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London and the Female *Bildungsroman*: Frances Burney's *Evelina*, *Cecilia*, and *The Witlings*

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Although many scholars have analyzed Burney's works through the lens of marriage and the family, given the central importance of London to Burney's stories, the urban setting merits special attention. In *Evelina* (1778), *The Witlings* (1779), and *Cecilia* (1782), Burney shows how London directly impacts single women's financial, marital, and social options. Through heroines who must navigate the perils of urban life, the author explores topics such as the commercialization of leisure, the clash between public and private life, and female vulnerability in the male gaze. Within Burney's early novels and plays, women's coming-of-age is inextricably tied to London itself.

While the city seems to offer an endless array of opportunities and wares, Burney reveals the class and gender constraints of urban life. *Evelina*, *Cecilia*, and *The Witlings* capture the cultural unease with female agency, and Burney presents marriage as both the solution to and the problem with limited female independence. Lest we condemn Burney for her emphasis on marriage, Jane Spencer reminds us, "The female *Bildungsroman* is bound to be problematic in a society where a woman's maturity is marked by entering a marital relationship in which she is considered a perpetual minor" (29-30). And as Kristina Straub notes, Burney recognized the complications of depicting female agency in a patriarchal society:

> *Evelina* seems to juggle two apparently contradictory ideas of marriage: the panacea that cures the ills of Evelina's life as opposed to "realistic," even grim notions of marriage. . . . But this apparent contradiction may also be the result of Burney's need to remain honest about both her negative impression of marriage and her conservative endorsement of traditional female roles. Marriage is, in Burney's words, "such chance," yet it is also women's *only* chance at what convention defined as a full life, and the novelist can hardly be blamed for stacking the deck so that her heroine wins the gamble. (61-62)

While Burney conveniently ends *Cecilia*, *Evelina*, and *The Witlings* with the marriages of her heroines, ultimately urban life has the greatest impact on women's expectations, choices, and experiences. London itself, and all the opportunities and predicaments it encompasses, rivals the ability of any single character to shape her heroines' fates.

When the first official Census was recorded in 1801, London housed 900,000 people (Porter 131), making it twelve times bigger than any other city in the world (Rudé 20). With a growing population came increasing commercial pursuits, and the city attracted regional and international visitors with its seemingly endless luxuries. In his 1782 preface to *The Ambulator: Or, a Pocket Companion, in a Tour Round London*, R. Lobb described the city as a commercial paradise:

> No part of the kingdom, perhaps can present more attractive scenes than the environs of London; in which the man of leisure may find amusement, and the man of business the most agreeable relaxation . . . rural elegance and rural beauty here appear in their most fascinating forms . . . Extensive prospects charm the eye with undescribable variety: the landscape, less extensive invites the pensive mind to contemplation; or the creative powers of Art exhibit an Elysium where Nature once appeared in her rudest state.[1]

The city's reputation as the cultural and commercial epicenter of Britain was solidified at the time of Burney's writing. However, economic participation largely depended on one's gender and class. For the poor, the landscape of the city was considerably limited. As James Walvin remarks, "The great bulk of working people had little free time, spare cash or adequate opportunities to enjoy what were, in fact, costly commercial pleasures" (153). The city became a prime destination for working-class women, who found work as domestic servants, seamstresses, and even prostitutes. Urban society exposed inherent class tensions, and the economic gap between the leisured and working classes is readily apparent in *Cecilia*, *Evelina*, and *The Witlings*.

Beyond capturing the general socioeconomic anxieties of London, Burney connects these fears to the frivolous consumerism of the leisured classes—in particular, the feminization of commercial excess. In *Cecilia*, Burney describes the daily routine of the *Ton* women, writing, "Several days passed on nearly in the same manner; the mornings were all spent in gossiping, shopping and dressing, and the evenings were regularly appropriated to public places, or large parties of company."[2] The gender and class dynamics of eighteenth-century London become most apparent in considering leisure

activities. James Walvin notes that while "women of the propertied orders enjoyed on equal terms many of their social group's pleasures—music, soirées, balls, masques, and the endless rounds of entertainment and dining" (156), shopping was viewed as a particularly gendered pastime. Indeed, German novelist Sophie von La Roche chronicled the diverse array of wares and services offered to urban women, writing:

