances.

Deviant Originality

Wells's performances in the Shakespeare Gallery are also significant because of the paradoxes about celebrity that the space represents. The original works on the walls of the Shakespeare Gallery were copied and circulated beyond the boundaries of the space of the gallery itself. Thus, people subscribing to the engravings circuit were purchasing known copies, which were valued because of the original commodities that they represented.[13] Wells's original and singular performances within the walls of the Shakespeare Gallery space (which are momentarily translated into a flexible theatrical venue where the audience is literally trapped by the menacing onslaught of the performer) represent, then, a terrifying spectacle that revises associations between originality and value. While the celebrity becomes famous in part because of the possibilities for duplicating his or her original persona, Wells's deviant originality is not reproducible.

Traditionally, originality or authenticity is tied to an essential quality of worth and value. In her preface to *Evelina*, Burney urges her readers to see her heroine as a true original, "The heroine of these memoirs, young, artless, and inexperienced, is

> No faultless Monster, that the world ne'er saw;

but the offspring of Nature, and of Nature in her simplest attire. In all the Arts, the value of copies can only be proportioned to the scarcity of originals" (*Evelina* 7). The idea that Evelina is not a "Monster, that the world ne'er saw' but, instead, an "offspring of nature" because of her recognizable foibles and her sympathetic originality suggests that originality is worthy paradoxically because of its recognizable authenticity. Wells's theatrical antics and her monstrous behavior render originality something altogether different and potentially dangerous. This is very different from Burney's view of Siddons's lack of originality, which renders her awkward, dull, and monotonous.

In addition, Burney's horror that the original incident with Wells may be reproduced in the newspapers represents larger anxieties about the loss of control over the ways in which anecdotes/narratives

are framed in the public media. Burney had good reason to be afraid of Wells's potential manipulation of the authentic or "original" story of what happened between them in the Shakespeare Gallery. For several years Wells participated in running her lover Edward Topham's newspaper, *The World*. Burney writes: "I must always fear being brought into any Newspaper cabals. Let the fact be ever so much against her, she will think the circumstances all to her honour, if a paragraph comes out beginning *Mrs. Crewe & Mrs. Wells*—" (*JLFB* 1: 211).[14] Burney's recording of these details emphasizes Wells's potential ability to manipulate the facts of the incident, and thus to extend her celebrity "privileges" beyond the space of the gallery with lasting effects.

Unlike Burney's experience with Siddons, which had a "disappointing" effect on her, Burney's proximity to Wells was truly unsettling and lingered even after Wells had left the scene. Burney describes getting into Mrs. Crewe's carriage and watching Wells as she "walked in sight, dodging us, & playing antics of a tragic sort of gesture, till we drove out of her power to keep up with us. What a strange Creature!" (*JLFB* 1: 212). Burney continues, "In our way back to Welbeck Street we could talk only of this Adventure. 'Such an unprovoked & assured impertinence, said Mrs. Crewe, ought certainly to be put an end to. An attack in public takes one defenceless, there is no getting away from it: unless by running, which would be just the encouragement this species of wit would triumph in the most. I own I have no notion of being conquered by people of that sort" (*JLFB* 1: 212). Mrs. Crewe then compares Wells to two characters in Burney's novel *Cecilia*: "If she went about making these assaults for any good purpose, or to answer any end that could not be produced in private, like Albany, it would be another thing. But such a woman as this knows no more why or what she does, than the pretty silly Hay Maker at the Masquerade, who, when she is asked *what she does with herself in the Winter? answers, why the same as in the Summer, to be sure!*—'" (*JLFB* 1: 212). Burney ends the anecdote with: "Mrs. Crewe made these two allusions precisely as if they belonged to some acquaintances of her own, which gave them all the grace of requiring no reply, nor any apparent notice" (*JLFB* 1: 212).

Mrs. Crewe's articulation of the threatening nature of Wells's behavior—the idea of being accosted, followed, manipulated, and trapped must have resonated with Burney, who may have included the details of Mrs. Crewe's reaction to the event as a substitution for a specific explanation of her own final thoughts about Wells. Mrs. Crewe's subsequent

comparison between the real Wells and the fictional characters in *Cecilia* is interestingly a way of re-contextualizing Wells's behavior in terms of the imaginary incidents in a novel, a far less threatening or intimidating thing than acknowledging Wells's potential power in "real life." The image of Burney and Mrs. Crewe traveling safely away in the carriage (slightly ironic because of associations with carriages as dangerous vehicles for unprotected young heroines in eighteenth-century fiction) while Wells, running after them outside, struggles to keep up with them, is in many ways a haunting image of what would become of the actress years later. Wells was unable to sustain the fascination of her original and unusual performance and became towards the end of her life an abject figure.

