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Noisy Homes and Stubborn Ears: the Social Significance of Sound in Frances Burney's *Evelina*

ELLES SMALLEGOOR

> Again, and with equal obsequiousness, Mr. Boswell did as he was bid; when the Doctor, pursing his lips, not to betray rising risibility, muttered half to himself, 'Running about in the middle of meals!—One would take you for a Branghton!'
>
> 'A Branghton, Sir?' repeated Mr. Boswell, with earnestness, 'what is a Branghton, Sir?' 'Where have you lived, Sir?' cried the Doctor, laughing, 'and what company have you kept, not to know that?'
>
> Mr. Boswell now, doubly curious, yet always apprehensive of falling into some disgrace with Dr. Johnson, said, in a low tone, which he knew the Doctor could not hear, to Mrs. Thrale: 'Pray, ma'am, what's a Branghton? Do me the favour to tell me? Is it some animal hereabouts?' (*Memoirs* 195-96)

After the publication of Frances Burney's first novel *Evelina* in 1778, Sir Joshua Reynolds's niece Mary Palmer informed the author that most readers in her circle were particularly entertained by her creation of the shopkeeping Branghtons: "everybody says such a Family never was Drawn before" (Troide and Cooke 141-42). Burney's meticulous and extensive portrait of a prospering London silversmith's family was indeed a novelty in the genre as her literary predecessors had chiefly focused on the lives and adventures of the rural laboring classes and the well-to-do country gentry. Where lesser tradespeople appeared at all (one thinks of the numerous landlords, landladies, and innkeepers in the urban settings of Henry Fielding's novels, the morally upright Mr. and Mrs. Smith in Samuel

Richardson's *Clarissa*, or the fashion-obsessed "wives and daughters of low tradesmen" in Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*), they were either sunk into anonymity or relegated to the periphery of the narrative.

Burney's decision to bring a shopkeeper's family into literary focus undoubtedly contributed to the novel's success. The sheer presence of the Branghton characters in *Evelina* enhanced the work's originality as well as its topicality as retailers formed an unmistakable part of the London landscape at the end of the century. Moreover, by giving ample space in her epistolary novel to the heroine's satirical comments on the vulgar behaviour of her City cousins and to the Branghtons' own humorously unrefined conversations, Burney was able to satisfy the contemporary demand for literary works that offered both instruction and entertainment. The late eighteenth-century readership could applaud the Branghtons' corrective value—these characters showed young readers how *not* to behave in polite society—as well as smile derisively at their social ignorance or laugh heartily at their "low" speech and comic antics.

Of course, Burney endowed the Branghtons with all the traits of vulgarity to throw into relief the exemplary behaviour of Evelina and her future husband Lord Orville, but, by doing so, she also popularized already existing negative cultural stereotypes of the smaller tradesman, who by this time was increasingly being seen as a disturbing emblem of social mobility. In *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb demonstrate that the people of Georgian England witnessed a "consumer revolution" which greatly affected all areas of life, including the physical landscape of villages, towns, and cities (9). The growing demand for "not only necessities, but decencies, and even luxuries" boosted the overseas as well as the domestic market and engendered "an ever-advancing network of shops and shopkeepers" in the country (9, 1). While there were still numberless smaller traders who suffered bankruptcies because of their vulnerable socio-economic position, there was a sizeable group of entrepreneurs who benefitted greatly from the growing consumer demand. McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb note in particular the contemporary "profitability of selling small items"; those who sold gloves, nails, wigs, pins, shoes, hats, and buttons saw their profits rise as many men and women mended, patched, and adjusted their basic dress and bought accessories in order to follow the latest fashion

(24). As a result, "the proportion of the population with family incomes in the £50 to £400 per annum range increased from something like 15 per cent to something approaching 25 per cent" (24).

It is exactly in this range that questions of gentility came to have importance. Although income was not the sole indicator of gentility, it certainly was adopted as a tool for the social placement of people. In *Women Writing About Money* (1996), Edward Copeland speaks of "consumption's ability to convey social meaning," and he draws up a list of the different incomes and their social signification at the turn of the century (11). While 20 to 40 pounds indicated "the lowest margins of gentility" and 50 pounds was "the next marginal competence," 400 pounds would enable one to live a life of "respectable gentility" (26). On the basis of Copeland's list it is possible to conclude that the number of smaller traders who could afford a genteel lifestyle and could subsequently lay claim to the title of gentleman or gentlewoman was growing.