> We especially noticed a cunning device for showing women's materials. Whether they are silks, chintzes, or muslins, they hang down in folds behind the fine high windows so that the effect of this or that material, as it would be in the ordinary folds of a woman's dress, can be studied. Amongst the muslins all colours are on view, and so one can judge how the frock would look in company with its fellows . . . Behind great glass windows absolutely everything one can think of is neatly, attractively displayed, and in such abundance of choice as almost to make one greedy.[3]

Burney's criticism of the "commercial city" (*C* 44) extends to women's spending habits (which, ironically, constrain women further) as well as the debilitating effects of such behavior on women's integrity and character. For example, as Mr. Monckton remarks to Cecilia Beverley:

> "... three years of absence spent in the cultivation of an understanding naturally of the first order, by encreasing your wisdom, has made you more fastidious; while the same time spent by [Mrs. Harrel] in mere idleness and shew, has hurt her disposition, without adding to her knowledge, and robbed her of her natural excellencies, without enriching her with acquired ones." (*C* 197)

Not only does London society encourage poor spending habits, but the urban environment also erodes women's intellect and character.

Though Burney might condemn the superficiality of London society, she undoubtedly recognizes the importance of identifying urban archetypes, a skill that is particularly important for London women, who must maintain their propriety in all sorts of company. Burney's heroines make sense of their environment by deciphering urban behavioral norms—engaging with the familiar London archetypes of fops, cits, and *Ton* misses. These urban figures play critical roles in Burney's novels and plays, for they facilitate her protagonists' coming-of-age. For instance, Cecilia Beverley learns important lessons about female friendship and the value of loyalty through her tumultuous relationship with her citified childhood friend, Mrs. Harrel. Meanwhile, Evelina Anville must learn to resist the foppish mannerisms of

Mr. Lovel and the rakish menace of Sir Clement Willoughby in order to secure the admiration of Lord Orville. And in *The Witlings*, Cecilia Stanley's bankruptcy forces her to engage with milliners, seamstresses, and other working class professionals. Through their conflict and engagement with contemporary urban archetypes, Burney's protagonists reflect upon their own roles in London society.

Self-awareness and social consciousness are particularly problematic for women, however, for London's emphasis on spectacle and scrutiny often conflicts with women's private lives and sensibilities. For instance, in *The Witlings*, public knowledge of Cecilia Stanley's bankruptcy nearly derails her impending marriage. Similarly, Evelina and Cecilia Beverley must face unwanted male advances at the theater and in public gardens. And in *Cecilia*, the estate sale of Lady Belgrade and the bankruptcy of Mrs. Harrel reveal how vulnerable women can be in the public eye. The inherent contradiction of city life lies in its emphasis on social recognition combined with its potential for anonymity (Wagner 103-04). By becoming aware of their role within London's social strata, as well as others' place in this hierarchy, Burney's heroines must explore and form a new urban identity.

Like their rural counterparts, urban young ladies were expected to craft an identity by carefully guarding their virtue while bowing to male authority. Contemporary literature emphasized female humility and obedience, particularly useful in an urban context. For instance, one review of *Evelina* suggested that the novel "[m]ay prove equally useful and entertaining to the younger part of our *male* as well as *female* Readers; to the latter of whom we particularly recommend it, as conveying many practical lessons both on morals and manners."[4] This hints at the importance of late eighteenth-century advice books, designed to provide proper modes of conduct for women. As Peter Ackroyd theorizes, literature emphasizing female humility and obedience was particularly useful in an urban context:

> . . . the purpose [of these books] was to restrain or curb the natural power or instincts of women, all the more overtly displayed in the city; a distinction was often drawn between the city wife and the country wife, for example, the latter manifesting all the characteristics of docility and faithfulness which the former noticeably lacks. (620)

Burney's heroines thus struggle to meet standards of docile femininity and at the same time protect themselves against urban exploitation. Though the moral binary between city and country has been well-chronicled (and satirized) throughout the Restoration and long eighteenth century, Burney's

novels offer new insights into standards of urban propriety. It is not that living in the city burdened women with new standards of conduct and propriety—indeed, we see similar codes of conduct circulated throughout Britain—but that London challenged women to uphold these same standards amidst urban disorder. In a setting where social and class roles seemed threatened by urban mobility, propriety became all the more important. And the lengths to which Burney's protagonists go to uphold this propriety evidences its power.