Mrs. Crewe's association between Wells and Burney's fictional creations also reflects anxieties about distinguishing between fact and fiction. Once again, when it is difficult to figure out who is the author, what is the original, and what is the copy, the process of discerning authenticity and "worth," or who deserves what Mrs. Crewe calls "privileges," becomes a vexed project. As Christopher Rovee explains, similar issues of taste and aesthetic discrimination were inherent in the appeal and unavoidable decline of the Shakespeare Gallery: "A highly visible venue in which artists could experiment with the relation between nation and genre, it offered an aesthetic harbinger of the complex social transformations that would define nineteenth-century Britain. Here, the romantic myth of the original ran smack into the commercial appeal of the copy; genres on the high end of the hierarchy became subject to the skilled labor of engravers; and authority of all kinds was reimagined in collective terms" (Rovee 543).

Rovee's notion of the ways in which the Shakespeare Gallery "reimagined authority" of all kinds in "collective terms" echoes Mary Wells's powerful declaration that "the public is open to us all." What happens to authority when the "public" is no longer an extension of an elite private sphere? The tension between Burney's fascination with Wells's behavior and the danger Wells's impropriety represents for her and her companions is a microcosm of the larger tensions surrounding actors, actresses, artists, theatrical managers, gallery owners, and their professional and social positions in London society. Wells may have imagined that she could claim a legitimate place in the Shakespeare Gallery as a well-known actress, but in the urban world offstage, her theatrical antics were read as unbalanced and menacing rather than entertaining. For Burney, Wells, the "strange creature," represents a momentary threat and a cautionary tale about the potential dangers of the insidious spread of celebrity culture.

Conclusions

Not surprisingly, the same qualities that led many to dismiss Wells as notoriously eccentric in her own lifetime have also led scholars to ignore her impact on the late eighteenth-century theater. Despite the fact that she "knew everyone and everyone knew her" in the late eighteenth-century theatrical world, scholarship on Wells has been limited, and the extent of her influence on historical figures that have received far more attention, such as Sarah Siddons, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Mary Robinson, has been largely unrecognized.[15] Burney's inclusion of Wells in her daily correspondence provides important evidence of Wells's presence and impact offstage—information that is crucial to charting a history of female celebrity that may have otherwise gone unrecorded and is not included in the traditional theatrical record.

In the Shakespeare Gallery, there is a clear division between the actress and the ladies, yet there is a sense that the actress's place in privileged society has become more threatening and in some ways less ambiguous. Even though Burney's reaction to Wells was a desire to run away from her and to return to the "safety" of her own world, the fact that Burney wrote about Wells and her curious behavior suggests that her interest in the potentially subversive power of female performances and spectacles would remain a part of her world at large, particularly out and about in urban spaces, and that this theme would continue to haunt her literary imagination long after she and her companions had "drove out of her (Wells's) power to keep up with us."

Ultimately, considering Burney's writings about actresses provides a partial answer to Leo Braudy's question: "What then do we see when we see a famous or a celebrated person, whether in the present, through immediate or virtual contact, or in the past through whatever archive or evidence we can muster?" (Braudy 1073). Burney's commentary on female celebrities also reaffirms Braudy's assertion that "by seeing a performer we enhance and reaffirm our own desire to be seen" (Braudy 1074). Perhaps significantly, the teenager who followed Frances Abington and the young lady who had the originality to critique Sarah Siddons would eventually become the older woman whose own celebrity and public image were constantly at risk. Indeed, Catherine Gallagher's argument about the trajectory of Burney's literary career echoes ironically, in small part, the fate of Mary Wells: "The more she [Burney] wrote, the more she sold,

the deeper in debt she was to a public who continually complained that she was not making good on her earlier promise. The Nobodies who had taken such pleasure in her fictions gradually declined, it seemed, into nobody at all" (Gallagher 256).

NOTES

[1] For analysis of Burney as a novelist and playwright, see Emily Anderson's chapter on Burney in *Eighteenth-Century Authorship and the Play of Fiction: Novels and the Theatre Haywood to Auste*n (47–76). See also Nora Nachumi's excellent discussion of Burney and the "performance of femininity" in Acting Like a Lady (116–46).