The world of letters did not welcome them with open arms. From mid-century onwards an increasing number of texts commented on the vanity and extravagance of shopkeepers, who were said to forsake their natural duty by living "above their station." One fictitious letter-writer called Peter Moderation nostalgically complains: "In my younger days there was not a Shopkeeper in London kept his Coach; now scarce one is to be found who condescends to walk" (*Letter-Writer* 229). Comments like these were certainly no novelty. Earlier in the century Defoe had already observed that "the shopkeepers wear a different garb now, and are seen with their long wigs and swords, rather than with aprons on, as was formerly the figure they made" (Defoe 43). On the whole, though, it is economic concern and not social disparagement that induces Defoe to such commentary; his *Complete English Tradesman* (1726) was a practical business guide, written to reduce the number of bankruptcies that, he lamented, were filling the pages of *The Gazette*. Celebrating the world of commerce, he urges tradesmen to take pride in their profession and to ignore allegations made about their natural inferiority: "Nor do we find any defect either in the genius or capacities of the posterity of tradesmen, arising from any remains of mechanic blood, which it is pretended should influence them" (216). It is around mid-century that we discern a dissociation from this view

when the tone becomes more strident and tradespeople become popular literary victims of snobbery.

Samuel Johnson's essays in *The Rambler* and *The Idler* contributed greatly to this change in tone as they attempt to bring about a shift in debates about gentility away from rich merchants and wealthy nabobs towards more modest yet prospering home traders. In his essays, the would-be gentleman is not an affluent cit like Colman and Garrick's Mr. Sterling, but a sugar-baker, such as the "misapplied genius" Sam Softly, or a shopkeeper, such as the coarse grocer's widow Madam Prune (Bate 289). Such figures are portrayed as vulgar and pretentious nobodies, and they are ridiculed for aping their betters. Their gentlemanly status is rejected mainly because their wealth springs from idleness instead of industry (both Sam Softly and Madam Prune advance socially because of a family inheritance); the underlying assumption is that they should have followed the long, meritocratic path of hard work, deference, and public conformity to the behavioral rules of polite society. At the same time, the essays suggest that those involved in England's domestic trades have a natural incapacity to recognize this social truth. The main function of Johnson's satire, then, is two-fold: it instructs readers in the nature of true gentility but also helps them determine where to draw the dividing line between those who can obtain it and those who cannot.[1]

In many ways, Burney's portrait of the Branghton family can be seen as a novelistic extension of Johnson's essays on the would-be genteel. Through the eyes of Evelina, the reader is given a memorable picture of three aspiring yet hopelessly incorrigible silversmith's children, whose dreams to belong to England's genteel community are never fulfilled. This may explain why Johnson so much relished the Branghtons; to him (and many other London literati), they became the epitome of ill-breeding as well as an entertaining vehicle with which to foster personal feelings of social precedence as the citation at the start of this article illustrates. Despite this element of continuity between the two writers, however, *Evelina* also signals a departure from Johnson—and other contemporaries—in its representation of the urban upstart. Burney's literary predecessors usually depict the latter as a solitary, public, and, most importantly, visually disturbing figure.

Condemning the trader's tendency to imitate the appearance and lifestyle of his superiors, they suggest not only that clothes, carriages, and country homes cannot make a gentleman but also that his aping behaviour renders the outward signs of hierarchy inherently meaningless, which, they imply, is a dangerous prelude to the destruction of the social order. In *Evelina*, Burney fashions an entirely new kind of social climber: a familial, domestic one, whose identity is not so much defined by appearance and matter as by the extent to which he is heard.

The following pages explore the ways in which Burney uses sound as a stylistic feature with which to characterize the Branghton family as social encroachers. By relying on auditory rather than on pictorial description, Burney is able to conceptualize the social stratum that this family represents and to give authenticity to popular anxieties that existed about this social stratum at the time her novel was published. By complaining about noise in her delineation of the Branghton household, Evelina can both give expression to feelings of personal insecurity and position herself and her shopkeeping cousins on different rungs of the hierarchical ladder. Evidently, the auditory agitations that the eponymous heroine recounts throughout the novel have several layers of significance, and they are complexly related to the different roles that Burney has given her in the novel: the rural innocent, the polite female, the baronet's daughter, the clergyman's ward. However, my interest here is to highlight how Burney engages the reader's auditory imagination in order to reflect—and consolidate—the ways in which her contemporaries used sound appraisal as a way to draw social distinctions. A subsequent comparative analysis with Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* will suggest that, after the publication of *Evelina*, sound appears to become a recurring motif in writings that engage contemporary questions of social mobility.[2]