Evelina

Burney completed her first major work, *Evelina*, when she was twenty-five years old. Her widely popular epistolary novel depicts the adventures of a young woman who comes into London society. Burney follows her protagonist through the first six months of her time in the city; therefore, Evelina's coming-of-age is inevitably linked to London. As Burney explicitly states in the preface to *Evelina*, her heroine's initial "ignorance" and "secluded retirement"[5] will stand in contrast to the real-world experience Evelina gains in London. Evelina's exposure to a wide variety of characters within an urban setting forces her to grapple with complex issues of gender, class, and female identity. By the end of the novel, she is substantially less "young, artless, and inexperienced" (*E* 96).

Evelina's primary guardian, Reverend Villars, understands the susceptibility of young women in urban settings. Villars realizes that Evelina's sheltered upbringing has made her especially vulnerable to London's influence, for he cautions Lady Howard, "The town-acquaintance of Mrs. Mirvan are all in the circle of high life; this artless young creature, with too much beauty to escape notice, has too much sensibility to be indifferent to it; but she has too little wealth to be sought with propriety by men of the fashionable world" (*E* 107-08). Villars specifies that it is not Evelina's wealth and experience that will attract men, but her beauty and innocence. However, he realizes that in time, experience may serve as a check against naïveté, noting, "the time draws on for experience and observation to take place of instruction" (*E* 107). It is through knowledge gained in London that Evelina will learn to form her own judgments about the world and to manage her public reception.

Although Villars is apprehensive about his ward's trip to London, Lady Howard provides a different perspective. She notes the benefits of such an

experience by specifically connecting London to Evelina's coming-of-age. As she tells Villars:

> [I]t is time that she should see something of the world. When young people are too rigidly sequestered from it, their lively and romantic imaginations paint it to them as a paradise of which they have been beguiled; but when they are shown it properly, and in due time, they see it such as it really is, equally shared by pain and pleasure, hope and disappointment. (*E* 106)

Indeed, Evelina's first accounts of London are tinged by this "pleasure" and "hope"; her letters to Villars describe a city of spectacle, beauty, and wonder. She witnesses the famous actor David Garrick perform at the Drury-Lane Theater, walks in St. James's Park, attends a private ball, and strolls in Ranelagh Gardens. She describes the latter to Villars, writing, "It is a charming place, and the brilliancy of the lights, on my first entrance, made me almost think I was in some inchanted castle [sic], or fairy palace, for all looked like magic to me" (*E* 130). Although she sometimes romanticizes urban life, Evelina is not so easily seduced as the reader (and Villars) might think. She writes to Villars, "the houses and streets are not quite so superb as I expected" (*E* 116), thus evidencing Lady Howard's prediction.

Evelina's first initiation into London society comes when she assumes the role of urban spectator. Ever the sharp observer, she notes how her appearance differs from the other London women, remarking that her style of dress is not yet "Londonized" (*E* 116). As Evelina delights in learning the names of the city's operas and playhouses (*E* 114), she acknowledges her own anonymity, admitting, "As to me, I should be alike unknown in the most conspicuous or most private part of the [Opera] house" (*E* 116). Especially because Evelina does not yet realize her social shortcomings, she is content to remain detached from London culture. However, her lack of urban knowledge quickly become apparent when she meets the handsome Lord Orville, who "talked of public places, and public performers; but he soon discovered that I was totally ignorant of them" (*E* 125). Evelina's brief tour of the theatres and parks of London cannot stand in for real, lived experiences in the city.