[2] Burney makes a brief appearance in Wanko's article when she is describing the effects of celebrity on authorial performances. She writes, "Writers as diverse as Delariviere Manley, Eliza Haywood, Ann Yearsley, Hannah More, and Frances Burney demonstrate different methods of creating identity within the freedoms and constraints celebrity increasingly offered" (355).

[3] See Hemlow, *History* 12.

[4] Barbara Darby notes: "While Burney was surrounded by theater professionals, including such noted figures as Richard Cumberland, David Garrick, Samuel Johnson, Arthur Murphy, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and of course Samuel "daddy" Crisp, who all offered her encouragement at various points in her career, her participation in the theater world remained almost exclusively private and her literary reputation would rest until recently on her letters, journals, and novels" (166). For detailed discussion of Burney's plays, see Darby's *Frances Burney Dramatist: Gender, Performance, and the Late Eighteenth-Century Stage.*

[5] Margaret Doody suggests that Burney's anxiety about public attention may have also been a reaction to her father's un-ambivalent strategies to gain public recognition. Doody writes: "Frances Burney's peculiar stiffness about public notice, her shyness at being loudly praised (qualities which have annoyed critics of her *Diaries*) can be seen as a reaction to her father's praise-seeking, and his almost abject, if graceful,

submission to any patronage" (14).

[6] For more on late eighteenth-century actresses and self-fashioning, particularly Sarah Siddons, see Robyn Asleson, ed., *A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and her Portraitists* and *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Art and Culture 1776–1812*, Gill Perry's *Spectacular Flirtations*, Felicity Nussbaum's *Rival Queens*, and my *Fashioning Celebrity*. For more on actresses and literary celebrity, see Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender Poetry and Spectatorship*.

[7] See Robyn Asleson, Shearer West, and Heather McPherson on the cultural impact of Siddons's portraits, as well as her ability to manipulate her public image through a variety of visual materials. Judith Pascoe, Catherine Burroughs, and Laura Rosenthal have explored Siddons's role as a literary and cultural icon. Joseph Roach has explored the ways in which Siddons's extraordinary success led to an "acquisition of cultural authority" that depended in large part on the apparent whiteness of her skin.

[8] Siddons did star in Burney's ill-fated production of *Edwy and Elgiva*. See Doody, *Frances Burney* 180, and Burney, *Journals and Letters 375*.

[9] Most of what we know about Mary Wells, otherwise known as Mary Davies, Becky Wells, Mary Stephens, and Mrs. Ezra, comes from her three-volume autobiography, *The Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Sumbel Late Wells*, published in 1811. Her memoir includes details of her career in the British theater as an actress, singer, and comedienne (she was famous for her imitations of Sarah Siddons and Dorothy Jordan); her liaisons with famous men; episodes of her alleged madness and treatment by Dr. Willis (the same doctor who "cured" George III); and her exotic marriage in debtors prison to Mr. Sumbel, who divorced her because she would not abide by the laws of Judaism. The narrative is lengthy, fragmented, and often difficult to follow, which has led scholars to dismiss much of the information in it. Burney's details about Wells thus offer substantial evidence on the impact of her persona and her career on public life.

[10] Frances Anne Greville (later Mrs. Crewe) was a lifelong friend of Frances and her father Dr. Burney (Doody 14).

[11] Burney adds, "This idea I confirmed, by recollecting various nearly similar gambols she had played at Weymouth, though I had not at first well known her" (*JLFB* 1: 209). In the summer of 1789 at Weymouth, Wells apparently followed King George III around the harbor on a yacht attempting to attract his attention. For more on Wells's outrageous behavior, see my chapter on Wells in *Fashioning Celebrity*.

[12] Burney's italics.

[13] Felicity Nussbaum, Joseph Roach, Robyn Asleson, Shearer West, Gill Perry, and others have demonstrated that celebrity culture flourished in the eighteenth century largely because of the proliferation and dissemination of materials about celebrities (newspaper articles, engravings, miniatures, china figures, etc.), which circulated widely and gave audiences the opportunity to "own" a piece of their favorite player. Purchasing "copies" or signifiers of celebrities in various forms became a way for the public to imagine a particular relationship to the original star performer.

[14] Burney's italics.

[15] In her recent biography of Elizabeth Inchbald, *I'll Tell You What: The Life of Elizabeth Inchbald*, Annabel Jenkins writes of Wells, "Like Inchbald, she knew everybody, and everybody in the theatre world of London knew her after the summer of 1781" (141).

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