* * *

Evelina's first letter from the City recounts how her grandmother Madame Duval houses her in a hosier's lodgings in Holborn and from there takes her to the Branghton home at Snow-Hill. She informs Mr. Villars that her first visit at this home was an unpleasant experience. Though admitting that she is not insensitive to the advantages of

material comfort—the place is "small and inconvenient"—Evelina makes it clear that her unhappiness stems mainly from the noisy behaviour of its occupants; the Branghton children—Tom, Biddy, and Polly—continually walk up and down the stairs, fling open doors, plump down in chairs, and talk, titter, laugh, scold, and quarrel without end. Throughout the letter, Evelina recaptures the domestic atmosphere by focusing on her auditory experiences in such a way that the voices of the Branghtons resonate from the page. Words are "cried" instead of spoken, exclamation marks and colloquial interjections like "Lord" abound, and the vocabulary directly appeals to the reader's ears: "a loud laugh" is "re-echoed"; mirth is "violent"; there is "uproar," "convulsive tittering," and "rage"; there are "angry interrogatories" and "whispers" (138-41). Sound is the defining quality of family life at Snow-Hill.

In view of this, the Branghton home seems to function as an emblem of bustling city life. We can draw a parallel between Evelina's description of her first stay with the Branghtons and literary accounts of first-time visits to London, which usually commence with the newcomer feeling overwhelmed by sensory impressions. The narrator in Ned Ward's *The London Spy* relates his initial experience of the metropolis as follows:

> My ears were so serenaded on every side, with the grave musick of sundry passing bells, the rattling of coaches, and the melancholy ditties of 'Hot bak'd wardens and pippins!', that had I had as many eyes as Argos, and as many ears as Fame, they would have been all confounded, for nothing could I see but light, and nothing hear but noise. (29)

In *Squire Randal's Excursion Round London; or, a Week's Frolic, in the Year 1776*, Squire Randal writes to his family in the country about the "general agitation" of London: "every foot that was trained to business, whether of man or of beast, appeared to be in motion" (9). He tells them that the city has transformed him and his friend into "spectators and auditors" (141). In *Humphry Clinker*, Matthew Bramble memorably describes his bewildered senses on his first encounter with the citizens of London: "rambling, riding, rolling, rushing, justling, mixing, bouncing, cracking, and crashing. . . . All is tumult and hurry; one could imagine

they were impelled by some disorder of the brain, that will not suffer them to be at rest" (Smollett 88).

In *Evelina*, Burney transposes this conventional city imagery to the domestic sphere, thereby seemingly emphasizing the urban character of the Branghton household. Echoing Bramble's analogy between physical movement and mental unrest, Evelina registers the almost deafening behaviour of her relations: "such noise, passion, and confusion, that had anyone stopped an instant on the stairs, he must have concluded himself in Bedlam" (140). Of course, such sensory perceptions often reveal as much about the speaker as about the place that is described. In these four examples the characters translate their emotional responses to the novelty of their surroundings into bodily ones in order to give expression to feelings of wonder, exhilaration, or perplexity. By communicating her displeasure at the sounds and disorder in the Branghton home to her guardian, Evelina can make known her personal insecurity at having been wrenched rather abruptly out of the familiar West-End and dropped into the unknown City. What these authors have in common, then, is an imaginative preoccupation, not only with urban life itself but also with the psychology of place.

In order fully to appreciate the workings of the literary trope in *Evelina*, it is important that we understand "place" in a geographical as well as in a social sense.[5] In *Hubbub: Filth, Noise and Stench in England 1600-1770*, Emily Cockayne notes that from the early modern period onwards there was a rising concern about noise produced in cities, not only among members of the visiting rural gentry but also among what she calls "the polite urbanites," the urban professionals who lived in the cities and whose work and lifestyles demanded concentration and peace (124). They wanted sound to be kept within acceptable bounds so that they could quietly read and study. What was considered acceptable, though, was primarily a matter of taste, which, as Cockayne's use of the adjective "polite" already suggests, was defined by the guardians of politeness, who set precise behavioral rules for noise abatement in the conduct literature of the time. Writings aimed at gentlemen seemed particularly concerned with man's propensity for emphatic laughter while those directed at ladies worried mostly about woman's volubility. Lord Monboddo's social aesthetics, for instance, lead him to observe that laughing results in

"noise" and to claim that for this reason "men of exalted minds, and who have a high sense of the Beautiful and Noble in characters and manners are very little disposed to laugh." In contrast, "laughter is . . . common among vulgar men" (Monboddo 195). The Earl of Chesterfield informs his son that laughter produces "disagreeable noise" and advises him to repress it at all times:

> . . . you may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh, while you live. Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners: it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy, at silly things; and they call it being merry. In my mind there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred, as audible laughter. (Chesterfield 328)

In another contemporary text, an anonymous mother assures her daughter that loquaciousness in a woman is harmful to her reputation as society will frown on "the grating noise of her babbling tongue." Moreover, she explains, polite conversation has its educational benefits only if a lady practises the art of listening: "For what knowledge or improvement can she possibly receive, who is always talking herself, and never allows the rest of the company to open their mouths?" (Allen 85).