Evelina's naïveté becomes problematic in social settings, such as the private ball she attends soon after her arrival in London. As a rural outsider, she does not know how to dance or even to converse with such an esteemed partner as Lord Orville. Inexperience with polite etiquette makes her a target for public ridicule, for the men at the dance discuss her looks and airs,

concluding that she is "ignorant or mischievous" and "a poor weak girl" (*E* 129). When Evelina mistakenly rejects Mr. Lovel for a dance, he later mocks her, saying:

> 'I think, Ma'am, you was never in town before? . . . So I did presume. Doubtless, Ma'am, every thing must be infinitely novel to you. Our customs, our manners, and *les etiquettes de nous autres* [our etiquette], can have very little resemblance to those you have been used to. I imagine, Ma'am, your retirement is at no very small distance from the capital?' (*E* 180)

By characterizing Evelina as a provincial outsider, Mr. Lovel publicly shames her for rejecting him. The narrator quickly realizes that her country upbringing has ill-prepared her for entrance into fashionable London society, concluding, "I am too inexperienced and ignorant to conduct myself with propriety in this town, where every thing is new to me, and many things are unaccountable and perplexing" (*E* 144). Yet Evelina also criticizes urban society, which is cruel to those who fail to grasp social custom. As she rightfully suggests, "But, really, I think there ought to be a book, of all the laws and customs *à-la-mode*, presented to all young people, upon their first introduction into public company" (*E* 185). Through her failings, Evelina learns that appearances are critical to one's social reception and that anonymity is sometimes preferable to public attention.

Beyond the gender and regional politics of polite society, life in London also forces the protagonist to confront urban chaos. Burney highlights Evelina's fear of crowds and strangers—two unavoidable staples of city life. For instance, in describing her anxiety at the ball, Evelina writes, ". . . I was frightened at the thoughts of dancing before so many people, all strangers, and, which was worse, *with* a stranger; however, that was unavoidable, for though I looked round the room several times, I could not see one person that I knew" (*E* 121). In a city of strangers and crowds, Evelina never truly gains the confidence to withstand public scrutiny. Even at the end of the novel she remains paralyzed by public attention. For instance, when Evelina visits the spas at Bristol Hotwells, Burney writes:

> . . . and the moment we entered, I heard a murmuring of, "*That's she!*" and, to my great confusion, I saw every eye turned towards me. I pulled my hat over my face, and, by the assistance of Mrs. Selwyn, endeavoured to screen myself from observation: nevertheless, I found I was so much the object of general attention, that I entreated her to hasten away. (*E* 463-64)

Evelina is the focus of speculation throughout the novel: her dubious lineage, her romantic connection to Lord Orville, and her appearance all expose her to criticism. Yet Burney details how the urban context influences this speculation, connecting it to the public nature of city life.

Without a proper guardian in the city (Madame Duval hardly counts), Evelina must learn to navigate the city on her own. Unsurprisingly, without Reverend Villars or Mrs. Mirvan to protect her, she is exposed to a range of unsavory London characters. The ball she attends early in the novel serves as an important allegory for her coming-of-age, for it forces Evelina to confront, nay *experience*, the male presence of London. She describes the fops, writing, "The gentlemen, as they passed and repassed, looked as if they thought we were quite at their disposal, and only waiting for the honour of their commands; and they sauntered about, in a careless indolent manner, as if with a view to keep us in suspense" (*E* 120). Evelina's anthropological account of fops takes a dark turn when she meets Sir Clement Willoughby, a predatory figure who repeatedly accosts Evelina in public places. His obsession with Evelina repels and frightens her, and more than once she resolves "never to be again alone with him" (*E* 204). She comes to understand that London men are quick to take advantage of a pretty girl, especially when social custom requires women to remain polite and accommodating. As Villars warns her, "Remember, my dear Evelina, nothing is so delicate as the reputation of a woman: it is, at once, the most beautiful and the most brittle of all human things" (*E* 279). In opposition to her natural trust in male authority, London trains Evelina to question men's true motives. In this way Burney cleverly reveals the conflicting demands city life places on women—Evelina must uphold propriety and yet not transgress urban social customs.

Contrasting the fops is the aristocratic Lord Orville, through whom Evelina is exposed to London nobility. Unlike Sir Clement Willoughby, Lord Orville is polite and respectful towards women, interested in Evelina's opinions, and seemingly impervious to the city's consumer culture. She writes to Reverend Villars, "His conversation was sensible and spirited; his air and address were open and noble; his manners gentle, attentive, and infinitely engaging; his person is all elegance, and his countenance, the most animated and expressive I have ever seen" (*E* 122). Lord Orville sets Evelina's standards for polite, urban, male behavior. For instance, when Evelina loses her party in Vauxhall Gardens and is accosted by prostitutes, Orville treats her with unwavering dignity and respect, regardless of her present company. Thus, Evelina comes to see Orville's merit by comparing his behavior with that of

her other admirers. She contrasts Orville with Sir Clement Willoughby, who:

> seems disposed to think the alteration in my companions authorises an alteration in his manners. It is true, he has always treated me with uncommon freedom, but never before with so disrespectful an abruptness. This observation, which he has given me cause to make, of his *changing with the tide*, has sunk him more in my opinion, than any other part of his conduct. (*E* 323)

As Spencer observes, "the impossibly decorous Lord Orville proves his superiority to the heroine's other admirers by his ability to see through apparently compromising social appearances and appreciate her true inner worth" (29). Evelina's ability to find genuine affection amidst artificial relationships speaks to her increasing maturity and confidence. Her changing relationship with Lord Orville—from polite stranger to confidante to love interest—also represents her romantic coming-of-age.

The gender politics of coming-of-age are also evident in Evelina's intellectual maturation. As stated previously, throughout the novel Evelina learns to think and act for herself, trading her initial passivity for a more assertive demeanor. She slowly matures into a discerning urban dweller although she initially relies upon her elders for moral guidance. In one letter, she begs Villars to "think for me" (*E* 231), showing deference to male authority and a lack of confidence in her own judgment. However, in her guardian's absence, Evelina is forced to reason through ethical dilemmas. The delay in correspondence means that she cannot rely on Villars for immediate advice and, thus, must navigate the city on her own. Although she is not without other caregivers, such as Mrs. Mirvan and Mrs. Selwyn, Evelina sees Villars as the supreme moral authority in her life. She tells him, "Unable as I am to act for myself, or to judge what conduct I ought to pursue, how grateful do I feel myself, that I have such a guide and director to counsel and instruct me as yourself!" (*E* 274). Evelina's intellectual and moral development largely defines her coming-of-age.

Villars understands that London will challenge Evelina's ingrained way of thinking. He calls upon her to trade her traditional female passivity and submission for a renewed moral responsibility, telling her:

> ". . . you must learn not only to *judge* but to *act* for yourself: If any schemes are started, any engagements made, which your understanding represents to you as improper, exert yourself resolutely in avoiding them, and do not, by too passive a facility, risk the censure of the world, or your own future regret." (*E* 279)

Like most young people, Evelina learns by trial and error. Her virtue becomes suspect when Sir Willoughby seeks her out alone repeatedly. She also becomes lost at night in Vauxhall Gardens, prompting a group of men to mistake her for a prostitute. Furthermore, Evelina does not learn from her past mistakes, for when she is separated from the Branghtons in Marybone Gardens, she is again associated with the fallen women of the city. When a pair of prostitutes link arms with Evelina, she writes, "Had I been at liberty, I should have instantly run away from them, when I made the shocking discovery; but, as they held me fast, that was utterly impossible: and such was my dread of their resentment or abuse, that I did not dare make any open attempt to escape" (*E* 360). Thus, Evelina allows her urban fears to immobilize her, rather than resorting to the action that Villars so urges.

Though she remains paralyzed by social convention concerning her own fate, Evelina proves her ability to act regarding others' misfortune. Like the protagonist in *Cecilia*, Evelina is spurred to action through exposure to financial hardship. The Scottish poet Macartney (later revealed to be Evelina's half-brother) is a boarder at the Branghton household in London. When his poverty drives him to attempt suicide, Evelina listens to her instincts and is able to persuade him otherwise. She describes the harrowing experience, telling Villars, "My first thought was to fly to Mr. Branghton, but I feared that an instant of time lost, might for ever be rued; and therefore, guided by the impulse of my apprehensions, as well as I was able, I followed him up stairs" (*E* 299). Instead of being immobilized by doubt and insecurity, Evelina courageously saves Macartney's life. In doing so, she recognizes her own autonomy and judgment in navigating urban environments.