Evelina's appraisals of sound reveal that she is developing a social identity that strongly engages with these models of refined masculinity and femininity. At her first entrance into London's polite society, the heroine is too shy and reticent to be accused of "babbling," but she does make the mistake of openly laughing at the fop Mr. Lovel whose deep bows and solemn language strike her as ludicrous. After she realizes that the judging ears of society disapprove of such unladylike behavior, she moderates her sounds and becomes highly self-conscious about those in her company who do not. She is embarrassed by Mrs. Selwyn's unfeminine sharp tongue and the improper blatancy of Captain Mirvan who, she writes to Mr. Villars, "laughs and talks so terribly loud in public, that he frequently makes us ashamed of belonging to him" (65). Evelina's complaints about the noisy Branghton home also help to characterize her as a deserving member of polite society and, conversely, her cousins as true specimens of vulgarity. With their incessant talk, Biddy and Polly

strongly deviate from the gender norms that the heroine has come to endorse. Likewise, Tom's practical jokes are incompatible with the behavior of a true gentleman; unsurprisingly, Evelina is appalled when he tells her he enjoys making a "fuss" by sending his friend Mr. Brown upstairs when his sisters are dressing:

> ". . . there they hide themselves, and run away, and squeal and squall like anything mad: and so then I puts the two cats into the room, and I gives 'em a good whipping, and so that sets them a squalling too; so there's such a noise and uproar!—Lord, you can't think, Miss, what fun it is!" (144)

We can imagine that this is exactly the "ill-bred" humour (or *tom*foolery) that both Monboddo and Chesterfield deplored.

Cockayne observes, however, that questions of politeness easily intersected with issues of class. Although any noisy person, be it an aristocrat or a beggar, could be considered ill-mannered, it was primarily the lower orders that were associated with excessive sounds: "Generally, it seemed that the poorer you were, the more noise you were perceived to make" (124). The idea that there was a connection between sound pollution and the behavior of the lower orders is indeed manifest in Lord Monboddo's use of the phrase "vulgar men" and the Earl of Chesterfield's reference to "the mob." It is evident, too, in Evelina's representation of her "descen[t] into a lower circle," as Burney herself described the heroine's move from her genteel friends towards her City cousins in a letter to bookseller Lowndes (Troide 216). In the novel, this metaphoric descent, or downward mobility, is indicated by the fact that Evelina is "conducted up two pair of stairs" at her first visit to the Branghton home (138). In the world of the eighteenth-century novel, characters frequently do not live in, but become reduced to, a situation where one has to climb two stairways. Henry Fielding's Amelia grumbles about a friend who, "in the shape of a fine lady, complain[s] of the hardships of climbing up two pair of stairs high to visit me" (23-24). When unfortunate circumstances compel the genteel heroine in Frances Sheridan's *Sidney Bidulph* to live on fifty pounds a year, she moves herself and her children into cheap lodgings above a milliner and writes to her friend: "I am now fixed in a

very humble habitation. Shall I own it to you, my Cecilia? I was shocked at the change. A room two pair of stairs high, with a closet, and a small indifferent parlour, compose the whole of my apartment" (341). A similar social embarrassment is experienced by Henrietta Belfield, a character in Burney's second novel *Cecilia.* Henrietta and her mother move from a comfortable dwelling to "a small and very meanly furnished apartment," and she complains to Cecilia about the reduced situation they now find themselves in: "up two pair of stairs! no furniture! no servant! every thing in such disorder!" (208).