In *Evelina*, Burney uses the context of London as a backdrop for the heroine's romantic, intellectual, and personal development. Margaret Anne Doody suggests that in the process of coming-of-age, Burney's intent is not to fault Evelina but, instead, to proffer social commentary. As Doody writes, "Evelina is no paragon, but the story of her coming-to-be does not rely on her mistakes. Rather, the trials of her growing up reflect the errors in her society rather than herself" (46). We may view Evelina's shortcomings as part of Burney's critique of London culture and not necessarily a moral failing on the part of her heroine. Through a variety of public mishaps, Evelina learns to act in accordance with societal and moral values. Her self-awareness allows her to see her own inexperience in the city, and she also becomes adept at distinguishing others' intentions—especially in regard to men. Finally, under the guidance of Reverend Villars, Evelina learns

to listen to her own intuition. She ultimately gains the life experience that leads to intellectual and moral autonomy. Evelina's trials reveal the gender complexities of urban life. Just as Evelina is able to assume the role of critical spectator, she also becomes the urban spectacle.

Cecilia and *The Witlings*

Cecilia and *The Witlings* both focus on the public nature of city life. Specifically, these two works feature unmarried heiresses who must confront public speculation regarding their wealth and marital status. In *Cecilia*, Burney analyzes how London affects her heroine's behavior after the initial shock of public attention has diminished. In *The Witlings*, the protagonist is a London native, taking preventive measures to avoid gossip when she is caught in a financial scandal. However, neither heiress can completely avoid the negative elements of London society. The quintessential conflict between women's desire to experience the city and their need for privacy shapes female coming-of-age.

In *The Witlings*, Burney describes the economic realities of marriage for single women. Cecilia Stanley is engaged to Beaufort, Lady Smatter's nephew and adopted son. When Cecilia loses her inheritance due to the bankruptcy of her guardian, Lady Smatter denies the marriage. Her warning that "London is a dangerous place for Girls who have no Fortune"[6] becomes a harsh reality for the heiress, who anticipates a social fall into the world of servants and milliners. In the end, Censor restores Cecilia's fortune, leaving Lady Smatter with no basis for objection to the marriage. Though Burney conveniently resolves Cecilia's predicament with Censor's benevolence, she highlights the class tensions among women in the city—and particularly the hardships of the working classes.

Burney grapples with more complex issues in *Cecilia*, depicting the explicit dangers of city life. Like Evelina, Cecilia Beverley has a father figure in the form of the Dean, her uncle. When he passes away, Cecilia joins the Harrel residence at Portman-Square in Paddington. In addition to the money her deceased parents have bequeathed her, Cecilia is left a large inheritance by her uncle, to be controlled by three guardians: Mr. Harrel, Mr. Briggs, and Mr. Delvile. Her fortune gives her marital autonomy, for she can choose her own husband so long as he takes her last name in marriage. However, her guardians waste her inheritance, compromising her engagement to Mortimer Delvile. Burney shows that public knowledge of Cecilia's wealth,

along with the incompetence of her male guardians, exposes her to specific urban dangers.

As with *Evelina*, both *Cecilia* and *The Witlings* are characterized by the merging of public and private life. Single women are the primary actors in a city described as "abounding with opulence, hospitality, and splendor . . . the principal inhabitants . . . now almost universally rising in elegance and liberality" (*C* 374). Roy Porter uses the phrase "commercialization of leisure" to describe a public life "that revolves around the town itself, its streets, public spaces, and entertainment" (168). In *Cecilia*, young women create their own diversion in public spaces. For instance, when Cecilia Beverley visits the Royal Opera House in Haymarket, she notices how the young women in the crowd become part of the entertainment itself. Burney writes, "[Cecilia] heard nothing but descriptions of trimmings, and complaints of hair-dressers, hints of conquest that teemed with vanity, and histories of engagements which were inflated with exultation" (*C* 134). The single women's desire for entertainment is matched only by their *own* need to be admired and envied.