The Branghton sisters are eager to present themselves as refined ladies and, therefore, adopt a similar attitude towards their room as soon as Evelina crosses the threshold. In an amusingly ungentle fashion, they tell their cousin that they are "quite ashamed" of their mediocre room and the bodily exercise with which their stairways burden her. They promise that on her next visit they will borrow their lodger's room, which is "only up one pair of stairs, and nicely furnished." Their brother Tom responds indifferently: "'Lord, what signifies?' said the brother, 'I dare be sworn Miss has been up two pair of stairs before now; Ha'nt you, Miss?'" (139). The fact that dialogue is the primary means through which Evelina recounts her first impressions of the Branghton household reinforces the characterization of this household as a cacophonous one; the conversation itself encourages the reader to associate this cacophony with downward mobility. In the context of Cockayne's findings, then, we can say that Burney's choice to have her heroine describe her "descent into a lower circle" in terms of rising sound levels was a timely one, and it certainly helped the author "to mark the manners of the times," which, she claimed, was "the attempted plan" of the novel (6). It also reveals Burney's awareness of the fact that her contemporaries talked about and *openly appraised* the sounds around them to manifest their allegiance to a specific community and to create hierarchical order in what was a predominantly fluid social world.[4] By emphasizing the sensitivity of her ears, Evelina asserts her social superiority and, by implication, reaffirms a class boundary that she feels is being blurred by her mixing with her shopkeeping cousins.

So Burney adopts a literary trope that conventionally functioned either to consolidate an age-old dichotomy between the country and the

city (rural silence versus urban noise) or to convey a character's emotional response to geographical displacement and extends its use to reveal the behavioural patterns that give shape to, and support, a popular system of social differentiation. Although she was not the first novelist to do so—Smollett has Bramble trace the source of his discomforts to "a mob of impudent plebeians"—she was the first to use the trope so pervasively and pointedly in the representation of one particular family of a particular social stratum (37). By highlighting a young lady's disapproving comments about the private hustle and bustle of a silversmith's family in Holborn instead of a country squire's grumbles about the anonymous public clatter in the metropolis, Burney brings into focus, not a concern about the capacity of London's "mob" to cause social disorder but, rather, a rejection of any personal membership in the community of shopkeepers and smaller tradesmen.

Evelina thus turns her cousins' home into a site of sonic disturbance consciously to characterize herself as a superior outsider, and she aims to reinforce this position by indicating that she should be the one in the Branghton home who establishes the rules of conversation. Adopting the role of a sound manager, she sometimes displays an unwillingness to enter into dialogue with her cousins while at other times, she insists on being heard by them. But Evelina's attempts to establish her precedence in this way are continually thwarted by the Branghtons. With their stubborn ears—Evelina complains that "the winds could not have been more deaf to me," that they "would not hear me," or "hastened away without listening to me"—they seem completely oblivious to the deferential attitude that they are expected to adopt (205, 71). Through Burney's stylistic play with sound, the constant tension between boundaries set and boundaries transgressed becomes palpable to the reader.

The efficacy of Burney's technique of engaging the reader's auditory imagination in order to convey a character's social anxieties derives from the immateriality of sound. As we have seen, any sound appraisal or management is an attempt to create order, to set boundaries, to establish distance. However, sound itself, by its very ability to cross physical boundaries, can symbolize the proximity that exists between the hearer and those who are heard. In other words, Burney capitalizes on the invasive quality of noise to capture Evelina's perception of the

Branghtons as social encroachers. It is fitting, then, that Burney relies on the pictorial element when these anxieties are absent. Indeed, the few visual descriptions of the Branghtons and their lodger Mr. Smith that do occur in the novel are always given by Evelina when she is in superior company, that is to say, when she feels personally secure. When she is still at the West-End house of the Mirvans, Evelina observes that the dress of the visiting Branghton sisters "was such as would have rendered their scheme of accompanying our party impracticable" (71). Later, in the company of Sir Clement Willoughby, she again turns from a fraught auditor into a scornful spectator by drawing attention to Mr. Smith's insecurities about his dress: "looking now at the baronet, now at himself, surveying, with sorrowful eyes, his dress, struck with his air, his gestures, his easy gaiety; he gazed at him with envious admiration, and seemed himself, with conscious inferiority, to shrink into nothing" (168). Evelina's descriptions of their apparel or appearance serve to confirm the distance between them and herself.

* * *

Burney's influence is apparent in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, a novel in which sound is also used as a feature with which to symbolize a character's social mobility. Its Portsmouth episode resembles Volume II of *Evelina* in that it, too, recounts how a young dependent woman of genteel education is subjected to experiencing rackety life in "a lower circle." Although Austen relies more on free indirect discourse than dramatization, her indebtedness to Burney in creating this episode is unmistakable. The narrator informs us that when Fanny Price temporarily returns to her modest Portsmouth home after spending most of her youth in her uncle's spacious country mansion, she finds it "the abode of noise, disorder, and impropriety": "The doors were in constant banging, the stairs were never at rest, nothing was done without a clatter, nobody sat still, and nobody could command attention when they spoke" (322, 325). The naval town Portsmouth is an altogether different setting from the commercial heart of London where the Branghtons reside. In this episode, Austen is more concerned with juxtapositions between the educated homes of the gentry (Sir Thomas Bertram's) and higher professionals (the Reverend Mr. Norris's) on the one hand

and those of lower professionals like Mr. Price, who is "a Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune, or connections" on the other (5). Nevertheless, by characterizing Mr. Price's lower-status home as a noisy one, Austen, like Burney, popularizes contemporary perceptions that associate downward mobility with rising sound levels, and she would do the same in her next novel *Persuasion* by having its narrator mention that Mrs. Smith, a gentlewoman in unfortunate circumstances, is reduced to one bedroom and "a noisy parlour" (137).[5]

Examining *Mansfield Park*'s preoccupation with (social) pollution and immorality and connecting it to the heroine's ongoing attempts to draw aesthetic and ethical boundaries, Ruth Bernard Yeazell argues that the Portsmouth episode, which associates Fanny's abhorrence of the dirt in the Price household with Mrs. Rushworth's elopement with Henry Crawford, illustrates that "[a]nxiety about transitional states and ambiguous social relations is repeatedly countered in *Mansfield Park* by this categorical sorting of things into the clean and the dirty, the sacred and the profane" (Yeazell 135). We can certainly add to this "the quiet and the noisy," as Austen's heroine overcomes her estrangement from her biological family and discovers her allegiance to the educated world of her adopted one primarily on the basis of her auditory experiences. In "a review of the two houses," Fanny feels that the noise in her parents' home "was the greatest misery of all"; her assessment of the relative tranquility in her uncle's mansion reveals to which community she wishes to belong:

> At Mansfield, no sounds of contention, no raised voice, no abrupt bursts, no tread of violence was ever heard; all proceeded in a regular course of cheerful orderliness; everybody had their due importance; every body's feelings were consulted. If tenderness could ever be supposed wanting, good sense and good breeding supplied its place. (325)

The "categorical sorting" that Yeazell draws attention to in her discussion of Fanny's behavior nicely points to the similarities between this heroine and Evelina, who also deals with her own "transitional state" and "ambiguous social relations" at the Branghton home by judging the sounds that its occupants produce.

Obviously, there are differences between the two episodes as well. First of all, there is more ambiguity about Fanny's auditory agitations. The remark that "living in incessant noise was to a frame and temper, delicate and nervous like Fanny's, an evil which no superadded elegance or harmony could have entirely atoned for" diffuses the notion that they are of a purely social kind (325). In her feebleness, Fanny differs from the sprightly Evelina or from one of Austen's later characters in *Persuasion*, the firm Lady Russell, whose sound appraisals clearly depend on social context. After relating the latter's displeasure with the "domestic hurricane" at the home of the Musgroves (120), the narrator concludes with soft irony:

> Everybody had their taste in noises as well as in other matters; and sounds are quite innoxious, or most distressing, by their sort rather than their quantity. When Lady Russell, not long afterwards, was entering Bath on a wet afternoon, and driving through the long course of streets from the Old Bridge to Camden-place, amidst the dash of other carriages, the heavy rumble of carts and drays, the bawling of newsmen, muffin-men and milk-men, and the ceaseless clink of pattens, she made no complaint. (121)

While Evelina's letters do not contain such ironic commentary, Burney nevertheless enables the reader to come to such conclusions. Although Evelina has a natural delicacy and rural innocence that befits a romantic heroine, there is no doubt that her complaints about the Branghtons are symptomatic of her social niceties. The urban scenes she describes are full of carriages and people, of conversations, whispers, screams, fireworks, music, and theatre, and Vivien Jones rightly points out that Evelina finds "evident enjoyment" in the sensory impressions, variety, and mobility that London has to offer (Jones xviii). Similarly, at Howard Grove, the house of the Mirvans, the heroine is not at all unsettled by domestic unrest:

> This house seems to be the house of joy; every face wears a smile, and a laugh is at everybody's service. It is quite amusing to walk about, and see the general confusion; a

> room leading to the garden is fitting up for Captain Mirvan's study. Lady Howard does not sit a moment in a place; Miss Mirvan is making caps; everybody so busy!—such flying from room to room!—so many orders given, and retracted, and given again!—nothing but hurry and perturbation. (18)

Like Lady Russell, Evelina is discomfited by sound and mobility only when she is confronted with the contingency of her own social identity. With Fanny, this is less clear. Her own view is that "*she* was nice only from natural delicacy" (336).