The commercialization of leisure means that single women become an active part of public spectacle. However, such social engagement is not without risk, and Burney showcases women's particular vulnerability in the public gaze. When Cecilia first arrives at Portman-Square, she is shocked to find a group of strangers waiting for her. Like Evelina, her rural upbringing has not prepared her for the public scrutiny of London society. Burney writes, "The ladies took an exact inventory of her dress, and internally settled how differently they would have been attired if blest with equal affluence. The men disputed among themselves whether or not she was painted . . . a debate ensued, which ended in a bet" (*C* 23). From the very beginning, London intimidates the heiress, for living at the fashionable Harrel residence ensures constant public exposure. Cecilia complains to Mrs. Harrel that "she was . . . sick of living always in a crowd" (*C* 101). However, speculation follows Cecilia even when she retreats from the public eye. As Mr. Gosport tells her, ". . . when you have lived some time longer in this commercial city, you will find the exchange of patience for mortification the most common and constant traffic among [its] inhabitants" (*C* 44). Burney presents women's loss of privacy as an unavoidable aspect of city life—and one that Cecilia never truly reconciles with.

The author artfully portrays how Cecilia's sheltered upbringing affects her expectations of London. Before she leaves her home in Suffolk, Cecilia

predicts her own anonymity, exclaiming, "It is happy then, for me, that neither my actions nor myself will be sufficiently known to attract public observation" (*C* 14). She cannot anticipate that her financial autonomy and beauty will captivate the *bon ton* crowd. Her friend Mr. Monckton correctly predicts that Cecilia's "[b]eauty and independence, rarely found together, w[ill] attract a crowd of suitors at once brilliant and assiduous" (*C* 10). Like Evelina, Cecilia desires anonymity. However, her society will hardly allow that, for Cecilia underestimates the power of public interest. Burney describes Cecilia's apprehension at a masquerade ball, writing, "Cecilia now became seriously uneasy; for she was made an object of general attention, yet could neither speak nor be spoken to" (*C* 111). As with Evelina, Cecilia is literally silenced by the city's gaze.

Not only does Cecilia become part of the urban spectacle, but she also discovers that commercial participation encourages artificiality in human relationships. Burney mocks women's role in urban commercialization—showing that money overrides friendship and, sometimes, even basic human decency. In one memorable instance, Miss Larolles begs Cecilia to accompany her to the estate sale of the bankrupt Lady Belgrade, saying, "'O, but do go, for I assure you it will be the best sale we shall have this season. I can't imagine, Mrs. Harrel, what poor Lady Belgrade will do with herself; I hear the creditors have seized everything'" (*C* 31). Rather than viewing other women in the context of their shared disenfranchisement, London's fashionable young women compete with each other for men, clothes, and status. As Mr. Gosport describes the *Ton* misses, "But this they have in common, that at home they think of nothing but dress, abroad, of nothing but admiration, and that every where they hold in supreme contempt all but themselves" (*C* 40). Yet perhaps the strongest lesson in how leisured society fosters artificiality in female friendship comes in Cecilia's relationship with her childhood friend Mrs. Harrel. Like many others before her, Mrs. Harrel has not remained impervious to London's commercial culture. Upon her arrival in London, "[Cecilia] found [Mrs. Harrel] insensible to friendship, indifferent to her husband, and negligent of all social felicity. Dress, company, parties of pleasure, and public places, seemed not merely to occupy all her time; but to gratify all her wishes" (*C* 32). Burney seems to suggest that for some individuals, London's commercial influence erodes traditional values and morals.