A second, more conspicuous, aspect that distinguishes Austen's episode from Burney's is the former's resistance to its own "categorical sorting." Although the narrator qualifies Fanny's perceptions of her parents' household as a loud one by emphasizing her feebleness, she never fully denies them either and sympathizes with the shame that the heroine feels when the fashionable Henry Crawford visits her there. At the same time, Fanny, and the reader with her, are quickly reminded that the Prices cannot easily be fixed into neat categories: there is more to them than just their noise. Amid the running, cursing, talking, and shouting emerges a sympathetic family whose good-will towards Fanny is manifested in the narrator's observations about Mrs. Price's "natural solicitude" and "looks of true kindness"; Mr. Price's "cordial hug"; the energy and health in the "rosy-faced boys" who, though "ragged and dirty," are "coming eagerly to see their sister"; their other brother's lack of "objection to her kissing him"; and her little sisters' pride in serving her (314–16). These observations encourage the reader to look beyond the Prices' shortcomings and to acknowledge that this is, after all, a loveable family.

Moreover, the narrator playfully teases Fanny with "pain upon pain, confusion upon confusion" and, a little later, a "thrill of horror" by raising the possibility of profound embarrassment only to flaunt her expectations. Fanny's anxieties about Henry's possible unfavorable opinion of her parents appear unfounded when her mother politely converses with him and is "greatly obliged" when he takes her daughters for a walk, and her father acts wonderfully well towards his daughter's guest when they meet him during this outing:

> ...(as Fanny instantly, and to her great relief discerned), her father was a very different man, a very different Mr. Price in his behaviour to this most highly-respected stranger, from what he was in his own family at home. His manners now, though not polished, were more than passable; they were grateful, animated, manly; his expressions were those of an attached father, and a sensible man;—his loud tones did very well in the open air, and there was not a single oath to be heard. Such was his instinctive compliment to the good manners of Mr. Crawford. (*333*)

We can observe a contrast here with Burney's less fluid representation of Captain Mirvan, a navy man who is consistently loud-mouthed throughout *Evelina.* In her representation of the Price family, Austen reasserts popular stereotypes of the differences between social classes, but she refuses to anchor its individual members into a fixed identity.

It is arguable that the narrator's liberal attitude toward the Prices is related to their lack of pretensions. Through Henry, Fanny perceives an "obliged" mother and a "grateful" father who pays "instinctive compliment": this deferential behavior reveals that, despite being the creators of private disorder, Mr. and Mrs. Price respect public order. In other words, they know their place. And it seems that their deference is rewarded. Significantly, Austen gives them a set of children whose careers hint toward a promising future. With one son as a clerk in London, one in the India trade, and another in the navy, with one daughter soon married into the clergy, and another who will receive a genteel education, it is not unlikely that the Price family will soon experience some degree of social advancement. The Portsmouth episode confirms social hierarchy but allows mobility within it—if only through a meritocratic route.

Whereas Austen's portrait of the Price family resists stasis and neat categorization, Burney's fictional treatment of the Branghtons supports Evelina's attempt to fix the Branghtons into one identity and into one place. Firstly, Burney's choice for the family name evidently underwrites the heroine's views; the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that "to brangle" means "to squabble" while "brangling" means "noisy and turbulent disputing."[6] Secondly, the words of exemplary characters

are often rendered in reported speech, and when they speak at all, they speak "softly." Conversely, the Branghtons are almost always represented directly and often through exclamatory speech. Critics such as Vivien Jones and Susan Staves have argued that the extensive dialogue that Burney gives vulgar characters like the Branghtons is so vivacious that it frequently undermines the social and cultural norms that Evelina, and the reader, are encouraged to endorse. The Branghton children are certainly surrounded with an air of exuberance that gives them an irresistible attraction. However, it is here, I think, that questions of politeness and questions of class diverge. Though highly ambivalent about manners (as she always was and would be both in her life and in her writings), Burney is very clear on the social position that the Branghtons are allowed to occupy. Though never entirely endorsing Evelina's distaste of impolite laughter and vulgar merry-making, the novel fully underwrites her attempts to draw an imaginary class boundary between herself and her shopkeeping cousins and supports her in creating a static identity for them out of which they cannot evolve. The stylistic differentiation with regard to speech encourages the reader's acceptance of the heroine's personal judgement of the Branghtons as noisy. By turning her readers into auditors through extensive dialogue, Burney enables them to feel the uncomfortable closeness of the Branghtons as keenly as Evelina does and, thereby, gives authenticity to the latter's perception of them as social encroachers.