Yet, at the same time, Cecilia wisely recognizes the shortcomings of a lifestyle of gratification and moral indifference. Though money is a

primary concern for the heiress, "A strong sense of DUTY and a fervent desire to ACT RIGHT, were the ruling characteristics of her mind: her affluence she therefore considered as a debt contracted with the poor, and her independence, as a tie upon her liberality to pay it with interest" (*C* 55). Indeed, it is Cecilia's moral responsibility that motivates her to help the poor widow Mrs. Hill. Her disapproval of the *Ton* crowd allows her to be guided by her own charity and compassion rather than by the greed and vanity of London consumer culture. Through her comparison of Mrs. Harrel, Miss Larolles, and Cecilia Beverley, Burney cleverly illustrates the way in which the city impacts women's romantic and platonic relationships.

Like Burney's other heroines, Cecilia Stanley of *The Witlings* must confront the merging of public and private city life. Her impending marriage to Beaufort is public knowledge; even her milliners know of her romantic history. Cecilia's financial affairs are made equally as public. When she loses her fortune in the economic crisis of the 1770s, she hides out with Mrs. Voluble in the knowledge that polite society will soon discover her failures. She even considers leaving the country and finding independent employment as a lady's companion or seamstress. Cecilia admits, "I see I must hide myself from the World" (V: 275). Although Cecilia anticipates the public's reaction to her bankruptcy, she does not predict Lady Smatter's cruel dismissal of her engagement. Cecilia's social prominence actually works to her disadvantage, for Lady Smatter denies the marriage for fear that her own reputation will be harmed. In the end, Burney shows that Cecilia's marital options are drastically limited by public knowledge of her bankruptcy.

Burney also connects London's commercial influence to women's financial power. With the city's emphasis on wealth, it is little wonder that Burney presents women as commercial products themselves. Both Cecilias are publicly equated with their inheritance; their well-being is bound up in the profit of the city. Within the first few lines of *The Witlings*, Cecilia is described as "a young Lady with a Fortune all in her own Hands" (I: 81-82). Even Cecilia's marriage to Beaufort hinges upon her lucrative financial position. Without her inheritance, she is expendable. As Lady Smatter warns Cecilia, "London is a dangerous place for Girls who have no Fortune" (III: 108-09).

In *Cecilia*, single women are also disadvantaged by the city's conspicuous consumption. Mr. Harrel's gambling debts (and eventual suicide) waste Cecilia's fortune and leave both Mrs. Hill and Mrs. Harrel without husbands. Mrs. Hill voices the particular concerns of widows, telling Cecilia, "a widow,

madam, is always hard to be righted; and I don't expect to hold out long myself, for sickness and sorrow wear fast: and then, when we are both gone, who is to help our poor children?" (*C* 86). Burney shows how women are publicly equated with their wealth and, furthermore, how the city disenfranchises single women who are lacking financial resources.

In her first major works—*Evelina, Cecilia,* and *The Witlings*—Frances Burney examines women's struggle for autonomy in the city. Through the characters of Evelina Anville, Cecilia Stanley, and Cecilia Beverley, Burney shows how urban quarters influence young women's intellectual, moral, and romantic development. While her heroines are often lacking in commercial and social power, paradoxically, their unique circumstances allow them to enact personal change. Although Burney conventionally resolves the issue of female independence with her heroines' marriage, she shows that women's ultimate goal is not necessarily finding a husband. Rather, her novels and plays detail the pain, delight, and adventure of growing up in the commercial landscape of eighteenth-century London.

NOTES

[1] Cited in McKlellar 495.

[2] Frances Burney, *Cecilia, Or Memoirs of an Heiress,* ed. by Peter Sabor and Margaret Anne Doody (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 52. Subsequent references to *Cecilia* will refer to this edition and appear in the text as *C* followed by the page number.

[3] Cited in Porter 144.

[4] *Westminster Magazine* 6 (June 1778): 325, cited in *E* 559.

[5] Frances Burney, *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance Into the World,* ed. Susan Kubica Howard (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2000), 95. All subsequent references to *Evelina* will refer to this edition, and appear in the text as *E* followed by the page number.

[6] Frances Burney, *The Witlings and The Woman-Hater*, ed. Peter Sabor and Geoffrey Sill (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2002), Act III, lines 108-09. Subsequent references will appear in the text with the act number followed by the line number.

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