Finally, unlike the Prices, the Branghtons are never granted any social advancement. As is the case in *Mansfield Park*, their behavior can be coupled to the identity they are ultimately given in the resolution of the plot. The novel seemingly shares Evelina's opinion that their lack of breeding "would have seemed of no consequence" "had they been without *pretensions*" (144). The Branghton children's pretence to gentility, their attempt to rise without merit, and their ignorance of how to conform publicly to the behavioral rules of polite society are punished, not just by Evelina but also by the novel itself. Indeed, Burney enables the heroine to become a successful sound manager after all by giving her full narrative control at the end of Volume II, when Evelina returns to her country home at Berry Hill and is subsequently reintroduced into high society. The heroine makes it clear that her readers will hear no more of her cousins in

the third, and last, volume: "All the Branghtons called to take leave of me: but I will not write a word more about them" (121). With this decision, she silences them for good. The only thing that she eventually shares with the reader in her penultimate letter is the news that Polly is getting married to Mr. Brown, the haberdasher. In other words, Polly marries someone from her own community and is, thereby, firmly anchored to her current place in the social hierarchy. So it is the novel's design, too, that encourages the reader to identify with Evelina's dissociation from the Branghtons. Burney uses her last volume to set off a boundary and transforms a textual boundary into a social boundary. Once Evelina has physically left the Branghton home and willingly forgets its occupants, she immerses the reader in the voices of the professions, the gentry, and the nobility. Almost immediately, the reader accepts their silence and, with this acceptance, acknowledges their marginality.

Burney was the first major novelist of her time to break the silence of London tradesmen's families, but she also uses their voices and sounds to reassert the social distinctions that they were perceived to threaten. This does not necessarily make the novel conservative in its outlook, especially not if we compare it to other texts of the period. Even though *Evelina* promotes social hierarchy, it shows a willingness, if not to embrace, then certainly to acknowledge modern urban life and to recognize those associated with it, such as shopkeepers, as legitimate social agents (even if they should know their place). This makes *Evelina* a more progressive novel than most of its time. Interestingly, and curiously, despite the widespread popularity of Burney's silversmith family, most novels of the period continued to focus on the lives and adventures of the well-to-do country gentry and the rural laboring classes, a fact which deserves further examination. Indeed, Burney's boisterous Branghtons serve as a powerful reminder that we should pay as much attention to what eighteenth-century novelists are silent about as to what and whom they let us hear.

NOTES

[1] For a detailed discussion of Samuel Johnson's redefinition of the notion of gentility, his personal status anxieties, and his contribution to the creation of the ideological mores of the modern English middle class, see Hudson.

[2] Burney's literary preoccupation with sound may be connected to her family life. Dr. Charles Burney's London home was a musical home where private musical performances were given, and musicians, musicologists, opera singers, famous literati, and Burney family members developed and discussed musical tastes and standards.

[3] For this observation I am indebted to Gillian Beer's introduction to Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, in which she discusses "the preoccupations of place, or precedence, which engross the members of Anne's family" (xxiii).

[4] Ruth Bernard Yeazell's examination of the ways in which "dirt is a function of the need for order" in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* helped me draw this conclusion (134).

[5] An earlier yet less extensive specimen of Burney's influence can be found in Charlotte Smith's *The Old Manor House.* In the novel, Smith draws a contrast between the quiet country gentleman's dwelling of Orlando Somerive's father and the noisy London home of his wine-selling uncle Mr. Woodford where "everybody talked together" (293). With two fashion-obsessed daughters and a facetious son who call Orlando "country cousin," the Woodford family is clearly modelled on the Branghtons although with her portrait, Smith seems to have imagined what kind of family the Branghtons would have become had they experienced the upward mobility that they dreamt of (295). Successful years in the wine business have turned Mr. Woodford into a "pompous entertainer" of "the great" and his children into pretentious siblings (421). His son James, "having quitted trade to study the law, is now a motley composition between a city buck and a pert Templar" while his eldest daughter Eliza has

"quite forgotten herself, . . . desiring that everybody else should forget the preceding years, when she was a wine-merchant's daughter in the Strand" (292, 495).

[6] The OED dates the first recorded usage of "to brangle" in the sense of "to squabble" (now obsolete or archaic) to 1553, the last to 1868. The first recorded usage of "brangling" in the sense of "noisy and turbulent disputing" is 1611, the last 1830.

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